

**A Line in
the Snow:
Visualizing
Borders
Imaginary
and Real**

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“Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of the visible world.”

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*¹

Borders are as much virtual as material. To create a border, one needs not merely a concrete geographical space, but an imaginary one as well. In the absence of both these conditions being met, the symbolic efficacy of the border dissolves. One would be hard pressed to find a more telling manifestation of this fact than the current situation in Québec. The Parti Québécois claims Québec's borders are inviolate. The federal government, on the other hand, maintains that if Canada is divisible, then so is Québec. Aboriginal groups, for instance, demarcate their own ancestral borders and may opt to be part of Canada or indeed to create their own sovereign states in the event of Québec secession. Add to this possibility the prospect of Québec anglophones in west-end Montréal and other federalist regions insisting on their right to stay in Canada, and the fragility of the political demarcation of places becomes painfully clear.

Indeed, in Québec, the proliferation of imaginary border spaces seems to become all the more frenetic as the “differences” those borders would vouchsafe lose their grounding in everyday experience. In the 1995 referendum on sovereignty, leaders of the secessionist movement claimed that after separation nothing would change in Québec, yet everything would. In the rest of Canada, the state of things is hardly clearer: in Parliament, Reform Party representatives from the prairies argue that decentralization is the only way to strengthen the Federation. In these times of increasingly ambiguous nationalist definitions, the desire for notions of nationhood at once more concrete and more historically resilient becomes palpable. For both Canadian and Québécois nationalists, the notion of the land as geographical site of nationhood has gained much credence of late. Not infrequently, this appeal to the land disregards the complex legal, historical, and cultural practices that have defined the lives of that land's inhabitants. Its limitations notwithstanding, this notion of the nation as land is a necessary prerequisite for the development of what Benedict Anderson has called the “imagined community.” In the context of Québec, this rhetoric of “the land” has increasingly become a key factor.² When land becomes the defining element of nationhood, borders — signs of a break, a gap, a demarcation of difference — become of paramount importance, and the “site” of the border often takes the form of images.

While image-making is often used in order to demarcate cultural and national difference, it is frequently the case that this serves to exacerbate rather than resolve uncertainties concerning what kinds of difference really exist. This is especially true of the Canadian Federation. This is not to claim that difference does not exist; instead, it is to posit that the boundaries that define such difference are far more blurred than nationalists of any stripe wish to believe. Indeed, it is at these points of uncertainty concerning identity that the various collective identities populating Canada find their deepest affinity. Regardless of one's national status within Canada, the one notion that unites Canadians and Québécois alike is the fear that they are no different from those who surround them. So as nationalists continue to produce countless images in an effort to clarify their difference, those images belie the very anxiety they were intended to assuage.

To illustrate these claims, I wish to address two very different border sites: one the forty-ninth parallel, the unguarded frontier between Canada and the United States, the other, the border, as much imaginary as geographic, stretching between the province of Québec and the rest of Canada. The choice of these two borders reflects an under examined position I believe that many Canadians and Québécois hold: that of negotiating a space between, on the one hand, the diversity of images of

