

A First for Film Studies

The Romance of Transgression in Canada:
Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas
Thomas Waugh
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by Lydia Perovic

THANKS TO WAUGH who was the first to spell it out, it will become clear to everybody that part one of *Trudeau: The Miniseries* is a big camp fest, that *The Romance of Transportation in Canada* is, now that you think of it, populated exclusively by the "flouncing and pompous white men" who are "downright sissy", and that *Canada: A People's History* should be titled more accurately 'Canada: A Straight People's History'. There is a wealth of potential queer readings of Canadian history—any history, really—waiting to be discovered, and the Black Adder or Eddie Izzard take on the bewigged, powdered-up men who had built empires is a case in point. A look into the past will shake up quite a few of our contemporary perceptions about gender, but the retelling of the same piece of history through televisual and cinematic media is an almost irresistible invitation to camp and carnival. Canadian writers too are beginning to show they have talent for this: Taras Grescoe comes to mind; his *Sacré Blues* finds the unexpected campiness and jest in many aspects of the history of the Anglo-Francophone and Quebecois-French nationalist relations. Margaret MacMillan's international best-seller *Paris 1919*, with its witty and detached tone, might have been co-authored by P. G. Wodehouse and Noel Coward. Thomas Waugh dedicates the first chapter of his book to some of the earliest cinematic stories that Canadians told themselves about their own history, social problems, and the family, recalling an era when spinsterhood, bachelorhood, 'street girls', mutually obsessed neighbours, and boys who chose butterflies over hockey were the only forms of 'queerness' allowed to get expressed in words and images.

The Romance of Transgression in Canada is the first mini-encyclopedia of Canadian queer cinema; its publication should be saluted, and it should receive attention in Canadian Studies, Queer Studies, and Film Studies departments around the country. The amount of archival work put into it is laudable in itself, and Waugh admits that he affirms and respects every work included in the book, "often simply because it is there, in spite of everything." He has also wisely decided against simple chronology and has grouped the films into chapters thematically and stylistically.

Waugh's interpretative strategy is just right. He is, of course, looking into films with obvious queer content, but he is also identifying the seemingly non-queer films susceptible to queer readings, many of which lose their pre-queer innocence once we see them decoded this way. Of great interest are also the films of disavowal—films which situate queerness in the abject and the criminal.

These are very good tools to work with. Waugh

reminds us that homosociality often works as a queer practice, although its practitioners may not be particularly conscious of this. The homosociality of the institutions of power, the instruments of the state apparatus like the army and the police, the clergy in most denominations, philosophy and the teaching of philosophy, sports teams and national(ist) fandom, and many of the films and TV series dedicated to such environments are simply calling for queer readings. There's a whole lot of interpretative fun to be had once we become aware that the exclusion of women under theological, philosophical, legal or biological pretexts might hide a different kind of motive. Waugh analyzes with particular acumen cinematic representation of the rites of passage that lead from boyhood into 'proper' adult masculinity, and follows with a careful eye the play of affirmation and repudiation of queerness in male bonding in sports.

What would human practices and gender-exclusive institutions really look like if they incorporated sexual difference? It's a question that many feminist and queer writers raise (notably, Luce Irigaray, who Waugh affectionately calls a 'den-mother' in one passage), but Waugh himself shows a distinct lack of interest in it. Instead, Waugh's primary focus is gay cinematography. Most of the book's content, excluding the Portrait Gallery, is related to aspects of gay queerness. His favourite directors are all men, and the thematic groupings into chapters follow cinematic content that women filmmakers and screen writers dealt with to a much lesser degree: sports; the HIV epidemic through the prism of Western gay couples or networks of friends; and pornography and the commercialisation of sexuality. Waugh frequently does make an effort to introduce films made by women into the conversation, but it's a visible effort, and the films are added but not stirred, and do not blend in with the general flavour of the writing. Sometimes he openly sidelines women's contributions by calling for a possible 'book about women in this subject to be written in the future'. There is the occasional patronising remark about the "sex wars" in feminist queer studies that are raging or are about to end. The "obscurity of the Butler decision" is mentioned in passing without any details given to describe what it was about, and the Little Sister affair is used as a spice in some of the musings on censorship, but again a comprehensive description is absent.

