

Moving out of the Background: Québec Women Filmmakers and the American Roads

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Abstract: In the American tradition of the road movie, female characters have often been relegated to being sex workers, third wheels, or background characters who can only be foils to the journeys of male characters on the road. This study examines how two Québécois documentaries, *Hotel Chronicles* (Léa Pool, 1990) and *L.A. Tea Time* (Sophie Bédard-Marcotte, 2019) comment on and subvert these expectations of women by placing them simultaneously behind the camera and behind the steering wheel as they travel these American roads. In completing close analysis of scenes from both films and comparing it with texts in feminist studies and Québécois cultural history, this study will reveal the fabricated nature of the American road as well as attest how Québécois women find their place on it.

Introduction: Quebec Documentary Films, Mobility, and Americanness

The birth of modern Quebec cinema can be dated back to the early 1960s, with the advent of Direct cinema, a movement propelled by technology (the possibility of recording and broadcasting sound and image at the same time) and by a social movement, the Quiet Revolution,

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which brought French-Canadians (soon to become Québécois) to sever their ties with the British Empire and to redefine their place in North America, as the only majority French-speaking population. Led by the father of Direct cinema, Pierre Perrault, the films born from this movement, adopting a documentary style with a bit of fiction or *mise-en-scène*, were mainly concerned with questions of identity, because, as Perrault stated, Quebec people had long lived in and through the fictional images produced by two dominant film industries: France and the United States (qtd. in Clanfield 198). With this statement, Perrault sought to denounce a cinema of the image coming from, among other places, a country home to “palm trees that are very beautiful, but that don't grow here” (Clanfield 198), and that in no way reflected the identity of a Nation still searching for itself, “caught between the American dream and distant French roots” (Clanfield 198). Most of his strongly nationalistic works found the filmmaker going on the road, always within Quebec borders, trying to constitute what he called the “family album,” i.e. inviting his protagonists “to take part in an action, a quest, a journey or a hunt and through these acts of mobility, collecting their stories” (Desjardins).

Following in his footsteps, other generations of filmmakers (all men) also took the road, transgressing the geographical limits of Quebec, to explore French-Canadian identity far from its Canadian and European (French and British) heritage, thus seeking new possibilities of emancipation. Indeed, according to Yvan Lamonde, if the Americanness of the post-war Québécois subject is linked on the one hand “to its consumer habits, its architecture and the predominance in its various cultural manifestations of the practical code over the cultural code” (qtd. in Thériault), it is also linked to a concept of Americanness that can be understood as the journey of new societies which, through a reconstruction/remediation of the American myth, acquire a new autonomy by detaching themselves from their European roots. More specifically, Jean Morency explains that the notion of Americanness has made it possible to place the myth of Americanization “in a much broader perspective” based on cultural transfers and confluences between Quebec, the United States and Latin American countries (32).

Following this train of thought, this article seeks to further explore questions of mobility, identity, and Americanness, through Québécois female filmmakers' lens and perspectives, which have not been studied up until now. Furthermore, because the quest for the American Dream has been forever associated with the conquest of the land by male protagonists who, from the Western genre to the road movie, have been represented as the main travelers of the American roads, we

wish to investigate how the American Dream has been criticized/sought after by two women directors, Léa Pool (*Hotel Chronicles*, 1990) and Sophie Bédard Marcotte (*L.A. Tea Time*, 2019) thirty years apart. Inspired by female critics who have written about women's mobility (Rebecca Solnit, Jessica Enevold) as well as by Jean Baudrillard's *America* (1986), we look into the ways in which some important elements of the road movie—the music, the journey, the spaces/locations—are addressed in these works that creatively mix documentary and fiction, social criticism and intimate emotions and thoughts about the concept of belonging.

French-Canadian Women on the Road: Transgressing the Borders of Gender and Space

The history of women in regard to their social and physical mobility in a Western context (and beyond) is plagued by examples of how women have been associated with “immobile place-bound domesticity and symbolic geography” (Enevold 406) and public spaces and traveling having been “closed off or minimally accessible to women” (Enevold 406). Indeed, women's bodies were, in the past, considered unsuitable for walking and long journeys, because their supposed “fragile constitution” and “width of their pelvis” made it hard for them to walk long distances (Solnit 43). They also were physically and symbolically restrained from traveling alone on long journeys, for example through restricting items of clothing (high heels and corsets, narrow skirts and dresses) and because “the impurity of their being made them a bad luck charm on the road” (Solnit 43).

