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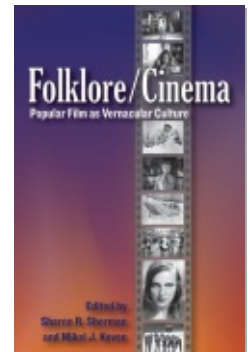
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“I’ y ava’t un’ fois” (Once Upon a Time)

Films as Folktales in Québécois Cinéma Direct

GILLIAN HELFIELD

THIS CHAPTER CONCERNS a small group of films produced at the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Golden Age of Canadian documentary. These short films, which aired on Radio-Canada TV as part of the television series *Temps présent* (1957–64), intended only to deliver direct reportages of their subject material without overt sociological or political agendas.¹ And yet, by making “visible the complex and changing face of French Canadians” (Morris 1984, 291), the films became an aesthetic and political turning point for Québécois cinema and Québécois cultural representation in general (Véronneau 1987, 37).

This group of films, led by *Les Raquetteurs* (1958), launched the *cinéma direct* movement in Québec, and was instrumental in initiating a new wave in French-language cinema and awakening a Québécois “national” consciousness (Coulombe and Jean 1991, 107).² The films also consolidated the Francophone documentary team at the NFB, thus providing a major source of original French-language film and television production. Significantly, this series was the first produced at the NFB to introduce original French-language segments, rather than *versionings* (French-language versions of English films using Francophone actors and/or commentators). Finally, the *Temps présent* series provided a vehicle for Francophone filmmakers to demonstrate their conscious, active engagement with social and political issues affecting Québécois society.

I am specifically concerned with a subset of the films aired on *Temps présent* which demonstrate the aesthetic and social aims and ideals of *cinéma direct* and most clearly illustrate two main themes: first, that Québécois cinema at this time demonstrated, through its combination of contemporary and traditional modes of representation, existing tensions within Québécois society; and secondly, that the traditional modes of representation used in the films took the narrative and structural forms

of French Canadian folktales. Each of the films discussed addresses some aspect or element of Québécois daily life engaging French Canadians, ranging from popular pastimes and community celebrations to key social and economic issues such as urban decline and unemployment. Thus, *Les Raquetteurs* (Michel Brault, Gilles Groulx, Marcel Carrière, 1958) features an annual snowshoers’ congress in Sherbrooke, Québec, while *La Lutte* (Michel Brault, Claude Fournier, Claude Jutra, Marcel Carrière, 1961), *Un jeu si simple* (Gilles Groulx, 1963), and *Golden Gloves* (Gilles Groulx, 1961) examine, respectively, wrestling, hockey and boxing in Québec, and *Margaret Mercier, ballerine* (George Kaczender, 1963) highlights the career of a principal dancer with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens.³ On the urban/industrial front, *À Saint-Henri le cinq septembre* (Hubert Aquin, 1962) presents a day-in-the-life of a working-class neighborhood in serious decline. *Bûcherons de la Manouâne* (1962) and *De Montréal à Manicouagan* (1963), both made by Arthur Lamothe, and *Jour après jour* (Clément Perron, 1962) profile the operations of modern-day Québécois industry, while *Les Bachéliers de la cinquième* (Clément Perron, 1962) addresses the problems of unemployment.

As suggested by the series title, which translates both to “Present Times” and “Present Tense,” the films focus on the “here and now,” the current social reality of Québec, which is a distinct departure from the typically historical subject matter of most NFB documentaries. This focus is borne out by the films’ cross section of subjects and themes related to contemporary Québécois society and culture. Additionally, the films are striking for their cinematic evocation of the rhythms of modern life. Unceasing activity in various urban loci, combined with the images and sounds of the hustle and bustle of vehicular and human traffic, convey a spirit of energy and vitality. Movement itself—the movement of the camera, of bodies in action within the frame, and movement between the frames via montage—becomes emblematic of change. Movement-as-change is also expressed through the association between technology, industrial labor, and the cinema: camera movement and montage, which replicate the patterns and rhythms of construction, stress that cinema itself is a form of technology that contributes to the transformations taking place.

The films’ evocation of movement and change in the contemporary Québécois social milieu is highly germane to the time and context of their production at the dawn of the Quiet Revolution, a ten-year period of unprecedented social, economic, and cultural transformation in Québec. The revolution was initiated by wide-sweeping reforms legislated by the Liberal government that came to power in 1960. The provincial election

that year, precipitated by the death of ultraconservative premier Maurice Duplessis, brought to an end the eighteen-year regime of his Union Nationale party. The Liberals' reforms aimed primarily to modernize the province and provide equal social and economic opportunities for its majority Francophone population, who, since the British Conquest of 1760, had represented an underclass relative to the socioeconomically dominant Anglophone minority. The Quiet Revolution also articulated a significant transformation taking place in Québec's national self-image. One of its most prominent and enduring symbols was the reformulation of Francophone national identity: this identity shifted from French Canadian, previously denoting "an indistinguishable minority from coast-to-coast" (Shek 1991, 45) to Québécois, which instead underscored both the Francophones' majority status in the province and their aim to become "masters in their own house."

