

# **PLACE D'ARMES**

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## Abstract

*Place d'Armes* is a 19-minute short film that explores the subject of chronic pain management within the structure of a narrative. The film follows Jean-Paul, a former longshoreman who has been injured at work and can no longer work at the docks. He now spends his days praying at various Catholic churches in Montreal. To make money, he works as a dancer at a strip club in the gay village. One night, a student named Scott watches him perform and pays for a private dance. This experience yields an emotional connection between Scott and Jean-Paul, which surprises them both, leading them to explore their inner lives and question the choices they have made. The film depicts a slice of Jean-Paul's life, showing his resilience in coping with pain, and his renewed faith in the beauty of life.

The film positions Jean-Paul as straddling two worlds that may seem from the outside to be in complete opposition. My intention is to illustrate the many sides that any one person holds within them and how these seemingly disparate elements can coexist. I hope these contrasting worlds feel less at odds with each other as the film continues. Jean-Paul is a practicing Catholic, still engaging with the traditions he was brought up in. He is also an out gay man who gets a special rush from performing a striptease for a room full of people. These are but two of the many facets of his complicated human existence.

The chronic pain Jean-Paul experiences in the film cannot be cured. However, he is somewhat mysteriously able to move freely while he dances at the club, despite being visibly affected by his pain in other aspects of his life. He takes painkillers routinely, seen at various points throughout the film. During the private dance, Jean-Paul tells Scott that he doesn't feel pain while he dances. This curious phenomenon is intentionally left open to interpretation. There is room for the viewer to make up their own mind, whether they believe he has communicated

with the divine, that he loses himself through the transcendent power of dance, or that some other force is responsible.

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## Genesis: Two Kathies

Kathy Acker wrote “pain is the world. I don’t have anywhere to run” in *Blood and Guts in High School* (Acker 1984). Acker was an American artist and writer known for her brutal and playful experimental fiction. She went to Tijuana in 1997, seeking alternative treatment for her cancer there. She was vehemently opposed to the approaches of traditional Western medicine. In fact, she was vehemently opposed to most things traditional.

The most important Kathy in my life is my mother. In her mid-forties, when I was a teenager, she began to feel pain and stiffness that came and went in various parts of her body. Soon the intensity of it became unbearable. My mother grew up on a farm, where she worked bailing hay and weeding the massive vegetable garden. Physical work was central to her upbringing. In school, she excelled in sports and still holds a regional record for the hundred-meter sprint. She studied kinesiology at university and became a physical education teacher. Her physicality was always one of her most apparent attributes. She communicates with her body. To see her suddenly become physically incapacitated at the age of forty-five was disheartening. She could no longer run. On some days, it was a struggle for her to walk. We laughed about it as we cried, but it was agonizing to not understand what was happening to her. Eventually she was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. She began seeing a rheumatologist and started on a combination of drugs: anti-inflammatories, disease-modifying anti-rheumatics and painkillers. However, it was when she was offered a new injectable biological medication that things took a clear turn. It changed her life. She has now been injecting herself with this biologic for over twenty years. Her quality of life is high, as is her range of motion. She found a medical intervention that restored her faith in her abilities.

Kathy Acker felt that she lived in a world of pain, from which there was no escape. Kathy Lint did all that was in her power to find medication to alleviate her pain. So why are some people vehemently opposed to certain medical interventions, while others are not? Kathy Acker's distrust was also a critique of the medical industrial complex, which had failed to actually provide cures to people living with both cancer and HIV/AIDS in the 1980's. Acker wrote a long essay commissioned by the *Guardian Weekend* magazine in 1997 called "The Gift of Disease." In it, she outlined her experience being diagnosed with breast cancer and having a double mastectomy, only to be told by her surgeon that her cancer may have metastasized, as they had found cancerous cells in her lymph nodes. Faced with the looming idea of undergoing chemotherapy, she rejected her doctor's opinion, seeking alternative methods of treatment. "Cancer is business," she said, (Acker 1997). She goes on to write "conventional medicine was reducing me, quickly, to a body that was only material, to a body without hope and so, without will," (Acker 1997). Acker died in Mexico in 1997.

Of course, the two Kathies were not just wildly different people, but also people in wildly different situations. My mother's pain, although life changing, was not life threatening. She did not find herself post-surgery being told she was still in danger. Rather, Kathy Lint took her chances with a relatively new drug, a decision that paid off and restored much of what had been taken from her.

Again, Jean-Paul, as a character, is situated between two disparate worlds. He is seen taking painkillers throughout the film, but when he speaks with Scott about his injury, it is made clear that the painkillers do not provide the relief he seeks. Surely they have an effect on his body, their potency is well-documented in the media. Regardless, they do not give Jean-Paul what he is looking for. Only the performance is able to satisfy that desire in him.



Image 1: Still from *Place d'Armes* (2023) directed by Drew Lint, featuring Francois Lalumiere.

*Place d'Armes* was initially written as an exercise in the screenwriting course I took with Howard Wiseman in my second semester in the Masters in Film program at York University. The assignment was to write a parallel script, using the same general topic or theme we were working on for our respective thesis projects, but with an entirely new and different setting, plot and cast of characters. I took the topic of pain and its management, which I was working with in *Galvanize*, my initially proposed thesis project, and applied it to a new story, set in Montreal during winter.

The initial inspiration for *Galvanize* came from a conversation I had with a friend who experiences chronic pain, something he manages daily. His name is Matthew Mockford. He works in a neuroscience lab researching pain. As we talked about his history, I realized that his life was dominated by pain. It made me think of my mother. As I developed *Galvanize* and thought more on the subject of chronic pain, I had conversations with other friends and collaborators on the topic. Almost everyone with whom I spoke knew someone with chronic pain. In fact, some friends confided in me that they had been managing chronic pain of their own

for years. This ubiquity inspired me to conceive a script for a narrative film following an individual experiencing chronic pain, desperate to control a situation out of their control. I did some preliminary research on the subject of chronic pain and methods of coping with it. I conducted a video interview with Matt, who discussed his journey to get a diagnosis for his chronic pain and his subsequent efforts to understand his pain through neuroscience. We also talked about the spectrum of pain and pleasure and the ways in which the brain can be conditioned to associate seemingly incompatible responses with stimuli (Matthew Mockford).

Around the same time as those initial conversations, I became familiar with the French philosopher Jacques Lacan's concept of *Jouissance*, another difficult phenomenon to pinpoint, since Lacan edited his theory annually and presented it in his various seminars. As I understand it, *Jouissance* aims to define a desire to transgress and transcend the confines of normative existence through the embrace of pleasure which is so intense it resembles pain (Lacan). He positions *Jouissance* as a dangerous force, connected to the death drive. There is a sense of risk attached to it. To achieve something as momentous as *Jouissance*, one must be willing to risk safety, physical well-being, life itself. Lacan's theory made me think about the excess of pain. Could that lead to pleasure? Bob Flanagan was an artist and writer born with cystic fibrosis who began to experiment with BDSM as a way of coping with his chronic pain. Flanagan's practice, as documented in the film, *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* (1997), involved documenting feats of masochistic experimentation with his body. He inserted needles into his skin, sometimes on his genitals, occasionally drawing blood, and often creating images that are as compelling as they are unnerving. He muses in the film about his own skewed sense of the sensation of pain, learning from a young age that he had a different approach to pain and sexuality than other people, as a result of his painful chronic condition (Dick).



The key Lacanian concept that reverberates through all of the subsequent research and development I did as part of this project is the idea of pushing past the accepted limits of normal daily life, transcending them for some greater, more exciting, dangerous and sexual beyond. Rather than pushing past his pain, Jean-Paul pushes through it, embracing the pain that shoots through his body and letting it transform him.

Pain and pleasure are often thought of as a binary, rather than as associated sensations. Anatomically, the modulation of both pain and pleasure occurs in neurons in the same location in the body. Neuroscientists cannot agree on whether pain and pleasure are opposite ends of a spectrum, as described by Siri Leknes and Irene Tracey, but it seems evident they are closely related (Leknes & Tracey).

