

The Shame and The Glory: *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas*

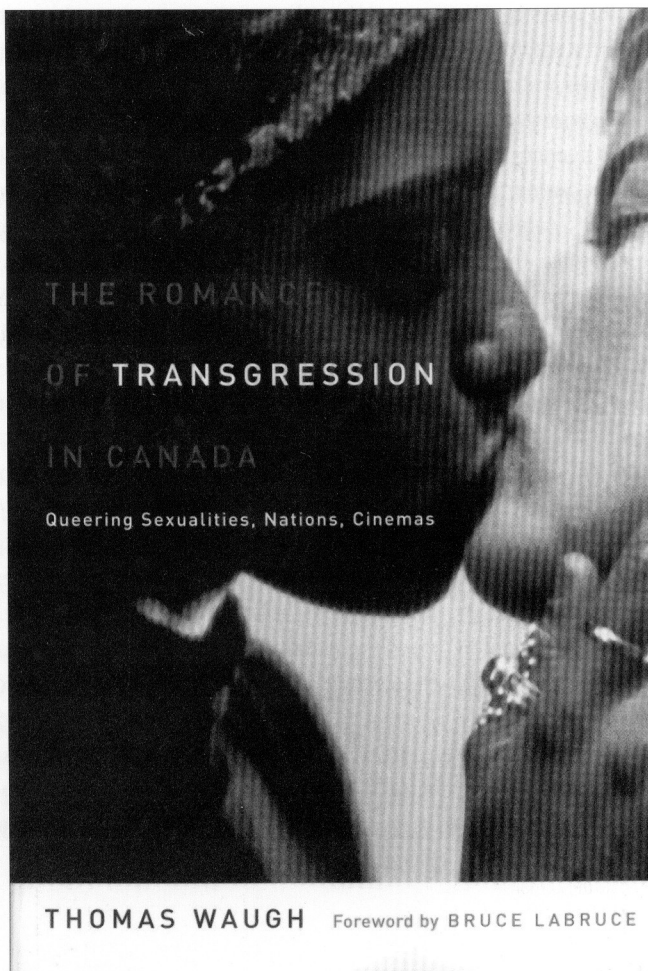
by Thomas Waugh, Foreword by Bruce LaBruce
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review by Andrew James Paterson

This most welcome volume announces three of its many intentions in its subtitle. Within this nation-state, there is a plurality in the subtitle with the transitive "queering" referring to a never-ending process rather than any limited goal or definition. This book provides a sizable history of Canadian moving pictures, their makers and the institutions permitting (and repressing) them. Having published

previous titles including *Hard to Imagine* (1996) and *The Fruit Machine* (2000), a collection of his essays and reviews for the formative Toronto queer journal *The Body Politic*, Waugh is renowned for his touring mock-pedantic presentational lectures on cults and sub-cults of beefcake. He also has a history of anti-censorship activism, and not only in relation to his own publishing career.

For *Romance of Transgression*, Waugh appropriates both the title and the tone of a 1952 National Film Board animation titled *The Romance of Transportation in Canada*. Drawing upon queer-performative theorists Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler as well as Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality or activist government, Waugh seldom loses his anecdotal timbre. He is often strategically dry, but too politically engaged to be arid. Aloofness and hyper-intellectual avant-gardism are indeed pet peeves of the professor's. Post-structuralist "death of the author" theories are not particularly relevant to queers and subaltern minorities who have experienced voices denied, and autobiography is significant to both this author and his field of subjects. So are bodies.

Transgression is not a liberal word. It acknowledges and even celebrates borders, boundaries, and shame — the concluding essay in this volume is titled "Of Bodies, Shame and Desire." The process of queering sexualities, nations and cinemas is eternal, and borders or boundaries that demand both transgression and violation aren't going to be collapsing anytime soon. Besides, isn't Canada a post-modernist nation? It certainly has been a nation-state linked by transportation and communications systems marked by their own intrinsic checkpoints with wildly fluctuating codes and regulations.



