



Dave Alexander

The Quiet Revulsion Québécois New Extremism in *7 Days*

There was no bigger sea change in Quebec culture than The Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, and it is here we find the roots of a particularly French-Canadian brand of cinematic new extremism, as embodied by the 2010 film *Les 7 jours du talion*, or *7 Days*. Adapted into a screenplay by Patrick Senécal from his own novel (also titled *Les 7 jours du talion*, 2002) and directed by Québécois filmmaker Daniel Grou (who also goes by the name “Podz”), it is one of the few Canadian films comparable to the European new extremist cinema described by Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall in their introduction to *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*. *7 Days* shares with its European cousins a sense of “determined transgression” (Horeck and Kendall 2), specifically via its use of shocking imagery and depictions of brutality characteristic of horror cinema (or its torture porn subgenre), with narrative and directorial techniques most often associated with art house cinema. Furthermore, although Québécois cinema is considered to have more in common with that of France than that of English Canada, *7 Days* represents a culmination of anxieties that are specific to the social, cultural, and political history of the Québécois, particularly their relationship to the Roman Catholic Church, which exercised a powerful hegemony over the people of the province.

An examination of the forces shaping the film reveals that it looks inward—speaking to its own people, perhaps in the tradition of Quebec’s direct cinema—rather than “fitting with the rising global tide of sex and violence and appealing to younger audiences” (Vincendeau 205). For example, as of November 25, 2012, retail site Amazon.ca ranked sales of the *7 Days* DVD at 24,338, compared to France-made new extremist film *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier 2008), which was ranked in the same category at 4,196. Similarly, *7 Days* has a mere twelve reviews on popular review aggregator site Rottentomatoes.com, compared to 83

for *Enter the Void* (Gaspar Noé 2009) and 154 for *Antichrist* (Lars von Trier 2009)—new extremist films with a considerably more robust worldwide presence in terms of film festival entries, media coverage, and distribution. It can therefore be argued that *7 Days* represents a uniquely Québécois brand of cinematic new extremism, one that speaks to its own particular cultural history and anxieties.

To begin to understand *7 Days*, a look at the history of Quebec is essential. In 1534, explorer Jacques Cartier erected a cross in the Gaspé Peninsula and created the first province of New France. In 1627, King Louis XIII of France declared that only Roman Catholics could settle in the territory. In 1759, the British took control of the city after the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, and in 1763 the Treaty of Paris forced France to give up its North American claims to Great Britain. That year, New France became the Province of Quebec. Due to growing unrest between the French and the English, the Quebec Act of 1774 officially recognized French language and culture, and preserved the Roman Catholic Church via provisions that officially granted freedom of religion. As Michel Houle points out, the Church was the most powerful entity in Quebec for most of the province’s existence, and this has been reflected in Québécois cinema:

[t]he most obvious and consistent theme of the first period [of Quebec cinema] is unquestionably the omnipresence and the near omniscience of the clergy. . . . It is easy to explain why this theme was so powerful and permanent in the forties and fifties. It ‘reflects’ the real influence of the Church in the social and cultural life of the Quebec people. . . . [The Church] had almost complete and exclusive jurisdiction in the fields of social affairs and health (hospitals, orphanages, convalescent homes, charitable institutions, reform schools, etc.). (n. pag.)

Houle notes that many of those making films in Quebec were staunch Catholics, often adapting stories from older works of literature. In a region where filmmakers relied on government grant money to make movies, it is unlikely that a filmmaker would have been able to successfully challenge the status quo. Furthermore, all films were vetted by the Church censorship bureau before they could play in the province's movie theatres.