The reformulation of national identity correspondingly manifested itself in Québécois literature, theater, and the visual arts. In literature, for example, the third-person, omniscient narration common to French Canadian novels gave way to the first-person, subjective mode or "insider" perspective, which also would become a principal characteristic of *cinéma direct*. Additionally, the new Québécois novel was more political in its choice of working-class urban protagonists and *joual*, the "truncated, highly anglicised speech of the uneducated masses of Québec" (Shek 1991, 57), to give its characters a truly "authentic" voice.

In the cinema, the revolution in the cultural sphere made itself equally felt at the NFB, which at this time was the center of Canadian film production and provided the only real training ground for aspiring young filmmakers. In response to the changes taking place both within Québécois society and documentary cinema elsewhere in the world, a group of Francophone filmmakers rejected the standard expository style associated with NFB documentary (instituted and formalized by its British founder and first commissioner, John Grierson) in favor of a more interactive, participatory approach. In conjunction with new lightweight cameras and equipment which afforded them greater mobility and flexibility (portable lights, faster film stock, and later, synch-sound recorders), the new "direct" documentary style permitted these filmmakers to capture events in the Québécois social milieu from the inside and then transmit the reality of those events to their viewers.

These developments enabled the filmmakers to "turn against the game" (*Parti pris* 1964, 4) they felt had been imposed upon them by the predominantly Anglophone NFB through its consistent underrepresentation of Francophone culture in its films, programming priorities, and

structural organization. They were greatly assisted in this task by the NFB's 1956 move from Ottawa, the nation's capital and seat of the federal government, to Montréal, the center of French Canadian culture. The move plunged the filmmakers into the midst of a society in the throes of transition, exposing them to a cultural milieu infected with a new curiosity and critical spirit, as well as providing them with a local Québécois context and ready supply of Francophone performers for their material (Lever 1991, 32).

Also significant for French-language production at the NFB was the arrival of television in 1952. In addition to providing a new demand and outlet for French-language material, television determined a certain social vision that was in tune with the changing face of Québécois culture. The national broadcast of French-language films on television importantly reached Francophones across the province, including the rural milieu isolated from regular cinema circuits.

Yet, despite the films' overriding emphasis on the processes of movement and change, they frequently and paradoxically evoke Québec's traditional rural culture, specifically the visible and aural signs and practices of French Canadian folktales. Some historians have duly noted the presence of such elements in these films: Yves Lever remarks on their "mix of traditional form and Cinéma direct form" (Lever 1995, 160) and their display of traditions and ancestral rituals, mythic symbols and structures (Lever 1995, 194). David Clandfield further observes that the formal elements of folk ritual (e.g., rhythm, cycle, and repetition) are used in the films to reflect and express the effects of modernity (such as mechanization and technology) on the daily lives of the Québécois at this time (Clandfield 1978, 32).

I propose that beyond merely referring to or incorporating these elements of folk ritual, the films examined here, in their use of iconography, archetypes, narrative structural patterns, and modes of narration, function like folktales. I also suggest that this function is neither anomalous nor antithetical to the surrounding context of change and modernization, but rather entirely in keeping with it.

During the period when the Quiet Revolution and *cinéma direct* movement arose, a mass folk revival took place throughout North America. This decade, while marked on the one hand by the younger generation's social rebellion against the ideals and values of the existing establishment, also testified on the other hand to a longing for the comparative simplicity and purity of the past: this was manifested in the adoption of naturalist lifestyles and the concomitant rejection of capitalist/materialist values; of products and processes associated with

modern technology, industry, science, and medicine; and of established formal religion (Rodnitzky 1976, xiv).

