

Queering the Québécois and Canadian Child in Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Léolo*

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In his analysis of Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Léolo*, Alain Chouinard argues that the destabilizing queer sexuality depicted through the marginal spaces of *Léolo*'s imagination works to undercut the pure laine images of childhood in Québec. According to Chouinard, the hybridity of cultural iconography in Lauzon's film, when combined with an explicit and controversial portrayal of child sexuality, ultimately aestheticizes a resistance to French-Canadian nationalism.

Amidst the 1992 Parliament debates on a child pornography law orchestrated by Justice Minister Kim Campbell in Canada,¹ Jean-Claude Lauzon released *Léolo* (1992), a film set in the Montréal of the late 1950s to early 1960s. The partially autobiographical film² depicts the turbulent childhood of Léo, a 12 year old child, who gradually discovers his own sexuality and, through his new Italian identity as "Léolo" and an imaginary Italian landscape, seeks to escape the highly restrictive adult world of Québec's Montréal. While *Léolo* was relatively well received at the time, its release, nevertheless, resulted in several negative reactions in Canada that were explicitly and implicitly directed towards its nightmarish depiction of *Léolo*'s childhood within Québec and its images of child sexuality.

This paper will seek to illustrate how *Léolo*'s depiction of child sexuality and the protagonist's hybrid cultural identity shapes a destabilizing queer identity. This identity undermines the centripetal and idealistic manifestations of nationalistic identity that are embedded within Canada's child pornography law

and Québécois culture and upon which Canadian and Québécois adults depend for a false sense of superiority. Specifically, *Léolo*'s queer identity rejects the child pornography law's nationalistic discourse of childhood innocence and its erasure of child sexuality. The film conveys this subversion through its representation of Montréal's education system and the parental surveillance of the *Léolo*'s body. *Léolo*'s queer identity is further reinforced through his search for marginal and heterotopic spaces in which he can express his queer sexuality, a narrative trajectory which parallels that of other queer characters in Canadian cinema.

Léolo's unstable 'queer' subjectivity is complemented by his cultural hybridity as well as his deviation from the image of hetero-masculinity embodied by Fernand, both of which invert the unifying images of nationalism and adult hetero-masculinity seen in Québec cinema including Lauzon's first film *Un Zoo La Nuit* (1987). The film's disembodied voice-over then enunciates this unstable form of subjectivity and produces an ambiguous confession of child sexuality that resists its absorption into centripetal categories informed by Québécois and Canadian discourses on childhood, nationalism, and hetero-masculinity.

In *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Michel Foucault argues that, since the eighteenth century, the structures of power in Western societies have contributed to the "pedagogization of children's sex"; consequently, child sexuality became a potential cause of "physical and moral, individual and collective dangers"³. Rather than accept the sexual potential of children, they were

labeled “‘preliminary’ sexual beings.”⁴ Ultimately, Foucault then argues that, since the nineteenth century, “the sexuality of children has been subordinated and their ‘solitary habits’ interfered with.”⁵ Through these historical developments, the subversive queerness of child sexuality has been erased and the discourse of childhood innocence reinforced in the twentieth century. For example, Steven Angelides argues in his article “*Feminism, Child Sexual Abuse, and the Erasure of Child Sexuality*” (2004) that, since “the advent of the discourse of child sexual abuse in the 1970s, [...] there has been a tendency to desexualize children and to highlight their innocence in relation to adult sexuality.” [6]

During the Canadian context of 1992, this discourse of childhood innocence re-appeared under the guise of Campbell’s child pornography law.⁷ According to Stan Persky and John Dixon in their book *On Kiddie Porn* (2001), Campbell and other members of the Progressive Conservative party sought to create a form of national unity through this law.⁸ The law was eventually passed in 1993 with the help of new Justice Minister Pierre Blais, a Québec MP, who sought to reinforce the unity of the Progressive Conservatives and voters for the upcoming elections in Québec and Canada in general.⁹ As Lee Edelman has argued in his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), the “Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention.”¹⁰

