

Being at Home with Roy Dupuis and Pascale Bussières

or, Star-Gazing In and Out of Québec

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Let me state at the outset that I see this essay participating, very modestly, in a (queer) film studies tradition that takes seriously fan culture and the notion that star images circulate among and are productively engaged with by audiences as ideological texts of self-stylization and collective identification. As such, I wish to point out that the immediate impetus for the following reflections was this particular fan's immense pleasure in learning of the double best acting wins by Roy Dupuis and Pascale Bussières at the 2005 Genie and Jutra Awards (for *Mémoires affectives* and *Ma vie en cinémascope*, respectively). Not only did this happy coincidence present an opportunity to reflect critically on the parallel twenty-year careers of two bona fide Québec film stars—and my own identification with them as such—it also allowed me a quasi-scholarly platform from which to hazard a few critical speculations about the nature of Québec celebrity culture more generally.

If we accept, following from Richard Dyer and others (see especially the work of Jackie Stacey),¹ that film stars can be read semiotically as clusters of signs that intersect with and communicate to spectators at given historical moments larger ideas and meanings about gender, race, sexuality, nationality, and the like; and if we agree, moreover, that the phenomenon of celebrity that underpins the star system is in some fundamental way compensatory, speaking to various anxieties and/or voids in an individual's or a collective's social and psychic life, then how do we interpret the various television and film roles of Dupuis and Bussières, as well as the equally various audience identifications they provoke? How, in turn, do those roles and identifications necessarily comment on the cultural/national nexus at the heart of the Québec entertainment industry's surprisingly successful battle against a North American media universe saturated with American content? And how, finally, do those roles and identifications signify differently nationally and internationally?

For, unlike many of their Québec acting contemporaries, Dupuis's and Bussières's recognizability as stars transcends the hothouse environment of the province's local media culture. This has to do, on the one hand, with the success-

ful exporting and showcasing of their talent to the English-speaking world via Bussières's high-profile roles in films by English-Canadian auteurs Patricia Rozema, Guy Maddin, and Jeremy Podeswa, and via Dupuis's long-running stint as Michael on the popular syndicated television series *Nikita*. But, as I will conclude by arguing, each actor's international appeal owes as much to their status as "queer" film icons, an aspect of their star personae that was arguably established at the very outset of their respective careers, and then solidified with Dupuis's role as the gay hustler Yves in Jean Beaudin's *Being at Home with Claude* and Bussières's as the newly liberated Camille in Rozema's *When Night is Falling*—films which both enjoyed great popularity on the international film festival circuit. This, then, is the "system" behind my own star analysis in this essay: I begin first with a general discussion of celebrity media in Québec, before moving on to comment briefly on the particular "medium" of transmission (i.e. television vs. film) of Dupuis's and Bussières's evolving star images. Next, I offer a few observations about genre, focusing on the role played by the costume drama and the biopic in solidifying each star as both a movie celebrity and a national icon. And, finally, I conclude with some remarks on gender and sexuality as they relate to theories of (queer) spectatorship and transnational audience identification.

Media

In addition to having a more robust film industry than its English-Canadian counterpart, Québec's star system operates at a more fevered pitch, fueled by television talk shows like *Toute le monde en parle* (which attracts audiences of close to one million every Sunday evening when it airs on Radio-Canada), and by celebrity gossip magazines like *Échos vedettes*, *7 Jours*, and *Star Système* (all owned by Pierre Péladeau *fil's* Québecor Inc.), upon which readers spend more than \$3 million a month.² Québecor also owns the gossipy newspaper tabloids *Le journal de Montréal* and *Le journal de Québec*; a chain of music stores (at which *lancements* of new discs by the latest pop stars occur almost daily); the television network TVA (upon which Julie Snyder

established the standard for the outrageous celebrity interview on *Le Poing J*, which aired from 1997-2000); the largest cable and internet provider service in Québec, Vidéotron; and a film distribution company, TVA Films. But media concentration and convergence is only part of the story here. Entertainment journalism and celebrity gossip in Québec practically invented the concept of embedded reporting. Interviews with stars are authorized by publicists and producers in carefully managed and controlled situations that offer lots of Hollywood glitz but little substance or depth, and are more about promotion and general boosterism than serious news coverage.

