

WATER RITES:
Reimagining Water in the West
Edited by Jim Ellis

ISBN 978-1-55238-998-0

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence. This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY:

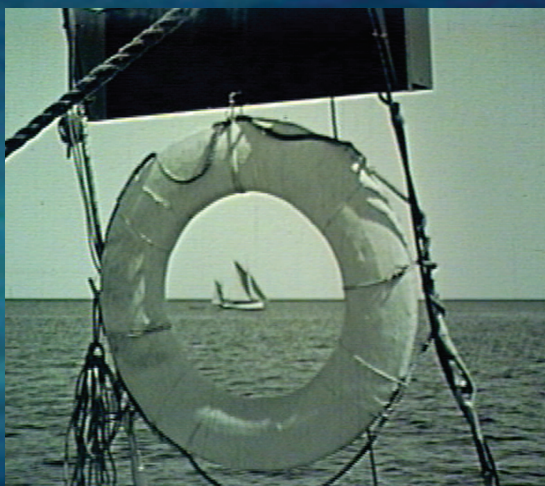
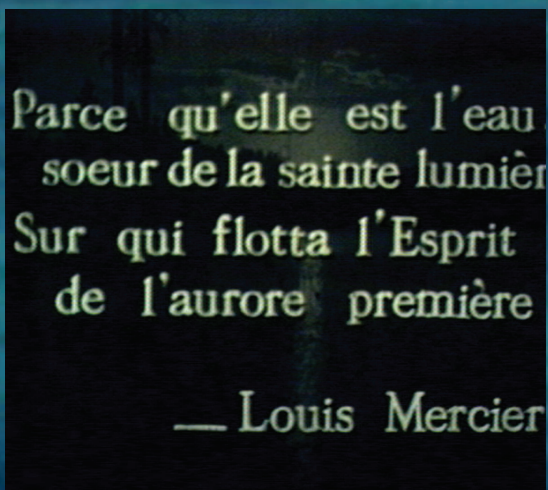
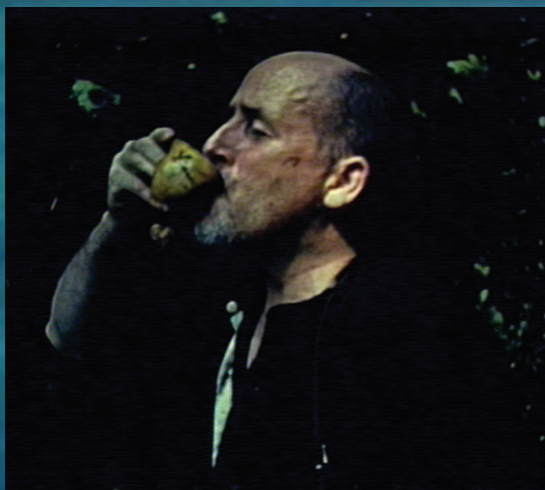
- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY NOT:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.



Acknowledgement: We acknowledge the wording around open access used by Australian publisher, **re.press**, and thank them for giving us permission to adapt their wording to our policy <http://www.re-press.org>



Frame captures from *Gloire à l'eau* (Albert Tessier, ca. 1935/1950) courtesy Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec.

glory to water gloire à l'eau by *albert tessier*

(ca. 1935/1950) 16mm, B&W and colour film, silent, 10 minutes

charles tepperman

university of calgary

When the 16mm film format was introduced by Kodak in 1923 it opened up the domain of filmmaking to non-professionals. While home movies made up the largest portion of this activity, many amateurs became proficient filmmakers who used the medium to chronicle their travels, support their professional work, or simply as means of creative expression. Albert Tessier was a priest and amateur filmmaker who used film for all three of these purposes. Based in the St. Maurice River area north of Trois-Rivières, Quebec, Tessier made about seventy short films between 1927 and the 1940s.¹ He used his films to record his canoe trips and also as part of the work he did for the St. Maurice Forest Protective Association and later for the Catholic church's program in family education. His films captured the region's nature, as well the rural life and customs of its inhabitants, often through a poetic and sacred lens. One of Tessier's most acclaimed films was *Gloire à l'eau*, a tribute to the many practical and spiritual uses of water.

Tessier filmed *Gloire à l'eau* in the mid-1930s, supplementing and re-editing it often over the next decade and a half. The print that survives is shorter than some versions of the film and we can see traces of his revisions in the different qualities of film stock (some black and white, some colour) and varying exposure levels.² Tessier described the film as "abandoned," indicating some dissatisfaction with its final state. Amateur moviemakers during the 1930s often made poetic and lyrical polished films about nature, so Tessier was part of a broader community of filmmakers in this respect. Tessier

described *Gloire à l'eau* as his “favorite movie ... a subject a cineaste should try.”³ Different versions of the film were exhibited widely, and it was included in the “International Amateur Movie Show” presented by Columbia University in New York in April 1938.⁴ Though typically Tessier presented the film with music or spoken commentary, the version that survives is silent.