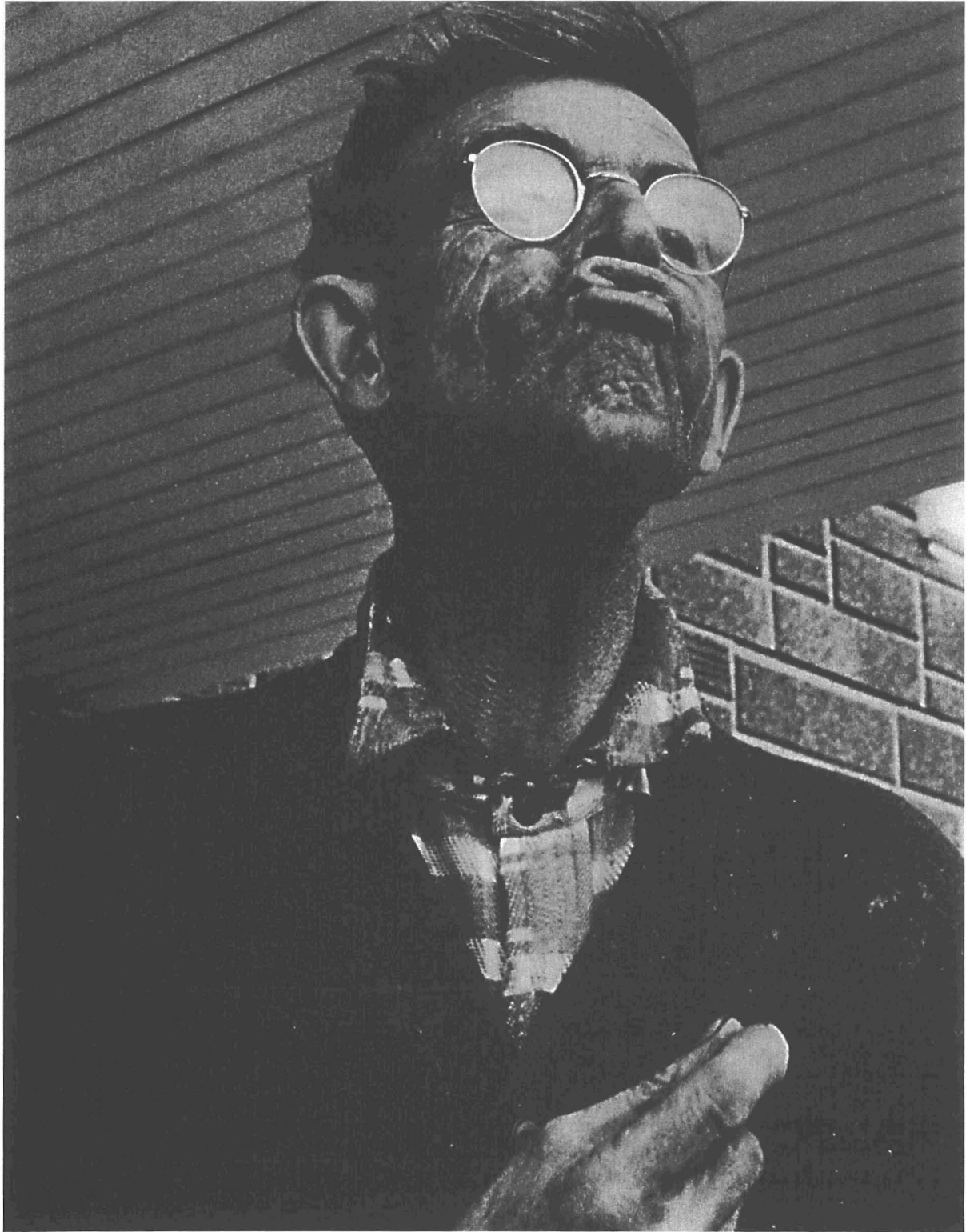


disparate Canadian cultural contexts we see and experience on a daily basis, and on the other, the knowledge we bring to bear on these images, rooted in our own local cultural, historical and social experience. Some forms of spectatorship in the paradoxical age of globalization and re-emergent nationalisms are not only about demarcating difference, but also about finding a space “in-between” cultures. They involve the comprehension and negotiation of the meanings of given sets of images.

On a metaphoric level, images become the border stretched out between the imagined referent of the image and the viewer. The Canadian and Québécois “border” viewer, then, is continuously negotiating, creating, imagining and understanding this intermediary space. The understanding of the meaning of images has been based on a process of negotiation from the days of the silent cinema of Léo-Ernest Ouimet, whose localized images can be seen as a basis for a secular, proto-nationalist identity, on through to the present-day case of the Canadian Airborne’s actions in Somalia, where a multitude of interpretive practices are brought to bear on the image. As video, television, and the cinema have proliferated, however, the process of viewing images has become increasingly self-conscious. It seems apt, then, that images emerging from the concrete borders of Canada(s) should be considered in light of their metaphoric “border” nature as visual walls and bridges.