The political and nationalistic tendency of discourses on child sexuality is, likewise, present in the child pornography law of 1993. Once the law was passed, the Criminal Code would define child pornography as any visual representation “that shows a person who is or is depicted as being under the age of eighteen years and is engaged in or is depicted as engaged in explicit sexual activity.”¹¹ Because they stand in opposition to the adult discourse of childhood innocence, Canadian courts believe that representations of child sexuality are contrary to the “Canadian community standard of tolerance.”¹² Through this law, the suppression of child sexuality became inherently linked to a centripetal and positive notion of Canadian nationalism, which characterized any image of child sexuality as ‘impure’ and in opposition to an imaginary, national standard of morality. Ultimately, according to Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley in their anthology *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (2004), this law has resulted in “a further entrenchment of the perceived division between the sexually queer adult and the sexual – and

queer – child.”¹³

In this Canadian context, *Léolo*, with its explicit images of child sexuality, conflicts with the discourses of childhood innocence being spread in Canada and Québec by the child pornography law and diverse forms of nationalism. Upon its release in 1992, the BC Classification Board, confronted with the film’s images of child sexuality and bestiality, attributed the rating “Restricted and Designated” to *Léolo*; this rating was typically reserved for pornographic films.¹⁴ The reason for this categorization was, in the words of Mary Louise McCausland, the director of the BC Film Board, the result of the manipulation of children in highly sexual contexts.¹⁵ Similarly, when *Léolo* premiered at Montréal’s Place des Arts, “controversies swirled around the film’s raunchiest, most provocative images.”¹⁶ According to Heinz Weinmann, the film was poorly received by the Québec public because its images disturbed the ‘proper’ image that Québec desires to give itself.¹⁷ While Weinmann exaggerates *Léolo*’s reception, the film did receive negative reactions from certain Québec writers and the public.

In his article “Léo pour Léolo our du Pareil au Même” (1992), André Roy from the Montréal magazine *Spirale* criticizes the film’s scenes of masturbation and bestiality as the product of Lauzon’s naïve and indulgent perception of perversion¹⁸ and, with his manipulation of the word “perversion,” Roy exposes his negative perception of child sexuality. Later in this article, Roy asserts that the film’s spectators can only have a negative reaction to its shocking and forceful images and concludes with his unwavering belief that Lauzon’s depiction of childhood in Québec is a deceptive portrait devoid of any truth.¹⁹ In an editorial to the Chicoutimi newspaper *Progrès- Dimanche*, an anonymous writer similarly judges the film’s scenes of child masturbation among other scenes to be an aberrant and false representation of Québécois culture.²⁰ Years after its release, such reactions would continue. For instance, in an article from the *Alberta Report* entitled “*The Art of Bestiality*,” Sillars Lee would oppose the telecast of the film in 1995 because it “portrays bestiality and a woman masturbating pre-adolescent boys. Nonetheless the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation deemed *Léolo* suitable for a late-night offering on Thursday, October 12.”²¹ According to two issues of *Le Droit*, deputy Monte Solberg believed that “certain ‘sexually explicit’ scenes did not contribute absolutely anything to the film”²² and questions why “tax-paying Canadians have to pay for this kind of trash? [...] A large majority of Canadians would never allow, in any circumstance, such

garbage to enter their homes.”²³ While these reactions perceive child sexuality as a perverse trait in opposition to a centripetal and positive image of Canadian and Québécois culture, this paper will focus on Québec’s rejection of *Léolo*’s subversive imagery of sexuality and content.

In his book *Quebec National Cinema* (2001), Bill Marshall acknowledges that “‘perverse’ Québec children in the form of [...] *Léolo* can be read as antidotes to the characters of one of the key specialisms of Quebec cinema over the past thirty years, the ‘children’s film.’”²⁴ In contrast to the childhood innocence present in these children films, Marshall states that *Léolo*’s depiction of lower-class Québécois environment is “far from the notion of ‘pure laine’ or indeed any purity”²⁵ After he addresses the inherent connections between sexual orientation and nationalism, Marshall concludes that:

*the distinction or boundary between heterosexuality and homosexuality is central to constructions of Quebec nationhood, although it may not be the only sexual-identity configuration which upsets the most unified and centripetal versions of it.*²⁶

In my opinion, the child sexuality, which is seen in *Léolo*, is another sexual-identity formation that obstructs a centripetal notion of Québécois or Canadian identity. In conformance with the views of Marshall, this paper will later illustrate that the nationalistic identity of Québec is intrinsically linked to a hetero-masculine image of adulthood, which *Léolo* also rejects. Ultimately, due to the non-centripetal character of child sexuality, its representation in *Léolo* along with the film’s unflattering portrayal of Québec influenced the negative reactions of writers like Roy upon its release.

