

4 Pure Laine Evil: The Horrifying Normality of Quebec's Ordinary Hell in the Film Adaptations of Patrick Senécal's "Romans d'épouvante"

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*He has a small brown mustache and curly brown hair that make him look rather tacky ... a typical suburbanite.*¹

Patrick Senécal, *5150, rue des ormes*

This is how Yannick Bérubé, a college student on a bike ride gone awry, describes Jacques Beaulieu when he initially meets him at the beginning of popular author Patrick Senécal's first horror novel, *5150, rue des ormes* (*5150 Elms Way*), published in 1994. Little does Yannick know, at this early point in the story, that this rather tacky, typical suburbanite is about to point a shotgun at him, lock him up in a small room, and hold him captive for several months. Throughout the novel, as in the film adaptation directed by Éric Tessier in 2009, Yannick is understandably disconcerted by his terrifying circumstances. But what is most disturbing to the student is the radical disconnect between the insanely malicious actions of the monster who keeps him trapped in his house, and the bewildering ordinariness of this middle-aged, middle-class man and his typical French-Canadian family. When Yannick first learns the name of his captor, he writes in his journal: "This name is just too banal; totally incongruous for such a demented man. I imagined he'd have some bizarre name with a bunch of Xs and Ys. Jacques Beaulieu. It's horrifyingly normal!"²

This horrifying normality, this "enfer ordinaire" as filmmaker Tessier puts it,³ not only is at the centre of *5150, rue des ormes*, but also characterizes all three of Senécal's "romans d'épouvante" that have been brought to the screen over the last decade: *5150, rue des ormes*, *Sur le seuil* (novel 1998; film 2003, Éric Tessier, aka *Evil Words*), and *Les sept jours*

du talion (novel, 2002; film 2010, Daniel Grou-Podz, aka *7 Days*) (and a fourth adaptation on the way: *Hell.Com* [novel, 2009; film to be directed by Daniel Roby]).⁴ The three narratives do not share obvious stylistic similarities and thematic concerns. While *Sur le seuil* involves a strong dose of the supernatural, *Les sept jours du talion* and *5150, rue des ormes* are tales of terror exclusively concerned with the iniquities of human villainy. Furthermore, *Sur le seuil* and *5150, rue des ormes* adopt a comparable first-person narrative form, but *Les sept jours du talion* uses a conventional omniscient narration. The one element that recurs in all three novels, and which is foregrounded in the film versions, is the centrality of a male subject who is confronted with a villain whose monstrosity is marked by such banal ordinariness that it calls into question the hero's own sense of his "normal" self. These banal monsters have little to do with the mythical Wendigo that Aalya Ahmad discusses in the previous chapter. They are just average men who choose to drag other average men into their ordinary hell.

Evil and the Ordinary Québécois

College student Yannick in *5150, rue des ormes*, psychiatrist Paul in *Sur le seuil*, and surgeon Bruno in *Les sept jours du talion* are all men who comfortably belong in the cultural elite and (certainly in the case of Paul and Bruno, if less obviously for Yannick) economic elite of Quebec society. When they are thrown in the middle of horrific circumstances, their otherwise solid bourgeois values are shaken to the core and their sense of self is deeply undermined. But one particular aspect of their terrifying experience threatens them more than anything else: the alarming familiarity and troubling casualness with which they encounter their respective demons. The ordinary Québécois men at the centre of each text are faced with the incomprehensible evidence that their nemesis – a satanic novelist in *Sur le seuil*, a murderous vigilante in *5150*, and a sadistic pedophile in *Les sept jours* – are themselves ordinary Québécois men. Horror in these novels and films is not caused by some heretic "Other" from some foreign land. Rather, both heroes and villains are "Canadian français pure laine," old-stock French Canadians, who share cultural values and historical heritage. In these texts, fear emerges from the inconceivable personal and cultural affinity between protagonists and antagonists. What horrifies Yannick, Paul, and Bruno is that monstrosity exists in such mundane people – "pure laine" French Canadian men who, in many ways, are so much like them.

The idea that ordinary French Canadians might commit extraordinary acts of violence is certainly not new in Quebec cinema. While there have been relatively few horror films produced in Quebec,⁵ there is a long tradition of violence in French-Canadian films where the perpetrators and the victims belong to the same familiar culture. From the classic 1950s melodrama *La petite Aurore, l'enfant martyre* (1952, Jean-Yves Bigras), in which a nine-year girl is tortured to death by her father and stepmother, to Denys Arcand's 1970s rape-revenge movie, *Gina* (1975), in which a stripper and her thugs eliminate one by one the men who savagely assaulted her, including shoving one of them in a giant snow blower, there has been no lack of Québécois-on-Québécois brutality in French-Canadian cinema. However, in these and many other films produced over the past sixty years, there is generally a clear distinction between the aggressor and the prey. Most significantly, vile cruelty tends to be divided along gender lines. From Anne Claire Poirier's devastatingly realistic exploration of violence against women, *Mourir à tue-tête* (1979), to Denis Villeneuve's sombre fictionalization of the factual cold-blooded shooting of fourteen female students by a lone male assassin at Université de Montréal in 1989, *Polytechnique* (2009), Quebec cinema has often denounced the atrocity of spiteful misogyny.