Successive Canadian governments have celebrated the Canadian/American frontier for its openness, while eliding the fears many Canadians feel about their encroaching neighbors to the South. A case in point: in 1976, the National Film Board of Canada, under the auspices of the Canadian government, issued a photo-book costing one-million dollars to produce, *Between Friends/Entre amis*.³ The book was offered as a gift to the American people in honour of the American Revolution Bicentennial. In spite its celebratory theme, *Between Friends/Entre amis* inadvertently addressed a set of profoundly Canadian anxieties: given the “friendly” relationship between Americans and Canadians, how do their identities differ from each other — the fear is, of course, that there is no difference. What is most interesting about the book is that it does not attempt to offer a history of Canadian-American border relations or analyze in detail how the 49th parallel became the border between the two countries. Instead, *Between Friends/Entre amis* attempts to document border life by sending out thirty-two photographers to take over 200 pictures in an attempt to “capture” the specificity of life at the borders, from Alaska to the Atlantic.

But what exactly was being “captured” in this endeavor? In his foreword to the book, then-Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau — a Canadian nationalist who, because of his “communist” affiliations with Castro and Communist China, was banned from crossing the American frontier from the late 1950s until he entered government — wrote that the images of the border in *Between Friends/Entre amis* were “. . . about the boundary itself, which both links these people and helps to define their separate national identities.”⁴ Yet, in looking at the images collected by the National Film Board, it is impossible to tell which images are of Canadian farmers, bars and snowdrifts and which are of their “American friends.” This question of difference and how the photograph could denote it was in circulation when the book was released; the reviews point to the fact that Canadians were far more concerned with this issue than their American neighbors were. Every Canadian review mentions the impossibility of representing the “difference” the border represents with any degree of specificity; the Americans did not seem too concerned with the issue of “difference” or even too concerned with the book, as no reviews were published in the States.⁵ One Canadian reviewer writes: “If the photographers found anything, it’s that along the border, even between Québec and the U.S., the two countries are indistinguishable. We have to create the distinction as concrete fact, the book seems to imply.”⁶ Another critic writes that the book contains “too many . . . clichés, all of them beautifully printed but strung together on a theme that is not strong enough to hold.”⁷ Both reviewers imply that the border itself — in terms of connoting some notion of cultural difference — does not exist; this is a strange image for a government to produce about their unprotected frontier.



What *Between Friends/Entre amis* accomplishes, in lieu of providing imaginary evidence of a cultural division separating Canadians from their American friends, is a poignant portrait of the rural, the prosaic and the everyday, a representation of quotidian life that eludes larger national and political questions. Despite their makers' best intentions, these images suggest that everyday life at the borders is both beyond the ken of nationalism and, paradoxically, formed by one of the most concrete signs and sites of nationalism: the border itself. Everyday life goes on at the border *as if* the border was not there, even though it is the border that gives the communities documented in this book their supposedly "distinctive" flavour.

What *Between Friends/Entre amis* demonstrates is therefore the way in which the border becomes a part of the imagined community of a nation through the process of image-making, and how these deconcretized images of the border are used to negotiate larger sets of cultural concerns and anxieties that may or may not be a real part of border life. While the border exists as a division inscribed in concrete geographical space, that space changes dramatically when turned into images: deconcretized, the image of the border becomes a virtual place where the limits of cultural identity and national territory can be challenged. There is no doubt that the gamut of communities photographed for *Between Friends/Entre amis* exist, but the book homogenizes all these distinctive sites into a monolithic map of the "culture of the border." In the end, what is most interesting about the collection of images found in *Between Friends/Entre amis* is that in addressing the border, they also address so many concerns that fall outside the stated goals of the work itself: a book that was published to celebrate Canada's American friends becomes a rumination on Canadian fears.

