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Unearthing Montreal's Past in *Hochelaga, terre des âmes*

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"He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging."

—Walter Benjamin

In his 2017 film, *Hochelaga, terre des âmes* (*Hochelaga, Land of Souls*), Québécois filmmaker François Girard delves into the complex history of Montreal. When a sinkhole appears in a football stadium, the site becomes an archaeological dig, led by a Mohawk graduate student at the Université de Montréal. The film tracks the progress of the dig, unearthing layers of history and revealing the stories of the generations of people who lived on the land, including the Indigenous peoples who lived there first.[1]

As Girard summarizes in an interview: "I sometimes have the fantasy that 1,000, 2,000 or 3,000 years ago, somebody was in the same place, looking at the same mountain, the same sky, feeling the same winter. We have that connection by the land. That's what the film talks about, looking at whoever has occupied that land, and then the connection between them" (Dunlevy, "TIFF 2017"). Still, despite living in Montreal, he himself did not often think of the history of the city. The film was initially commissioned by Just for Laughs founder Gilbert Rozon, to be part of Montreal's 375th anniversary celebrations. As Girard prepared, however, he discovered an abundance of material, more than enough for a feature film. He also realized that he could not limit the time frame to 375 years, counted from the establishment of the French colonial mission

Ville Marie in 1642, but must look further back in the past. He explains: "I think in Quebec we have focused historically, intellectually and socially on anglo-franco relations, which defined a lot of speeches and politics. And we came to represent ourselves by that duality" (Dunlevy, "François Girard"). His film rejects that duality and focuses as well on First Nations history and heritage.

Girard goes back another 375 years to 1267, opening on the aftermath of a battle between the Iroquois and the Algonquins. This is one of four historical moments the film presents, spread across 750 years: the aforementioned battle between the Iroquois and the Algonquins; the arrival of Jacques Cartier at Hochelaga, a fortified permanent Iroquois settlement at the base of what is now known as Mont Royal (1535); a love affair between an Algonquin woman and a French settler (1687); and a run-in between the Patriotes and the British Army during the Lower Canada Rebellion (1837). All of these events involve interactions between people from multiple backgrounds, and all involve Indigenous people. These stories suggest a more nuanced situation than the historical narratives that are most frequently retold: to the Iroquois, Cartier and his men are foreigners with strange habits; the French settler dies of smallpox and struggles to leave his hospital bed to return to his partner; and the French Patriotes are helped by a British woman.

Rather than progressing chronologically through these moments, the film is structured around the archaeological dig, flashing back as historical objects from the different times are found. In a short text called "Excavation and memory," Walter Benjamin writes: "Epic and rhapsodic in the strictest sense, genuine memory must therefore yield an image of the person who remembers, in the same way a good archaeological report not only informs us about the strata from which its findings originate, but also gives an account of the strata which first had to

be broken through" (576). *Hochelaga, terre des âmes* is a good archaeological report. It is both epic and rhapsodic – epic in its scope and rhapsodic in its organization, "consisting of a medley of narratives," "fragmentary in style."[2]

These fragments of history come together to form a sort of medley, a selection of moments from Canada's past that resonate together in the context of the film. These moments are further linked by a series of interludes set in a forest glade, featuring an Indigenous prophet.[3] These two organizational schemas– the recurring scenes in the forest and the archaeological dig –represent the two primary ways the film studies the traces of those who have lived on the same land. With the archaeological dig, it unearths what is hidden under the ground, while with the scenes with the Indigenous prophet, it suggests that observing the nature above the ground, and in particular the trees, is crucial in developing a full picture of the past.

