

## **Beyond Eurocentrism: Manuel Poirier's Breton Road Film *Western***

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Peruvian-born French director Manuel Poirier, who received the Prize from the Jury at the 1997 Cannes Film Festival for his film *Western*, decided to set his film about friendship, love and miscegenation between Europeans and non-European immigrants, not in the 'center' of France, but rather on the 'margins,' in the region of Brittany. With the growing inability of European nation-states to act as poles of identification for their populations, Brittany has recently become a destination of fantasized, or actual relocation, not only for the French, but also for other nationalities, among which the British figure prominently. The popularity of the summer saga suggestively called *Dolmen*, which the French television channel TF1 broadcast in 2005, points to the cultural significance that Brittany has acquired in recent years. Up to 2005, the region that had traditionally been selected as backdrop for the saga was the sunny Côte d'Azur in the South of France, whereas Brittany was out of question for fear that its allegedly inhospitable climate would jeopardize the shooting of the film.

Poirier's attraction to Brittany shines through in an interview, in which the director says that the region is not a passageway to a more desirable destination, but a place where one actually goes to [settle down]: 'Elle n'est pas une région où l'on passe, mais où l'on va' (Poirier 1997a). The fantasy of coming 'home' in Brittany lies at the heart of Poirier's film, in which two male 'nomads,' the Catalan-born Paco and the Russian-born Nino, both struggle to find domestic happiness in what the film's title implicitly presents as a European 'Far West.' One of the most striking aspects of Poirier's film can be considered its depiction of non-European immigrants as guides and hosts for the homeless European male protagonist. In this article, I wish to explore the ways in which

Poirier appropriates and re-signifies the American genre of the western in *Western* to present Brittany as a micro-version of an idealized European Union. In Poirier's utopian Europe, brotherhood, friendship and love characterize the relationships between Europeans and their intimate Others, that is to say non-European immigrants.

According to Manuel Poirier, the making of *Western* fulfilled his own desire to leave Paris and go to Brittany to shoot a road movie that, like the West in American westerns, would reflect the notion of freedom (1997a). In choosing to go to the farthest end of the European continent to make his film,<sup>1</sup> Poirier takes up a French tradition dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Already during the age of industrialization, French writers and artists such as Gustave Flaubert and Paul Gauguin left the French capital to undertake their own journeys in the 'savage' region in search of primitivism, male empowerment, authenticity, stability, intellectual freedom, and rejuvenation (Sicard-Cowan 2007). More recently, the image of Brittany as a 'wild' alternative to Parisian civility has become part and parcel of the region's own self-image. For example, the producers of Breizh Cola, a local variant on Coca Cola, played on the homophonic resemblance of 'far' and the French term *phare* [lighthouse] to advertise their product as 'l'autre cola du phare ouest' [the other cola of the lighthouse (phare) in the west].

Given this insistence on characterizing Brittany as a French equivalent of the American frontier, it might be worthwhile exploring the associations conjured up by this comparison. In her book *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, Jane Tompkins contends that 'the [American] West seems to offer escape from the conditions of life in modern industrial society: from a mechanized existence, economic dead ends, social entanglements, unhappy personal relations, political injustice' (1992, 4). As is the case with the heroes of conventional American westerns, the impulse to 'go west' for artists such as Flaubert and Gauguin can be said to have originated, to a large extent, in a sense of profound dissatisfaction with personal and/or socio-political circumstances. Much the same could be said for Manuel Poirier, whose film bears the mark of the repressive political climate in which it was conceived, shot and released, and thus reveals something of the director's reaction to such a context.

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<sup>1</sup> Not only did he choose Brittany, but he chose the western most *département* (an administrative district in France) of Brittany suggestively named Finistère (*finis terrae*).