In Québec, the folk revival of the 1960s had deeper historical and political implications. There had been an earlier folk revival during the mid-nineteenth century, which had arisen in response to Francophone fears of cultural assimilation following the British Conquest and subsequent colonization of Québec. These fears produced a deeply conservative ideology, which aimed to preserve the principal elements of French Canadian national culture: the French language, the Catholic faith, and the rural agrarian way of life. Excluded from an economy controlled by English and American industrial interests, and with no recourse to other domains of economic activity, French Canadians were relegated to a "culture of the soil" (Brunet 1964, 119), which included renewed interest in local lore and legendry and the corresponding interest in earlier literary genres. For example, the *romans du terroir*, or "novels of the land," such as *Les anciens Canadiens* (1863) by Philippe Aubert de Gaspé (*père*) or *Le chercheur des trésors* (1837) by Aubert de Gaspé (*fil*), featured numerous country traditions, superstitions, and beliefs. By rekindling interest in the culture of the countryside, this earlier folk revival consolidated associations between the French Canadian people and the land, thereby also helping establish the rural milieu as the heartland of French Canada.

The 1960s folk revival to a considerable degree traded upon the mythical significance of traditional French Canadian culture as a touchstone of its national heritage. Despite the Quiet Revolution's overarching credo of reform and modernization, poets, folksingers, and filmmakers of the 1960s nonetheless incorporated folk traditions and conventions into their work. For example, Gaston Miron, the radical nationalist poet, relied extensively on folk traditions in some of his own poems, including "L'Ombre de l'ombre" (Miron 1996, 152), which attempts to recreate the rhythmic models of folk songs and dances.⁴ The '60s also witnessed the revival of the *chansonniers*: itinerant folk singers, such as the legendary La Bolduc (aka Mary Travers), who traveled throughout rural Québec in the 1930s and '40s, performing traditional French Canadian folk songs in local halls and church basements, accompanied simply by one or two instruments such as guitar or piano. The new generation of chansonniers in the 1960s, including Gilles Vigneault, Pauline Julien, Monique Leyrac, and others, looked back to this tradition for inspiration (Carpenter 1979, 263), routinely adapting folk melodies from the past and modifying their lyrics to contextualize them to the contemporary Québécois social reality. For all these artists, use of these forms of traditional folk

music helped foster the creation of a new popular and cultural imaginary. At the same time, in its fusion of traditional folk-song cadences and contemporary nationalist rhetoric, the new folk music also seemed to capture both the hope and the malaise of an entire society that suddenly felt Québécois.

At this critical juncture, documentary cinema was also undergoing a revolutionary revival. The emergence of new documentary movements during the 1960s announced the rise of a sensibility that was on the one hand modern and progressive, and on the other, conservative in its affirmation and reinforcement of "certain patterns of life and structures of feeling" (Hall and Whannel 1964, 46). In their aim to capture the elemental "truth" of an event, the new generation of documentary filmmakers evinced a desire to return to the basics of filmmaking, comprised of the original materials (man and movie camera) and the philosophical concerns with realism of early cinema. For the *cinéma direct* filmmakers, in particular, this return to origins also included using familiar conventions of folktales in their representations of the "new" Québécois nation and national identity.

These folktale conventions correspond to the signposts of the regional picturesque described by François de la Brétèque: rural geography and topography, physical structures representing key social ones, familiar archetypes, and customary social practices and rituals. Moreover, the rural milieu in French Canadian folktales is similar to de la Brétèque's village universe, which functions as a kind of metonymy for the territory (both cultural and national) encoded in the *mise-en-scène* of the tales' description of the land. The image of the village universe significantly embodies the "fantasy of return" (de la Brétèque 1992, 61) to the *ancien régime* of the past and the rural-agrarian way of life, which, in the context of Québécois culture, connotes the French colonial régime and the strong time of French Canadian cultural autonomy prior to Anglo invasion and conquest.⁵

In the French Canadian regional picturesque, the main feature of the rural geography and topography is the landscape, which has two distinct types, *wilderness* and *pastoral*, each with its own iconography and enduring archetypes. The wilderness landscape, associated with the period of New World discovery and early colonial foundations and characterized by forbidding natural terrain (mountains, forests, rivers, and lakes), is not as prominent in the folktales as the pastoral one, which corresponds more closely to the postsettlement village universe of agrarian French Canada. Nonetheless, the folktales and films frequently refer to the rugged archetypal persons of the wilderness, legendary for their fortitude



The “habitant” costume of the snowshoers in *Les Raquetteurs* reaffirms the festival’s celebration of collective Québécois identity.

and resourcefulness in negotiating the backcountry and instantly recognizable in the unique apparel which represents their *métier* or vocation. These include the famous *voyageurs*, or “canoe men” of the North American waterways, with their buckskin jackets and coonskin caps; the *bûcherons* (loggers), with their axes and red-and-black-plaid lumberjackets; and the *coureurs-des-bois* (outlaw trappers and poachers); and *habitants* (settlers), dressed in their *tûques* (long woolen caps), *capôts* (parkas), and *ceintûres fléchées* (embroidered cloth belts with arrow patterns). This habitant costume is an important feature in *Les Raquetteurs*: as the official apparel of the participating snowshoe clubs, the costume underscores the significance of this annual congress as a ritual reaffirmation of collective Québécois cultural heritage and identity.

