

Authenticity and Innovation in Traditional Performances: A Case Study of “Jésus de Montréal”

Charlie McCormick

Volume 19, numéro 1, 1997

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087652ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087652ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d’Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

McCormick, C. (1997). Authenticity and Innovation in Traditional Performances: A Case Study of “Jésus de Montréal”. *Ethnologies*, 19(1), 129–146.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1087652ar>

Résumé de l'article

Dans cet article, McCormick s'interroge sur le bien-fondé du paradigme contemporain selon lequel l'innovation et la créativité dans les performances culturelles seraient plus significatives que la tradition. Il discute de cette question par le biais d'une étude de cas du film *Jésus de Montréal*. L'auteur avance que c'est l'auditoire qui détermine, en fin de compte, si une performance culturelle est modifiée de manière novatrice par son évolution dans le temps ou bien si elle demeure « authentique ».

**AUTHENTICITY AND INNOVATION IN
TRADITIONAL PERFORMANCES**
*A Case Study of *Jésus de Montréal**

Charlie McCORMICK

University of Pennsylvania

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master —that's all." (Carroll 1960:269).

In 1989, screenwriter and director Denys Arcand released *Jésus de Montréal*, his soon-to-be Genie-award-winning and Oscar-nominated film about the production of a modern Passion play, in Canada. It should come as no surprise that a movie so widely and well received would have various appeals. To the film's credit, it received its attention not because it cast megastars or created dramatic visual effects but because of its layers of complexity and resulting intellectual thickness. This paper is interested, particularly, in the way the film engages the problem of authenticity and innovation in "traditional" performances, and in doing so, how it comments on folklore's own discussion of the terms. To understand the movie's engagement of these concepts, it is necessary to analyze how *Jésus de Montréal* problematizes the folklore process.

The folklore process is defined as a cultural performance's attempt to directly or symbolically reference a tradition. In contemporary folkloristics, this referenced "tradition" generally is viewed as being constructed in the present so as to be considered appropriate by present-day performers and audience. There is rarely an "authentic tradition" referenced in the performance since every performance must be constructed anew to fit ever-changing situations, and there certainly is not a restoration of the past in the present. As Richard Schechner says concerning performances generally, "Hard as it may be for some scholars to swallow, performance originals disappear as fast as they are made. No notation, no reconstruction, no film or videotape recording can keep them. What they lose first and most importantly is their immediacy, their existence in a specific space and context" (Schechner 1985:50). In other words, the past is not only past, it is manipulated and re-created in the present for the present.

Jésus de Montréal challenges this perception of the folklore process. It suggests that the folklore process does not necessarily or fundamentally involve a creative or innovative rendering of “tradition” in the present. It does so by presenting a situation wherein, regardless of what the performers intend and attempt to do, innovation is not automatically recognized as such by the performance’s audience. In short, a traditional performance’s convergence with the authentic and the innovative is located as much (if not more so) with the audience as with the performers and the performance text. This audience reaction and agency can be gauged representatively by examining the relevant movie reviews that appeared in both secular and religious publications. While this approach is more suggestive than definitive, it seems to provide enough data for this paper’s hypothesis to be at least initially verified.

This paper is not arguing, however, that innovation has no role in *Jésus de Montréal*’s traditional performance of the Passion of Christ. In fact, on one of the film’s levels the actors attempt to use explicitly innovative means to perform the most authentic version possible of the Passion. Still, when the movie finally is successful in restoring the life of Christ in the present (instead of presenting another contrived or re-created version), it does so in a way that is surprisingly tangential to the performers’ innovative manipulations or lack thereof. This suggests that the performers themselves do not have primary responsibility for manipulating the “authentic” in the contemporary traditional performance; instead, that responsibility lies with the audience watching the performance. It suggests, as well, that the dominant paradigm in contemporary folkloristics concerning the illusory role that tradition plays in the folklore process is problematic, for the audience — at least in some performance situations — restores the past event into the present performance regardless of what the performers’ intentions are.

In 1992, Simon Bronner edited a collection of essays in honor of W. F. H. Nicolaisen entitled, *Creativity and Tradition in Folklore*. The title reinforces in its ordering of the words *Creativity* and *Tradition* the argument of the opening sentence of Bronner’s introduction that “individuals creatively, strategically, control their cultural tradition” (Bronner 1992:1). His position aligns itself with the growing trend among folklorists to claim as their domain a dynamic arena in which creativity and innovation are the primary agents instead of a static tradition. The trend is, in some ways, a move towards an evolutionary model since it posits that variability leads to survivability in a constantly changing world; in short, that which is unable to change will be selected against. As Nicolaisen says, “creativity and tradition, ... together produce vital variability thus keeping alive the very items that their integrated

forces help to shape" (Bronner 1992:11). Bronner, though, clearly is not proposing that the concept of tradition in folklore studies is obsolete; instead he is arguing, as did Nicolaisen, that performers are capable of actively responding to the changes around them and their own creative urges by reconfiguring the components of their "traditions" in response to these changes and urges. This argument, while re-defining folklore's traditional interest (i.e. re-defining it as a creative process), has made folklore a discipline which focuses on the progressive, adaptive nature of humans.