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Under the Ground

Using archaeological practices as a way of thinking about the past is a key aspect of contemporary conceptions of time, according to Lionel Ruffel. As he demonstrates, older teleological methods of conceiving time have increasingly been rejected in favour of the concept of layers of time: "the superimposition of apparently contradictory, distinct, and homogeneous temporalities," or what he terms "a co-temporality" (176). For him, this is an archaeological model "with the memory of the past lodging itself in the materiality of the present" (176). One of the implications of this model is to "renounce historical continuity, favor the effects of discontinuity, make untimely connections, practice learning through montage" (161). With its archaeological structure, *Hochelaga, terre des âmes* rejects a teleological sense of history. Although the film starts in 1267, it does not progress chronologically from there, but rather flashes forward

and back, showing first the relationship between the Algonquin woman and the settler, then the Patriotes of the Lower Canada Rebellion, and finally the meeting between Jacques Cartier and the Iroquois at Hochelaga. The film also returns frequently to the scene in 1267, keeping that historical moment in the foreground of the viewer's mind. Montage is, of course, French for editing, and the film, cutting back and forth between past and present practices "learning through montage," as it presents Montreal's history in a series of archaeological layers. These different moments, a series of co-temporalities, resonate and echo together across time and into the present, even if the "memory of the past" is not immediately visible in "the materiality of the present."

At the beginning of *Hochelaga, terre des âmes*, the surface of modern-day Montreal is undisturbed by the city's complex past. The film cuts to a typical scene of a college football team preparing to play a game. The locker room is tidy, and the players are involved in their pregame preparations. There are no visible marks of the past, nor is there any consideration of history beyond past game statistics, as the coach launches into an aggressive pep talk to his team. They are called the Redmen, a name not invented for the film, but the actual name of the McGill University sports teams from 1927 to 2019 when the name was formally dropped (Deer). Although McGill historian Stanley Frost has stated that the name originated from the colour of the jerseys, the name quickly became conflated with the derogatory term for Indigenous peoples, to the point that hockey and football helmets and jerseys even featured Indigenous-style logos from 1981 to 1991 (Arsem-O'Malley). The coach's casual uses of the name Redmen to address his team reflects the broader willingness to ignore the discriminatory implications of language in everyday situations and is symptomatic of a lack of understanding and knowledge of Canada's

colonial past. His apparently innocuous pep talk, consisting of motivational clichés, takes on a darker meaning when heard in the context of the previous scene showing Indigenous people on the land, centuries before the arrival of Europeans. He tells his players: "This field is sacred, this field is ours, this is home," before asking them "to think about what happened a year ago, 10, 20, 50, 100 years ago in this stadium." He ends by encouraging them to fight for "what belongs to us" and to fight so that they do not "wipe us out again" (00:11:00-00:12:30). For the coach, history only goes back 100 years. He does not think beyond his manicured turf nor beyond this institutionalized history to what happened on the land more than 100 years ago. The coach is certainly portrayed as unpleasant, but his speech stems primarily from ignorance: he is privileged to ignore the past buried under his feet and to focus only on the game.

In *Bark*, an account of his visit to Birkenau, Georges Didi-Huberman cautions against just such an impulse to not look beneath the present to the memory of the past. He writes: "We can therefore never say, 'There's nothing to see, there's no more to see.' To be able to doubt what we see, we must know how to keep looking, how to see in spite of everything. Despite the destruction, the erasure, of all things. We must know how to look as an archaeologist looks" (105). *Hochelaga, terre des âmes* proposes just such an archaeological look at Montreal's past. Like Didi-Huberman, who acknowledges that "[g]iven that the terrifying story for which this place served as the theater is a story of the past, one would like to believe what one sees at first, namely, that death has departed, that the dead are no longer here" (105), Girard suggests the presence of a similar reluctance to delve beneath the surface of modern-day Montreal and confront the ugliness of the past. However, as the film shows in dramatic fashion, this memory of the past cannot be ignored.

Outside the locker room, all is not peaceful around the stadium, nor is the land beneath the football field content to keep its secrets. Torrential rains batter the field and, when seen from above from the window of an airplane, the city looks dark and gloomy, its lights barely cutting through the clouds (00:10:40). Only the football stadium glows brightly, but it is an unnatural green that suggests the city has lost touch with its roots, both natural and historical. The land has become unstable, and when a football player hits the ground hard after a tackle, the earth buckles under him, claiming his life and leaving a deep hole in the middle of the field. The sinkhole is also a gaping metaphorical hole, "un trou de mémoire," as René Lemieux said while moderating a panel on the film (Poisson).[4] The land, out of sync and represented negatively as a sinkhole, is an embodiment of the historical wounds of colonization and dispossession.

