

LA LAMPE DANS LA FENETRE

The Visualization of Quebec Fiction

Eva-Marie Kröller

ON SEEING CLAUDE JUTRA'S FILM *Kamouraska* (1973) and Jean Beaudin's *Cordélia* (1979) and *J. A. Martin photographe* (1977), one cannot but notice the repeated references to windows. Although the camera's insistent focus on windows is, in each case, realistically motivated (and an all too obvious part of each heroine's everyday existence), it soon becomes clear that these windows also establish a metaphorical correlation between the female protagonists and the way in which they respond to their environment. More specifically, the window can be seen to embody the imprisonment of nineteenth-century Québécoises like Elisabeth d'Aulnières, Cordélia Viau, and Rose-Aimée Martin in their sexual and domestic roles; but, conversely, the image may also function as an opening into self-recognition and release.

To appreciate the changing metaphorical values of the window-image (and others closely related) in Jutra's and Beaudin's films also has, I would like to argue, a retrospective bearing upon the texts that two of these films are based upon, Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska* (1970) and Pauline Cadieux's *La Lampe dans la fenêtre* (1976). Both *Kamouraska* and *Cordélia* originate in husband-woman-lover triangles, but the connections between text and film differ. Jutra's visualization and patterning of cues found in Hébert's novel enhance its sense of authenticity: Quebec architecture is seen to provide a natural metaphor for the prison which Elisabeth's spinning memories have created for her. *Cordélia*, since it is directly based upon a criminal case history, provides the opposite relation between text and film: here, the text contains meticulously collected data regarding the Viau case. The film orders these in the logic of an artistic genre, a logic which, in itself, is an ironical statement upon the irrationality of Cordélia's case. J. A. Martin may be placed between *Kamouraska* and *Cordélia*, both chronologically and metaphorically. Although it is not itself based upon a literary or documentary model, it derives much of its impact from re-defining the visual leitmotifs found

in Jutra's and Hébert's *Kamouraska* on the one hand and in *Cordélia* and Cadieux's book on the other.

The element of movement is probably the feature in which *J. A. Martin photographie* differs most strikingly from *Cordélia* and *Kamouraska*. The setting in the latter two is literally confined: Elisabeth and Cordélia spend time in gaol or else remain in their respective homes. The fact that Elisabeth moves from a house in Sorel to another in Kamouraska and yet another in Québec does not widen her field of range; these houses have become almost interchangeable in her memory. Conversely, Antoine Tassy, Elisabeth's first husband, and her lover George Nelson travel freely; Nelson escapes into freedom to Burlington, across the American border; Isidore Poirier, Cordélia's husband, leaves his young wife behind to seek work in California. Rose-Aimée, however, refuses to let her man go on yet another photographic trip through Québec and Maine without her. The Martins travel in a cart, "une charrette," a means of transport frequently associated with spunky women — ranging from Brecht's *Mother Courage* (evoked, as an allegory of Québec, in Gaston Miron's "L'Octobre") to Antonine Maillet's *Pélagie-la-Charrette* (1979). Among the means of transport we see in *Cordélia* are carriages with men spying on her and the cart that carries Cordélia to gaol. Similarly, carriages in *Kamouraska* are oppressive miniature houses, an impression much emphasized in Jutra's film; "Secouées par le mouvement rapide de la voiture, Elisabeth d'Aulnières et sa belle-mère, Mme Tassy, demeurent aussi défendues, l'une contre l'autre, que des noix entrechoquées dans un sac."¹ For Rose-Aimée, the cart becomes a genuine means of escaping her home and the five children crowded in it. All through the first sequences of the film we see Rose-Aimée nervously trying to clear space around her, chasing the children outside, forbidding them to play in her presence. As long as her mind is preoccupied with her home, the cart, too, remains a "mobile home." Even when she has begun to renew her self and her marriage with J. A., a miscarriage reminds them of the biological limitations of her newly-found freedom. One of the most powerful scenes of the film, one realized entirely without dialogue, shows Rose-Aimée lying on the cart, suffering through a miscarriage. Her body is hidden under the covering of the cart which, here, becomes an ambiguous combination of protection and confinement, especially so since J. A. sits apart helplessly looking on. Yet the couple also teams up to pull the cart, literally and metaphorically, out of the mud. That scene, again, has a negative correspondent in *Kamouraska* which uses the ancient romantic ploy of a sleigh overturning to throw the lovers into each other's arms. What at first appears as the delirious fulfillment of erotic desire, soon serves to project Elisabeth's ever-increasing solitude: "Nous restons dans la neige. Couchés sur le dos. Regardons le ciel, piqués d'étoiles. Frissonnons de froid. Longtemps j'essaye de me retenir de claquer des dents." Not surprisingly, the sleigh scene under the stars is immediately followed by images of captivity. At the Governor's Ball, Elisa-

