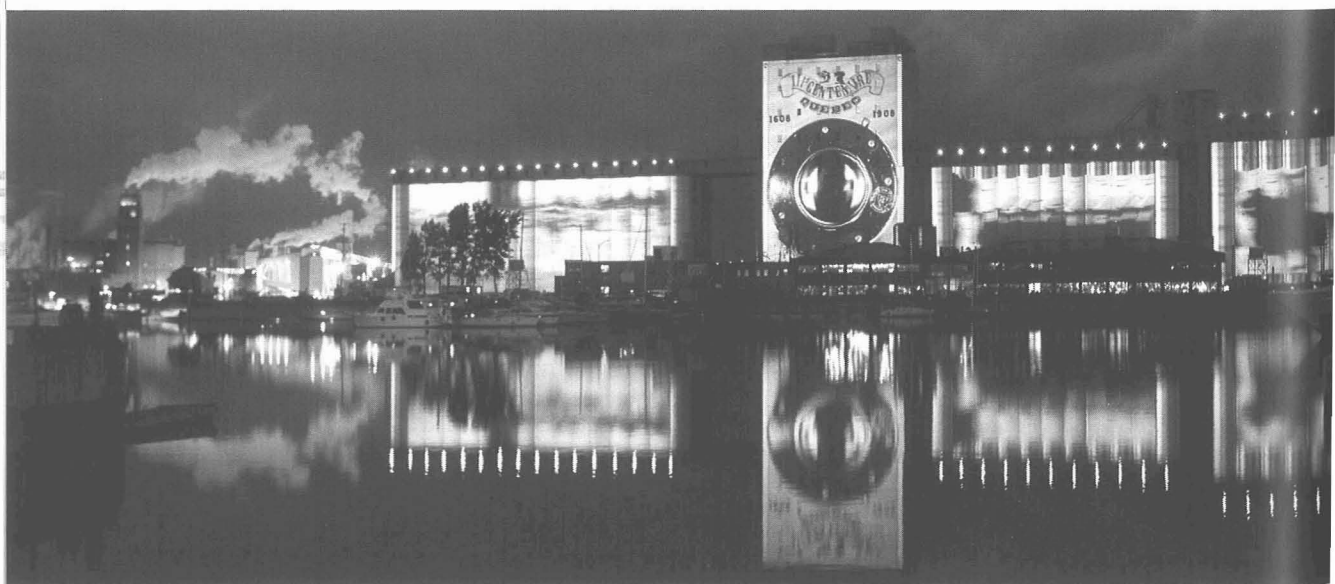


**Site-Specific Screening and the Projection of Archives:
Robert Lepage's *Le Moulin à images***

Bruno Lessard



The year 2008 marked the 400th anniversary of the founding of Quebec City. Accompanied by a plethora of commemorative activities and special concerts, featuring celebrities such as Paul McCartney and Céline Dion, the celebrations were framed by a three-month, site-specific outdoor projection created by Quebec City's own and world-renowned theatre and film director Robert Lepage. Using archival materials, paintings, photographs, films, etchings, and engravings, *Le Moulin à images* [*The Image Mill*] projected images onto the Bunge of Canada Ltd., eighty-one grain silos that served as one monumental screen in the Old Port of Quebec City. The result was a visually stunning 43-minute unfolding of images, which takes the spectator back to the early days of the French colony in 1608, touching on the very problematic issues of collective memory and visual historiography along the way. *Moulin* aired nightly at 10 p.m. for three consecutive months, from June 20th to September 20th, 2008. A sign of the spectacular projection's undeniable public success, a lavishly-illustrated, commemorative publication now graces the shelves of Québec bookstores, and a 53-minute documentary, Mariano Franco and Marie Belzil's *Dans le ventre du Moulin* [*In the Belly of the Mill*], aired on Radio-Canada after its run in selected movie theatres in the summer of 2009 in order to immortalize the creation process behind this unique site-specific installation.

Enabled by 27 projectors, 329 speakers, and 238 spotlights, the work is divided into four sections that correspond to the city's four centuries of history.¹ The work's first "movement," "Waterways: The Age of Exploration and Discovery," runs approximately six minutes and is devoted to Samuel de Champlain's arrival in 1608 and to the founding of the colony. Most of the visual materials are animated reconstructions of various conflicts between French settlers and Aboriginal populations. These fictional images cater to the public's collective memories of what they have read and seen in history books in terms of forts, caribou, and French vessels. The second part, "Pathways: Road Building, Clearing and Developing the Land," runs less than five minutes and concerns various forms of human and animal movement. It is arguably the least inspired of the four segments as most images hardly relate to "pathways." The third part of the installation, "Railways: The Railroad and Industrial Expansion," runs a little over seven minutes. British and French flags, announcing the 1759 battle on the Plains of Abraham, the Conquest, and the Patriots are also featured in the third part.

