Queering Childhood: *An Examination of Claude Jutra's* *Dreamspeaker*

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Through a close reading of Claude Jutra's *Dreamspeaker* (1976), Kate Rennebohm offers an exploration of the breakdown of the traditional notion of 'child' as identity. Particularly through forms of silence and spectatorial address, Jutra opens up discursive spaces that can be seen as queer, thus breaking down the traditional connotations of innocence and ignorance commonly associated with childhood.

In his book *The Romance of Transgression in Canada*, Tom Waugh describes a critical concern surrounding the work of Québécois director Claude Jutra, and Jutra's preoccupation with children as subjects of his films:

> *Jutra's sense of [growth, education, socialization]…is channeled and deepened through the physicality of his pubescent heroes and through his eroticization of their pedagogic interactivity. Jutra the poet of youthful learning cannot be separated from the Jutra whose erotic fulfillment derives from engagement in that process. This is the essence of Jutra's work. Here is the terror it has held for critics and film historians, here are the secret and the courage that his closest collaborators couldn't face (442).*

It is this 'terror' that I would like to explore in an examination of Jutra's 1976 television film *Dreamspeaker*, a film which presents one of the most heartbreaking visions of childhood found in the Canadian film canon. Through a close reading of the film we will see that

Jutra breaks down and disrupts traditional categories, particularly the notion of 'child' as an identity, and opens discursive spaces which can, in effect, be seen as queer. It is in these spaces, which largely figure in the film in the forms of silence and spectatorial address, that Jutra is able to introduce sexuality into a film about childhood without trespassing into such negative notions as pedophilia or predation. Through this examination of Jutra's techniques, I will attempt to break through some of the critical silence surrounding Jutra's queer authorial status (Waugh 110).

Dreamspeaker originally aired on the CBC on January 23, 1977, as part of the CBC's For the Record anthology series. The film, set in British Columbia, marked Jutra's second film for the series (the first being ADA, also shown in 1977) and his second production outside of Quebec. The film follows Peter, a troubled eleven year old orphan, as played by Ian Tracey. After Peter burns a building down, he is sent to juvenile detention centre by, presumably, his foster parents. Extremely unhappy, Peter escapes and eventually comes to live with an older Native man and his younger, mute friend. As Peter begins to recover in the company of the two men, the RCMP burst in and return Peter to the institution. The older man dies of natural causes shortly thereafter and both the younger man and Peter kill themselves, violently. *Dreamspeaker* was written by Anne Cameron (aka Cam Hubert) and, as such, shares its authorial voice between both Cameron and Jutra – Cameron's influence is particularly evident in the film's depiction of native beliefs and spiritualism. Delineating exactly whose influence upon the film led to each of the various aspects I will be discussing is more, unfortunately, than

can be addressed here. As such, I will be working from the admittedly general assumption that, as Jutra picked Cameron's script to direct, he felt his own artistic aims and concerns were mirrored in Cameron's writing.

One of the concerns shared between Cameron and Jutra was that of a fascination with the lives of children; Jutra "was always interested in children; he established with them very privileged relationships." (Werner Nold, quoted in Waugh 439) This remark, of course, about an older man enjoying the company of children not biologically his own, already sends up red flags of concern over the impropriety of such a relationship and, implicitly, the safety of said children. Why such a response? In his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault ties this viewpoint to a "a pedagogization of children's sex" (104) which amounted to "A double assertion that practically all children indulge or are prone to indulge in sexual activity; and that…this sexual activity posed physical and moral, individual and collective dangers; children were defined as "preliminary" sexual beings…astride a dangerous dividing line (104).It is this notion of a 'dangerous' childhood sexuality, which may presumably be ignited by exposure to anything resembling adult sexuality, which has led to a rather hysterical separation of the two, and a demonization of any adult who would threaten to cross that boundary. However, it is overly simplistic to dismiss the concern around such horrifying problems as child sexual abuse as mere manifestations of a discourse about children – a discourse which has taken "on a consistency and gained an effectiveness in the order of power" (Foucault 104). As such, it is important to delineate how this discourse around children can and does work to create a certain view of children, and to distinguish its functions from actual concerns of mistreatment of children.