In “Where Does It Hurt,” Laura Kolbe investigates ways of defining pain. She offers psychologist Ronald Melzack’s “neuromatrix of pain” as a model, which “implies that pain arises from a complex array of neural inputs, in relation to one’s genetics as well as environmentally provoked developments in the brain and nervous system. Some of the inputs that feed this matrix come from nociceptors (peripheral nerve endings detecting painful stimuli), but there are many other inputs relating to stress, inflammation, memory, and mood,” (Kolbe 4). The neuromatrix differs in every case, meaning that the pain any one person experiences is unique and changeable, based on the complex web of interacting inputs that create it (Kolbe 4).

Kolbe discusses Abdul-Ghaaliq Lalkhen’s *An Anatomy of Pain: How the Body and the Mind Experience and Endure Physical Suffering*: “Lalkhen writes of an encounter with a patient with fibromyalgia: ‘I have never met a lonelier person than someone suffering with pain.’ Perhaps this yawning gap— between someone who’s in pain and someone who isn’t—speaks to the perplexing nature of pain more than any... physicians’ case histories,” (Kolbe 3). This seems

a particularly relevant point to *Place d'Armes*. Jean-Paul is a lonely character. He spends most of his time alone, whether at home, at a church, or at work, he moves through the world quietly, and on his own. He suffers in silence, to the degree that when given the opportunity by Michelle to talk more about his inner life, he chooses not to do so. Only Scott coaxes out details about Jean-Paul's pain, and with them, kernels of his personality.

In her seminal work *The Body in Pain*, which explores how we express our pain, Elaine Scarry discusses the limitations of language. She differentiates between “one’s own physical pain” and “another person’s physical pain,” making the argument that we can only truly understand pain that we experience for ourselves (Scarry 4).

Scarry writes that “physical pain does not only simply resist language but destroy it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned,” (Scarry 4). This statement is interesting to consider within the context of a film that shows a character experiencing pain. Scarry is right, pain is beyond language. And so, the filmmaker is faced with a dilemma. How best can a film show that a character is in pain?

I am developing *Galvanize* as a feature length film now, which will focus on a queer neuroscience student with chronic pain caused by a congenital condition, who begins working at a lab doing research on pain and reconceptualizes his ideas about pain versus suffering, leading him to seek out pain, in both an erotic and therapeutic context, as a way of coping with his chronic pain. Again, I am faced with the question of representing pain on screen. I toyed with the idea of associating memory to the sensation of pain, triggering flashbacks for the characters, but eventually decided the strategy I employed in *Place d'Armes* was the most suitable. We see Jean-Paul as he goes about his daily life, vocalizing his pain as he stands up, grimacing when he feels

a twinge of pain in his shoulder. The simplicity of representing pain as it looks and sounds on the face and in the voice of the afflicted character is the only way to illustrate a feeling that is barely communicable from person to person. If anything, restraining myself to convey that sense of pain without resorting to expressionistic techniques seemed like a good goal to challenge myself to meet.

*Galvanize* provided the roots for *Place d'Armes*, which evolved over time to become a richer piece through subsequent drafts of the script, additional research visits to Montreal and collaboration with both the cast and crew. I spoke to several male dancers at various strip clubs in Montreal, always informally, sometimes during private dances. I wanted to understand their motivations, to get their perspectives on dancing. Do they enjoy the experience? Most were very forthcoming. I had the sense that very few had been asked non-sexual personal questions on the job before, or at least not with the tone I was using. There were moments when my line of questioning seemed to echo that of the character I'd written, Scott. Some told me they loved dancing on stage and I genuinely believed them. One young man was particularly enthusiastic, telling me it was the best job he had ever had. Others seemed indifferent underneath their smiles, but they were willing to humour me and answer my questions (Anonymous interviewees).

## Jean-Paul: Un Homme Brisé

*Place d'Armes* is a 19-minute contemporary neorealist film set in Montreal, in dialogue with new queer cinema and examinations of the body, both as a source of physical suffering and as a vehicle for transgression and transformation. Jean-Paul, the protagonist of the film, pushes his injured body to its limit, dancing on the stage for an audience. Does dance have the power to heal? Can a narrative film leave a question unanswered, such as the source of a character's miraculous moment without pain, and retain the realistic integrity required by its form? Can pain motivate a person to make changes in their life that benefit them in a greater sense, transcending the pain itself? How can pain be understood and represented on screen?



Image 2: Still from *Place d'Armes* (2023) directed by Drew Lint, featuring Francois Lalumiere.

The main focus of the film is not the contrast between the sacred and profane, but rather the balance between those two things within the character's life and their intersection in his process of seeking out relief from pain. Jean-Paul is a person who was raised Catholic in a predominantly Francophone community in Montreal. Despite his homosexuality, he has

continued to live as a practicing Catholic, while also finding a place within the LGBTQ community. When he incurs an injury while working at the docks that leaves him physically changed forever, he looks to the two communities he has connected with in his adult life for support. Those two communities look different in many ways, but in others, have values in common. Ultimately, both seek to create safe space for people within the community to grow, develop and flourish. Jean-Paul can count on the Catholics to give him the traditional religious-based support he first learned as a child. This support is conditional, in the sense that in return he is expected to live a life that upholds the teachings of the church. The LGBTQ community offers support in a less formal, although perhaps comparably dogmatic way. Jean-Paul can count on the queer community to give him the space he needs to experiment and figure himself out. This support is conditional too, in the sense that in return he is expected to live a life that upholds the collective openness and non-judgemental approach espoused by the dominant queer culture. The bottom line here is that a community looks after its own. That leaves Jean-Paul looked after by two communities. However, those two communities have little public overlap. He does not exactly hide his affiliation with one community from the other, but he hesitates to reveal certain details in certain company.

Another important component of the story is the looming spectre of work, hanging over Jean-Paul, and the film itself. In a time when inflation is steadily growing and the average consumer is regularly confronted with ever-higher grocery prices and rental rates, finances are on the collective mind of the culture. Even despite Jean-Paul's payments from the CNESST, the labour standards board of Quebec, he is compelled to work. Quebec instituted a new basic income program in January 2023 to provide an increased monthly payment to people who are unable to work full time due to physical or mental health conditions, providing them with a

pension of \$1,548 per month (Lowrie). However, people with chronic or acute conditions are able to access this program only after they have been suffering for five and a half years, meaning any individual whose condition has lasted less than this time, is eligible to receive about \$300 per month less (Lowrie). Jean-Paul, whose condition has arisen within the year, would qualify for an annual pension of about \$14,976. According to Retraite Québec, the provincial administrator of pension plans, an individual's disability pension will be suspended if they earn over \$20,171 in annual gross employment income (Retraite Québec).



Image 3: Still from *Place d'Armes* (2023) directed by Drew Lint, featuring Francois Lalumiere.

In May of 2020, a study by the Institute for Research and Socio-Economic Information found that a single person living in Montreal would need an annual income of \$27,948 to remain above the poverty line (CTV). In the three years that have elapsed since the release of that study, inflation and cost of living have both soared: the consumer price index reached an annual increase of 8.1% in June 2022 (Statistics Canada).

Given the current economic climate, even with his extra job at the club, Jean-Paul is not living a comfortable life from an economic standpoint. Even if he earns the maximum amount allowed by Retraite Québec, he would not be in a position to save money for his future.

Also associated with work is the idea of danger, particularly for those people who do manual labour in environments where there is potential for physical harm. So work is tied to danger both in the sense that financial precarity sometimes necessitates dangerous work, and also in the sense that financial precarity is dangerous in and of itself.

If the ghost of the story is Jean-Paul's accident, we could say that he is haunted by it throughout the film, its physical embodiment in his injury, which affects the way he moves in his daily life and causes him pain that keeps him up at night. As Jean-Paul himself says during a prayer in the film, "je suis un homme brisé" (I am a broken man). It is only when he is on stage while dancing at the club that he truly shakes the apparition of his trauma and moves unencumbered. Perhaps this concept of embodied trauma is the key to understanding Jean-Paul's pain. He achieves freedom, if only briefly, while dancing, when he is able to lose himself in music.

The transcendent feeling that Jean-Paul experiences on stage may relate just as much to the act of performing itself. Performance can be a liberating experience for the person on stage. A performer opens up to the audience, exposing something personal by allowing something inside to come out. While *Place d'Armes* remains ambiguous in its treatment of the temporary relief Jean-Paul feels from his pain, it is clear that he experiences a kind of liberation while dancing at the club.