But in the works considered here, the typical gender distinction is patently absent. French-Canadian men abuse and torture other French-Canadian men in a fratricidal conflict that suggests a perplexing, self-destructive drive. These internecine struggles reflect an intense anxiety about Quebec's increasingly untenable myth of the homogeneous nation. If it ever existed, the homogeneous nation has definitely started to experience profound fragmentation: the acrimonious debates around reasonable accommodations for immigrants, which have pitted multicultural cities against more conservative rural regions; the fierce tensions between students, the government, and the general population during the 2012 university and college strikes; 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 recent phenomena, manifest internal conflicts that are tearing to pieces the cohesive nation. It is not surprising that these horror films would emerge at this time to echo the disintegration of traditional notions about Quebec society, for horror is a genre gleefully fixated on disastrous dismemberment.⁶

Moreover, the fact that both protagonists and antagonists are men also encourages an interpretation of the texts as analogies for masculine insecurities within the Quebec nationalist project, in which the French-Canadian man is always doomed to failure. 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 (evidenced by two failed separatist referenda) corresponds to a failure of Quebec men, who remain trapped in shackles imposed by other men who are, themselves, prisoners of their own impotence.

Such cultural hermeneutics might appear somewhat suspicious. Indeed, suggesting that the ethos of an entire nation can be determined through an analysis of three novels and their film versions seems rather dubious. Yet in this case, there might be something to it. If nothing else, commercial success indicates that Quebec readers and spectators do recognize something of themselves in these tales of terror.

As early as 1998, with the publication of his second novel, *Sur le seuil*, Senécal was already starting to get some recognition as “le maître du roman d’horreur québécois” (Francoeur 1998, 7). Within a few years, the CEGEP teacher had become one of the top-selling authors of Éditions Alire, Quebec’s foremost publisher of science fiction, crime, spy, and horror novels (Chevrier 2003, 5). As Senécal’s novels were starting to sell in increasingly considerable numbers, his fame reached new heights thanks to cinema. Éric Tessier’s screen version of *Sur le seuil* ranked among the five top-grossing Quebec films of 2003 (Loiselle and McSorley 2006, 321–2), an achievement repeated in 2010 by Daniel Grou-Podz’s adaptation of *Les sept jours du talion* (“L’année 2010 ...” 2010). As for Tessier’s *5150, rue des ormes*, it ranked a respectable seventh among the Quebec box-office hits of 2009 (Tremblay 2009, B8). Given that the horror film is something of a niche genre (as I have said elsewhere, some people will never go to see horror films),⁷ such results are nothing short of remarkable. Clearly Quebecers find something in these horror books and films that strikes a chord, and an argument could be made that what makes this chord resonate are the horrific affinities

between the hero and the villain, which imply that *le monstre, c'est nous* (Vax 1960, 11).

This choice of words – “horrific affinities” – owes something to my co-editor, Gina Freitag, who developed the idea of the “shock of similarity” in her brilliant thesis on female characters in contemporary Canadian horror films. Freitag argues that in horror films such as the Canadian co-production *Orphan* (Jaume Collet-Serra, 2009), female protagonists encounter female antagonists in a “shock of similarity.” This “shock of similarity” occurs at

a moment of recognition between the two characters as they come to understand one another’s positions, not simply as victims of patriarchal “otherness” but as liminal figures ... [It is] a shared sense of connection with another, clear and distinct being, who also embodies the capacity for both good *and* evil. This moment brackets them within the narrative realm, highlighting their fragmentation from some collective (family, traditional notions of femininity, and so on). Horror is not necessarily inherent in the moment; rather, this moment acts as a catalyst for the horror which erupts as a result of it. (Freitag 2011, 65)

Freitag’s concept of the “shock of similarity” opens up possibilities beyond Linda Williams’s conventional model of shared victimization between the woman and the monster.⁸ Aside from shared victimization, there can also be shared villainy, shared violence, aggressive selfishness, and emotional greed. What is shocking in this recognition is that the heroine discovers in the female monster a sign of her own sadistic potential.

***5150, rue des ormes* and the Horror of Suburbanite Self-Righteousness**

Like the flawed mother Kate in *Orphan*, who recognizes her own destructive potential in her murderous adopted daughter Esther, Yannick recognizes himself in his tacky captor Beaulieu. But unlike the “shock of similarity,” which can be quite empowering for the woman who comes to appreciate her potential for violence and cruelty, the affinity between Bérubé and Beaulieu is paralyzing. And less than a sudden shock, as in *Orphan*, the recognition of affinity in *5150* is a maddeningly slow and neurotically incremental process of discovery which leads to an abyss of subjective futility and obsessive self-absorption.

Throughout *5150*, the novel, Yannick writes journal entries as his captivity persists. As the narrative unfolds Bérubé becomes increasingly captivated by his captor, Beaulieu. He becomes fascinated with the astounding coherence and delirious logic of Jacques's insanity (Senécal 2001, 140). He "masochistically tries to relive the sensation of terror" (2001, 70) he experienced when an angry Beaulieu almost strangled him to death after a failed escape attempt. Yannick's fixation on Beaulieu becomes so intense, in fact, that near the end of the novel, after he has managed to escape the Beaulieu house, he actually chooses to walk back to the site of his confinement to play a final game of chess with Jacques (2001, 287–8). Similarly, near the end of the film, Yannick refuses to leave when Beaulieu's wife, Maude, allows him to, and prefers instead to stay in the house at 5150 Elm's Way to wait for his chess opponent. This is in drastic contrast with the first part of the narrative, during which the young man desperately tries to escape and fantasizes about killing Beaulieu by stabbing him in the neck (2001, 93–4).