As a starting point for this delineation, one could note that Waugh's assertion that Jutra's filmmaking is marked by a "centrality of intergenerational eros and mentorship," (440) could be seen to place Jutra astride that dangerous dividing line himself. This concept of intergenerational eros hinges, in Jutra's films, on the "elder-bachelor mentor figure;" (106) it is through this figure that "the hero discovers…a hitherto unarticulated alternative model for the masculine self, a redeemer of stigma, and this intergenerational socialization process has a more or less explicit eroticized gloss" (106). In order to address the relationship between this 'eroticized gloss' and questions of child sexuality, we must first chart Jutra's particular presentation of the notion of 'childhood' itself.

As Foucault himself notes, no single discourse on a subject becomes definite: "we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies" (100). According to this, then, the prevalent notion of children as innocent figures to be protected is not an inescapable conclusion, then, but rather part of a "complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (Foucault 101). I would argue that, in the ways in which Jutra presents the character of Peter in *Dreamspeaker*, Jutra resists and refigures the dominant discourse of childhood through a foregrounding of contradiction and opposition within Peter and the world he inhabits.

As I mentioned previously, *Dreamspeaker* has a tragic, heartbreaking quality; while this can largely be attributed to the film's grisly ending, I noted it also in the films' lack of condescension towards Peter as a character. Far from being given the one-dimensional motivations, or psychological explanations, so prevalent in 'troubled child' characters of more conventional films, Peter's character is remarkable in his multi-dimensionality. In fact, at times, Peter, as a character, seems to border on incoherence, according to more conventional representations of character in film. As an audience, we receive almost no information about Peter's background; although there is an implication that he has been in more than one foster home, we never learn the exact details. He behaves in contradictory ways and we are often given no understanding of the motives behind Peter's erratic actions. In her article "*Critical Categories and the (Il)logic of Identity*" Angela Stukator writes that "discourses on identity which posit coherence, unity and wholeness – whether they are cinematic discourses or scholarly discourses on cinematic representations – must be seen as examples of our insatiable desire to fix identity despite the impossibility of this desire" (118). Stukator also writes that the way to move away from these false, 'fixed' identities is to foreground, in a film's characters, "internal difference, contradictions, and tensions which could potentially blur the boundaries of a category" (119). It is through this rubric that I believe we can explore the ways in which Jutra breaks down the 'identity' of childhood, and thus open up ways of looking at and understanding a young person without the notions of innocence and ignorance traditionally tied to that identity.

I have already outlined some of the ways in which Peter is presented as a character with 'internal contradictions.' In his book on Jutra's career, Jim Leach also focuses on the ambiguity and contradictions of Peter's character as presented to the audience. By comparing the film to the novel which Cameron wrote from the screenplay, Leach comes to the conclusion that "the film maintains a high degree of ambiguity, refusing to settle for either the rational or spiritual explanations [concerning Peter's troubled behaviour]" (204). Leach adds that "the film uses [fire] as a striking opening image that associates the boy's troubles with elemental forces and suggests that they can never be fully explained" (204). The workers at the institution are similarly stumped by Peter's attacks – in which Peter tries to strangle himself – and cannot find any explanation or treatment. When the two native men try to help Peter control his attacks, they have more success, but there is no easy solution; the older man states that Peter will likely be plagued by evil spirits for the rest of his life. That the film not only does not offer an explanation for Peter's behaviour but goes so far as to suggest that, perhaps, there is no single explanation, and no way to simply erase Peter's 'internal tensions,' brings the film into conjunction with Stukator's breakdown of the 'logic of identity.' In addition to Peter's attacks, Peter's personality also manifests contradictions:

> *Two sequences…bring out a "schizophrenic" division in [Peter's] personality between an obsessive desire for order and outbursts of violence: in the dining hall, an older boy taunts him for his care in laying out his cutlery, and Peter pushes his soup bowl in the boy's face and violently attacks him; when the other boys rapidly change in the locker room, he carefully folds his clothes before compulsively swimming up and down the pool (Leach 205-206).*

In Leach's remarks, we can see that the film presents Peter's behaviour as indications of clear 'divisions' in his personality. While it would have been simple enough to have Peter explain to some other character in the film his motivations for these seemingly incompatible behaviours, the film removes this option as well – at least initially: "Peter has earlier… refus[ed] to speak, frustrating the adults at the institution but also denying the spectator verbal explanations for the character's thoughts and behavior" (Leach 207). Throughout the film, Ian Tracey's spectacular performance as Peter often confounds our expectations by denying us emotional explanations for Peter's behaviour as well; his face will

be seemingly devoid of emotion for long periods, only to shift dramatically and almost instantaneously to an emotional register without a clear reason. An example of this occurs in the scene in which the older native man confronts Peter, at the dinner table, about his fire-setting: Peter's normally imperturbable face, over the space of a cut, gives way to an expression of such agony, pain, and remorse that the mere speed at which Peter arrived at this emotional state indicates to the audience that we have not had access to Peter's actual emotions prior to this moment, and hence cannot take for granted that we will ever fully know Peter's emotional state. Peter's 'schizophrenic' behaviour and verbal and emotional opacity of motivation present two ways in which the film can be seen to 'blur the category' of childhood through a foregrounding of disunity and incoherence in Peter's character.

