

From *Téléroman* to *série télévisée québécoise*: The (coming of) Golden Age of Quebec TV

Yves Picard

The *téléroman* is Quebec's distinctive TV fictional genre. Unlike American TV *soap*, it is aired on prime time ; unlike Brazilian or Mexican *telenovela*, it is scheduled on a weekly basis ; unlike French *feuilleton télévisé*, it has original scripts, written by one or two authors ; and, unlike American TV *series*, it has shows which are open ended and endure for seasons of no more than a dozen of episodes. The *téléroman* is a TV national genre in its own right.

The popularity of the *téléroman* has been uninterrupted since the fifties and *La famille Plouffe* (1953). Since then, the *téléroman* has evolved in its content as well as in its aesthetic. While the text has been challenged by the social context since the beginning, the evolution of the *téléroman* aesthetic has been remarkable, especially in the new century's first decade. Indeed, no more afflicted by a studio aesthetic like the *soap* was, the *téléroman* has now a cinematic aesthetic much like the *series* has. While still a *téléroman* by its generic format, few describe it as such anymore. The new coined expression is "*série télévisée québécoise*."

This new semiotic system represents the Golden Age of Quebec TV. In this new *televisual* form, the perennial *talking heads* are more and more silent, because the *motion pictures* are more and more fluent. No more an *audio-vision*, the Quebec TV form in fiction is a *visual-aural* media. The gaze has replaced the voice. The small screen has been replaced by a bigger one, on the literal front in many households, but also in the figurative sense, by the fact that television has as acquired the *dimension* of cinema. The leadership chair has been occupied by a new *auteurial*: the screenwriter has been replaced by the director as the main driver of the show. The Quebec TV drama show as evolved.

To argue that the Quebec TV's new fictional form is indeed the fact that has being exposed, the text will address two questions. It will therefore be divided in two parts. First, the necessary question: what is a *téléroman*, both from a paradigmatic and a syntagmatic point of view? Secondly, the gritty question: how well did the *série télévisée québécoise* perform during the 21th century's first decade? Or to put it bluntly: is it truly Quebec TV drama golden age? To say it yet in another way: how can a society of 7 million people (much like Catalonia) produces a TV idiom, which has both a national role and a high quality status ?

A distinctive voice

The *téléroman*, literally *telenovel*, is Quebec's fictional TV form. It has a long history and many successes, and it is still a popular art form in Quebec. His longevity and vitality defies true logic: why does it surfaces and survives while there are a huge quantity of TV plays just south of the border and available for consumption in Quebec? American soaps or series have a popular appeal in Canada as a whole, so why does Quebec have its own fictional TV?

While being as North American as Americans or Canadians, Quebec people speak French. Their language is the *français-québécois*. Quebec society is distinctive on two cultural fronts: it

is different from its North American neighbors and from its European ancestors. *Quebecers* in North America are akin to the Brazilians in South America: they write a language which is clearly different from their spatial counterparts, and speak a language which is typically different from their temporal counterparts. While the Brazilians write in Portuguese, talk in Brazilian-Portuguese, and are surrounded by Spanish people, the Quebecers find themselves in the same situation on the French, *Français-Québécois* and English front.

Quebec people are *gens de paroles* (lyrics people): they exports singers (Céline Dion), songwriters (Luc Plamondon), playwrights (Michel Tremblay) and poets (Gaston Miron). The Quebec language seems to be better expressed by its artistic voices. (But lately Quebec has also exported the *Cirque du soleil*, a unique fest circus with no voices, a lot of songs and even more new images...). In other words, from a social and cultural point of view, Quebec society constitutes a nation. Yet, if the situation is a perennial political problem since Quebec's birth more than two centuries ago, it turns out to be an ideal venue for a television idiolect.

As Bazin would have put it: *What is television?* In words, the answer seems quite simple: it is a visual media. Like the word "telephone," the substantive television has a double sense: from a far distance, we are able *to look at*. But is TV truly a *visualicity*? In France academics use the word *audiovisual* to talk about it. In Quebec we often say, with unorthodoxy but also with certain wisdom: *As-tu écouté la dernière émission ? (Have you heard the last TV show?)* The word *audiovisual* is indeed in itself illuminating. It says: first comes sound, then the image. While cinema is for due reason and for everyone characterized as an image and sound media, TV, on the other hand, may be the exact opposite: a sound and image media, in that order.

The arguments in favor of this thesis abound. Television has historically followed radio. For that matter, institutional names of television networks say it loudly: SRC (*Société Radio-Canada*), CRTVE (*Corporación Radio Televisión Española*), RTP (*Rádio e Televisão de Portugal*), ERTU (*Egyptian radio and television union*). Nouns such as *talk shows* and *talking heads* have been coined because there was such a fact in the TV reality. Quebec TV shows titles sometimes spell the same idea: *Tout le monde en parle* ("Everyone's talking about it"), *Droit de parole* ("The right to speak"), *Pierre, Jean jasant* ("Peter and John talk"), etc.