The tacky suburbanite that Yannick initially approaches to ask for help when his bicycle breaks down very quickly reveals his monstrosity. As Yannick first enters Beaulieu's house, he hears someone screaming for help. Curious, he climbs upstairs and finds a bleeding man, chained to a wall in an empty bedroom. As he quickly finds out, this is one of Beaulieu's many victims, one of the "sinners" whom the monstrously self-righteous suburbanite kidnapped and tortured in punishment for their guilty actions. Having been found out, Beaulieu abducts Yannick. But as the readers and spectators soon learn, Beaulieu cannot, in "good conscience," kill Yannick for the young man is not guilty of anything (2001, 16). He was only at the wrong place at the wrong time. So while the college student knows from the beginning that Beaulieu is a kidnapper, a killer, and, basically, a madman, he is also confronted with a tacky suburbanite who tries to be friendly under the circumstances and behave like a "good host." He invites Yannick to eat with him and his family and encourages him to play chess to pass the time. This pastime soon becomes an obsession for both men.

At first Yannick is appalled at the sense of incongruous normality that surrounds his dire circumstances: "There's a man locked up on the second floor of their house and this traditional little family eats dinner like any other day!" (2001, 49).⁹ He witnesses Maude "doing her work like a good little housewife. Surreal. Absurd" (2001, 53);¹⁰ and he sits in disbelief before a radiant Beaulieu, who looks like a genuinely delighted nice guy when Yannick eventually accepts to play chess with him (2001, 102). Yet,

the normality that Maude and Jacques project clashes with the strangeness of Beaulieu's children. Anne, a ten-year-old girl (visibly younger in the film), is forever silent, and her vacuous, mindless gaze is oddly menacing. Michelle, the sixteen-year-old *nymph fatale*, is as seductive as she is ferociously violent. In one of the most intense scenes of the film, which reflects a similar moment in the novel (2001, 110–11), Michelle viciously strikes Yannick on the shin with a baseball bat as he tries to escape, and repeatedly kicks and strikes him as he lies on the ground in excruciating pain. What renders this scene all the more disconcerting is the sunny suburban sky that shines over the inconspicuous backyard where the violence occurs. Michelle resembles her father, whose bouts of rage whenever the young man challenges him are terrifying. But while Jacques can switch back to perfect normality moments after a burst of fury, Michelle remains a constant threat. Yet Yannick starts to develop a fixation on this cruelly sensual teenager, which parallels his growing fixation on Beaulieu and his daily chess games. In the novel, Yannick dreams of Jacques and Michelle, the former playing chess, the latter seductively enticing the young man to hurt her (2001, 114). The crux of the narrative is Jacques's claim that, because he is righteous and punishes only unrighteous sinners, he can never lose at chess – the white pieces that he always uses symbolize his just cause (2001, 141). And by all accounts, Beaulieu is indeed a remarkable chess player, the undisputable champion of his local chess club whose incredible winning streak leads some of his peers at the club to speculate that he's made a deal with the devil (2001, 117). But Yannick does not believe that Jacques is unbeatable and therefore endeavours to win against him, at least once, to disprove his self-righteous theory. The novel elaborates at great length on Yannick's incredulity regarding Beaulieu's invincibility. No need to review the entire canon of adaptation theory to understand that the film has to be far more concise than the literary text in its evocation of the young man's suspicion. Rather than relying on an awkward voice-over to reproduce the journal entries, Tessier wisely chooses to use a simple but very effective visual device to bring to mind Yannick's disbelief. The director includes one brief shot that sows the seed of doubt in Yannick's mind. The first time Yannick is invited to eat super with the Beaulieus, about twenty minutes into the film, he sits in the dining room and notices all the plaques that commemorate Jacques's victories at the chess club. One wall is covered in such mementos of invincibility, except one spot: an absence that conspicuously breaks the chain of triumphant signifiers. Tessier does not foreground this (seemingly)

missing trophy at the time. But the shot in the dining room is quickly repeated later in the film when Jacques reasserts that he has never lost a game. This small empty space on the wall might go unnoticed on both occasions when the image appears on screen. But it is definitely visible. And it is this interval, this visual hiatus in the winning streak that gives rise to Yannick's obsessive certitude that he *can* beat Jacques – for he must have lost at least once, hence the one missing trophy.

The idea of a small spot on the wall that becomes the locus of obsession is rendered manifest through a somewhat typical but nevertheless effective device of the horror genre¹¹ as a blotch of blood in Yannick's prison room inexplicably grows until a pool of blood overwhelms the domestic cell. Like this small red mark, which eventually becomes omnipresent, the space of absence on the dining-room wall engenders Yannick's all-pervading obsession with winning against Beaulieu. Soon Yannick's room becomes something of a chessboard, both visually as the student covers the walls with chess graffiti, and narratively as Yannick increasingly identifies Beaulieu as the subject who dictates his every move.

Interspersed with distorted shots of the walls around him, images of Yannick's own abusive father, stunning nightmarish hallucinations in which Jacques bleeds ink as he beats his young opponent yet again, the captive student's intensifying obsession with Beaulieu and chess is counterpointed by segments of banal normality: Maude's mundane religiosity; typical tensions between a strict father and his insecure, rebellious teenage daughter; commonplace domestic violence. These are all markers of an unpleasant reality. But it is hardly the stuff of a horrifying descent into the bleeding bowels of hell. Even Jacques's righteous struggle against the unrighteous is rather unremarkable. The scene in which Jacques kills a reprobate with Michelle, as part of her "initiation" into her father's self-righteous operation, reveals the victim's sin as sexual deviancy: vague pedophilia, barely hinted at through mildly creepy behaviour. Again, hardly the stuff of an epic battle between good and evil. Similarly, Michelle's initiation scene in the novel involves a victim whose sin is racism (2001, 256); again, unpleasant, but not the stuff of Greek tragedy.

