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## **Reinventing Regional Identity in Twenty-first-Century Québécois and French**

### **Cinema**

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It is perhaps because of some disenchantment with urban life that filmmakers in both France and Quebec have recently revived the traditions of rural and regional cinema and that audiences have responded by making such films commercial successes.<sup>i</sup> Many twentieth-century films tended to present the regional, despite the fact that there are a number of regional centres that qualify as cities in their own right, as the binary opposite of the urban. These cinematic portrayals of the regions largely showed regional areas as either a home to romanticised natural life or a site of poverty, violence and resentment-laden alienation. The regional put on display for twenty-first-century audiences has tended to be more complex.<sup>ii</sup> Reflecting the ever-diminishing distance between urban and regional spaces, recent films market life in regional France and Canada by demythologising the non-urban, mixing the idyllic representations of traditional narrative

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<sup>i</sup> Michel Cadé traces this rural revival back to the 1990s in France, citing Manuel Poirier's *À la campagne* (1995), Étienne Chatilliez's *Le Bonheur est dans le pré* (1996) and *Une hirondelle a fait le printemps* (2000) by Christian Carion, three rural comedies about stressed urbanites who find happiness in the countryside. See Michel Cadé, "Le mythe du ruralisme dans le cinéma français", *Cahiers de la cinémathèque*, 75 (October 2003), 27-38.

<sup>ii</sup> Although the "regional" necessarily encompasses the rural (which we take to include not only agricultural lands, but also woodlands and remote areas), the reverse is not necessarily true. We thus employ the term "regional" to designate those spaces and the representational traditions that flow from them that emphasise the distinctly non-urban aspects of an area and its culture and that presuppose a distance (both literal and figurative) from the assumed norms associated with urban spaces. The term "rural" is used to designate the subset of regional spaces and representational traditions that focus specifically on the natural environment within regional settings.

genres such as the French pastoral and the Canadian *roman du terroir* with disenchantment.<sup>iii</sup> This refashioned version of “real” regional life seeks to restore faith in non-urban environments as places of happiness and personal fulfilment that are nevertheless, with the exceptions of Eric Rohmer’s *Les Amours d’Astrée et de Céladon*, far from utopic, and thus more accessible to modern audiences.

In this analysis, Rohmer’s controversial film, which sought to recreate Honoré D’Urfé’s seventeenth-century pastoral novel *L’Astrée* in an idyllic and pre-industrial landscape, serves as a counterpoint to Dany Boon’s *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis* and Jean-François Pouliot’s *La Grande Séduction*.<sup>iv</sup> Rohmer’s insistence on showcasing an impossibly idyllic pastoral setting disconnected from the contemporary realities of regional France left audiences feeling alienated, while the latter films seduced audiences with the charms of contemporary regional areas as both critical of and connected to the strong traditions of rural and regional narratives in France and Quebec.<sup>v</sup> An analysis of these successful and unsuccessful regional films provides insight into what contemporary audiences expect of such representations. Although audiences still turn to narratives of the rural and the regional as both a geographical and temporal escape from “modern” urban problems such as violence and pollution, they also expect representations of these “retreat” spaces to reflect the changing nature of regional life and landscapes. While this negotiation of the ideal and the real was present in the French pastoral and the Canadian

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<sup>iii</sup> The pastoral is a literary mode that glorifies the beauty and simplicity of rural life. In France, the pastoral reached the height of its popularity in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. See Jean-Pierre Van Elslande, *L’imaginaire pastorale du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999). The *roman du terroir* is a literary genre that promoted an ideology of godly agricultural living. See below for more information.

<sup>iv</sup> *Les amours d’Astrée et de Céladon*, dir. by Eric Rohmer (Rézo Films, 2007); *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis*, dir. by Dany Boon (Pathé, 2008); *La grande séduction*, dir. by Jean-François Pouliot (Wellspring, 2003); Honoré d’Urfé, *L’Astrée* (Lyon: Masson, 1925).

<sup>v</sup> Although documentary and non-fiction filmmaking shares in some of the characteristics of fictional regional films being discussed here, the present study limits itself to the fictional genre.

*roman du terroir*, over-determined portrayals of the regional as the binary opposite of the urban arguably led to a decline in the popularity of rural and regional cinema. The successful return to the regional and rural has consequently embraced rather than eschewed complexity.

### **Earlier rural and regional narratives**

By 1931, France's urban population had surpassed its rural population.<sup>vi</sup> Despite the reality of increasing urbanisation, Pierre Sorlin argues that “until the middle of the twentieth century, the French perceived themselves as members of a ‘rural’ country, a country whose dominant feature, apart from Paris, was the village with its church tower, its fields and its quiet life”.<sup>vii</sup> Filmmakers like Marcel Pagnol and Jean Renoir reacted to these changing demographics by creating visual tributes to pleasant regional life, and audiences flocked to the cinemas to see them.<sup>viii</sup> For French Canadians too, the myth of country living long outlived Quebec's demographic realities. The 1911 census was the last to report more people living in rural areas than in those classified as urban and by 1961 only 26% of Quebecers lived outside of the province's cities and larger towns. The current ratio of four urbanites for every rural inhabitant has been the norm since the mid-sixties.<sup>ix</sup> These discrepancies between perceptions and reality underscore the power of the rural myth not only to fascinate and captivate audiences, but also to make them believe in a version of their past that is more temporally near, accessible to them and idyllic than it

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<sup>vi</sup> Groupe service du réseau rural français, *Quel avenir des services en milieu rural* (2013), p7.