The pastoral landscape is typically identified by the farmhouse and the church, two outstanding physical structures that emphasize the rural milieu’s association with advancing French Canadian civilization and culture. The farmhouse, which generally is located on the outskirts of the village and set picturesquely on a hillside, in a valley, or against the background of a lake or river, takes on a quasi-mythic character in Québécois folktales, novels, and cinema in its nostalgic reference to the past. The farmhouse is a symbol of French Canadian collectivity

and community, whether these values are expressed through the farm family that inhabits the house, through the rural traditions they enact under its roof, or through the rural-agrarian social class they represent (Lemieux 1984, 22).

Thus significantly, in *Les Raquetteurs*, the first structure that is visible in the snowy countryside when the film cuts to the race on the city outskirts is a farmhouse, built in the traditional Norman style of the habitant home,⁶ also formalized in the paintings of nineteenth-century Québec artists such as Édouard Massicotte and Cornelius Krieghoff.⁷ As well, the workers' cabins in *De Montréal à Manicouagan* recall the *chantiers* or "lumber camps" (described in numerous tales), where the loggers worked and lived throughout the winter season and which similarly emphasize the importance of basic creature comforts and companionship within the rural milieu.

The interior of the habitant farmhouse is dominated by one central room (*la grand'chambre*), described in the literature and folktales as a sacred place. It is where one is born and where one dies, and the place where all daily activities and rituals take place (Lemieux 1984, 23). This central room contains four prominent fixtures: the large table in the middle, where the family prepares its meals, dines, or does its chores; the crucifix, altar, or icon of Jesus or Mary, to which the family addresses its daily prayers; and the fireplace or wood-burning stove, used for cooking and heating and which acts as the emotional hearth of family and community life (Tétu de Labsade 1987b, 205). Finally, there is the rocking chair, strategically placed by the fire, the warmest and most comfortable spot in the house and one usually reserved either for the patriarch or matriarch of the family or such honored visitors as the *curé* or *conteur*, the traditional storyteller invited to tell his tales to gathered guests at a *veillée*, or private social gathering.

The *grand'chambre* is recalled in the films' depictions of communal gathering spaces. For example, in *Golden Gloves*, most of the scenes detailing boxing contender Ronald Jones's home and family life are shot at the kitchen table. In other films (*La Lutte*, *Un jeu si simple*, *Margaret Mercier*, *À Saint-Henri*), the domestic, private spaces of the nuclear family are supplanted by public spaces such as sports arenas, stadiums, theatres, nightclubs, restaurants, and taverns, which represent gathering spots for the new "national family" that assembles there en masse to participate collectively in celebrations or performances of Québécois cultural identity.

The church, symbol of the Catholic faith and parish community in the rural milieu, is appropriately depicted in the regional picturesque at the direct center of the village, its gleaming Gothic steeple towering



In *La Lutte*, the ethereal effect of the powerful lights shining down on the ring enhances the mythical significance of the wrestling match.

over neighboring structures and visible from afar. In the films, images of the church and religious ritual suggest that the Catholic faith is still a tangible presence. For example, in *À Saint-Henri*, a shot of a neighborhood church echoes images of country churches in traditional landscape paintings and on picture postcards. However, the rural church's typically bucolic décor of interlaced pine branches has been replaced here by overhead power lines and streetcar wires. Another striking religious reference in the film is the twilight radio broadcast of *le chapelet* (the rosary): as the camera pans over the houses of Saint-Henri, we hear the familiar litany; by means of this nightly religious ritual, the community's collective culture and identity are continually reaffirmed.

The church's resonant power is also felt in *La Lutte*, in the film's depiction of the Forum, the famous Montréal sports arena, as a modern-day shrine.⁸ The overhead lights inside the arena, shining down on the ring and illuminating the canvas, cast a glow that seems almost ethereal. Nondiegetic music includes the sounds of Gregorian chants and a Bach-Vivaldi concerto: this piece, transcribed from Vivaldi, is one of many which Bach composed to the "honor of God" during his lifelong career as a church cantor and organist (Schrade 1973, 10). Though the

filmmakers may be using these religious elements to make ironic statements about professional wrestling and mass popular culture, at the same time they are also alluding to the continuing symbolic currency of the church within Québécois society.

