

Tales of Terror in Québec Popular Cinema: The Rise of the French Language Horror Film since 2000

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Before the 2000s, the horror film was virtually non-existent in Canada's Francophone film industry. Over the past decade, however, the situation has changed drastically. The recent emergence of a crop of successful French-language horror films, including Éric Tessier's *Sur le seuil* (2003) and *5150 Rue des Ormes* (2009), Philippe Gagnon's *Le Poil de la bête* (2010), Daniel Roby's *La Peau blanche* (2004), Daniel Grou-Podz's *Les 7 jours du talion* (2010), Robin Aubert's *Saints- Martyrs-des-Damnés* (2005), Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs* (2008) and Jean Beaudin's *Le Collectionneur* (2002), manifests a multiplicity of important transformations in Québec cinema in particular, and Québec society in general. This article suggests that the Québec horror film bears witness simultaneously to: (1) the productive diversification of the industry in the province; (2) the rise of filmic adaptations of popular literature as a viable practice; (3) the development of a critical perspective towards the traditional themes of Québec culture; and (4) the creative potential of co-production. These aspects position the cinematic tale of terror as one of the most informative objects of analysis in contemporary Québec film studies.

Keywords: Horror Film; popular Quebec culture; Francophone Canadian cinema; co-production

In 1972, Jean Beaudin directed the first French-language horror film produced in Québec: *Le Diable est parmi nous*. For the next 30 years, this would remain the only Francophone contribution to the horror genre in Canada. While the production of English-language horror films thrived in and around Montréal throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s—including of course the early Cronenberg classics *Shivers* (1975), *Rabid* (1977), and *Scanners* (1981)—it is only in the first decade of the 21st century that Québécois filmmakers have started producing a number of films that qualify as “horror” (unlike parodies such as *Karmina* [Gabriel Pelletier, 1996], which seek to amuse rather than scare, shock and disturb their audiences). The emergence of a crop of successful French-language horror films¹ over the past decade, including Éric Tessier's *Sur le seuil* (2003) and *5150 Rue des Ormes* (2009), Philippe Gagnon's *Le Poil de la bête* (2010), Daniel Roby's *La Peau blanche* (2004), Daniel Grou-Podz's *Les 7 jours du talion* (2010), Robin Aubert's *Saints-Martyrs-des-Damnés* (2005), Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs* (2008) and Beaudin's return to horror after 30 years, *Le Collectionneur* (2002), manifests a multiplicity of important transformations in Québec cinema in particular, and Québec society in general. This article suggests that the Québec horror film bears witness simultaneously to: (1) the productive diversification of the industry in the province; (2) the rise of filmic adaptations of popular literature as a viable practice; (3) the development of a critical perspective towards the traditional themes of Québec culture; and (4) the creative potential of co-production.

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The diversification of the industry

Traditionally, Québécois cinema has been associated with two broad practices. On one hand, we find *auteur* films: relatively small-scale projects that typically focus on ambivalent individuals struggling with existential angst and moving within a narrative world where realism hides deeper humanist concerns. From Gilles Groulx's *Le Chat dans la sac* (1964) to Xavier Dolan's *J'ai tué ma mère* (2009), earnest character studies solidly anchored in the conventions of art cinema have long represented Québec at film festivals and have sometimes gained genuine international recognition. On the other hand, there are light comedies emerging from the theatrical tradition of early twentieth century burlesque, where sexual innuendo and mild political satire fuse into conservatively subversive entertainment, appealing to large audiences in Francophone Canada for at least the past 45 years (Loiselle 1999). From *Deux femmes en or* (Claude Fournier 1970) to *Starbuck* (Ken Scott 2011), juvenile romps which are occasionally quite insightful in their social commentary, have broken box-office records and have abundantly demonstrated the viability of commercial cinema in the province.

While these two parallel practices continue to dominate, the late 1990s and 2000s have witnessed the emergence of a significant diversification of genres. Historical dramas, crime thrillers, action movies, musicals, science fiction films and, more to the point of this article, cinematic tales of terror are now produced with some regularity and have enjoyed respectable success. This recent rise in the production of genre films is due in no small part to contemporary industrial shifts, mainly the greater emphasis that governmental funding agencies such as Telefilm Canada and SODEC (Société de développement des entreprises culturelles) have put on profitability over the past decade. As Telefilm executive director Carolle Brabant indicates in the interview included in this special issue of *the American Review of Canadian Studies*, the federal agency currently prioritizes projects that are most likely to appeal to Canadian audiences. Consequently, many Canadian filmmakers (both French- and English-speaking) have now undertaken to optimize their opportunity for revenue by relying on the tried-and-true formulas of genres. In fact, Telefilm's official guidelines highlight the importance of generic diversity: "The programs are designed to support the development and production of Canadian feature films with strong domestic box office potential. To encourage diversity in feature film production, Telefilm supports a wide range of genres and budgets."² More specifically within the Québec context, SODEC has also been promoting diversification. As the current President of SODEC, François Macerola, explains in the commentary also published in this issue, funding for production projects is based in part on "financial and marketing aspects with an eye to maintaining a diversity of genres." In fact, as early as 2005, Jean Chaput, the President of SODEC from 2004 to 2009, already extolled the virtues of diversity. "There's no question about it—this is a good time for Québec cinema," Chaput says. "The industry has matured here, has become diversified. There is room in Québec for auteur-driven features as well as genre films. The quality of films here has vastly improved over a decade. Of course, we feel SODEC has played a role in all of this" (Hays 2005).³