Thus, for example, Dupuis, who is notoriously media-shy, tolerates a series of embarrassingly intimate and cloying questions from reporter Michel Beauduin in the November 30, 2002 issue of *7 Jours*—on everything from his status as a sex symbol, his approach to women, whether or not he wants children, and what “power” accrues to him as a star (for the record, Dupuis states that he always tries to act according to his conscience)—in exchange for the following plug of his upcoming movie, *Séraphin*, at the end of the article: “The man has charisma. He had it before, but now it’s more fully realized....Go watch this movie in order to experience the freedom that Roy Dupuis inspires.”³ And for his at that time unprecedented second appearance on *Toute le monde en parle* in October 2005 to promote, alongside screenwriter Ken Scott, his new film *Maurice Richard*, Dupuis gamely sang along with the audience to Pierre Letourneau’s popular 1999 song about The Rocket, put up with host Guy Lepage and sidekick Dany Turcotte’s bad jokes, and participated in a Maurice Richard trivia contest with Scott. His reward? Getting a chance to plug, in front of a million or more fans, his Rivers Foundation, for which he currently serves as co-president, and which helps protect the rivers of Canada from exploitation by hydro-electric developments.

Modeled on the French program of the same name hosted by Thierry Ardisson (who was himself a guest of the Québec show in September 2006), *Tout le monde en parle* has, since its premiere in 2004, become a staple of Québec’s celebrity diet, and an unavoidable stop for media, entertainment, sports, and political personalities of all persuasions. Bussièrès was invited on following her Jutra win for *Ma vie* in February 2005, where she politely answered Lepage’s somewhat leading questions about what it was like to work with a director as notoriously difficult as Denise Filiatrault, and to play a living legend who was now trying to muscle in on the acclaim for her own performance. And in March 2007, André Boisclair became only the second person, after Dupuis, to be invited back to the show: On his first visit, in September 2005, when he was then campaigning for the PQ leadership, he flirted so outrageously with Turcotte, according to *Globe and Mail* columnist Konrad Yakabuski, that he effectively outed him. For his return visit, on March 4, 2007, Boisclair was doing damage control, explaining away recent media reports about the PQ’s slide

Being at Home with Claude



in election polls, and responding to a shock-radio host's comment to another gay candidate about the PQ becoming "a club of fags."⁴ I mention this to suggest that questions of gender and sexuality, especially as they overlap with questions of nationalism, are never far from the surface in discussions of Québec celebrity culture. If, as more than one observer has noted, the Québec show business industry functions more as a big family, then like the aspirant nation for which it serves as a metonym, it's a family that has its share of (sexual) dysfunction. One need look no further, in this regard, than the fallout surrounding the 2004 criminal conviction of the man who for all intents and purposes invented Québec's star system, Guy Cloutier, jailed for sexually assaulting child star Nathalie Simard while she was his client and protégé during the 1970s and early 1980s.⁵

Medium

The popularity of *Tout le monde en parle* points to the fact that it is the medium of television, even more than the cinema, through which Québécois invest collectively in the representation and reproduction of a national-cultural

imaginary, and—as importantly—in the homegrown stars who bring to life that imaginary on the small screen. There is an abundance of statistical evidence showing that whereas Québécois have no qualms about shelling out \$12 or more to see dubbed Hollywood blockbusters, since the 1950s, and beginning especially with the broadcast of the first *téléroman*, *La Famille Plouffe*, on Radio-Canada in 1953, they have consistently shunned dubbed American television shows in favour of locally produced French-language ones.⁶ Shows are made quickly and relatively cheaply, drawing on a deep pool of writing, directing, and acting talent, and are broadcast across the province at the same time each week, creating a sense of "eventness" that contributes to a swelling of audience numbers. Stars who ignore this kind of exposure, or who dismiss the medium as lowbrow, do so at their own peril, and it is no accident that Dupuis and Bussièrès have regularly taken on television roles throughout their careers, nor that their respective performances in the hugely popular linked series, *Les Filles de Caleb* and *Blanche*, in the early 1990s in effect made those careers.