As an unavoidable representation of the gaps in Canada's historical narratives, the hole facilitates the emergence of the past. An archaeological dig is quickly organized, led by Baptiste Asigny, a Mohawk graduate student.[5] The archaeological process, shown in the film, reflects the work Girard did when preparing: "In writing the film, I was an archeologist with a pen, just seeing what comes out, what I wanted to say" (Dunlevy, "François Girard"). The link is further reinforced as Asigny sets up the slides for his doctoral defense, based on the artifacts he finds at the site. The images flash across the screen behind him, like the flickering of a film, acting as a *mise en abyme* and reinforcing the parallel processes of filmmaker and archaeologist (00:03:26-00:03:43). Both must negotiate the complicated relationship of archaeology and colonization. In *L'avenir du passé*, Jean-Paul Demoule and Bernard Steigler write: "The scientific gaze is, however, never neutral. […] beyond its progression in time and space, archaeology is also a stakeholder in the constitution of national identities" (6, my translation). In the Canadian

context, these national identities were constructed at the expense of the Indigenous peoples, and the practice of archaeology was often a semi-metaphorical battleground for the ownership of the land.[6] The polemic continues into the twenty-first century, as Neal Ferris asserts: "Today, the relationship between North American archaeologists and Native peoples dominates discussions in the discipline, especially around the control of burial grounds and sacred sites, the repatriation and ownership of institutionally housed human remains, and the overarching question of who has authority over the past" (154-155).

As Steigler and Demoule write, archaeology became codified during the nineteenth century, along with other social and natural sciences like ethnography, zoology, geology, botany, and paleontology (6). The study of Indigenous peoples and the land on which they lived, and continue to live, is therefore often conducted using Western research methodologies, research methods developed and put in place by the colonizers. For Linda Tuhiwai Smith: "From the vantage point of the colonized, a position from which I write, and choose to privilege, the term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism" (1). Marie Battiste and James (Sa'ke'j) Youngblood Henderson in *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage: A Global Challenge* also argue for the rights of Indigenous peoples to their knowledge and heritage and for the imperative decolonization of cognitive imperialism. In a 2012 roundtable, "Different Knowings and the Indigenous Humanities," Battiste reiterates that the codified social sciences serve to "dimini[sh] what was there by exoticizing and primitivizing the multiple peoples around the world who had anything that differed from anything that was European: Canadian or American or European" (Coleman 156).

It is particularly important that it is Asigny who is leading the dig, not his Québécois thesis supervisor. The nature of the artifacts he finds is indicative of Girard's attempt to present a

different aspect of archaeological work – Asigny only finds European-made pieces. From the Lower Canada Rebellion, he finds rifles, from the couple, he finds a wrought-iron stove door, and from Cartier's visit, he finds a cross. He then traces the door and the cross back to the foundries that made them in France. It is of great importance that it is Asigny who finds the site where his ancestors lived, although it should be noted that this climactic find of the cross given by Cartier to the Iroquois chief is a fabrication of the film – the exact location of Hochelaga remains one of Canada's most intriguing archaeological mysteries, although experts believe that it would have been somewhere near the McGill campus. As Asigny shares his knowledge at his doctoral defense, he is fulfilling the role the prophet gave to his ancestor in 1267 – to share knowledge from generation to generation. He has reinterpreted the way of sharing knowledge for a contemporary context and the process of the dig has also renewed his relationship with his personal past, and, using his Mohawk name for the first time in years, he phones his mother to tell her of his discovery (01:26:58).

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Above the Ground

Asigny's team does not uncover any traces from 1267, the fourth historical scene represented in *Hochelaga, terre des âmes*, suggesting that an archaeological dig is not the only way to engage with history. That no artifact from the early battle is found is indicative that the crucial core of this Indigenous past is not accessible through the Western discipline of archaeology. Girard turns towards a more Indigenous way of knowing, particularly in his focus on the knowledge found in the natural world. His representation of nature seems to reflect the Great Law of Peace of the Haudenosaunee, about which Kayanesenh Paul Williams writes:

> Another crucial aspect of the Great Law is its constant closeness to the natural world. The obligation to help one another reflects how the Haudenosaunee see the natural world, as a balanced system that retains its balance through the efforts of all its components. […] The natural world is a web of symbiotic relationships, of organisms that are partners, interdependent and mutually supportive. (4)[7]

In the forest scenes in particular, the film showcases not only the people but lets the camera focus on the trees, streams, and rocks, encouraging a deeper look at the traces of the past found within the natural world as well as underneath the ground.