In the scene where the pedophile is killed the most powerful moment is not Jacques's self-righteous punishing of the sinner, but rather Michelle's incensed kicking and stabbing of the victim. While her father disapproves of this "unnecessary violence," the spectator is most enthralled by this sensuous outpour of aggression from the diminutive

but dangerous body of the teenager. Later in the film, when Michelle's boyfriend discovers Beaulieu's secret after accidentally coming across a videotape that Yannick had managed to record in the early days of his captivity, she does not hesitate to beat him to death using a digital camera. While one could easily read a facile metaphor on the horror film in this lethal use of a camera, what is most arresting about the scene is Michelle's ferocious violence against someone of whom she seemed to be rather fond just moments before.

In her extraordinary capacity for gruesome violence, Michelle is clearly the most dazzling presence in *5150, rue des ormes*. Not surprisingly, Sénécal has further developed her character in the eight-episode web series, *La reine rouge*¹² (Sénécal et al., 2011) in which Beaulieu's daughter moves on after her father's arrest to cause more chaos and mayhem. But as strangely attractive as she might be, Michelle remains marginal in *5150*. She is merely the sensual, irrational, passionate mirror image of her father's manic logic. Similarly, Maude, with whom the young man develops an awkward friendship,¹³ is merely an appendage to Jacques. While Yannick helps her understand that her traditional religious submissiveness has enabled Beaulieu to commit his crimes, when she is finally ready to leave her own oppressive prison, the student is unwilling to help her escape, fixated as he is on playing one more game of chess against the local champion. Even after witnessing Maude's suicide, he runs to work on a strategy to beat his chess opponent.

When Beaulieu discovers his wife hanged in the closet, he and Yannick mutually accuse each other of being the unrighteous man responsible for her death. To solve the question, they decide to play a final game with Beaulieu's special chess set: a human-size set where the pieces are incarnated by all of Jacques's victims whom he painstakingly preserved as trophies like stuffed animals and the recently deceased Maude has just been crowned White Queen. Now sharing Beaulieu's insanity, Yannick readily accepts to play the game. As Yannick is on the verge of victory, Anne, the silent child with the sinister gaze, enters the scene. As she recognizes her dead mother in the middle of the giant chessboard, she puts an end to the demented competition by screaming and attacking her father. Terrified by this little monster, Jacques frantically grabs his shotgun and kills the girl. Incredibly, Yannick begs Beaulieu to finish the game, in vain. Having killed an innocent child, Beaulieu has all of a sudden invalidated his self-righteous theory. In his own mind, Beaulieu has irrevocably lost the game. Henceforth, he will remain silent and does not resist arrest when the police arrive on the premises.

Months later, back to his “normal” life, Yannick remains obsessed with the chess game he never finished. Unable to communicate with others, including his girlfriend, he has withdrawn into an imaginary world where he and Beaulieu sit at a table, on the verge of playing chess. The film’s final scene is highly theatrical, comprised of a brilliantly nightmarish decor where banal suburban houses surrounded by gothic trees and fog engulf the players in a bleached-out environment of lunacy. The clash between theatricality and realism – “le choc entre la folie totale et la normalité,” which first attracted Tessier to the novel (Laurin 2009, 68) – echoes the typical composition of Senécal’s “romans d’épouvante,” in which the mundane and the monstrous coexist to evoke a world where normality and aberration are intertwined.

***Les sept jours du talion* and the Dread of Ubiquitous Pedophilia**

The ordinariness of violent insanity is even more explicitly highlighted in *Les sept jours du talion*. Something of a mirror image of Senécal’s first novel, *Les sept jours* also deals with self-righteous punishment. But this time the “hero” is the vigilante, seeking retribution for the rape and murder of his daughter Jasmine. As the novel opens, Jasmine’s body has already been found in a field near her school; her murderer has already been arrested; and Bruno’s elaborate plan to kidnap, torture, and eventually kill the culprit has already been set in motion.

Like Beaulieu, an average Joe whose fifteen-year killing spree began when he slaughtered the incompetent physician responsible for the death of his stillborn son,¹⁴ Bruno is an ordinary man who, presented with the horrific death of his child, is pushed over the edge of sanity. With *Les sept jours*, as with *5150, rue des ormes*, Senécal productively taps into the pedophilic mentality that has dominated not only Quebec, but all of North America over the past several years. “Pedophilia,” in its etymological sense of “love of children,” has indeed become an omnipresent credo, verging on dogma, in our society. It is everywhere to be seen in contemporary culture – from Oprah Winfrey’s heartwarming stories about special kids and John Gray’s self-help parenting best-seller saccharinely entitled *Children Are from Heaven* (1999) to Pitt-Jolie style adoption extravaganzas and reality shows such as *Toddlers and Tiaras* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. It is not surprising then that in a society so fixated on children, pedophiles (in the narrowly pathological sense of the term) would become front-page news and emerge as the

villain par excellence in tales of terror. Where Senécal proves most original and daring in his treatment of pedophilia, as a theme much broader than a mere psychiatric disorder, is in his argument that there is a very fine line between a monstrous obsession with prepubescent girls and the intense love that an ordinary man feels towards his daughter. What lies at the core of *Les sept jours du talion* is precisely a demonstration that the ordinary man in his obsession with his deceased child can become as monstrous as the murderer himself.