## Slave to the Rhythm: Performance as Potentiality

Jean-Paul feels seen in a way he has never before experienced when he exposes his body to strangers. For a moment, he is like a beautiful, glowing demi-god up on the stage, moving as if in slow motion, illuminated by the stage lights, while the onlookers are cloaked in darkness. As if in a painting by Patrick Angus, he appears on the stage as a display of flesh and body, moving rhythmically, at once both tantalizingly present and untouchably out of reach. Patrick Angus was a 20<sup>th</sup> century American painter, whose most famous work portrays male erotic dancers and their patrons, primarily from the Gaiety Theater, a male burlesque theatre in New York's Times Square. In Angus' "Boys Do Fall in Love" (1984), a young man stands on stage, illuminated by a hard spotlight. He displays his bare buttocks to the crowd, looking tentatively over his shoulder, as if asking for permission. His audience gives it.. The patrons of the club gaze upon him, almost as though he is not flesh and blood, but a symbol of something greater. His youth is on display.



Image 4: "Boys Do Fall In Love," 1984, by Patrick Angus.



Jean-Paul, however, is not displaying his youth, so much as his bravado. Jean-Paul bursts on to the stage, also asking for permission, even if his audience gives little to nothing back, save for Scott, the one adoring fan he has inspired in the darkness. Scott is younger than Jean-Paul, by contrast, flipping the typical dynamic associated with the transactional nature of the relationship between dancer and client. And yet, there is something about the Angus painting that feels in keeping with the mood of *Place d'Armes*. The exchange, no matter its flipped dynamic, remains: the watcher and the watched. One asks for permission. The other grants it.

Another Angus painting presents a reality perhaps more attuned to Jean-Paul's experience; in "Slave to the Rhythm" (1986), a dancer stands in the nude, in a position exuding confidence, one arm extended high above his head. This dancer could arguably be losing himself in the music, the electricity of his performance giving him a rush of adrenaline, with his outstretched hand and assured posture. Where the dancer in "Boys Do Fall in Love" (1984) seems to beg for permission to take up space, this one claims it defiantly. Although it is entirely likely that Angus was painting different subjects in these two paintings, I like to think of them as moments in the life of one dancer, as he evolves. The title "Slave to the Rhythm," of course invokes the pop song by Grace Jones, released in 1985, the lyrics of which (incidentally not written by Jones herself, but by Bruce Woolley, Simon Darlow, Stephen Lipson and Trevor Horn) seem to explore music as a driving force of perseverance through physically brutal work: "you build on up, don't break the chain / sparks will fly, when the whistle blows / fire burns, heart beats strong / sing out loud, the chain gang song" (Jones). Again, the spectre of hard, physical work appears. Applying the title to the context of work at the strip club, it evokes the sense that the music is what keeps this dancer going. To apply that principle to Jean-Paul and *Place d'Armes*, he is both set free from his pain by the rhythm, but also remains beholden to it.

He relies on the music to release him from a world of pain and also relies on the income from that physically demanding work, which, could very well be negatively affecting his injury in the long term as well.



Image 5: "Slave to the Rhythm," 1986, by Patrick Angus.

In *Pornography in the Urban World*, Jean Gagnon devotes a chapter to "The Strip Joint," examining it from the perspective of architecture:

A closed door regulates entry; we have to ring and wait until the doorman opens it. This ritual makes our passage a 'sacred' act, sets the bar apart from the outside world and produces the first effect of supervision and surveillance... Everything here suggests a 'private club,' with its psychological correlate of membership in a brotherhood or near-secret society, (Gagnon 60-61).

Gagnon divides up the various areas of the strip club, differentiating between the public spaces (the main stage and the audience around it) and private spaces (the private rooms for one-on-one

dances, and the peepshow rooms). Despite the club being a private space in and of itself, it is important to consider that within the club, there are spaces only accessible by some: namely those patrons who pay for that access. The architectural plan of the strip club is organized by economics. The people who do gain access to the club are part of a certain society, engaging in its rituals, like those in other equally specific groups. If Jean-Paul is engaging in a ritual that heals (or at least distracts), the patrons of the club are engaging in the ritual too. Without their participation in the ritual, Jean-Paul would be performing without an audience. Interestingly, Gagnon posits that “we know that the strip joint is designed so that naked women will be seen to produce a euphoric state,” (Gagnon 69). He explains that dancers perform on the main stage, where they are visible to all patrons who enter the establishment, involving even those who do not pay for private dances in the production of this euphoric state. Granted, Gagnon is writing about heterosexually oriented strip clubs with female dancers, but nonetheless it seems telling that he should invoke the concept of euphoria, giving the power to conjure up this euphoric state to the dancer. If Jean-Paul is performing the ritual on stage at the club, he is conjuring up his own euphoria via the show he puts on.

The work of conceptual artist Felix Gonzales-Torres engages directly with the topic of performance. His body of work places performing as an ephemeral event, momentary and special in its fleeting beauty. In his piece, “*Untitled*” (*Go-Go Dancing Platform*) from 1991, Gonzalez-Torres presents a solo male go-go dancer who performs on a white platform adorned with glowing lights. The viewer is invited to engage with the dancer on the stage, but the dancer, who listens to music through headphones and wears sunglasses, does not interact with the viewer at all. The dancer is having their own private experience on stage, an experience of euphoria possibly, but nonetheless, a private one. This dance, both public in the sense that it occurs in

front of an audience and private in the sense that the dancer exists both behind the shield of his reflective sunglasses and in a different sonic landscape than the audience, stands in opposition to the experience Jean-Paul has in *Place d'Armes*. He is engaging directly with the audience, raised up on a similar stage, but making eye contact with patrons and dancing to music that reverberates throughout the main space of the club. Jean-Paul's euphoria is intrinsically shared with those around him: the people who have gained access to the space to participate in this ritual with him.



Image 6: "Untitled" (Go-Go Dancing Platform), 1991, by Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

As bell hooks writes about Gonzalez-Torres' perspective, "there is always the insistence that elegance and ecstasy are to be found in daily life" (hooks 46). Gonzalez-Torres finds joy in the quotidian. This is another thread that runs through *Place d'Armes*. The opening of the film shows various processes occurring at the port: a crane swaying, a forklift moving shipping containers into a pile. These routine movements are graceful, as if moving in a mechanical ballet

as an organ plays “Pastoral Drone,” a piece composed by George Crumb (1982). Here a moment of quotidian elegance plays out on screen, before any flesh and blood character has even entered the frame. This industrial dance foreshadows Jean-Paul’s performance to come. hooks goes on to write:

Taking the familiar, the everyday, the mundane, and removing it from the realm of domesticity, Gonzalez-Torres’s work disrupts boundaries, challenges us to see and acknowledge in public space all that we have been encouraged to reveal only in private. Bringing us face to face with our emotional vulnerability, our lack of control over the body, our intense longing for nurturance, this art restores the primacy of our bond with flesh. It is about exposure and revelation. It indicts the audience. We are witnesses unable to escape the truth of what we have seen, (hooks 46).

Like, Gonzales-Torres’ go-go dancers, Jean-Paul’s exposure of both his flesh and his inner world is a personal revelation. In fact, Scott’s interest in Jean-Paul could be a response to this mutual revelation.

When Jean-Paul finishes his routine on stage at the strip club, the music stops. He gets on his feet, pulling his pants up, grabbing his hi-vis jacket and leaving. The spell is broken. The performance is over. The camera records him as he exits stage right. A puff of haze spurts out from the smoke machine. In this shot, the illusion of the performance is shattered and the film too, is shown to be a representation of an event, captured only for a moment. The ephemerality of the performance itself illustrates that Jean-Paul’s relief is momentary. He goes back to the familiar routines that take up the time spent between those freeing moments of performance. However, in going back to his routine, he accepts that his life is now composed of time spent in pain and time spent in the absence of pain. He accepts the good that comes with the bad. If it weren’t for the bitter pain, the relief would not feel sweet. This is, in fact, the principle that Leigh Cowart discusses in their book, *Hurts So Good*, which chronicles their forays into BDSM and kink culture: the relief felt after intense pain is so great, it causes a sense of euphoria (Cowart 5).