Bronner's summation of the current direction of folkloristics is attractive since it empowers individuals. It is, of course, a very different direction from the one proposed by Thoms (writing as Ambrose Merton) in 1846. In his letter to *The Athenaeum*, Thoms argues that folklore must be collected quickly since it is rapidly being lost. He writes, "I am not without hopes of enlisting your aid in garnering the few ears which are remaining, scattered over that field from which our forefathers might have gathered a goodly crop" (Thoms 1965:5). There is no reference to folklore's adaptability or variability in Thoms' conception of the term. Folklore was unchangeable, and it was therefore passing out of existence as the world around it changed. Creativity or innovation, then, had no place in early folklore studies.

While Thoms did not see the possibility of innovative processes occurring in folklore performances, later folklorists soon did. Von Sydow, for instance, recognizes — probably because of his work with collections obtained using the historic-geographic method which attempted to align chronologically and geographically the *variants* of an item of folklore — that folklore items and events are not traditional performances unsullied by their movement through time and space. They are subject to misrepresentation, to error, and to innovation as well. Make no mistake, von Sydow would not claim alliance with Bronner. Von Sydow writes, after all, that "passive bearers act, to some extent, as a check on tradition. If some deviation should be made, they can easily correct it, and they do so, which is of great importance for the unchanging survival of the tradition" (Sydow 1977:15). Innovations, then, are corrected by the community itself when, and if, they occur. Assuming that the innovation occurs in a place where there is no one to check and correct the item of folklore, the innovation might last. Of course, if it is similar to another item of folklore in the same geographical region, it will be engulfed by the old tradition. So innovation, in this model, while involved in the process of folklore, is not necessarily laudable nor is it vital to the continued success of the tradition.

For some time thereafter, tradition came to be “likened to a natural object, occupying space, enduring in time, and having a molecular structure” (Handler and Linnekin 1984:286). Tradition had some sort of essential essence that traveled through time and was maintained through change. Change for change’s sake was not the impetus for the transformation, however. As Lauri Honko says, “The adaptation of tradition in a specific milieu is naturally not an end in itself. Tradition is not only adapted so that it can continue to exist ... An adaptation of tradition occurs only when it is used for special expressive purposes in living situations” (Honko 1981:32). In other words, traditions are changed so that they will continue to be meaningful in everyday life. This change, however, is always limited to a reconfiguration of the traditional components. As H.G. Barnett states, “[M]ental content is socially defined; its substance is, in major part, dictated by tradition. But the manner of treating this content, of grasping it, altering it, and reordering it, is inevitably dictated by the potentialities and the liabilities of the machine which does the manipulating; namely, the individual mind” (Barnett 1953:16). While this position concedes that innovation and creativity have a role in the production and perpetuation of folklore, it makes these processes subservient to and bounded by the unchanging aspects of tradition.

In 1983, historian Eric Hobsbawm collected a series of essays in a book entitled *The Invention of Tradition*. These essays explored the notion of “tradition” and challenged its current definition. Hobsbawm concluded that in the past 200 years there had been a “rapid transformation of society” (Hobsbawm 1983:4-5) which weakened the old patterns and produced new ones. In his view, tradition emerged as a process (traditionalizing) rather than constantly remaining in a static state of being. Even “customs”, which are largely unreflective and therefore subject to less conscious traditionalizing, he argues, “cannot afford to be invariant, because in ‘traditional’ societies life is not so. Customary or common laws still show this combination of flexibility in substance and formal adherence to precedent” (Hobsbawm 1983:2).

The year after Hobsbawm’s publication, two folklorists, Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin, responded to the historians’ summation of “tradition” in an article in *The Journal of American Folklore* entitled “Tradition, Genuine or Spurious.” Their key question is posed, “[D]oes tradition refer to a core of inherited culture traits where continuity and boundedness are analogous to that of a natural object, or must tradition be understood as a wholly symbolic construction?” (Handler and Linnekin 1984:273). Building on Hobsbawm’s work and responding to Edward Shils’ description of tradition using a naturalistic metaphor (i.e. tradition superficially changes but essentially

remains the same), Handler and Linnekin propose that “since all cultures change ceaselessly, there can only be what is new, although what is new can take on symbolic value as ‘traditional’” (Handler and Linnekin 1984:273). All is new, then, and tradition finally is understood as something wholly constructed in the present having no actual diachronic dimension but a significant symbolic dimension.