beth is “prise, entraînée, poussée, tirée. Capturée” by her scandalized aunts,² a scene which Jutra frames by using oppressively low ceilings in his film.

Rose-Aimée’s resurrection as an individual is accompanied by clothing imagery that, following the Christian tradition of the soul divesting itself of its earthly shell, gradually releases her into her freedom. From the beginning of the film, clothing serves as a synecdochic expression of Rose-Aimée’s efforts to leave the chrysalis of conventionality and of her fears to forfeit its protectiveness. We first see Rose-Aimée doing the laundry and folding sheets; coming close to J. A. for the first time during their trip together is a result of her pulling the cart out of the mud and having to take her clothes off. Before they enter the hotel, she clears the clothesline with which she has festooned the cart and worries about “faux-plis” in her dress. Listening to a couple noisily making love next door makes her aware that houses are not necessarily protective if they are not her own; thus she falls asleep fully clothed — her dress a substitute for an environment she feels safe in. Yet her personal liberation, temporary as it may be, culminates in her enjoyment of a wedding-party, at which she sings a naughty song about a woman removing her clothes; J. A., the photographer of the wedding, temporarily assumes her role by sitting apart, holding a tired child.

CORDÉLIA, ALL THROUGH THE FILM, is locked not only in her clothes but also in her skin: she suffers from a skin disease, and the film corroborates the restrictions she experiences through her illness by showing her in tight clothes, buttoned up to her neck, that scarcely seem to leave her space to breathe in. As her trial proceeds, Cordélia increasingly loses control over her body until she degenerates into an animal in her cell, helplessly exposed to the stares of the villagers. In direct opposition to Rose-Aimée, who re-possesses her body, the images of her past, and, finally, her house, Cordélia loses power over all of her existence. In the final sequence of the film when she is prepared for execution she is seen in a tight black dress, with straps around her knees and hands, her face covered with a black veil, the noose around her neck. The last sound we hear from Cordélia is her laboured, anxious breathing. The film’s credits are superimposed on a shot of Cordélia’s deserted home, “La maison, maintenant détériorée, les persiennes pendantes, les vitres brisées, il n’y a plus de porte. . . . Une jeune fille . . . lance une pierre dans la bay-window qui n’a pas été brisée.”³ *Kamouraska*, again, seemingly contrasts with *Cordélia*. Elisabeth is forever shedding her clothes in crumpled heaps about her; in one of the crucial scenes of both the novel and the film, Nelson orders her to strip, and the couple make love behind a window brightly lit by a lamp. But nudity in *Kamouraska* does not imply freedom and resurrection. On the contrary: during her wedding-night, Elisabeth regards “avec

effarement ses vêtements jetés dans la chambre, en grand désordre, de velours, de linge et de dentelle.” George Nelson, the seemingly ideal counterpart to Antoine Tassy, orders her to strip in order to humiliate her, and she describes their love-making on top of her crushed clothing as an act of murder, with “Son sexe dur comme une arme.” The men in Elisabeth’s life try to divest her of her individuality by giving her clothes to other women; Antoine presents them as gifts to his whores; George uses Elisabeth’s best dress to bribe Aurélie Caron. Elisabeth’s marriage to Jérôme Rolland has forced her to make do with the left-overs of her hopes and passions. When Jérôme, on his death-bed, more states than asks: “Elisabeth, tu as eu bien de la chance de m’épouser, n’est-ce pas,” she replies in terms of clothing: “Jérôme, sans toi, j’étais libre et je refaisais ma vie, comme on retourne un manteau usé.”

