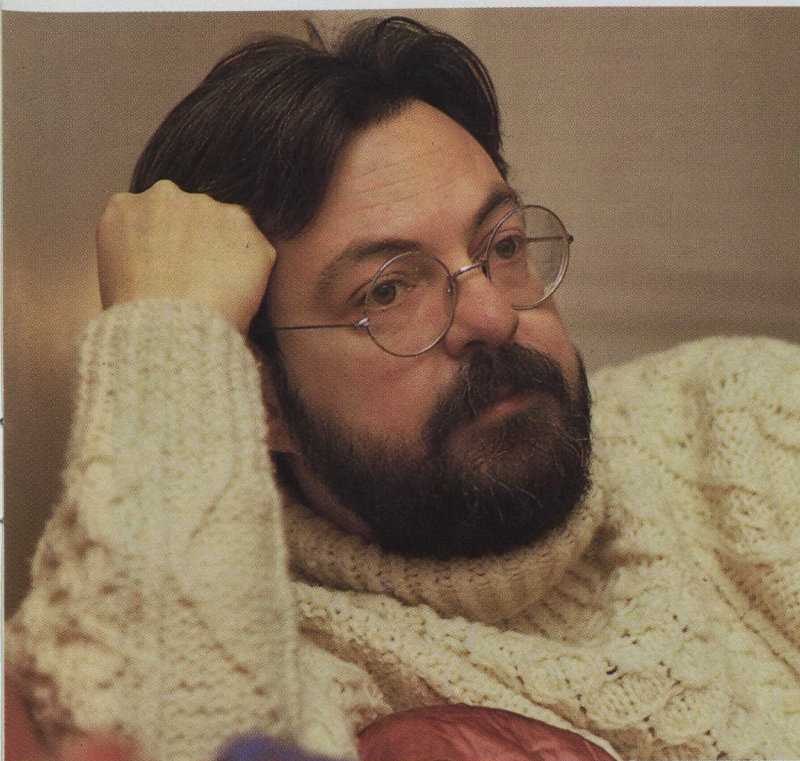




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Michel Tremblay: one of Quebec's most celebrated playwrights.

There was an explosive ferment in all fields. Playwrights such as Michel Tremblay celebrated the long-ignored culture of Quebec's proletariat. The censorship that had afflicted the film industry for so long was lifted, and today there are fewer restrictions on films shown in Quebec than anywhere else in North America. Such films as *9 1/2 Weeks* and *Angel Heart*, mutilated by the censors in several U.S. states, were shown in their uncut, original versions on Montreal's screens.

Particularly in Montreal, Quebec's urban heartland, with its cosmopolitan cluster of two million people and its important English-speaking minority, the cultural diversity is almost without equivalent: American films are shown there at the same time they

appear in New York, and French and European films at the same time as they are released in Paris. At any newsstand, publications such as *Newsweek*, *Ms* and *Rolling Stone* are displayed alongside French magazines such as *Le Nouvel Observateur* and *L'Express* and such British periodicals as *The Economist*, in addition, of course, to a full array of Canadian magazines in both French and English.

The same pattern of diversity holds true for television. Quebecers have access to a dozen Canadian networks broadcasting in French and English, educational channels from both Ontario and Quebec, all American programming transmitted by cable or satellite and, through an intergovernmental agreement, the pick of French, Swiss and Belgian television productions.

Influenced by both Europe and America, Quebec culture has lost its obsession with the past and is more open than ever to outside influences. Experimentation in the visual arts, in dance and in the theatre, has much in common with what is happening in *avant garde* milieux in New York, London and Barcelona.

In the Quebec of the 1980s, as nearly everywhere else, a relative de-politicization has succeeded the seething ideological passions of the previous two decades, and writers have turned increasingly to exploring more personalized worlds. What sets them apart, however, is that they write in French with a North American sensibility.

The main problem facing Quebec artists is the small domestic market; though with five million French-speaking inhabitants, Quebec is no different in this respect from Denmark or Austria.

Until recently, France has been a much easier market to penetrate than the United States — with the notable exception of music or the visual arts, where communication is non-verbal. The Montreal Symphony Orchestra, for example, is well-known across the United States as well as in Europe and Asia. A number of French-Canadian writers have made their mark in Paris in recent years, notably, the Acadian, Antonine Maillet, winner of the prestigious Prix Goncourt, France's equivalent to the Pulitzer Prize for literature; and Anne Hébert, who lives and is published in Paris, but whose novels are set on the banks of the St. Lawrence.

Music is, however, the primary area in which Quebec's artists have carved a niche in the French market. The great *chansonniers* such as Gilles Vigneault still draw substantial crowds in France, and younger contemporary performers and songwriters satisfy the French appetite for a combination of freewheeling American pop rhythms and French lyrics.

Language Protects Culture

Most recently, the national debate over free trade between Canada and the United States crystallized the profound differences between English- and French-Canadian cultural sensibilities. Ever haunted by the fear of seeing its cultural gems submerged in the omnipresent American cultural sea, the English-Canadian intelligentsia furiously opposed the Free Trade Agreement with the United States. In Quebec, on the other hand, intellectuals greeted it with indifference at worst, and with considerable enthusiasm at best.

Indeed, Quebecers feel less threatened by the powerful American rival, protected as they are by language. Quebecers cannot rely exclusively on American cultural offerings because they are in English only, nor on French imports because they are too far removed from North American realities. Quebec has, in a sense, been forced to develop its own cultural industries, which today are solidly established, dynamic — and popular. The best among the numerous homegrown soap operas on TV draw a larger viewing audience than "Dallas" or "Miami Vice." The biggest best-sellers in the bookstores are written by the likes of Yves Beauchemin or Arlette Cousture.

In this respect, Quebec's relative isolation, to which it has been forever condemned by its status as an obstinate minority in North America, has served its culture well. Having learned the art of survival, of prevailing against all odds, and now comfortable in its identity, Quebec is well prepared to confront the stimulating challenges presented by the growing internationalization of cultural exchanges. ♦