That reaction is visible, for example, in a manifesto against the anti-immigrant policies of the French government that Poirier co-signed in 1996 while working on *Western*. Specifically, the manifesto targeted the enactment of the so-called 'Debré Laws'—named after the Minister of the Interior, Michel Debré—which, as Mireille Rosello has shown, redefined hospitality by requiring 'any host to act as an immigration officer' (2001, 38) vis-à-vis his/her guests. These new laws stipulated in particular that it was illegal to open the door of one's home to a foreigner who had not been issued an official *certificat d'hébergement* [lodging certificate] by the French authorities prior to his/her arrival in France. In addition, anyone putting up foreigners was also required to inform French authorities of the departure of his/her guest(s). In 1997, when a French woman was accused of, and subsequently charged with, having committed a *délit d'hébergement* [crime of hospitality] for taking in a female friend along with the woman's undocumented Zairean partner, sixty-six film directors, including Poirier, urged the French population to practice civil disobedience against the institutionalized xenophobia of the Debré laws. In a text entitled 'Il faut désobéir à des lois inhumaines' [One must disobey inhumane laws] ('Il faut' 1997) the directors claimed to be guilty of having put up undocumented immigrants, and demanded to be judged accordingly.<sup>2</sup>

Against this backdrop, *Western* appears as a filmic meditation on hospitality. More precisely, the film can be interpreted as the translation, in the filmic medium, of what Michael Roth calls a 'political nostalgia,' which he defines as 'an expression of the refusal to feel at home in an unjust political regime' (1993, 34). In *Western*, such nostalgia reveals itself most notably in Poirier's contrasting representations of Paris and Brittany. While the former is associated with the predominance of economic interest over human concerns and the active discouragement of contacts with foreigners, Brittany is imagined as a place of daily interactions between foreigners and 'natives.'

This sense of relationality in Brittany is evidenced already in the rather unconventional opening shot<sup>3</sup> with which the film begins: the film opens onto an image of a busy street set against the backdrop of a town situated below, with the traffic coming towards the camera. Partially visible on the right side of the frame, we see a sign with the name of a

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<sup>2</sup> For more details on this matter see Rosello (2001, chapter one).

<sup>3</sup> Jane Tompkins indicates that 'the land revealed ... in the opening shot of a Western is a land defined by absence: of trees, of greenery, of houses, of the signs of civilization, above all, absence of water and shade' (1992, 71).

city exhibiting the letters 'qui,'<sup>4</sup> opposed on the left side by the hand of a hitchhiker. After a few seconds, a car driven by Paco (Sergi López), a Spanish salesman who works for a Parisian shoe company, pulls over, and the identity of the hitchhiker is revealed as that of an attractive Breton woman. However, she declines Paco's invitation to ride with him, telling him instead to take another hitchhiker who had been waiting longer than she had. In this way, Paco is brought together with the other protagonist, Nino (Sacha Bourdo), a penniless Russian who has been on the road ever since his French bride left him before their marriage two years before.

For Paco, this chance encounter triggers a series of unpredictable events through which Poirier redefines European masculine identity from being self-contained to being-in-relation and open to alterity. Such a transformation is of the most crucial importance. As will become clear below, Poirier posits it as a condition for the creolization of Europe.<sup>5</sup> The first step in Paco's mutation comes when Nino subsequently steals the former's car along with all of his commercial merchandise. The incident costs Paco his job because, although the car does not belong to the company, his employer has strictly forbidden him to share this private space with strangers for fear that his goods might be stolen. At a superficial level, Nino might thus appear responsible for Paco's critical situation, a reading that would seem to give weight to the vilifying argument that male immigrant foreigners rob European men of their jobs. However, it would be difficult not to interpret Paco's predicament at once as Poirier's way of highlighting the negative impact of the Debré laws on French society at large since, in the end, the European subject is found guilty of and punished for having shared his personal space with a foreigner—not unlike the French woman mentioned above who, as punishment for her 'crime of hospitality,' lost her job and was subsequently sent to jail.

While not ignoring the dominant discourse that turns hospitality into a 'crime,' the project of *Western* will also suggest another possible model. In an unexpected plot twist, Paco eventually comes to see himself as partly responsible for the theft of his car. As he explains to Marinette (Elisabeth Vitali), a Breton woman who offers him a lift and a bed for the night, he made a mistake that no hero in a conventional western would ever

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<sup>4</sup> Those familiar with the region will have recognized Quimper.