Throughout *Kamouraska*, Elisabeth is seen framed by a window, looking out into the present as well as into the world of her memories. The gothic and metonymic implications of this motif in Hébert’s novel and in Jutra’s film have been thoroughly analysed elsewhere and need not be repeated in this context.⁴ The motif of Elisabeth framed by a window suggests confinement, suffocation, solitude, responses corroborated in Jutra’s film through the use of tiny glass-panes set in solid house-walls. *J. A. Martin photographe*, on the other hand, develops the window-motif by interpreting it as a means of framing a moment of sharp self-recognition. In one take, Rose-Aimée, occupied with the laundry, glances out of the window at the grandmother who is napping in the garden. The first shot shows the grandmother from Rose-Aimée’s perspective; then, the camera angle changes to show Rose-Aimée, framed by the window, as she, in turn, would be seen from the garden. The exchange of angles corresponds to Rose-Aimée’s mounting fear that her marriage will result in a life like the grandmother’s, and in contentment that J. A. is “travaillant pis y boit pas.”⁵ Shots directed from the interior of a room towards a window, as well as angles showing Rose-Aimée in the frame of a window or a door are soon established as one of the visual leitmotifs of the film. The final sequences of the film close the circle of these enclosure images by showing the Martins arriving back from their journey. Rose-Aimée looks at her home which now appears spacious and fresh: “R’garde la maison . . . y m’semble qu’était pas si grande que ça . . . regarde comme la galérie est blanche.” The exchange of interior and exterior angles and their ironical implications as modes of seeing things are particularly revealing in scenes where J. A. is unable or unwilling to get involved, an attitude which Rose-Aimée likens to his profession as a photographer where he hides his head “toute la journée en dessous de ton maudit voile noir, à rien entendre pis à rien voir.” When the Martins give a ride to a small boy and subsequently stay at his house so that his father can fetch a priest for his dying mother, J. A. is seen, outside, urging Rose-Aimée to leave. She responds, “On peut pas la laisser comme ça . . . viens la voir.” J. A. refuses. A little later, J. A. lets the boy

look through a close-up lens he is polishing, only to have him called into the house by Rose-Aimée: "Julien! Ta mère voudrait te voir." In contrast to J. A., who remains outside, equipped with at least the mechanical means to view things more clearly, Rose-Aimée's voice is heard describing pictures of Rome and Versailles she is showing the children, while the camera is directed at a window.

The most extensive use of the window-motif in *Cordélia* occurs while Cordélia is in gaol, standing below the barred window of her cell, hysterically proclaiming her happiness and freedom. The gaol scene is prepared by repeated allusions to "la lampe dans la fenêtre," placed in Cordélia's bay-window to attract visitors, and a habit of her that is used by the villagers to push Cordélia to her condemnation. When she and Sam, her supposed lover, dance a waltz in her living-room, the camera moves back to show the couple framed by the window as well as the silhouettes of villagers observing them. Cordélia, then, is trapped not in memories the way Elisabeth is, but in the contempt and distrust her environment projects upon her. Thus, the bay-window frames the image others have made of her. A newspaper article of December 18, 1897, assesses the Cordélia Viau case; it sums up its observation by drawing the reader's attention to a photograph which, in its opinion, summarizes Cordélia's predicament: "Cette femme se croyait très forte et incomprise. Le monde dans lequel elle vivait lui pesait, elle rêvait d'une existence de luxe et de folies et ne pouvant satisfaire ses goûts, elle singeait la vie élégante. Pour s'en convaincre, il suffit de voir cette pauvre femme de journalier se faire photographe à cheval, en amazone, chapeau haut de forme et escortée d'un petit chien bouledogue. Une caricature de la femme riche et élégante."⁶ Beaudin's film tells the story of how this photograph came into existence. Cordélia sews herself a "robe d'amazone" and has her picture taken by a photographer whose apparatus is as slow and cumbersome as J. A.'s. Shortly afterwards, village urchins throw stones at her and she comes home, her splendid dress ripped, her face bleeding. Isidore receives a photograph in California which eternalizes Cordélia in a pose she held for precisely four seconds, yet a pose that becomes part of the public evidence against her. Photographs in *Cordélia* are primarily police evidence, mugshots, photographs used in the scandal press. The increasing violation of Cordélia's privacy begins with Paul Gravel, journalist of *La Presse*, searching through her clothes and old pictures. Her portraits further her entrapment in the prejudice of others, a process underlined in Beaudin's film through the use of a very still camera framing the heroine at almost all times of the film. The camera moves considerably in only three sequences, each time in scenes when a large number of members of the community are seated together, "in the church, at the trial, and at the hanging. The camera tracks slowly across the townspeople in a different way each time, finally, directly accusing the faces of legal murder."⁷