Another feature of the folktales related to geography/topography as well as customary social practices and rituals is the cycle of seasons. This cycle both determines and is in turn reflected in other cycles of rural-agrarian life (agriculture, the tides, reproduction, and religious cycles of birth/death/rebirth) that provide structure and meaning, as well as regulate the inhabitants' social customs and practices. The most enduring season in the Québec rural milieu is winter, which lasts on average sixteen to eighteen weeks, at least five weeks longer than in the urban areas (Provencher 1986, 12). The length of this season is duly reflected in the frequent depictions of winter sports and recreational activities (hockey, ice-skating, sledding, and sleigh rides) and celebrations of sacred and secular holidays which fall during the winter months (Christmas and Midnight Mass, New Year's, Lent, Carnival, and Easter). As well, the most prominently depicted form of socialization among friends, family and neighbors is the *veillée* or the *soirée de campagne* ("country evening" of feasting, singing, dancing, card playing, practical joking, and storytelling), which was originally institutionalized in the rural milieu to pass the long winter nights. Significantly, the *soirée de campagne* frequently provides both the setting for the folktale and the occasion for telling it.

True to the conventions of the regional picturesque, films use mostly winter settings for the kinds of collective cultural activities in which people participate. Some of these activities, such as snowshoeing in *Les Raquetteurs* and hockey in *Un jeu si simple*, take place specifically during the winter season. In other films, winter provides a recognizable setting, as in *La Lutte*, as indicated by the snow outside the Forum and the overcoats worn by the wrestling fans, or in *Margaret Mercier*, as the ballerina trudges through the snow every day on her way to and from the theater. Winter also provides familiar context for collective merrymaking that recalls the *soirée de campagne*, as in the gala party that ends the snowshoers' congress in *Les Raquetteurs*, and numerous other social gatherings that take place in taverns, dance clubs, social halls, or restaurants, as in *Golden Gloves*, *À Saint-Henri*, or *Jour après jour*. The prominence of winter in the films can be explained simply by this season's length: a great deal of film production would naturally take place during this time, and outdoor scenes would automatically contain shots of snow and ice. Yet I believe that such winter scenes (for example, the racers in

Les Raquetteurs moving across the snow-covered rural landscape) owe as much, if not more, to the conventions of representation established in the folktales.

As noted earlier, in addition to appropriating the visible markers of the regional picturesque formalized in the folktales, the films are also structured and presented like folktales. The filmic techniques and conventions through which the *cinéma direct* filmmakers attempted to capture and transmit the “unmediated truth” of the contemporary Québécois social reality are not dissimilar from those used in earlier, traditional forms of pictorial representation. These conventions include contextualization; the presence of a *conteur*, either in the form of an on-screen character or folk performer who narrates the action as well as provides eyewitness authentication of the event; and the use of certain narrative devices and structuring patterns, such as cycles, which similarly shape traditional ways of life in the rural-agrarian milieu. While these conventions, like the signposts of the regional picturesque, do not individually justify the claim that these films function as folktales, together they make a compelling argument,

Contextualization is one method that makes the folktales and films more accessible: the more they are contextualized to a local, recognizable milieu, the more seemingly authentic their representations of surrounding social reality become. Contextualization may take the form of recognizable landmarks, such as the neon sign identifying the Forum in *La Lutte*, the familiar skyline of Saint Henri, or the office towers and concourse shops of Place Ville-Marie identifying downtown Montréal in *Margaret Mercier*.

Equally important to the setting or scene of the story is its actual telling. Thus, a key component of contextualization is the presence of the *conteur* or “storyteller”; he or she is the narrator who simultaneously describes the action, acts out the roles of the characters, and imparts the tale’s subtextual ideological message(s) as well as participating in the event being retold. The *conteur*’s participation is particularly significant: by means of his or her self-insertion into the story, the *conteur* establishes him or herself as an eyewitness to the event, thus corroborating the truth of its occurrence and the authenticity of the account. At the same time, the *conteur* identifies him or herself as one of the crowd gathered for this folk performance. In paintings of the regional picturesque, this perspective is achieved through the pictorial first person, namely an eye-level position which places the artist (and the viewer) in the center of the picture plane and thus in the midst of, or within reach of, the action.

In the films, the conteur's self-insertion is similarly achieved through the pictorial first person by means of cinéma direct techniques, such as the mobile, handheld camera and the use of panning and tilting, instead of cutting, to mimic the movements of a human spectator and thus further attest to the actual physical presence and personal testimony of the filmmaker. In *Les Raquetteurs*, the camera gets into line with the marchers in the parade or mingles with the crowd on the sidelines. In *À Saint-Henri*, the camera follows a young couple as they walk down the street, hand in hand, turning when they turn, pausing when they stop to kiss. In each of these examples, the camera-conteur inserts itself within the social context and culture of the on-screen community.