Translation in both media is indeed different: while we read subtitles on the big screen, we often hear an overlapping of voices from the small one. The same is true of professional sports in general: visual elements are shown on the latter, while continuous speech is heard on the former. Hence, as J. Fiske and J. Hartley have stated in *Reading Television* (1978), television has a *bardic function*: it tells its stories to the community orally. TV aesthetic is, we have to face it, in its essence, a *mise-en-scène* of the speech.

Academics have see it. Indeed, as M. Chion has written in the aptly entitled *Audio-vision*:

As we have seen, the image defines the cinema ontologically. Now, the difference between cinema and television lies not so much in the visual specificity of their images, as in the different roles of sound in each. In *La toile trouée*, I wrote (with no pejorative intention) that television is illustrated

PREVIOUSLY ON

radio. The point here is that sound, mainly the sound of speech, is always foremost in television.
(1994: 157)

If talking heads are indeed more important than moving images in television, we are then able to understand why there is such an abundant TV production in Quebec or in Brazil. TV's own semiotic system is an opportunity for societies such as these to continuously speak out and show in that order its features to the world. Therefore, there is no great surprise in *téléroman*'s popularity in Quebec. As soon as Quebec's distinctive voice could be heard on TV, and its distinctive settings could be seen, success was guaranteed. The public applauded its own presence on the screen, even if it was a small one, because it gave it a chance to have a self in the mirror... while the film big screens have been and still are monopolized by Hollywood. In essence, the *téléroman* has flourished on the small screen because it has given the nation a *mediatic* voice and territory, within the realms of the collective imaginary landscape.

A brief history of the *téléroman*

From the 1950's to the mid 1980's, the *téléroman* was shot in studios, as the soap was, and had a vision that looked backwards, but that didn't matter to Quebec's television public. Nobody cared if the aesthetic was similar to primitive cinema. Mise-en-scène was based on staging the dialogue exchanges within fake sets, captured by three cameras at a very slow dramatic pace. But, as in *Bonanza*, *Dragnet* or *Star Trek* in US TV, it was sufficient in itself, for this was the Quebec TV 1st age (not golden yet).

Besides, characters in *téléromans* dealing with the past like *Les Belles histoires des pays d'en haut* (1956-1970) or *Le temps d'une paix* (1980-1986), or with the present like *Quelle famille !* (1969-1974) or *Jamais deux sans toi* (1977-1980), were speaking in *français-québécois*. So while the shots were stoic or redundant, the speeches were at least, or at last, vernacular. It can even be argued that zero degree style (Barthes, 1952) is a better way to take control of speech in audiovisual medias. Indeed, on both the production and the reception sides, focus can be made on, and pleasure can be taken in, the distinctive mother tongue of any nation.

While the aesthetic of the *téléroman* was stagnating, content evolved with Quebec society at an extremely fast pace. Between the early 1960's and the beginning of the 80's, the nation overcame a Quiet revolution, went through sexual liberation, lived industrial transformations and has achieved political emancipation. In sum, people changed from being *French-Canadian*, in a past tense society, to being *Québécois*, in a future tense one. TV fiction, as theater and music, could not escape the changing and prevailing attitudes; it gave it new norms and new values. In TV historical pieces, it gave right to a rereading of the past. In TV comedies, the clash of old and new mentalities nourished the laughs, while in TV dramas, it was echoed with tragic tones and tunes. To assess the evolution of the *téléroman*, suffice to compare aforementioned Quebec TV objects produced in different decades: the further they are from one another, the clearer the picture of the evolution of mentalities appears to be.

The *téléroman* underwent a makeover in the mid-1980's. While the format endured, style and

values changed a lot. In tune with the advent of new channels in the TV landscape, notably *Musique+* (an explicit clone of MTV network) and *TQS* (an implicit clone of Fox network), both launched in 1986, the *téléroman* was replaced by the *télé série* on that same year. *Lance et compte* (1986-1988) was set in real locations, shot with one camera and with a fast editing scheme. With it, the Quebec TV fictional form deserted the French paradigm in favor of the US TV syntagm. The cultural shift came after the failed referendum of 1980 and pointed out a new climate: welfare state and national challenges became less appealing than free market. Accordingly, characters stopped being “losers” and became “winners,” which could be viewed as a revenge for the lost political debate. That the style echoed the *hollywoodian* manner, and lavish production values, with underworld shows such as *Omerta* (1996-1999) and cop shows such as *Fortier* (1999-2003), was not a big debate for the TV viewing public; instead, it was a welcomed new move. The *télé série* proved that the Quebec TV fictional form could do as well as the normative occidental audiovisual form. At last, Quebec was showing that the self in the mirror could be as interesting and powerful as... the one of the Other. The *télé série*, which endured from 1986 to 2004, would have been a symptom of the alienation phase, if it had not been overshadowed by a trilogy that gain both popular successes and critique esteems. Indeed, almost in parallel, from 1993 to 2003, three 30-minute shows revolutionized Quebec television: *La Petite vie*, *Un gars, une fille*, and *La Vie, la vie*. Each was different by the world it was depicting, but the three were as noted united by their very format and by a shared common stylistic trait: self-reflexivity.