The intense bond between Bruno and Jasmine in the film is represented through a few stereotypical moments that immediately signal that father and daughter have a special relationship. The girl is heard insisting that her dad, rather than her mom, should spend time with her. He insists on getting a kiss as his “dessert” before the daughter leaves and carefully ties a bow in her hair. In a brief but noteworthy scene, Bruno and Jasmine are espied in the distance walking on the sidewalk and heard chatting playfully. Significantly, another father-daughter pair is also seen in this long shot. The pairs are so similar that, given the distance, it is difficult to know which one is overheard on the soundtrack. The “doubling” effect suggests that while very intense, Bruno and Jasmine’s relationship is not uncommon: any “ordinary man” blessed with a charming daughter would love her as intensely as Bruno loves Jasmine.

Throughout the novel, the omniscient narrator often comments on Bruno’s ordinariness: while as a surgeon he is comfortably wealthy, he lives a normal, uneventful life. His house is sober (Senécal 2002, 90), decorated in a simple, tasteful, but non-ostentatious manner (2002, 108). Bruno and his wife Sylvie drive ordinary cars and own a small, ordinary cabin.¹⁵ Bruno himself looks quite ordinary: he is described in the novel as a balding, slim, aging thirty-eight-year-old with brown eyes.¹⁶ As is to be expected, the film version is much more limited in its ability to convey the concept of “ordinariness” – again, it would be awkward to have a voice-over narration waxing poetic over the banality of Bruno’s life. Rather, director Grou-Podz chooses to evoke the ordinariness of the surgeon indirectly by emphasizing the analogy between him and the detective in charge of investigating his case, Hervé Mercure.

As in the novel, Mercure’s wife in the film was murdered, and he is experiencing great difficulty in mourning his loss (2002, 107). But while this information is gradually introduced in the novel, it appears at the very beginning of the film. Even before spectators encounter Bruno, we have already seen the dejected Mercure, living a life of banal routine

interrupted only by his obsessive review of the surveillance tape that recorded his wife's random execution during a convenience-store robbery. The darkness and dreariness of his house, the fact that he sleeps on the couch, the boarded-up bedroom door, his slow, heavy movements through his morose domestic space, and, of course, his repeated viewing of the shooting, all create the impression of a heartbroken individual who tries to cope as best he can. This is how an ordinary man deals with tragedy.

A similar moroseness and silent introspection characterize the few scenes that show Bruno and Sylvie after the discovery of Jasmine's body. But as the grieving father starts plotting his revenge, the surface resemblance between the cop and the surgeon is replaced by a deeper analogy. This similarity is constructed according to the well-established crime-thriller convention of a complex parallel between the troubled cop and the tormented suspect he is pursuing. Matching close-ups and voice-image overlaps are used to connect the angst-ridden criminal and the suffering police officer. As the parallel unfolds there emerges a sense of both "ordinariness" and "aberration." The ordinariness of the detective's difficult mourning serves as a point of reference from which we can imagine an alternative to Bruno's radical actions. They are two ordinary men, but while one chooses routine bereavement, the other follows the path of horrifying atrocity.

Like Jacques Beaulieu, Bruno Hamel is initially convinced that he is doing the right thing and sees in the succession of coincidences that aid his vengeful project clear indications that his cause is just (2002, 24–5, 31). But as the narrative unfolds, the self-righteous vigilante becomes increasingly monstrous, increasingly similar to the murderous pedophile, to whom Hamel always refers in the novel as "le monstre." Having kidnapped "le monstre" and sequestered him in an isolated country house for a seven-day nightmare of horrific tortures, Bruno begins with brute physical assaults on the rapist-murderer. His first act of violence, both in the film and in the novel, is to unceremoniously crush the captive's right knee with a sledgehammer (2002, 95). In the novel, Bruno eventually moves on from straightforward violence to performative torment, in which spectacle becomes a strategy of fear inducement. Bruno "runs towards the monster, wielding the sledgehammer and grimacing theatrically. His prisoner screams in terror and covers his face as Bruno lowers the sledgehammer and starts to laugh."¹⁷ From this moment in the novel, when Bruno performs terrifying threats rather than merely inflicting pain, his actions bring him increasingly close to the realm of



Figure 4.1. Video capture from *Les sept jours du talion*. Courtesy of Go Films.

monstrosity. As I have argued elsewhere (Loiselle 2008), the monster is necessarily theatrical and the performance of villainy is intrinsic to the sensation of fear and terror that the horror text seeks to elicit: “The monster’s very name, derived from the Latin *monstrare*, connotes the state of being put on display. By definition, the monster is theatrical, for it must be perceived as a menacing spectacle in order to achieve its terrifying impact” (3).

It is no coincidence, therefore, that shortly after Bruno’s theatrical performance of villainy in the novel, elements of the narrative establish an increasingly direct link between Bruno and “le monstre.” From a legal perspective, one character points out, the crime of abduction, torture, and potentially murder, would earn Bruno the same sentence as the pedophile (2002, 107). By day three of the ordeal, Mercure describes the vigilante as someone who no longer has “anything in common with the happy and sociable family man” he used to be, “nothing in common with the man who has Amnesty International posters in his

home office."¹⁸ "Has Hamel become a monster?" Mercure later asks in the novel.¹⁹ As the tortures become gradually more vicious and insane, the captive rapist starts seeing a terrifying streak of madness and inhumanity in his captor's eyes (2002, 165). More importantly, Bruno himself starts recognizing his own monstrosity. He has visions of blood and gore in which he performs unspeakable acts of violence: "Gruesome images popped in his head. He saw himself chopping off the monster's arms, scalping him, sewing his testicles to his eyes. And these images turned him on as much as they annoyed him."²⁰ In another nightmare he literally sees himself as a monster: half-beast, half-human, with horns and hoofs (2002, 258), reminiscent of medieval depictions of the devil.