Gloire à l'eau presents an inventory of water's many uses, both spiritual and banal. The first shot of the film shows a silent, colour image of a man (perhaps Tessier) speaking and drinking water from a cup before an intertitle introduces the metaphysical dimensions of film's subject: “Because it is water/ Sister of holy light/ above which floated the spirit/ of the first dawn.” We see shots of waves from a high angle and surf crashing against rocks, and the visually dramatic quality of water is juxtaposed against the religious themes of the next intertitles: “Praise be, my Lord/ for sister water/ which is plentiful/ useful and humble/ and precious and pure.” The camera pans across water in a landscape setting of a lake or river with hills rising above it.

Following these introductory verses and images, the film presents a series of water types. According to surviving documentation, the film's thesis was to organize water into two broad categories, the first of which was “L'eau, mère de la vie” [Water, Mother of Life]. The first instance of this is “L'eau-sanctification” [Water-Sanctification], explained by Tessier as “Mother of Supernatural Life.”⁵ Here we see an interior scene with faucets and ceremonial accoutrements, and then a priest performing a baptism, pouring holy water on a baby's head. Second in the film's typology is “L'eau-beauté” [Water-Beauty], which for Tessier is the “Mother of Intellectual Life.” Here we see images of water running past plantlife, a swirling pool near some rocks, ripples, and rapids, and then cutting larger rivers and their rapid and gentle flows. The next category is “L'eau-nourriture” [Water-Nourishment], “Mother of Animal Life (Men and Beasts).” We see a moose standing in shallow water drinking, and in the next shot a man drinks with a cup at the water's edge and then we see him casting a fishing-pole, before cutting to fishing boats on larger bodies of water. By editing in this way Tessier employs a categorical form of filmmaking, juxtaposing different users and uses of water. “L'eau-engrais” is next, focusing briefly on instances of “Water-Fertilization” (“Mother of Vegetable Life”) and showing large trees along the edge of a river.

The second broad category of water is its practical uses as “Collaboratrice de l'homme” [Man's Collaborator]. This includes “L'eau-force” [Water-Power], and we see a water-driven mill turning, a steam locomotive charging past the camera, and tumul-

tuous rapids churning in the river and passing an electric generation plant, leading from water flow to electrical wires. “L’eau-route” is next, showing the means of transportation provided by water, including canoes passing on a large river, larger boats diverting lumber, and then a mass of logs passing down the river, through a chute, and into rapids. Finally, a sailboat is shown, pointing to more peaceful methods of traveling, and large passenger ships are seen travelling down the river, belching smoke into the air. “L’eau-hygiene” concludes Tessier’s typology, as a large pitcher of water is poured into a clean white basin and a nurse bathes a baby with soap and water. Further images compare different kinds of bathing, from babies in the tub, to a man washing his face in the river, and then a large group of children splashing, swimming, and playing in the water. The film’s conclusion returns to verses that connect water with prayer and religion: “Praise be, my Lord/ For sister water/ which is plentiful/ useful and humble/ and precious and pure.” Graceful ripples of blue water are shown, and are almost abstract in quality; the film’s last images are of light reflections on rippling water and the moon.

Gloire à l’eau is an excellent example of thoughtful amateur filmmaking from the 1930s. It presents a compilation of a varied informational and poetic footage of water that is then organized into categories of use and spiritual significance. In this way, Tessier could employ his film as both an expression of individual creativity and as a demonstration of religious ideas, showing how the sacred and beautiful qualities of water permeated all aspects of life. Over the course of the 1930s, amateurs developed networks of movie clubs to support their activities, and national and international organizations emerged to help coordinate efforts and circulate their films. After 1941, some of Tessier’s films (including *Gloire à l’eau*) were distributed by Quebec’s government cinema service.⁶ Today, Tessier is best remembered as the namesake for the Prix Albert-Tessier, awarded each year to an individual for their outstanding career in Quebec cinema.

notes

1. René Bouchard, *Filmographie d’Albert Tessier* (Montréal: Les Éditions du Boréal Express, 1973).
2. The film is preserved by Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec.
3. Bouchard, 55. All translations by author.
4. “Three Cinematographer Awards On International Show Program,” *American Cinematographer*, April 1938, 170.
5. *Filmographie*, 55.
6. Louis Pelletier, “Un cinéma officiel amateur : les racines artisanales du cinéma gouvernemental québécois,” in *L’amateur en cinéma – Un autre paradigme*, Valérie Vignaux and Benoît Turquetty (eds.) (Paris: AFRHC, 2016).