Both in road books and road movies, women travelers were portrayed, up until recently, as atypical travelers, third wheels or sex workers, present to satisfy men's sexual desires and putting their lives at risk to travel the open road, as it can be seen in Kerouac's *On the Road* (1947) and its movie adaptation (Salles, 2012). On the documentary side of things, it is also of atypical women travelers/explorers that anthropologist Serge Bouchard and writer Marie-Christine Lévesque wrote about in their monograph *Elles ont fait l'Amérique* (*They Have Made America*, 2011). Whereas the discovery and exploration of America have been mostly associated with men, the two authors write about how the achievements of important historical female figures from Quebec—many of them Indigenous or Métis—are linked with their time spent on the road, often traveling from Quebec to various regions of the United States, as part of fur trade expeditions (Marie Iowa Dorion, 1786-1850) or for their career (Robertine Barry, journalist, 1863-1910).

Through these narratives, which span three centuries, we can trace back the willingness of French-Canadian/Québécois women to be part of the American Dream, conquering new territory in the hope of giving themselves and their families a better life, or, in Barry's case, improving the status of women in the workplace. It is therefore relevant to ask ourselves, three hundred years after Marie Iowa Dorion's overland expedition to the Pacific Northwest, how and why the roads of America are travelled by women. We propose to do so through the analysis of documentary/essay films made by two women filmmakers who have chosen to go on the road, exploring symbolic territories and identities different from the ones investigated by their Québécois male counterparts, and perhaps, adopting a more personal approach, discovering if America, as Baudrillard has stated, "has become the orbit of an imaginary power to which everyone now refers" (Baudrillard 117).

Feminizing the American Road in *Hotel Chronicles* (Léa Pool, 1990)

Hotel Chronicles was produced by the National Film Board of Canada in 1990. This documentary film covers Québécois transplant (she is originally from Switzerland) Léa Pool's travels from New York City, Washington D.C., Monument Valley, Las Vegas, and the roads in-between. In her travels, she speaks with people she meets about the reasons why they are traveling (or have traveled), and what the "American Dream" means to them. *Hotel Chronicles* often plays with road movie tropes, such as several shots of vehicles and gas stations, as well as various people being lost and needing to consult road maps. It also adapts from the road movie the notion of motion being intermittent, instead of constant, as most of the film is spent speaking to individuals in hotel rooms, diners, and gas stations, and thus focusses on the act of stopping and self-reflection, as seen in classic road movies, such as the camp fire scenes in *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1967), which "serve as effective moments of punctuation" for reflection upon the journey (Lederman 72).

Furthermore, there are three key road movie tropes that the film adapts: the heavy use of music becomes a study of the mediated nature of the road; the focus on landscape speaks to how a woman challenges masculine notions of being on the road; and the repeated *motif* of self-reflection emphasizes the dangers of the American Dream. In studying how *Hotel Chronicles* adapts these three tropes, we reveal the simultaneously liberating and restricting nature of the American Dream for a Québécois woman going on the road in the early 1990s. Furthermore, we

discover how the never-ending Québécois identity quest is brought forth through the narrative dimension of identity (i.e. the ability for Québécois transplant Léa Pool to share bits and pieces of her own identity quest while on the road).

In a first instance, when performing a study of this film, one immediately notices how omnipresent the use of soundtrack is, notably through its narration, in which Pool reads out loud letters sent to her lover. In fact, music is almost always present; it is heard in the television screens of the various hotel rooms, in the dance halls, and on the radio of the stores that she visits. Even in moments of anticipated silence, such as when she is getting ready to go to sleep in Washington, D.C., the television remains on, quietly playing the theme to a news bulletin. This busy soundtrack is suggestive of a process of self-reflection (or lack thereof).