<sup>5</sup> I borrow the expression 'creolization of Europe' from Rosello and Pratt (2007), editors of a themed issue of *Culture Theory and Critique* titled 'Creolisation: Towards a Non-Eurocentric Europe.'

make: after erecting a wall of silence between himself and the foreigner, Paco ends up listening and speaking to Nino, thereby adopting an attitude that stands in sharp contrast to the ethos of the typical film western hero. As Janet Tompkins indeed remarks, in a conventional western the hero would never render himself vulnerable by opening himself up to 'penetration' by the outside world:

*Control* is the key word [in westerns]. Not speaking demonstrates control not only over feelings but over one's physical boundaries as well. The male, by remaining "hermetic," "closed up," maintains the integrity of the boundary that divides him from the world. (It is fitting that in the Western the ultimate loss of that control takes place when one man puts holes in another man's body.) To speak is literally to open the body to penetration by opening an orifice; it is also to mingle the body's substance with the substance that is outside of it. Finally, it suggests a certain incompleteness, a need to be in relation. Speech relates the person who is speaking to other people (as opposed to things); it requires acknowledging their existence and, by extension, their parity. If "to become a man," as Schwenger says, "must be finally to attain the solidity and self-containment of an object," "an object that is self-contained does not have to open itself up in words. (56)

In Poirier's film, Paco pays a dear price precisely for failing to keep himself hermetically sealed to Nino's speech: the later makes the false claim that he hears an unusual noise coming from the rear of the car, Paco stops the vehicle to inspect it, and finds himself stranded on the side of the road. 'Il m'a eu à l'oreille' [He tricked my ears] Paco tells Marinette in the aftermath of Nino's *tour de force*.

In the dominant French political discourse on immigration, it is common practice to invoke France's alleged vulnerability in order to justify the need for even harsher immigration laws. But the equation between France's supposed fragility and tougher immigration laws is precisely what Poirier seeks to undo. When asked in one interview to comment on the 'message' of his film, Poirier underlined what distinguishes his argument from those put forth by the French extreme-right and embraced by mainstream politicians:

Plein de gens vivent dans des situations très difficiles, ils sont au chômage, n'ont que le RMI ou même le SMIC. Pour autant, ils ne votent pas Front national. On pourrait leur rendre hommage. Et moi, j'ai envie de raconter ces gens-là, tels qu'ils sont, pas en les démunissant davantage.<sup>6</sup> (Poirier 1997a)

As it turns out, in the alternative space of *Western*, which Poirier qualifies as 'utopian,' Paco's dispossession and vulnerability does not lead to the commiseration of this

<sup>6</sup> Lots of people live in very difficult situations, they are unemployed, have only a minimum wage, or not even that. But still, they do not vote for the National Front. And I want to show these people the way they are, without making them more dispossessed than they already are.

character's fate by the director, but rather to the representation of meaningful, nurturing relations between a European and a non-European, which ultimately prove beneficial not only to them, but to French society at large.

In *West of Everything* (1992, 9), Jane Tompkins points out a contradiction, which she perceives to be inherent in the genre of the western: 'Logic would suggest that in his flight from women and children, family life, triviality, and tameness, the Western hero would run straight into the arms of the Indian, wild blood brother of his soul, but it doesn't happen.' In his own western, Poirier follows the logic suggested by Tompkins by allowing a 'buddy film'-style friendship to develop between a European man and a 'nomadic' foreigner. Although Poirier's protagonists are marked as different in terms of geographical origins, social status and ways of life at the beginning of *Western*, as the film progresses, the contours of their respective identities become blurred, and they eventually trade places, as evidenced by a formal parallelism of Poirier's narrative: in the opening shot, Paco can be seen giving a ride to Nino, whereas toward the end of film, their respective roles have been reversed.