The final segment is the most elaborate movement of the four. "Airways: The Age of Air Travel and the Development of Communications," functions as the backbone of the work and is the most appreciated judging from the attention to which spectators devote to it. Running over twenty-five minutes, its diegesis retraces, chronologically, Quebec City's twentieth century in a montage of images that are, in turn, subject to a tripartite media structure based on radio, television, and the internet. In the closing section, spectators contemplate archival images of the conscription; the Duplessis era and the clergy; *Université Laval* and its Department of Sciences; entertainers such as Alys Robi, *Capitaine Bonhomme*, and *Bonhomme Carnaval*; landmark cabarets such as *Le Capitole* and *Chez Gérard*; works by famous Québec painters such as Jean-Paul Lemieux, Alfred Pellán, and Luc Archambault; and events such as Queen Elizabeth the Second's controversial visit in the 1960s; the 1970 October Crisis; and Corporal Lortie's killing spree in *l'Assemblée nationale* in 1984. The fourth section ends with fireworks that celebrate Quebec City's 400th anniversary.²

Because the aesthetic merits of Lepage's path-breaking apparatus have monopolized the reception of the work in Québec media, in this article I am more interested in the unanimous praise showered on Lepage's *Moulin* and the reconstruction of the conditions of intelligibility that should accompany such a potentially controversial art form.³ *Moulin* will therefore serve as a case study for rethinking the assessment of site-specific works that rely heavily on archival materials. *Moulin*'s reception in Québec stresses the need for more thorough assessments of such site-specific installations within contemporary media arts criticism. The fact that

few have questioned Lepage and his co-creators' highly selective archive use to represent history and collective memory should be at the heart of any critical take, which wishes to go beyond the chauvinistic coverage that has accompanied the work's media reception.⁴

I am, therefore, particularly interested in the quasi-unanimous media reception of *Moulin*, its treatment of history and collective memory, and the work's reanimation of Quebec City's past via the mining of archives. Putting emphasis on the (re)animation of the archive and the visual representation of history will allow us to reassess Lepage's moving image installation in the context of site specificity and contemporary media arts. In order to do so, I shall lay particular stress on the document/monument dialectic that has been at the heart of twentieth-century historiography, in order to reconsider the stakes of a short-lived debate between a trained historian and one of Lepage's co-creators. Instead of positing historical reproduction as the crucial concept to make sense of both the work's media reception and its actual technological and representational principles, I will turn to the way it actually *produces* a problematic, yet novel form of visual historiography based on animation and monumentality. Such an approach to *Moulin* will allow us to reconsider the document/monument controversy in historiography and the type of history contemporary media arts that "screen the archives" can create in the context of site-specific installations in the city. Finally, the arguments contained herein serve as a contribution to the rapidly expanding field of Québec studies with regard to the province's neglected media arts productions.⁵

Archival Memory: Monuments and Documents...and Monuments

The challenging artistic productions that have come from the Robert Lepage-*Ex Machina* assemblage have given the theatrical, operatic, and cinematographic worlds often unsurpassed creations that testify to the genius of Québec's *enfant chéri*. Through award-winning collaborative efforts that have taken him around the world on some of the most famous stages and in prestigious opera houses, showcasing his undeniable qualities as artistic director in large-scale projects, such as *The Dragon's Trilogy* (1985-87) and actor in his more intimate solo pieces such as *The Andersen Project* (2005), Lepage has consistently sought to resist nationalist sentimentality or complacent internationalism in works that range from the reevaluation of Québec's politically charged past in *Nô* (1998) to the traumas of Japanese history in plays such as *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* (1994-96).⁶ Lepage's work has thus come to function as a celebration and commemoration of history in all its individually and collectively inflected transformations. Lepage's most recent experimentation with the moving image, *Moulin*, would yet tell another story.

The treatment of psychic and collective individuation in Lepage's films would contrast drastically with that of *Moulin*. In his cinematic practice, Lepage opens up the closed *Québécois* society to Anglophone and international influences, whereby "glocality" emerges as an emancipating force. Lepage's film images have been celebrated because of their departure from the nationalist concerns of traditional Québec cinema and their exploration of more international and fluid identities in overlapping temporal and spatial formations that merge past with present. In films such as *Le Confessionnal*, *Nô*, and *Possible Worlds*, the *Québécois* public sphere is magnified to include English Canada and the English language, and an examination of postmodern *Québécois* identity takes a different form due to the presence of these hybridizing elements.⁷

One can turn to Lepage's approach to the representation of the city in order to foreground his work on *Moulin*; for his love story with Quebec City has been immortalized in his 1995 masterwork, *Le Confessionnal*. Prior to Lepage's reworking of what used to be the most impressive depiction of Quebec City in world cinema,

Hitchcock's *I Confess* (1952), spectators had films such as Gilles Carle's *Les Plouffes* (1981) to examine the rare appearances of the city in Québécois films. Even today, Quebec City remains a neglected urban topos in Québec cinema for a number of reasons that partly explain its absence from cinema screens. As Bill Marshall notes, "Quebec City is also 'not Montreal.' Not really a city of immigration, nor a 'North American' city in terms of capital flows, nor a city structured by a business or cultural élite, it provides a 'local' space connecting with 'the world' by leapfrogging over its larger and more cosmopolitan counterpart."⁸ Yet it may be precisely this feeling of non-place or undefined space between Montréal and the northeastern parts of the province that makes of Quebec City such a special place for Lepage, who lives and works in Quebec City, and for Quebecers alike. In works such as *Le Confessionnal* and *La Face cachée de la lune* (2003), Lepage manages to transform this transitory space into the surface onto which Québécois fantasies and myths are projected and, more importantly, deconstructed.