Of course, the film cannot use lengthy explanatory passages to expose the theatrical nature of Bruno's monstrosity. Instead, it must use concise audiovisual precepts to suggest that Bruno is no longer an ordinary man but has rather become an ostentatious villain. Not surprisingly, therefore, Bruno's monstrous theatricality takes the form of overacting on the part of Claude Legault in the role of the vigilante. While generally stoic, Legault's Bruno becomes increasingly histrionic in his hysterical phone calls to his wife, his demented fits of rage as he realizes that torturing "le monstre" brings him no satisfaction, and his abject facial expressions as "le monstre," in his maimed delirium, starts tormenting the father with obscene references to his daughter. But in both the film and the novel, the final step in Bruno's progression from ordinary man to monster is when he is eventually accused of having killed his own daughter.

Watching TV in his chamber of torture in the middle of the forest, Bruno sees a report on a woman whose own child had been killed by "le monstre" but who refuses to hold the same violent grudge as Hamel. In a vain attempt to convince himself that he is still doing the right thing, Bruno manages to find out where the woman lives, kidnaps her, and brings her to the cabin where she can see the tortures he has inflicted on her daughter's murderer. But in spite of her fear of Bruno and her hatred of "le monstre," the woman refuses to grant the vigilante the approval he now desperately needs. Rather, by showing her the killer, whom she has struggled to forget since the death of her daughter, Bruno has reignited the pain and suffering she had managed to repress over time. "When I saw this man," she tells her kidnapper in both the novel and the film, "I felt that my daughter died again. But this time, it is your fault. *You have killed my daughter a second time ... and each time you have tortured this man over the past week, you have killed your own daughter, over and over*

again."²¹ Bruno then violently strikes the grieving mother – a gesture that clearly makes him inexcusably monstrous, especially within the Quebec film tradition of gendered violence referred to above. Bruno's vengeful plan, which might have once seemed like a normal reaction from a father devastated by his child's murder, now comes across as the horrid machination of a criminally deranged psychopath. Accordingly, when Bruno finally surrenders to the cops surrounding the cabin, police officers are petrified at the sight of Bruno's horrifying visage; he has become a "spectre effrayant" (2002, 328 and 330), an unrecognizably ordinary monster whose terrifying actions proved aberrantly normal.

***Sur le seuil* and the Terror of the Jaded Soul**

The ordinary man who becomes a monster is also at the core of Senécal's most accomplished novel and, in my opinion, the best horror film ever made in Quebec: *Sur le seuil*. Decades ago, Father Pivot was a friendly and kind young priest in a small Quebec town (Senécal 1998, 355). As in the case of Bruno Hamel and Jacques Beaulieu, a traumatic tragedy – the death of a beloved family member – transformed the pleasant, ordinary priest into a monster who worships "the power of evil" (1998, 359). Pivot took over a village church and recruited a clan of devil worshippers, who proceeded to tear each other to pieces during a demonic orgy of blood and gore. Pivot's turn from ordinariness to malevolence is the historical backdrop that explains the contemporary case of pure laine evil that forms the story's present tense. *Sur le seuil* focuses on Paul Lacasse, a jaded psychiatrist who tries to cure a deranged horror novelist, Thomas Roy. Roy has cut off his fingers and tried to commit suicide so he will no longer write the tales of terror that inevitably become ghostly reality.

Significantly, Doctor Lacasse is initially indifferent to Roy's case (1998, 49), which he considers to be ordinary; and when a journalist, Charles Monette, shows him evidence that Roy has supernatural powers, Lacasse dismisses his argument as absurd (1998, 107). Even when the accumulation of strange and morbid coincidences incites Lacasse to drive to a remote village and the church that might hold the key to this bizarre case, what he finds is merely "une église bien banale" (1998, 341).

Banality and ordinariness are central to Lacasse's jaded experience of the whole affair. Yet, nagging oddities distress him. The church is banal, but its location is strange. While he has treated innumerable psychopaths, this case gives him irritating stomach aches (1998, 139) and

disturbing nightmares (1998, 155). And in spite of his rational, scientific mind, he constantly feels that he is on the edge – “sur le seuil” – of something frighteningly incomprehensible (1998, 286). Lacasse’s response to Roy’s case is thus profoundly uncanny. As Freud writes:

We – or our primitive forefathers – once believed in the possibility of these things and were convinced that they really happened. Nowadays we no longer believe in them, we have surmounted such ways of thought; but we do not feel quite sure of our new set of beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation. As soon as something actually happens in our lives which seems to support the old, discarded beliefs, we get a feeling of the uncanny. (Freud 1953–74, 247–8)

As a psychiatrist who no longer fully believes that his science can help anyone, Paul is a prime candidate for an uncanny experience. The thin veneer of comfortable boredom hides the dread of unimaginably familiar terror.

As is the case for the other adaptations of Senécal’s work, Tessier’s film version of *Sur le seuil* is more limited than the original novel in its ability to convey the inner thoughts and emotions of the main character. However, the audiovisual material still manages to evoke effectively the terrifying underpinnings of the banal and the ordinary. The film opens with a television report of eleven children having been shot to death by an otherwise “normal and stable” police officer. Lacasse is then observed watching the TV report with an inscrutable facial expression that seems to blend indifference and rage. As such, Lacasse immediately appears as a liminal character who seems calm and able to respond with rationality to violence and madness, but also has the potential to engage with the deep “terror of the soul” that lies beneath the banality of the everyday.