The first moment of bonding between the two men occurs when Paco visits Nino in the hospital after having given the Russian a serious beating in retaliation for the theft of his car. At the hospital, Nino tells Paco that he stole his vehicle to seduce a woman. However, in spite of the car and the pair of shoes he offers to the woman in question, all Nino manages to gain from his theft is a bed for the night, not the relationship he had longed for. In the meantime, Paco has also met a woman named Marinette, and he expresses his gratitude to Nino since the latter facilitated their encounter precisely through his theft (Marinette gave a lift to Paco after he had been stranded on the road by Nino). In the scene at the hospital, then, Paco begins to subordinate economic interest to love interest, which again marks a deviation from the conventions of the genre of the western. As Virginia Wexman indicates in *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage, and Hollywood Performance*, in traditional westerns, 'romantic love is marginal' (1993, 83) since it is subordinated to what she calls a 'dynastic model of marriage which understands the marriage relationship not in terms of emotional fulfillment but as an economic partnership, the object of which is to make use of land to build a patrimony for future generations' (81). In Poirier's own western, love is associated neither with marriage, nor with capital gain; in fact, Paco tells Marinette that marriage does not mean

anything to him, and the unexpected cancellation of Nino's marriage by his wife-to-be has left him with a less than positive attitude for the institution. As for the material benefits which the two protagonists could derive from their relationships with Breton women, the living conditions of the latter do not appear to be conducive to the men's potential accumulation of wealth: Marinette sells trinkets and souvenirs in the fishing village of Le Guilvinec, and Nino's girlfriend Nathalie is a single mother who works hard to put food in the plates of her five children.

It is, above all, Paco's distancing from ownership that brings him closer to Nino's way of life. When Paco asks Nino if he locked the car after using it, Nino answers in the negative; as a poor homeless person, he does not have the reflexes that come with ownership. Soon enough, Paco will relinquish his own economic interests in his quest for emotional fulfillment, as illustrated for example by his absolute disinterest in recovering his car after he sees the vehicle race by Marinette's house. Poirier's next move in deterritorializing Paco's personal identity then consists in making him homeless just like Nino: Marinette puts Paco's love to the test by asking him to return after spending three weeks of 'absolute freedom,' after which the two of them will decide if they still want to be together. Marinette's action derives from her fear that Paco might end up cheating on her, like her previous lover did. As a consequence, Paco and Nino embark on a rather peculiar three-week journey through Brittany on foot.

However, despite Poirier's suggestion of great distances in his use of CinemaScope,<sup>7</sup> an aesthetics traditionally used to represent landscapes in westerns according to Wexman (1993, 109), the protagonists' journey differs sharply from the frontier conquest of traditional western heroes—consisting rather of circular motions performed in a perimeter of only eight miles. For instance, at the beginning of their journey, Nino tells Paco that they are heading eastward, toward the city of Nantes. But after a short while, they decide to go back to the town of Pont L'Abbé because the waitress at the hotel

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<sup>7</sup> 'Un road-movie en Cinémascope sur quinze kilomètres' (Poirier cited in Burdeau 1992). James Monaco (1997, 87) defines the filmic aesthetics of Cinemascope.wide screen as follows: 'The ... method of achieving a widescreen ratio, the anamorphic process, became popular in the mid-fifties as "CinemaScope," a process via which 'an anamorphic lens squeezes a wide image into the normal frame dimensions of the film and then unsqueezes the image during projection to provide a picture with the proper proportions. The standard squeeze ratio for the most common anamorphic systems (first CinemaScope, now Panavision) is 2:1; that is, a subject will appear in the squeezed frame to be half as wide as in reality.'

where they stayed the night before has invited them to spend the evening with her and a girlfriend. Similarly, at the close of the film, the protagonists return to Le Guilvinec, where Marinette lives. The absence of a linear, teleological trajectory suggests that the protagonists' journey cannot be equated to a conquest in the traditional sense of the word. In fact, whereas the hero in a conventional western appears to be 'a kind of "natural" proprietor of the land' (Tompkins 1992, 81), it is far from being the case in Poirier's film. One scene in particular illustrates this point: having spent their last bit of money, Nino and Paco seek work in a farm. When Nino accidentally wounds Paco with the chain saw the farmer had let them borrow to cut tree branches, the farmer refuses to call the doctor, chases them away from his property, and even burns their personal belongings. Nino interprets the farmer's actions as being driven by a need to erase the slightest trace of their existence. Such a scene underlines both the landowner's exclusionary attitude, and the protagonists' sense of homelessness—a far cry from the promotion of land ownership to be found in traditional westerns. Furthermore, by narrating failed relationships between his male protagonists and Breton women whose names refer to Breton landscape and flora (Marinette is evocative of the sea, and Fougère means 'fern'), Poirier ironizes the western hero's fantasy of being united with nature, for which female characters usually serve as metaphors in the genre (Tompkins 1992, 109).