If the image of the Canadian border as a demarcation of difference is a shaky one, then Québec's is no less so. The geographical arguments as to the nature of Québec's borders are based as much in notions of language as in notions of space. Having historically justified the need for a clear distinction between Québec and the rest of Canada, protection of the French language now stands as the ideological linchpin in contemporary demands for a Québec nation-state. As René Lévesque wrote in his 1968 treatise on sovereignty:

We are Québécois. What that means first and foremost — and if need be, all that it means — is that we are attached to this one corner of the earth where we can completely be ourselves: this Québec, the only place that we have the unmistakable feeling that "here we can really be at home." Being ourselves is essentially a matter of keeping and developing a personality that has survived for three and a half centuries. At the core of this personality is the fact that we speak French. Everything else depends on this one element and follows from it or leads infallibly back to it.⁸

For Lévesque, land and language could not be separated; indeed, they were two transhistorical factors that inexorably led to the need for, and eventual existence of, the Québécois nation-state. Yet, language has never been transhistorical in nature and the fluidity of culture is often hard to control through philosophy or law. Michel Brault's little-known film, *Éloge du chiac* (NFB, 1969), explores the ways in which the futural dimension of cultural identity invariably frustrates attempts to establish a transhistorical, "official" national culture. Brault interviews a teacher, Rose-Anna Leblanc, and her students at a school in Moncton, New Brunswick, who speak *chiac*, a hybrid dialect of French, largely influenced by the influx of English. While the school wishes to teach proper French to the students, the students themselves have many relevant insights about language and its relationship to identity. For some students, *chiac* is a backwards language that they wish to shed through proper education, although their French teacher admits that she was brought up speaking *chiac*. For other students, though, the language they speak is an integral part of who they are and how they see themselves; to forgo speaking *chiac* is to give up who they are, and learning "proper" French is to learn and speak in