La Petite vie came to this result by staging a dysfunctional family in the *téléroman* world, and even by setting it up to reach its most absurd conclusion. In the hyper-codic kitchen, the mother kept talking to her turkeys while the father did the same with his garbage bags or miscellaneous machines. When they stopped their alienated discourses, their dialogue became soliloquy: they could only enunciate one-liners filled with repressed anger. Their children were as disconnect from the real world as they were, if not even more. All the while, the author put emphasis on the TV set as the center piece of concern. Clearly, *La Petite vie* was intended to be decoded at the second level. Content-wise, it was revolutionary because of its inter-textuality and for illustrating the resentment linked to a repressed need to be love.

Un gars, une fille went further in the subjective landscape. Set in a contemporary Quebec, it showed that women and men are living in different gender planets. The world view was as lucid as warm. The two main characters, Guy and Sylvie, lived and debated all the time but assumed further and further their differences as the shows progressed. Characters moved in and out of the frame, while the camera remained stoic; some characters were even staged in the foreground and back to the camera, as a visual obstacle and a forever denial of identity. The result was a new one for Quebec television: off-screen finally came to life, the camera acquired a certain level of autonomy, and the author put emphasis on his point of view. (The show was also new in the world of TV landscape as a whole and across the world: the format has been subsequently sold to twenty countries, including such different societies as France or Ukraine). Furthermore, at the end of the sketches, images were often empty in content, but full of graphic

effects, without dialogue, but with jazzy commentary songs. The style was educating the public to accept and appreciate the modernist approach to TV making.

And then came *La Vie, la vie*. This project is still to this day unique: three seasons of 13 episodes each, or 39 episodes in total, within which each had its title, theme and style. The full spectrum of this series could have been titled in homage to one great film : *39 Short Films About The Life, the life*. To say that it was a masterpiece would be an understatement. It was a tipping point in many ways. *La Vie, la vie* was as harmful as it was elegant. Five characters with their own view on every matter, shot as if the future of Quebec TV resided in its quality. With *La Vie, la vie*, the *téléroman* gave birth to the author as *metteur en scène*, like it is in cinema. Nothing could be the same thereafter. The *téléroman* had evolved up to the point where it was about to change. If at the beginning of *La Vie, la vie* the dialogues and the voice (of the screenwriter) were as important as they were before, at the end, a new semiotic system emerged: the images and therefore the director's point of view were, at last, as important as the dialogues and the screenwriter's voice, if not more important. *La Vie, la vie* was on air at the start of the first decade of the 21st century and gave birth to the Quebec TV's Golden Age.

In sum, Quebec's television landscape has clearly changed since the publication of *De La famille Plouffe à la Petite vie* (Desaulniers, 1996), which dealt with *téléroman* as a whole and thought it from a sociological perspective. Sadly, since then, the author of the aforesaid work hasn't updated it (he died in 2005). Unfortunately, in surplus, nothing has been published ever since regarding Quebec TV's drama as a whole. As a matter of fact, dozen of works by graduate students have been done in parallel, at master's or doctorate levels, but only one was published (Aubry, 2006). Besides, these works, while offering interesting and often stimulating ideas, are more focused on particular cases by means of academic criteria or time schedule. The conclusion is blatantly clear: the Quebec idiosyncratic TV genre is still ambiguous, if not negated, and his evolution even more unclear, if not unknown.

Hence, the first part of the text, which is a sketch of the study I have already published for undergraduate students: *Quand le petit écran devient grand* ("When the small screen becomes bigger") (Picard, 2010) and which is a preliminary report of a forthcoming doctoral thesis : *De la voix au regard. Étude esthétique de la fiction télévisée québécoise de ses débuts à nos jours* (to be presented in 2012). This being said, a question is still unanswered. To be more precise than I have been in the introduction, this question is the following : How well did the Quebec fictional TV performed during the first decade of the 21st century, after *La Vie, la vie*?

A long view of the *série télévisée québécoise*

How well did it perform since the aforementioned TV masterpiece? Well, very well, indeed. Let us align a series of successes, which will serve to prove this point. *Rumeurs* (2002-2008) has been remade for (English) Canada in 2006. *Minuit, le soir* (2005-2007) won three first prizes at the same international competition in Reims in 2007. *Les Lavigueur* (2008) won *the FIPA d'argent* at Biarritz and the *Rose d'or* in Lausanne in the same year and has been remade for

Antena3 in Spain as a movie titled *El Gordo*. *Le Coeur a ses raisons* (2005-2007) has been aired on NRJ 12 in France since 2008. *Les Bougon, c'est aussi cela la vie !* (2004-2006) and *Les Invincibles* (2005-2009) have been remade for France, the first in 2008 for M6, the second in 2010 for ARTE. *Aveux* won the prize for the *Best French TV program (all categories)* in Banff in 2010. *Les Parent* (2008-...) has been sold since its inception to Spain, Greece, Russia and Israël. And *Taxi 0-22* could be object of a remake for HBO by Gandolfini.