From Chaput's vantage point of 2005, 1995 marks the beginning of a decade of improvement for which he takes partial credit on behalf of SODEC. Not coincidentally, 1995 is the year Jean-Marc Vallée's crime thriller *Liste noire* became the first non-comedy

genre film to make over \$1 million at the box office; in the process, it helped trigger the successful diversity that we now see in Québec. Homemade genre films like the melodrama *Séraphin: un homme et son péché* (Charles Binamé 2002), the odd-couple cop thriller *Bon Cop, Bad Cop* (Eric Canuel 2006), the sentimental cop comedy *De père en flic* (Émile Gaudreault 2009), and the adventure biopic *Piché: entre ciel et terre* (Sylvain Archambault 2010) have all been box office hits at home. They are not only successful as “Québec movies;” They have also become some of the top-grossing films in Québec regardless of origin. And of course, this generic diversification has also resulted in the production of a significant number of French language horror films.

Generally, a national cinema is viewed as a thriving industry when even its genre films—and especially those in the horror genre—are flourishing, indicating that it is on the verge of maturity. The rise of the American monster movie in the early 1930s, at the dawn of the golden age of the Hollywood studio system, is the most obvious example of the appearance of horror at transitional times, when the industry is still eager to experiment with novel styles and contents, while feeling itself solid enough to survive resistance from the more conservative segments of the population. Universal’s production of *Dracula* (Tod Browning 1931) was spearheaded by Carl Laemmle, Jr., the 21-year-old son of the studio’s founder, who in 1930 was “willing to try anything” (Gomery 1996, 55) to find his place alongside the big players such as MGM and Paramount. Along with *Frankenstein* (James Whale 1931), *Dracula* was seen by Laemmle as a means to break with the studio’s “rather cautious and unimaginative policies [which] had left it some distance adrift of the giants of the industry at the end of the 1920s, namely Famous Players, Loews, and First National” (O’Flin 2002, 109). These two and the subsequent “streak of inventive and impressive films ranging from subtle to macabre and effects-laden extravaganza took the public by storm forcing even studios unfamiliar with the genre (such as MGM) into the fray” (Odell and Le Blanc 2001, 18).

Similarly, the significant transformations of the British film industry that occurred after WWII “as post-war austerity evolved into affluence” (Street 1997, 62) fostered the advent of horror, “a genre which was especially imaginative and pertinent regarding contemporary social themes” (Street 1997, 76). Struggling to attract audiences at a time of fierce competition from television, British cinema relied on horror to appeal to young spectators eager to experience the kind of naughty thrills that the new medium, still in its innocent infancy, could not possibly provide. It is no surprise that during this transitional period, as British cinema moved from the stuffy historical costume dramas of the 1930s and 1940s to James Bond and the Beatles in the 1960s, “the most commercially successful studio in the late 1950s was Hammer Horror” (Street 1997, 76).

In the same way, the current boom of gory horror flicks in Australia represents what Mark David Ryan has called “a growth strategy for producers,” as they seek to escape the existing limitations of “a national cinema driven by public subsidy and valuing ‘quality’ and ‘cultural content’ over ‘entertainment’ and ‘commercialism’” (Ryan 2009, 43). Tapping into a long, gothic film tradition that emphasizes small casts and secluded locations, such as in the outback slashers *Wolf Creek* (Greg Mclean 2005) and *Storm Warning* (Jamie Banks 2007), and relying on special effects that can be realized more cheaply than those of science-fiction, action and fantasy, “Australian horror films are produced on lean—indeed, at times very low—budgets, enabling films to recoup production budgets, some from presales alone. Consequently, Australian horror production is an example of a genre within the broader industry operating within viable budget ranges and may be a driver of sustained low-budget horror production into the future,” says Ryan (2009, 46). Furthermore, because successful horror depends less on expensive

pyrotechnics than on a keen sense of narrative timing and a vivid audiovisual imagination, the production of scary movies can serve as a fertile training ground for young directors eager to learn the trade of proficient filmmaking and move up the ladder of their national film industry (Ryan 2009, 50).