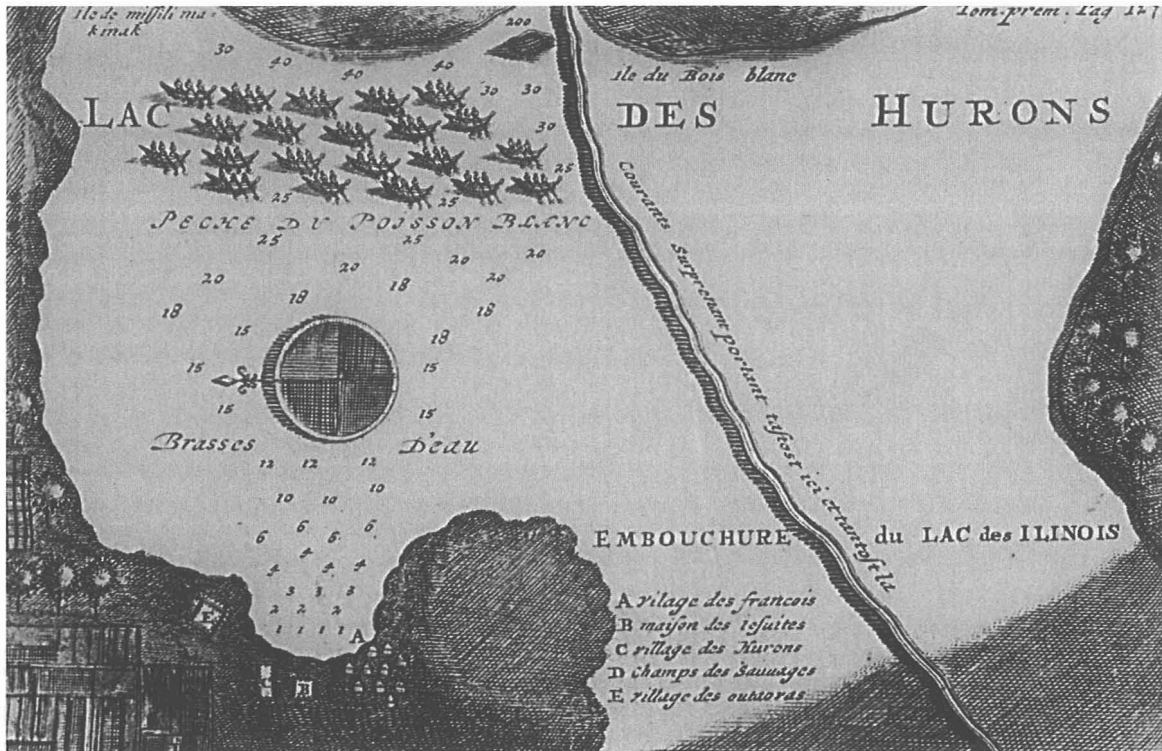
a second language. In purely linguistic terms, this may sound hyperbolic, as the differences between French and *chiac* are not so great as to make them two separate languages. But in terms of how one defines oneself in relation to others, and how important a shared language is to the development of a community, the difference made by *chiac* is monumental. The students in this film, whether they prefer to learn French or *chiac*, identify with their region far more than they do with urban anglophones or francophones: their imagined community is one of *chiac*. As the film ends, Brault asks each student to identify themselves to the camera. When the last student does this, after he states his name, he says “*je suis un chiac*,” disregarding the labels of anglophone and francophone employed by the other students. Brault’s film points to the malleability of culture and with that to the frailty of any shared sense of identity. Frustrating the orthodoxies promulgated on either side of the sovereignty debate, the film documents a strange reversal wherein the French language, far from being threatened by English, is instead threatening *chiac*, a language developed quite naturally in response to the “English fact.” This reversal points not only to the complexity of any national culture and the impossibility of enumerating all its components, but also to the diversity which finds shelter under the rubric of any given nation-state. As language continues to slip away as a transhistorical site of nationhood, one must then turn back to the land as the geographic site of nationhood.

I ask you: is this the face of an exclusively European man?
 Pierre Elliott Trudeau⁹

Trudeau’s ad-libbed comment during his final speech of the 1980 referendum campaign points to the *bête noire* of the *pure laine* nationalist: that a large percentage of Québec’s French settlers inter-married with aboriginal inhabitants. This *ur-text* of what it means to be Québécois throws into question many received categories: what Québécois nationhood means; what roles are played by language and ethnicity; and what the oft-shouted statement “*le Québec aux Québécois*” belies. Indeed, the acknowledgement of Québec’s multi-ethnic nature also lays bare the fear underlying then Premier Jacques Parizeau’s now infamous comment upon losing the 1995 referendum: “Well, what defeated us in the end? We know. Money and the ethnic vote.” Nevertheless, it is a mistake to view the desire for a sovereign Québec solely as a quest for ethnic and linguistic purity, at least on the part of many of its adherents. For them, finding one’s own cultural identity and in the process, re-imagining the world in which one lived, was at the forefront of the social-democratic independence movement in its inception, no matter how much these goals may have been obscured in subsequent years.¹⁰ Nevertheless, by acknowledging this diversity, the Québécois nationalist is faced with even greater dilemmas when attempting to define what exactly constitutes the Québécois nation-state.