This brief review of select works concerning the historical roles of tradition and creativity in the folklore process documents the general tendency in folkloristics towards a growing distrust of tradition and an increasing appreciation of creativity and innovation. Of course, there remain today extreme positions which posit that either the former or the latter is the sole force compelling the folklore process, and there are many others who remain ultimately undecided or who propose that the controlling force will always be situation specific. But a majority of folklore scholars maintain, as Henry Glassie recently has, that tradition should be considered one “of the many ways people convert the old into the new” (Glassie 1995:395). His view finds “change” to be the defining characteristic of the folklore process, initiated by the necessarily innovative tendencies of performers and artists. *Jésus de Montréal*, however, seems to complicate and problematize this otherwise well-informed understanding of the folklore process.

Jésus de Montréal opens with a Catholic Church in Montreal soliciting help in updating its regular production of the Passion on the Mountain (referring to the mountain shrine on which the Montreal Church sits). Daniel Coulombe, a once promising actor who has been absent from the performing arts for the past few years, is hired to perform this revision of the life of Christ. He casts himself as Jesus and finds two more men and two women — all of them struggling actors — to play the other roles. Mary and Martha are played by Constance (who is having a secret affair with the Priest who has hired Daniel to update the Passion) and Mireille (a young model whose boyfriend snidely tells her that all of her acting abilities are in her ass) respectively, while Peter and Pilate are played by Martin (who does the voice-overs for documentaries) and Rene (who joins the company of actors on the condition that he be allowed to recite Hamlet’s soliloquy sometime during the Passion performance).

Once the cast agrees to participate in the production, it begins writing and rehearsing the drama. Much of its inspiration for understanding Jesus Christ and subsequently transforming the church’s version of his life comes from archaeological and historical sources which cast new light on the man at the center of the Passion. While the cast thinks that its changes are making the

story more accurate and authentic (as well as more enjoyable), the Church authorities are distressed by the alterations to the story, particularly those which challenge the divinity of Christ. Although the Church authorities find the new Passion on the Mountain very troubling, other Montrealers laud the performance as a masterpiece and as infinitely more meaningful than other performances of the Passion.

As the movie progresses, the film's audience (and the actors themselves, to a certain extent) begin to realize that the troupe of Passion players — and especially Daniel — are becoming transformed; their theatrical roles are becoming juxtaposed with their everyday lives. Daniel, for instance, cleanses a theater of its commercialism in the same way Jesus cleansed the Temple of its money-changers. As a result of their transformations, the actors find it essential to stage an illegal performance of the Passion even though it has been officially canceled by the Church. The actors have been overwhelmed by the power of their performance and insist that it must continue to be staged. The audience within the movie frame watching this Passion of Christ similarly senses its power and riots when Church guards arrive to stop it.

In the midst of the riot, Daniel, who has been hanging on the cross as Christ, is knocked over by wrestling audience members and guards and is driven face first into the ground. Although the Jewish hospital in Montreal tries to save Daniel's life, the trauma to his body is too severe. He dies, but not before giving in a very Christ-like manner a final exhortation to those nearby to love one another. The doctor who tries to save Daniel's life asks Constance and Mireille if he might remove Daniel's organs and distribute them to those awaiting transplants. Constance gives her permission, and Daniel's eyes allow the blind to see, and his heart makes the sick become well.

One apparent interpretation of *Jésus de Montréal* seems to confirm the discipline's contemporary conceptualization of the folklore process; that is, it seems to suggest that innovation plays a more causal role than tradition in the folklore process. This conclusion is understandable since, in one reading, the movie suggests that every interpretation and performance of the Passion of Christ is an innovative construction, and neither the older nor the newer versions are heir to the "authentic" performance. This interpretation certainly seems to be voiced in the reactions of secular audiences. As suggestively represented and informed by film reviewers in secular sources, this position holds that the movie is a "furiously funny film" whose satire of the Bible is certain to distress fundamental and liberal Christians alike (Novak 1990:131). Other articulations of this interpretation of the movie by reviewers in similar sources posit that *Jésus de Montréal* satirizes all of modern Christianity by

exposing “a world that can’t recognize its own hypocrisy” (Travers 1990:39). Still other secular reviewers argue that the movie’s strength is not that it maintains the status quo by unquestioning sacred tenets of the Church but that it raises serious questions about the amount of power modern church institutions try to hold over individuals’ faith (Meyer 1991:66). As a final example of the interpretation of the movie in secular sources, academic reviewers see the movie as ultimately about the “contrary pulls of crass commercialism and human and artistic *engagement* for contemporary actors” (Shek 1990:214). This secular audience, in other words, seems to focus on the film’s idea that the Passion play is ultimately inconsequential to faith because of its recent, ancient, and inevitable manipulations.