Faced with the discourse of childhood innocence embedded in these reactions, Angelides suggests that queer theory can offer “an important corrective to the culturally prevailing linear and sequential model of age stratification and sexual development.”²⁷ Through the use of queer theory, the prohibited representations of queer children can be rendered visible in order to undermine these Canadian discourses about childhood. Bruhm and Hurley define the figure of the queer child as:

that which doesn’t quite conform to the wished-for way that children are suppose to be in terms of gender and sexual roles. In other circumstances, it is also the child who

*displays interest in sex generally, in same-sex erotic attachment, or in cross-generational attachments.*²⁸

In short, the queer child is any child who deviates from the adult discourses of childhood innocence and engages in sexuality. In Lauzon’s film, *Léolo* and Buddy Godin fall under this category, even though the adult world in Montréal strives to inhibit their queer sexuality. Regardless, the visual and aural representations of their sexuality reinforce their queer subjectivity and undermine the nationalistic discourses on childhood purity pervading Canada and Québec. Consequently, the representation of sexual children in *Léolo* queers the pure laine image of Québec itself and its cinematic children. In adherence to the views of Angelides, the social erasure of child sexuality, which is perpetuated by the child pornography law and nationalistic discourses in Canada, is also present in the narrative of Lauzon’s film and restricts *Léolo*’s desire to explore his own sexuality. For instance, within a brief classroom sequence at *Léolo*’s Montréal school, the voice-over narration by a seemingly adult *Léolo* speaks of Mary and John, the representatives of English in this class. In this sequence, *Léolo* asserts that he was the only student to worry because “il manquait des details aux corps de John et Tintin.”²⁹ In addition, he wonders why no individuals spoke of “cette queue qui gonflait entre mes jambes” and questioned why it was absent from “le tableau des organes de John.”³⁰ The lack of genitals on the figures of John and Mary are explained by their role as the classroom’s “modèles de la bienséance parfaite.”³¹ In this sequence, the constructed dichotomy between childhood innocence and adult sexuality is perpetuated through state-funded social institutions in Canada and Québec like the education system.

Due to this institutional erasure of child sexuality, a power relation is formed between teachers, who possess sexual knowledge, and the ignorant children, who, like *Léolo*, must strive to discover sex by themselves. In the original shooting draft of *Léolo*, the school’s implicit discourse of childhood innocence was linked to that of child sexual abuse when the Word Tamer’s apparent intimacy with *Léolo* results in an accusation of pedophilia by a professor.³² Outside the education system, this nationalistic discourse is also unintentionally perpetuated when *Léolo*’s mother idealizes him as her “bel amour” and, like his father, remains oblivious to his emerging sexuality. Because the knowledge of sex is withheld from children by the French-Canadian world of adults, *Léolo* remains mostly ignorant of sexuality. Consequently, *Léolo* explores his genitals with a mirror

within his family's sole bathroom and, during the film's infamous bestiality scene, he declares that he discovered sex: "entre l'ignorance et l'horreur."³³ The obstructions to Léolo's sexual expression, however, are not limited to that enacted by state institutions. Social institutions, likewise, have a complementary role in the perpetuation of the discourse of childhood innocence.

Reinforcing this discourse, the family and religion also control and regulate children's bodies in a manner that carries nationalistic undertones. In relation to this form of surveillance, Foucault states:

*the body of the child, under surveillance, surrounded in his cradle, his bed, or his room by an entire watch-crew of parents [...] all attentive to the least manifestation of his sex, has constituted [...] another "local center" of power-knowledge.*³⁴

Similarly, in Lauzon's film, Léolo's parents watch and regulate his body in order to reduce it to the functional roles of consumption and defecation. Once Léolo's body is forced to defecate, they believe that his body will become pure and cured of disease. This constant regulation and surveillance of children's bodies subjects these children to a regressive form of inexperience and perpetual infantilization that is exemplified by Fernand who, despite his hetero-masculine appearance, remains "un beau petit bébé trop gras."³⁵ When Léolo's patriarchal father administers Friday's laxatives during a mock communion accompanied by Thomas Tallis' "Spem in Alium" on the sound track, the religious and biological discourses of Léolo's parents become interlinked in a quixotic attempt to keep their children's bodies physically "pure" through defecation.