It has been remarked that the Canadian mentality is essentially bureaucratic¹ and, whether or not such quasi-essentialist labeling is accurate, Canada has always had less the frontier mindset than its omnipotent Southern neighbour. If American gay liberation commenced with the 1969 Stonewall riots (in which drag queens were the prime resisters), Canada's began cautiously with the same year's Omnibus Bill.² Yet Canada's foundation, built upon *les deux nations* (not to mention the First Nations, who did come first), arguably provides structural encouragement toward counting past binary mentalities.

How queer can a default nation be or become? Its relative lack of revolutionary machismo aside, the gradual transformation of Canada from colonies to nation-state permits a fluidity at odds with any fixed national essence or identity. Such lack of definition, despite all those state apparatus devoted to building and then reinforcing essential Canadian masculinities and femininities, allows a plurality of possible identifications. Transfolk have insisted that everybody count past two (and well beyond three). Bisexuals have also problematized the number two, and those letters just keep proliferating. With tongue not entirely in cheek, Waugh suggests, "why not consider *BLLAGTITISQQ* as an at last pronounceable acronym: bisexual, lesbian, leather, asexual/celibate, gay, transsexual, intersex, transgendered, two-spirited, intergenerational, sex-worker, questioning, queer....Have I left you out?"³ Considerations of race, ethnicity, class, looks, age, ability (have I left you out?) notwithstanding, all of these letters represent constituencies standing against mandatory heterosexist assumptions.

Waugh moves beyond a Montréal and Toronto binarism to recognize Vancouver as the third Canadian urban centre that has been seriously queered and will thus continue its queering. He looks at a trope of works involving queer adults returning to their regional homes, and also to queerable spaces removed from urban hostility and regimentality. But he also insists that, in the Canadian film industries (whether commercial or government-funded), where sex goes money is certain to follow, and the money shots are in the big cities, along with the sex trade, pornography and tearooms. It is significant that his lengthy acronym includes "a" for Asexual (or anti-consumption) and "s" for Sex-Trade Worker (hyper-consumption).

To put things more succinctly, this tome is all about bodies. It focuses on sexual and sexually-politicized bodies working either against or within bureaucratic bodies — sometimes private corporations, though overwhelmingly he is referring to governmental agencies. The *NFB* (our dear old uncle) is omnipresent, receiving its own deserved chapter, and then of course there is *AIDS*. The trajectory of Waugh's essays begins with the Cold War, then the so-called Sexual Revolution, and the incipient queer rumblings in Montreal and Toronto. He pays respects to different regions and then zeroes in on the *NFB*. That institution's prescribed sobriety, its insistence on verite, is revealed by Waugh to be a Canadian constant, intrinsic to even the most audacious queer fictions in his national canon. Documentary is more than a cousin of autobiography, and autobiographical impulses are too strong to be airbrushed away.

It is Waugh's autobiographical imperative to temporarily abandon chromosome

counting for his seventh essay — "Boys and the Beast." That beast is athletics, especially hockey, Canada's national sport. Waugh examines nearly a half-century of sports films, many of them made for television as part of both nationalist and corporate mandates to make sure there aren't too many sissy boys who don't appreciate sports. Within that lifespan, the author has himself progressed from "the failed peewee to the supreme pool queen of the Montréal y..."⁴ In these films, homophobia and homo-sociality and homo-eroticism uncomfortably share the same arenas and locker rooms.

Waugh's next essay, "Sex, Money, and Sobriety," shifts to other arenas where men's and women's bodies are performing and thus on display, and usually within complex and contradictory scenarios. Pornography and prostitution involve both money and "acting." Again, documentary sobriety is never that far below the radar, especially in Canadian porn and meta-porn,⁵ when structural reliance on the American porn economy montages with Canadian autobiographical imperatives.