This position seems arrived at naturally enough since Daniel Coulombe’s version of the Passion of Christ intentionally and explicitly attempts to create anew the Christian story in the hopes of making it more relevant to modern audiences, thereby rendering it incapable of being the authentic heir to the sacred story. Neither can the Catholic version be considered the authentic version. It, too, is flawed, the audience discovers, in light of recent historical and archaeological discoveries which suggest that the Church has, maybe often in its history, made its own revisions to the performance of the passion of Christ. In Richard Schechner’s model of performative possibilities, both versions represent $1 \rightarrow 5_a \rightarrow 5_b$ performances.

Schechner proposes a model for performances that, like contemporary folkloristics, awards a primacy to innovation rather than traditionality in performance. Unlike the preceding, representative scholars and researchers who have discussed the significance of these processes generally, Schechner focuses his comprehensive documentation and theorization of authenticity and innovation on theatrical performances of the folk variety, on — in other words — performances such as Passion plays. Since this paper takes a counter-position from the one reviewed above, this makes an extended discussion of his argument relevant to this paper’s project. “Performance,” Schechner notes, “means: never for the first time. It means: for the second to the n th time. Performance is ‘twice-behaved behavior’” (Schechner 1985:36). He presents traditional performances, therefore, as a dynamic, diachronic activity that attempts to restore an earlier performance but that rarely is able to re-actualize the event. Certainly, Schechner continues, “[t]he original ‘truth’ or ‘source’ of the behavior may be lost, ignored, or contradicted” (Schechner 1985:35). Schechner develops a notational shorthand to refer to the different manifestations of twice-behaved behavior, two of these being “a restoration of historically verifiable past ($1 \rightarrow 3 \rightarrow 4$), or — most

often — a restoration of a past that never was ($1 \rightarrow 5_a \rightarrow 5_b$)” (Schechner 1985:38).

In his model, “1” represents the “me rehearsing” or the actors themselves. “2”, while not entirely relevant to this paper, represents “someone else.” In a $1 \rightarrow 2$ performance, then, the actor becomes someone else as might happen in trance performances or certain religious ceremonies. More directly related to this study is when the performer (i.e. “1”) either refers his or her performance to “3,” an “actual, historical past event” or “authorized original,” or to “ 5_a ,” a “mythical or fictional past.” In the first modeled situation, the actor refers his or her performance quite directly to some sort of source material which provides a connection to the authentic original. In the second modeled situation, the actor’s performance is referred to something that never was (e.g. legendary material or acknowledged fiction). A $1 \rightarrow 3$ performance, then, is manifested as a “4,” a “restored event” which represents the original in its contemporary form. A $1 \rightarrow 5_a$ performance, on the other hand, is manifested as a “ 5_b ,” a “non-restored event” which represents an original non-event in its inevitable process of transformation (Schechner 1985:35-55). This conceptual model gives us a shorthand for discussing traditional performances and provides us an articulate position concerning the role of authenticity and innovation in traditional performances which further information may help to elaborate or correct.

Schechner hypothesizes that a performance rarely, if ever, restores a past event ($1 \rightarrow 3 \rightarrow 4$). There seems to be ample evidence validating this hypothesis. Regina Bendix, for instance, in *Backstage Domains* notes that the two Swiss communities in her data group which perform “William Tell” every summer do not hesitate to modify Schiller’s original text even though the traditional tale is highly regarded as a national treasure (Bendix 1989:198). In Schechner’s model, of course, whether the performing communities treasure the material or not is irrelevant. Over the course of time, the performance almost inevitably becomes altered. He writes: “But even the strictest attempts at $1 \rightarrow 3 \rightarrow 4$ frequently are in fact examples of $1 \rightarrow 5_a \rightarrow 5_b$. $1 \rightarrow 3 \rightarrow 4$ is very unstable, simply because even if human memory can be improved upon by the use of film or exact notation a performance always happens within several contexts, and these are not easily controllable” (Schechner 1985:43). This is not to suggest, however, that the past is entirely absent from present performances. At the very least and even in some of the most explicitly “created” festive performances, a “cultural model” is operating which serves as a prototype and provides the building blocks from which organizers can create something new

(Salmi-Niklander 1992:34). Even so, a restoration of the past — or making the past live in the present — is rarely, if ever, what is ultimately achieved.

Jésus de Montréal seems to present its characters as being in search of a $1 \rightarrow 3 \rightarrow 4$ performance, but ultimately succumbing to a $1 \rightarrow 5_a \rightarrow 5_b$ performance. If the movie ended on this point and this point alone, it would have reinforced one of folklore's contemporary paradigms, but it would have been less satisfactory to any believing Christian moviegoer who might have seen the film. For it is one thing for this latter group of people, who must attempt to understand the life of Christ, to realize there may be other equally valid — if superficially different — interpretations of the life of Christ which they should consider, but it is another thing entirely for them to realize that they will never understand the life of Christ because by this point in time it has been so constructed and manipulated that it has lost all but the most irrelevant references to the historical figure. Christians accept (for the most part) that their understanding of the life of Christ is not perfect or complete. As Schechner says:

How Christ offered his disciples wine and matzo at the Last Supper (a seder) is irrelevant to the performance of the Eucharist. The Roman Catholic church ceremony has its own performance history. The language of church ceremony has never been the language Christ spoke, Aramaic-Hebrew. Nor are the gestures or costumes of the priests modeled on Christ's. And if the church had chosen another of Christ's gestures as the keystone of the Mass — say, the laying on of hands to heal the sick — this would have developed its own traditional scripts (Schechner 1985:52).