If the sweet distraction of dance gives Jean-Paul relief, perhaps this is where his euphoria comes from.

Jean-Paul also decides in his acceptance of the situation, to do what he can to make the time between those moments of relief as tolerable as they can be. After the performance, Jean-Paul dances for Scott in a private room. Their conversation is not what Jean-Paul has come to expect from these transactions. Scott is legitimately curious to get to know him, asking him questions about his life outside the club, and what he does during the day when he is ostensibly not working. Scott's line of questioning comes from an honest, if perhaps naïve, place of interest. Their exchange breaks the traditional codes of "the strip joint," as Gagnon puts it. Scott has paid to access the private room, adhering to the rules set out by the architectural scheme, but he immediately transgresses the limits of the standard client to customer relationship by asking Jean-Paul about his life outside the club. The world outside is not governed by the rules of the strip club. Scott's curiosity is a desire that cannot be contained by the architecture of the private room.

Live performance has a certain magic to it. Can a *live* performance live on when recorded? Or does the act of recording itself modify the performance? If the transformation from a live experience to a recorded one changes the very nature of the performance, why record it at all? Does video documentation have a power of its own? In José Esteban Muñoz's seminal text, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, he argues that the temporality of performance is less focused on its ephemerality and more actively working toward futurity. Muñoz offers that:

“The real force of performance is its ability to generate a modality of knowing and recognition among audiences and groups that facilitates modes of belonging, especially minoritarian belonging. If we consider performance under such a lens, we can see the temporality of what I describe as a utopian performativity, which is to say a manifestation of a ‘doing’ that is on the horizon, a mode of possibility. Performance, seen as utopian performativity, is imbued with a sense of potentiality.” (Muñoz 98-99).

There is a potential future-building power to performance. What is performing, if not creating, after all? When faced with the hardship of relentless pain, Jean-Paul turns to a form of world-building, creating an alternative for himself. However, does the representation of this performance on screen rob it of its magic? One could certainly make the argument that the performance only has its full impact in the time and space that it occurs. However, it must also be considered that documentation preserves the performance to be viewed by larger groups, and in the case of a dramatic film, also recontextualizes the performance. Of course, in the film *Place d’Armes*, Jean-Paul performs on stage at the club, but in reality Francois Lalumiere, who plays Jean-Paul, is the one dancing, and he is also performing in all the scenes in the film. Film, as a medium, relies on the viewer’s suspension of disbelief, rendering all the performances that are compiled together to construct the film reality, at least within the perceived reality of the film itself. This transformation of performance into reality seems like its own kind of special magic, essential to cinema’s very being.

The image of Jean-Paul looking into Scott’s eyes is replaced by a wide shot of the city of Montreal, a stone angel at frame left. Empty spaces inside the church replace each other on screen, as a sad synthesizer carries on from the song Jean-Paul danced to in the private room. He sits alone in a wooden pew in the church. This time no prayers echo out. Instead, it is silent. He has much to contemplate about his relationship to his pain, and his relationship to the world around him, after the conversation he has had with Scott. He leaves and goes to a florist, where he buys a bouquet of flowers. The viewer is left to wonder what purpose these flowers will have

and whom they will go to. Earlier in the film, Jean-Paul brings a bouquet to Michelle when he is late meeting her at a diner. There is an expectation that the flowers will be a gift, perhaps for Scott. However, Jean-Paul brings the flowers home to his apartment, a space that is not without a certain charm, although largely utilitarian in design. Regardless, his home is a private space and in using his body to bring the flowers there, he brings all his body's pains and pleasures there too. In this private space he has no audience to perform for. He carefully fills a vase, testing the water with a finger, then gently places the flowers inside, arranging them in a formation. With a short exhale of satisfaction, Jean-Paul leaves the vase of flowers on the table, illuminated by an almost heavenly glow from the hanging lamp above.

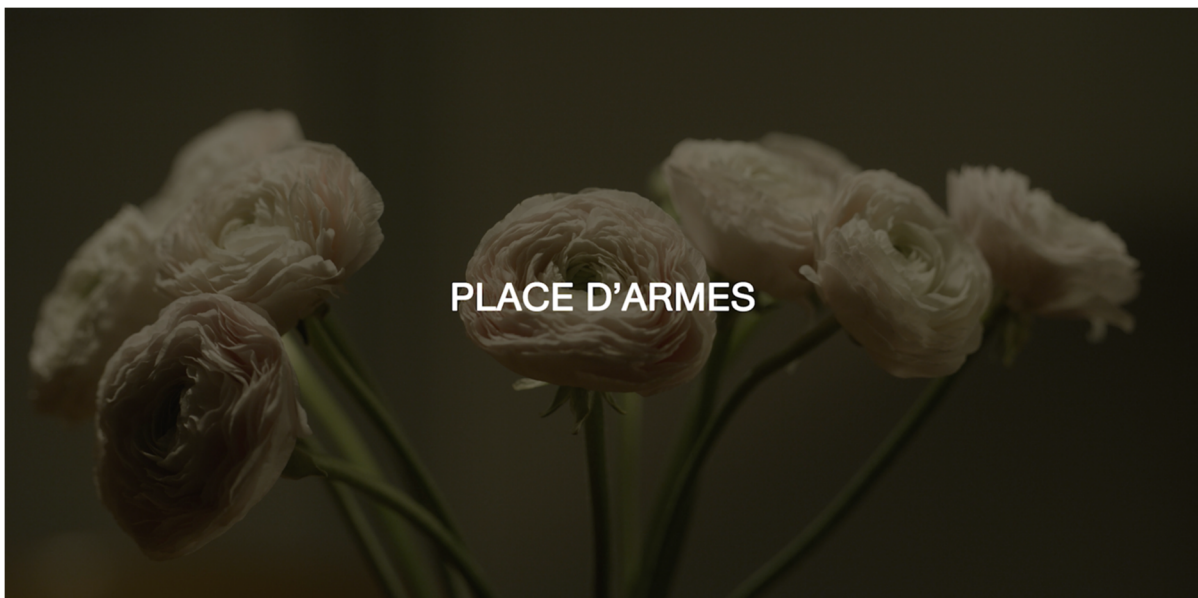


Image 7: Still from *Place d'Armes* (2023) directed by Drew Lint.

This is an offering for himself. Jean-Paul is learning to care for himself, beyond the physical realm. It is an act of care that he keeps the flowers. He can rely on the communities he is a part of for support, but in the moment where he keeps the flowers, he proclaims that he is also an independent person, more than just his injury, more than just a Catholic, more than just a gay man. He is a complex human being, like the rest of us. His pain has lead him to accept



himself in his complexity. He buys himself flowers, basking in the “elegance and ecstasy” of daily life (hooks).

## Macho Dancers: Influences in Cinema and Literature

I looked to a variety of different films as references when I set out to make *Place d'Armes*. The films of Joao Pedro Rodrigues were a source of both stylistic and narrative inspiration. *To Die Like A Man* (2009) was the film I initially thought back to while writing the first draft of the script. The melancholy face of Fernando Santos as Tonia, gazing at her reflection in the mirror, like a prisoner in her body, which has now begun to turn on her, rejecting her silicone breast implants, was in the back of my mind while I wrote the first draft.



Image 8: Still from *To Die Like A Man* (2009) directed by João Pedro Rodrigues, featuring Fernando Santos.

*O Fantasma* (1999) and the protagonist's evolution into an animalistic "phantom" is a key reference for *Galvanize*, so I had Rodrigues' films on my mind. At that early stage, I considered writing Jean-Paul's character as a drag performer, but when I sat down to write, the character coping with pain became an erotic dancer and his melancholy didn't lead up to a tragic end, like Tonia's. Instead, the film shows Jean-Paul living to see a happy ending, a sign of hope for his

future. In the initial draft, Jean-Paul was more hopeless, beaten down by his experiences, but as I expanded on the script in subsequent drafts, Jean-Paul gained an optimism and a level of agency I had not initially afforded him. He became a character of his own, leading me to his story.