The ending of *Dreamspeaker* further refutes any attempt to place Peter in a traditional child-character role. This is accomplished first through the absolute brutality of the final turn of events. As Waugh points out, this violence contradicts expectations about the usual trajectory of a child-character: "the violence in *Dreamspeaker* especially is so incommensurate with the narrative premises of the coming-of-age tradition" (107). That Peter, as the main character of a coming-of-age film, dies presents an occurrence which unusual enough in of itself. That Peter kills himself, and Jutra chooses to show the audience Peter's hanging body, blue face, and broken neck, foregrounds the death to such an extent that it is very difficult to think of Peter in the normal terms of 'childhood.' Brutal, selfinflicted death brought into contact with the discourse of children as innocent individuals to be protected is, as Waugh says, incommensurable. Finally, the last shot of the film further troubles our understanding of Peter: through a visual return to an earlier, happier scene and a voice-over in which the older Native man remarks that death is only part of a larger cycle, the film "infuses posthumous memory and learning onto the final cataclysm, retroactive wisdom and absolution" (Waugh 107). That the film confuses the traditional Western boundary between life and death presents a final avenue by which the audience's view of Peter as a 'normal' child is upset.

Stukator's argument that 'blurring' traditional categories of identity through foregrounding irreducible contradictions within a character presents an avenue through which Jutra is able to problematize the popular discourse concerning children. A parallel avenue to Stukator's treatment of contradictions can also be

found in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's writings on the various discourses around sexuality. In *Epistemology of the Closet,* she takes a deconstructive stance, in order

> **to demonstrate that categories presented in a culture as symmetrical binary oppositions – heterosexual/homosexual, in this case – actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation according to which… each dyad is irresolvably unstable, an instability caused by the fact that term B is constituted as at once internal and external to term A (10).**

Sedgwick, then, promotes addressing the binarisms constructed around sexuality in such a way to foreground that the fact they are a discursive construction, and, through this, open up the possibility of discursive spaces not marked by a need to create oppositions and binaries – in effect, a queer space. Sedgwick also discusses the ways in which sexuality, as a discourse, is linked with other questions of, and discourses around, identity:

> **In accord with Foucault's demonstration… that modern Western culture has placed what it call sexuality in a more and more distinctly privileged relation to our most prized constructs of individual identity, truth, and knowledge, it becomes truer and truer that the language of sexuality not only intersects with but transforms the other languages and relations by which we know (3).**

Through these remarks, we can see that Sedgwick's deconstructive stance toward binarisms traditionally associated with sexuality shares a common drive with Stukator's move to blur the categories harnessed to produce traditional notions of identity.

The question then becomes, how does sexuality enter into *Dreamspeaker*'s resistance to the popular discourse of childhood? At first glance, sexuality seems almost absent from the film. There is an exception to this, however, early in the film: during his first night at the institution Peter dreams of a grotesque adult couple engaging in sexual intercourse in front of him. That this dream upsets Peter very much – he wets his bed – would seem to play into the notion of children as individuals to be protected and separated from sexuality. This view, however, is, I believe, a red herring and, in fact, only one part of the film's much larger address of sexuality and its overall tendency toward multiplicity

and heterogeneity. In order to discuss the film's presentation of sexuality, however, we must first take into account the rather contradictory voice of silence. In his discussion of sexuality, Foucault notes, "There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things…There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse" (27) Foucault also remarks that silences can "loosen [power's] holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance." (101) These arguments, then, present a different way in which to address evidence of sexuality as a discourse in *Dreamspeaker*.