By the end of the '50s, however, the status quo began to change with the Quiet Revolution. During the fifteen years prior to this, Quebec was governed by Conservative premier Maurice Duplessis and his Union Nationale party, which had strong support from the Roman Catholic Church. Duplessis died while in office in September 1959, and his party was voted out the following year. The Liberal party, led by Jean Lesage, took power, and over the next decade massive changes were enacted that wrested con-

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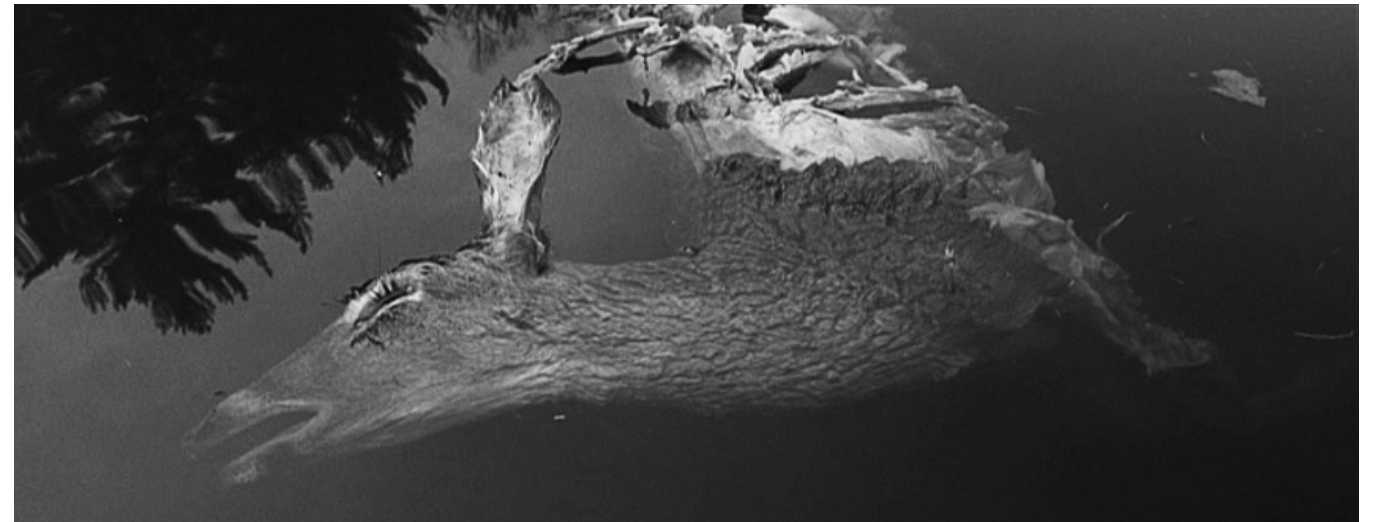
trol away from the Church: the ministries of Health and Education were created and generously funded; schools were secularized and given a standardized curriculum; civil servants were allowed to unionize; and the province took a much larger degree of control over its resources. As for cinema, the increased government presence resulted in a provincial movie ratings system introduced to replace the censorship bureau. These sweeping changes led to increased feelings of nationalism, which fuelled Quebec's separatist movement and in turn were reflected in the content of its films. The Québécois identity was no longer so defined by the Church, and, newly freed from religious censors, the province's filmmakers responded.

Houle notes that "the clergy was supplanted everywhere and Quebec cinema echoed this process," but he adds that even though the Church underwent a significant erosion of its official power within the province, it still had a large hold over the souls of many Québécois, who, having internalized the doctrines, were "[unable] to conceive beyond that frame of reference" (n. pag.). Although clergyman characters largely disappeared from Quebec cinema following the Quiet Revolution, the province's films are still largely obsessed with what Houle identifies as "sin: fault, guilt, and remorse" (n. pag.). (Fault, guilt and remorse also form the thematic foundation of *7 Days*, with a religious fervour that connects the film to Quebec's cinematic past.)

In the early '70s, "[a]fter having tried to define the *Québécois* culturally and free them from the folkloric and ideological image of French-Canadians," a type of cinema arose that encouraged questions about identity and the influence of Quebec's past on its conflicted present (Houle n. pag.). As the people of Quebec worked towards the formation of a new identity apart from Church and Union Nationale rule, a horrifying revelation was made that involved both the Church and the former government. During the '40s and '50s, Duplessis and the Church devised a plan to reclassify orphans as mental patients in order to obtain federal funding. After a quick, and false, diagnosis officially labelled them "mentally retarded," they were shipped off to asylums, or, in some cases, entire orphanages were given a new classification as mental institutions. These newly "mentally incompetent" children were subjected to mental, physical, and sexual abuse (including electroshock treatment and even lobotomies) at the facilities, which were staffed by not only administrators and psychiatrists, but also priests and nuns. According to survivors—who dubbed themselves "The Duplessis Orphans"—medical experiments performed on children were not uncommon. In documentary footage shot in 2007 for a story in *Freedom* magazine, a former patient forced to work in the morgue at one of the institutions describes his shock at seeing a boy whose skullcap had been taken off and his brain removed. He also recalls transporting the bodies of 67 children from the morgue over a three-month period. Many of the children who died were buried in unmarked graves (described in the footage as "pits") in a field dubbed the "pigsty graveyard."