In contrast with the scene at the Breton farm, scenes shot in Cinemascope that feature Breton landscape as such—as opposed to the people who own it—convey images of Brittany as a shelter for the two dispossessed protagonists: in such scenes, where the two men can be seen walking in the Breton countryside, the camera invariably pulls back, causing them to ultimately blend in with their surroundings. This merging, however, does not cancel difference in the manner of the traditional western, where 'the sense of Otherness is suppressed [and] bodies, beasts, and landscape merge into a harmonious whole' through the use of color, wide screen, and music (Tompkins 1992, 109). Poirier, on the contrary, takes great pain to represent Brittany as a space open to alterity. For instance, the scenes depicting the Breton landscape are accompanied by non-diegetic Flamenco music; and toward the end of the film, Nino is shown singing a Russian song in the Breton home where he has finally found domestic happiness. Thus, Brittany is characterized as a multilingual space since Paco, Nino, Baptiste, as well as some of the Breton characters that appear in the movie speak French along with other



European and non-European languages. Therefore, *Western* does not reduce Brittany to its Celtic heritage. Rather, the film represents the Celtic heritage as only one of several cultural influences. Poirier's emphasis on the foreigners' various cultural backgrounds in his film undoubtedly serves to illustrate his conviction that identities need to connect with other identities in order to live, contrary to the belief held by proponents of cultural assimilation in France.<sup>8</sup>

In *Western*, Brittany's relation to Otherness, where Otherness is neither degraded, nor annihilated, but welcomed in its difference, mirrors the male European subject (Paco)'s gradual acceptance of the male foreigner (Nino) as an equal. If, at the beginning of their journey together, Paco looks down on Nino for the latter's identity as a powerless man (Paco tells Nino that he feels 'shitty' and hopeless for being jobless, homeless, and loveless like Nino), he ends up trusting Nino to act as mediator between himself and Marinette, the woman he thinks he loves. Previously, it was Paco who, because of his luck in love, played the role of mediator between Nino and Breton women in the film.

Paco's position vis-à-vis the 'foreigner' is further transformed when he seems to find a 'double' of sorts in another character Baptiste (Basile Siekoua): a black male from the Ivory Coast whose legs have been paralyzed. Paco can be regarded as a potential double for Baptiste in that both his legs are wounded in the course of the film: the first time through the chain saw held by Nino; the second time through a car door inadvertently slung open by Nathalie (Marie Matheron), a Breton woman suffering from an acute sense of isolation, whom Paco immediately falls in love with.

Since Baptiste is the only male character involved in a successful relationship with a Breton woman, he appears as an ideal romantic partner and a model of masculinity to be emulated.<sup>9</sup> In identifying Paco with Baptiste, it would seem that Poirier raises the

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<sup>8</sup> Poirier (1997a) says the following: 'Pour vivre, une identité a besoin d'aller vers les autres .... Quand on a trouvé la sienne, on se sent bien, on peut s'ouvrir aux autres et les accueillir. C'est l'inverse du raisonnement d'extrême-droite qui, au nom de la sauvegarde de son identité, en appelle à se cadenasser à double tour' [An identity needs to connect with other identities in order to live .... When one has found one's identity, one feels good, one can open up to others and welcome them. It is the opposite of right-wing thinking, which calls for double locking one's door for the sake of protecting one's identity].