How does Lepage's *Moulin* negotiate the spaces of Québécois history in its representation of the city and in the context of outdoor screening practices? One would think that on the occasion of Quebec City's 400th anniversary, Lepage would have managed to integrate visual materials or at least organize archival materials in such a way as to go hand-in-hand with the originality of both the visual *dispositif* and his artistic legacy so far. By contrast, *Moulin* seems to abandon Lepage's concern for the emancipation of Québécois identity, insofar as it is a commissioned work that examines the history of Quebec City without deconstructing its collectively shared premises. There is no question of possible selves, of future political entities after two lost referenda, no interplay between personal and collective memory. Finally, the chronological approach to history in *Moulin* lacks the non-linear approach to local and global experiences and influences found in his films, even though Lepage and his co-creators have stated that *Moulin* evades chronological development.

The preceding account of Lepage's artistic legacy, though brief, could very well frame a discussion of *Moulin* that would inquire into the failures of the work to live up to his artistic reputation. I prefer to argue that such a work demands a different approach based on the way in which it rearticulates debates over archives, historiography, and the visual representation of historical events. *Moulin* is by no means the first installation or media artwork to have used archival materials to produce both history and future archives. Perhaps more important than their reproduction of past events, works that produce archive-images successfully question traditional definitions and conceptions of what an archive qua document is.⁹ Recall here Paul Ricoeur's traditional definition of the archive: "The moment of the archive is the moment of the entry into writing of the historiographical operation. Testimony is by origin oral. It is listened to, heard. The archive is written. It is read, consulted. In archives, the professional historian is a reader."¹⁰ Whereas Ricoeur aligns the archive with writing and print culture, and the transition from oral to print culture, a work such as *Moulin* reminds us of the "becoming-audiovisual" of all archives in the digital era and their potential appropriation in various media and relational configurations.

The notion of appropriation is a valid entry point to understand the notion of historiography that undergirds claims on *Moulin*. As stated in the introduction, *Moulin* calls back to mind the twentieth-century re-evaluation of the tension between monument and document in historiography. This important debate, masterfully explored in the writings of French historians Michel Foucault and Jacques Le Goff, rests on the criticism of the notion of objectivity at the heart of nineteenth-century positivist historiography. In short, positivist historians claim that documents are objective traces of the past and that the written word should signify the death of the subjective site-specific monument commemorating an illustrious conqueror or a well-known historical event. One of the fundamental insights of the historians associated with the *Annales* School was to challenge the

arguments of the positivists by claiming that the definition of the document, as written document, should be broadened and that historiography should thoroughly question the nature of its object of study. What merits closer attention for us in the case of *Moulin* is the Annalists' desire to expand to notion of document and to re-conceptualize the relations between document and monument.

Foucault and Le Goff alternatively contest the dialectical relation between document and monument. In the case of Foucault, he argues in the introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that "history, in its traditional form, undertook to 'memorize' the *monuments* of the past, transform them into *documents*, and lend speech to those traces which, in themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in silence something other than what they actually say; in our time, history is that which transforms *documents* into *monuments*."¹¹ But whereas Foucault's critical agenda is to destabilize once again the historiographical practices of his contemporaries by claiming a return to an albeit different "monument," *Moulin* is intent on destabilizing the use of archival documents in the context of screen practices predicated on monumentality and spectacle. For both Foucault and Lepage, we can surmise that documents have come to function as written totalities in the hands of historians who hold onto the power of the written word to claim, not the right to historical objectivity and truth, but the right to historiographical activity altogether, as we shall see in the case of the Vaugois-Dubé debate that epitomizes the flawed reception of *Moulin*.

The ontological reversal from monument to document again bears important consequences for work on archives and monuments. Foucault's forty-year-old insight should be borne in mind when we read Le Goff on the unmasking of the interrelations between documents and monuments. The historian uses the word "montage" to characterize the complex assemblage "document/monument." Our main task, Le Goff informs us, is to deconstruct such assemblages: "First of all, we need to dismantle, to destroy this montage, to de-structure this construction and analyze the conditions in which were produced these documents-monuments."¹² *Moulin*'s complex assemblage of history and media is an intriguing mixture that needs to be investigated in a way akin to what Le Goff suggests. The fact that documents have become monuments in the hands of historians should give us pause, for it implies a return to a certain faith in the written word, which translates into a potentially dangerous return to objectivity, albeit in disguised form. The reception of *Moulin* in the Québec press exemplifies the stakes of such a return of the document qua monument and the problems that may arise when competing historiographical ideals are not willing to bridge the gap between history as document and history as monument. The novel relations between documents and monuments in *Moulin* turn out to be one of the key elements in its conditions of intelligibility.

"Je me souviens": La Querelle des Modernes et des Postmodernes"

In the summer of 2008, television coverage of *Moulin* gave the impression that the entire population of Québec unanimously applauded the work. One had to turn to print-based media to find one of the only sustained critical takes on the representation of history in *Moulin* and the biased role of the federal government in the promotion of national unity. In an interview published in *Le Devoir*, historian and editor Denis Vaugois, of the Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste, complains that the event was more "festive" than "historical,"¹³ pointing out that history had to take a backseat to a-historical celebrations that had no particular historical flavor. In his reply to Vaugois two days after the publication of the interview, Philippe Dubé, one of Lepage's writers on the project and professor of museum studies at Université Laval, offers a passionate plea for what critical theorists would describe as a postmodern take on history as an open-ended unfolding of events that does not

have to offer one road to historical truth. Dubé argues for a type of historical representation that favours individual histories of Quebec City through various images that are not assembled according to any thematic or organizing logic, beyond that of the title of the section to which they belong (e.g., “pathways”). The major problem that may arise from a theoretical perspective on history, such as Dubé’s, is that it often claims to be neutral, and, therefore, tends to erase its equally ideological orientation that does away with history altogether, which, in turn, engages in de-problematizing history. *Moulin* actually reveals very modern tendencies in its omissions—or willful erasures—of fundamental markers in Québec history, such as major post-*Révolution Tranquille* political figures (i.e., René Lévesque, Robert Bourassa, Jacques Parizeau, Lucien Bouchard, Bernard Landry and Jean Charest), as well as crucial socio-political events such as the anti-globalization riots surrounding the 3rd Summit of the Americas held in Quebec City in 2001. Retracing the steps of this debate, I am particularly interested in the nature of the arguments, which support the erasure of political and historical markers and their failure to have sparked more interest in the public sphere.