A similar method of establishing the identity of individuals in a group occurs in the miners' scene in *J. A. Martin photographe*. J. A. takes great care in arrang-

ing the workers for a group photo; he includes, against the foreman's orders, a boy who has been fired a few days before. The men are ordered to keep still "pendant huit secondes" and, while they are doing so, the camera lingers on individual faces before showing the final product, the group photograph. Yet whereas the camera in *Cordélia* becomes an accusing eye, singling out Cordélia's tormentors from their protective group, J. A.'s camera (hence, by implication, that of Beaudin) is a means of bestowing individual dignity upon those whose picture is being taken. The group-taking session coincides with the turning point in the Martins' relation: their ways of perceiving their environment begin to complement each other. This convergence of perspectives corresponds to a gradual replacement of old photos, in the film, by photos about to be taken. At the beginning of her quest she discovers, in various old photographs, images of J. A. and herself that she did not know about or that she had forgotten. When they stop at J. A.'s regular hotel, Rose-Aimée, mistaken for an unattached "créature de passage," contemplates a photo of J. A. and a woman and cunningly asks a bystander, "C'est sa femme qui est avec lui?" At uncle Joseph's, Rose-Aimée looks at wedding-pictures of herself and J. A. which her aunt has preserved, and taunts J. A., when one of the wedding-guests, her old admirer Adhémar, appears, still unmarried, obviously still full of tender feelings for Rose-Aimée. At the beginning of the journey, taking photos together is a painful experience; Rose-Aimée is reduced to being a hand-maiden, holding a backdrop, collecting the money, and suffering verbal abuse from J. A. Later, after Rose-Aimée has flared up at J. A.'s behaviour, she participates, through her presence and commentary, in creating the miners' photo described earlier.

AMONG THE TEXTS AND FILMS DISCUSSED, *J. A. Martin photographe* is the only one which explores the partnership between a man and a woman, thus denying a permanent entrapment in any one role or habit.⁸ Pictures are static but may be looked upon with fresh eyes or replaced by new ones. Rose-Aimée's energy and innocence in this respect contrast sharply with Elisabeth d'Aulnières's cynicism. For her, pictures are lies. Their rituals must be adhered to in order to maintain a falsely decorous front or to freeze the hypocritical misery of a scene in the past. In one of the early scenes of the novel, Elisabeth efficiently cleans up the disorder in the nursery, gathering her children about her in "un . . . touchant tableau." Elisabeth's own negligent appearance, however, strikes one of her daughters as "une fausse note." Little Anne-Marie's comment breaks the illusion, "la fausse représentation rompue." In Elisabeth's memories, the scenes of her marriage and motherhood appear arranged in the poses of conventional portraits and sculptures; bride and groom are perfect like a "Gravure

de mode pour Louis-Philippe de France"; both have the air of a "mannequin de cire," "une poupée mécanique." Antoine Tassy, in an attack of self-mortification and guilt, smashes the mirror reflecting his face; the fragments busily recompose the image he has tried to destroy: "Un fragment de miroir tient encore au-dessus de la commode de la chambre conjugale. La suie détache en poussière de velours. Dégage un petit hublot de tain pur. Quel joli tableau se mire dans cette eau morte. Un portrait de famille. Le père et la mère confus se penchent sur un nouveau-né tout rouge."