Clearly, the Quebec TV's distinctive fictional form is being the object of an international recognition since *La Vie, la vie*, on the critical front, in prizes, and on the commercial side, in sales. For due reasons: after *La Vie, la vie*, in tune with the turn of the century, *téléroman* became *série télévisée québécoise*. Indeed, Quebec TV's drama is a serial narrative within a national framework, as excellent as any other top-notch national TV on the international market. It belongs to the *Quality TV* realm (McCabe and Akass, 2007). The authenticity and originality of these productions are encoded in its speech and in its images. That being said, let us again put it as Bazin would have if he had studied TV: *What is the série télévisée québécoise ?* The answer: it is diverse and it can be anything, provided that it possesses two distinct features. On the one hand, a national speech and the distinctive mentality that comes along with it; on the other hand, and now equally important, an enunciative form.

The former property does not need any discussion; it is a truism. The latter is more complicated for practitioners as they have to invent always new twists to be, at least, as expressive as the last one, at best, even more original than its predecessors. It is also more complicated for spectators because they have to acknowledge the manner, the style of these new formats. Indeed, self-reflexivity also works the other way around: the spectator has to know the code, and has to be able to recognize the style. As if this was not difficult enough, he needs to keep an open mind: styles per se are always different. Godard is not Tarantino, but both have style (whatever we may think of their respective world view).

Since 2004, which is perhaps the year of the *birth of the notion*, the *série télévisée québécoise* has added almost five excellent series per year. Considering the space limitation, the next journey, and the second part of the text, will be limited to ten series that have been aired from 2004 to 2010. This ensemble will serve to establish a coherent system with a national mentality towards themes and an international form regarding style. It will be discussed in the synthesis as an exemplary manifestation of the TV 3rd Golden Age. At that point, we will be even in position to discuss why it came to light during the new century's first decade.

While it could be said that the actual US Quality TV system has to pay tribute to *Twin Peaks* for its explorer role, the same is true of *Grande Ourse* (2004) and *L'Héritière de Grande ourse* (2005), two series of ten episodes of sixty minutes each with open narratives. The analogy is not far-fetched, since *Grande Ours* obviously paid homage to *Twin Peaks*. Like this American series it was set in a small town build around a factory, with interiors made out of wood, full of kitsch objects and filled with even more strange behavior from the characters. As with the famous Lynch series, the normative is actually a disguise: beneath the surface, vivid desires and images

are waiting to violently emerge from the unconscious or erupt from the subterranean. In the first Quebec series, these images were video ones showing rabbits in heat. (*Grande Ourse*, for that matter, has been made...before *Inland Empire*.)

Grande Ourse and its sequel both have been written by a young author (F. Ouellet) who at that time had just come out of the Quebec Media School (INIS), and which had been directed by the *telemaker* (as we say filmmaker) of *La Vie, la vie* (P. Sauvé). Hence, the series was as fresh as stylish; while the dialogues were frequently offbeat and the themes dealt with the paranormal, the *mise-en-scène* was elegant on two fronts. On the one hand, the sets were being shot by someone who obviously took pride at his craft. On the other, the moves of the actors and the camera were orchestrated with wit by an audiovisual artist: characters talked to each other from background to foreground, moved onscreen from opposite directions or appeared elsewhere by virtue of the montage. The edgy style gave depth to the eerie theme. In fact, it can be argued that *Grande Ourse* could have been a success if it had been shown later, since at the time TV sets were too small and still in the 4:3 aspect ratio, and the series was too new. As *Twin Peaks*, it was ahead of its time. The same thing can be conceived the other way around: *Grande Ourse* and its sequel were the opening act of the *série télévisée québécoise*.

The two innovative series would have been forgotten stars if they had been the only two in the Quebec TV sky. On January 2004 while *Twin Peaks* was remade with a self-reflexive manner, *La Famille Plouffe*, the matrix of the *téléroman* for that matter, was also object of a *redux* process with *Les Bougon, c'est aussi cela la vie !* (2004-2006). This series consisted of fifty 30-minutes episodes, each with closed narratives, but united as an ensemble by a dramatic arc. The three seasons, which could be viewed as a trilogy, were written by a novelist (F. Avard) and a stand up comic (J.-F. Mercier) and directed by two *telemakers* (A. Desrochers, and D. Grou a.k.a. Podz, who are also filmmakers). The analogy between the two shows is uncanny. The Bougon family of the new century's first decade was like the Plouffe family of more than fifty years ago. For example, both were working class families with a wise mother, a sardonic father, and their children of different sexes and ages. In fact, both were a bound group in front of changing times. But the thematic similarities end here. While the Plouffe family was naïve and made us smile, the Bougon family was tricky and made us laugh loud... because in each episode they invented new twists to take profit of the system. In the end, they take the money and run, laughing all the way to the bank. Their victims were masters of the universe: landlords, businessmen, bureaucrats and politicians. Les Bougon were narcissistic Robin-Hooders: they stole from the riches to be less poor. The subtitle said it clear and loud with irony : *this is also life!* (a clear wink to the previous SRC series *La Vie, la vie*).