Speaking of *Moulin*, Vaugeois notes that the spectacular nature of the piece is not the issue. He denounces primarily the absence of historical content, arguing that there was “no content at all” (*aucun contenu*). Vaugeois qualifies his criticism when he claims that what is truly problematic is not the images themselves but the fact that there was not “a word of explanation.” Therefore, it is the collective appropriation of images by the public that seems to be the second problem for Vaugeois after the aforementioned absence of content. Where do the images come from? How were they created? Who decided to exclude fundamental post-Duplessis-era events from *Moulin* and why? Where are the citizens of Quebec City? These questions raise a number of problems, especially if we decide to take Lepage and his co-creators at their word on the subject of visual history and postmodern historiography. Indeed, if it is the nature of the piece to be a postmodern historical representation of history, should not it have emphasized a multitude of *petits récits* or personal narratives projected onto several screens throughout Quebec City, instead of the number of grand narratives it recycles and which are projected onto only one screen? Even in Lepage’s introduction to the commemorative publication or on the *Ex Machina* web site, there is no explanation or justification to be found for these crucial editorial choices that should have sparked some reaction in the Québec population.

In his reply to Vaugeois, Philippe Dubé revisits the historian’s claims in order to clarify some of *Moulin*’s underlying historiographical principles. Dubé dismisses offhandedly Vaugeois’s suspicions on the subject of the federal government’s plot to deny Québécois identity and, therefore, cover over any historical wrongdoings. Dubé goes on to blame Vaugeois’s own politically biased take as an “ultra-sovereignist position” (*posture ultrasouverainiste*) that would cloud his objectivity.¹⁴ More fundamental is Dubé’s allegation that Vaugeois might be worried over the “decay of the semantic building called History” (*effritement de l’édifice sémantique appelé Histoire*) that historians supposedly cherish. While Dubé seems to be aligning all historians under the same banner of grand narratives, he nevertheless touches on a crucial, if not the most crucial, bone of contention between the two men, namely, the nature of the historical reconstruction that is to be projected to commemorate Quebec City’s 400th anniversary.

In order to support Lepage and his team’s historical reconstruction, Dubé turns to collective pedagogy and the nature of the impact of *Moulin* on its spectators when he claims that Quebecers experienced “a true revolution in the meaning to give historical matters” (*véritable révolution du sens à donner aux choses de l’histoire*). Dubé locates the revolutionary ideas of *Moulin* in Lepage’s own admonition to avoid the old notion of the “charming Château Frontenac,” with its romantic undertones, in order to retell the story of Quebec City in a novel way by projecting it onto a “(non-historicized) neutral surface” (*surface neutre (non-historiée)*) afforded

by the eighty-one grain silos. While it is tempting to deride Dubé's notion of "neutral surface" in the case of an anglophone company's primordial function as projection surface in commemorating North America's oldest francophone city, and the problems it raises for observers, such as Vaugeois, at this point in the re-telling of the debate it is more pertinent to elaborate further on Lepage's vision by way of Dubé's comments.

Lepage's stated design was to retell the story of Quebec City through images that had to avoid the clichés, which always seem to find their way in publications on Quebec City. Dubé points out, in viewing *Moulin*, which supposedly does away with clichés, the spectator is now free to read historical events as he or she pleases. The images are thus read as "new visual texts" available for everyone to freely write his or her own historical narrative.¹⁵ The intention is simple: allow *Québécois* and tourists alike to shape the history of Quebec City through images without interfering in the process. Yet this position naively assumes that spectators select images when in fact they can only contemplate the images projected onto the screen. Spectators are invited to shape whatever historical narrative they may, according to the number of images *they can actually identify*. For *Moulin* is, in fact, as Dubé emphasizes, an "explosion of signs," but, I would add, whose signifieds often remain indeterminate in the minds of Quebecers, not to mention the thousands of tourists who spent time in Quebec City between June and September 2008, and who were urged to watch the outdoor installation based solely on its spectacular aesthetics. For observers, such as Vaugeois, under the guise of an open-ended historical representation, lies the danger of the absence of significant temporal markers, for those "who could construct for the first time the narrative of their own history" (*construire pour une première fois le récit de leur propre histoire*). While Dubé's words imply that a number of Quebecers had to wait for *Moulin* to finally appropriate their own history, probably because history has finally left textbooks one intimates, most trained historians would have nightmares at the idea of thousands of spectators constructing their own versions of the history of Quebec City with images of the former Montreal *Canadiens*–Québec Nordiques rivalry.