Anne Hébert's novel uses, as its framework, the more than conventional genre of the detective novel. Here, however, its mechanisms of repeated interrogation and verification gradually turn against themselves. Words and concepts assume uncanny echoes and acquire trap-doors of inverted meaning: "La matière romanesque, tout en mimant certains gestes du roman policier se métamorphose en aventure politique et métaphysique."⁹ *Kamouraska* re-sensitizes conventional motifs; Jutra's film confirms this process. *J. A. Martin photographe* subjects the same motifs to a radical re-definition by releasing the "woman in the window" into a lush countryside¹⁰ and into a dialogue with her man. *Cordélia*, in its combination of visual beauty and oppressive atmosphere, appears as an anachronism; not surprisingly, the film has been criticized for its self-indulgent exploration of surface textures.¹¹ Here, then, are the limits of exploring a single subject through chronologically separated texts and films — the trap-door of traditional conceptualization may close again. *Cordélia*'s bay-window should, more appropriately, have been "une fenêtre à guillotine": the film not only executes her but, in retrospect, also obscures the truth glimpsed through Rose-Aimée's and Elisabeth's window.

For these (and other) reasons, feminist writers like Nicole Brossard, Louky Bersianik, and Suzanne Lamy have expressed their distrust in the representativeness of any one of the traditional literary genres. In one approach to the creation of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Louky Bersianik incorporates strongly integrated visual allusions in her mock-Platonic dialogue, *Le Pique-nique sur l'Acropole* (1979).¹² The redefinition of conventional philosophical and literary forms goes hand in hand with a defamiliarization of print through the insertion of black pages, scribbled notes, incomplete sketches. Book design is no longer merely decorative but part of *l'écriture*; writers express their distrust in the printed word as an adequate symbol of truth that defies the tradition of linear argument which the printed word stands for.¹³ The text of *Le Pique-nique sur l'Acropole* is interspersed with black pages containing Jean Letarde's sketches, in white, of different kinds of windows. The names of these windows are chosen to reflect, in their ambiguity, upon the quotations scribbled inside the sketch. The "jalousie pour fenêtre à guillotine," for instance, frames statements by Aristotle and Jacques Lacan to the effect that "La femme est femelle en vertu d'un certain manque de qualités" and that "La femme n'est pas toute." Similarly, the "meurtrière" (murder-weapon; loophole)

condemns women to be “courtisanes,” “concupines,” “épouses,” and “gardiennes.” Revealingly, most of the affirmative statements concerning women are made within windows of circular or half-circular shape (*imposte, vitrail, Judas, hublot, lunette*), whereas many of the quotations entrapping them in their traditional roles are placed within square frames (*meurtrière, chausse-trappe, croisée*.) Windows of circular shape and the telescope (*lunette*) suggest words said in parentheses, truths glimpsed through a spy-glass, much in the way in which the black pages suggest photographic negatives, with the image as yet undefined. Square frames frequently correspond to the impact of linear print: they suggest definitiveness and orderly division into glass panes, at the expense of cutting the image perceived behind them into equally orderly segments. Bersianik, then, uses visual cues to enlarge upon the topics discussed during the picnic and, as it were, to open windows on factual documentation of the statements made within the fictional context of the symposium. Similarly, factual subjects are released into fiction to find a promise of freedom. Bersianik includes the photo of a young African girl who has just undergone clitoridectomy; unlike Cordélia, Adizetu is not forever trapped in her anguish. Released from the picture, she becomes an active participant in the women’s symposium.