If one film attempts to face these issues head-on and problematize Québec’s search for borders and identity — both real and imaginary — it is Pierre Perrault’s *Un pays sans bon sens! ou Wake up! mes bons amis* (NFB, 1970). Originally commissioned by the English production unit at the NFB as a film that would explain Québec’s aspirations and interests to the rest of Canada, *Un pays sans bon sens!* quickly became a film that would be impossible for most people outside of Québec, and many inside of it, to understand. The film offers different traces of Québécois cultural roots: to rural Québec; to France; to the land; to the past; and to language. All are to no avail. Despite all the intensely “Québécois” images in the film, Perrault seems to be positing that there is no present-day visual or properly linguistic language to speak about what it is to be Québécois: it is ephemeral, opaque and continuously in transition. Yet, to repeat the earlier stated paradox, the fact that Québécois identity eludes cinematic capture only makes the desire to capture it more intense. While language seems to be at the central root of these issues, no one language adequate to the Québec experience can be found. One is reminded that in Perrault’s 1967 film *Le Règne du jour* (NFB, 1967), a rural Québécois couple





journey to France to find their ancestors, but the French dialect the ancestors speak is, in essence, a different language. More tellingly, Perrault's first feature, *Pour la suite du monde* (NFB, 1963), had to be sub-titled in French so that urban francophones could understand the dialect spoken in rural areas.

Un pays sans bon sens! is, in essence, a search for the mythic origins of the Québécois, a search that is required in order to establish a national identity, and then, finally, a nation. While undertaking this search, Perrault fully admits it is impossible to achieve under the present conditions. The film is centrally concerned with language, nationalism and identity, and where exactly the borders of Québec exist in relation to these concepts, if they do at all. Perrault, however, does not posit that the relationship between language, identity, and nation are self-evident in the Québécois context. Indeed, the film advances in what Peter Ohlin has described as the "future tense"; it is a film that strips away all received knowledge as to what being Québécois is, so that the real work of defining a nation and identity can begin.¹¹ Underlying all these concerns is the notion of the border, both real and imagined. For anglophones living in Canada, but outside Québec, the film seems like it is from a different country, documenting a way of life that is profoundly "foreign" to rural and urban anglophone alike. Through the process of image-making, the real borders that exist become, if not concrete, concretized as part of the imagined identity of the Québécois. Perrault's film constructs a border that most people on either side did not believe was there. In this sense, the border becomes imaginary: the rest of Canada sees another country within its own, proving again that the existence of countries and sub-countries and sub-sub-countries within one nation is a profoundly Canadian phenomenon.

Un pays sans bon sens! fulfills a very different role in the context of Québec. For the Québécois, the film becomes a search for a frontier, as all the other sign-posts of a distinctive culture have been demythologized. Indeed, Perrault's film addresses and acknowledges not only Québec's near-mythic political goals, but also the impossibility of achieving these goals in the *realpolitik* of Québécois life. Charles Levin astutely summarizes these goals — so great as to be unattainable: "The purpose of all politics has been refined to the point of exquisite abstraction, namely, to be born into history: to transform Québec into a collective subject expressing itself on the historical stage, unfolding its destiny according to a cultural programme which lies somewhere deep in the heart of the within, the organic recess of the 'nation.'"¹² But finding this voice and a means to articulate it is incredibly difficult, especially as all the traditional signs of nationhood fall by the wayside. Perrault's film comes to the same conclusion as Brault's: when language — a key signifier as to what it is to be Québécois — slips away, the notion of a fixed national identity begins to crumble as well.

The characters Perrault follows offer the greatest insights into the problems of building a Québécois national identity. The most interesting persona in the film is Maurice Chaillot, a francophone from Manitoba; he feels like an outsider both in Québec and in the rest of Canada. And then there is Didier Dufour, a scientist who compares the Québécois to mice. Dufour argues how the notion of a homeland that is also a nation-state is also foreign to Québec:

The nation, for me, is visceral. It's so visceral that if you don't think about it, you'd say Québec is not your country; it's Baie St.-Paul, my house, the corner of the street, the climate. . . . It's all these things inside you that you can never get rid of. . . . That's the nation; it's an indelible signature. It's visceral; you can't intellectualize it.¹³