<sup>9</sup> In portraying a disabled man, and particularly a black disabled man, as embodiment of a masculinity to be emulated, Poirier subverts the conventions pertaining to the representation of the western hero, whose hypermasculinity, argues Wexman (1993, 92), is usually linked to his unusual size, as indicated in the

viewers' expectations that his European protagonists will come together as a couple (Paco with Marinette, or with Nathalie), whereas the non-European Nino will continue his erratic, loveless life. On the other hand, however, in depicting an interracial couple formed by a non-European man and a European woman (Baptiste and his Breton girlfriend) as an ideal couple, the director also seems to suggest that a happy ending is possible for Nino. As it turns out, it is Paco who loses in the aleatory game of love. One scene in particular foreshadows the Spaniard's bad luck. In this scene, Paco and Nino spend the evening—and the night—at their waitress's place. The women gathered there exoticize Paco in spite of the latter's attempts to undermine their efforts by remarking that both Brittany and Spain share a Celtic cultural heritage. Such an attitude on the women's part reveals that Paco is the object of fantasized erotic union, not a candidate for durable companionship. Nino, on the other hand, finds both love and a home at the end of his Breton journey.

In order for Nino's emotional fulfillment to finally occur, the male European subject has to relinquish his sense of entitlement as the foreigner's host. In the final scenes of the film, Paco blames Nino for taking advantage of his invitation to spend the evening with Nathalie: according to Paco, Nino flirts with the woman, even though Paco has told him that he is in love with her. Paco's anger mounts in spite of the fact that it is not Nino who is flirting with Nathalie, but Nathalie herself who is attracted to Nino. In light of his friend's frustration, Nino decides not to go back to Nathalie's, but ultimately, Paco accepts that Nathalie has chosen Nino, not him. At the end of Poirier's film, Paco comes to recognize Nathalie's role as decision-maker in her own private space, as well as his guest-turned-host's own entitlement to happiness. At the end of the film, Paco is even shown sharing in Nino and Nathalie's happiness since the three of them can be seen laughing and sharing a meal with Nathalie's numerous children.

In his review of *Western* called '... à la maison' [At Home], Emmanuel Burdeau (1997) perceives the absence of the epic quality characteristic of traditional westerns as some kind of failed mastery of the generic conventions on Poirier's part. I would suggest instead that Burdeau has missed the political significance of Poirier's intentional deviations from the genre of the western, some of which I have highlighted in this

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titles of such westerns as *Tall in the Saddle* (1944), *The Tall Texan* (1953), *Tall Man Riding* (1955), *The Tall Stranger* (1957), and *The Tall T* (1957).

article. In my view, *Western* should be read as Poirier's attempt to represent immigration not as reverse colonization through the usurpation of European jobs and women by male foreigners, but rather as a source of personal and social betterment. The male foreigner, in Poirier's film, is not portrayed as a parasite threatening to undo France's 'fragile' social fabric, but rather as a facilitator, and even 'fixer' of social relations: between men, between men and women, as well as between parents and children as evidenced in a scene in which Nino attempts to reconnect an estranged son to his father.

Interactions between the male foreigner embodied by Nino and the male European subject embodied by Paco serve not only to redefine conventional European masculinity, but also to promote an alternative to the dominant eurocentric definition of Europe: in Poirier's European 'family,' a European man has accepted his role as guest of a male foreigner; the latter, for his part, has turned into a stay-at-home father, and he forms a happy couple with a working mother providing for him and for her five children whose facial features and names reflect various ethnicities. In addition, Poirier's choice of locating his alternative European family in Brittany serves to fragment France's national identity into regional identities and bring out the country's longstanding ethnic and cultural pluralism—a reality which continues to be denied in today's France as evidenced by the country's refusal to ratify the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Poirier's belief that personal identity is not reducible to national affiliation gains further visibility in the final credits: there, the names of all the individuals involved in the making of the film are paired with flags representing one or more countries which are, in turn, coupled with one or more specific regions; one name is paired neither with a national affiliation, nor with a regional one. In *Western*, it would seem that Poirier defines personal identity as subjective performance, as is illustrated in the Ivorian national Baptiste's mention of his Breton origins.

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