In the '90s, survivors pressured the Quebec government to compensate them for the ordeal. After an initial offer of \$1,000 per Duplessis Orphan resulted in the government being crucified in the media, an offer of \$10,000 per former patient (plus \$1,000 per year of wrongful incarceration) was accepted, but it only included those who were officially deemed mentally deficient, and made no allowances for those abused physically or sexually. The government refused to hold an inquiry, and the Church refused to issue an apology. The Duplessis Orphans were not the only children who suffered at the hands of the clergy in Quebec: in 2011 the Church agreed to pay up to \$18 million in compensation to 215 victims who were abused between 1950 and 2001 by various clergymen at Montreal's Collège Notre-Dame as well as schools in Pohénégamook and Saint-Césaire. No amount of compensation, however, could erase these traumas from the Québécois consciousness.

If the Quiet Revolution allowed this dark underside of the province's Roman Catholic Church to be revealed, a new generation was there to gaze upon its visage, includ-



ing Senécal and Grou, who were both born in 1967. Often referred to as "the Stephen King of Quebec," Senécal has written a dozen novels, three of which have been adapted into Québécois features. The first was *Sur le seuil* (1998), which was made into a feature of the same name (retitled *Evil Words* in English) in 2003, directed by Éric Tessier, and concerns a popular but tortured writer with the power to make the horrific events that he pens come true. The writer is revealed to have been born as the result of a satanic orgy initiated by a Catholic priest who turned to the devil after the death of his sister. When the head of the cult slaughters his own followers, the other three priests in the rural parish cover it up by burying the bodies in the woods and leaving the baby at an orphanage.

The second adaptation of Senécal's work, *5150 rue des ormes* [*5150 Elm's Way*], also made by Tessier, in 2010, was based on Senécal's first novel of the same name, which was published in 1994. It follows a film student (in the novel he is studying literature) who falls off of his bike while shooting footage of the suburbs for a school project. He seeks help from a seemingly innocuous family man, only to discover a wounded captive inside of the man's house. It turns out that the suburban father is a vigilante who kills drug dealers, pedophiles, and anyone else who he deems "un-righteous." He lives by a strict moral code and cannot kill the protagonist, but also cannot release him, so he makes the young man a prisoner in his house, living in a locked room amidst his similarly warped family, including his violent older daughter and devoutly Catholic wife, who is too afraid to help the boy and eventually commits suicide after allowing her husband to institutionalize their youngest daughter. The men enter into a series of chess games with the young man's freedom at stake, culminating in a final match in the basement of the house involving human-sized chess pieces made out of corpses.

Both films trade heavily in the religious fault, guilt, and remorse that Houle describes, both expose the madness of the devout, and both feature instances of shocking violence—a baby is cut from the womb of a pregnant woman in *Evil Words*, and a young girl is killed by a point-blank shotgun blast in *5150 Elm's Way*—but neither movie blends art house aesthetics with torture porn gore the way that *7 Days* does. While *Evil Words* and *5150 Elm's Way* fit comfortably within the horror/suspense genre, *7 Days* is a much more radical work as it cannot be easily situated within generic boundaries. In this regard it has more in common with European new extremist cinema such as Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* or the films of Gaspar Noé than with previous adaptations of Senécal's works. Indeed, Québécois cinema is often regarded as having a closer connection with European films than with English-Canadian ones. In an article about the influence of the French New Wave on Québécois cinema, Peter Lester argues that

[a]s far as English Canadian cinema, the direct influence is perhaps a little less easily traceable . . . but generally speaking, the French influence is typically more pronounced within the context of Québécois cinema. . . . Since at least the 1950s and 60s there has been a rather close crossover between the cinema of France and that of Quebec. (qtd. in Ho n. pag.)