Visual allusions, as techniques constituting an integral part of *l’écriture*, are an innovative feature in Québec fiction. Yet they also remind one of other literary periods in which writers felt that the capacities of language needed to be widened in order to include new views and experiences and that verbal communication ought to be complemented by visual images. Such experiments were, for instance, conducted during the Romantic Age when William Blake illuminated his poems and those of others with illustrations that frequently developed ideas only touched upon in the text itself, and when Friedrich Schlegel postulated the novel as the all-embracing, never-completed genre typical of great national, metaphysical, and personal turmoil. Their art may be interpreted as an attempt at imposing adequate form upon the fragmentary components of an emerging ideology. Similarly, it may be argued that the closeness of film, fiction, and documentary in Québec is one expression of its artists’ awareness that the traditional limits of *écriture* must be transcended to include new forms of communication both linguistic and pictorial, if an adequate expression of a politically and intellectually re-defined Québec is to be found.¹⁴

NOTES

¹ Anne Hébert, *Kamouraska* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970).

² Suzanne Lamy has shown in her book *d’elles* (Montréal: L’Hexagone, 1979) how feminist literature makes use of “litanies” to exorcise petrified concepts. It seems to me that Hébert’s enumerations such as the one quoted serve the opposite purpose, namely to confirm the action described.

- ³ Jean Beaudin, *Cordélia*, scénario et dialogue (National Film Board, 1979), p. 172. I wish to thank the NFB for making the scripts of both *Cordélia* and *J. A. Martin photographe* available to me and for permitting me to quote from them.
- ⁴ Cf. for example, E. D. Blodgett, "Prisms and Arcs: Structures in Hébert and Munro," in Diane Bessai, David Jackel, eds., *Figures in a Ground* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978); Margot Northey, *The Haunted Wilderness* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), pp. 53-61; Yves Lever, "Kamouraska — un film de Claude Jutra," *Relations* (mai 1973), pp. 157-58.
- ⁵ Jean Beaudin, *J. A. Martin photographe*, dialogue (National Film Board 1977), p. 4.
- ⁶ Pauline Cadieux, *La Lampe dans la fenêtre* (Ottawa: libre expression, 1976), p. 24.
- ⁷ Mark Leslie, "Jean Beaudin's *Cordélia*," *Cinema Canada* 64 (April 80), p. 38.
- ⁸ From the beginning of the film, Rose-Aimée insists that the outcome of her trip with J. A. might be "qu'on s'parle."
- ⁹ Albert Le Grand, "Kamouraska ou l'Ange et la bête," *Etudes françaises*, 7 (1971), p. 115.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Marshall Delaney's comment on *J. A. Martin photographe* in *Saturday Night*, 92 (December 1977), p. 95, comparing Beaudin's film with "art and fiction dealing with that time and place"; unlike earlier pieces, *J. A. Martin* is conceived "against an idyllic summer landscape."
- ¹¹ Leslie, p. 38.
- ¹² Bersianik's book was published by vlb éditeur; the lavish illustration of *Le Pique-nique . . .* is undoubtedly connected with Victor-Lévy Beaulieu's own conception of the novel as a genre comprising all of the traditional literary as well as visual genres. In his trilogy, *Monsieur Melville*, for instance, he has his narrator, Abel Beauchemin, claim that "Ecrire ne constitue pas une orientation parce que cela ne fait que se recommencer pour occuper tout le champ de ses fissures et, par cela même, en produire de nouvelles, et d'autres encore, jusqu'à l'extinction de soi." Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, *Monsieur Melville: Dans les Aveilles de Moby Dick* (Montréal: vlb éditeur, 1978), p. 14.
- ¹³ Not surprisingly, the editors of *La Nouvelle Barre du Jour* acknowledge poet-artist Roland Giguère as one of those "qui annonçaient déjà les temps de la liberté." See *Ellipse*, no. 23/24 (1979), p. 24.
- ¹⁴ This seems to be confirmed by the cameo appearances of well-known Québec singers like Claude Gauthier and Gilles Vigneault in *Cordélia*, and the general mobility of Québec artists between different artistic genres.