The very first scene of *Les Bougon, c'est aussi cela la vie !* set the tone. Filmed as the opening of *Ugly, Dirty and Bad* (Scola, 1976), the series was as satirical as elegant. As *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, it was a single camera sitcom. As *Entourage*, it had filmic ambitions. Staged in real locations with expressive lighting, its style was a mixture of the documentary approach and the manners of art. The director's view was autonomous: the camera moved freely in space from

one character to another, from one room to another, from inside to outside, and from the inner circle to the outer circle. The dialogues were *mise-en-scène* in shots and reverse shots, as they usually are in the audiovisual realm, but these moments weren't the only vital ones. They were the meal, but not the appetizer, and certainly not the dessert. Before or after the laughter, there were moments of silence and emotions, where the images spoke by themselves and where the montage didn't need the music to dramatize the scenes. The series had the texture of a social canvas narrated by bardic voice and staged by an *auteurist* gaze.

Then came *Minuit, le soir* (2005-2007), a thirty-nine episodes series, each one also of 30 minutes, but this time of open-ended stories. The three season series, which could also be viewed as a trilogy, was written by two friends (P. Y Bernard and C. Legault) and directed by the aforementioned Podz. It has been praised for its cinematic style. For those who thought that the TV screen is a small one, *Minuit, le soir* came as a shock. Not only did the camera moved freely in the *diegetic* space creating an autonomous point of view like the previous series, but out of focus shots, telescoping time and completely silent sequences abound as well. In fact, the manner was in adequacy with the series themes: images and sounds were disconnected, while the characters were having trouble in connecting with their inner world. In the series, both the thematic and the stylistic were orchestrated as systems of alienation.

Minuit, le soir centered on three male characters who were bouncers in a bar and who were not only in conflict with clients, but with themselves. The episodic violence was more beneath the surface than graphic: the three male figures were in a psychic warfare with their past, their hidden sexual desires and the dominant male attitude. As the Beatles would have sung, this was truly *a lonely heart's club band*. They were way less than supermen: they were in fact out of touch men, almost estranged from their own manhood. In the promo, the three leading men were walking towards us, like the women of *Sex in the City* but with much less independence. Since they were older and poorer than their female counterparts, the series may have been titled: *Sad in the City*. In fact, the series could have been on the cover of any film magazine in Quebec or elsewhere. Its presence would have been a necessary statement: the *série télévisée québécoise* is alive and well, and living in Quebec, in a realm not unlike cinema.

The *série télévisée québécoise* isn't exclusively a dramatic universe as *Les Bougon, c'est aussi cela la vie !* has proven. Since the Quebec fictional TV system is small in comparison to nations like the USA or the UK, distinctions between soap, series and sitcom seem here superfluous. The *série télévisée québécoise* is one of closed or open stories, with a dramatic or satirical tone, and in 30 or 60 minutes formats indistinguishably. However, TV professionals know what the US TV genres are and what they mean. Hence *Le Coeur a ses raisons*, a "soap on dope," which was the first Quality TV series to be aired on the private network.

Le Coeur a ses raisons (2005-2007) was staged as if extraterrestrials tried to mimic terrestrial TV images they had captured by their satellite dishes, with voices and dialogues being recorded by an alien nation. The eccentric and out-of-control characters were rich and lonely individuals in a dysfunctional family, living stereotypical conflicts. Men and women of different generations

and in constant turmoil were performed by the same male actor; a naïve nurse in white uniform or a bitchy woman in black dresses, both with outsized fake breasts, but with inside jokes, were played by the same actress; two brothers, one white, one black, were played by the same white actor with different accents; babies were puppets and were thrown in the air like basketballs; exterior sets had visible plastic trees ; and everyone spoke with a parodied *French-Parisian* accent (which is very different than the Quebecois accent). The series was clearly intended to be decoded at the second level: the referent wasn't reality, nor was it representing a national reality, but rather the US soap shown on foreign markets. *Le Coeur a ses raisons* was akin to a *Saturday Night Live* skit but dubbed specifically for the French in France (but made by the French of Quebec).