I also see Michael Haneke's films, especially *The Piano Teacher* (2001) and *Benny's Video* (1992), both exceptional studies in repressed desire, as significant story references, as well as aesthetic ones. The spartan approach to design in both films is in keeping with my own sensibilities as well. In *The Piano Teacher*, especially, there is a streak of physical brutality that runs through the characters and their interaction. In fact, the nonchalant banality of the cruelty in *Benny's Video* is perhaps more disturbing, but it is a closer reference for *Galvanize*. Of course, in *Place d'Armes*, we meet Jean-Paul after he has found an outlet for his repression. He doesn't go down the dark path of Haneke's characters because he finds a place to put his desire and subsequently feels seen in the process. *Place d'Armes* could be seen as a Hanekian setup, where the protagonist finds a happy ending, an unlikely path for Haneke's characters perhaps.

I was also drawn to the films of David Cronenberg when I began work on *Galvanize*. Of course, his films are relevant to explorations of pain and the body. One could say that his whole body of work circles a common theme, attempting to transcend the limitations of the human body. *Crash* (1996) and *Dead Ringers* (1988) both provide rich territory to mine. *Crash*, in particular, can be read as a vehicle for Lacan's concept of *jouissance*. The destructive desire shared by the main characters of the film, eroticizing car accidents, pushes them all beyond the pleasure principle and into ecstatic pain. However, it is Elias Koteas' Vaughn who pushes it furthest, driving his speeding car into a concrete abutment and off the side of the Gardiner Expressway into a burst of flames, and theoretically some form of transcendence.



Image 9: Still from *Days* (2020) directed by Tsai Ming-Liang, featuring Lee Kang-sheng and Anong Hounghuangsy.

*Days* (2020) by Tsai Ming-liang is another relevant reference, wherein one character seeks out relief from his chronic pain by engaging a sex worker for an encounter that straddles the sexual and the therapeutic, striking an interesting balance between those two fields. Lino Brocka's *Macho Dancer* (1988) begins like *Days*: a male sex worker sees clients. Soon the narrative diverges though and we follow Pol and his friend and mentor Noel as they navigate Manila's underworld, looking for Noel's missing sister. The film's aesthetics are sometimes reminiscent of Rodrigues,' and similarly it always treats its characters with care, no matter the setting.

The namesake of the film, *Place d'Armes*, is the *Combat Journal for Place d'Armes*, a highly personal, semi-autobiographical, wildly embellished, non-fiction hybrid novel written by Scott Symons and published in 1967. It has been called the first queer Canadian novel. Chronicling his solo trip to Montreal to write a novel, *Place d'Armes* is about Symons' search for both a Canadian identity and for his own queer identity. The book itself was printed in a

unique style, manufactured to appear like a journal, complete with handwritten notes and a pocket in the front that includes maps.

Symons shifts perspective throughout the novel, wildly oscillating between his rough first person notes (which take a mad form of stream of consciousness) and a more measured first-person perspective (ostensibly the refined version of said notes), then to a jarringly different omniscient third-person (perhaps the “actual book” he is writing). The style gives the impression that we, the reader, are invited into the process of creating the work itself. We have an insider view, as if we have been invited for a studio visit into Symons’ brain. The novel is almost unreadable, lurching on in psychotic spurts of rage against the stuffy Canadian establishment, peppered by Symons’ meetings with male sex workers, which are often sweet and sometimes sexy. It brings to mind the work of Joan Didion and Bret Easton Ellis.

In 1967, homosexuality was still an unlawful act in Canada. It was only decriminalized in 1969. The mere act of writing *Place d’Armes* during this period was transgressive, but perhaps Symons was transgressive without thinking of the greater good. He wrote to free himself, not others. One could compare Symons’ approach to that of Bruce LaBruce, another queer Canadian provocateur. While LaBruce’s work is more squarely focused on sexual identity and less on a Canadian identity, there is something surprisingly similar in the work of these two artists.

LaBruce’s films are structured as a series of provocative questions posed to the audience. What if a young support worker falls in love with the elderly man he takes care of in a seniors’ home, as in *Gerontophilia* (2014)? What if a group of neo-nazi skinheads is actually a group of gay lovers, as in *Skin Flick* (1999)? And what if they get violently dominated by the gay couple they mug?

LaBruce does not shy away from taboo subjects, and like Symons, he seeks out the truth.

Another common element practiced by both artists, they foreground themselves within the

narrative, playing with autobiography and autofiction. Both LaBruce and Symons have self-mythologized, creating identities for themselves in and out of their work. LaBruce “uses images to retrace his artistic and personal life and redeeming them, (self) re-establishing his own philosophy and consequently consolidating his own image as an artist” (Santoro).

LaBruce’s films have “always affirmed [his] desire not to be part of a system either gay or hetero... Their audience is made by rebels, people free of identity or genre classification, possessing an anarchistic spirit: they are like him. Whereas the counterculture denounces the negative values of a society, LaBruce’s irony and self-mocking bring a glimmer of hope to the protest, greatly reinforcing subversive charge, almost on the verge of being revolutionary” (Santoro). One could make a similar argument from the work of Symons. In a similar vein, Donald Martin called Symons “a catalyst to changing the whole social fabric of this country, in terms of sexuality and the government’s role in dictating what we do, where we do and who we do” (Sheehan). In fact, Symons was opposed to the decriminalization of homosexuality. As an outsider looking in, it seems fairly clear that he was battling the homophobia that was undoubtedly pressed upon him from a young age, he from a generation of closeted men who had wives and families.

It seems that Symons lived life for himself, jumping off the precipice (and out of the closet) for his own good. Like LaBruce, he wasn’t interested in performative labels. Perhaps this is not quite true. Maybe more accurately, both artists are fixated on labels, in the sense that they take labels like “the outsider,” “the family man” and “the pervert” and satirize them, spitting them out again as parodies of society as they see it. Symons wanted freedom on his own terms. In a way, this refusal to live within the label of gay or hetero predicts the rise of the concept of “queerness.” Of course in the 1960’s, queer was a derogatory term used to describe a

homosexual person. Today it has been reclaimed and repurposed to be practically undefinable. Part of its strength comes from being so vague as to be applicable to almost anything. Queerness is open, accepting, intangible, experimental, changeable, nimble, agile. Queerness is a work in progress. It is in a state of becoming. As Muñoz writes:

“Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.” (Muñoz 1).

However, Symons and LaBruce respond to queerness in ways that illuminate their differences as artists. Symons’ approach to queerness is a queerness of the self, while LaBruce’s queerness seems to have ambitions to offer others. Films like *The Raspberry Reich* (2004) seem to exemplify this communitarian impulse to create queer space and identity for the purpose of benefitting a greater populace. Thinking about the pair this way, my film *Place d’Armes* seems more in line with the ethos of Symons. Jean-Paul lives for himself. He brings the flowers home to keep in the kitchen. His kind of queerness is personal and introspective. I can see both approaches in my own practices. I have always been a very private person beneath the surface, but I care about the community too.

As I sat reading Symons’ book, *Place d’Armes*, on the train from Toronto to Montreal, coming to do research on strip clubs for a film, I couldn’t help but see some parallels between myself and Scott. There is something strange and unsettling about that fact, given Symons’ self-destructive nature, although, the context is completely different. Perhaps then I was sensing this form of *queerness for the self* I have identified in Symons, and can identify in myself too. However, it may make for a more logical comparison when we consider that Symons’ trip to Montreal allowed him to break free and create the queer art he wanted to make. I can also

identify with this kind of strategy of distance. Almost ten years ago, I moved to Berlin and it was there that I first really allowed myself to make the kind of films I wanted to make. There is something liberating in the act of being far from home. It feels like no one is watching. I'm not sure this is intrinsically queer or intrinsically Canadian. Perhaps it's both, or neither.



## Queer Quebec: Sebastian, Sex and Suffering

Like Berlin, Montreal has a reputation as a city of sexual freedom and open queerness. Unlike Berlin, however, Montreal has deep Catholic roots, the influence of which is undeniable on the culture of the city, even despite the impact of the Quiet Revolution of the 1960's and 70's and the secularization it promoted. Catholicism, of course, has a deep interest in pain, as does queerness. Although the Christian idea of redemptive suffering is rarely manifest in queer culture, self-flagellation and corporal mortification are tenets of BDSM kink culture, just as they are Catholic ones.