Like his father, Léolo's mother also plays an instrumental role in the regulation of his body because she compels him to defecate at the age of two and rewards the ritual's completion with love in the present. She further contributes to this regulatory system when she forbids him from playing with his food during the first dinner sequence as it to ensure its utilitarian consumption and its eventual evacuation. Due to Ginette Reno's status as a singing star in Québec,³⁶ her participation in the nuclear family's scatological ritual lends it a nationalistic character. This ritual's combination of nationalism and clericalism reflects the pure laine clerical nationalism, which, between 1945 and the Quiet Revolution, continually reproduced the cultural myth of a Catholic and francophone Québec within Québécois society.³⁷

With the inclusion of this religious discourse, Lauzon's film reveals its intertextual relationship with Réjean Ducharme's *L'Avallée des Avalées* (1966),³⁸ an inspirational book placed by the Word Tamer in Léolo's household in order to ignite his rebellion against the adult world. Ducharme's book, like Lauzon's *Léolo*, positions its child protagonist, Bérénice, against the repressive and religious laws of the Catholic and Jewish adult world and constructs a dichotomy between adults like Mauritius Einberg, Chamomort, and their children.³⁹ The intertextual parallel ends there, however, because Léo is drawn in a considerably more sympathetic light than Bérénice whose aggressive individualism is demonized by Ducharme. Nevertheless, Léo shares a form of parental oppression similar to that of Bérénice in Ducharme's novel upon her parents' discovery of her seemingly incestuous feelings for her brother Christian.

In several scenes of Lauzon's *Léolo* localized in the bathroom, the scatological regime of Léolo's family and its surveillance of his body foreground this confrontation between adults and children. During these scenes, Léolo's father waits outside the bathroom door, so he can visually confirm that Léolo has defecated and purified his body. Due to this surveillance, it is almost impossible for Léolo to explore his body's sexual features and discover their potential for nonproductive pleasure, particularly anal pleasure. In his book on Québécois cinema, Marshall argues that, in Lauzon's film, anality "is a source of order, not pleasure."⁴⁰ While Marshall is correct in identifying this coercive form of anality in the film, he neglects to mention that it is imposed by a satirical parody of the heterosexual family unit and Québec's clerical nationalism, both of which strive to eliminate anality's potential for pleasure and what Christine Ramsey regards as Léolo's "anal-erotic freedom."⁴¹

In the view of Georges Bataille, "excretion presents itself as the result of a heterogeneity, and can move in the direction of an ever greater heterogeneity, liberating impulses whose ambivalence is more and more pronounced."⁴² Thus, while Bataille aligns excrement with a revolutionary and nonproductive impulse, Lauzon's *Léolo* complicates such a simplistic connection because excrement, in Léolo's family, is instrumental to the authoritarian order of consumption and authority subjected upon him. Defecation has thus been robbed of its revolutionary character. Within an inverse relation to excretion, Bataille has, however, written that appropriation, which is most often embodied by oral consumption, is "characterized by a homogeneity of the author of the appropriation,

and of objects as final result.”⁴³ Implicitly, Bataille links the kind of consumption seen during the dinner sequences in Lauzon’s film with the same form of homogeneity perpetuated by the present economic order; through such a lens, it can be seen how, in *Léolo*, the revolutionary potential of excrement is co-opted by the homogeneous realm of economic consumption, religion, and the nuclear family with its distinct discourse of childhood innocence. Because this coercive anality is a product of the heterosexual couple, it distances *Léolo* from *Un Zoo*, *La Nuit* and the homophobic reaction of its protagonist Marcel to his anal rape.⁴⁴ Ultimately, this parental surveillance of children’s bodies obstructs *Léolo*’s potential for sexual pleasure, but he is not the only child whose queer sexuality is restrained.

Like *Léolo*, Buddy Godin’s child body is also subject to a Catholic and nationalistic form of surveillance by his religious mother, who similarly perpetuates the discourse of childhood innocence present in Québec. In order to preserve her innocent and idealized image of Godin, she regularly inspects his nails for signs of nicotine consumption and forces him to take a shower every Sunday before Church. Despite her attempts, Godin’s innocent appearance transforms him into an object of sexual attraction for his hockey coach because, as *Léolo*’s voice-over declares, “la viande blanche se vend mieux.”⁴⁵ Godin’s sexual ignorance also renders him unable to control his sexual desire and, as a result, it emerges in a bestiality scene with a cat. However, this presence of child sexuality still positions Godin as the film’s second queer child and inverts his mother’s Catholic discourse of childhood innocence when the cat’s violation is followed by a wooden crucifix on the wall. Because Godin’s sexuality opposes Christ’s image of innocence in this scene, the Rolling Stones’ song “*You Can’t Always Get What you Want*,” which is played on the sound track, becomes an implicit address to the absent mother about her fundamental inability to sustain Godin’s image as an innocent child.