The similarities are certainly present, but it would be a mistake to contextualize *7 Days* as simply an offshoot or copycat of French new extremist films, as it is firmly situated within, and is a product of, Quebec culture. *7 Days* combines art house techniques such as long, contemplative takes, abstract metaphorical imagery, and a minimalist score with unflinching violence, torture porn gore, explicit nudity, and taboo-breaking imagery, eliciting the visceral affect of new extremist cinema while interrogating particularly Québécois notions of culpability, sin, and remorse.

High-profile Quebec actor Claude Legault stars in *7 Days* as Bruno Hamel, a surgeon living in the suburbs with his wife Sylvie (Fanny Mallette) and their only child, Jasmine (Rose-Marie Coallier). The couple allows the young girl to walk the few blocks to school one morning while they have a romp, only to discover that evening that she was abducted, raped, and murdered. A labourer named Anthony Lemaire (Martin Dubreuil) is arrested for the crime; however, Hamel is dissatisfied with the machinations of the justice system and concocts a plan to kidnap him. While the pris-



oner is being transported, Hamel steals the van and brings Lemaire to a lakeside cabin, confining him to a makeshift surgery room/torture chamber. The doctor informs both his wife and the police—via phone calls rerouted through a remote laptop—that he intends to torture and kill Lemaire in the seven days leading up to Jasmine’s birthday, and then turn himself in. As Detective Mercure (Rémy Girard) and his officers hunt for Hamel, the doctor brutalizes his captive. The torture becomes increasingly gruesome, yet Hamel is unable to find any satisfaction or relief in his actions, only more pain and self-loathing—even after Lemaire admits to other crimes against children, which Hamel exposes to the media, earning him hero status among many of the Québécois watching the story as it develops on television. When the mother of one of the dead children publicly condemns Hamel’s actions, he kidnaps her, locks her in a room with Lemaire, and encourages her to follow his example. On the seventh day, Hamel decides to let the mutilated man live and allows himself to be captured. A reporter on the scene asks him if he feels that vengeance is right, to which he answers “no.” The reporter then asks Hamel if he regrets his actions, to which he also replies, “no,” thereby denying viewers the transcendent closure expected from a typical narrative film with such dramatic weight.

Grou establishes from the outset that *7 Days* is not a typical narrative film. In one of the most upsetting scenes in any movie, he slowly tracks across Jasmine’s corpse in a close-up. From her bruised head and dead eyes, to her bloodied thighs and the soiled underwear around her ankles, it is a visual assault on the viewer. Asbjørn Grønstad describes the films of Noé and von Trier as

[i]mpossibly violent, they assault their own audience and negate the scopophilic pleasure considered intrinsic to film as an art form. Uncompromising and anti-voyeuristic, they enact a reversal of the relation between film and spectator that historically has defined the cinematic situation—these films compel us to look away. (194)

This description can also apply to *7 Days*: once Hamel has Lemaire, he strips him naked (the state in which the prisoner stays for the remainder of the movie, with his genitalia exposed), shackles him, and begins a regiment of abuses, none of which are depicted as pleasurable for the protagonist or the viewer, despite the graphic portrayal of Jasmine’s corpse evoking a desire to see Lemaire pay for his crimes. Hamel smashes the man’s knee with a sledgehammer, and Grou does not cut away from the impact: the entirety of the blow is depicted using shockingly realistic special effects. Hamel also urinates on Lemaire, beats him unconscious with a chain, and then operates on him without anesthesia.



The procedure is shown via graphic close-ups, as Hamel cuts open Lemaire, who is incapacitated by curare but still able to feel the surgery, and digs around inside of him. Lemaire passes out after the procedure, regaining consciousness only to discover that Hamel has relocated his anus to the side of his torso. He lies chained to the floor as fecal matter gurgles out of his side, and Hamel feeds him and cares for his wounds enough to keep him alive and suffering for the duration of the week. The uncompromising brutality of these scenes constitutes an assault on the spectator that is reminiscent of the disturbing, anti-voyeuristic effects of European new extremism.