This use of music specifically reveals the mediated nature of the American Road, as it is saturated in images of its own making. It might even be endemic to the American experience, as Jean Baudrillard notes: “the TV is constantly on” (Baudrillard 68) and it “delivers its images indifferently, indifferent to its own messages” (Baudrillard 51). This notion is seen in the consistent references to the musical cues of other road films, such as an electric guitar playing a solo with a slide in D minor, akin to Ry Cooder’s theme of *Paris, Texas* (Wenders, 1984). The consistent use of road movie music represents how going on the road in America is not about the journey itself, but about replicating the dream that has been set up by so many men beforehand.

This idea makes itself most present in the beginning of the film, where Neil Diamond’s “America” plays over short clips of transport in New York City, where archive footage of immigrants arriving on Ellis Island can be seen, and brief moments from films such as *The Sweet Smell of Success* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1957) are edited together in a montage. With lyrics such as “We’ve been traveling far/Without a home/But not without a star” and “Got a dream to take them there/They’re coming to America,” it is clear that the film regularly uses music to play with the fabricated image of the American Road, rather than merely depicting the road itself. Its oversaturation of soundtrack suggests that the purpose of going on the road in America is not to tread new and unseen territory, as it is usually depicted in Western films, but rather to re-tread a path taken by men, in hope of finding a dream that many have already sought.

Secondly, in terms of women traveling these American territories, they have often been consigned to the background of landscapes inhabited by men. In her study of women in road novels, Jessica Enevold notes that “women [characters] become public property rather than private

individuals and circumscribed as ‘goods’ contained by masculine borders” (409) by being represented as unable to drive, consistently desiring to marry male characters and “settle” (409). In *Hotel Chronicles*, this stereotypical view of women is challenged. Not only is Pool, the filmmaker, consistently moving (through driving a car in Las Vegas or walking as part of an activist march in Washington, D.C.), but she also captures women leaving the background to speak directly to the camera about their desire to move. This is seen in Monument Valley, where she speaks to women working as waitresses in a hotel about wanting to leave to get an education elsewhere in the United States; they are later seen driving in a car, going towards an unknown location.

Thus, Pool places women at the forefront of her narrative, always wanting to move and travel to their next location. This is most evident in one of the film’s final shots, where Pool is represented against a backdrop of a mountain, at first stationary, then moving as her narration picks up, where she admits she does not know where she is going, but will travel regardless. The image originally looks like a painting, but then motion occurs; she will not be passive against the road ahead of her. As such, in Pool’s use of landscape shots, women are not stable, but in constant motion on the road.

The women in *Hotel Chronicles*, therefore, adapt the American Dream by being consistently in motion. Yet, a study of the final trope of the road movie reveals how there is a duplicitous nature to the road for women—it is freeing yet dangerous, open as means of escape yet closed in its possibilities. This ideal is represented through the consistent metaphor of reflection. This is most evident in a shot where she is composing a letter to her love in the Monument Valley, where we see a shot of a window, showing both the mountains outside and an opaque reflection of Pool as she writes. In this moment, she admits, “I’m gradually recognising our link. The roots run deep. They suffocate us, but they also sustain us. What fascinates me about you are all your contradictions.” This is obviously represented to be a personal letter written to a male lover, but through the double nature of the image, this could also be a letter to the America she is seeing. She is fascinated by how the image of the American Road is constructed, but unsure of how its large, meaningless landscapes will change her. As Janis Pallister notes in her study of Pool’s approach, she often accomplishes “two visions” within her documentary work—discovering herself through exile, but also making a statement against alienation (Pallister 209).

Thus, as this analysis demonstrates, *Hotel Chronicles* does not merely replicate the tropes of the road movie. It is responding to them, expanding on them, and commenting on what mobility a woman possesses, on the road built by the American Dream. It is up to her to self-define what the road is and consistently reflect on what the American Dream is—both are never static, and always adapting, as we will also discover through the exploration of Sophie Bédard Marcotte's *L.A. Tea Time* (2019).

