

Teaching Quebec History and Culture through Film

by Simone Pilon

Over the past few decades, French curricula at both the K-12 and post-secondary levels have increased their emphasis on the study of French-speaking communities outside France. As French programs expand their focus on the francophone world, instructors face new challenges and they have to be competent in a greater number of areas. Traditionally, French instructors, in addition to being fluent in the language and having a strong grasp of grammar so that they could teach it to their students, had to be well versed in the classics of French literature as well as in the history and culture of France. Today, instructors must also be familiar with various regions of the francophone world so that they may be able to share information about the culture and history of different countries and to discuss the literature being produced in these areas. Each region has its own linguistic and cultural identity as well as unique literary and artistic traditions.

With the study of the francophone world beyond France more prevalent in the French curriculum, to include materials on Quebec is particularly important, since the history of the province is closely tied with that of the United States and many students will visit the province with their school or families. In order to help teachers include the study of Quebec in their classes, this article provides information on two broad periods of the history of Quebec: the settlement of French Canada and the movement towards a modern-day society. Films which illustrate these historical moments and elements of Quebec culture and which may be used in the classroom are suggested. These films are readily available for purchase or downloading. Scenes of particular interest are specified, along with information to help guide discussion.

The Settlement of French Canada

Following “La Conquête” (the Conquest) and the Treaty of Paris (1763), when New France was ceded to Great Britain, the French-speaking population represented a small number of people speaking a different language (French) and following a different religion (Catholicism) than the conquering British. The Catholic Church assumed power over the people and values such as submission of the individual for the good of the collective were reinforced. Traditions and customs that would remain in place through to the early twentieth century developed in the nineteenth century, specifically a culture based on the land, where the French language, Catholic religion, and family and collective values could be maintained. With this focus on the family and the need for labor to work the land, the French-speaking population of Quebec grew significantly between the end of the eighteenth century and the 1960s: from 65,000 in 1763, to 1,111,566 in 1861 and 4,055,681 in 1951 (de Labsade 62).

In order to create more land for agriculture and to accommodate the large families and descendants, efforts were undertaken to colonize new parts of Quebec. The main work to be done was clearing the land for agriculture, roads, and, eventually, railroad lines. Early colonization efforts had been primarily undertaken along the Saint Lawrence River. Around 1840 the focus turned to the Lac Saint-Jean area, followed by the Laurentian Mountains to the north of Montreal

around 1870. Expansion continued through the end of the nineteenth into the twentieth centuries to the west (Témiscamingue and then Abitibi) and to the east (Gaspé).

Living off the land was hard, and fluctuations in prices or a bad harvest could cause financial ruin for a family. People therefore sought other work elsewhere in Canada or in the United States; many found it in the textile mills of New England, where almost two thirds of the emigrants to the United States settled. Little Canadas grew throughout the region and French-language schools, churches, and other services were established. Between 1840 and 1930, approximately 900,000 French Canadians left Quebec for the United States (Roby 1).

Films:

La Chasse-galerie (1996)

Director: Robert Doucet

This animated short (10 min 35 s) depicts a French Canadian folktale that was made famous by Honoré Beaugrand and published in his collection *Légendes Canadiennes* (1900). The story is of lumberjacks who, having spent the winter in a logging camp deep in the woods, want to be with their families for Christmas Eve. They make a pact with the devil, who will transport them home in a flying canoe.

The film illustrates the hardships endured in the logging camps and the key values of the period: the importance of family, community, and religion. It is an engaging story and can be paired with a reading of Beaugrand's work in French or in English translation. Many other written versions of the story exist including picture books. Elements of the story change depending on the target audience but the essential themes of hard work, community, and observance of religion remain. There are also two musical adaptations of the story: "Chasse galerie" by Claude Dubois and "Martin de la chasse-galerie" by La Bottine Souriante.

Maria Chapdelaine (1983)

Director: Gilles Carle

Starring: Carole Laure, Nick Mancuso, Claude Rich

Based on the eponymous novel by Louis Hémon published in 1914, the film depicts a family working to clear their parcel of land in the Lac Saint-Jean area. At the heart of the story is Maria, a young woman who must choose between three suitors who each offers a different future. François presents a life of adventure, that of the *coureur de bois*. He is strong, good looking and Maria is in love with him. While Maria believes that life with François would be perfect, as suggested by his last name, Paradis, François eschews the traditional choices of the period: agriculture, family, religion.