Perhaps Saint Sebastian is the most notable example of this crossover. Depictions of the saint seem pointedly erotic: Sebastian stands in ecstatic agony, his chest pierced with arrows, his gaze sensual and transcendent. He is often positioned as a queer martyr in contemporary culture. Admired by Oscar Wilde and Yukio Mishima alike, Guido Reni's "Martyrdom of St Sebastian" (1615) has become a particularly famous depiction of the saint and eventually solidified Sebastian as a queer icon. Wilde took on Sebastian as a pseudonym while in prison for practicing homosexuality in the late 19<sup>th</sup>



Image 10: Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, c 1615, by Guido Reni

century. Mishima's book *Confessions of a Mask* details a homosexual awakening in the presence of Reni's painting of the saint. Mishima later photographed himself in Sebastian's trademark contrapposto position, arrows sticking into his torso, shortly before his death. After his embrace

by so many queer artists who made work in conversation with the depictions of the saint, including Derek Jarman, Robert Mapplethorpe, Keith Haring and David Wojnarowicz, Sebastian came to be associated with both queer persecution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and contrastingly as a symbol of healing during the AIDS crisis of the 1980's (White).

How does cinema examine the erotics of suffering in the context of the church? If we consider the tradition of this topic in the context of Quebecois cinema, specifically set in Montreal, *A Tout Prendre* (1963) directed by Claude Jutra, leaps to mind. Today Jutra's semi-autobiographical film reads as an expression of the restless and energetic years of Montreal during the Quiet Revolution. It follows Claude, a young Francophone man wrestling with his homosexuality during the sexual liberation of the 1960's. His pain is emotional, but this suffering is very real. Jean-Marc Vallée's *C.R.A.Z.Y.* (2006) mines similar territory, although focusing on adolescent Zach's struggles to come to terms with his homosexuality in relation to his traditional Catholic family, including four masculine brothers. Vallée and cowriter François Boulay deliberately position Zach's suffering as having a religious underpinning: he is born on the same day as Christ. In Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* (1989), Lothaire Bluteau's Daniel suffers for his art, eventually taking on Christlike characteristics, attacked for his methods by the church itself, as he mounts a passion play in contemporary Montreal. *Jesus of Montreal* is an interesting film to consider in conversation with *Place d'Armes*. Arcand's film follows a contemporary production of a traditional Passion Play at a local parish on Mount Royal. The players incorporate some transgressive themes and details derived from scholarly research on Christ, which attracts the ire of the church. It is interesting to consider however, that even if they incorporate ideas perhaps outside traditional Catholic doctrine, the troupe is still performing a passion play. They are a group of young urban artists engaging with religious teachings and the

historical records of Christ. At a time when religious practice was certainly not in fashion, the film takes a nuanced approach to contemporary faith and culture in Montreal. *Place d'Armes* takes a more oblique approach, focusing more on Jean-Paul as a character, and less on his beliefs, but could be seen as similarly projecting a world where ideas coexist in messy ways that are difficult to define.

## Formal Geography: An Aesthetic Bridge from Berlin to Montreal

*Place d'Armes* is not a formally complex film. It is a dramatic narrative that makes use of commonly accepted conventions of film like synchronized sound, shot/reverse shot technique and incidental music, among others. I have spent much of my career making films that foreground commonly used tropes of specific genres of film, presenting those tropes in the shape of a film to foreground the medium. I have always felt that constructing a film was a very literal objective. My debut feature length narrative film is called *M/M* (2018). It follows Matthew, a Canadian new to Berlin, who meets a German named Matthias. Matthew is initially attracted to Matthias, then becomes obsessed with him and eventually tries to take over his identity.



Image 11: *M/M* (2018) directed by Drew Lint, featuring Nicolas Maxim Endlicher and Antoine Lahaie

The film mixes satire with familiar elements from thrillers, relying on aesthetics as a storytelling method. With *M/M*, I set out to make a film specifically in the vein of a European psychosexual thriller, and employed the hallmarks of that genre, suturing them together with aesthetics from

contemporary queer culture. Through this process, I aimed to draw attention to those genre tropes, in my view, queering the genre, and presenting a finished piece that is both part of the erotic thriller genre, but also a critique of those films.

My aim for *Place d'Armes* was to continue to explore narrative conventions, but to illustrate them in a subtler way. It is less focused on genre as an experimental technique than my previous films, and more focused on narrative as a device for exploring character. If *M/M* was dreamlike from beginning to end, an uncertain tension always present between sleep and waking life, *Place d'Armes* is rooted in the relentless reality of working people. The film allows little room for doubt about the reality represented on screen. Jean-Paul is always awake. He is earthly and humble. His relief comes from movement. The formal qualities of the film reflect these character traits. Most of the film is composed of static frames, while compositions are balanced. The most notable exceptions to this pattern are the handheld tracking shots following Jean-Paul as he moves through space. The first of these occurs in the Oratory of St. Joseph after the dialogue scene with Michelle, when Jean-Paul's equilibrium is off and he is looking for tranquility at the shrine in the crypt. It is only then that the camera returns to the tripod, back to the sense of static calm. This calm is shaken again shortly when Jean-Paul is backstage, full of pre-show nervous excitement and again, the camera is handheld, following him out onto the stage as he performs for an unresponsive audience.

The scene in which Jean-Paul performs on stage is the one moment in the film when it could be argued that we enter a subjective reality. The camera takes on Scott's perspective in the audience, moving from the more objective wide shot of the stage to a long lens close up shot that follows Jean-Paul as he dances suggestively. By the time Jean-Paul is writhing on the stage floor

in close up, the camera has returned to his perspective, as if we are being snapped out of his reverie with him.



Image 12: Still from *Place d'Armes* (2023) directed by Drew Lint, featuring Francois Lalumiere.

The film has two conversational dialogue scenes, which function as mirrors. The first occurs between Jean-Paul and Michelle, his friend and colleague from the port, who has a motherly affinity for him. Their exchange is sweet and Michelle demonstrates genuine concern for Jean-Paul's well-being, although he is evasive when she presses him for details about his life. There are unspoken truths between them and Michelle understands that Jean-Paul is unable to let her in completely. Jean-Paul finds himself in a similar situation with a relative stranger when he performs a private dance for Scott at the club. Like Michelle, Scott tries to pull Jean-Paul out from inside himself. Unlike Michelle, Scott is, at least moderately, successful. Jean-Paul is a private person, quiet in nature, humble. He is disarmed by Scott's inquisitive nature, his frankness, and his genuine interest. Sometimes it is easier to be honest with a stranger than with someone familiar. There is safety in the distance a stranger brings.

*Place d'Armes* incorporates b-roll images of its setting to tell the story. Like *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) and the other city symphony films of the early twentieth century, the city of Montreal is a character in the film, just as in *M/M*, where the city of Berlin became a character. Montreal is a port city, due to its strategic location on the St. Lawrence River. Located within the region colonized by the French in the 1600's, it is also a former bastion of Catholicism: spires and steeples peek out across Montreal's skyline. So, two of the most prominent historical images of the city are its industrial port and its Catholic churches.



Image 13: Still from *Place d'Armes* (2023) directed by Drew Lint.

Conversely, Montreal has long been a nightlife capital, attracting visitors from English Canada, the United States, and around the world. Montreal is a city of contrasts then, much like the character of Jean-Paul himself. There is a unity present in the city, and in the character. I felt that a character from the port who frequented the city's monuments to sanctity and its monuments to carnality, made for an appropriate balance of Montreal's unique character. Place d'Armes, the square in the centre of Old Montreal that gives its name to both Symons' novel and my film, has



historical significance for French Canada, it being one of the oldest sites of European settlement in Montreal, another subtle nod to the coexistence of old and new, sacred and secular. The place was, in fact, the site of a bloody battle between the French and the Iroquois people. Despite the recent removal of a plaque in the square celebrating Paul de Chomedey's killing of an Iroquois chief "with his own hands, March 1644" (Valiante), there still stand statues and dubious plaques that tell the history of the French slaughter of indigenous people in the square. That said, the most significant thing about Place d'Armes is not the square itself, but its proximity to the buildings that surround it, including the Notre-Dame Basilica, The New York Life Building (Montreal's first skyscraper), and the Saint Sulpice Seminary (Montreal's oldest standing building, from 1680), structures that hold the unique history of the city (GPSMYCITY).



