

How Softcore Porn Kicked Off a Cultural Revolution in Quebec

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Screencap from the film *Valérie*

Few people have heard of the film *Deux femmes en or*, a sexploitation film made in 1970, but to this day it's sold more tickets than any other Quebec film. The film is also hailed as one of the first films to discuss the idea of modern Quebec in an international context—the very next year saw the debut of Montreal's Festival du nouveau cinema, the **2015 edition of which kicked off this week (<http://www.nouveaucinema.ca/en/vision-and-history>)**. The plot centres on the titular "Women in Gold" who, tired of their boring lives as housewives, use sex and ingenuity to find international fame. By the end of the film, a Broadway play about their experiences is being staged in New York.

Emerging at a threshold of changing culture and a growing sense of independence in the province, the film and others like it are forever intertwined with a burgeoning sense of Quebec identity. The so-called "distinct culture" of the province hinging, in part, on some beautiful women taking off their clothes.

Before 1960, Quebec was under the control of the Catholic Church, but at the dawn of that new decade, the province swiftly embraced secularism. Suddenly freed from their docile Catholicism, a liberated population wanted their own culture. Speaking with Paul Landriau, a Masters student in film at Université de Montreal, told VICE that people "wanted to look Quebecois, eat Quebecois, and read Quebecois." This was matched with a shift in North America, as the hippie culture flourished and free love reigned.

The very first "film de fesses" (ass film) in Quebec, ***Valérie*** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hlWlnLp5O9Y>), was released on May 2, 1969. While Quebec audiences had already seen women bare it all in films from Europe, they felt a sense of ownership and pride about seeing one of their own onscreen. The tagline for the film read "Déshabiller la petite québécoise" (undress the little Quebecoise), signaling that this was no ordinary t&a film. As the director Denis Heroux put it, "I've broken a taboo—undressing a woman in front of a camera. Not a Swedish or Parisian girl, but a Québec girl." This was not just a softcore porn film, but a story of emancipation.

Valérie holds up today, it has that retro vibe but also an electric energy. In her first screen role, Danielle Ouimet shines as the title character. The music and the almost constantly moving camera gives the film a kinetic power and masks some clumsy acting and the low budget. The film's first shot is a nude Valerie, making herself up before the camera, smoking cigarettes, sitting in her darkened dorm room at the convent. A nun watches her from a crack in the doorway, outraged, mirroring the old guard of Catholic morality. This sets the tone for a film full of gratuitous scenes of undress, topless dancing, psychedelic lesbianism, and prostitution—one which strays pretty far from being a generic blue movie. The film also showcases Montreal strongly: Many seminal scenes take place on Mt. Royal and in various haunts familiar to nearly any Montrealer, even today. Mirroring the experiences of the province itself, the story follows Valérie as she breaks away from the Church and learns to survive in an unfamiliar but exciting secular world.



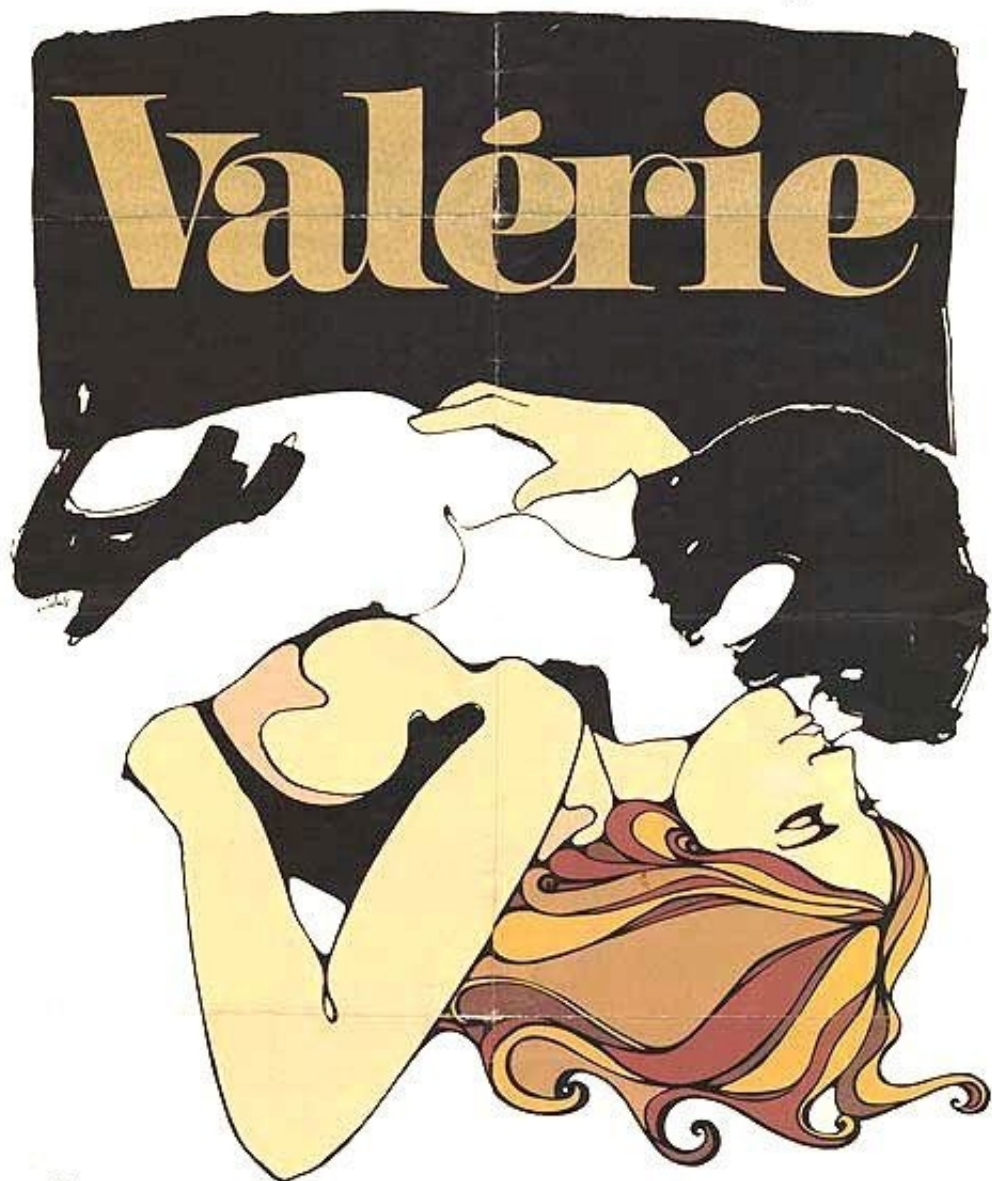
The opening scene in Valérie.