Lorenzo Surprenant offers Maria life in a city, with, as his last name suggests, luxuries she cannot imagine. Lorenzo is an example of the tens of thousands of French Canadians who left Canada for the United States to work in textile factories. Lorenzo describes the Little Canadas, enclaves of French Canadians where language, religion, and traditions are

maintained. Despite this, the risk of losing one's French Canadian identity and values are great.

Maria's most committed suitor, Eutrope Gagnon, offers a traditional agricultural life, one that the Catholic Church believed would guarantee the survival of the French Canadian people under English rule. Eutrope does not offer the thrill of a new life but rather a continuation of what Maria has always known.

In French Canada, most novels published from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries fall in the category of *littérature du terroir*, where *terroir* refers to the characteristics of the land and, in this case, life working and subsisting on the land. Although there are different types of *roman de la terre*, they generally present an ideology that has the goal of conserving French Canadian culture, the tenets of which are the French language, Catholic traditions, agriculture, and the family. The belief that French Canadian culture would survive by families living as *habitants* was strongly supported by the Catholic Church and is central to this type of novel (Hémon 14).

Maria Chapdelaine presents this culture as well as the threats to its survival. However, unlike the *roman de la terre*, which often presents an idealized version of agricultural life in Canada, *Maria Chapdelaine* shows the hardships of living as *habitants*.¹

Scenes to highlight:

40:00-43:00 and 1:00:48-1:02:05

Lorenzo's first meeting with the Chapdelaines, where he compares life in the United States to life in Canada. Lorenzo's clean, formal clothes and meticulous mustache contrast with the simple clothes worn by the Chapdelaines. His description of the city, where there it is always light and where there are large theaters, is juxtaposed with the Chapdelaines' small, dark house full of mosquitoes. The first scene ends with Madame Chapdelaine commenting that Quebec is the "true" Canada.

54:05-57:18

This clip provides an insight into the work done by both men and women on the farm and highlights the importance of religion. The high illiteracy rate among men of the period² is reflected in the reference that Monsieur Chapdelaine can't write.

Eutrope speaks with the French family who bought the land he was interested in. The differences in their appearance and their ways of speaking are illustrated in this scene. For instance, Eutrope uses a word that is unfamiliar to the French men: *habitant*, a colloquialism for *paysan* or *cultivateur*. "Les Habitants" would become a nickname for the Montreal Canadians hockey team.

¹ This text is based on the introduction of the author's edition of *Maria Chapdelaine*.

² According to Michel Verrette, in the 1880s, 56.4% of men in Quebec were literate. This increased to 69.3 percent in the 1890s (148).

1:08:07-1:10:40

This scene shows François Paradis as a foreman at a logging camp, working to clear land for future development. Young men would often spend the winters away from their families, when little could be done on the farm. They would bring their wages back at the end of the winter to help the family with its expenses. A scene at the beginning of the film (21:13-22:00) includes a lesson from the priest on the importance of giving the money to the family rather than spending it on alcohol, reinforcing the importance of family. This scene connects with two of the other films suggested in this section, *La Chasse-galerie* and the *Log Driver's Waltz*.

1:16:45-1:20:10

Madame Chapdelaine has just passed away and her husband reflects on what she wanted – a life in an established parish, near people – versus the life he gave her, one filled with new challenges, further north, away from neighbors. The idea of women's submission to the needs of her husband and family prevails in this segment.

1:41:12-1:44:04

Maria is grieving the death of her true love, François, and ponders her choices for the future, either discovering a new life with more comfort in the United States with Lorenzo, or marrying Eutrope and accepting to stay in Quebec, thereby leading a life similar to that of her mother. The scene includes a conversation with the priest who reminds her of her duties and reinforces the importance of family.