Dubé ends his reply to Vaugeois by demanding that "more space be given to free interpretation" (*plus de place à l'interprétation libre*) of public heritage. Dubé's final words are worth quoting at length: "The generalized appropriation of history is an important part of the cultural future of a nation, and this 'popular' memory cannot remain captive on the historian's writing case." The problem, which Vaugeois briefly touches on but fails to contextualize beyond federalist propaganda, is that history has become de-problematized in the minds of those who create and in the minds of those who watch. This last observation should entail a radical reconsideration of the role of archives in site-specific art and the historiographical framework that supports their use.

Unfortunately, Vaugeois's and Dubé's arguments rest on a series of sterile oppositions that polarize the debate: historical content vs. spectacle; the official version of history books vs. popular memory; textual history vs. image-based representations of history. Such oppositions can lead to unproductive claims such as that of Vaugeois when he asserts that "this city [Quebec City] is the sum of the texts that stand behind The Image Mill." The historian seems to close the door on a number of possible visual representations of history that could be more historically grounded than is *Moulin*. Finally, a series of questions frame the Vaugeois–Dubé debate. First, what type of historical reconstruction and visual apparatus will most appropriately deliver images of the past? What is the role of the public sphere in constructing history? What kind of autonomy should citizens have in the reconstruction of their own history? What kind of price has to be paid for such historical leeway, and what are the benefits of such a theoretical stance?

An anglophone journalist who works for the CBC, Patricia Bailey, has tried to provide some answers to the preceding questions, and her take complements the Vaugeois–Dubé debate from a different perspective. She has pointed to certain inconsistencies in terms of historical representation and to more general considerations

of the work's overall impression on spectators. Indeed, she notes in an article found on the CBC web site that "despite the spectacle, the display lacks soul. Watching it is like taking in an expensive fireworks show. It's breathtaking while you're there, but with the exception of a few powerful images, it's hard to remember anything specific afterwards."¹⁶ Beyond the work's ephemerality and spectacular design, more fundamental is Bailey's remark on the subject of historical representation: "As well, at times, it seems as though Lepage's creative team was trying to whitewash the past to avoid controversy." Here Bailey joins Vaugeois and, thus, goes beyond the spectacular apparatus to comment on the ideological underpinnings of the work that have failed to incite controversy in the Québec population.

On the subject of historical truth, Bailey adds to her critical account of the work: "Disappointingly, the Image Mill takes the standard European point of view—namely that Canada didn't exist until France discovered it. While there are a few passing images of aboriginal people, the overall impression is that it was the industrious French-Canadians that gave the area form."¹⁷ After mentioning glaring "omissions," such as French settlers killing aboriginal populations, Bailey concludes on a telling note. She remarks,

Lepage's decision to tell Quebec City's history in this fashion was inspired. After all, moving pictures are a focal point of modern Quebec culture ... By communicating common values and references, Quebec film and TV screens reinforce the province's identity in a media landscape saturated with all things American. It's on the screen, rather than in books, that this province's stories have been told.¹⁸

Beyond Lepage's leaving out of "some uncomfortable truths," Bailey finally deplores that Lepage could not add "a more compelling chapter to his culture's narrative." One feels that often trivial images represent this "past" and do not do justice to four centuries of often heart-wrenching conflicts between Anglophones and Francophones and between Francophones themselves in the case of the two referenda. This is indeed strange in the case of a commissioned work that was meant to commemorate a 400-year old historical event, the founding of Quebec City that ends up being an apolitical event. The fact that the last segment of the installation, devoted to the twentieth century, avoids politically charged historical events such as the two referenda and post-1960s politics would signal a turn from controversial subject matter that echoes Bailey's comment on the subject. Commenting on Québec history, Lepage made the following remark on the day of *Moulin's* premiere: "I wanted to show a different side of the city and how controversial its past was."¹⁹ All things considered, Lepage's greatest merit may have been to show, albeit unwittingly, how controversial Quebec City's past still *is* in terms of appropriation and visual representation.

(Re)Animating History: Site Specificity and Relationality

The Vaugeois-Dubé debate and Bailey's critical take on *Moulin* may have given the false impression that history is solely a matter of reproduction. Indeed, their takes on the history of Quebec City address the past as a vast continent of archival materials that can be mined and seized upon. Yet, an installation such as *Moulin* could be said to actively produce history rather than merely reproduce it. Indeed, upon watching the first two sections of the work, "Waterways" and "Pathways," the spectator is impressed with the way in which the historical matters and archives are literally reanimated through the movement of still images. Breathing new life into the archives, the first two sections of *Moulin* put in movement still images in a way that could align the work with some of the best contemporary animated installations.

The introductory sections of *Moulin* denote the work's hybrid components, which draw on both animation and cinema. As a monumental work of art that relies on projection, the eighty-one grain silos function as a giant cinema screen onto which images are projected. This innovative type of screen and outdoor "cinema" use a number of strategies to allow the originally still images to come to life. The first two sections feature depth-of-field and multi-plane compositions that foreground movement as the artificial driving force of the historical retelling of which few of the spectators are familiar. In the fourth section, where found footage from archives and television abandon the animated and composited nature of the first eleven minutes to create a fantasmagoric, apolitical twentieth century that is subjected to the moving image, *Moulin*'s creators implicitly posit that it has become practically impossible to conceive of history without the moving image. The fact that they animate still images to create movement testifies to their commitment to this type of moving historiography.