<sup>vii</sup> Pierre Sorlin, “Stop the Rural Exodus: Images of the Country in French Films of the 1950s”, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 18 (1998), 183-197 (p. 184).

<sup>viii</sup> On the importance of Pagnol in French regional and rural film in the 30s and 40s, see Claire R. McMurray, *Beyond Paris: Contemporary French Film and the Countryside* (doctoral dissertation, Yale University. Ann Arbor: Proquest/UMI, 2010), p. 15.

<sup>ix</sup> Statistics Canada, “Population, Urban and Rural, by Province and Territory”, *Census Summary Tables* <[www.statscan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/101/cst01/demo62f-eng.htm](http://www.statscan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/101/cst01/demo62f-eng.htm)>, [accessed 29 October 2012].

really is. Speaking of the French Canadian fascination with the rural, Peter Harcourt identifies a longing for the land that is more appropriately characterised as “an *idea* of the land”.<sup>x</sup> This idea of what life outside the city should be is based on earlier rural narratives: pastoral and *roman du terroir*. These genres devoted to chronicling country life have flourished in times of cultural crisis, when their representations of a return to the land and a return to the roots of traditional national identity provided troubled readers with a sense of stability and continuity with the past.

French pastoral literature reached the height of its popularity in the years following the wars of religion. When the first volume of Honoré d’Urfé’s *L’Astrée* appeared in 1607, readers who had endured decades of bloody civil war embraced the chance to immerse themselves in the peaceful world constructed in its pages. Published in six lengthy volumes between 1607 and 1627, d’Urfé’s novel follows a group of highborn residents of fifth-century Gaul who retire to the countryside, vowing to renounce all worldly ambition and to live peaceful lives as shepherds. *L’Astrée* was extremely popular amongst its primarily aristocratic seventeenth-century readers, who regularly dressed as shepherds to re-enact their favourite scenes together. D’Urfé’s novel staged a return to rural life as well as a return national unity. The novel promotes a version of French history grounded in traditionally rural values, and creates a direct link between this imagined past and the present by combining idealised portraits of rural life and recognizable features of regional France.

While *L’Astrée* has all of the defining features of pastoral fiction, namely an idealised natural setting and a love story between a shepherd and a shepherdess, the text breaks with the conventions of the pastoral literary mode in that it is a geographically

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<sup>x</sup> Peter Harcourt, “Images of the Rural: The Cinema of Quebec”, *Cineaction*, 69 (2006), 2-11 (p. 7).

precise paradise. The countryside to which the noble Gauls retire is identified as the Forez region along the Lignon River outside of Lyon, where d'Urfé spent most of his life. The novel is full of references to sites and geographical features around the region that the author knew and loved. The geographical specificity of the novel contributed to its accessibility, and has inspired generations of readers to journey to the Forez in search of the pastoral paradise it describes.<sup>xi</sup> *L'Astrée's* negotiation of the realities of regional life and the idyllic environment of pastoral convention was typical of seventeenth-century pastoral literature.

In this period, a debate arose about whether pastoral art and literature should favour the real or the ideal in its depiction of regional and rural spaces. This argument was part of the larger dispute between the Ancients and the Moderns that divided the *Académie Française* in this period.<sup>xii</sup> The Ancients objected to contemporary pastorals that were completely disconnected from the realities of rural life, and they often cited *L'Astrée* as the most striking example of an unacceptable lack of verisimilitude. The opposing camp, the Moderns, agreed that some degree of verisimilitude was necessary, but that too much was not only offensive to modern sensibilities, but interfered with the reader's ability to access the text. As one prominent Modern and author of pastoral poetry Bernard le Bouvier de Fontenelle saw it, the most important function of this type of literature was to transport the reader into a pastoral world. While the evocation of the tranquillity of the countryside facilitated this movement, material details had the opposite effect. In his *Discours sur la Nature de l'Eglogue*, Fontenelle writes:

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<sup>xi</sup> One notable example of this phenomenon was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who writes about his journey to the Forez in his *Confessions*.

<sup>xii</sup> See Larry F. Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient: Literature and History in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 2011), and *La querelle des anciens et des modernes*, ed. Marc Fumaroli and Anne-Marie LeCoq (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

Quand on me représente le repos qui règne à la campagne [...] mon imagination touchée et émue me transporte dans la condition de berger, je suis berger; mais que l'on me représente, quoiqu'avec toute l'exactitude et toute la justesse possible, les viles occupations des bergers, elles ne me font point d'envie, et mon imagination demeure fort froide.<sup>xiii</sup>

For Fontenelle, the *idea* of the rural had a comforting, restorative effect on readers. He concludes in the *Discours* that the mark of a successful pastoral text was a balance between carefully filtered “realities” of country life that established verisimilitude, and idealised elements that assured aristocratic readers that they would be perfectly at home in this world.<sup>xiv</sup>

In post-revolutionary France, the idea of life outside the cities continued to play an important role in the cultural imaginary as a bastion of stability in tumultuous times. Nineteenth-century France saw a renewed interest in the regional and especially the rural as concern grew over the corrupting values being promoted in urban literature. Activists in social and moral hygiene movements promoted regional France as a healthy escape from the disease-promoting and morally corrupting environments of Paris.<sup>xv</sup> These idealised portraits did not go unchallenged however, and narratives like Zola's *La Terre* exposed readers to the harsh realities of life outside urban centres.<sup>xvi</sup>

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<sup>xiii</sup> Bernard le Bouvier de Fontenelle, *Discours sur la Nature de l'Eglogue, Oeuvres Complètes 2* (Paris: Librairie Arthème-Fayard, 1991), p 395.