One way in which *Dreamspeaker* foregrounds sexuality through silence is by making largely absent that thing which is so closely tied to sexuality: gender. The film is almost entirely devoid of women; as Leach notes, aside from the social worker seen earlier in the film, "the only other women to appear in the film are Peter's "dream mother" (so identified in the final credits) and Queen Elizabeth II [in a portrait]. These two women appear only briefly, but they represent the pressures of sexuality and power that provoke Peter's apparently irrational behaviour" (Leach 205). Leach's remark indicates that the lack of gender representation in the film (as Sedgwick notes, gender is a relational concept and as such, requires two or more terms to be present (31)) links its few appearances to sexuality automatically. Leach's statement also points out a larger silence in the film – the silence concerning Peter's body and his own sexuality. Although Peter is likely on the cusp of puberty, at age 11, there is never the slightest mention of this fact in the film. While Peter is obviously troubled by his body – as shown in the 'compulsive' swimming scene and his physical attacks on himself – there is never any attempt by an adult to address this, which is particularly striking in the case of the institution's doctor. This aspect of the film is interesting in that Peter's attacks could also be read as being, in some ways, the result of his separation from the discourse of sexuality and hence, his own body.

Another absence, or silence, in the film is linked to the unequal presence of the female gender; this is the fact that the two Native men are both bachelors. As described by Waugh, this has the effect of creating a "celibacy anxiety" in which the two men are, in effect, placed in a queer space by virtue of their unexplained choice to remain single (38-41). Interestingly, this aspect is mirrored to some extent in Peter himself – not, of course, by a choice to remain single, but by

the fact that Peter seems to have had relatively little contact with the opposite sex. When he escapes the institution, Peter does not seek out a 'mother-figure' but instead willingly accompanies the two Native men home; while, reductively, this could be attributed to the grotesque mother figure seen earlier, this explanation is inadequate as Peter has obviously been mistreated by adults of both genders. In these ways, the silences around the bachelorhood of the two men and Peter's comfort with men present two more ways in which the film foregrounds questions of sexuality. These two aspects of the film also function in terms of Sedgwick's rubric of breaking down the binarisms of heterosexual/homosexual.

And so, we arrive at the final way in which the film foregrounds sexuality in relation to the child Peter and thus crosses a boundary and problematizes the traditional discourse concerning childhood. This final point is also the most important in terms of addressing the 'terror' that Jutra's eroticization of his young male characters has caused for critics. This final point is that of the film's spectatorial address. Waugh's focuses on one specific scene in the film as the pivotal example of 'intergenerational eros:' this is the "sacramental skinny-dipping scene" (107) or the "ecstatic skinny-dipping scene" (439). In this scene Peter and the younger Native man play gleefully in a stream, naked, as the older man watches and laughs from the bank. Before exploring this scene further I feel it is important to note that I do not believe there is any narrative sexualized aspect to this scene; I do not feel that the film indicates there is any sexual attraction indicated between the three characters here – narratively, the scene is simply an exercise in joyful freedom.

That being said, there is, of course, something else going on this scene; the way that Jutra presents the scene does allow very clearly for a visual enjoyment of Peter and the younger man's bodies. This scene fits with Waugh's discussion of Jutra's films *Le Dément Du Lac Jean Jeunes* (1948) and *Mouvement Perpetual* (1949) when he notes that certain scenes "vibrate…with intense and conflicted undercurrents of homoerotic desire – whether conscious or unconscious, we may never know" (438). And so, the eroticization of the male bodies in this sequence functions on a level between the director and object and audience and object (of course, only if the audience responds to it in such a way), not as an implication of pedophilia or predation upon Peter by the older men in the narrative. This spectatorial aspect of the film also works in tandem with the other points to open up a queer space outside strict distinctions of

heterosexual and homosexual.

In my analysis of *Dreamspeaker*, I have attempted to put forward a critical rubric for addressing Claude Jutra's queer authorial status. In *Dreamspeaker*, Jutra works toward a presentation of children which falls outside of the traditional protective and condescending discourse around children, as described by Michel Foucault. By looking at Jutra's presentation of children in terms of Angela Stukator's arguments about the 'logic of identity,' I have argued that Jutra effectively 'blurs' the category of childhood. The same breakdown of binarisms and categories also brings Jutra's presentation of Peter into the realm of Sedgwick's discussion of queer spaces. By treating the identity of 'child' as something which does not require condescension and protection from other discourses, Jutra opens a space into which he places sexuality in relation to childhood. Working within this refiguration of the discourse of childhood, Jutra is able to insert a spectatorial view of his young character which may be read as erotic and yet does not threaten or mistreat that character. While others may argue that this sort of an address presents a slippery slope in terms of treatment of children, I would only say this: in the film *Dreamspeaker*, Jutra presents a portrait of a child with the same respect and tenderness ever extended to the treatment of an adult character in a film.

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