The recent success of the talk-show and sitcom (cf. the extraordinarily popular *La petite vie*) formats notwithstanding, the television dramatic serial, or *téléroman*, continues to hold a special place in the history of Québec popular culture. Thus it was that Dupuis was plucked from relative obscurity in 1990 and cast in *Les Filles de Caleb* as Ovila Pronovost, the intense and brooding love interest of the show's willful protagonist, Emilie Bourdeleau. At that time the highest-rated series in Québec television history, *Les Filles* instantly cemented Dupuis's celebrity status, not least for the way in which, as Bill Marshall has noted, his role as Ovila, the often shirtless and sexually objectified woodsman who works hard and loves even harder, consciously traded on various natural and "naturalized" codes of masculine and national authenticity.⁷ Two years later, Bussièrès achieved her own star-making breakthrough when she was cast as Ovila and Emilie's daughter, Blanche, in the equally popular sequel to *Les Filles*. The series mimicked the successful sex/gender formula of its predecessor, focusing on an independent working woman in 1916 Abitibi, whose career as a nurse and relationship with her best friend (Pascale Montpetit's Marie-Louise) is thrown into turmoil by an *amour fou* with Patrice L'Écuyer's Clovis. Both Dupuis and Bussièrès have since gone on to star in several other Québec-made television series and mini-series—including *Scoop*, *Marguerite Volant*, *Le dernière chapitre*, and *Le coeur a ses raisons*—but it was arguably *Les Filles* and *Blanche* that established their star images both within and without Québec. For the films they were cast in immediately following—and presumably as a result of—these television roles were Jean Beaudin's *Being at Home with Claude* and Charles Binamé's *Eldorado*. Both edgy and sexy takes on contemporary Montreal's demimondes of sex and drugs, in which Dupuis and Bussièrès were very much playing against period type, the films premiered to great acclaim at Cannes and made a significant impression in English Canada as well.



Shake Hands With the Devil

Genre


With the success of *Les Filles* and *Blanche* we also see how genre becomes crucially implicated in the structure of address mediating the reception of Dupuis and Bussières as film and television stars in Québec. In terms of what Marcia Landy has identified as the "cinematic uses of the past,"⁸ the heritage film, or historical costume drama, also holds a special resonance within the Québécois national-cultural imaginary, its "transtemporality," in the words of Marshall, that is, the doubled backward and forward movement of its narrative time and the time of its narration, establishing at once a nice myth of origins and the historical continuity of a core connection to place that underscores that myth.⁹ In other words, we look at Dupuis in buckskin or beaver pelts, and Bussières in cloche or corset, and we are invited to identify with them not just as movie stars, but as *gens de souche*. Is it any wonder, then, that they, along with countless other Québec film stars, have continued to don period dress throughout their careers?

As important in terms of illustrating how film genres participate in transtemporal relays between past and present,

performer and role, on-screen spectacle and off-screen historical reality, is the biopic. And it is, I think, no accident that Bussières and Dupuis have recently solidified their celebrity status in Québec via their respective star turns as Alys Robi and Maurice Richard, portraying national icons whose professional successes and personal struggles we're clearly meant to read as mirroring Québec's collective throwing off of decades of national, religious, and gendered repression in the years immediately preceding the Quiet Revolution. (Dupuis's recent star turn as Roméo Dallaire, commander of United Nations forces in Rwanda at the time of the 1994 genocide, in Roger Spottiswoode's *Shake Hands with the Devil* [2007], arguably serves a similar function for Québécois audiences split over Canada's current combat role in Afghanistan.) Hollywood biopics of late have largely become exercises in actorly mimicry (one thinks of the rival Capote films, for example), and while Bussières and Dupuis successfully avoid this trap in their performances, the publicity machines surrounding each film have certainly traded on a certain identificatory slip-page in Québec audiences' connections to the various star



When Night is Falling



personae overlapping each film, a signifying chain that we might map palimpsestically, or along a continuum, as performer-role-historical subject-national/cultural icon. In the case of Bussièrès, normally known for her withdrawn and emotionally distant film roles, this meant playing up her wonderfully exuberant and extroverted incarnation of the still very much alive Robi, featuring the two performers together at events surrounding the film, noting repeatedly that she sang all the Robi songs featured in the film, and emphasizing the physical resemblance between the two performers. In the case of Dupuis, the filmmakers were no doubt counting on the audience's de facto identification with him in the role. For Binamé's film is the third time Dupuis has played The Rocket on screen, having previously starred in Jean-Claude Lord's 1999 television mini-series, as well as a classic 1997 Heritage minute about the hockey icon.

Gender

When Alys Robi was released from the mental asylum in 1952 following several rounds of electro-shock therapy and an involuntary lobotomy, it was the gay community in Québec City that first embraced her and welcomed her back to the stage as she slowly attempted to reestablish her career. A residual effect of Bussièrès's performance in *Ma vie*, then, is, arguably, its consolidation of her status as a queer film icon, something that had of course begun, espe-

cially in English Canada, with her appearance as Camille in Patricia Rozema's *When Night is Falling* a decade earlier. Indeed, in turning to examine how Bussièrès and Dupuis signify transnationally as film stars in the final section of this essay, I want to emphasize that understanding the ways in which gender and sexual address overwrite national iconicity in the spectatorial production of each actor as (ex)portable object of desire becomes key to reading their most high-profile English-language roles, with an erotic heat in the case of Dupuis, and an equally erotic cool in the case of Bussièrès, providing audiences with a reassuring fix on their respective representations of classic masculinity and femininity.