<sup>xiv</sup> Fontenelle describes this balance in his *Discours sur la Nature de l'Eglogue* as a compromise between the Ancient pastoral style represented by Theocritus, and the overly idealized style of Modern pastoral: “entre la grossiereté des bergers de Théocrite, et le trop d'esprit de la plupart des bergers modernes, il y a un milieu à tenir” (p. 402).

<sup>xv</sup> Anne-Marie Thiesse, “La littérature régionaliste en France (1900-1940)”, *Tangence*, 40 (1993), 49-64 (p. 52).

<sup>xvi</sup> Émile Zola, *La Terre* [1887] (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2006).

In both twentieth-century Quebec and France, a return to the countryside and the more isolated regions was advocated as a means to cure social ills and mend fractured national identities. The first novelistic genre to find success in Quebec was the frequently formulaic *roman du terroir*. These narratives depict earnest country youths either renouncing the temptations of the city or paying the price for their forays into urban environments and are largely seen as a reaction to the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Quebecers for the mill towns of New England.<sup>xvii</sup> The novels dominated the early twentieth-century French Canadian literary scene and linked the fate of the nation to that of the *paysan*. For this, they not only received the backing of the Catholic Church, but were supported by some of key texts from clerics-turned novelists like Lionel Groulx and Felix-Antoine Savard.<sup>xviii</sup>

The poverty, poorer access to health care and education, substance abuse, aging populations and xenophobia that were and remain problems in many regional and rural areas are included in these narratives, albeit often in a paradoxical fashion such that they become the celebrated traits of simple country or small town living. When issues that were undeniably of concern—such as depopulation—did surface, they were the object of theses that preached staying on the land (or in the woods, on the coast, in the village, etc.), keeping away from cities, and that underscored the tragic consequences of leaving or changing one's ways. This tendency became more pronounced in the 1930s when novels with rural settings became darker and more willing to break with the tradition of depicting Quebec's countryside as a North American Arcadia and its inhabitants as

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<sup>xvii</sup> Aurélien Boivin, "Le roman du terroir", *Québec français*, 143 (2006), 32-37.

<sup>xviii</sup> Lionel Groulx, *L'Appel de la race* [1922], Michel Gualin, ed. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986); Felix-Antoine Savard, *Menaud, maître-draveur* [1937], (Québec: Bibliothèque Québécoise, 1992).

models of Catholic virtue. Deeply flawed characters such as the greedy and cruel protagonist of Claude-Henri Grignon's *Un homme et son péché* foreshadowed the dark, almost gothic turn the genre would take in the 1960s with works like Marie-Claire Blais' *Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*.<sup>xix</sup>

Rejecting the complex representation that typified the pastoral and the *roman du terroir*, French cinema presented both positive and negative visions of regional life as the binary opposite of urban life. Propagandist films produced under the Vichy government reinforced differences between the harmful effects of city dwelling and the more wholesome effects of life at some remove from it.<sup>xx</sup> Although the message was a familiar one, urging the population to seek refuge in the countryside from culturally invasive influences, economic dependency, moral waywardness and disease, the association of regionalism and “back to the land” movements with collaboration and reactionary politics tainted the images of the rural and the regional. In the wake of the anti-Pétain backlash therefore, the kind of rural and regional themes promoted by the right-wing wartime government were abandoned until the 1970s, when a left-wing regionalism (such as that encountered in the Larzac protests<sup>xxi</sup>) emerged in a tradition that lumped rural and regional residents of all economic statuses in with the city-dwelling poor and working classes.<sup>xxii</sup> The documentary-inspired return to agricultural and regional subjects would at last expose the profound and unsettling changes that had taken place in France's supposedly ideal, non-urban areas. In the face of increasing urbanisation and

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<sup>xix</sup> Claude-Henri Grignon, *Un homme et son péché* [1936], (Outremont: Stanké, 2003); Marie-Claire Blais, *Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* [1966], (Montreal: Boréal, 1991).

<sup>xx</sup> Sorlin, p. 188.

<sup>xxi</sup> The Larzac protests began in 1971 as a movement against the expansion of a military base into the grazing lands used by local sheep farmers. The non-violent protests were bolstered by a collective of sympathisers from outside the region and went on for 10 years until François Mitterrand abandoned the planned expansion of the base in 1981.

<sup>xxii</sup> Thiesse, p. 53.



centralisation, the rural and the quintessentially French regional identities it had come to represent emerged as cultural assets in need of protection.<sup>xxiii</sup> Similarly, the growing importance of the European Union amplified interest in regionalism as France's national identity was perceived as being under threat in the larger European body.<sup>xxiv</sup>

In Quebec, despite the far less idealistic tone that its rural literature had adopted by the 1950s, film and television depictions of the rural and regional oscillated between largely enchanting tales of country life and grittier and gloomier representations of existence outside the cities. The television show (aired between 1956-1970) adapted from Grignon's novel, without eliding the shortcomings and far less than saintly traits of its characters, nonetheless managed to turn a tragic novel into a popular show in which the characters not only escaped the terrible deaths that befell them in the original tale, but enjoyed romances and the charms of northern Quebec.<sup>xxv</sup> Coming on the heels of this commercial success were a series of films (*L'Ange et la femme*, *Gina*, *Mon oncle Antoine*) that portrayed the vast Québécois countryside as a stark, frozen landscape populated by characters engaging in either dull and depressing pursuits or violent acts.<sup>xxvi</sup> The countryside was accordingly subject to representations that were either overwhelmingly pleasant or utterly repugnant.