It is therefore appropriate to claim that neither Vaugeois nor Dubé is correct in wanting to claim historical truth for *Moulin*. In the case of Vaugeois, there is an undeniable longing for the written document and the archive, which cannot account for the role of visual media in memory formation. In the case of Dubé, there is an underlying historiographical premise based on open-endedness, which frames his arguments, and that ultimately bypasses the true impact of both the "screen" and the work's uninterrupted unfolding images for any type (modern or postmodern) of historical closure to emerge. Future accounts of the installation, and of its reception, must inquire into the effects of such a visual *dispositif* that does not go beyond the cinema screen or the television set, aside from its size. The monumental format has been the most discussed aspect of the work; the present article suggests that we have to account not only for the affective impact of the work on the senses but also for what it actually does with images and how it produces a history of Quebec City.

What Foucault and Le Goff have taught us with their reappraisal of the document-monument debate is to reconsider the way in which documents have been turned into monuments. Their insight serve as a starting point to examine how *Moulin* has turned archives and the history of Quebec City into a monument in the landscape of both site specificity and contemporary media arts. However, the unprecedented and monumental qualities of the piece should not deter us from turning to other site-specific pieces such as Krzysztof Wodiczko's politically engaged projections onto public buildings or Jane and Louise Wilson's *A Free and Anonymous Monument* (2003) for alternative practices,²⁰ or from comparing the installation with other commemorative works such as Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Véctorial Elevation* (2000) that have taken an altogether different path in terms of commemoration, participation, and design.

A potential starting point for such an inquiry could refer to the fact that Lepage's *Moulin* cannot be separated from the notion of site specificity. A useful distinction established by James Meyer between two types of site-specific works can set the stage for the discussion of *Moulin*'s unique design. Meyer argues that there are two types of site: the literal site and the functional site. While the former would refer to "an actual location, a singular place,"²¹ the latter "may or may not incorporate a physical place."²² Rather, the functional site would act as a "process, an operation occurring between sites, a mapping of institutional and textual filiations and the bodies that move between them (the artist's above all). It is an informational site, a palimpsest of text, photographs and video recordings, physical places, and things."²³ As we can see, according to Meyer's distinction between the literal and the functional site, *Moulin* would correspond to the literal site, because it is located in one place only and does not reach out to other sites.

However, upon closer inspection, Meyer's description of the functional site merits further qualification precisely because *Moulin* tends to complicate any clear-cut distinction between the literal and the functional site. On the one hand, Meyer's description of the functional site addresses two different aspects of site-specific art:

the use of physical space and the modalities of interaction or relational capacities of images. On the other hand, a work such as *Moulin* is indeed what Meyer calls an “informational site,” a subcategory of the functional site, and does offer a wealth of visual information in palimpsestic fashion, which corresponds to the second part of Meyer’s definition of functional site. Even though Lepage’s work does not function as a process or an operation between sites or between images that would be similar in nature, or that would link events that happened in Quebec City to similar events in other cities, the images would correspond to Meyer’s definition of functional site qua informational site in terms of images and would qualify as functional because of the way the images interact with each other regardless of what they actually show. In other words, *Moulin*’s apparatus would be “literal,” while its images would be “functional.” In the end, one might ask: is Meyer’s distinction between literal and functional sites really helpful to make sense of the hybrid nature of several site-specific artworks such as *Moulin*?

Since the 1960s, site specificity has been linked to the critique of commodification in the art world. Indeed, site-specific works, such as *Moulin*, have taken issue with the rising commodification of art and its place in the art gallery or the museum. Wishing to counter the ideological and institutional biases of the art market, literal artworks adopt a location, which becomes inseparable from the work’s *raison d’être*. In the case of *Moulin*, the work is unimaginable without its site and the eighty-one grain silos that serve as one monumental screen. *Moulin* would, therefore, function as a conceptual oddity in site-specific art. The unavowed conservative historical content of *Moulin* (the functional aspect) seems to contradict the seemingly strong stand site-specific art takes against commodification (the literal aspect). In the case of *Moulin*, Lepage’s work is not meant to go on tour; it did not play 24/7; there is no integral film version of it in stores; and, finally, no one had to pay to see it during its three-month run.²⁴ Thus, there seems to be a tension between the nature of the images it offers and the anti-commercial patterns of consumption that such a site-specific work advocates, which challenges Meyer’s distinction between literal and functional sites.²⁵

Finally, I suggest that we turn to Lepage and his co-creators’ stated intentions and ideals to make sense of the literal-functional dialectic that is doubled by the preceding document-monument dialectic. This approach should allow us to bridge the gap between Vaugois and Dubé with regard to the document-monument dialectic and Meyer’s problematic distinction between literal and functional sites. As Lepage and his associates have pointed out, there is a dual goal at the heart of the design process of *Moulin*: to produce an open-ended design that would reveal, as Lepage puts it, the “controversy” that is Quebec City’s past. The potential danger for the critic is to project onto *Moulin* his or her own ideal design for such a work. Rather, I prefer to build on Lepage and his co-creators’ intentions to ask what kind of commemorative work could have been created with respect to their stated intentions, and how the current design for the piece fails to live up to those intentions. For example, if the goal is to propose an open-ended design, it could be argued that the work fails to take advantage of the appropriate technologies to do so and, therefore, equally fails to uphold a notion of relationality, which would go beyond the supposedly open-endedness of its linear narrative. *Moulin* did not take advantage of the multitude of digital technologies now available to offer a relational environment in which spectators could truly engage the work beyond the familiar position of the television viewer or film spectator. Betting everything on its monumental screen that has, in fact, clouded the work’s historical contents, the work’s monumentality serves a very conservative historical content that is accompanied by an equally conventional viewing position, which lacks movement and reflexivity. As Meyer reminds us: “The most convincing site-related work not only represents, or enacts, this mobility, but also reflects on these new parameters.”²⁶