The following sequence then constructs a sense of the dull routine of Dr Lacasse’s daily hospital rounds. Even when his colleague Dr Jeanne Marcoux announces that famous author Thomas Roy has been brought to the psychiatric ward after he tried to commit suicide, Lacasse remains unimpressed. This brief succession of shots, which show his tediously repetitive morning visits, creates a sense of dull comfort, with actor Michel Côté as Dr Lacasse generally presented in medium close-ups uninterestedly listening to his patients sitting in their plain but clean and cozy hospital rooms. Lacasse’s first visit to Roy’s room interrupts

this tone of comfortable boredom. But it is not a radical break with the ordinary. The first scene with Roy is just peculiar enough to evoke strangeness. Rather than routine medium close-ups, we are introduced to Roy through a low-angle medium-long shot that displays an odd-looking room, with a peculiar combination of mauve curtains, lavender walls, and greenish-blue bedding. The first close-up on Patrick Huard as Thomas Roy emphasizes the feeling of strangeness. He is not menacing, only creepy: he has one blue eye and one brown; dark facial stubble and bleached blond hair; and an eerily blank expression.

The typically Canadian sense of comfortable boredom is re-established in a number of subsequent scenes in the first half of the film: when Lacasse discusses the banality of the Roy case with his colleagues in the non-descript hospital boardroom; when Lacasse and Marcoux meet in a pleasant urban bistro to talk about his recent breakup, her current pregnancy, and the “mere coincidences” between Roy and dozens of real-life tragedies; or when Lacasse is seen sitting in his plush home office, listening to classical music and unenthusiastically attempting to write an article on Roy. These scenes do not evoke blissful ignorance unwittingly waiting to be destroyed by alien monstrosity. Rather, they convey a deep awareness of, but surface indifference to, violence, pain, and madness. While the film deploys images of banality that seek to repress terror and dread, bursts of horror sporadically seep through. Flashes of tortured bodies, blood-covered headlines, and distorted Catholic symbols start appearing before the doctor’s jaded eyes, and strange voices keep haunting him. The horrifying impact of these visions emerges from their uncanny character: they seem wholly familiar and yet unrecognizably foreign.

As the film unfolds, Lacasse resists the growing “evidence” that Roy has the power to incite people to committee evil deeds. But the more he seeks to repress the uncanny coincidences between fiction and reality, the more (un)recognizable images of rational beings gone mad, and angels turned demonic, perturb the psychiatrist. Uncanny visions become concrete deeds of madness when, almost half-way through the film, the innocuous Madame Héneault, one of Lacasse’s many average patients, decides to gouge out her eyes before the good doctor. Madame Héneault’s sudden, self-inflicted blindness allows Lacasse to start “seeing.” A drawing and a few words scribbled on a page by Roy convince Lacasse that, indeed, the famous author can provoke those around him to commit evil deeds through his writing.

As in the novel, the film culminates in Lacasse's trip to the small village where Roy was born. An aging village priest explains to Lacasse that infant Roy came to life in the middle of a black mass performed by Father Pivot, who turned his back on the Church after his sister's violent death (his niece in the novel) and chose to worship evil. The sequence juxtaposes the quaint kitchen of an old presbytery in the film's present tense and the gruesome flashbacks in which we witness Father Pivot and his flock of devil worshippers indulging in an orgy of mutual torture in an attempt to experience pure evil. The contrast between the appealing simplicity of the presbytery where the old priest reminisces about a pre-Satanist, pastoral time, and the horrors that transpired there thirty-six years ago creates an intense sense of fear routed in the uncanny correlation between pleasant, wistful banality and pure, unadulterated evil. This sequence evokes the nostalgic image of a bygone era in French-Canadian history when priests were the benevolent autocrats of small, self-sufficient agrarian communities that had no interest in the petty, neoliberal concerns of North American modernity – back then, there was “nothing to disturb our daily routine,” says the aging cleric. And then, as the old priest recounts, in 1966 all hell broke loose, and this pleasant archaic world came to a crashing end.

Within the setting of the black mass itself, the uncanny resides in the evocative concurrence between the innocent infant and the depraved ritual. As the inoffensive newborn is kissed by the demented thirty-six-year-old Father Pivot at the climax of the Satanist rite, the ordinary baby somehow managed to absorb all the wickedness unleashed in the desecrated church where the black mass took place. At that moment, Roy was granted the supernatural power to write evil into action. While much of the impact of this scene results from the sense of “pastness” of the tale of terror, which injects a strong dose of morbid gothic melancholy into the gory flashbacks, the juxtaposition of malevolent carnage and commonplace innocence also creates fear when it is brought to the present tense of the narrative in the last fifteen minutes of the film. The bloodshed that unfolded in the desecrated church years earlier is now transposed to the contemporary psychiatric ward, at the aptly named Hôpital Ste Croix (Holy Cross Hospital), where Roy's deadly influence has led the other inmates to rape, ravage, and maim one another. Lacasse returns to the hospital just in time to see Roy remove the unborn baby from the womb of a lifeless Dr Jeanne Marcoux, and kiss him as he had been kissed



Figure 4.2. Video capture from *Sur le seuil*. Courtesy of Go Films.

thirty-six years before by the thirty-six-year-old Pivot. While Roy is shot by the police the baby is saved.

The epilogue shows Lacasse and Jeanne's spouse Marc a year later, looking after the baby. For Lacasse this "typically charming baby"²² now incarnates all that is *potentially* wicked. In a final moment of banal familiarity and unspeakable horror, the world-weary psychiatrist intensely stares at the innocent babe sitting on the living-room floor, swearing never to let him out of his sight. That a grown man could be so concerned about the latent malevolence of an infant is as ridiculous as it is frightening. But this is the essence of Senécal's infernal vision: the most normal and inoffensive beings are those who conceal the most monstrous evil.