For Dufour, that sense of an "imagined community" spoken of by Anderson does not exist. More so than anyone else in the film, Dufour identifies nationhood as inextricably tied to the experience of the land, but land as a localized site, not a bordered-in country. Nationhood is embodied, but this embodiment is profoundly local in nature. The Québécois nation is not defined by the imagined relations the individual has with others who share culture, language and history; instead, the feeling of belonging to a nation emerges from the proximity one feels to a localized site of experience, where a local language, geography and history are shared. Indeed, one can see in Dufour's quote the tension between, on the one hand, an ahistorical vision of the Québécois nation tied to the unchanging land, and on the other, a living, breathing, concretized vision of nationality based on daily experience and on the immersion of the self in the surrounding environment. As the tension between these two poles is irresolvable, it points to the limitations inherent in attempting to represent a national character or identity once the traditional signs of nationality have been stripped away.

Un pays sans bon sens! concludes that for the Québécois, the feeling of national belonging is tied to symbols which often do not extend beyond the local (René Lévesque being the one figure in the film who functions in a manner symbolic of a broader sense of identity). It is at this local, highly internalized site that the Québécois feels most at home. Here the land embodies not only a transhistorical geographic space, but also ever-shifting local cultural practices, languages and histories as well. It is this paradox that Perrault addresses in his film: if there is no sign, no symbol, no one pivot for a national identity to be built around, how can one define a national history and identity? How can one define the borders, the demarcations of difference, of one's culture? At the conclusion of *Un pays sans bon sens!* all that is left is a sense of despair and a need to start the process of national self-definition again. Yet, as language itself has become uprooted as a stable aspect of culture and land reflects a localized existence, and not an imagined nation, the question that remains is: what is left?





Notes

A shorter version of this text was originally presented at the Borders and Cultures conference held by the Graduate programme in Communications, McGill University, February 21–25, 1995. My thanks to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their financial support.

- 1 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC/Penguin Books, 1972), 9.
- 2 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991), *passim*.
- 3 National Film Board of Canada, *Between Friends/Entre amis*, ed. Lorraine Monk (Toronto: McClland and Stewart, 1976).
- 4 Pierre Elliot Trudeau, "Foreword," *Between Friends/entre amis*, iii.
- 5 Stephen Chesley, "The Million Dollar Birthday Book," *Quill and Quire*, vol. 42, no. 9, 1976, 32.
- 6 Allan Fleming, "It's the Thought that Counts," *Macleans* 31 (May 1976), 60–1.
- 7 René Lévesque, *An Option for Québec* (Toronto: McClland & Stewart, 1968), 14.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Pierre Elliot Trudeau, "Transcript of a Speech given by the Right honourable Pierre Elliot Trudeau at the Paul Sauvé arena in Montréal on May 14, 1980," cited in Stephen Clarkson and Christina McCall, *Trudeau and Our Times*, vol. 2 of *Magnificent Obsession* (Toronto: McClland and Stewart, 1990), 237.
- 10 Former FLQ member Pierre Vallières, author of *Nègres blancs d'Amérique* (Montréal: Éditions Parti Pris, 1968), for one, believes that the independence movement has radically veered from its social democratic principles and has sold itself out to the very capitalist agenda it originally challenged. See Pierre Vallières, "The Demagogueury of Consensus," *Boundaries of Identity*, ed. William Dodge (Toronto: Lester Press, 1992), 42–44, as well as Pierre Vallières, "Nationalism isn't the solution to Social Problems," *Canadas*, ed. Jordan Zinovich (New York: Semiotext(e), 1994), 58–64.
- 11 Peter Ohlin, "Film as Word: Questions of Language and Documentary Realism," *Explorations in Film Theory: Selected Essays from Ciné-tracts*, ed. Ron Burnett (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 133.
- 12 Charles Levin, "Canada as an Unidentified Historical Object of International Significance," *Jean Baudrillard: A Study in Cultural Metaphysics* (London: Prentice Hall, 1996), 213.
- 13 Cited in Alain Berson, *Pierre Perrault, Cinéastes du Québec* 5 (Montréal: Conseil québécois pour la diffusion du cinéma, 1970), 50. The translation is my own.