There exists an elective affinity between contemporary cities and functional site-specific works: they both rely on “a mobile notion of site and a nomadic subjectivity,”²⁷ which can be supplemented by the latest relational technologies. *Moulin* failed to appropriate digital technologies other than digital projectors and the software used for compositing and animating images. These would have greatly complemented Lepage and his co-creators’ design for a different type of visual history. As well, audience members did not have any input in the work, pace Dubé, in order to truly create their own narratives of Quebec City. To mention only two well-known technologies that could have made the project more than one giant cinema screen, what about GPS mapping and the Internet? These could have been put to good use in making Quebec City a networked city based on a vast array of relational digital technologies that would have served the creators’ desire for an open-ended apparatus.

Finally, in terms of the representational content that would truly render Quebec City’s “controversial past,” the emphasis could have been placed on alternative “archives” and histories of Quebec City that would have gone beyond traditional archives and the official historical re-tellings that we expect from commemorative celebrations. Bailey’s claim that the work whitewashes the past has some truth to it, not only in terms of founding fathers. What about other events such as the annual riots that followed Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day (June 24) several years in a row in the 1990s, the massive resistance surrounding the 3rd Summit of the Americas held in Quebec City in 2001, and the important manifestations surrounding the CRTC’s decision to revoke the license of the controversial CHOI radio station, which prompted 50,000 people (which corresponds to more than 10% of the population of Quebec City) to walk the streets of the city in 2004? There is an unstated desire to exclude certain events from the images in *Moulin* because, one assumes, they would reflect poorly on the city in the eyes of tourists and could be considered “negative” in the eyes of governmental funding institutions, even though no one can deny that they are truly part of the city’s history. If the intention was to show controversy, *Moulin* does not reflect Lepage and his co-creators’ intention, and, as a result, it fails to deliver what might have served as a fascinating and, indeed, controversial history of this unique city in North America.²⁸

ENDNOTES

1 The quadripartite structure derives from a little-known publication, *Sur les 4 routes* (1939), penned by famous architect Le Corbusier. As Philippe Dubé mentions (in Larochelle 2008), *Moulin* adopts this structure freely. However, this type of free adaptation fails to attend to Le Corbusier's utopianism and technological determinism. This oversight tends to over determine the overall structure of *Moulin* and the values it ultimately upholds in structuring a history of Quebec City, according to Le Corbusier's anticipatory principles for rebuilding post-World War II France. For an incisive look at Le Corbusier's socio-political views, see Mary McLeod, "'Architecture or Revolution': Taylorism, Technocracy, and Social Change," *Art Journal* 43.2 (1983): 132-147.

2 It is noteworthy that the aforementioned representational contents are the ones that I have been able to identify upon several projections. Lepage and his co-creators have kept the archival sources secret from the public and what the contents of the images actually depict. This proves very problematic in the first three segments, due to the lack of historical references. Even in the official publication (Robert Lepage and *Ex Machina*, *Le Moulin à images / The Image Mill* [Quebec City: *Ex Machina*, 2008]), archival sources are passed over in silence, visual aesthetics being given priority.

3 This is not to say, however, that other approaches could not be used to make sense of *Moulin*. For example, in the 2009 documentary *Dans le ventre du Moulin*, Lepage reveals that there are two commemorative events, the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution in 1989 and footage of Quebec City's own 300th anniversary in 1908, which inspired the design of *Moulin*. In the same documentary, Lepage also mentions that he wanted to avoid realism and documentary-like representation in commemorating Quebec City's history and favored a more "impressionistic" design. Finally, Lepage notes the absence of a scenario and storyboards in *Moulin's* pre-production process. These revelations go to show that there are several types of potential approaches (comparative, stylistic, design-oriented, etc.) that could be used in the future to complement the present article.

4 For example, see the hyperbolic accounts of two of Québec's most high-profile cultural critics: Nathalie Petrowski, "Le moulin magique de Robert Lepage," *La Presse*, June 22, 2008, p.2, "Arts Spectacles" section, and Odile Tremblay, "Écran total," *Le Devoir*, June 28, 2008, Section E: 2. Focusing exclusively on the spectacular aesthetics and unprecedented size of the work, Québec media were quick to alert the population to the fact that Lepage's installation will appear in the next edition of the *Guinness Book of World Records* for having showcased the largest outdoor projection screen ever created.

5 As Marvin Richards points out, Québec has been a neglected topos in francophone studies. See his "Putting Québec Studies on the Map," *Contemporary French & Francophone Studies* 13.1 (2009): 81-89. The present article on Lepage's *Moulin* would like to serve as an initial foray into contemporary Québécois media arts by building on the socio-historical insights of Fernand Dumont, Gérard Bouchard, and Jocelyn Létourneau and, most importantly, by addressing media phenomena that are rarely examined in more traditional discussions of identity politics.

6 For thorough accounts of Lepage's theatrical practice, see Ludovic Fouquet, *Robert Lepage, l'horizon en images* (Quebec City: *L'Instant même*, 2005), and Aleksandar Dundjerovic, *The Theatricality of Robert Lepage* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).

7 The most complete account of Lepage's cinema is Aleksandar Dundjerovic, *The Cinema of Robert Lepage: The Poetics of Memory* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003).