In these and many other instances, the emergence of horror as a successful genre reflects a set of circumstances where daring creativity mixes with shrewd entrepreneurship (and a healthy dose of sadomasochism) to produce significant artifacts that bespeak the complex inner workings of a nation's cinematic culture. In some contexts, other genres might appear as signs of transformation and rejuvenation. The example of Italy immediately comes to mind. While horror was part of the industrial movement away from art-house neorealism in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was the "spaghetti western" that most brazenly operated the transition (Bondanella 2009, 307). But the fact remains that the evolutionary leap towards diversification always engenders an emergent genre that can thrive and flourish only under certain specific conditions, including cultural heterogeneity and economic pertinence. We argue that in Québec, horror has been the most flagrant spawn of diversification.

Popular cinema and literary adaptations

Pierre Véronneau has argued that the current generic diversification in Québec cinema has been paralleled by an increased interest in the adaptation of popular literary works (Véronneau 2006, 100–101). Generic diversification occurred earlier in Québec literature than in film. It is not surprising therefore that cinema would find inspiration from literary diversity. But beyond that, there is also a very pragmatic reason for contemporary filmmakers to look at bestsellers as sources for screenplays. In the same vein as the tried-and-true logic of generic conventions, adaptation of popular novels and plays is now seen as a means to ensure a certain degree of success by appealing to a pre-existing audience, at the same time as it may benefit from the cultural capital of the original.

Under the ascendancy of auteurism and art cinema, both generic formulas and adaptations were deemed suspicious: it was assumed that adaptations and generic conventions limited the artistic freedom of the auteur. This assumption seems to have greatly diminished under the current paradigm. Ranging from adaptations of Québec classics, like Charles Binamé's *Séraphin: un homme et son péché* (from Claude-Henri Grignon's book) and Erik Canuel's *Le Survenant* (2004, from Germaine Guévremont's novel), to screen versions of contemporary bestsellers, such as Robert Favreau's *Un dimanche à Kigali* (2006, transposed from Gil Courtemanche's novel), Laurent Cantet's *Vers le sud* (2005, adapted from short stories by Dany Laferrière), John L'Ecuyer's *Le goût des jeunes filles* (2004, also from Laferrière's canon) and Philippe Falardeau's *C'est pas moi, je le jure!* (2008, based on books by Bruno Hébert), some of the most memorable productions since 2000 have been inspired by already published material. And of course, Canada's two remarkable back-to-back Oscar nominations for best foreign-language film in 2011 and 2012, Denis Villeneuve's *Incendies* (2010) and Falardeau's *Monsieur Lazhar* (2011), are also adaptations (from stage plays by Wajdi Mouawad and Évelyne de la Chenelière, respectively).

The rise in popularity of adaptation among Québécois filmmakers has been instrumental in the drastic increase in horror film productions over the past 10 years, as most of the French-language horror films produced in Canada since 2000 have been inspired by popular novels. Roby's *La Peau blanche* was adapted from Joël Champetier's novel; Beaudin's *Le Collectionneur* was based on Christine Brouillet's book, and Éric Tessier's *Sur le seuil*

and *5150 Rue des Ormes*, as well as Daniel Grou-Podz's *Les Sept jours du talion* were all transposed from bestsellers by "le Stephen King Québécois," Patrick Senécal. We propose that this correlation between horror and adaptation is not a coincidence, for the very process of transposition from page to screen can serve to intensify, both in form and content, the unsettling effect central to horror. As is the tradition of adaptations, "otherness" is typically inherent in the transposition process, for we are aware that there exists *another text*, and so are sensitive to potential divergences from the initial work. Often we are predisposed to feel a certain resistance to, or perhaps at times even a purposeful distancing from, whichever of the forms (be it written or audiovisual) that we encounter second. One source is always more familiar than the other due to the order in which the productions are released, or as they are experienced—one narrative form is generally favored over the other. The result is often an *uncanny effect*, where the familiarity of the original is made strange through the process of adaptation. Not surprisingly then, the effect of horror adaptations is rendered even more potent, for the purposefully disquieting atmosphere of the original narrative is augmented through the uncanny effect of adaptation. Indeed, the anxiety created by the conflict between normality and monstrous strangeness,⁴ which forms the basis of all horror fiction, can be amplified by the opposition between the *written* narration and the *audiovisual* adaptation.

Most of these original literary works have in common the theme of geographical otherness as a source of fear. In the three novels by Senécal, horror is clearly associated with an impression of physical distance from safety. In *5150* . . . an unfortunate young man, Yannick, whose bicycle breaks down in the wrong place at the wrong time (in the film, this occurs when the leisurely exploration of his new surroundings is disturbed by the sudden crossing of a black cat, an omen of the danger that awaits him in this unfamiliar neighborhood); he is held captive in a house that is just isolated enough to thwart any easy rescue. In *Les 7 jours* . . . a secluded cabin becomes a torture chamber for a father, Bruno, seeking revenge on his daughter's rapist and murderer. And in *Sur le seuil*, a psychiatrist, Paul, travels to a remote village to discover the disturbing personal history of one of his strangest patients. Interestingly, this geographical otherness is one which characters *actively* seek out for one reason or another: the experience of new surroundings (Yannick); the destination in an investigation (Paul); or the use of isolation as a coping method (Bruno). They oddly embrace physical distance, even when unfamiliar locations are confining, and threaten to engulf the character.