The presence of the conteur as off-screen narrator or on-screen performer also draws attention to the ritual of storytelling itself. In *À Saint-Henri* and *Golden Gloves*, narration is delivered via off-screen voice-over. In *Bacheliers de la cinquième*, however, the narration, provided by folksinger Gilles Vigneault, is more an overt performance. The film intercuts between diegetic shots of the protagonists vainly seeking employment and nondiegetic shots of Vigneault singing directly to the camera in the recording studio, thus positioning the folksinger as both part of the sequence and an integral conveyor of its meaning. Further suturing the folksinger into the action as a kind of one-man Greek chorus lamenting this tragic aspect of Québécois social reality is the combination of the song's lyrics (which describe the causes and hardships of unemployment) and its delivery (through which Vigneault acts out the respective roles of the employer and the unemployed). At the same time, we are still conscious of the conteur's performance, and thus of our own participation in this familiar folk-song ritual.

Another important facet of the conteur's storytelling performance is his or her use of language to describe or act out events in the tale and strengthen the bond with the audience. The language of the conteur is both verbal in its utilization of colloquialisms, idiomatic expressions, trade jargon, and local patois that are specific both to the conteur and the particular region (Guilbault 1991, 10), and physical (i.e., body language) in its reliance upon distinctive gestures, mannerisms, and facial expressions (Calame-Griaule 1974, 195–96) that are a hallmark of the conteur's particular style and repertoire. Language importantly impacts both the performance of the tale and the representation of the society described, conferring a creative liberty and agency upon the conteur that makes him or her both the transmitter and author of the tale.

Language is also an important contextualizing element within the films. Language has always been the chief defining element of Québec's

distinctive national identity. Whereas in previous periods of folk revivalism, language was primarily an instrument for safeguarding and preserving French Canadian identity from assimilation into the dominant Anglo culture, during the Quiet Revolution it became less of a defensive measure and more of a specific target for reform by the newly elected Liberal government.⁹

For the Francophones at the NFB looking to liberate Québécois film from the constraints of Anglo-Canadian cinematic conventions, language became an important instrument for taking back the controls of cultural representation. Making films in French enabled the filmmakers to distinguish themselves and their work from the NFB's general output but also importantly permitted their on-screen characters to tell their own stories directly: in their own language, in their own words, in their own accent and idiom. Thus, French is spoken in the films everywhere and by everyone, unmediated by voice-over commentaries or subtitles typical of NFB productions.

One may even argue that the cinematic techniques in the films function as a kind of language in and of themselves. The trademark devices of the *cinéma direct* movement mentioned earlier (the mobile camera, movement within the frame and between frames to evoke the rhythms of modern urban living, and the use of montage to replicate the rhythms of construction and labor) function in a way similar to the storytelling devices of the *conteur*—the gestures, colloquialisms, and intonations—which place the viewer/listener at the scene, while at the same time capturing a sense of its immediate social reality. Overall, as in the folktales, language in the films operates simultaneously as a hallmark of style, a means of contextualization, and, perhaps most importantly, as a form of authorship that enables the filmmaker-*conteur* to control the means and method of representation, and thus take possession of culture and identity.

One other folktale convention used in the films that has important bearing on their narrative structure is the device of cycles that signal recurring beginnings and endings, arrivals and departures. The most prevalent cycle motif is the journey or voyage. To a considerable degree, the journey motif has a mythic function in providing the means by which we travel back to the time of national origins. The journey device provides the structural basis for *De Montréal à Manicouagan*, providing the means by which we travel between these two geographic sites, and simultaneously between past and present and old and new national identities. Similar journey motifs mark the beginnings and endings of *Bacheliers de la cinquième*, in the boys' boat voyage to and from the North



In *Jour après jour*, the image of smokestacks provides bookends for the journey to and from the mill, and the beginning and end of the film.

Shore, and *Jour après jour*, in the shots taken inside the car traveling to and from the paper mill.

The voyage or journey cycle may also be viewed as one version of the *mise-en-abyme*, or story-within-a-story, effect common in Québécois folktales, which is like a narrative hall of mirrors. The *mise-en-abyme* device entails not only the repetition of the story itself, from one conteur and audience to the next, but also repetition of the surrounding conditions when the story is told and when the actual event took place. Such conditions also signal that the storytelling ritual is about to take place. One such condition is the venue, which provides a space for the conteur/storyteller to address the audience, gathered around in a group. Whereas in the folktales, the performance takes place in an intimate living or workspace (a habitant home, a lumber camp, a blacksmith's shop), in the films, in keeping with the urban context, the venue is larger, more public. Yet it still provides the requisite materials for the ritualized folktale performance, including the circular seating for the gathered crowd, as seen in *Les Raquetteurs* in the stadium where the races take place and the podium set up at the gala to crown the festival queen; in



In *Un jeu si simple*, the hockey arena provides the venue for a ritualized folk performance.

the arena that encircles the wrestling ring and hockey rink in *La Lutte* and *Un jeu si simple*; and in the rows of seats facing the theater stage in *Margaret Mercier*.