There are no overt references to Catholicism in *7 Days*, as there are in *Evil Words* and *5150 Elm Street*; however, one can read the film as a perversion of the Church’s imagery and symbolism. The title itself carries Catholic connotations, as the number seven figures prominently in Catholic scripture, including the Seven Corporeal Acts of Mercy and Seven Spiritual Acts of Mercy, the Seven Deadly Sins, the Seven Virtues, the Seven Sacraments, and, most often, the Seven Days of Creation. As such, seven is recognized by Catholics as the number of completeness. Furthermore,

Lemaire, naked, whipped, and at one point restrained to a surgical table placed upright, is depicted as a martyr figure, although this particular martyr is punished for his own sins—or perhaps in the context of the Catholic Church in Quebec, the sins of a system that could allow such a monster to exist. Instead of a spear wound in his side, Lemaire has an asshole hemorrhaging shit. For anyone familiar with Catholic imagery, these images are symbolically charged, and Hamel’s refusal to provide closure or narrative redemption in the end reinforces the critique of Catholicism apparent in the film’s symbolism.

The perversion of Catholic imagery has been a centerpiece in previous (France) French films in the new extremist canon, as illustrated by Pascal Laugier’s *Martyrs*, which was partially shot in Quebec. Despite its affinities with French new extremist cinema, *7 Days* lays out its critique of Catholicism within the particular framework of Quebec’s cinematic heritage and exhibits some of the central conventions of that tradition, for example, in the portrayal of Hamel. In his aforementioned article, Houle identifies a hero trope from the early days of Quebec cinema, which he describes as

the *humiliated hero, beaten but morally righteous*. . . by sacrificing their lives or their happiness, rather than failing in their duties (duties that are imposed on them), they acquire the halo of new moral qualities. Humiliated, resigned, and beaten, they at least have the conviction that they have not left the narrow path of Christian virtue, that they are in the right. (n. pag.)

Hamel is initially positioned in the narrative as a man devout in his mission of revenge; however, he is stricken with what could be considered a Catholic sense of guilt, which leads to a crisis of faith that ultimately causes him to fail in his mission. The Catholic hero of early Québécois cinema does not stray from the path, no matter what, but the modern protagonist, though still subject to a lingering religious guilt (symbolized in the film by the deer carcass that Hamel tries to hide, but that keeps reappearing after being picked at by animals), ultimately answers to himself.

Senécal and Grou present a post-Quiet Revolution Québécois hero who is self-determined and refuses to rely on the institutions that have proven to be either ineffectual or downright monstrous. Detective Mercure, by contrast, is presented as the foil to Hamel and embodies an “old” Québécois way of thinking, in which the individual allows himself to be at the mercy of the official institutions. Whereas Hamel is handsome and physically fit, Mercure is flabby and unattractive. Both of them have lost loved ones to violence, but while Hamel is proactive in shaping the outcome of his situation, Mercure continues to live in the house that

he shared with his wife: he sleeps on the couch because he boarded up their bedroom, and repeatedly views security camera footage of her death. He is only able to track down Hamel on the seventh day, after being outwitted on several occasions, and laments not finding him sooner. Mercure is a broken-down, ineffectual “hero,” who works within the system and pleads with Hamel to do the same. By contrast, Hamel represents an independent viewpoint that falls in line with a Quebec nationalist way of thinking: if the Church has a broken moral compass, the police allow citizens of the province to be victimized, and the courts do not sufficiently deter criminals, then the individual must act independently. Secular self-sufficiency is heroic in a post-Quiet Revolution Quebec that continues to be haunted by its past, although the efficacy of such a position is called into question by the lack of resolution at the end of the film.

Abused and murdered children, medical experimentation, a failed justice system, and Roman Catholic guilt are forces that linger in Québécois culture, simmering until boiling over in *7 Days*. Like the films of European new extremism, *7 Days* makes a visceral appeal to the spectator through its combination of art house aesthetics and brutal content; however, it does so in a way that is uniquely Québécois. This work of new extremism is grounded in Québécois culture through its transgressive elements, and can be understood as the eruption of the internal cultural forces described herein. The result is a caustic cinematic experience grounded in the corporeal that speaks volumes about its place, people, and history. By generating its critique of Quebec’s traumatic past through regional film conventions, graphic content, and perversions of Catholic imagery, *7 Days* asserts itself as a loud aftershock of Quebec’s Quiet Revolution.

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