Distance is also central to the impression of terror created in *Le Collectionneur*, in which a "killer from the States," Rochon, kidnaps a Québécois boy and sequesters him in a torture chamber in Maine. And in *La Peau blanche*, a young man from France, Thierry (he is from the remote Gaspé Peninsula in the film) is haunted by a Montreal succubus. Horror in these novels is therefore not simply a generic opposition between normality and monstrosity, but also a geographical conflict between the familiar milieu of safety and reason and the place of revulsion, insanity and terror. Much of the creepy effect of these novels results from a sense of geographical disorientation; what Amy Ransom calls "deterritorialization" in her contribution to this special issue, or what is perhaps best captured by the French term, *dépaysement* (Loïselle 2008). Not coincidentally, the film adaptations greatly intensify this sense of disorientation through film techniques that purposefully clash with literary techniques to destabilize the viewer familiar with the bestselling original.

Tessier's *Sur le seuil* is probably the best example of this multi-layered *dépaysement*, for here, the conflict is based primarily on the obvious dichotomy between modern urban space and traditional rural environment. Even a superficial reading of the novel and the film suggests immediately that the source of terror is the result of a displacement from the

familiar metropolis dominated by science and logic to the distant village where religion and superstitions dominate.

Senécal's novel is narrated in the first person by Paul Lacasse, a disillusioned, skeptical psychiatrist who has lost faith in just about everything. When he is presented with the case of horror novelist, Thomas Roy, who chopped off his fingers and tried to commit suicide, Paul becomes increasingly confused by the strange behavior of his new patient. His investigation eventually takes him away from Montréal to the small village of Mont-Mathieu where he discovers that Thomas is the spawn of Evil. There are two levels of dislocation in the novel: one cognitive, the other cultural. On the one hand, the psychiatrist is mystified by an inexplicable case and, on the other hand, the Montrealer arriving in the village of Mont-Mathieu is profoundly disturbed by the archaism of the isolated community. In the novel, Paul describes his arrival at the village as follows:

I'm on a small country road, under a cloudy sky. . . . I'm becoming increasingly nervous. . . . I drive in front of a general store, and a few small houses. Elderly pedestrians are watching me suspiciously. . . . I stop and get out of my car. Complete calm. The Church is utterly isolated. . . . A terrible anxiety suddenly paralyzes me. . . . And I am seriously contemplating turning back and leaving. Escaping . . . back to Montreal and just retire. That's it. The hell with Roy; the hell with explanations. (Senécal 1998, 341)⁵

The anguish of the city-dweller confronted with this freakishly antiquated and eerily quiet rural space evokes geographical and even temporal otherness. This parallels the cognitive dissonance that the physician experiences before Roy's confusing case. This is typical of the tale of terror, in which rational characters who are faced with unexplainable phenomena come to question their own sanity, and sense or realize an otherness about themselves. For Paul, who initially refuses to believe that Thomas Roy is anything but a regular patient suffering from a rare psychosis, the gradual recognition that the writer is the embodiment of evil is inconceivable. Yet, after his investigation into the origins of the Roy case, he eventually accepts that the village church where Thomas was born following a black mass hides horrible secrets that cannot be fathomed. Paul relates:

. . . I turn towards the Church. It stands against the dark sky, overwhelming . . . it seems terrible and threatening. I feel as though it conceals petrifying secrets, and if I were to open the door, a stream of blood and corpses would pour out to my feet. Father Lemay [the village priest] is right; the full truth remains unknowable. . . . And even if I could discover this truth, would I even be able to comprehend it? (Senécal 1998, 388)⁶

Tessier's film builds on both the cognitive dissonance of the rational being faced with an irrational reality and the *dépaysment* of the Montrealer lost in a creepy rural environment, but also adds a third level of troubling dislocation through the use of cinema-specific techniques that amplify the destabilizing effect of the novel; and this is precisely where adaptation is especially suited to horror.

As some critics have noted,⁷ while the novel provides the reader with an anchor through Paul's first-person narration, which affords at least some degree of linguistic rationality, the film must necessarily dispense with the abstract logic of written language and, in the process, denies the viewer the stability of the scribed account. Furthermore, the 100-minute movie is also compelled to simplify the complexity of the Roy case that the novel takes dozens of pages to expose. But what the film lacks in expository material, it makes up for in gory spectacle. For example, though Senécal devotes seven pages to the description of the horrific night that saw the birth of Roy, the film devotes to the event only a two-minute succession of disturbing shots. The frantically edited sequence is as startling as it is

succinct, not unlike the sudden fragmented bursts that appear throughout the film to dissect the narrative, with their violent deep reds and obscured scratched images layered with the sounds of slicing, scraping, and chanting.