In this eighth chapter, Waugh also examines both boy and girl Canadian home-grown porn, and then offers various tea-room encounters on film or video as bucolic sexual moments outside of or transcending exchange economies. In his next essay, "Anti-Retroviral: A Test of Who We Are," he surveys a variety of Canadian *AIDS*-related works — experimental, activist, informational and more. Due to the nature of this beast, there are scores of *AIDS*-related works that were made for the then-immediate situation (*The Epidemic*) and not for any sort of definitive canon, and are thus not referred to within this volume. However, Waugh manages to recognize

many works by men and women across the nation before focusing on three artists who have contributed sizable bodies of AIDS-related films and tapes — John Greyson, Richard Fung and Mike Hoolboom.

The concluding essay: “Of Bodies, Shame, and Desire,” extends the stigmatization of HIV+ and other historically-marked bodies. Waugh looks at several works that defy assimilationist complacency and platitudes about “the end of gay.”⁶ In the century when post-nationalist globalism and post-corporeality mesh all too easily with religious fundamentalisms and other repressive mindsets, “bodies (and bottoms) are the bottom line.”⁷

The Romance of Transgression also offers a second component, consisting of a portrait gallery of transgressors — 340 of them. This useful resource references names and provides brief portraits of Canadian queer and queer-positive directors, writers, producers, festival programmers, actors, writers and even a few plain old celebrities. Waugh is knowledgeable about details such as, for example, the queer second camera-operator hypothetically responsible for the officially-unintended homoerotic content of many straight-directed films — the chapters concerning “The Cold War,” the “Sexual Revolution,” the NFB and, of course, athletics, are ripe with such speculations. Originally, he had intended to restrict the portrait gallery to 100 names, but this proved futile. There are, of course, a few names missing, a few bibliographical glitches, and, for spatial reasons, most portrait-gallery entries are included by virtue of their specifically same-sex content titles — the higher the sexualized body count, the better. This means that Waugh frequently misses titles by the

same artists that may not be capital “G” gay but are most certainly queer in their mindsets. Waugh includes many individuals and organizations that he considers “queer-friendly,” which is a usefully vague term. These two adjectives can unambiguously refer to straight folks who have been crucially supportive, or it could refer to an intriguing or frustrating lack of public-definition regarding certain individuals an “are they, or aren’t they?” Since Waugh is a politicized film historian, his bias toward social cinema prevails, although he doesn’t fall short with video art and even some installation. While television is not the professor’s cup of tea, the role of both the public CBC and the private networks in the formation and enforcement of desired masculinities and femininities is placed under his acerbic lens.

Generally, I think *The Romance of Transgression* succeeds in its intentions. A slippage between queer, meaning perversely subversive, and queer, meaning same-sex bodies, frequently leaks through, but Waugh doesn’t apologize for his biases. He is a long-time Montréaler and a proud Stonewaller. He makes no apologies for the privileged space granted to artists working when queer was an insult rather than a compliment, and who have been relatively ignored or de-queered in previous histories. For the information and gossip about pioneers like renowned animator Norman McLaren, Québécois auteur Claude Jutra, pioneering documentarian Margaret Westcott, and many other artists and the institutions that they have transgressed, this book is invaluable. As a reference book on ongoing queerings of Canadian cinema and their infrastructures, this is also a very useful volume. Let’s have more.

Andrew James Paterson is a video artist, writer and general observer based in Toronto. His name is not omitted from Professor Waugh’s list of 340 movers and shakers.

Notes:

1. See AA Bronson, Introduction, *Media Works*, N.E. Thing Co. Ltd. Art Metropole, 1992.
2. The Omnibus Bill removed the clauses dealing with “buggery” and “gross indecency” from the Criminal Code but the state did not completely remove itself from the bedrooms of the nation as group sex, intergenerational sex, and other “perversions” remained illegal and continue to be. p. 541.
3. p.10.
4. p.182.
5. Waugh deploys the term “meta-porn” to encompass a “spectrum of avant-garde practices...referencing explicit imported film or video” in many works by Canadian artists, specifically during the later 1980s. (p. 230).
6. Bert Archer. *The End of Gay (And the Death of Heterosexuality)* (Toronto, Doubleday, 1999), Canada.
7. p.327.