Canada Vignettes: Log Driver's Waltz (1979)

Director: John Weldon

A mostly animated short (3 min), available only in English, that tells the story of a young girl who chooses to marry a log driver. This light and engaging film shows the process of transporting logs after the lumberjacks have felled the trees. Whereas *Maria Chapdelaine* shows the work done by lumberjacks, cutting down the trees and piling the logs on the frozen river, *The Log Driver's Waltz* illustrates the next step in the process. The song, on which the film is based, is performed by Kate and Anna McGarrigle, folk singers born in Quebec and who grew up in the Laurentian Mountains.

Moving Towards Modern-Day Quebec

La Grande noirceur designates the period in the history of Quebec between the Depression and the Quiet Revolution of 1960. The era was characterized by a growing conservative ideology and can be described as “rural and reactionary” (Dickinson and Young 289). The impressions of the period are those of stagnation. The main figure associated with this period is politician Maurice Duplessis, Premier of Quebec from 1936 to 1939 and again from 1944 to 1959. Despite changes that were happening in Quebec due to modernization, the conservative powers in the province maintained the notion that the population was composed of docile, reliable, hard workers. Catholicism remained the bedrock of the society and the Church held significant power and controlled various aspects of Quebec society such as education and health care. In Duplessis’

second term, he established an authoritative, conservative, antiunion, and nationalist government. He focused on economic growth and modernization while upholding traditional values.

Despite the power of the church and the pervasive conservative ideology, changes were happening:

[...] the period shows sharp social conflict and an emerging sense of democratic and universal rights among unions, women's groups, and farm organizations. Across the period can be detected the clear signs of the weakening of conservatism and a decline of the church's real power. The church was challenged by youth, agricultural cooperatives, unions, and progressive clerics (Dickinson and Young 290).

By 1921, the majority of people in Quebec lived in urban areas – which contrasted with the Church's vision of a rural Quebec – and, after the stock market crash of 1929, five out of six people lived in a city (de Labsade 68-69). Manufacturing became the most important occupation for men by the middle of the twentieth century. The Church struggled financially with the changes and the government began to assume responsibility in the areas of education and health care. Women were becoming more present in the workforce and obtained the right to vote provincially in 1940. The concentration of English speakers in Quebec increased in Montreal where, by 1961, they represented over 70 percent of the population. Furthermore, the number of immigrants to Quebec increased significantly after the Second World War and two thirds of them chose English schools for their children (Dickinson and Young, 274-275). This increased linguistic tensions and fostered the growth of Quebec nationalism.

The end of *La grande noirceur* is normally associated with the death of Maurice Duplessis in 1959 and the election of Jean Lesage as Premier of Quebec in 1960. The period that followed, known as The Quiet Revolution (*la Révolution tranquille*), was marked by rapid changes. A wide range of institutions in Quebec, which had in large part been controlled by the Church, were secularized as a generation of francophone intellectuals assumed political roles.

En quelques années, le Québec devient une démocratie libérale dirigée par un gouvernement qui s'appuie d'abord sur les classes moyennes et qui régularise la vie économique, repartit plus équitablement les biens et les services, soutient l'entreprise privée. Mais ces transformations ne vont pas sans heurts (Hamelin and Provencher 112).

One of those challenges resided in the number of people who felt alienated from the new processes, specifically those who had exercised authority and their voice in the more traditional society.

The nationalist agenda of the period focused on the French language and on the Charter of the French Language (Bill 101), which became law in 1977. The province of Quebec began to be considered by many as a nation, changing the relationship between English and French as well as between the province, under the leadership of Premier René Lévesque (1976-85), and the federal government under the leadership of Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau (1968-79 and 1980-84).

The demographics of the province also changed, as the birth rate dropped to one of the lowest in the Western world. A significant number of Anglophones left Quebec in the 1970s and 1980s while those who remained represented over 75 percent of the population of Montreal in 1986.

Films:

Séraphin: Un homme et son péché (2002)

Director: Charles Binamé

Starring: Pierre Lebeau, Karine Vanasse, Roy Dupuis

Loosely based on Claude-Henri Grignon's novel *Un Homme et son péché* (1933), the film tells the story of miser and profiteer Séraphin. The story takes place in the late-nineteenth century in the village of Saint-Adèle in the Laurentians. Séraphin lends money to the local people who are struggling to meet their basic needs. One of his borrowers is the owner of the general store, who extends credit to the members of the community and finds himself unable to remain solvent himself. Séraphin proposes an agreement: he will forgive the storeowner's debt in exchange for the hand of his daughter, the beautiful (and much younger) Donalda. The final decision is left to Donalda who eventually agrees to the marriage and finds herself leading a life of misery and poverty, unaware of the wealth her husband has hidden in the attic.