Marie Battiste emphasizes the importance of place for Indigenous knowledge, explaining that "they learn from the knowledges that begin within a particular place, and that place defines for a group of people what it is, how they relate to the world, how they relate to each other, and how they're going to survive and live within that particular place" (Coleman 144). Crucially, the film begins by establishing a strong sense of space. It opens directly onto a forest glade, a wide shot that shows trees, a stream, and moss-covered rocks existing peacefully in a forest glade, as shafts of sunlight pierce the leaf-cover. As the camera slowly pans back, it lingers on the natural elements of the scene, picking up the tree trunks and the fallen trees, leaves, and branches that cover the ground. A title appears on the screen, establishing the date, 1267, before the camera tracks around the glade to reveal the bodies of fallen warriors on the ground and the figure of the Indigenous prophet. He is bent over a body, his feather cape blending into the land around him so that, as he rises, he appears to be rising from the ground. His relationship to nature becomes explicit as he intones: "Give me the strength to bind the wounds that cry out, to dispel the poison of hatred. Grant peace to this bleeding earth, the sacred land of our ancestors" (00:02:13-

00:02:39). He gives voice to the wounded earth, which resonates across time and manifests itself physically a few minutes later in the film through the appearance of the sinkhole.

Scenes set in this glade, featuring the prophet, return throughout the film and anchor the subsequent events in this specific place. The opening sequence situates viewers in the context of the peoples who lived on the land before the arrival of the Europeans, and the return of the glade throughout the film emphasizes that Indigenous cultural realities, even if they have been co-opted, reduced, and codified, have not disappeared. As indicated by the reappearance of the prophet throughout the film, Indigenous connection to the land is ongoing, as is further reinforced by the film closing on the words of the prophet and a final shot of the glade. These recurrent scenes imply that the land and the Indigenous cultural reality it holds is always there, underneath all the subsequent historical events. Joëlle Papillon sees a similar trend in Natasha Kanapé Fontaine's poetry, writing that "the Indigenous land is always breathing/exhaling (respire) behind the stifling mask of North-American urban life – Turtle Island behind America (21), Kanata underneath Canada (23-24), and Hochelaga underneath Montreal (38) – which makes possible the resurgence of Indigenous individuals, peoples, and territories" (69, my translation). A similar effect is produced in *Hochelaga, terre des âmes* with the repeated scenes in the forest, which arise as interludes between the other historical scenes, reminding the viewer of the original peoples of the land and the possibility of resurgence.

The glade also appears across time: in the depths of winter in 1687 as the Algonquin woman and the French settler nest in their hut, in late summer as the two Patriotes flee through the woods attempting to escape the British forces, and in October 1535 as Iroquois men run through the forest to warn of the arrival of a group of foreigners. Although it changes with the

seasons, the glade is always recognizable, filmed from a similar angle and in a wide or full shot. As the people pass through the glade, they are placed in the context of the land on which they move and seen in relation to the trees and water rather than alienated and set apart from the earth. Although the film cuts from historical moment to historical moment, returning to this recognizable place across the centuries instills a sense of continuity and oneness. Rather than imposing a feeling of teleology, progression, or even sequentiality, the repeated scenes set in the glade emphasize the idea that all the people, seen across the centuries, exist within a shared space.