Valérie satisfied a strong desire from Quebec to consume local culture. The film's takeover arrived precisely at the right time economically as well: Just one year before it was released, a government funding body Société de développement de l'industrie cinématographique Canadienne (SDICC, which would eventually become Telefilm Canada) was launched. Unlike the National Film Board funding which had both cultural and artistic ambitions, the SDICC was motivated by profit. Starting in late 1968 the first wave of commercial Quebec cinema was released, and *Valérie* was at the forefront.

Unlike older national cinema industries that emerged in the earlier part of the 20th century, commercial cinema in Quebec really exploded during the only period in North American history where porn films were commercially viable. While the trend started in the early 1960s with the so-called **nudie-cutie films** (<http://www.popoptiq.com/the-immoral-mr-teas-russ-meyer-1959-the-birth-of-an-auteur-and-the-face-of-a-new-genre/>) (which skirted obscenity laws by posing as educational documentaries about nudist colonies), by the early 1970s hardcore pornography was making waves in movie theatres across the country. Deep Throat grossed over \$100 million dollars

(though the exact amount is **disputed** (<http://articles.latimes.com/2005/feb/24/business/fi-golden24>)) and several pornos were able to crack the top ten box office during the early part of the decade. Exploitation cinema is implicitly radical as it exists in defiance to the mainstream and Hollywood. For Quebec audiences to embrace sexploitation was to reject traditional and respectable film.

Tender sensuality



with
DANIELE OUIMET
GUY GODIN
ANDRÉE FLAMAND
MICHEL PAJE

directed by DENIS HEROUX

Valérie is representative of the life and norms of Quebec culture, which up to this point, was rarely seen onscreen. But, most crucially, it does so with a sense of youthful abrasion that contradicts the conventions of mainstream cinema. By using a film that features nudity and sexuality so brazenly, even in the Hollywood post-code era, *Valérie* contradicts the self-imposed rules of conventional filmmaking. There are no films like this coming out of Hollywood, and even in the counterculture of independent cinema few were as well made and as self-empowering as *Valérie*. This kind of moral defiance is not just in opposition to mainstream cinema, however, but an old way of thinking that was being squashed out of the province.

While *Valérie* initiated this new kind of cinema, *Deux femmes en or* would revolutionize it. The film's opening credits featured a song from popular Quebec artist **Robert Charlebois** (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Charlebois), which was basically the equivalent of Elvis Presley singing the title song of *Deep Throat*. The storyline was to the point: two bored housewives hungry for sex begin a series of affairs with the delivery men they regularly call into their apartments.

Along with Robert Charlebois, the film would feature a parade of well-known stars from Quebec popular culture (including future prime minister, Pierre Elliott Trudeau). This was not a fringe film that rose to the top, but a viable and popular commercial prospect that was embraced by the artistic community as well as the audience. *Deux femmes en or* would sell over 2 million tickets, a number still unmatched today. The only film to come close is *Séraphin: un homme et son péché* in 2002, selling 1.3 million tickets.

The success of these films inspired a number of other sexploitation films. In most cases, the film's popularity among Quebec audiences is more political than any of the form or content. One exception was a filmmaker, Gilles Carle, who saw his career take off during this era. With films like *La mort d'un bûcheron* (1973), *La vraie nature de Bernadette* (1972), and *La tête de Normande St-Onge* (1973), he would bridge the gap between exploitation and arthouse. Carle, who died in 2009, described his work as "social fables, allegorical tales rather than films of social protest." *La Vraie Nature de Bernadette*, in particular, was a harsh indictment on the double standards of the Church. In the film, Bernadette is generous emotionally and sexually, and rather than return their

respect, the men run her dry—while condemning her for her "loose" behavior. The film radically equates Bernadette with the saint of the same name— suggesting a dark history of the Church's exploitation of women.

The era of softcore porn dominating Quebec screens was relatively short lived and by 1975 had mostly run its course. This was not only the birth of a commercial cinema in Quebec but an important turning point in identity. Like it's avant-garde heroines seeking to escape their oppressive past, the citizens of Quebec latched onto these images of women undressing as icons for their own cultural rebirth.

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