8 Bill Marshall, *Québec National Cinema* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 307.

9 For more on archive-images and the way in which media arts have refashioned the traditional notion of archive, see Bruno Lessard, "Between Creation and Preservation: The ANARCHIVE Project," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 15.3 (2009), 315-331.

10 Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 166.

11 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1972), 7. Emphases in original.

12 Jacques Le Goff, "Documento/Monumento," *Storia e memoria* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982), 455. The English translation of Le Goff's collection of articles, *History and Memory*, does not include the article "Documento/Monumento," originally published in Italian translation in *Encyclopedia Einaudi*, vol. 5, in 1978.

13 Vaugeois voices his discontent in Réginald Harvey, "Le 400e de Québec et l'histoire—Une fête célébrée à la sauce Canada," *Le Devoir*. September 27, 2008. <<http://www.ledevoir.com/2008/09/27/207741.html>>. All references are to this article.

14 All references are to Philippe Dubé, "Une histoire sans nom, sans date, ni événement," *Le Devoir*. October 1, 2008; available online: <http://www.ledevoir.com/2008/10/01/208392.html>

- 15 This historical narrative, it should be borne in mind, is composed entirely of images and adopts an open-ended view of history, which takes the form of a chronological unfolding of images. In terms of overall design, *Moulin*, as a site-specific artwork, proposes a visual dispositif that could not deliver the goods in terms of postmodern historiography. In other words, one could argue that the modern projection apparatus does not seem to fit the postmodern historical views.
- 16 All references are to Patricia Bailey, "Projecting the Past: Robert Lepage's Dazzling Visual History of Quebec City"; available online: <http://www.cbc.ca/arts/artdesign/story/2008/08/21/f-lepage-image-mill.html>
- 17 Christopher Gittings notes similar "erasures" in films (among which one finds Lepage's *Nô*), which use the 1970 October Crisis as a backdrop, and that ultimately reveal an unstated historiographical agenda. He points out that such films "endow the stories of October 1970 with a white subjectivity, thereby producing a misleading and ethnically specific meaning: the contested nation of Québec is composed of a pur laine Québécois people, while Canadian nation is composed of an Anglo-Celtic people and a Québécois people." Gittings concludes that Canadian biculturalism "performs the cultural work of forgetting the colonization of Aboriginal cultures upon which the 'founding nations' of both Canada and Québec are predicated." Christopher E. Gittings, *Canadian National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 193.
- 18 Patricia Bailey, "Projecting the Past: Robert Lepage's Dazzling Visual History of Quebec City," <<http://www.cbc.ca/arts/artdesign/story/2008/08/21/f-lepage-image-mill.html>> (Accessed November 18, 2008).
- 19 Quoted in Bailey, "Projecting the Past: Robert Lepage's Dazzling Visual History of Quebec City"; available online: <http://www.cbc.ca/arts/artdesign/story/2008/08/21/f-lepage-image-mill.html>
- 20 Giuliana Bruno provides an extensive reading of the Wilsons' installation in *Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 43–82.
- 21 James Meyer, "The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site Specificity," in *Space Site Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, Erika Suderburg, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 24.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 25
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 That is, of course, as of this writing. Interviewed on Québec's highest-rated television show, *Tout le monde en parle*, on May 10, 2009, Lepage mentioned that the mayor of Quebec City, Régis Labeaume, wants the future editions of *Moulin* "to avoid repetitions [redites]." Lepage also mentioned that 20% of the work's images would be modified accordingly. The impact of municipal power on the work's design will have to be investigated in the context of the recently signed contract between Lepage/*Ex Machina* and Quebec City, which allows *Moulin* to benefit from a five-year extension. The financial terms of the contract, however, remain undisclosed for this publicly funded installation, which has generated a number of criticisms from conservative circles in Quebec City. Moreover, on March 3, 2009, Lepage and *Ex Machina* informed the Québec population, through *Ex Machina's* web site, that they are looking for new images for the upcoming 2009 edition of *Moulin*. Whether this "call for contributors" is directly related to Mayor Labeaume's request to avoid repetitions in the retelling of the history of Quebec City remains to be confirmed. However, it also remains to be seen if Lepage and his team will properly acknowledge contributors to *Moulin's* extended run, or if their collective contribution will only enhance the auteurist politics of creativity that has surrounded the reception of *Moulin* so far. See http://lacaserne.net/index2.php/news/le_moulin_a_images_the_image_mill/.
- 25 My claim that *Moulin* challenges art-related historical definitions of site specificity should not be taken as a critical endeavour to recuperate the piece and claim the work's radical nature, of which I think it is deprived, given its emphasis on commemoration rather than contestation and its willful erasures of fundamental socio-political markers and events in the history of Quebec City.
- 26 Meyer, 32; Scott McQuire describes what media art should strive for if it wants to avoid a certain artistic status quo: "the new experimental practices of contemporary media art can offer a useful test-bed for exploring the critical potential of relational space—the demand to actively construct social relations to others across heterogeneous spatio-temporal regimes, promoting new forms of public agency." *The Media City: Media, Architecture and Urban Space* (London: SAGE, 2008), 132. For an account of site specificity that focuses on media arts, see Maria Miranda, "Uncertain Spaces: Artists' Exploration of New Socialities in Mediated Public Space," *SCAN: Journal of Media Arts Culture* 4.3 (2007); available online: http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=101
- 27 Meyer, 32.
- 28 I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer of this article for their comments, and suggestions.