The stream that flows through the glade adds to the sense of continuity. The first sound heard in the film is flowing water, played over a black screen, which then reveals the forest. The flow of the water is incessant, existing long before 1267, continuing during the film and after the final credits, as implied by the final shot of the water. The stream reappears throughout *Hochelaga, terre des âmes*, running even when the glade is shown in the middle of winter. When it resurges at the bottom of the sinkhole, the viewer understands that it has been flowing underneath the football field since time immemorial (00:26:11). The flowing stream is a constant, reaching across time and space to implicate all those who live and have lived on the same land. The flow of water is also a powerful way of understanding the passing of time. Kayanesenh Paul Williams writes: "As people who lived and travelled by rivers, [they] understood that the world flows; that time and space both flow; and that relationships also flow. […] Within that sense of flow, the Haudenosaunee see the people who are alive at any one time as simply part of a larger people, one that includes those who have gone before and those who will come after" (5).

Girard emphasizes this flow between generations. Rather than a linear progression, the passage from generation to generation is presented as a cycle of births and deaths, looking forward to the future, while also honouring those who have died and whose impact continues to be felt. This dual gaze, simultaneously directed to the past and the future, is expressed by the prophet, who encourages the survivor of the 1267 battle "to wash away the blood of this massacre so your children and the children of your children will know neither hatred nor war" (00:04:50-00:05:08). He asks that the fallen warriors be given courage "to face the night and return to the earth to join the dust of our ancestors" (01:31:26-01:31:38). If no objects from the thirteenth century are found during the dig, it does not follow that no traces of the past exist. Indeed, we see the beginning of the process of the bodies becoming dust. In the opening shot of the film, as the camera pans back, it shows fallen bodies, positioned so that they look like fallen logs, their limbs indistinguishable from the branches of the trees around them (00:01:20-00:01:32). A similar effect is created when the French Canadian Patriote is shot by the British soldiers and dies on the forest floor of the same glade, the muted earth tones of his clothes blending into the fallen leaves around him (01:06:38-01:07:57). As the bodies sink into the ground, they become part of the dust that will nourish the next trees that will grow. They are part of a constant cycle of birth and death, strikingly represented on the screen by trees at various stages of life, including fallen trees on the ground.

The shared roots of modern-day Canada are nourished by this diverse soil – new growth is born out of this earth that has absorbed the past of multiple generations. The importance of roots in the film echoes the Great White Roots of the Tree of Peace, which "not only spread the Great Law over the earth, fostering a landscape of peace: they also encouraged the people who

were touched by them to become part of the family of peace. […] The Great Law, despite its constant references to family terms, created a civic, not an ethnic, society. 'Family' meant support, responsibility, and mutual aid" (Williams 3). In his idealistic, and perhaps even simplistic, concluding scenes, Girard foregrounds the idea of a shared family, showing all of the different historical people as ghostly figures in the stands of the football stadium (01:26:22-01:26:44). They look down on the land where they once lived, and where their descendants now live, descendants who are not only the product of their past, but who have also inherited a responsibility to the land, its memories and its family.

Hochelaga, terre des âmes suggests that the eponymous souls of the title are part of the land, buried under the ground, but also discernible in the trees and the rocks. The prophet charges Asigny, the Iroquois warrior who survived the battle, to "go among the trees. There you will find my face. Carry these stones into the world. Protect them from being forgotten" (01:33:19-1:33:38). Yet his words are not heeded by Asigny's descendant, Baptiste Asigny who, at the beginning of the film, like other contemporary Montrealers, is disconnected from the trees and nature. In Girard's film, it is particularly hard to look at the trees in modern-day Montreal. Unlike the airy wide shots of the forest glade, the scenes in the city are tightly framed. The interiors seem particularly cramped, often with walls foreshortening the shot, preventing any depth of focus and metaphorically suggesting that contemporary people are only looking cursorily into the past. The trees that are seen at all are primarily viewed from aerial shots that show the forest covering Mont Royal, but the camera does not get close enough to look at the individual trees. In another scene, Asigny rides the bus, trees apparent through the windows, but only as a confused blur (00:02:45-00:02:58). The lack of detailed shots of trees, rocks, and streams in the modern-day Montreal sequences is an indictment of a contemporary way of

looking and shows a refusal to engage more actively with the land on which is written the more complex and repressed colonial realities.