Le Coeur a ses raisons was in fact doing for a US TV genre what *La Petite vie* had previously done for the *téléroman*: it was a hyper-reflexive act. The series was a real pleasure to heard... and to watch. It still can be viewed on and on without exhaustion, often with smiles on screen and laughs between takes and applause in living rooms during the shows. Nonetheless, the public's reception came as surprise. While in Quebec the series was a bit successful, in France it became a cult TV classic. In both societies the series "visuals winks" were decoded at the second level with the same joyful reactions. But can we say the same thing of the aural double-entendre? Is it possible that the *French-Parisian* accent had been taken in France as simply a French parody of US soaps? If so, it would remind us of the perils of the second level reading: it must indeed be acknowledged to be effective.

The problematic second level, or the *second degree of literature* (Genette, 1982), is at the center stage of the interesting series of this new TV landscape in Quebec. For instance, two series of the last five years have been condemned or applauded, precisely because of the reading level involved. On the one hand, the three seasons of *Les Invincibles* (2005-2009) and the four seasons of *C.A.* (2006-2010) have been viewed as depictions of the *thirtysomething* generation's incapacity to get out of the teenage mentality of *sex, drugs and rock'n'roll* in favor of the values of maturity (work, engagement, family). The four male characters of the former series or the two male and two female characters of the latter series were all obsessed with themselves, also by their sexual desires (a lot), their career (a bit) and their broken hearts (a load). They were narcissistic individualists. But during the series, they evolved and surprised us. So to say that they were despair role models in unfair.

Les Invincibles and *C.A.* were stylish, not in the sense of lavish images as the *CSI* series or because of its temporal telescoping as *Lost*, or its hyperactive editing as *24*, but... in the manner of the modern cinema of the sixties. *C.A.* for instance was a Quality TV's textbook: indeed, as often with W. Allen, present and past were shown in the same frame. While a character told his or her sexual adventures to the other three, the editing was not a fade of takes, as usual, but a *mise-en-scène* within the shot. Thereby, imagine four characters by a poolside and a short story of a sexual intercourse in an empty classroom performed by the teller, with sarcastic remarks made by the other three present in the narrator's space, but still in swimsuits. The result was at

first astounding, at second exhilarating. The form had style. The view was interfering with the talks of the characters. It had the maturity they lack.

Les Invincibles also had modernist manners that intervened with the *adulescens* of its protagonists. In this case, instead of being endogenous the style was exogenous. The series was a mixture of three layers. On zero degree level, it was the quest of four guys and the conflict with their four girlfriends. On the first degree, it was the visualization of their superheroes inner-world shown as it is: in cartoons. On the second degree level, it was the story they tried to tell to a fictitious documentary crew but weren't able to tell clearly, caught in the entanglement of their confessions. The leaf of the three layers of meaning created a patchwork, that constituted some sort of predestination: they had a past full of visual BD images, but a future full of aural TV disclosures. This form also had style. It gave a clue. It was a signifier in itself. It was different than self-reflexive: it was enunciative.

But, as noted before, the second degree has to be acknowledged to be effective for the telespectator... or the critic. Thus, while the aforementioned arguments tend to consider the last two series as quality TV ones, it must be said that a serious review has stated recently that the two previous *téléseries* offered deceptive mirrors to viewers (Létourneau, 2010). The second degree style in the TV intellectual realm or the Quality TV style is still a matter of debate. Does a TV series is a matter of themes only or does the TV style exists in and for itself. Does TV style contribute to a given world view? Can it distinguish itself from the content to the point where it can provide an autonomous point of view, carrying an *auteurist* gaze by itself? The debate is a done deal as far as cinema studies are concerned, since cinema is an art; therefore films can be *authorials* and indeed many independent movies achieved it. The same debate is less than a closed one in TV studies. Who can say that TV has become an art form with the advent of the aforementioned Quality TV in this new century's first decade? We do in this text, perhaps for the first time in Quebec's media studies.

In the same line of reasoning, the mini-series *Les Lavigueur, la vraie histoire* (2008) pushed the envelope of the *série télévisée québécoise* one step further. The six episodes mini-series, each of 60 minutes, with open ended stories, won two prestigious prizes from two TV festivals in less than six months. It could be argued that it's a masterpiece. To put it bluntly: the series offered a Wong Kar-Wai aesthetic of a working class family tragedy. The story of the Lavigueur family was not a family Plouffe drama variation and it was based sadly on a real event : they were poor, won a lottery and suddenly had a lot of money, but sharks and media vultures circled them, so they lost all they had, even what they had before and what was essentially priceless, family ties. The backbone structure of the mini-series was operatic, with a rise and fall story, full of powerful performances and broken dreams along the way. The series attain the Quality TV domain by its elegant *mise-en-scène*.