Christians accept these sorts of alterations because they are necessary given the dilemma of living 3,000 years after Christ. Christians are less secure, however, with the assertion that their primary referent (i.e. Christ himself) is a manipulated fiction. I am reminded, for instance, of the many picketers who gathered outside movie theaters throughout the "Bible-belt" region of the southern U.S. when *The Last Temptation of Christ* was released in movie theaters. They feared their basic assumptions about Jesus Christ were being attacked (even though many of them never saw the film), and it scared them into action. These believers' understanding of the world and their place within it would have been undermined by the movie's premise that their concept of what constitutes the sacred Christ is inaccurate and even responsible for the ongoing falsification that involves this historical figure.

Jésus de Montréal, though, is not merely a movie that can be interpreted as showing the inevitability of innovation in what we think of as our traditional performances. Arcand makes interpreting his film an exceedingly more

complex process when Daniel becomes transformed during the course of the movie. Daniel, in short, changes. Ironically enough, his life is changed into an accurate restoration of the very event which he had been having such difficulty accurately representing — the life of Christ. In many ways, of course, Daniel's seemingly unintentional $1 \rightarrow 3 \rightarrow 4$ performance is "transformed by specific cultural values into $1 \rightarrow 5_a \rightarrow 5_b$ " (Schechner 1985:43). As in the above example, for instance, Daniel does not begin speaking Aramaic-Hebrew nor does he wear the same type of clothing that Christ wore, but on a more significant level—on the level of content, perhaps — Daniel's transformation becomes a $1 \rightarrow 3 \rightarrow 4$ restoration/re-actualization of the life of Christ.

Schechner looks at whole performances in his restored behavior model. For *Jésus de Montréal*, however, it might be more useful to apply his model to the individual components of Daniel's performance rather than his performance as a whole since, depending on the component's relevance to the audience, the performance could be of either the $1 \rightarrow 3 \rightarrow 4$ or the $1 \rightarrow 5_a \rightarrow 5_b$ variety. There are superficial aspects of Daniel's transformation (as noted above) that do not re-actualize the authentic event, but the content of the performance can be a direct restoration of the life of Christ. To accept this argument, of course, one must question Schechner's assertion — and the contemporary folklore paradigm as well — that the "past is one that is always in the process of transformation" (Schechner 1985:40). Remember, however, that certain components of this performance are undeniably contemporary constructions ($1 \rightarrow 5_a \rightarrow 5_b$). Even so, there is something more significant about the performance, a "something" that I am referring to — rather imprecisely I fear — as content, that is interpreted by certain audience members as a restoration of the past event ($1 \rightarrow 3 \rightarrow 4$) which was the life of Christ.

The argument supporting the hypothesis that Daniel's transformation is a $1 \rightarrow 3 \rightarrow 4$ performance is based on the assumption that the movie can "work," that an audience can interpret it as a re-actualized performance. Arcand, after all, never explains Daniel's transformation in the movie. The characters never discuss it, Daniel never reflects on it, and there is nothing else in the movie to suggest that what is happening to Daniel is a $1 \rightarrow 3 \rightarrow 4$ performance re-actualizing the life of Christ. In fact, if anything, the movie's most direct message is that there can never be a $1 \rightarrow 3 \rightarrow 4$ performance and explains why this is so from both the Passion players' perspective and the church's perspective. The actors' argue that they must always be aware of their audience and strive to make the performance meaningful for them. The church's explanation, on the other hand, is that it must always strive to maintain the faith of its own audience, and an abrupt change in the presentation of the central

figure in the religion (even if this change were to more accurately reflect what “really” happened) could undermine or destroy people’s faith. Admittedly, these are compelling reasons to believe that the life of Christ can never be re-actualized in the present and that every performance attempting to do so will be an exercise in innovation. Yet Arcand presents just such a restoration. When Daniel is transformed at the end of the movie, certain audience members know that at last they are witnessing the “authentic” Passion, not another manipulated version of the life of Christ. This suggestion that Daniel’s transformation takes place, and in content he re-actualizes the life of Christ, is validated because certain audience members draw these conclusions in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. This audience concludes, in other words, that Daniel’s transformation restores the authentic Passion of Christ, not just another imitation of this life.