At the end of the film, Girard finally shows a modern-day scene set in nature. The girlfriend of the college football player who died in the sinkhole is walking in a park with their son, now about six. It is a wide shot, showing the details of the park around them, and it feels like the forest glade, although there is now a path through the trees and added bushes and flowers (01:29:27-01:29:45). As his mother talks on the phone, the little boy bends down to look at a purple flower, likely lavender, identical to the one plucked by a French explorer almost 500 years ago. The film suggests that we should be like the little boy with the flower, inquisitive to the world around us and attentive to the stories of the land. Georges Didi-Huberman too emphasizes the importance of observing nature in *Bark:* "The destruction of people does not mean they are departed. They're here, they are indeed here: here in the flowers of the fields, here in the birches' sap, here in this tiny pond where lie the ashes of thousands dead" (105-106). He too encourages a careful examination and awareness of trees, noting that, "[b]ark is irregular, discontinuous, uneven. Here it clings to the tree, there it disintegrates and falls into our hands. It's the impurity that comes from things themselves. It tells of the impurity – the contingency, the variety, the exuberance, the relativity – of all things" (118). For Didi-Huberman, then, to truly look "as an archaeologist looks" is not to ignore nature, its trees and their bark in favor of what lies in the earth, but rather to look above and below the ground with the same intention of looking beneath and beyond the surface of things.

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Conclusion

Hochelaga, terre des âmes considers what lies both beneath and above the ground, approaching the past through a study of trees and the natural world as well as through an academic, archaeological dig. Girard celebrates both ways of looking, and, ultimately, like Didi-Huberman, shows them to be two facets of the same process of unearthing the past. As Lionel Ruffel contends, a combination of the two is a very contemporary way of approaching the past. The film is also contemporary in another sense, as it actively participates in current discussions around reconciliation in Canada. *Hochelaga, terre des âmes* came out in 2017, two years after the conclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, established as part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement. The introduction to the formal report states:

> As First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities access and revitalize their spirituality, cultures, languages, laws, and governance systems, and as non-aboriginal Canadians increasingly come to understand Indigenous history within Canada, and to recognize and respect Indigenous approaches to establishing and maintaining respectful relationships, Canadians can work together to forge a new covenant of reconciliation. (17)

The film attempts to work within this framework, nuancing the archaeological process and resisting the intellectual colonization that has so often accompanied it. Girard shows that traces of the past are discernible both above and below the ground, that the two cannot be separated, and that, just as the past cannot be isolated from the present, they must be considered simultaneously. *Hochelaga, terre des âmes* is rhapsodic in the sense of being composed of fragments, but it is also rhapsodic in another respect: it celebrates and encourages recitation and performance.[8] Baptiste Asigny shares his work during his doctoral defense, continuing the story

of his ancestor. The film encourages others to do the same, to notice the trees around them, to listen to their stories, and to tell their own. Like the trees he films, Girard hopes that his film will encourage further conversation, to "become a living, breathing entity through which connections, both physical and metaphysical, are made possible" (Dunlevy, "François Girard").

Notes

1. This interest in multigenerational history is not new for François Girard. *The Red Violin* (1998), perhaps his most well-known film, follows the story of a violin, crafted in seventeenth-century Italy, as it crosses multiple countries and continents before being put up for auction in present-day Montreal.

2. Rhapsodic (def. 1): "Of a literary work: consisting of a medley of narratives, poems, etc.; fragmentary or disconnected in style" (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

3. This figure, played by Raoul Max Trujillo, is listed in the credits as the prophet (Le Prophète).

4. In French, "un trou de mémoire," literally a hole in your memory, is the equivalent of the English "memory slip."

5. Baptiste Asigny is played by Samuel Tremblay, also known as Samian, a half-Algonquin rapper.

6. See, in particular, Bruce G. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought* and Joanne Lea and Karolyn Smardz Frost, "Public Archaeology in Canada."

7. The Haudenosaunee, the People of the Longhouse (until 1722 the five Iroquois-speaking nations of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca) were brought together by the Peacemaker to live together under the Great Law of Peace. The Tuscarora people joined in 1722.

8. Rhapsodic (def. 5): "Of a performance: consisting of a recitation of poetry; designating a recitation of this type" (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

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