That these and other roles of Bussièrès and Dupuis are likewise available for queer consumption and resignification has much to do with the fact that each famously starred (and got naked) in films in the 1990s that were absorbed into the New Queer Cinema pantheon even as their resolutely Québécois and Upper Canadian plots—not to mention technical accomplishment—resisted the dominant politics and aesthetics of that cinema. The spectacular success of *Being at Home with Claude* and *When Night is Falling* on the international film festival circuit, including the international queer film festival circuit, combined with Dupuis's and Bussièrès's career willingness to tackle other queer-inflected roles, necessarily adds another identificatory layer to their star images. In the case of Dupuis, queer audience identification is in part transmitted through the intense physicality and superabundant eroticism he brings to all his performances, from his first film role as the tortured kid from the sticks in love with his best friend in Michel Langlois's *Sortie 234* (1988), through to the wayward son, Alex, who disrupts everyone's (male and female) emotional and sexual equilibrium in Langlois's *Cap Tourmente* (1992), and the bankrupt straight architect Dominique who pretends to be a gay antiques dealer in order to rescue his business in Claude Fournier's lamentable *J'en Suis* (1997). With reference to this latter film, Tom Waugh summarizes the dilemma for (queer) fans of Dupuis as follows: "Can the star who read his scripts too lazily be forgiven when the hate movie of the decade includes his to-die-for wrestling scene [with co-star Patrick Huard] followed by a long and lingering bare-all shower scene?"¹⁰ Even the lack of affect and actorly restraint Dupuis displayed in the four years he played counter-terrorist operative Michael Samuelle in the wildly popular television series *La Femme Nikita* (it was syndicated in over 50 countries and has produced a thriving afterlife on the internet) has been read—at least to judge by the voluminous fan fiction (both straight and gay) devoted to the character—as an erotic tease, Dupuis's clipped and cryptic performance barely disguising the animality lurking under the surface of Michael's black suits and uber-professional façade. With Bussièrès, on the other hand, it's the twin poles of obsession and repression we see mixing in her roles as Camille in *When Night is Falling* and Louise in *La Répétition*, among others, that account for their performa-



Eldorado

tive doubleness. This, in turn, encourages us to re-read all of the portraits of female friendship on offer in her films in terms of their queer representational resonances—however ambiguous, paradoxical, or problematic those resonances might be (as, for example, in the case of the two films Bussi eres has made with Micheline Lanct ot, *Sonatine* [1983], and the Bergmanesque *Deux Actrices* [1993]).

Of course, queer spectatorship has always been a process of seeing double, of looking both at and beyond the image bounded by the screen. In tracing the remarkably parallel contributions of Dupuis and Bussi eres to what Judith Mayne has called the "cinematic public sphere,"¹¹ and how those contributions have intersected with different film-going communities, I have attempted to demonstrate that reading the semiotics of their stardom requires a similarly doubled gaze. This means paying attention not just to how their performances are received inside and outside of Qu ebec, but also to how both dominant and minority audience identifications are further inflected by questions of gender and genre, medium and message, the national and the sexual.

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Notes

- 1 See Richard Dyer, *Stars*, new edition (London: British Film Institute, 1997); and Jackie Stacey, *Star-Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
- 2 Val Ross, "The Doyenne of the Mag Trade," *Globe and Mail* 23 February 2006: R3.
- 3 Michel Beauduin, "Entrevue avec Roy Dupuis," *7 Jours* 30 November 2002: 37; my translation.
- 4 Konrad Yakabuski, "Boisclair finding homosexuality may be an issue after all," *Globe and Mail* 3 March 2007: A11.
- 5 See Patricia Bailey, "Circling the wagons around Quebec's star-driven culture," *Globe and Mail* 15 April 2006: R7.
- 6 See V eronique Nguyen-Duy, "Du t el eroman de cuisine au supermarch e m ediatique: L' evolution du t el eroman qu eb ecois depuis 1980," *Qu ebec Studies* 18 (1994): 45-62; and Gisele Tchoungui, "The Quebec *T el eroman*: Between the Latino and the Wasp, a TV Serial with Gallic Humor in North America," *Qu ebec Studies* 25 (1998): 3-22.
- 7 Bill Marshall, "Gender, Narrative and National Identity in *Les Filles de Caleb*," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 2.2-3 (1993): 51-65.
- 8 Marcia Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996).
- 9 Marshall, 55.
- 10 Thomas Waugh, *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2006), 407.
- 11 See Judith Mayne, *Private Novels, Public Films* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988).