



Interview with Bill Marshall

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Fifteen years have passed since the publication of Bill Marshall's *Quebec National Cinema* (2000), a book that explored the understanding of Québec cinema as more than a territorialized, linguistically limited phenomenon, and anticipated academic breakthroughs such as Mette Hjort's *Small Nation Global Cinema* (2005). Challenging the traditional application of the National Cinema framework, Marshall's pivotal work allowed for an understanding of the sub-national reality of Québec as a broader phenomenon in terms of industry and cultural identity. The state of Film Studies scholarship dealing with national cinema has drastically changed in the past two decades, discovering in world cinema and transnational cinema useful paradigms to rethink the circulation and reception of the filmic object in the global era, but also the negotiation of geo-cultural specificity in the growing scenario of film festival circuits, online exhibition, and migration of local talents abroad. Québécois directors such as Denys Arcand and Léa Pool led the way during the 80's and the 90's, allowing younger generations of filmmakers such as Denis Villeneuve, Jean-Marc Vallée, and Xavier Dolan to export Québec cinema and grant it international—if not global—visibility. On the occasion of *Synoptique's* special issue on Xavier Dolan and Québécois cinema, we discussed with Bill Marshall the recent achievements and global turns of Québec cinema, and what they entail for the future of its practice and academic investigation.

Editors: *In accordance with the changes in both the making and the study of Québec cinema, how do you feel your scholarship has shifted, or rather evolved, from the idea of Québec cinema as a national phenomenon to a global one? How do you position yourself and your work in the ongoing debate on national and transnational cinema studies?*

Bill Marshall: The ‘global’ reach of Québec cinema is very partial and incomplete, and you seem to acknowledge that possibility in your introduction, which draws a slight distinction between ‘international’ and ‘global’ visibility. There is also a paradox in the question, as it retains that ‘national’, ‘sub-national’ or ‘provincial’ terminology, i.e. a category we call ‘Québec cinema’. Here I think it is important to ask: which ‘Québec cinema’? The exportable films such as those of Arcand, Dolan, or even *La Grande Séduction*? Or the frankly inexportable, such as *Séraphin*? It remains the case that only a fraction of Québec auteur cinema is distributed abroad, or even reaches festivals (although this is true of most ‘national’ cinemas), and the difficulties of finding audiences for Québec films in seemingly the most obvious international market, that of France, are notorious. However, there is no denying the changes that have taken place since 2000, despite the nuances we may place on them, and the national/transnational question does raise the all-important question of mapping that is so productive in the humanities today. I am inspired by the work in literary studies of Franco Moretti, and in Film Studies that of Dudley Andrew, Mette Hjort, Lucia Nagib etc., which forces reflection on, and indeed exploration of, what different cartographic perspectives can do to the creation of a corpus, the juxtaposition of heterogeneous texts, the generation of new insights. I followed the *Quebec National Cinema* book with a large project which sought to rethink—via an Encyclopedia and monograph—cartographies of French and Francophone Studies both literally and figuratively via the term ‘The French Atlantic.’ Whereas the terms ‘global’ and ‘globalisation’ risk being rather abstract and general, I am more interested in tracing the specificities of particular exchanges, routes and itineraries that spatial categories such as the Atlantic, *la francophonie*, nordicity, and so on create.

Editors: *In a talk given at the ACQS conference in Montreal in October 2014 (“Spaces and Times of Québec in Laurence Anyways (2012) and Tom à la ferme (2013)”) you discussed matters of queer historiography and geography in the work of Xavier Dolan. What do you believe is the role played by Dolan in the shift towards the global stance of Québec cinema?*

Marshall: Dolan's breakthrough is extremely important, and in some senses it is also a break-out, in that his work has found both new audiences and new scholarly attention beyond the rather restricted field of Québec specialists outside Canada. This begins I think with *Laurence Anyways*. It is true that he sidesteps deep models of national or class grand narratives, and favours a proliferation of surfaces whose playfulness, plurality and expressiveness challenge imposed categories of 'normality.' This is appealing to international youth audiences, and the fact that sexuality is a key example of this fluidity does mean that, for me, 'queer' is a useful term to use in relation to his work. Of course, he dislikes being pigeon-holed in terms of sexual identity, but as long as we use 'queer' with an anti-heteronormative rather than identitarian emphasis—or even as a verb ('queering')—then I think it is rather enabling. At the moment I am trying to reflect further, again, on the issue of space in his work, and the idea of 'queer spaces', or the 'queering' of space in for example *Tom à la ferme*. I also like the way that for him music is part of that mobility. It may be said that he is part of a generation that has definitively discarded the colonial reference in relation to both the English language and Anglophone culture: it is interesting—and amusing—that James Cameron's *Titanic* is famously more important to him than some of the classics of Québec cinema.