Like Buddy Godin, *Léolo* becomes a queer figure when he expresses his child sexuality within marginalized spaces similar to those of other queer characters of Canadian cinema. For example, during a later scene in which a fourteen year old Regina masturbates *Léolo* and another boy under a demolition site, the queerness of his child sexuality emerges and deconstructs the formerly fixed dichotomy between childhood innocence and adult sexuality. If the film had been released after the passing of the child pornography law, this scene of child sexuality could have been interpreted as an instance of its violation. Throughout the film’s

narrative, *Léolo* continues to subvert this discourse of childhood innocence as he begins to explore his queer sexuality within a bathroom setting.

In his writings on Canadian queer cinema, Thomas Waugh has identified the cinematic use of the toilet as a space in which queer figures can confront “the mainstream political and economic regulation of sexuality with a transgressive politics of sexuality as pleasure and excess, waste and contestation.”⁴⁶ While Waugh specifically addresses public toilets, this concept can be expanded to *Léolo*’s manipulation of the bathroom as a similar nonproductive space of sexual rebellion. In the bathroom, he can express his queer sexuality and masturbate with a piece of liver to the images of nude women found in a pornographic magazine. During the auditions for the role of *Léo*, the ‘queer’ child sexuality featured in this sequence would test the social mores of one child’s mother,⁴⁷ an example of the scene’s transgressive qualities. In defiance of his body’s functionality, *Léolo* continues to masturbate in this space and he is more and more attracted “par le plaisir.”⁴⁸ Thus, *Léolo* subverts his family’s scatological regime in the very private space that it seeks to control.

During an overhead shot of *Léolo* masturbating in the bathroom, Thomas Tallis’ “*Spem in Alium*” is re-played in order to signify his direct subversion of the religious and nationalistic discourse of childhood purity that is perpetuated within his family’s scatological rituals. *Léolo*’s queer opposition to this religious discourse re-emerges when Fernand eats his sperm-infested liver during dinner and a crucifix falls in response to *Léolo*’s implicit sexual transgression. Aside from being a queer space for child sexuality, *Léolo* discovers images of sexuality within the bathroom that have been hidden from him by the education system and his parents. In this space, he discovers his own genitals in a mirror, the nude bodies of women in his pornographic magazine, and the queer and nonproductive inter-generational sex between Bianca and *Léolo*’s grandfather. During the POV shots of this intergenerational relationship, *Léolo* masturbates to the image of a half-naked Bianca in another marginal space connected to the bathroom. Even though the bathroom allows him to indulge in his queer sexuality, Weinmann stresses the self-enclosed character of *Léolo*’s sexuality during acts like masturbation.⁴⁹ For instance, through the use of POV shots, Lauzon establishes *Léolo*’s distance from Bianca and the impossibility of physical contact considering the sexual norms of Western society that restrict cross-generational sex and its queerness.

Although his voyeuristic position in these scenes and his masturbation in response to pornographic images transforms women like Bianca into pieces of sexualized ‘meat,’ this unfortunate consequence is enabled by the taboos of society against cross-generational relationships and it is evident that Léolo seeks a more personal form of attachment to Bianca as opposed to this more distanced interaction. Failing to achieve the illusive sense of hetero-masculine possession afforded by voyeurism, Léolo himself stresses this latter distance when he declares that: “À cette époque, nos quelques années de différence semblaient une frontière infranchissable.”⁵⁰ Moreover, Léolo’s sexual inexperience also renders him afraid to love Bianca in a more physical manner and this fear is perceptible in dialogue such as “Je n’avais pas le courage de mon amour pour Bianca” or “Parce que j’ai peur d’aimer.”⁵¹

Frustrated by this distance and his grandfather’s ability to cross the frontier of age with Bianca, Léolo attempts to kill him in the bathtub. Léolo’s violence against his grandfather is also motivated by his intrusive inclusion of money within his sexual relationship with Bianca and its opposition to his queer space’s nonproductive character. When Godin is pressured with money into violating a cat, Léolo discloses his personal belief that money, through its social familiarity, is merely a means to lessen Godin’s fear of a nonproductive queer experience. During an imaginary sequence within the film’s original script, Léolo similarly tells Bianca that she would have had sex with older men, even if she received no money and compels her to prostitute herself in order to test her fidelity.⁵² Through his misguided murder attempt, Léolo seeks to expulse the economic relations of the adult world, so he can preserve the bathroom’s role as a location in which his queer and nonproductive child sexuality can be expressed, but never truly fulfilled.