The opening titles of the first episode set the emphatic tone: under a score which exalts the simple life of the poor, images shot with telephoto lens of children having fun in alleys, girls sunbathing on a roof, people chatting on balconies and pigeons behaving in groups abound; relating each other

by a smoothly and consolidated editing style. When the Laviguer father appeared on screen the style took full sense: the family members were de-framed, with out-of-focus surroundings and objects in the foreground, acting as constant visual obstacles. Furthermore, they moved from off-screen to onscreen or the inverse, while the camera remained static. The effect was subtle but relevant: the members of this family were isolated on a formal basis, right from the start. Therefore, the following acts were not surprises. The style here also gave a clue. Moreover, each shot and sequence, some in saturated yellows and others in profound blues, demonstrated the stylistic control of the *mise-en-scène* while at the same time marking the memories. With its craftsmanship, it achieved excellence and managed to make emotions real and profound for the viewers, filling them with raw emotions.

The series *Aveux* (2009) raised the bar a notch above, therefore demonstrating that the *série télévisée québécoise* is an artistic relay race: series tried to surpass the ones who preceded and often succeeded in doing so, mainly at the public network SRC. It shall be emphasized that a bunch of other television shows prefer to follow the trend, mainly on the private network TVA, while others confine themselves to the sideshow, mainly on the still not gainful private network TQS-V or the still not popular educational network TQ. The song remains the same throughout the adventure of the Quebec fictional TV form: the development was, and for the most part still is, a SRC (thus public) achievement. The premium cable network in Quebec *SuperÉcran* prefers to support the cinema, in part, and to make profits, in full. The effects are precarious budgets for both television... and cinema.

The series *Aveux* made a lot with very little. It was full of whispers and silences. It was about hidden emotional events, real nightmares that were repressed, but, as the story went, reappeared one by one through characters and style. It was about a son's return, his mother's culpabilities, his father's pain, his wife's discovery, their neighbor's drama and the family's reunion(s). It was about life, within a tragic structure, and this would be a melodramatic stance if it weren't transcended by a poetic style. The series, which was written by a theatrical author (S. Boucher) and directed by an experienced *telemaker* (C. Desrosiers), and which was a unique occurrence of twelve one hour episodes, a kind of a mini-series on the long haul, offered a *televisual* form of a rare consistency and relevancy. It gained more and more viewers as it was aired weekly.

The series *Aveux* was a brilliant adequacy of the *televisual* form and content of tragic dimensions. Indeed, while the main characters were restraining their inner thoughts, due to the laps of time and the burden of fate, and were remaining silent in well composed frames, the aural made the point: their voices and words precede their visual presence. It was as if the sounds were ghostly. Not only were they disconnected from their audiovisual counterparts, but, they lived by themselves, so to speak. This in return built up the platform for their potential eruption. In other words, they were chasing the images, striving to fill the gap between the real and the emotional. Therefore, the reader will not be surprised to learn that, when the sounds and the images finally achieved synchronicity, when the past rejoined the present, tears weren't anymore for fears. *Aveux* won its title: confessions finally made.

The new century's first decade of the Quebec fictional TV form ended in 2010 with an apotheosis. We may say in the future that *Aveux* was its nadir, one year before the finish. But stories are often never ending and the *série télévisée québécoise* is not an ephemeral advent. It will continue its course. So, it's no surprise that the last series to be considered, **Musée Éden**, has an already announced sequel. This last series even had one more nomination than *Aveux* at the Quebec TV industry 2010 competition, *Les Gémeaux*. How did this happen? Simply put, *Musée Éden* was a Quality TV's thriller, with a *made in Quebec* cachet.

Musée Éden, which was written by G. Desjardins and directed by A. Desrochers the aforementioned *telemaker* (*Les Bougon, c'est aussi cela la vie !*) and also a filmmaker ever since (*Nitro*, 2007), and which consists of nine one hour and open ended episodes, was a historical TV narrative set in Montreal at the beginning of the 20th century. The city representation was worthy of an historian's research: the Quebec metropolis was full of dust, with narrow streets, prostitutes openly on the sidewalks, opium houses and corrupt police officers in back alleys. Clearly the city image was without concession to the usually accepted postcard mentality. The series offered a contra representation of a gentle nation in the making. Montreal's *Musée Éden* was a misery world populated by misfits. It had a Dickensian mindset and could have been made by D. Milch. It even had a forensic scientist as the *CSI* series, who was a lone male working in a well light white set, which is by the way more realistic.

That being said, *Musée Éden* was full of Quebec content. The protagonists were two young sisters in vintage dresses, who came in town to take control of a macabre wax museum, due to an inheritance. They weren't the naïve blond girls of so much American TV series. Symbolically, the elder one was played by a blond actress who changed the color of her hair at the director request; she had a red flame colored hair, covered with hats. In fact, they were heroines, as often in the Quebec culture, who had to fight murderers, extricate from domestic violence and face a patriarchal mentality which was everywhere, from the courthouse to the hospital, without forgetting the weight of the catholic religion. The themes of *Musée Éden* were as the settings: contemporary's readings of the past. It can even be argued that of the two heroines, the youngest was truly a brown hair naïve girl, but the oldest, a feminist in disguise. In surplus, characters had the Quebec mentality: they were ordinary people united against the odds, with a progressive if not socialist journalist in the front row denouncing the fat cats.