This audience — comprised of believing Christians — has its position representatively articulated by movie reviewers in religious journals. These sources suggest, for an example, that *Jésus de Montréal* is fundamentally about showing sensitivity towards religion and revitalizing the Gospel story by giving it deeper meaning (O’Brien 1990:526-527). More tellingly (and more precisely to the point of this paper’s argument), another religious reviewer notes that the movie’s actors,

without realizing it, re-enact portions of the biblical story, including a perfect modern version of Jesus’ throwing the money-changers out of the temple ... It would be too bad if U.S. audiences were deprived of seeing a Jesus film as it should be made, one relevant to a contemporary audience but authentic to the original story (Wall 1989:836).

The movie fosters in its audience members a healthy suspicion of Passion performances. Still, with no dramatic flair, with no deliberate theorizing or moralizing, certain members of the film audience see unfolding before their eyes what they know is finally the authentic performance of the life of Christ.

The argument that Daniel’s transformation is a 1→3→4 performance, then, places as much — if not more — responsibility for this interpretation with the audience as with the intentions and abilities of the performers. Unlike Schechner’s model which gives this agency to the performers of folk dramas, this paper suggests it is the audience which is involved in the creation of restored performances. Some audiences, whether the movie “works” for them or not, will be less inclined to view the film as a performance of the type 1→3→4. They may get caught up in the dramatic technique used in

representing (or in the non-representation of) Daniel's transformation as a re-actualization of the life of Christ, but they will keep the movie and its subject within the fictional frame. In this case, because the film and the life it restores are both fiction and therefore, necessarily, constructions, the audience will see the Passion performance as a $1 \rightarrow 5_a \rightarrow 5_b$ since there never was an authentic or original performance, although the film itself can still be meaningful since it comments on a number of other important issues. Audience members who share a different set of beliefs, however, may view Daniel's transformation as a $1 \rightarrow 3 \rightarrow 4$. To these audience members, the movie's fictionality is irrelevant. The story may be situated within a fictional frame but for this audience of Christian believers, that does not contradict the fact that it can be interpreted as restoring an actual past.

Schechner says that "[b]ecause performance behavior isn't free and easy it never wholly 'belongs to' the performer" (Schechner 1985:118). This paper is suggesting it may, instead, belong largely with the audience. A performance's intention may be to play with the "authentic" original, but depending on the audience's interpretation of this performance it can become a restoration of the past nonetheless. Christian audiences, for instance, might interpret Daniel's transformation as a re-actualization of Christ's life whereas a non-Christian audience would not accept the premise which underlies this interpretation and therefore not accept the interpretation, but it could still enjoy the movie as a delightful and intriguing fiction.¹

An analogous interpretive situation seems to have occurred with an audience of cultural analysts. Edith and Victor Turner made a career of working with the Ndembu of Zambia. In 1968, Victor Turner analyzed the Ndembu's Ihamba tooth ritual in light of its social context, the psychological state of the patient, and the psychological skill of the Ndembu doctor. Then, in 1985, Edith Turner returned to the Ndembu and participated in an Ihamba tooth ritual herself (as observer and full participant). At the conclusion of the ritual

-
1. An analogous situation has occurred wherein Obergammerau's famous Passion play was interpreted differently by religious and secular sources but in ways that correspond to the different audiences' interpretations of *Jésus de Montréal*. Glenn Loney, for instance, in his article: 1991. Obergammerau, 1634-1990: The Play and the Passions. *New Theatre Quarterly*, 7: 203-16, documents the history of the play and its anti-Semitic allegations. Finally, he suggests possible improvements that could be made to the production. Paul Maier, on the other hand, in his article: 1990. Anti-Semitism Charge Follows Obergammerau Passion Play. *Christianity Today*, 34: 80, discusses the charges of anti-Semitism surrounding Obergammerau's production, but he also attempts to document the powerful effect the performance has on some of the masses. He comments that many viewers have a spiritual experience during the performance and "sense an immediacy unknown before with the life of Christ."

she witnessed a “large afflicting substance” mysteriously emerge from the Ndembu patient’s back (Turner *et al.* 1992:2). Edith Turner does not document significant differences between the earlier and later performances that would have resulted in the significantly different interpretations of the event. Her study does suggest, however, that performers have, at best, only partial ownership of their performances. In the case of the Ihamba tooth ritual, for instance, Victor Turner as audience accepted one group of beliefs — and not others — and so he was limited as to how he could interpret the event. Edith Turner, on the other hand, apparently accepted a different range of beliefs that permitted her to have a different limit of possible interpretations regarding the event. The performance may not have been changed by the performers, but because of the audience’s final ownership of the performance it becomes something fundamentally different to the individual audience members.