Is the queer women's cinematographic esthetic something quite different, and does it deserve different parameters and thematic groupings? Most likely, although *Romance* suggests that Waugh will beg to differ. What would the awareness of 'sexual difference' (which is just another, French-theory way of talking about queerness) look like in a book written by a gay man? Would he be 'duty-bound' to focus on all things male because of his gender or would we get a male equivalent of Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky—in other words, a gay male writer with a keen interest in female queerness? Queer women have indeed been writing about their male counterparts with not a small degree of socio-political, esthetic, and even erotic fascination (names as different as Camille Paglia, Iris Murdoch, Patricia High-

smith, Marguerite Yourcenar come to mind), but I am not seeing evidence that queer men writers have been reciprocating. It has become a commonplace in reviews of queer studies books to complain about the unfortunate lumping of the gay and lesbian, and the subsuming of lesbian into general, yet somehow always male-focused queerness. Unfortunately, the complaint will be reiterated here too. *The Romance of Transgression* is the first work in Canada in its category, and as such it should be cherished. Readers interested in female-centered queerness in Canadian cinematography, however, will not be rushing to use it as the primary source for their own studies.

Further, does a 'queer' film simply happen whenever a filmmaker makes a half-decent movie with gay men or lesbians in it? Is that all it takes? The exclusion of women from the main sources of power both in commercial and auteur cinematography is still as blatant as their mostly male-driven narrative—so much so that most movies in any geographic or historic period can be summed up as the 'exchange of women', the phrase Levy-Strauss used to convey his insight into kinship structures. To use the old-fashioned term 'agency', women don't have much of it in film industry—not as artists and not as film characters. Even today, the homosocial environments and distributions of power narrated in a great number of easily accessible films do not reveal the 'crises of contemporary masculinity' but actually help in spreading it. Are women changing the machismo of the camera and the ways of seeing cinematic objects? Are women directors and writers 'queering' cinematic genders in any fundamental way? That is one of the biggest unacknowledged questions in Waugh's analysis. What are Marguerite Duras, Chantal Akerman, Agnes Warda, Catherine Breillat, Jane Campion, Liliana Cavani, Margarethe Von Trotta, Claire Denis, Patricia Rozema and others changing in cinematographic representation of the sexes and the way we understand desire? Or do Kathryn Bigelow and Doris Wishman prove that women directors can out-men the men?

Waugh has read his Foucault, Halperin and Weeks, but not with as much care his Judith Butler, and not one of the forefathers of queer studies, Sigmund Freud. The insights Waugh derives from psychoanalysis are few and far between; he writes about film from within the cultural studies framework, and is happily unburdened by psychoanalytic theoretical knowledge.

There are more important things missing, though. There are occasional and very valuable forays into the conditions of financing, distribution, promotion and popularization of Canadian queer film in the book, but the topic is not dealt with systematically, nor is it given the space it deserves. Ditto for the issue concerning the all-powerful US neighbour 'feeding' Canada (and the rest of the globe) its cinematography—from big-budget studio productions to alternative queer porn. Waugh alerts us to this periodically, but the subject warrants a chapter of its own. Waugh does write about differences in narrative structures and is on the verge of taking the stereotypes a bit too seriously: the American dream vs. Canadian existential despair; the American winning individual vs.

individual vs. the Canadian hero who is "beaten up to a pulp" by the end of the movie; open and feisty queer transgression in American movies as opposed to proper young men wearing suits, marrying women, and portraying the quiet collapse of straight masculinity in Canadian movies; Stonewall vs. the Omnibus Bill, and so forth. There is a very precise awareness of U.S. cinematic and televisual dominance of Canada throughout, but no serious attempt to show how and why it's working, in this instance, in queer cinematography.

It is valuable to read an author who does his research well and who has also been personally involved in many of the social struggles that are being addressed through his academic writing. There is such a thing as too much per-

sonal content, however, especially in university press publications. What is added to the knowledge of Canadian queer cinema if we are told at great length that the introductory chapter was written by Waugh "far from Canada, holed up in the Indian Ocean megalopolis of Chennai," followed by a few pages on how the local audiences reacted to his paper on Richard Fung. The book is full of descriptions of Waugh's emotional reactions to the films, and by the last page readers will know how many of the filmmakers mentioned are his close friends. Although the inclusion of his letter to the NFB might have been warranted, the many repeated references to it and its impact are not. Waugh is not the only researcher of social movements who resorts to talking about his moods in the

midst of academic writing, and if this is some sort of a trend, the university press editors should stop it.

Waugh is at his most stellar in the Portrait Gallery section, where he shows that he's most at ease with fragmentary, brief, witty pieces packed with information. He has perfected biographical vignettes to the point of turning them into works of art. His passion for his subject is most contagious in this section, and his ability to inform and entice is unhindered by the fussy, meandering tone of the preceding essays. Even the gender balance is impeccable here. The Portrait Gallery will be the reason that readers will be drawn to this book in years, probably decades, to come.