Editors: *Can you identify a corpus that can be addressed as the herald of the “global turn” of Québec cinema? And if so, how does Dolan situate within it? Moreover, how does such corpus, if it exists, relate to the one examined in Quebec National Cinema?*

Marshall: There are several concurrent phenomena here. Dolan, yes, but before that *La Grande Séduction* (unusually, a highly exportable comedy which spoke to different global audiences all negotiating the relations among belonging, community, and international capitalism), *Les Invasions barbares* of course, with its ambitions to say significant things about the current epoch, and its attendant international success. The work of Jean-Marc Vallée, finding international audiences with *C.R.A.Z.Y.*. I would also not underestimate *Café de flore*, which despite its faults is one of the recent Québec films which produces the most sustained sense of global connectedness. Villeneuve

and *Incendies*, of course. The globalising trajectory constituted by remakes, of *La Grande Séduction* and of *Starbuck*. However, I would also stress because of this the difficulty in establishing when the 'global turn' actually takes place: already in *Quebec National Cinema* I was discussing the Hollywood remake of *Louis 19 le roi des ondes*, and the work of Denis Chouinard, whose *Clandestins* is also from the 1990s but is a very powerful and prescient work about international migration flows.

Editors: *Is it possible to argue, provocatively enough, that the national take of your seminal book could be now revised in light of the global cinema paradigm? What has consistently changed to allow the passage from national to post-national understanding of Québec cinema?*

Marshall: The nation is not going to go away. The nationalist project seems currently to be in abeyance and support for it among 18-35 year-olds in decline, but who knows the future? *Quebec National Cinema* was in any case never about nationalist readings of films, but rather about the way in which the contradictions and tensions inherent in the idea of the nation were present in individual film texts or a film corpus. It is possible to see this 'push and pull' between forces of assertion and dispersal in what has happened since 2000: alongside the global successes, we find new heights reached in the Québec domestic film market by locally produced films which, as we have seen, are sometimes very inexportable, even incomprehensible to audiences outside Québec. I ended *Quebec National Cinema* with a discussion of so-called 'post-modern' film texts which related to globalisation. So I would firstly say there is some continuity rather than a complete break with the past. But secondly, and more importantly, the changes since 2000 have definitely seen an *intensification* of processes which were already becoming visible in the second half of the 1990s (including the big popular successes, such as *Les Boys*). That intensification in turn both generates re-shapings, and, as we have seen, invites re-mappings of the spatial categories within which we position film texts. Those re-shapings are both industrial and to do with the readings we make and that can be made. For example, Oedipal father/son relationships still abound, but now, in a film like *C.R.A.Z.Y.*, the gay son can be integrated into a national narrative. *Café de flore's*

extreme idea of the extensibility of the self also plays with a time that is labyrinthine rather than that of linear progressivism associated with 'national narratives'. Xavier Dolan's combination of mother/son paradigms, queer sexualities, ludic film form, and spatial mobility takes us into new territories. The evolving difference is that Québec cinema, instead of its narratives and content being conceived in terms of 'lack', is becoming more and more *relational*.

Editors: *How have changing funding structures shaped not only the practice but also the study of Québec cinema?*

Marshall: There are more films produced, and so more to look at, and very competing practices of filmmaking become visible. A race for the popular means that success breeds not only success but the expectation of success by funding organisations, with the possibility of more risky auteur projects being squeezed out. The quest for *valeurs sûres* means that the role of production companies devoted to independent film, such as Les Films de l'Autre, become all the more important. The other big change is of course that of more mobile film personnel, as we have seen, including moving across languages. What concerns me is that despite the increase in production, and the big successes, the opportunities for women filmmakers and those of indigenous or immigrant origin to make fictional feature films is not progressing significantly. This idea of the 'global turn' being expressed in the 'worlds within' national cinemas is one of the most exciting possibilities the paradigm shift, if that is what it is, holds out, and it is a pity that insufficient advantage is taken of it. A (scholarly, critical) effort to 're-map' and connect minority or other identity positions across different national spaces may help this process.

Editors: *Since you have been working within Québec film studies so long, what other developments have you seen in the study of Québec cinema outside the national-global debate? As Québec film continues to grow and diversify, are there any other trends you have identified in the study of this cinema in North America and/or Europe (is there more scholarship in English or cross-linguistic conversations?)*

Marshall: I have to say that in the UK at least (but also the USA, where Québec is absent from most French Departments), it is still a battle to interest scholars in Film or French Studies in Québec, despite my and others' best efforts. Lucille Cairns' 2006 book, *Sapphism on Screen*, takes a wide Francophone purview that includes Québec. There is not a lot more, certainly in terms of monographs, although queer and gender issues are probably among the most fruitful avenues to follow. Here, Dolan helps a lot, and I was able to organise a workshop recently in London on him that reached beyond the *Québécois*. One significant change since I began work on Québec cinema in the early 1990s is the much greater dialogue between Anglophone and Francophone work in Canada. There is much more critical work going on in English, often from teachers at or graduates from Concordia, and the cultural studies paradigms are shared much more than before. When I began, the gap between the latter and formalist approaches in French was rather vast, but no longer. Figures such as Germain Lacasse, Chantal Nadeau, Robert Schwartzwald (whose book on *C.R.A.Z.Y.* is just appearing) and Sherry Simon have played very important roles as intercessors here. Rather than write a sequel to *Quebec National Cinema*, my next project will be to do an edited book of essays that will include film scholars not usually associated with writing on Québec film, but there will be established names in the Québec field too!