What accounts, then, for the ownership some *Jésus de Montréal* audience members assume which interprets Daniel’s performance — at least on the level of content — as a restoration of a past event? A librarian in *Jésus de Montréal* meets Daniel in the library as he researches material in anticipation of his re-writing of the Passion of Christ. She asks him if he is looking for Christ. He nods his head ‘yes’. She responds before walking away, “He will find you.” Arcand may be suggesting this is exactly what happens to Daniel and, by extension, to the audience watching the movie as well. Through appropriate rehearsing, audience members become capable of recognizing this performance as a restoration of a past event. In *Jésus de Montréal*, for instance, Daniel’s rehearsals leading up to the point of his transformation *facilitate* his transformation and *enable* him to restore on the level of content the life of Christ. While Schechner argues that in some performances “I become someone else, or myself in another state of being, or mood, so ‘unlike me’ that I appear to be ‘beside myself’ or ‘possessed by another.’ There is little rehearsal for this kind of performance, sometimes none” (Schechner 1985:41), the Christian tradition tells initiates to follow (or rehearse) Jesus figuratively in the daily practice of their lives² so that they might eventually be able to follow Jesus³ literally and thereby re-actualize the life of Christ in their own life. To become “possessed by another” (i.e. Christ) in this framework, then, does require rehearsal. It requires of a person a certain amount of effort and determination before he or she “become[s] someone else.” In Daniel’s case, he is transformed through his diligent efforts to “follow Christ”, to determine who the holy man was and how he lived so that he might restore through

2. Matthew 4: 19.

3. Matthew 16: 24.

performance his life ("Jesus will find you."). And in the acting out of this "someone else", the rehearsing actors become capable of differentiating the authentic from the innovative.

In his book, *The Greek Passion*, Nikos Kazantzakis writes about the production of another fictional passion play in the Greek village of Lycovrissi, a world away from Montreal. Kazantzakis' work, like *Jésus de Montréal*, recounts the tragic life of a group of men and women who have been chosen to perform the last days of Jesus' life. Like the acting troupe in *Jésus de Montréal*, these actors undergo radical transformations once they begin rehearsing, and like their counterparts in Montreal, these actors attempt to bring something innovative to their roles so that their performance will more closely mirror the biblical lives they are intending to portray. The elders and religious leaders of Lycovrissi, like the Canadian Catholic Church, resent this alteration to the "traditional" story of which they consider themselves caretakers. While pulling and pushing the story to suit their individual desires, however, the actors begin to feel that, through rehearsal, some greater force is moving them as well, moving them towards the authentic version of the performance:

"What's happened to you, poor Panayotaros?" said Michelis, sitting down near him; "for several months you've been unrecognizable. You were always a rough one, but not mischievous. Someone's injured you, Panayotaros? Who? What's happened to you?"

"Lot's of things, devil take me, lots of things, and you know very well. So why ask me? You know very well!"

"Is it because you were chosen to act Judas?" Michelis asked shyly; "but it's a play, a sacred play but only a play, not real. Is Manolios Christ once and for all? Am I really John, His beloved disciple? How did you come to get an idea like that into your head? It's a real sin!" (Kazantzakis 1981:321-322)

The Penitentes of New Mexico also act out the trial, flagellation, and crucifixion of Christ in their celebration of Holy Week. They do this by bloodying their backs with knives and broken glass, carrying huge wooden crosses across the desert, and tying themselves to these crosses until their "veins distend and their trunks turn blue from near-strangulation" (Podles and Podles 1992:350). The Catholic Church has tried to make them cease these practices and institute the Church's rituals instead. In spite of this pressure, however, the Penitentes continue their physical worship today regardless of official sanctions and the pain it entails. It is through their rehearsing of Christ's final hours that they become an audience which is capable of

performing a 1→3→4 performance and viewing their performance as a restoration of the life of Christ and therefore unalterable.

Perhaps this is the same sort of process which Edith Turner went through, permitting her to form such a different interpretation of the Ndembu ritual from that of her husband. As actor, she trained herself to become an audience member sensitive to a certain range of interpretive possibilities. In doing so, she taught herself to see what her husband never could. So regardless of the actors' intentions, their performances remain subject to an audience (themselves included) which owns its individual interpretations of the event as a re-actualization of the past or as a present-day manipulation.

Schechner writes concerning restored performances: "It is my view that 1→3→4 is very unstable: it is always becoming 1→5_a→5_b" (Schechner 1985:44). His position is consistent with the contemporary idea in folkloristics that innovation and creativity should be awarded primacy in the folklore process instead of tradition. This position, as recently expressed by Richard MacKinnon, who documents and analyzes vernacular architecture in Newfoundland, has become paradigmatic for the discipline and readers are therefore not only unsurprised to hear him argue that although houses and other buildings in Newfoundland "often appear to be in the same condition as when originally built" they have been subject to all manner of and seemingly inevitable alterations and innovations (MacKinnon 1995:32), but they expect to hear it. This paper, however, has attempted to consider again, with new data, how much of a role both innovation and tradition play in the folklore process, generally, and in theatrical performances, specifically, by suggesting that in *Jésus de Montréal* certain members of the film audience witness a past performance re-actualized in the present. The performance produces, for some audience members, an isolatable cultural element that has been transmitted through time, even though recent folklore theorists argue that the "emergent reorientation" in the discipline looks skeptically on this idea (Bauman 1992:31).