Unlike the cinematic regional narratives of the twentieth century, twenty-first century filmic representations of regional and rural France and Quebec have tended toward the more balanced perspective typical of the literary texts. The realities of

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<sup>xxiii</sup> On this shift in tone in rural cinema of the seventies and eighties, see McMurray, p. 19-24.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Colette Windish, "Du roman du terroir au feuilleton de l'été: Vers un nouvel imaginaire populaire français?" *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 11.1 (2007), 137-145, p138.

<sup>xxv</sup> Claude-Henri Grignon, *Les belles histoires des pays d'en haut* (Radio Canada, 1956-1970);

<sup>xxvi</sup> *L'Ange et la femme*, dir. by Gilles Carle (Films RSL, 1977); *Gina*, dir. by Denys Arcand (Cinéprix, 1975); Jutra (1971).

environmental degradation, depopulation and economic decline are integrated into the idyllic worlds of the pastoral novel and the *roman du terroir*. The less picturesque realities of life outside the cities that have always been present at the borders of idealised representations—“the worm in the apple, the disruptions that were invading the rural space”,<sup>xxvii</sup> or what Gérard Genette refers to as “le serpent dans la bergerie” in his famous essay on *L’Astrée*<sup>xxviii</sup>—are incorporated into a more complex narrative. As with the pastoral and *roman du terroir*, the inclusion of these imperfections proved to be part of the appeal. Indeed these films were transformed into real-life endorsements (complete with economic benefits in terms of tourism) for regional France and Quebec. Twenty-first century audiences embraced pictures that blended the real and the ideal such as Pouliot’s *La grande séduction* and Boon’s *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis*, but they reacted negatively to Rohmer’s *Les Amours d’Astrée et de Céladon*, a film which suppresses all of the less idyllic aspects of the region it portrays in an effort to create a pure pastoral.

### **Successful seduction: twenty-first century rural narratives**

If the rural novel or regional film in the latter part of the twentieth century emphasised either the positive or negative binary opposite of the urban, the twenty-first century approach is one that like its successful antecedents self-consciously and awkwardly beguiles and seduces the public with a more complex portrait of regional life. The problems such as poverty, unemployment, and alcoholism are laid bare, and the plots—usually classic “fish out of water” stories—are so far from original that they are little more than clichés. Films like *La grande séduction* and *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis*

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<sup>xxvii</sup> Harcourt, p. 7.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Gerard Genette, “Le Serpent dans la Bergerie.” *Figures I* (Paris : Seuil, 1966), p. 109-122.

nonetheless succeed in reviving popular interest in the kind of idealised stories of regional life from which both France and Quebec had turned away, both explicitly in their treatment of the rural and regional and implicitly in their recent aversion to these kinds of settings for films. Through a mix of alluring deception and shameful confession of the banal (as opposed to sensationalistic) problems of non-urban life that is especially disarming, both films celebrate their distinctiveness and make the regions they portray highly alluring destinations to the millions who have seen the films. All the while championing the regions in a very real economic sense, as much as in the fictions of their stories, these films succeed in negating the propagandist reputation of the traditional cinematic representations.

Jean-François Pouliot's *La grande séduction* is the story of an island fishing community, the ironically dubbed Ste Marie-La-Mauderne, that has fallen on hard times since the closure of the fishery. Desperate to attract a doctor (deemed a necessary part of the local infrastructure) so they can entice a plastic-ware factory to set up shop and thus save their community from bankruptcy and emigration, the villagers mobilise. When they happen upon a once-in-a-lifetime chance to keep a doctor on the island, they go to ridiculous lengths to entice Christopher Lewis, a Montreal plastic surgeon who is forced to spend three months in Ste. Marie as a way to escape prosecution on drug charges, to remain in the village and be their doctor. To carry out the seduction, Germain, the mayor, and the other locals mount an espionage campaign to tap the doctor's phone to find out his favourite foods (beef stroganoff), fetishes (feet), hobbies (cricket and jazz), and emotional secrets (growing up without a father). They then use this information to transform their welfare-funded, ice hockey-crazed island into a beef stroganoff, jazz, and

cricket loving enclave where women walk around barefoot, and where Germain takes Dr. Lewis in as the son he supposedly lost, but in reality never had. When the doctor is at last let in on the ruse by the village's mysterious postmaster, Germain comes clean about their scheming:

Ça fait huit ans que la pêche est pas rentable. Ça fait huit ans que les hommes s'enlignent à toutes les fins de mois pour recevoir du BS.<sup>xxix</sup> As-tu déjà été chercher du BS? C'est pas juste l'argent que tu vas chercher, c'est de la honte aussi; tu vas chercher une bonne dose de honte. Ils te donnent pas assez d'argent pour quinze jours, mais la honte t'en as pour le mois au complet, par exemple. La pure vérité c'est que sans docteur, on a plus de village icitte. La pure vérité c'est qu'on ne savait pas comment faire pour avoir un docteur pour réanimer 120 vies.<sup>xxx</sup>

As Germain justifies the ploy that at that moment seems destined to fail, he exposes the town's desperate motivations.