Whether or not they enjoyed the film, critics all acknowledged that Tessier succeeds in creating extremely intense montage sequences, whose unbearable shock effect is amplified by disturbingly oppressive music.⁸ The geographical disorientation and cognitive dissonance of the novel are thus intensified through the audiovisual confusion created by high-voltage cinematic techniques that do not *mean* but rather *affect*. Paul's (Michel Côté) long reflections on the complexity of the case in the novel become a structured absence in the film. The spectator senses that there is a "lack" in the film that the images and sounds attempt to cloak. The sensory saturation produced by the flow of colors and noises confound the viewer, who sees too much and comprehends too little. There is no doubt that the audiovisual fragmentation that characterizes the scenes of horror in Tessier's film successfully enhances the pleasurable destabilization that horror fans yearn to experience.

Critiquing traditional themes of Québec culture

The frighteningly fragmented imagery of Tessier's film evokes another level of interpretation, namely, that of the cultural fragmentation of the nation. The urbanite's growing terror as he arrives in the small village suggests a deep sense of alienation in this "foreign" space. This is a rather rare phenomenon in Québec cinema but, as we will see, quite common in the Québec horror film. Generally, characters in Québec movies feel at home anywhere in their national territory. Indeed, the Montrealer often feels more comfortable in the countryside than in the city, for the rural setting is deemed to be the authentic space of French-Canadian culture. As Gillian Helfield explains in her article, "Cultivateurs d'images: Albert Tessier and the Rural Tradition in Québécois cinema," the idea of the peaceful countryside as the space where the essence of Québécois identity resides remains a common trope (Helfield 2006, 61). In canonical films like Groulx's *Le Chat dans le sac* and Gilles Carle's 1972 *La vraie nature de Bernadette*, as well as in more recent films such as Jean-François Pouliot's 2003 *La grande séduction*, Denys Arcand's 2007 *L'Âge des ténèbres* and Bernard Émond's 2005 *La Neuvaïne*, discussed at some length by Jerry White in his contribution to this issue of ARCS, the countryside is depicted as the repository of the fundamental values of Québec culture; where the real Québec is situated. When the alienated urbanite goes back to the country it is to rediscover the values—embodied visually in rustic houses and trees and lakes and snow—that s/he has lost somewhere along the way through overexposure to the busy streets, noisy bars, inhuman office towers, and foreign influences of the city. Québec's only French-language horror film of the 1970s, *Le Diable est parmi nous*, conveys exactly this message, albeit through the excessive mode typical of the genre. In this film, foreign-looking *objets d'arts* are instrumental in turning a group of Montrealers into devil worshippers. While the film ends on the pessimistic note that the devil walks among us ("parmi nous") in the streets of the big city, the film offers a brief escape from this threat when, halfway through the narrative, the main character (Daniel Pilon) and his girlfriend (Louise Marleau) drive away from the urban nightmare to a small village where they can enjoy, however briefly, a return to pastoral peacefulness (Loiselle 2010, 147).

Contemporary Québec horror cinema functions very differently. In these recent films, the main character feels estranged in his own nation. Indeed, Paul's sense of dread when he drives through the eerily quaint streets of Mont-Mathieu in *Sur le seuil* reflects a common theme among the corpus discussed here. In *Saints-Martyrs-des-Damés* it is a tabloid journalist from the city, Flavien (François Chénier), who is thoroughly disconcerted by

the strangeness of the remote town where he arrives to investigate a story about strange disappearances. A similar situation is found in one of the rare Québec television shows to include elements of horror, *Grande Ourse* (Patrice Sauvé 2003–2004), in which again an urban journalist, Louis-Bernard (Marc Messier) finds himself in a weird rural environment seemingly peopled by ancient witches. The fish-out-of-water formula of throwing urbanites in the middle of an unfamiliar and threatening rural setting is certainly not rare. One only needs to think of *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972) or its English Canadian counterpart, *Rituals* (Peter Cater, 1977). However, it is quite unusual in Québec cinema for, as mentioned above, this culture has tended to construct an image of itself as a homogenous community whose members might lose their way on the traffic-jammed boulevards of the metropolis, but are always just a Sunday car ride away from “l’essence du peuple québécois” in the countryside.