In some ways, the film reflects the traditions of the *roman de la terre*: Séraphin's greed makes him a miserable person, feared and despised by all, and it leads to his downfall. The collective, who share the values of family and religion, and who earn an honest living by working the land, are the victims of a man who seems unfeeling and who makes his fortune through the misery of others. By marrying Séraphin, Donalda sacrifices her own happiness to save her family. Although the story takes place during the period of the *roman de la terre*, the film shows aspects of Quebec during the *Grande noirceur*: the hardships of living off the land and in remote areas; the declining faith in the Catholic Church as illustrated by the priest who has a mistress and catches a venereal disease; the cost of personal sacrifices for the good of the family and the community.

Éric Bédard believes that this film along with one of its contemporaries, *Aurore*, "partagent surtout une vision extrêmement sombre du rôle joué par l'Église catholique et son clergé dans le Canada français de la Grande noirceur. [...] L'Église est représentée comme une institution oppressante, surtout pour les femmes qui sont confinées à leur rôle de mère et toujours obligées de se sacrifier" (Bédard 83). He considers this negative representation in these films to be a caricature of reality.

The novel *Un Homme et son péché* has been adapted for radio, television, theater, and film. The word *séraphin* (*séraphine* in the feminine) is now used as both an adjective and a common noun, meaning "miserly" or "stingy." It is used in the expressions *être séraphin*, *faire le séraphin*, *tight comme Séraphin*, and *avoir affaire à des séraphins*.

Scenes to highlight:

18:27-20:35

Donalda and her original suitor, Alexis, talk about their plans for the future. Alexis sees possibilities beyond farming, but his dreams are still of a rural life and one filled with adventure and possibilities. Alexis in the film is reminiscent of *Maria Chapdelaine*'s François Paradis.

25:38-29:30

The scene opens with the funeral of a young girl, Simone, the orphan of the village, who tried to give herself an abortion after, it is implied, Séraphin raped her. Donalda refers to something Alexis had said, that it is “un pays qui nous étouffe en dedans.” This theme, that people are suffocating in French Canada, appears in a play about the period by Marie Laberge, *C'était avant la guerre à l'Anse à Gilles*. The funeral is followed by a scene showing the men of the village looking at a map of *les gros chars*, the railroad line that will eventually go from Montreal north through the Laurentians, the *Train du Nord*. This was a project headed by François-Xavier-Antoine Labelle, the priest of St-Jérôme, who founded numerous communities in the Laurentians.

1:16:30-1:18:19

This scene of Alexis clearing his land provides an example of the hard work done without machinery and with very basic tools, to prepare land for farming. It connects with scenes from *Maria Chapdelaine*, of the family doing back-breaking work to clear their land.

Maurice Richard (2005)

Director: Charles Binamé

Starring: Roy Dupuis, Stephen McHattie, Julie LeBreton

The Rocket: The Legend of Maurice Richard (English title) tells the story of the famed Montreal Canadiens hockey player. It starts by showing Maurice as a young man, working as a machinist and playing hockey in junior leagues. Richard eventually joined the Canadiens, with whom he played from 1942 to 1960, including in five consecutive Stanley Cup championships. During the early part of his career with the Canadiens, he continued to work in the mill and those scenes in the film illustrate some of the changes that were happening in Quebec, in particular the modernization of labor, the shift from a rural to an urban population, and the growing importance of the labor movement.

The film also clearly demonstrates linguistic divisions in Montreal. At the mill, the bosses are Anglophones and speak English to the francophone workers. The management of the Montreal Canadiens, the coaches, and the officials of the National Hockey League are almost all Anglophone and the language of communication is English. The Francophone players are clearly treated as second-class citizens. This division between the English, who hold positions of power, and the French, who serve as their workforce, fed the nationalist movement of the time.