The collective desire is one that echoes the messages of the *romans du terroir*: staying where one had grown up, in the place that is central to one's identity, and earning a living through their own toil rather than accepting an easy way out, be it government assistance or desertion of the only place they had ever called home. The failed seduction thus plays out as an exercise that is at once a humiliation, insofar as it is a confession of wrongdoing and actions that are out of keeping with the ideals of citizenship vaunted in

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<sup>xxix</sup> "BS" refers to the common abbreviation for Canada's welfare payment scheme known as "le bien-être social". For most French Canadians who have a reasonable familiarity with crude English idioms even if they would not consider themselves bilingual, the resonance with the English meaning of "BS" as *bullshit* would not be lost.

<sup>xxx</sup> *La grande séduction*, 2003.

the literature of self-sacrificing *habitants*, and a show of pride-of-place and frankness that results in the doctor pledging to stay.

What the film does so masterfully is engage in an unabashed defence of the isolated island community typical of the *roman du terroir*, but because the whole intrigue revolves around lies, it does so in a way that is painfully self-conscious of its attempts at the hard sell. The ugliest, most dilapidated house in town is cleverly labelled a heritage site in order to make even the objectively unpleasant aspects of the landscape part of the village's quaint charm. The villagers hold up their simple tastes as objects of ridicule when pretending to be sophisticates enamoured of music and sports they neither like nor understand. It is not a rejection of the rural, nor is it a parody of rural life; rather it is a sort of satire of the previous narratives and their commonplaces of unspoilt landscapes, simple ways of life and honest, moral inhabitants.

The self-deprecation exhibited by the characters is mirrored in the role that the region itself played in signing on to the production. Harrington Harbour, an island near the Upper North Shore in the far reaches of Eastern Quebec, was felt by the producers to be too picturesque to represent the economically depressed village. As a consequence, the setting was made to look more ramshackle than it actually is.<sup>xxxii</sup> Although touting itself as the antithesis of a tourist or settlement destination by appearing in the film as a laughably named anti-Arcadia, the community of 300 found itself overrun with tourists—a phenomenon that has made regions even more eager to welcome film crews than in the past, when they could be counted on to inject money into the local economies while filming. The island setting in both fiction and real life had used deception to become a

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<sup>xxxii</sup> Wellspring, "Seducing Doctor Lewis" [press release], <<http://static.thecia.com.au/reviews/s/seducing-doctor-lewis.pdf>> [accessed 29 November 2012].

place of attractive earnestness harkening back to a time when life was lived closer to the land and sea. In the doctor's words: "Y'a quelque chose ici qui est extraordinairement vrai. Vous êtes vrais et puis ça, on le retrouve pas en ville".<sup>xxxii</sup> Both Dr. Lewis and the viewer consider the scheming and the representational liberties that all movies take as what James Skidmore has framed as a questionable but ultimately defensible deception for the purposes of nostalgia. The lies are forgivable because they preserve a way of life that, despite the superficial changes, still exists once the lie has been acknowledged.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Lies and cunning paradoxically become part of the traditional values of the rural in the Québécois tradition.

In many ways, Dany Boon's *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* echoes Pouliot's earlier film. A Southern city-dwelling civil servant, Philippe, is transferred to the small town of Bergues in the department of the Nord as a disciplinary measure.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Arriving in the town, however, he has to deal with what he perceives to be overbearing locals, unappealing accommodations, unappetizing food, drunken employees, and a regional dialect that he cannot understand. Unlike in *La grande séduction*, however, Philippe's eventual appreciation for the town develops naturally thanks to the generous nature and patience of his co-workers who bring him furniture for his empty apartment, initiate him to local delicacies, and teach him the finer points of speaking Ch'timi.

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<sup>xxxii</sup> *La grande séduction*, 2003.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> James Skidmore, "Good-Bye Reality, or The Seduction of Nostalgia: Genre and the Cultural Imaginary in *Good Bye, Lenin!* and *La grande séduction*", in *Screening Canadians: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Canadian Film*, Wolfram R. Keller and Eugene P. Walz (Marburg: Universitätsbibliothek Marburg, 2008), pp. 119-131 (p. 125).

<sup>xxxiv</sup> The notion that the regional town or rural setting has become a place of exile for wrongdoing is a curious feature of both films and speaks to a persistent belief that anything other than the metropolitan centre is a place beyond civilization and therefore fit for those who are not prepared to play by society's rules. In this we see echoes of the French *maquisard* or the Canadian *coureur des bois*, who are regarded as ambivalent social figures.

His warming to this rather maligned area of France is nevertheless incomprehensible to those who know the North only through the stereotype of a brash drunken people, who are constantly depressed by the abysmal freezing weather, desolate, landscape, and isolation from any of the hallmarks of French culture, such as good food. As if to emphasize the reputed horrors of this region, Philippe must learn about the North as an inept gangster might learn of his fate in a mafia movie. He seeks the advice of a knowledgeable older man in an exchange marked by every conventional sign of the menacing discussion: the older man is shown seated, obscured by shadows, the music is eerie, his speech is halting but his tone tells of unspeakable horrors.