***L.A. Tea Time* and the Reconfiguration of the Yellow Brick Road**

Just as Baudrillard explores the fictional and cinematic nature of America through its open roads, deserts, mountains and freeways, Québécois filmmaker Sophie Bédard Marcotte is intent on touching the fringes of the American Dream. To do so, she embarks on a documentary filmmaking journey, taking on the American roads with her director of photography, Isabelle Statchenko, hoping to maybe have tea in L.A. with her idol, independent filmmaker Miranda July. We learn early on, even before the two protagonists leave the arid wintery Montreal city for the U.S., that the aforementioned meeting with July is but a pretext for the struggling filmmaker to get away from an alienating job translating online texts for hotel sites to pay for rent. Trapped in this artistic desert, which is clearly demonstrated in the very first panoramic shot of the film, showing the two women as tiny figures walking arduously in a white desert landscape (of sand or snow, we are not sure), fighting against the wind, the filmmaker leaves her life behind to find some kind of solace and inspiration on the road.

The film's score suggests a desired connection to director Miranda July, as it often references her films. The sixteen bars of joyful piano score that repeats throughout the film is, for example, reminiscent of the score used in Miranda July's *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (2005), a film in which July's character is a video artist who abandons a comfortable life in order to go out and seek connections with others in the art world. The use of tubular bells in the documentary's meditation sequences is also similar to the score used in the narration sequences of *The Future* (2011), a film in which July's character feels isolated and afraid to settle in a domestic relationship. The references to July thus serve as a means to speak to the simultaneous freedoms and isolation that come from living a non-sedentary life.

As the women cross the Canadian border, heading down south, America clearly and quickly becomes a kind of promised land, as we see their car driving out of the snowy landscape and into the green pastures of a more fertile space. These green fields and the animals that they hold fill their frame (and ours) for a large part of their journey, the flora and fauna being captured in such a way by their camera as to let us rediscover the magic of what can be found on both sides of an open road. The long desert sequence (which lasts about 15 minutes) conveys the organic connection to the land and the sometimes-utopic ideas/images we have about American open spaces, as it leaves the two women wandering, on foot, in the Arizona desert, looking for the perfect shots. These turn out to be the rocks, sand, and some strange vegetation they find along their path, with the almost fiction-like space they get lost in once again, heightened by majestic panoramic shots which confirm that “in the desert, everything contributes to the magic of [this space]” (Baudrillard 70). These sequences are in a way self-reflexive, as the filmmaker and her sidekick are made conscious of their limits (and of the limits of the American dream) and use humor to convey the futility of their journey.

It is in fact this whimsical, intimate look at a cinematic America that constitutes the main narrative of their travels, with Sophie framing herself as a modern-day Dorothy *en route* towards the enchanted kingdom of Oz (L.A.), Miranda July being the elusive wizard to which Bédard-Marcotte seeks counseling on her career. Stylistically, this translates to giving the audience glimpses of yellow bricks along the way, as well as very short, random, and dispersed shots of the lion (a real one, shot in a zoo), scarecrow (in a field), and tin man (in a dream sequence), as reality and fiction meet sporadically, reflecting “a transcending of the imaginary in reality” (Baudrillard 104). But the real wizard, whose voice they encounter along the way, mostly through daydreams, is that of another important figure of cinema: the French filmmaker Chantal Akerman, who appears as a purple-colored hue in the sky and dispenses her wisdom to Bédard Marcotte, telling her, for instance, “I don’t know how to define the real. Does it exist? Do we ever find reality”? Akerman, whose documentary work seeks to preserve the intimacy of captured reality without establishing a clear line between the magical and the real, evidently inspires the Québécois filmmaker, who is attentive to these intimate moments she shares with the people she spontaneously reaches out to, including university students, a yoga practitioner and especially during the online conversations she has with her mother.

The somewhat raw documentary aspect of the film shines through in the limited dialogues where the two women discuss their film, the different shots and composition they choose, as well as the direction they are taking (literally and figuratively). This way of intertwining the two genres are, according to Quebec film specialist Paul Warren, what makes the specificity of Québécois cinema: the capacity to integrate, into these films, the two cardinal traits of documentary, “on the one hand fidelity to factual data, to the basic material (during the shooting phase) and, on the other, creativity or ingenuity (during editing)” (72).