In order to bridge his distance from Bianca perceived in this ‘queer’ space, Léolo again mimics the trajectory of queer characters in Canadian cinema and escapes the dystopic and urban environment of Mile End towards a seeming heterotopia, an imaginary space in Sicily. In this non-urban and natural landscape, Léolo believes that his queer sexuality can be expressed with Bianca out in the open. According to Foucault, heterotopias are countersites where “the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”⁵³

Influenced by Foucault’s terminology, Waugh believes that non-urban spaces like Léolo’s Sicily “have indeed functioned in a crucial way as heterotopias for our

audiovisual corpus of Canadian queer cultures.”⁵⁴ However, Léolo’s imaginary escape towards Italy does not constitute a true heterotopia because it is Romantic and not real. In this Italian space, Léolo can not achieve a physical and ‘real’ form of sexual intimacy with Bianca and his seemingly innocent and de-sexualized expressions of love for Bianca are the product of his sexual inexperience, fear, and his parent’s idealized love. For instance, Léolo’s address to Bianca “mon bel amour” in this space is nearly identical to the idealized address that his mother directs towards him. Thus, the erasure of child sexuality in the adult world partially obstructs the depth of Léolo’s sexual expression in his imaginary space.

However, on another level, Léolo’s constructed space of Italy does act as an altered form of heterotopia. It provides a refuge from the hetero-masculine world of Léolo’s home in which Fernand’s macho posturing is approved by his father and mother during the film’s numerous dinner sequences. Furthermore, in the film’s original ending, Léolo is on the verge of kissing Bianca in this imaginary space until his dream then fades to black and he is shown in a comatose state within the psychiatric hospital.⁵⁵ This planned sequence is even more striking because it is accompanied by Léolo’s family singing a hopeful song about love.⁵⁶ Thus, when Léolo writes about this imaginary Italian space, it provides a negative space in which he can express his inter-generational sexual desire for Bianca in an open environment and feel closer to her.

Similarly, in Ducharme’s novel, Bérénice invents her own language and original worlds with her friend Constance in order to escape the sense of confinement that she experiences. In contrast to the illusive proximity desired by Léolo, inter-generational sex is stigmatized and reductively associated with the discourse of child sexual abuse within Québec and Canada during the early 1990s. Despite the real limitations to Léolo’s intergenerational love, the marginal spaces of his imagination still allow him to express his queer sexuality and invert the more centripetal and pure laine representations of childhood depicted in Québécois cinema. His emerging queer sexuality constructs a destabilizing form of subjectivity that resists its assimilation within the positive nationalistic framework of Québec and Canada in general.

As Léolo’s destabilizing queer sexuality already undermine the pure laine images of childhood in Québec, the cultural hybridity of images and sounds in Lauzon’s film further contributes to this unstable subject

position and resists French-Canadian nationalism. During the film's first scenes, Léo gives himself the name "Léolo Lozone" and creates an imaginary space of Italy in order to distance himself from both his nightmarish perception of Québec's Montréal and his French-Canadian family. However, despite this attempt, his self-given name is still partially derived from his French-Canadian name "Léo Lozeau" and the film's voice-over by a seemingly adult Léolo remains in the French language. In addition, Léolo is still, on an intertextual level, connected to the protagonist Bérénice in Ducharme's now popular Québécois novel, *L'Avalée des Avalées*.⁵⁷ However, this latter novel, like Lauzon's film, does not, in its narrative, entirely promulgate a truly coherent, nationalistic, and positive conception of Québécois society.