Image 14: Still from *Possession* (1981) directed by Andrzej Żułowski.

There are countless examples from throughout cinema history, but Andrzej Żułowski's *Possession* (1981), pointedly set in West Berlin during the Cold War, comes to mind as a



reference for this positioning of a city as a character. The Berlin Wall is visible in several shots, the team having clearly designed the film around the geography of the city. There is an exchange in one scene in the film where a character looks out the window of an apartment building, gazing at the Berlin Wall, directly across from them. The guard towers of the wall are visible and guards are seen standing on them, holding machine guns. It is at this brief moment, that the real collides with the unreal: the verisimilitude of the film's mise-en-scene has crept into the real world. Even without this uncanny moment, the film owes much to the heavy atmosphere created by the aesthetics of 1980's Berlin.



Image 15: Still from *The Last Time I Saw Macao* (2012) directed by João Rui Guerra da Mata and João Pedro Rodrigues.

*The Last Time I Saw Macau* (2012) directed by João Rui Guerra da Mata and João Pedro Rodrigues is structured entirely of what could be termed b-roll photography. However, the film is not a city symphony in the traditional sense. Rodrigues and Guerra da Mata use footage and narration to construct a loose narrative around Guerra da Mata's return to Macau at the request of his friend Candy, a transgender cabaret performer who finds herself in danger. The film consistently sells itself as authentically both documentary and fiction. It also features a prominent scene in which Candy performs a lip sync routine on stage, lit by a spotlight. This performance is the only time we see Candy. Otherwise, her presence throughout the film is on the periphery. Guerra da Mata refers to her letters and recollects moments from their shared past. Even on stage, we see Candy only as her cabaret persona. We never hear her actual voice. She is silent and only visually manifests as a beautiful face covered in heavy makeup, like a mask. The real Candy is as elusive to us as she is to Guerra da Mata. In *Place d'Armes*, Jean-Paul comes alive on stage, as if he has taken a mask off, where in *The Last Time I Saw Macau* Candy has put one on. Perhaps this differentiation is an incorrect impulse on my part. It may be that both characters are simultaneously taking one mask off and putting another on. If performing is becoming, creating, constructing, the performer creates a character to become on stage. Although *Place d'Armes* is a much more traditional narrative project, I do also believe there is a similar element of geographic specificity also present in *The Last Time I Saw Macau*.

## Bodies and Space

I trained as a production designer in my undergraduate film studies, eventually earning a Certificate in Design for Arts and Entertainment after my initial degree in film. I think that foundation and continued interest in design has led me to write with a strong sense of place. I find the setting of a story is often the driving force that inspires me to write it. Even when I have an idea for a story rooted in character and emotion, the setting is the thing that really gets me excited as a creator. I feel that I can place the story once I know where it takes place. Character comes first, but the setting is what makes them feel real to me.

The first months I spent living in Berlin in the autumn of 2013 were an incredibly inspiring time in my life. I found myself in an unfamiliar place where I did not speak the language. It was liberating to be far away from everything and everyone I knew. It was also a bit lonely, but I think that separation was essential in giving me the freedom I needed to really look inside myself and express something true, honest and personal. *M/M* is about desire, but more than sexual desire, it is about the desire to belong. I think my own desire to be part of something, to be accepted by a community, was what fueled the writing of that film. Matthew's obsession is for Berlin, personified in Matthias, and it is Berlin's acceptance he desires.

The body has been a focal point in my work from the outset. I began working with dance on camera when I was a student in the film program at Ryerson (now Toronto Metropolitan University). In an independent study course supervised by Gerda Cammaer, I researched the dance film genre and created a short piece of my own in response, a collaboration with dancer and choreographer, Miranda Forbes. That film was called *Parallel Lines* (2008) and was essentially an experiment in capturing the body in motion. It showed a dancer moving in front of a background striped with black lines, who then began ripping the lines from the backdrop in

increasingly frenetic movements that seemed to defy the laws of physics, this effect augmented via editing. Miranda and I made two more films together, experimenting more with choreography for camera, trying to better marry camera and body movement. Of course, dance on camera has an inherent focus on the body. Bodies move through space using movement to create meaning. So, the beginning of my career as a filmmaker was more centred around bodies moving through space than any linear narrative storytelling structures.



Image 16: Still from *Rough Trade* (2014) directed by Drew Lint.

*Rough Trade* (2014) was my first film to explore queerness and classic tropes and iconography from queer media like “The Leatherman,” the work of both Kenneth Anger and Bruce LaBruce, and occultism. Although only minimally more linear than my dance film projects, *Rough Trade* represented a shift in the way I thought about filmmaking. Placed in a setting more grounded in reality, it followed a character called “The Stud” on a night that saw

him roaming the streets of an unnamed city and eventually being picked up and inducted into a ritualistic leather cult. Still focusing on the body and its relation to camera, it was another experiment in representing character without dialogue. *Rough Trade* is also ultimately about the desire to belong, although this desire is represented in a more abstract way through The Stud's initiation in the gang.

Ann Tipper is my director of photography. We have collaborated on almost every film I have ever made. Ours is one of the most important collaborative relationships to my work and life. We share a similar sense of composition, a willingness to go to great lengths to get the material we need, and importantly, a love of film. Ann was the director of photography on *Parallel Lines*, *Rough Trade* and *M/M*, as well as on *Place d'Armes*. The visual style of *Place d'Armes* is a progression of the work Ann and I did on *M/M*. However, Ann and I do not repeat ourselves. Every project we do together is a new challenge and a new opportunity for us to create something unique that serves the story. There is a similar approach to composition, and while the lighting style is similar, on *Place d'Armes* we embraced shadows and backlighting, creating a naturalistic and dim environment for Jean-Paul's story, which reinforces the narrative grounding of the film. Much of the film occurs at night. A lot of *M/M* took place at night too, although we represented it differently. *M/M* was full of glowing bulbs and reflective surfaces: the constructed objects that populated Matthew's grimly superficial existence. The night of *Place d'Armes* is dark and lonely. When Jean-Paul is alone, we have the feeling that he is truly alone in the world. While both films paint portraits of isolated characters, they differ greatly in tone and part of what separates the two films is their visual styles.

The making of *M/M* was a fantastic period of growth for me, both as an artist, but also as a person. That said, it was a long and arduous process too, which began in 2014. Although not a

dance film, it applies many of the lessons Ann and I learned while working with dance on camera. The film has very little dialogue, relying on mostly wordless performances from its two lead actors and striking images with strong compositions to tell the story. *M/M* was a leap into a more traditional narrative format for me, but it straddled the divide between art film and thriller in a way that allowed me to use abstract visual storytelling.



Image 17: Still from *M/M* (2018) directed by Drew Lint.

In the same way that I see *Place d'Armes* as a natural evolution of the aesthetic sensibility Ann and I have created together, I see it as an evolution in my work toward a more classical narrative approach to storytelling that still retains the strong visual and aural elements that defined my earlier work as a filmmaker. I find myself more interested in representing reality at this point in my career. I have always seen my films as being driven by character, but with this increased interest in reality, I believe they are more grounded in the everyday, ultimately creating more relatable stories.

Although *Place d'Armes* is a standalone film, a work unto itself, I also see it as a progression toward my next film projects, namely *Galvanize*, which, as I have mentioned, was the impetus for *Place d'Armes* itself.

## Making the Film

Montreal became an integral part of the narrative. When we went into production, I had to consider the cost benefit of shooting in Montreal. Was it really essential for the film to be shot in Montreal, when I live and work in Toronto? Ultimately this seemed like an easy question to answer. The story was conceived in Montreal, and so the film had to be shot there or not shot at all. The port, the churches, the strip clubs: the major elements of the story are all so intrinsically tied to the city of Montreal. I think the end result represents a very particular slice of Montreal, in the same way that *M/M* represents a very particular moment in Berlin, frozen in time.