Philippe's wife, Julie, who has stayed behind in the South, also plays to conventional wisdom about the North, as she adheres so rigidly to her assumptions about the area that Philippe's attempts to set her straight are interpreted as denial and putting on a brave face. Philippe eventually lets her think what she wants and even plays to her assumptions, thoroughly enjoying the sympathy and attention he gets on his fortnightly visits home. Insofar as Boon makes comedic hay of these stereotypes, he aligns himself with the kind of caricatural play that Marcel Pagnol made famous in his regionalist plays, novels and movies (such as *La femme du Boulanger* and *La fille du puisatier*) about the Provençal.<sup>xxxv</sup> The viewer is then drawn into the comedy of the film owing to their presumed familiarity with Northern stereotypes while he or she watches Philippe warm to the North precisely because it contravenes these shared expectations.

The stereotypes held by the Southerners resurface in the film, but they do so in a way that distinguishes them from the dominant trends in rural and regional literature and

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<sup>xxxv</sup> *La femme du Boulanger*, dir. by Marcel Pagnol (Les films Marcel Pagnol, 1938) and *La fille du puisatier* (Les films Marcel Pagnol, 1940).

film. When Julie threatens to move to Bergues to rescue Philippe from the horrors of the North, he panics. His friends consequently attempt to protect his ruse and his happiness by staging an elaborate anti-seduction, which consists of emphasising the worst stereotypes about their region so that Julie will go home thinking that she is unable to live among such savages. The Northerners play to the worst of the stereotypes by dressing oddly, disavowing all etiquette, swilling one cheap beer after another, serving overcooked “mystery meat” and stale bread and acting violently. This anti-seduction, in classic comedic fashion, fails miserably: Julie feels compelled to move because it is worse than she thought; she must rescue her husband. These sections of the film, where Northerner actor-director Boon both in actual fact and in the fiction of the story leads the rest of the cast in blatant self-mockery reinvent the often all too earnest dramas of the French regional genre.

If, as Thiesse’s study contends, the main contributions of France’s regional literature were largely ethnographic in nature, correctives to common assumptions about the backwardness of the provinces compared to the capital (or other more idyllic regions), Boon’s film both participates in this process and mocks the very need for it. The staging of assumptions in an almost carnivalesque fashion lampoons French approaches to regional culture. Gone are the few words of regional languages dropped in for effect, the descriptions of traditional dress and customs, and even the apparent isolation of the regions in the films, which traditionally turn outward from the centre of the hexagon and exist at a remove from urban centres.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Ch’timi is ever-present, but as Antoine (Boon’s character) remarks somewhat condescendingly, they do sometimes speak French. The

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<sup>xxxvi</sup> Although comparisons between the seemingly monolithic “urban” and the particularities of the region in which characters find themselves is a common device in rural film, there is a sense that once one is located within a rural or regional space, the city becomes ever more distant. See Clare R. McMurray.



characters do not dress remarkably differently from working class people in other (urban) areas of France, and although certain customs are showcased—the carillon, some regional dishes and drinks—they are neither relegated to encounters with the older generations, nor the hallmarks of the movie. Even Philippe’s constant travels between the North and the South and the many encounters he has with the patrol officers on the highways undercut regionalist tendencies by showing the physical links between regions rather than their isolation from one another.

Instead of using beautiful vistas of mountains, rolling farmlands, or the sea to convince the viewer of the inherent charms of the North, Boon’s movie practically ignores the landscape shots that are so characteristic of regional cinema in France. Indeed in the whole movie, there is only one scene—where Philippe and Antoine are racing blokarts on the seashore—that offers the beautiful scenery viewers have come to expect. Even here, however, the overcast skies at the water’s edge offer up a palate of muted colours that contrast sharply with the vibrant hues of purple lavender, yellow sunflowers, the blue Mediterranean Sea, and red clay associated with the South, which has been among France’s most cinematically vaunted regions.

This is not to say that *Bienvenue* does not participate in the kind of pedagogy and clichés that we normally associate with regional texts on both sides of the Atlantic. On the contrary, it carves out a kind of middle ground for itself, one where the quirks of Northern living are acknowledged, but where expectations are managed in such a way that viewers are left thinking: “It doesn’t seem so bad”. If Boon’s defence of the regional

is more pointed than Pouliot's, this might be due to France's much earlier questioning of the regions and their inhabitants as in some way less French than its *citadins*.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

### **Rohmer's failed seduction**

Pouliot and Boon's successful marketing of regional and rural life is based on a critical element that Rohmer's film lacks: a portrait of regional identity that includes all of its assets and all of its faults. The public conflict provoked by Rohmer's perceived disregard for the regional specificity of the pastoral novel *L'Astrée* demonstrates that this complex reality is central to what audiences expect out of twenty-first century rural and regional films.

While scouting locations for what was to be his final film, *Les Amours d'Astrée et de Céladon*, Rohmer encountered a casting problem. He had succeeded in finding two young, relatively unknown actors to play the novel's star-crossed lovers, the shepherdess Astrée and the shepherd Céladon, but it proved to be more of a challenge to fill the most important role, that of the landscape. When Rohmer went looking for a plausible setting for an early modern pastoral paradise in twenty-first century France, he logically began in the place where the novel is set, in Honoré d'Urfé's native Forez in what is now the Rhone-Alpes region. When he arrived, he experienced a disappointing disjunction between the literary landscape of *L'Astrée* and the contemporary environment before his eyes, and this led to his decision to alter one of the key aspects of d'Urfé's story, its