But this homogenous nation, if it ever existed, has started to experience profound fragmentation: the acrimonious debates around reasonable accommodations for immigrants, which have pitted multicultural cities against more conservative regions;⁹ the tensions between students, the government and the general population during the recent university and college strikes;¹⁰ the split in the separatist movement, with no less than three political parties in the province claiming to represent the only viable option to achieve sovereignty (Parti québécois, Québec solidaire, and Option nationale). All these, and other similar cases, manifest internecine struggles that are tearing to pieces the united nation. It is not surprising that horror—a genre fixated on catastrophic dismemberment—would emerge at this time to reflect the disintegration of traditional notions about Québec society.

Senécal’s *5150 Rue des Ormes* and *Les 7 jours du talion*, as well as their screen adaptations, epitomize the rising fear in Québec that those with whom we share deep cultural bonds have become a threat. The ordinary Québécois men at the center of each text, respectively Yannick (Marc-André Grondin) a college student, and Bruno (Claude Legault) a physician, are faced with the incomprehensible evidence that their nemeses—a murderous vigilante in *5150 . . .* and a sadistic pedophile in *Les 7 jours . . .*—are themselves ordinary Québécois men. Horror in these novels and films is not caused by some heretic “Other” from some foreign land. Rather, it is caused by shocking familiarity; here, the familiar, the ordinary, the homogeneous are the source of irrepressible panic. Both heroes and villains are “Canadian français pure laine”—old-stock French Canadians—who stem from the same ethnic heritage. In these texts, fear arises from the inconceivable personal and cultural affinity between protagonists and antagonists. What horrifies Yannick and Bruno is that monstrosity exists in such mundane people—“pure laine” French-Canadian men who, in many ways, are so much like them.

We argue that this theme can be read, at least in part, as the reflection of a profound apprehension in Québec with regard to internal conflicts that threaten to obliterate the myth of the homogeneous nation. Moreover, the fact that the main characters (villain and hero) are *all men* can also encourage an interpretation of the texts as analogies for deep masculine anxieties within the Québécois nationalist project. The nationalist project, Jeffery Vacante argues, was an attempt at “masculine emancipation.” He writes:

Many Québec nationalists have also defined their own heterosexual virility according to their ability to lead the province out of its figurative state of homosexual weakness and dependence within Canadian federalism [. . .] In addition to reversing almost two centuries of humiliation and subservience within the “colonial” shackles of the federal state, then, the push for “decolonization” and subsequent calls for independence came to be seen as necessary steppingstones to achieving full manhood. (Vacante 2006, 98)

As such, the failure of the nationalist ideal corresponds to a failure of men, who remain trapped in shackles imposed by other men who are, themselves, prisoners of their own impotence. Villain and hero in *5150 . . .* and *Les 7 jours . . .* are at once identical to one another and drastically different. While they are both trapped, the villain has the uncompromising insight afforded by an evil conscience that recognizes the inescapability of bondage. The “hero,” for his part, still naively believes in freedom and masculinity. Bruno is tragically blinded by his masculine desire to achieve bloody vengeance for the rape and murder of his daughter and Yannick is self-destructively fixated on his masculine desire to beat his captor in a game of chess. Both defeat their opponent, but are equally defeated in their aim to assert their masculine dominance. These and other horror films expose the breakdown of the Québécois male and of Québec society as a whole, as it tears itself to pieces in a vain effort to achieve self-determination.

Such cultural hermeneutics might appear somewhat suspicious. Indeed, it could be argued that trying to determine the ethos of an entire nation through an analysis of a couple of novels and their film versions is a rather dubious exercise in overgeneralization. Yet in this case, there might be something to it. If nothing else, commercial success seems to indicate that Québec spectators do recognize something of themselves in these tales of terror, that there is a presence of horrific affinities shared not only between the protagonists and antagonists, but by the viewers as well. Daniel Grou-Podz’s adaptation of *Les 7 jours du talion* ranked among the five top-grossing Québec films of 2010,¹¹ repeating the success of Tessier’s 2003 version of *Sur le seuil* (Loiselle and McSorley 2006, 321–322). As for Tessier’s *5150, rue des Ormes*, it ranked a respectable seventh among the Québec box-office hits of 2009 (Tremblay 2009, B8). Given that the horror film is a niche genre, such results are nothing short of remarkable. Clearly Québécois audiences find something in these horror stories that strikes a chord, and what makes this chord resonate is the horrific recognition of a radical alterity within themselves. The uncanny pleasure of these films rests in the misrecognition of familiarity as incomprehensible difference.

The Uncanny Effect of Co-production

The uncanny impression that familiarity has become bizarre and malignant can be augmented when recognizable settings are made strange and well-known faces masquerade as foreigners, as in the case of co-productions. While co-productions tend to have a bad reputation in Canada, because they compel Montreal to become Paris, or Toronto to become Chicago, in the case of horror, this kind of *dépaysement* can successfully intensify the degree of discomfort and trepidation characteristic of the genre, while maintaining its relevance for local audiences. Pascal Laugier’s *Martyrs* (2008) is probably the best example of the creative potential of co-production. Set in France but shot entirely in Québec, the France-Canada collaboration was a “succès de scandale” everywhere it played due to its scenes of extreme violence against women. More than just another contribution to the “gorno”¹² sub-genre epitomized by the *Hostel* series (2005, 2007, 2011), *Martyrs* provides a philosophical justification for its disconcerting spectacle of torture and abuse: the search for saintly transcendence which martyrs experience at the threshold of death. Young women are used for these experiments in transcendental pain, for they are “more responsive to transfiguration.”