Like Bérénice's individualistic belief that her subjectivity shapes her world, Léolo believes that, because he can reconstruct his identity within his dreams, he is not a French-Canadian. Léolo's unstable subject position of cultural hybridity is, nevertheless, formed when his aforementioned associations to French-Canadian culture and its language are combined with Italian culture as well as iconic images from the United States like the cowboy hat worn by the six year old Léo. More importantly, this hybrid identity is developed by the film's multicultural and transnational score, which is evoked by Léolo's autobiographical writings. According to Jim Leach, the film's multicultural songs create an unstable "postmodern text."⁵⁸ They include songs ranging from Tom Waits' "*Temptation*" and the Rolling Stones "*You Can't Always get what you want*" to the Gyuto Monks music from the album *Freedom Chants from the Roof of the World* and "*Alleluia*," the Byzantine Chant of Soeur Marie Keyrouz. The resulting cultural hybridity complements the unstable character of Léolo's queer subjectivity and its rejection of an idealistic self-image informed by French-Canadian nationalism. According to Homi K. Bhabha, this form of cultural hybridity creates a Third space of enunciation that problematizes signification and the essentialism of a singular nationalistic category.⁵⁹ Consequently, Léolo's hybrid identity further deconstructs the nationalistic discourse, which often accompanies the adult discourse of childhood innocence in Canada and Québec.

As the cultural hybridity evoked by Léolo's autobiographical tale and its explicit portrait of child sexuality shape the character's queer subjectivity and his rejection of nationalistic certainties, the instability of this subject position is simultaneously enhanced by his deviations from a specific French-Canadian

manifestation of hetero-masculinity. According to Marshall, a distinct trend in Québécois cinema has perpetuated and continues to perpetuate a nationalistic and hetero-masculine representation of its male protagonists.⁶⁰ This tendency is present in Lauzon's own *Un Zoo, La Nuit* when Marcel, a former gangster, asserts his nationalistic hetero-masculinity through his homophobic violence against a gay Anglophone named George and his aggressive sexual relations with his ex-girlfriend Julie. Lee Parpart has implicitly argued that *Un Zoo, La Nuit* reflects the French-Canadian male's search for both his lost phallic masculinity and nationalistic prowess after the referendum defeat in Québec.⁶¹ In the film, Léolo attempts to mimic an American form of hetero-masculinity when he wears his cowboy hat, but can not embody it due to his inherently sensitive character. For instance, he cries after his mother kills the flies that he had offered to his sister, Rita, as a present.

However, in his desire to achieve this image of masculinity, he begins to identify with the hetero-masculine and French-Canadian image of Fernand. Léolo's identification with this image abruptly ends when the heavily muscled Fernand is defeated by an English-Canadian bully and, in this moment, Lauzon "foregrounds the masculine phallic ideal as [...] a grand performance."⁶² After the loss of this masculine illusion, Léolo attempts to kill his grandfather, but fails to murder him and this moment of masculine action is depicted as fleeting and futile. Excluding this momentary action, Léolo remains a predominantly passive character who does not act upon his attraction to Bianca or actively resist the constraints of his family in any imposing or forced manner. In fact, as he admires it, he also evinces a certain degree of repulsion towards the infantile hetero-masculinity of his brother and present during the bestiality.

Despite the latter scene's aforementioned queer undertones, the disconcerted glances of Maxime Collin within it display Léolo's sense of alienation within the hetero-masculine environment of street punks who, with their matching black leather jackets, embody a form of masculine conformity and pressure Buddy Godin to violate the cat or "pussy," so that he can prove his masculine prowess. Complementing Léolo's deviation from a rigid portrait of hetero-masculinity, a form of homosocial intimacy develops between him and Fernand and Léolo as they sleep together; however, in contrast to the father-son relationship in *Un Zoo, La Nuit*, this sense of intimacy is not explicitly undermined by a nationalistic and violent expression of homophobia. Ultimately, Léolo does not embody

an active, hetero-masculine position in the film and, through his imaginary, Romantic, and heterotopic vision of Italy, he escapes the nightmarish hetero-masculine and French-Canadian space inhabited by his father, grandfather, and Fernand. Léolo thus distances himself from a nationalistic image of adult hetero-masculinity and inhabits an unstable subject position produced by his queer sexuality, cultural hybridity, and his generally sensitive and passive character.

Throughout the film's narrative, Léolo's unstable subjectivity and sexual identity is conveyed by a disembodied adult voice-over as if by means of confession. Marie-Chantal Killen links this voice-over to Michel Chion's concept of an acousmatic voice and she argues that, in accordance with the term's definition, the adult narrator's voice has no visual source.⁶³ While this is an accurate description of the narration as it appears to the spectator, this view still ignores the possibility that the adult voice-over emanates from Léolo's writings as a child. At the film's beginning, the adult voice-over identifies himself with Léolo as a six year old child. Within several scenes in *Léolo*, the Word Tamer often repeats the words of this adult voice-over as he recites the fragments of Léolo's writings. Furthermore, when Léolo's child voice overlaps with that of the adult narrator as Léolo lies comatose in a psychiatric ward, this formerly "acousmatic" narrator is connected to Léolo's child self and his writings.