As part of my research process, I did informal interviews with several dancers at strip clubs in Montreal. Some had recently migrated to Canada, others had multiple jobs, others still were young men from rural Quebec who had come to Montreal looking for work. I felt I got a sense of the general situation they were working in and took those conversations to heart during the development process. I believe the representation of sex work in the film is positive and accurate. I did not want to show Jean-Paul through a pornographic gaze. It was important to me that his performance was shot in a way that conveyed his psychology and treated him with care and respect.

Casting was an important component in creating a fiction that believably exists within the reality of Montreal culture. The character of Jean-Paul was written to be such a specific person, I worried I would never find the right actor to bring him to life. I contacted agents, poured over headshots, got recommendations from friends and people in the industry, but no one was working out, and no one seemed quite right. I took a step back and began to think of people I knew in Montreal, specifically male-identified, Francophone people I knew. Eventually I thought of Francois Lalumiere, who I knew did performance art work and dance. I contacted him to see if



he would be at all interested in the idea of acting. After two days, I had not received a response from him and thought he was not interested, that he may have even found the proposition unwelcome altogether. Then, he responded, with great interest. He sent an audition video and immediately I felt it was the right fit. This film is the first time Francois has acted in the traditional dramatic sense, but his willingness to embrace the role and the material in general made me confident in his commitment and his abilities. Locking Francois in as Jean-Paul gave us forward momentum. Davinder Malhi was also an acquaintance of mine, albeit from Toronto. My partner and producer, Carter West, suggested him, knowing he was a professional actor. Davinder was extremely easy to work with, taking direction with grace and applying notes in a way that felt collaborative. He seemed like a perfect fit for Scott, and I liked the idea of pairing Francois, a first-time actor, with the more experienced Davinder. The final piece of the puzzle was to find the actor to play Jean-Paul's friend from work. Initially this character was written to be male, and there was a small part near the end of the script for a nun or doscent that Jean-Paul interacted with at a church. I began looking through the cast lists of Denys Arcand films online and sending emails to the agents of actors I thought would be a good fit for either of the two remaining roles. I was surprised, and frankly honoured, to learn that Johanne-Marie Tremblay was interested in participating in the film, initially to play the nun. I thought her work as Constance in *Jesus of Montreal* (1989), for which she was nominated for a Genie, was wonderful. I decided to rewrite the character of Jean-Paul's friend from work, Michel, to be, Michelle, essentially absorbing the nun's role. She became an important part of the film, anchoring Jean-Paul within his Catholic roots and making explicit reference to his work at the port and the accident there. Again, Francois was paired with an experienced actor, this time a seasoned and revered actor of Quebecois stage and screen.



Image 18: Still from *Place d'Armes* (2023) directed by Drew Lint, featuring Johanne-Marie Tremblay.

Meanwhile, Carter worked steadily on finding churches for our locations. We went to Montreal to scout various locations for the film: churches, diners, strip clubs. It was the churches that took the most legwork and Carter was committed to finding the perfect place to shoot each scene. Being in Montreal on that preproduction trip was probably the most exciting and inspiring part of the process. The film began to feel like a reality, as cast and locations came together. It was autumn and Montreal began to look the way it was written. The skies were gloomy and there was a bite in the air.

One of the most challenging aspects of shooting the film was directing the French dialogue scene. Purely due to logistics, it was scheduled to be our first scene of the shoot. To still be finding a groove with the crew, many of whom were people I had not worked with before, and also to give direction for a scene in a language I am not fluent in, all while keeping the shoot on schedule, was difficult. Adding to this difficulty was the actual geography of the space we were shooting in. The diner is a maze of booths, the space divided up by faux-wood panels, so I felt cut off from the actors, hidden behind layers of brown panelling. I must admit, I am happy with

the end result of that scene. I trusted the actors and they delivered what I asked them to do. We rehearsed together the day before and I felt they understood the characters and the situation.

That first day involved two location shifts, although one was simply a walk down the street from the diner to the florist. Predictably, the unit moves took longer than we hoped, but our final location for the day was the apartment, which belonged to a friend, so there was flexibility in our in and out time.

Shooting the scenes at the strip club the following day offered a new set of challenges. Our first issue was that we needed to shoot more in one day at the strip club location than seemed possible. That is the reality of independent filmmaking. We had a window to do our shoot and there was no way to extend it, beyond an hour or so of buffer time. The dialogue scene between Jean-Paul and Scott was prioritized, because without it, there was no film. The strip club we shot in has two owners. One owner was with us on the day of our shoot, and the other had been present for our tech survey. On the shoot day, we had technical difficulties from the beginning. The lighting of the club, which seemed so easy to control when the other owner was showing us around, was now impossible to change. Ann had to reconfigure her lighting plan, pivoting to embrace what we had to work with. I have seen Ann work under pressure in many situations and she is a master at creating beautiful images with limited resources. The dialogue scene went well. Again, the actors understood the scene and interpreted it beautifully. Because of the sexual undertones of the scene, we had an intimacy coordinator on set, Mo Matton, whose positive presence was very welcome. Mo was helpful and accommodating, offering good ideas about blocking.

Because of our technical complications, we were running behind as we reset the location for Jean-Paul's performance. It was at this point that Carter sensed the owner was uncomfortable

with what we were doing. I think we had made him nervous with our questions about the lighting early on, and as we shuffled banquettes around the floor, clearing chairs and tables here and there, hanging silver tinsel to cover beer logos on the walls, he began to feel the place was unrecognizable. Why would we want to shoot in his bar if we wanted to change it so much? Carter calmed him down, assuring him that we loved the space, that we just needed to make some changes to set our scene. We reassembled the tables and chairs and even with the added tinsel, the owner seemed to feel the space had been returned to a relatively acceptable state. Even with this problem solved, we were running late, so Ann and I sat down to discuss how we could reimagine our shots for the remaining scenes. We absorbed a scene set in the locker room into



Image 19: Still from *Place d'Armes* (2023) directed by Drew Lint, featuring Francois Lalumiere.

the performance scene itself and streamlined our shots. The strip show went quickly. As usual, dance is faster to shoot than dialogue. Francois had taken pole dancing lessons leading up to the shoot, so he did several takes of a routine on the pole. The repeated exertion of the new muscles he developed for pole dancing caused him rather intense pain the following day when we shot

the church scenes: perhaps appropriately, given the subject matter of the film. He certainly had access to some method-appropriate discomfort.

Aside from Francois's relative physical agony, the remainder of the shoot went smoothly. We could have spent full days shooting in the churches. There were so many compelling angles and details. Ironically, working with the church administrators was much less complicated than the high maintenance owner of the strip club. Once we had contracts in place, they were quite happy to adhere to the negotiated stipulations.

## Conclusion

My intention with *Place d'Armes* was to create a narrative film, playful in form, but ultimately within the landscape of traditional storytelling. I wanted to give myself the opportunity to direct actors in dialogue scenes, to develop my craft as a filmmaker, while still staying true to the personal style of filmmaking I have created for myself throughout my career. In a time when politics seem increasingly divisive and communities seems more polarized than ever, I wanted to make a film that points toward unity. All people have complicated lives, with complicated histories and desires. I wanted to make a film that reflects that plurality present in all of us, focusing this concept on the story of one individual. *Place d'Armes* is a character study. It is a film about coping with pain, but it is also about striving for personhood, accepting oneself and exercising care in the way one lives day to day. As Muñoz holds, “both the ornamental and the quotidian can contain a map of the utopia that is queerness,” (Muñoz 1). Jean-Paul’s flowers are both ornamental and quotidian, and they are a symbol of his own personal push toward a queerness that is utopian, even if it is tempered by his pain. That queerness is personal and private, not for fear of living openly in public, but because we can also choose to live quietly, to live for ourselves.

If Elaine Scarry is correct, for one person to truly understand the pain of another is nearly impossible. However, that summer in 2001, I came very close. I witnessed my mother’s pain as she attempted to move, but could not, her joints seizing. This pain was both physical and emotional. I also witnessed her resilience in the face of that pain. *Place d'Armes* seeks to express the inexpressible in its depiction of pain on screen, because it seems to me that the inexpressible can be expressed. Through *Place d'Armes* the viewer is invited to watch a character as they push through pain toward a future. To quote Muñoz one final time, “queerness is also a performative

because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world,” (Muñoz 1). Jean-Paul practices the type of world-building unique to queerness. He builds a future for himself where no one else will build it.

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