There is certainly more to these displays of violence than meets the eye. One hour into the film, the idealist search for transcendence is made manifest when it is explained to the main character, Anna (Morjana Alaoui), why she is about to be physically and psychologically tormented beyond her worst nightmares. But as a co-production, *Martyrs* hints at the

fact that it is not just another splatter film much earlier. After an eight-minute prologue, during which a young girl, Lucie (Jessie Pham), who has been victim of horrible abuse is placed in an orphanage and befriends young Anna (Erika Scott), the title of the film appears and we move forward 15 years. It is a glorious morning and a normal, happy family is having breakfast. The setting seems to be France, since the characters speak with what seems to be a Parisian accent. But it isn't, really. All four members of the family are played by recognizable Québec actors, and their *faux* Parisian accents all sound "off." The father and mother are played by veteran performers Robert Toupin and Patricia Tulasne. Up-and-coming young star Juliette Gosselin appears as the teenage girl, and her brother is incarnated by the soon-to-be-famous golden boy of Québec cinema, Xavier Dolan.

For the Québec spectator who recognizes these local actors masquerading as French petit bourgeois, this mundane scene of blissful domesticity in a peaceful *banlieue* sticks out like a sore thumb. Something is definitely wrong; this normal family is all *but* normal. It is therefore no real surprise when Lucie, now an adult, bursts onto the scene with a shotgun and blows them all to smithereens. Nothing in this film is what it seems: Lucie's seemingly random act of gruesome violence against an innocent family is in fact a justified revenge for unspeakable cruelty; the "innocent" family are actually members of a secret society that kidnaps and tortures young women; unlike what might be expected in such a tale of terror, the tortures are never sexual and never gratuitous; as has been pointed out by some feminist critics, this intense violence against women "is not misogynistic, rather it infers the converse . . . that women are most capable of transcending the physical limitations of self-identity" (Gruno 2011, 151); and this disgusting gore-fest is in fact an investigation, not only of the display of rage as retribution rather than as a sexualized exploitation, but more importantly, as an attempt to explore the deeply spiritual question of transfiguration.¹³

One of the most meaningful moments in *Martyrs*, as a co-production, is two-thirds through the film when Anna meets the elderly leader of the sect, Mademoiselle, who explains the purpose of all this brutality. Played by celebrated Québec actress Catherine Bégin, Mademoiselle elaborates on how she and her followers are not trying to victimize women—although it is generally the unavoidable result. Rather, they are trying to create a martyr, who will experience transfiguration and witness firsthand the secrets of the great beyond.¹⁴ At the end of the film, as Anna realizes her martyrdom and survives to tell Mademoiselle what she saw, the old woman is incapable of facing the Truth and chooses to shoot herself. For the Québec spectator who recognizes Bégin and her *faux* French accent, the search for the transcendence of martyrs might take on particular connotations.

Martyrs have a special place in the Québec collective consciousness. Not only is there another contemporary horror film with the word "martyrs" in the title—*Saints-Martyrs-des-Damnés*—but one of the most famous and culturally influential French Canadian films, *La petite Aurore, l'enfant martyre* (Jean-Yves Bigras, 1952; remade in 2005 Luc Dionne), is all about a young girl being tortured to death by an older woman—her evil stepmother. Furthermore, from nineteenth century rebel Louis Riel¹⁵ to 1990s separatist Lucien Bouchard,¹⁶ the Québécois have had a tendency to perceive some historical figures as veritable sacrificial lambs for the Francophone cause. In Québec literature, symbolist poet Émile Nelligan (Brissette 1998, 69–78) and 1960s experimental novelist Hubert Aquin (Soron 2001, 10) have assumed the role of national martyr. And most recently, the Anglophone politician Jack Layton, who managed to touch Québécois hearts shortly before his death after a long terminal illness, was also hailed as "un martyr de la politique canadienne" (Dutrisac 2011). The perceptive Québec spectator might recognize through Catherine Bégin's subtle accent as a French Mademoiselle a familiar yearning for a transcendental experience that would transform the victim into a martyr; an

extraordinary person who could break free from the petty limitations of everyday life and achieve ultimate sovereignty. But perhaps the Québécois, like Mademoiselle, could not face the overwhelming freedom beyond the banality of their lives within the prosaic limits of federalism.