It has not been the intention of this study to try to suggest that innovation and creativity are completely absent in folklore processes in general and in Passion plays in particular. This latter battle has been fought and lost already by critics who attacked Salmi Morse for producing the United States' first professionally staged Passion drama. The entire nation, it seems, turned on Morse in disgust in the late 1870s for suggesting that the traditional story of the life of Christ was not sacrosanct, that it was manipulatable. And while "[l]aws were passed banning its production," and "Morse was denounced by editors and ministers throughout the nation" (Nielson 1991), Morse's

technique, of course, has been vindicated. The life of Christ is creatively manipulated today in books (e.g. Joseph F. Girzone's *Joshua*), musicals (e.g. *Jesus Christ Superstar*), and movies (e.g. *Jésus de Montréal*).

Even so, tradition plays a significant role in the content of Daniel's performance in *Jésus de Montréal*. This suggests that performances are not ultimately constructed in the present, at least not for audience members who, as products of certain types of rehearsals, have been trained to see certain performances as restorations rather than innovations. When Schechner says, then, that the "people possessing the latest version of the original often presume (falsely) that it has come down unchanged over many generations" (Schechner 1985:49), his argument must be qualified. Tradition can still be an operative word in folklore studies, not only to refer to present-day constructions but as an actual element that emerges substantially unchanged from the past in certain performance situations for certain audience members. As Kazantzakis concludes *The Greek Passion*:

Priest Fostis listened to the bell pealing gaily, announcing that Christ was coming down on earth to save the world. He shook his head and heaved a sigh: In vain, my Christ, in vain, he muttered; two thousand years have gone by and men crucify You still. When will You be born, my Christ, and not be crucified any more, but live among us for eternity (Kazantzakis 1981:429).

I would like to thank Regina Bendix for encouraging, reading, and commenting on an early draft of this paper and several anonymous readers who provided insightful criticism on a later draft.

References Cited

- Barnett, H.G. 1953. *Innovation: The Basis of Cultural Change*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company Inc.
- Bauman, Richard. 1992. Folklore. In *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments*, ed. Richard Bauman. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bendix, Regina. 1989. *Backstage Domains: Playing William Tell in Two Swiss Communities*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Bronner, Simon. 1992. *Creativity and Tradition in Folklore*. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Carroll, Lewis. 1960. *The Annotated Alice: Through the Looking Glass*. Meridian.
- Glassie, Henry. 1995. Tradition. *Journal of American Folklore*, 18.
- Handler, Richard and Jocelyn Linnekin. 1984. Tradition, Genuine or Spurious. *Journal of American Folklore*, 97.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. 1983. Introduction: Inventing Traditions. In *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Honko, Lauri. 1981. Four Forms of Adaptation of Tradition. In *Adaptation, Change and Decline in Oral Literature*, eds. Lauri Honko and Vilmos Voigt. Helsinki: Suomalainen Kirjallisuuden Seura.
- Kazantzakis, Nikos. 1981 (1953). *The Greek Passion*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- MacKinnon, Richard. 1995. House Movings and Alterations: Stability and Change in the Codroy Valley Landscape. *Canadian Folklore Canadien*, 17, 2: 31-50.
- Meyer, Marianne. 1991. Jesus of Montreal. *Video*, 15.

- Nielsen, Alan. 1991. *The Great Victorian Sacrilege: Preachers, Politics and The Passion, 1879-1884*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc.
- Novak, Ralph. 1990. Jesus of Montreal. *People Weekly*, 33.
- O'Brien, Tim. 1990. Jesus of Montreal. *America*, 162.
- Podles, Mary E. and Leon J. Podles. 1992. Saint-Makers in the Desert. *America*, 167.
- Salmi-Niklander, Kirsti. 1992. Festival as Ritual — Rituals in Festival: Symbolic Expressions in Modern Finnish Local Festivals. *Canadian Folklore Canadien*, 14, 1: 31-46.
- Schechner, Richard. 1985. *Between Theater and Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Shek. B. 1990. Humanities. *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 60.
- Thoms, William. 1965 (1846). Folklore. In *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Travers, Peter. 1990. Jesus of Montreal. *Rolling Stone*, May.
- Turner, Edith, Blodgett, William, Kahona, Singleton, Benwa, Fideli. 1992. *Experiencing Ritual: A New Interpretation of African Healing*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Sydow, C.W. von. 1977 (1948). *Selected Papers on Folklore*. Copenhagen, Rosenkilde and Bagger.
- Wall, James M. 1989. Jesus and Others at Montreal Festival. *The Christian Century*, 106.