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<sup>xxxvii</sup> Residents of the French countryside were "negatively represented by the psychological stereotypes of a deceitful, lying, shallow race", as though they were colonial Others who required constant surveillance and guidance to become civilised. See Margaret Atask, "L'Affaire Dominici: Rural France, The State and The Nation", *French Cultural Studies* 12 (2001), 285-301 (p. 293). Similarly, the fact that regional languages and dialects were suppressed after the revolution suggests that the regions posed more a threat to the unity of the new Republic. See Renée Balibar, *L'Institution du français: essai sur le co-linguisme des Carolingiens à la République* (Paris: PUF, 1985) and Renée Balibar and Dominique Laporte, *Le Français national: politique et pratique de la langue nationale sous la Révolution* (Paris, Hachette, 1974).

location. The film opens with a disclaimer explaining his decision not to film in the Forez, choosing instead a region that had more successfully retained its supposed pre-modern purity:

Malheureusement, nous n'avons pas pu situer cette histoire dans la région où l'avait placée l'auteur; la plaine du Forez étant maintenant défigurée par l'urbanisation, l'élargissement des routes, le rétrécissement des rivières, la plantation des résineux. Nous avons dû choisir ailleurs en France comme cadre de cette histoire, des paysages ayant conservé l'essentiel de leur poésie sauvage et de leur charme bucolique.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

In displacing the story from its original setting because of urbanization in the Forez, Rohmer suppressed the contemporary reality of the region in order to depict a romanticised landscape. In so doing he rejected the inherent complexity of d'Urfé's novel, which combines recognisable features of the Forez landscape with idyllic portraits of the region.

When Rohmer prefaced his film with a detailed description of the environmental decline of the Forez, he not only threatened the tourism business that had become a spin-off benefit of new regional cinema, but he wounded the pride of people who have used d'Urfé's novel to construct a regional identity. Unlike other areas such as Brittany, the Basque country, and Provence where regionalism is based on an ethnic identity or a shared language, it is a shared claim to the cultural heritage of an iconic literary text that connects the communities of the Forez region. It is the geographic specificity of d'Urfé's pastoral paradise—its blending of real and ideal—that allows it to function as a tool in

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<sup>xxxviii</sup> *Les Amours d'Astrée*, 2007.

the creation and marketing of a regional identity.

In 1995, seventeen Rhone-Alpes municipalities banded together to form an official administrative federation, a group of townships now known as the *communauté des communes du Pays d'Astrée*. Part of the mission statement of the group is to use the novel as a model as they plan environmental and cultural projects. Turning their region into a modern-day pastoral paradise is a feasible goal because the landscape represented in d'Urfé's novel is accessible to them: "Notre pays d'Astrée est le cadre principal de l'oeuvre d'Honoré d'Urfé [...] la plupart des lieux et itinéraires précisément décrits dans le roman sont aujourd'hui encore parfaitement identifiables. En un mot, le Pays d'Astrée, théâtre des actions du roman, ne demande qu'à s'animer de nouveau".<sup>xxxix</sup> Working in a space where the seventeenth-century novel meets the twenty-first century environment, residents of the *Pays d'Astrée* are using the text to model a kind of environmental awareness, a sense of community and a continuity with their past. This contemporary reinvention of the pastoral is also a marketing tool, offering tourists the promise of an easily accessible rural retreat where the landscape has been spared the damaging effects of urbanisation. As the region's website explains, "Le Forez est ainsi un espace géographique clairement limité, un microcosme facilement accessible [...] il est resté jusqu'à aujourd'hui un espace rural préservé, seulement traversé depuis peu par une autoroute".<sup>xl</sup> It is at once a pastoral paradise and a geographically specific place where practical work is being done to protect and improve the local environment.

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<sup>xxxix</sup> From the official website of the Communauté de communes du Pays d'Astrée, <[http://www.pays-astree.com/qui\\_sommes\\_nous\\_/le\\_roman\\_%22I\\_astree%22\\_d\\_honore\\_d\\_urfe/%22I\\_astree%22/65](http://www.pays-astree.com/qui_sommes_nous_/le_roman_%22I_astree%22_d_honore_d_urfe/%22I_astree%22/65)> [accessed 18 May 2013].

<sup>xl</sup> From the Communauté de communes du Pays d'Astrée website <[http://www.pays-astree.com/que\\_faisons-nous\\_/tourisme\\_et\\_culture/les\\_chemin\\_de\\_l\\_astree/l\\_arcadie/135](http://www.pays-astree.com/que_faisons-nous_/tourisme_et_culture/les_chemin_de_l_astree/l_arcadie/135)> [accessed 23 July 2013].

Considering the ways in which d'Urfé's novel has informed the regional identity (not to mention the business and development strategy) of the Forez, it is not surprising that Foréziens were outraged by Rohmer's displacement of the story in his film. In a letter to Rohmer, representatives of the *Centre culturel du chateau de Goutelas* accused him of betraying Honoré d'Urfé by turning *L'Astrée* into a mere "fable de nulle part".<sup>xli</sup> Residents of the area were spurred into action by what they felt to be an incorrect and offensive characterisation of the regional environment. The regional council filed an ultimately unsuccessful lawsuit against the film's production company, charging defamation and demanding the suppression of the film's opening message.