Editors: *Documentary has been and still is a predominant mode of filmmaking in Canada, and Québec in particular has offered quite a few box office hits in the recent years. What place is reserved to those branches of Québec cinema that don't pertain to successful documentary filmmaking as well as to internationally renowned feature films? What about studies of cinema in Québec that don't fit into either category?*

Marshall: Popular cinema really needs to be looked at, as I have said. There are a number of directors that deserve scholarly attention and wider audiences, such as François Delisle, as well as work by women and minorities I alluded to earlier. One 'uncategorisable' figure who consistently produces interesting work but about whom very little academic work is written is of course Robert Morin.

Editors: *In Small Nation, Global Cinema Mette Hjort has observed that “minor cinema is understood at some level as appealing to national but also international audiences on account of the way in which it articulates or rearticulates the core understandings, experiences, and expressions that are the basis for a deep sense of national belonging.” (Hjort 2005, 116) Do you believe such claim to be applicable to the current state of Québec cinema as well?*

Marshall: Yes, Québec is a very important case, hence my initial interest in it, because I saw here a whole host of issues and relations, between national and global, regional, local, gender, sexual, immigrant etc. cultural identities which could inform debates elsewhere, particularly in Europe. The term ‘minor cinema’ needs to be unpacked here, I think, as it can be used in various ways: referring to small nations, but also to minorities in nations or other imagined communities small and large, and then there is the sense in which Deleuze and Guattari use it. As I have argued, Québec and other cinemas navigate between (would-be) ‘major’ and ‘minor’ configurations of nationhood. What I would stress in relation, and in addition, to Mette Hjort’s work are the key elements of mapping and re-mapping which characterise the insertion of small-nation cinemas within global cinema, and the way film scholars look at them; the very different configurations which can be analysed according to the cartographies used; and the renewed emphasis on Relation, including Édouard Glissant’s conceptualisation of it, when looking at the plurality of cultural forms in the contemporary world.

Conclusion

The above interview highlights Bill Marshall’s role as both an innovator and a catalyst in the scholarly discussion surrounding (small) nationhood, cinema, and globalization. More specifically, his seminal work on Québec cinema has further enabled the understanding of these themes as categories in constant transformation. Marshall’s reference to Mette Hjort as a close interlocutor, and the shared concerns of his work with that of the Danish scholar, proves particularly telling in this regard.

Hjort's seminal book *Small Nation, Global Cinema* began to explore globalization not simply in terms of broad trends, but from the necessary perspective of specific contexts, as she discussed a wide array of case studies to provide a more complete and nuanced picture of this multifaceted phenomenon (24). Marshall's interview seems to answer this call by continuing to interrogate and expand the scope of his already thorough examination of the Québécois context. His more recent work promises indeed to push the boundaries of what Québec national cinema constitutes, perhaps announcing a further stage in our understanding of globalization as an observable occurrence. Marshall thus intimates that it is precisely from the heterogeneous perspectives coexisting within specific (small) national contexts that productive scholarship on the intersections between nationhood, cinema, and globalization can most usefully emerge.

A further conjuncture between the works of Marshall and Hjort can be found in their shared interest in the political gesture of small national and subnational cinematic movements. In *Small Nation, Global Cinema* Hjort understood Dogme 95 as a way for small nations to "change the rules of the game" dominated by Hollywood and take active participation in it (40-41). In this interview, Marshall's reference to the *littérature-monde* manifesto and the corollary notion of *cinéma-monde* could offer a compendium to Hjort's perspective in relation to the specificity of the Québec case. Does the *littérature-monde* manifesto and its cinematic analogy also "change the rules of the game" for Québec and other francophone cinemas in relation to *la francophonie*? Does it bear a similar effect of "levelling the field" to the one that Hjort observes in New Danish Cinema? Is the *littérature-monde* manifesto comparable?

Anticipating Marshall's intervention at the upcoming 2016 Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) Conference in Atlanta—where he will further develop his reflection on "new thematic convergences" and the notion of a "post-national" Québec cinema—our interview shows the scholar's concerns with the insufficient exploration of the potential connection between the "global turn" of cinematic culture and the representation of "minority or other positions" from within and across different national cinemas. In this respect, as Marshall notes, the anti-hegemonic notion of queerness proposed by

Dolan's cinema not only functions in opposition to narrower categorizations of gender and identity, but could also help shape different cartographies of global cinema. This engagement with queerness, de-centred articulations of globalization, and small national contexts also confirms the timely rationale of *Synoptique's* current issue, which views global and Québec cinemas through the lens of Xavier Dolan's oeuvre.

Works Cited

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