Other elements establishing atmospheric conditions are the presence of liquor and smoke from the fireplace, stove, or tobacco. While the smoke provides an appropriate atmosphere for the more mysterious or mystical elements of the folktales, liquor is always passed around the room immediately preceding the telling of the tale; *p'tits coups* or shots of rum or whisky not only provide additional warmth on a cold winter's night but also loosen tongues and imaginations and enhance the already-formidable talents of the conteur. In the films, the presence of liquor and smoke seems more routine and less ritualized than in the folktales, perhaps due to the waning power of the church as an agent of social and moral control. Much of the action in the films takes place in public venues (taverns, nightclubs, arenas), where drinking and smoking are not only unrestricted but part of the natural local atmosphere. One film that does make ritualistic use of atmosphere is *La Lutte*: the combination of smoke from the spectators' cigarettes and steam from the



Bûcherons de la Manouane intercuts shots of modern technology with those of traditional logging methods.

powerful overhead lights creates an ethereal ambience that enhances the mythical significance of the wrestling match.

Taken together, all of the various iconographic and narrative elements of folktales utilized in the cinéma direct films provide important ties to the historical and cultural past and preceding conventions of pictorial representation. These elements, in turn, counterbalance the processes of modernization, suggesting the need for continuity through tradition, as underscored by the films' frequent counterpointing images of the old and new Québec. For example, *Les Raquetteurs* constantly intercuts between the downtown core and outskirts of Sherbrooke, and the party scene at the end of the film presents striking contrasts between traditional and modern modes of dress (traditional habitant costumes versus contemporary suits and evening gowns), modes of music (folk versus jazz) and styles of dancing (contemporary versus folk). Similarly, in *Bûcherons de la Manouane*, shots of loggers using motorized chain saws are intercut with ones depicting others using old-fashioned axes, while shots of men loading logs onto waiting transport trucks are juxtaposed with ones of men loading logs onto horse-drawn sleds. Continuity with

the past is further strengthened by the extradiegetic sound of ringing axes that reverberates throughout all the scenes, even those that do not portray logging. The rhythmic blows of the axes suggest the beat of custom and tradition that continues to regulate life in the lumber camps (and by extension, Québec).

In comparable fashion, the boat trip down the St. Lawrence River in *De Montréal à Manicouagan* is a journey both toward Québec's future and back into its past because it reiterates the historical voyage of Jacques Cartier, the discoverer of Québec, who sailed up this river in 1534. Each site passed along the way is laden with both contemporary and historical significance: Donnacona, once the historic meeting place of Cartier and the Indian chief, Stadacona, is now the location of a paper mill. Laval, named for the first bishop of New France, is now the home of Laval University. These juxtapositions stress Québec's advancement to a state of modernity, as well as its ability to assume mastery of its own destiny—to say, "Look how far we've come." At the same time, this attention to key points of origin also tells us to "look back where we came from."

This chapter demonstrates the way contrasts between past and present, and tradition and modernity, in these films draw attention to important shifts taking place in Québécois society, while at the same time corroborating the continued presence and power of traditional culture in developing new modes of cultural expression and representation. The chapter offers only a very general overview, which can provide the basis for a more detailed study of the historical evolution and relevance of traditional Québécois culture, one which analyzes additional modes which could not be covered here (picture postcards, poetry, dance, traditions, and rituals).

Québécois filmmaker Gilles Carle once said that in *cinéma direct*, "the picturesque has yielded to the familiar" and "the myth...has yielded in the face of reality" (Clandfield 1987, 43). This statement, though ideologically consistent with the aims of this movement, is not true of the films, which portray the picturesque and familiar, and myth and reality, as two sides of the same cultural coin.

As these films clearly indicate, for Francophone filmmakers at the NFB during this period of revolution and change, Québec's folk heritage was equally as rich a resource for their nationalist agenda as its social and political history. Preservation of the past and its traditions could and did provide them with a viable means of preserving creative control over the representation of their culture and nation.