While the *Foréziens* fought for the acknowledgement of the regional specificity of the landscape represented in d'Urfé's text, Rohmer argued that filming in a pristine natural setting allowed him to be more faithful to the pastoral spirit of the novel. According to Rohmer, it is the very universality of pastoral nature that made *L'Astrée* more easily communicable to a visual medium than a novel in a more realist style would have been, as he explains in a 2007 interview with *Le Figaro*:

*L'Astrée* est un roman pastoral, par conséquent situé dans la nature, mais il ne comporte aucune description du paysage. A cette époque, la littérature ne parlait pas de la nature, comme si elle laissait ce sujet aux peintres. C'est une chance pour moi, car cela permet d'ajouter au roman une dimension qu'il n'a pas. Je n'aurais jamais pu filmer un roman de Balzac parce que ses descriptions sont déjà

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<sup>xli</sup> Letter from Marc Delacroix and Marie-Claude Mioche to Eric Rohmer, reprinted in Nicole Vulser, "Le Conseil générale de la Loire attaque le cineaste Eric Rohmer", *Le Monde* 23 September 2007. <[http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2007/09/22/le-conseil-general-de-la-loire-attaque-le-cineaste-eric-rohmer\\_958310\\_3246.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2007/09/22/le-conseil-general-de-la-loire-attaque-le-cineaste-eric-rohmer_958310_3246.html)> [accessed 18 May 2013].

une mise en scène extrêmement précise. Alors que *L'Astrée* laisse un espace à inventer.<sup>xlii</sup>

For Rohmer, pastoral nature functions as a blank slate on which he is free to write his own idyll, and which permits him to move the film to another region without being unfaithful to the novel. Apart from the setting, however, and the trimming of secondary storylines necessary to fit the multi-volume novel into the space of a feature length film, Rohmer took few liberties in his adaptation of d'Urfé's text. The shepherds and shepherdesses are clothed in neo-classical robes inspired by the novel's illustrations. The love story that forms the core of the novel is not altered in any way that might make it more accessible to modern audiences, nor is the language, which is lifted word for word from the book.

Along the shady banks of the Sioule River in Auvergne, Rohmer recreates the major sites of d'Urfé's novel: the spot where Céladon, despondent after a jealous Astrée has banished him from her presence, throws himself into the river; the tomb that Astrée builds for her beloved Céladon after she gives up searching for him; the place where mystical nymphs rescue Céladon from drowning; and the home of the druid Adamas where the two lovers are at last reunited. Along the Lignon River in the twenty-first century Forez, these same sites are marked by plaques along Astrée-themed walking trails that allow tourists to follow in the footsteps of the novel's characters. Despite Rohmer's meticulous recreation of d'Urfé's pastoral world, and despite any resemblance that the Sioule might bear to the Lignon, for many viewers the displacement of the setting was a fundamental change that undermined all other efforts at fidelity to the original work.

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<sup>xlii</sup> Marie-Noëlle Tranchant, "Eric Rohmer pour réenchanter le monde", *Le Figaro* 4 September 2007. <[http://www.lefigaro.fr/...eric\\_rohmer\\_pour\\_reenchanter\\_le\\_monde.html](http://www.lefigaro.fr/...eric_rohmer_pour_reenchanter_le_monde.html)> [accessed 18 May 2013].

The argument between Rohmer and the Foréziens interestingly reproduces one of the main lines of disagreement in the seventeenth-century debate between the Ancients and the Moderns about rural representation. Like the Moderns, Rohmer conceives of the rural as a universal or ideal setting, whereas the Foréziens, like the Ancients, are intent on maintaining the geographical realities of particular settings.<sup>xliii</sup> Ultimately, Rohmer's investment in a universally ideal landscape alienated viewers who expected to connect to this seventeenth-century narrative through a particular region that they recognised. Audiences rejected the notion that one regional setting can simply stand in for any other. Rebuffing the one anchor to regional reality that might have made this narrative accessible to contemporary audiences, Rohmer ties the film's cultural capital to a purely idyllic rural space that is defined primarily by its opposition to the urban and that denies the reality of the region.

The negative reaction to Rohmer's film exemplifies some of the attitudes that inform recent depictions of regional France and Quebec illustrated here by *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* and *La grande séduction*. Audiences have embraced representations that bring the rural and the regional closer and make them more real. The particularities of the local environment and the people who inhabit it can be laid bare while still retaining the positive connotations of literary traditions such as the pastoral and the *roman du terroir*. Audiences have eschewed representations that mask the material realities, prejudices and

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<sup>xliii</sup> The debate between the Ancients and the Moderns revived by Rohmer's film had its analogue in Quebec in the form of what Annette Hayward has called "la querelle du régionalisme", which occurred during the first 3 decades of the twentieth century. It pitted, Ancients, who championed literature that fervently prioritised themes of regionalism, Catholicism and agriculturalism, against Exotics, who looked not to the land and insular themes, but rather to France for literary inspiration. See Annette Hayward, *La querelle du regionalism au Québec (1904-1931): Vers l'autonomisations de la littérature québécoise* (Ottawa: Le Nordir, 2006).

hardships of regional and rural life.<sup>xliv</sup> The regional is no longer understood to be the binary opposite of the urban centre, nor is it a blank screen on which directors can project idyllic images of a pure pre-industrial past. In its re-invented twenty-first century form, the regional and rural retain their status in the cultural imaginary as an escape from urban ills, but they are accessible, regionally specific escapes rather than inaccessible utopias. Drawing on the complexity already present in the literary traditions of the pastoral and the *roman du terroir*, they are demythologised places that audiences can encounter both in cinemas and in their travels around regional France and Quebec.

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<sup>xliv</sup> In one of the most famous critiques of pastoral literature, Raymond Williams writes about the dangerous capacity of idealised representations to cover up harsh realities such as rural poverty. See *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).