In *L.A. Tea Time*, the mixing of documentary, essay, and fiction genres contributes to the physical and symbolic mobility of the protagonists, leaving more space to cinematic as well as internal/intimate explorations of movements that propel them both outwards and inwards. In a context where, historically speaking, geographical and social mobility has always been limited for women, and where “the first explorers often refused to allow women on board because they thought they would distract the men from their task” (Pritchard 45), the act of traveling American roads, on foot or by car, is in itself a political act of reappropriation of the female body, in the sense that “the affirmation of mobility is partly enjoined as a feminist strategy constructing the conceptual binaries that constrict women’s identities” (Pritchard 45). During their travels, the two women find a certain freedom within themselves, as they allow for the events, peoples, and spaces to impregnate them, pushing them to move forward, despite their knowledge of the possible dangers of the road. Furthermore, their debonair attitude, casual clothing and overall untidy appearance of Bédard-Marcotte and her partner all challenge and question stereotypical images of femininity in road movies, thus furthering a feminist agenda that is not at the forefront of their journey, but lurks in the background and can be felt, for example, through the relationship they share with two other filmmakers. Indeed, the ghostly presence of July and Akerman, referred to as role models, serves as a motivation for the filmmaker and her friend to move forward and to position themselves as being capable of self-creation through their physical mobility, in a context where traditionally “women were consigned to the background ... in a space without distance and time without future” (Bauman 87).

The inclusion of a scene where the filmmaker and her friend encounter a shady, redneck man intent on giving them compliments on their bodies (which he qualifies as being “sexy”) reminds the viewer of the ways in which women on the road have been considered like “women on the streets” aka sex workers, remaining to this day still “imagined territories” for men (Rojek

and Urry 17). Despite this scene, there are no other instances where we are made to feel like the two women are in any kind of peril in the middle of a deeply divided country, perhaps because Bédard Marcotte is “not interested in the missiles that saturate the US horizon, but in the flowers that lie in their wake” (Thibodeau). In fact, the America that unfolds for them (contrary to the very political America Léa Pool is confronted with in the 1990s) is infused with people intent on making sense of their lives through esoteric means, with very few individuals wanting to discuss politics, religion, or anything else going on in their country, leaving more time and space for wandering, for inner reflection, and contemplation.

Conclusion

Both *Hotel Chronicles* and *L.A. Tea Time* present women based in Québec who seek the American road as an act of self-definition. While *Hotel Chronicles* plays with postmodern aesthetics of the 1990s (through its repetitive use of television, music, and film references), and suggests that the road is a political realization, *L.A. Tea Time* presents an intimate portrait of what the freedoms of the road can provide for two women in a contemporary setting. This suggests a new sense of mobility for women since the 1990s. Thus, it is crucial to recognize how far these women have come between the time both films are made. As Alison Yarrow writes in her review of feminism in the 1990s, “[w]hen any woman made the news, she often stayed there for days, weeks, months, and, in some cases, years. Meanwhile, news consumers blamed women for their own unceasing visibility, as if they had narcissistically engineered unflattering coverage of themselves for personal gain” (Yarrow).

Pool’s investment is thus inherently political, as visibility and mobility on the road are political acts that are present even through the more intimate moments of the film, where the filmmaker reads out loud letters to her lover/to America. As for Bédard Marcotte’s era, the women of “a new generation are becoming more involved in the mass media and culture, calling for social mixing, acceptance of difference, inclusion and the ‘disappearance of power relations instituted by gender norms’” (Dagorn 19) and her work suggests that the road can be more than just a political realization; it can also be an artistic practice (Dagorn 19). Though Pool’s film is inherently more political than Bédard Marcotte’s, it is important to acknowledge how the two documentaries are revolutionary in how they capture movement.

Neither work claims it is a feminist work (nor do the women put forward their Québécois identity in a significant manner), yet both films are invested in a form of female self-discovery through the realization of mobility. In both films, each woman is shown transgressing the background: Pool moves from the mountains, as Bédard Marcotte's journey begins when she decides to move out of the stillness of the Québécois winter to begin her journey on the yellow brick road possibly leading to the American Dream. They also travel symbolically with other women along the way: Pool through the various women she meets and interviews, and Bédard Marcotte with the magical images of July and Akerman. Thus, they both effectively position themselves as strong, confident women on the road, seeking liberation through physical, aesthetic, and symbolic mobility.

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