According to Bruhms and Hurley, typical frame narratives about childhood usually return to the future adult and negate the narrated desires of the child.⁶⁴ Lauzon's *Léolo*, however, subverts this tradition because no adult body is linked to this voice-over and the voice is shown to emerge from the writings of Léolo as a child. Thus, with an adult voice, Léolo falls under one of Kathryn Bond Stockton's category of the queer child: a child who is "eerily mature and infantilized."⁶⁵ Produced by a child, this mature voice, which enunciates Léolo's queer sexuality, deconstructs the constructed dichotomy between childhood innocence and adult maturity. The film's seemingly oppositional dichotomy between the adult world and children like Léolo is, likewise, undermined by the existence of the Word Tamer. He is the only adult in the film, besides Léolo's mother, who calls him by his self-given Italian name and acknowledges the hidden maturity and complexity of his writings about child sexuality. Within his shooting draft, Lauzon would dedicate the film to his former mentor André Petrowski,⁶⁶ a NFB employee, another adult Word Tamer who recognized Lauzon's maturity during his time as a young criminal.⁶⁷

If viewed in this manner, Lauzon's autobiographical film acts as a double confession in opposition to the restrictive discourses against child sexuality. Léolo's fragmented writings and Lauzon's non-linear film become confessions of child sexuality that conflict with the adult discourse of childhood innocence embedded in the diegesis, Canada's child pornography law in Canada, and Québécois nationalism. Through the non-linear and fragmented character of the film's narration, the unstable subjectivity expressed within this confession problematizes the process of signification. In contrast to the renowned views of Foucault on the subject of confession, this subjectivity obstructs the traditional absorption of a sexual confession within a detrimental "power relationship."⁶⁸

While Léolo succumbs to madness in a psychiatric hospital, his writings are salvaged from the ravages of the adult world by the Word Tamer. The Word Tamer acknowledges the unstable and poetic complexity of Léolo's confession of his child sexuality, but he does not frame or assimilate it within the homogenous and adult realm of Canadian and Québécois society. Instead, he preserves this confession within his marginal, Italian underground archive of cultural detritus, which was shot within "Fellini's statue warehouse at Cinecittà."⁶⁹

The queer and unstable subject position, which these confessional writings contain, can thus continue to undermine the dominant discourses about childhood, nationalism, and hetero-masculinity in Québec. According to Ramsey, Léolo's poetic writings about his imaginary Italy provide:

*a place where negativity, contradiction, ambiguity, excess, transgression, and abjection are dramatised as the theatre of the divided subject, and where the authority of the larger cultural system is also thrown into question.*⁷⁰

The film's final image of Léolo running in Italy with his writings in hand then reflects the survival of his unstable identity in the imagination of sympathetic adults like the Word Tamer, Andrew Petrowski, and, often, the viewers themselves.

Jean-Claude Lauzon's *LÉOLO* ultimately queers the dominant discourses of childhood innocence, nationalism, and hetero-masculinity in Québec. The film's numerous images of child sexuality with Léolo and Godin invert the adult discourse of childhood innocence reinforced by the education system in

Québec and the parental surveillance of Léo's body. Through his expression of queer sexuality within a bathroom and an imaginary heterotopia, Léo follows a trajectory similar to that of other queer protagonists in Canadian cinema. Furthermore, Léo's multicultural attachments and his deviation from hetero-masculinity complement the formation of his unstable identity initiated by his queer sexuality.

When the film's mature voice-over of Léo's emerging sexuality is connected to a child's body, this seeming paradox deconstructs the rigid dichotomy between childhood innocence and adult sexuality perpetuated by the child pornography law in Canada and the pure laine nationalism of Québec and its cinema. The fragmented narration of this unstable subjectivity thus hinders the absorption of the film's confessions of child sexuality into the contemporary discourses on childhood, nationhood, and masculinity in Canada and Québec. All of these seemingly detached elements contribute to the unstable subjective space of Léo's mind as a child that shatters the core centripetal ideas and concepts perpetuated by the adult world in Canadian and Québécois society.

FOOTNOTES

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Edited by Lindsay Peters.