Richard became an outspoken advocate for the rights of French Canadians. In 1955 Richard was suspended for attacking on the ice a player of the Boston Bruins. Fans of the Montreal Canadiens found the suspension – the remainder of the season including the playoffs – too severe and felt that an anglophone player would not have received a similar punishment. This decision and the arrival at the Montreal Forum of NHL president Clarence Campbell precipitated what is referred to as the Richard Riot in Montreal. Some see the riot as a precursor to the Quiet Revolution. As André Laurendeau wrote in *Le Devoir* four days after the riot, “Le nationalisme canadien-français paraît s’être réfugié dans le hockey” (Laurendeau).

Scenes to highlight:

3:57-10:48

This early scene shows Maurice Richard as a young man, working in a machine shop. Maurice is approached by another man in the mill who is trying to organize the workers. He discusses the scare tactics used by management and the conversation, in French, is shrouded in secrecy. This scene reflects the growing labor movements of the time as well as the resistance to these changes.

The workers speak to each other in French but the management speaks to them only in English and in many cases the workers don’t understand what they are saying. Maurice’s ability to channel his anger about this situation into his hockey playing is featured throughout the film and introduced here.

1:08:28-1:10:35

A few Francophone players of the Canadiens talk about how they are treated because they are French: among their grievances are that they have to better players, their accomplishments are always downplayed, the Toronto Maple Leafs have never hired a French player, the management only speaks English (just like in the factories), and French is banned on the bench. One of the players points out that it doesn’t bother him that he is spoken to in English. The problem, according to him, is that the players and, by extension, workers as well, must answer in English. This sequence connects with Bill 101, which grants, among other things, the right to work in French.

Richard’s teammates tell him that he is too docile and needs to assert himself more. This comment is reminiscent of the notion during the *Grande noirceur* that the French workforce was docile and respectful of authority.

1:31:52-1:38:25

Maurice Richard has begun to work with a journalist, to publish his thoughts on how the French players are treated in the NHL. In this scene, the Canadiens have just won the Stanley Cup. The coach speaks to the players for the first time in French, showing that he understands the problems, has been listening, and respects Maurice Richard and what he is trying to do. The segment ends with Maurice talking to his partner journalist, deciding that it is time to address the problem at the top, with Clarence Campbell, because “Il faut que ça change.”

1:51-1:56:55

A newscast of the Richard Riot is shown and the racial dimensions of the event are underlined. Maurice's coach encourages him to continue playing despite his plan to quit playing for the Canadians. Maurice's barber talks to him about the situation and about the importance of fighting no matter the outcome. He notes that French Canadians have not fought in a long time and never really win when they do. It is important to start fighting and to learn what it feels like to win.

Le chandail (1980)

Director: Sheldon Cohen

Narrated by Roch Carrier

An animated short (10 min 21 s) depicting Roch Carrier's story "Le Chandail de hockey," a tale of his childhood passion for hockey and for Maurice Richard in particular. The heart of the story is a young French Canadian boy's love of the Montreal Canadians and of their rivalry with the Toronto Maple Leafs. The influence of Maurice Richard on the youth of Quebec is illustrated in the film and the rivalry between the Montreal Canadians and the Toronto Maple Leafs evokes the growing nationalism in this period.

Octobre (1994)

Director: Pierre Falardeau

Starring: Hugo Dubé, Luc Picard, Pierre Rivard

In 1963 the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ), an independence group, was formed. The FLQ focused on the middleclass English in Quebec and the federal government. Their early acts were to rob banks to finance their activities, steal weapons from the Canadian army, and set off bombs in areas that symbolized the oppression of the French, for instance in the upscale anglophone Montreal neighborhood of Westmount. The FLQ worked in cells so that they were not aware of each other's activities. This protected them but, at the same time, the different cells did not always share the same vision. In October 1970 their actions became more aggressive when members of the FLQ kidnapped first James Cross, a British consular official, and then Pierre Laporte, labor minister in Quebec. Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau invoked the War Measures Act on October 16 and called out the army. Pierre Laporte was found dead on the 17th. These events, which shook Quebec both by their violence and by the reaction of the governments, are known as the *crise d'Octobre* (October Crisis). This film tells the dramatized story of the cell that kidnapped Pierre Laporte.