Conclusion

As a genre, the horror film thrives on contradiction and uncertainty: the destabilizing liminal space where staunch rationalism clashes with cognitive dissonance; where inflexible conventions struggle with erratic creativity; where the bottom-line demands of the industry threaten cultural relevance and specificity. In the Québec context, contemporary horror has emerged at the intersection of serious art and crass commercialism, literature and film, the city and the countryside, Canada and France. The message that horror conveys is not a pleasant one (we are definitely not talking about romantic comedies here). As a cultural artifact, horror speaks of social disintegration. It belongs to the *mythoi* that Northrop Frye has labeled “Sparagmos”: the tearing apart of the body or the breakdown of society, before it is reconfigured into a new entity, the “Anagnorisis” (Frye 1957, 192). Its theme is brutal death and its form is visual laceration.

But to flourish as a commercial enterprise, horror must also operate under favorable material circumstances that can sustain its idiosyncratic styles and peculiar audience appeals. It can succeed only within an industry that enables it to combine formulaic narratives and characters with innovative plot twists and striking audiovisual effects. Its producers must be *auteurs* as much as businessmen. Thus, paradoxically, it is the amalgamation of a maturing film industry and an unstable social context that has fostered the successful rise of the French-language horror film in the province. When these necessary conditions disappear, the horror film will disappear along with them. But not to worry; as all horror fans know, just when you think the monster has finally been repressed, it always comes back to bite you.

Notes

1. While genre purists might argue that some of these films are “tales of terror,” featuring human villains such as the serial killer of *Le Collectionneur*; rather than pure “horror films,” showcasing supernatural monsters such as the werewolves of *Le Poil de la bête*, we see no value in making such a distinction here. What matters is that all these films seek to disturb, shock and scare their audiences. This in our view is enough to categorize them under the rubric of “horror.” For a “purist” perspective on horror see Carroll (1990).
2. See http://www.telefilm.ca/files/fonds_prog/cfff_production_guidelines_french_language_market.pdf (accessed on July 2, 2012).
3. Matt Hays, “Prez points to funder’s role in Quebec film renaissance,” *Playback*, 21 November 2005. Online version: <http://playbackonline.ca/2005/11/21/chaput-20051121/>.
4. The tension between monstrosity and normality has often been seen as the fundamental characteristic of horror. See Wood (1979) and Lenne (1985).
5. “Je me retrouve sur un petit chemin de campagne, sous un ciel couvert . . . la nervosité me gagne de plus en plus. . . Je passe devant un magasin général, quelques petites maisons colorées, des piétons plutôt agés qui me regardent d’un air méfiant. . . Je m’arrête et sors de mon véhicule. Le calme est total. L’église est entièrement isolée. . . Une angoisse terrible me paralyse soudain. . . Et j’envisage alors très sérieusement de tourner les talons et de partir. Fuir . . . retourner à Montréal et prendre ma retraite. Point final. Tanpis pour Roy, tant pis pour les explications.” (authors’ translation)
6. “je tourne la tête vers l’église. Elle se dresse contre le ciel noir, imposante . . . elle me semble terrible et menaçante. J’ai l’impression que des secrets immondes s’y trouvent camouflés et

que, si j'ouvrais la porte, un flot de sang et de cadavres déferlerait jusqu'à mes pieds. . . . Le père Lemay (le curé du village) a raison, la vérité complète demeure dans l'ombre. . . . Et même si je pouvais atteindre cette vérité, serais-je capable de la recevoir?" (authors' translation)

7. See for instance, Lessard (2003).
8. See for instance, Lessard (2003) and Bilodeau (2003).
9. For comments on the chiasm between Montreal and the regions around reasonable accommodations, see for instance, Marie Ève Mathieu (2007), Kathleen Lévesque (2007), Sébastien Rodrigue (2007).
10. The heated debates in the op-ed pages of *La Presse* and *Le Devoir* manifest the tension between students, the government and the population stuck between the two. See for instance, "La crise étudiante: des citoyens divisés," *La Presse*, April 27, 2012.
11. Anonymous, "L'année 2010 au cinéma," *La Voix de l'est*, December 31, 2010, 22.
12. Term coined by film critic David Edelstein in *New York Magazine* in reference to *Hostel*, from "gore" and "porno."
13. For an insightful and thorough analysis of the film, see Gree (2011).
14. The film's premise is reminiscent of René Girard's work on violence and the sacrificial scapegoat (Girard 1972). In a nutshell, "Girard contends that human culture is founded on violence done to an innocent victim" (Hardin 1992, 108). As such, *Martyrs* offers a reflection on the fundamental human belief in the transcendental power of violence.
15. Shortly after Riel's execution, on November 16, 1885, the Montreal newspaper *La Presse* published a 96-page special issue entitled *Louis Riel, martyr du Nord-Ouest: sa vie, son procès, sa mort*.
16. See Lawrence Martin's comments on Bouchard's "martyr complex" (Martin 1998, 284).

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