Conclusion

Senécal's novels and the films they have inspired all share the same concern with the petrifying banality of ordinary terror. Whether this paralysing dread of the common man as monster is something uniquely Québécois or Canadian would be hard to prove. But there is little doubt that these works have struck a chord with local readers

and spectators. The texts' reliance on the uncanny and a gnawing distrust of the familiar and the ordinary clearly tap into the deep-rooted fears of a significant portion of the francophone population of Canada. That the ordinary, old-stock French Canadian – *le canadien-français pure laine* – is in fact the most menacing of all fiends is not an easy interpretation to accept; many Quebec nationalist critics would doubtlessly reject this reading of Senécal's corpus. But it is important to keep in mind that the power of the tale of terror is precisely to confront us with disturbing truths and unpleasant realities. Spectators and readers who are looking for comforting stories that will reassure them and provide them with an agreeable vision of Quebec culture should not bother with Senécal's oeuvre. But those of us who are ready to face the unsettling truth about the monstrosity of the everyday will always be mesmerized by the compelling authenticity of these tales of "enfer ordinaire."

NOTES

- 1 Patrick Senécal, *5150, rue des ormes* (Quebec: Éditions Alire, 2001), 5. My translation. "Il a une petite moustache brune sous le nez et ses cheveux châtons frisés en boule lui donne un air un peu québécois ... Le banlieusard-type."
- 2 Ibid. 26. My translation. "Ce nom est trop banal, incongru pour un tel cinglé. Je m'imaginai plutôt un patronyme bizarre avec plusieurs *x* et *y* dedans. Jacques Beaulieu. C'est épouvantablement normal."
- 3 Tessier, cited in Anabelle Nicoud, "5150, rue des ormes: l'enfer ordinaire," 3 October 2009. <http://www.lapresse.ca/cinema/nouvelles/201207/17/01-4550499-5150-rue-des-ormes-lenfer-ordinaire.php>.
- 4 The production of this new adaptation was announced in 2011, but has not been completed at the time of writing this chapter. See André Duchesne, "Daniel Roby adaptera Patrick Senécal au cinéma," *La Presse*, 4 July 2011, Arts/Spectacles 8).
- 5 See my article "Quebecus Horribilis: Theatricality, the 'Moment of Horror' and Quebec's 'Satanist' Cinema" in the online journal *Nouvelles "vues" sur le cinéma québécois* 8 (Winter 2008): 3. <http://www.cinema-quebecois.net/pdfs/LoiselleNVCQ8.pdf>.
- 6 For further discussion on these issues, see Gina Freitag and André Loiselle, "Tales of Terror in Québec Popular Cinema: The Rise of the French

- Language Horror Film since 2000," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 43, no. 1 (Winter 2013).
- 7 See my piece, "Popular Genres in Quebec Cinema: The Strange Case of Horror in Film and Television," in Bart Beaty, Derek Briton, Gloria Filax, and Rebecca Sullivan, eds, *How Canadians Communicate III* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2010), 144.
 - 8 See Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks," in Barry Keith Grant, ed., *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1996), 22.
 - 9 My translation. "Il y a un homme enfermé dans leur maison, au second, et eux, petite famille traditionnelle, dînent comme tous les jours."
 - 10 My translation. "Elle ... poursuit son travail de bonne petite ménagère. Surréaliste. Absurd."
 - 11 Haunting bloodstains on walls are common in horror tales ranging from Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977) to recent horror films such as *The Messengers* (2007, Danny and Oxide Pang) and *100 Feet* (2008, Eric Red).
 - 12 See the web series at <http://www.reinerouge.tv/>
 - 13 In addition to Yannick's first-person journal entries, the novel also includes entries from Maude's journal. This device establishes an obvious parallel between the two characters, who, in both the novel and the film, do seem to have certain affinities. However, this structural similarity appears superficial in contrast to the deep connection between Bérubé and Beaulieu. Not surprisingly, when push comes to shove, Yannick betrays Maude and remains true to his doppelgänger, Jacques.
 - 14 Senécal, *5150, rue des ormes*, 182. This information is not provided in the film.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, 21. In the film, Bruno and Sylvie have thought about buying a cabin, but never did.
 - 16 *Ibid.* 82. The actor playing Bruno in the film, Claude Legault, seems somewhat more handsome than his literary counterpart but still qualifies as "ordinary" looking.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, 103. My translation. "Courir vers le monstre, la mass brandie, grimaçant avec une exagération toute théâtrale. Le prisonnier poussa un cri de pure terreur et se couvrit tout le visage des deux mains. Bruno baissa la masse et éclata d'un rire tonitruant."
 - 18 *Ibid.*, 135. My translation. "Rien à voir avec le père de famille heureux et sociable ... Rien à voir avec cet homme qui possédait chez lui des affiches laminées d'Amnistie internationale."
 - 19 *Ibid.*, 176. My translation. "Hamel est donc devenu un monstre?"

- 20 Ibid., 152. My translation. "Des images sanglantes lui traversèrent l'esprit: il se voyait couper les deux bras du monstre, le scalper à vif, lui coudre les testicules sur les yeux, et chacune de ces images l'excitait autant qu'elle l'agaçait."
- 21 Ibid., 292. My translation. "J'ai senti que ma fille mourrait à nouveau! Et cette fois par votre faute! *Vous avez tué ma fille une deuxième fois!* ... Et vous, depuis une semaine, à chaque torture que vous infligez à cet homme, vous tuez votre fille. Encore, et encore, et encore."
- 22 *Sur le seuil*, 428. My translation. "Charmant comme tous les bébés."