Scenes to highlight:

5:10-15:30

In this segment, updates on James Cross' situation are read on the radio along with the FLQ's demands. As members of a second cell listen to the news, they feel the need to do something, to escalate the situation. They make their own plans to kidnap Pierre Laporte. While the men prepare for the act, excerpts of the FLQ's manifesto are read. The text of

the full manifesto is available online, as is a reading of the manifesto by Gaétan Montreuil on television on October 8th, 1970. The segment ends with the kidnapping of Laporte.

The FLQ communiqués were issued with an outline of illustrator Henri Julien’s *habitant* symbol, a reference to their self-identification with the *Patriotes* of the Rebellions of 1837-38. Coincidentally, Henri Julien also did the illustrations for *La Chasse-galerie* by Honoré Beaugrand.

1:06:27-1:09:50

The members of the cell listen to the radio where information on the arrival of the Canadian army and the declaration of the implementation of the War Measures Act is being shared. A member of the cell, who has been separated from the group, watches the news from a coffee shop. The patrons of the coffee shop share their impressions on the situation.

Conclusion

The films recommended in this article, with the exception of *Maurice Richard* and *Octobre*, depict Quebec as rural and traditional. Quebec has since evolved into a secular urban society where approximately 80 percent of people live in an urban area. Although Catholicism remains the primary religion in the province, according to a survey done by the Pew Research Center in 2011, 12 percent of Quebec residents claim to have no religious affiliation. However, in this same study, only 17 percent of “Quebecers reported attending religious services as least once a month” (Canada’s). While the percentage of Quebec residents with no religious affiliation is lower than the Canadian average (24 percent), adherence to the tenets of the Catholic Church has changed significantly since the time of *Maria Chapdelaine*. Not only does a small percentage of the population attend church regularly, in 2011, 52 percent of census families were married couples, while 32 percent were common-law-couples and 17 percent were lone-parent families (Portrait). Birthrates in Quebec, which, for decades, were by far the highest in the country, were statistically comparable to those of Canada as a whole in 2008 (Fertility).

The demographic makeup of the province continues to change. Recent immigration patterns have had an impact on both the languages spoken in Quebec – 8.1 percent of the population in 2011 spoke a language other than English or French at home (Language) – and in religious practices – 7 percent identify with a religion other than Protestantism or Catholicism (Canada’s).

The films proposed here allow students to gain an understanding of the history of Quebec and put contemporary debates, in particular the issue of sovereignty, in context.

BERKLEE COLLEGE OF MUSIC

Works Cited

- Bédard, Éric. “Ce passé qui ne passe pas. La grande noirceur catholique dans les films *Séraphin. Un homme et son péché, Le Survenant et Aurore*.” *Globe* 11.1 (2008): 75-94. Print.
- Canada’s Changing Religious Landscape*. Pew Research Center, 27 June 2013. Web. 1 August 2014.
- Dickinson, John, and Brian Young. *A Short History of Quebec*, 4th edition. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s UP, 2008. Print.
- De Labsade, Françoise Tétu. *Le Québec: un pays, une culture*, 2nd edition. Montreal: Boréal, 2001. Print.
- Fertility: Overview, 2008*, Statistics Canada, 9 December 2013. Web. 13 September 2014.
- Hamelin, Jean, and Jean Provencher. *Brève histoire du Québec*. Montreal: Boréal, 1997. Print.
- Hémon, Louis. *Maria Chapdelaine*. Ed. Simone Pilon. Delaware: European Masterpieces, 2010. Print.
- Language Spoken Most Often at Home, Canada, Quebec, Canada Outside Quebec, 2006 and 2001*, Statistics Canada, 24 January 2013. Web. 1 August 2014.
- Laurendeau, André. “Suspension de Rocket: on a tué mon frère Richard,” *Le Devoir*, 21 March 1955. Web. 1 September 2014.
- Portrait of Families and Living Arrangements in Canada, 2011 Analytical Products*, Statistics Canada, 14 January 2014. Web. 13 September 2014.
- Roby, Yves. *The Franco-Americans of New-England: Dreams and Realities*, Mary Ricard (trans). Québec: Septentrion, 2004. Print.
- Verette, Michel. “L’alphabétisation au Québec 1660-1900.” Diss. Laval University, 1989. Print.