Notes

1. *Temps présent* was not produced as a series in the usual sense of the term. Rather it is the title given to this group of films that were made by the NFB and subsequently organized into a series of screenings or airings for Radio-Canada, the French arm of the CBC. For this reason, the NFB has never released or distributed these films as a series. They are only available under their individual titles.
2. I emphasize Québec to avoid any confusion with *direct cinema*, which typically refers to the American *cinéma vérité* and, more particularly, to the fly-on-the-wall observational style of documentary filmmaking associated with Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, the Maysles brothers, D.A. Pennebaker, and others. *Cinéma direct* and *direct cinema* tend erroneously to be used as interchangeable terms, with the former often regarded as a derivative of the latter. However, this is "historically inaccurate inasmuch as [Canadian developments in *cinéma vérité*] actually anticipate those in the United States upon which they supposedly draw" (Elder 1979, 87), beginning as early as the mid-1950s with the *Candid Eye* TV series produced by the NFB's English-language documentary unit (Unit B) and, a few years later, in several TV series produced by the French film unit, including *Temps présent* as well as *Panoramique* (1957) and *Coup d'oeil* (1958) (Véronneau and Euvrard 1978, 30). For more on Canadian and Québécois *cinéma direct*, see also Gilles Marso-lais (1974), Marcel Jean (1991), and Yves Lever (1995).
3. Although *Margaret Mercier* was aired as part of *Temps présent* with the other films mentioned, it is not discussed in any of the standard historical and critical texts on the *cinéma direct* movement I have come across thus far. This omission may have occurred because Kaczender was not Québécois, but rather a Hungarian emigré who came to the NFB in 1952, where he made only two documentary films, *Margaret Mercier* and *City Scene* (1964), which was produced for the English series *Comparisons* (1959–64). *Margaret Mercier* is a sadly overlooked treasure, for it provides not only an excellent example of pure *cinéma direct* technique but also a prime demonstration of "motion as change" via the movement of the human body engaged in an athletic competition or aesthetic performance.
4. Miron was the driving force behind *L'Hexagone*, the radical poetry journal and publishing house that became a major center for nationalist poetry during the Quiet Revolution.
5. The "fantasy of return" to the golden age of French colonial times in Québec is implicit in the slogan *Je me souviens*, which is the provincial logo on Québec automobile license plates. The phrase translates as "I remember," referring to the decisive 1763 battle between French and English forces on the Plains of Abraham outside Québec City, where the French were defeated and subsequently colonized by Great Britain.
6. This style of architecture, in *l'esprit français*, or "French spirit," meant a two-story structure with a pavilion or mansard pitched roof, dormer windows, a wide porch, and clapboard or fieldstone construction (Tétu de Labsade 1987, 205).
7. Artists such as Krieghoff, Massicotte, and Raphael and later, caricaturists such as Henri Julien were well known for their "picturesque and anecdotal"

- depictions of “happy, frolicking *habitants* engaged in perpetual revelry” and the performance of local customs and traditions (Harper 1969, 82).
8. The sports media in Montréal often described hockey as a “religion” and the Forum as its “shrine” (Goyens 1996, 71). This image was reinforced by the religious services that frequently took place there, including Christmas Midnight Mass and prayer meetings held by various religious groups and leaders, such as Billy Graham, Aimée Semple McPherson, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses, as well as funeral and memorial services for important public figures and celebrities like hockey star Howie Morenz
 9. Several language laws legislated throughout the 1960s and 1970s effectively sought to “francisize” Québec to safeguard French culture and promote a greater sense of national cohesion among Québécois at all levels of society. This process of francisization was effected in several ways: first, by guaranteeing the preeminence of French over English in schools and places of businesses; second, by ensuring that new immigrants to the province were required to learn French; and third, by making French the national language of Québec (Tétu de Labsade 1987, 104, Dickinson and Young 1993, viii–xii).

Filmography

- Les Bacheliers de la cinquième* (1962). 28 min. Clément Perron
Bûcherons de la Manouâne (1962). 28 min. Arthur Lamothe
City Scene (1964). 28 min. Gordon Burwash and George Kaczender
Coup d’oeil (1958). 10 min. Michel Brault and Grant Crabtree
Golden Gloves (1961). 28 min. Gilles Groulx
Un jeu si simple (1964). 28 min. Gilles Groulx
Jour après jour (1962). 28 min. Clément Perron
La Lutte (1961). 28 min. Michel Brault, Claude Fournier, Claude Jutra, and Marcel Carrière
Margaret Mercier, ballerine (1963). 28 min. George Kaczender
De Montréal à Manicouagan (1962). 28 min. Arthur Lamothe
Les Raquetteurs (1958). 15 min. Michel Brault, Gilles Groulx, and Marcel Carrière
À Saint-Henri le cinq septembre (1962). 42 min. Hubert Aquin

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