Musée Éden was a well written script within a well conceived concept. It also had a reflexive style. As noted before it was set at the beginning of the 20th century, and it had the styles of the period. In action sequences, the angles were low or Dutch, the lighting was expressive and contrasted, and the colors were saturated browns and blacks. Clearly the style paid homage to the German expressionist movement. In transition scenes, the frame, the distance and the angle seemed as if had been crafted by Griffith. The opening scenes were montage sequences, obviously for mystery purpose, with winks references to the Russian montage school. And for the skeptical spectator, the love interest of the youngest sister was a young man trying to invent movie machines that immersed the viewers in black and white films. Repeatedly, *Musée Éden*

was eyeing cinema accomplishments as sources of meaning and of consistency.

Aftermaths and afterthoughts

During the 21st century first decade, the TV landscape changed in a significant number of countries. In an exemplary fashion, US TV reached its 3rd Golden Age arguably even before the start, with the three *S* series of HBO (*Sex in the City*, *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*). Indeed, the prestigious film magazine *Les Cahiers du cinéma* aptly called this (r)evolution an *Age d'or* in a famous special number (2003). Quebec TV participated in its own fashion to the international Quality TV quest.

Due to a long hibernation in the studios during the *téléroman* period, which lasted thirty-three years (1953-1986), and the subsequent acceleration which endured almost twenty years in two parallel passages, on the one hand the *télé série* (1986-2004) and on the other the *trilogie* (1993-2003), the *série télévisée québécoise* started the 21st century first decade a bit late, four years later, in 2004. But in less than six years it went full blown and full circle. From references to TV's past or its respectful homage to cinema's past, Quebec's small television screens became bigger in virtual dimensions as well as in ambitions, constantly in tune with the advent of the bigger HD TV actual dimensions. While voices and dialogue still endured in the *série télévisée québécoise*, images and point of views spoke more all by themselves. While the aural was still meaningful for obvious reasons of intelligibility, the visual of Quebec TV's new form was becoming a mean of production, if not the main factor of sense.

In fact, its style is now as elegant, original or self-reflexive as the cinema style may be in artistic good hands, probably due in part to another technological evolution. The whole creating process in both audiovisuals media is now digitally made, from storyboarding and shooting to editing. Nowadays, young people are directing videos for academic purposes or for themselves with cameras and software editing tools that are often the same as the one used by professionals. So to say that TV is a small screen, in a pejorative sense, is an outdated formula; to say the reverse, which is that TV as now attain a quality status and is becoming an art form is not that far-fetched, either. But if the quality status of today's TV dramas seems appropriate, its art form status is another ball game altogether. Even though one academic has recently said that, « This the fate of a technology that is moving from an object of denial to an *objet d'art* » (Miller, 2010, 179), to put the words TV and Art in the same sentence still seems inappropriate for many people. These ideas may change in the not so distant future.

Since we're in the last paragraph of the text, a complete reasoning can't be fully achieved. Suffice to say those final remarks, though. Publics have an insatiable appetite for images, if they are realistic. That's the case since the ages of time. All the while, media evolved and replaced each other. As two scholars have put it, this process can be called *remediation* (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). In their words, two principal styles give dynamic to the cultural process: *transparent immediacy* and *hypermediacy*. This process can be explained differently. Two centuries ago, photography replaced painting as a way to represent the real. Therefore, the

modernist art of painting could emerge, post facto. As we know this decisive period gave birth to the Impressionist movement. But, the remediation didn't end there, since there have been new media ever since. At the 20th century's beginning, the same became true of the effect of the advent of the cinema on photography. Fifty years later, the same dual process involved this time TV and movies. But, it's clear in minds that painting became artistic due to the advent of photography, it's not as clear for the effect of television on film art. Nonetheless cinema became modernist, less than a decade after the advent of the television. So here we are, this time at the 21st century's beginning, more or less another fifty years later. What is the contemporary media landscape? Where are the realistic audiovisual depictions which glue the new generations to screens of whatever dimensions ? On (big) TV screens ? No, baby-boomers were children of the TV screens. *Xers* are glued to their *computer* screens. They are fully impressed by their videogames or fully immersed on the Internet or both ways. Is it therefore inappropriate to put the words TV and Art in the same sentence, nowadays? Maybe the 21st century first decade will be known as the tipping point in the TV evolution, as the mid 20th century did for cinema or as the late 19th century did for painting. It could well be the case for Quebec's television, for the US television and for others. *To be continued...*

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PREVIOUSLY ON

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Note

DVD of the aforementioned Quebec TV's fictions can be purchased from Canadians e-commerce sites (archambault.ca or amazon.ca) or from their TV distributor (imavision.ca). For the most part, they are encoded in NTSC (Zone 1) and are in *Français-québécois*. They can also be viewed in streaming at Société Radio-Canada web site (radio-canada.ca) or at a Quebec TV web site (tou.tv), provided they are still available at the time of the reading.