

Queering the Heterosexual Male in Canadian Cinema: An Analysis of Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Léolo*

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Canadian cinema is a queer cinema, both represented by and representing queerness in its own unique way. As a highly influential characteristic of the Canadian narrative, queerness has become a thematic staple of the creative process for those artists aspiring to construct and contribute to a national mythos. Of particular interest is the quality of this phenomenon's effect on cinematic representations of the Canadian heterosexual male. This paper will investigate the desire of the Canadian filmmaker to queer heterosexual males by specifically examining Jean-Claude Lauzon's second and final feature-length film, *Léolo*. Essentially, it is the rejection of hetero-masculine influence which permits the protagonist, Leo Lozeau/Léolo, to transgress hetero-normative societal pressures and embrace his queerly positioned identity, illustrating some of the ways in which countless examples of Canadian film have fundamentally queered the heterosexual male.

In his 1977 article "*Coward, Bully, or Clown: the Dream Life of a Younger Brother*," Robert Fothergill analyses the marginality of hetero-normative males in Canadian cinema. The article has led to much speculation on the topic and proves to be a starting point from which many theorists and writers have since disembarked. According to Fothergill, the Canadian hetero-normative male is deficient. He states that these filmic representations exhibit, "the radical inadequacy of the male protagonist – his moral failure, especially, and most visibly, in his relationships with women. [...] like a recurring dream which takes its shape from the dreamer's guilty consciousness of his own essential impotence" (Fothergill, 235-6). Fothergill analogizes this disposition to the subjugation of a figurative younger

brother. In this example, the Canadian male identity aspires to reproduce representations of American heterosexual masculinity. Existing in the shadow of its American counterpart, the Canadian cinematic male is forced to formulate an alternate disposition as a strategy of subjective purgation. These strategic dispositions are purveyed in the title of Fothergill's article; the Canadian male is designated either a coward, bully, or clown. All three denominations display associational behaviour, resulting from the inability to reproduce the status position of the older brother. As a defence mechanism, the marginalization imposed by the older brother provokes a Canadian heterosexual male to act in negative and unconstructive ways in all relationships.

Throughout the development of the film's narrative, Léolo occupies a space of fluctuating indeterminacy within this system. His existential confusion results as the display of behaviours attributed to each of Fothergill's denotations: it is his shifting between positions that represents his fluid identity. Léolo occupies this indeterminate space between categories for the majority of this film. The hetero-normative representations around him, and their imposing behaviours that influence and confuse him simultaneously. When attributes of any one category are displayed by Léolo, they are simply temporary reactions to stresses imposed by the hetero-normative pressures.

Though failure-of-character is not as abundantly identified in the canon of Québécois cinema, Fothergill believes that there are numerous examples available (Fothergill, 241). In his opinion, there are only two

possible avenues to which the younger brother is destined, either aspiring and ultimately failing to be like the older brother or locating another space which to inhabit. The latter is what Fothergill refers to as energetic resistance. However, of this possibility, “there is little satisfaction in achieving what the other disdained to aim for” (Fothergill, 244). For Fothergill, the primary distinctive feature of Québécois protagonists is their display of energetic resistance, most often to the avail of martyrdom.

Undoubtedly, English-Canadian and Québécois cinema are distinct from one another in many ways. However, there are similarities shared which apply to the representation of a general Canadian hetero-male identity. In *Léolo* a dismantling of borders presented by a collage of cultural hybridity supports this concept. Music alone is a strong marker of this boundary blurring. From Tom Waits, to The Rolling Stones, to the chanting of Tibetan Monks, the pastiche is hard to ignore. On the level of narrative, the Lozeau family lives in the poor, mixed-Anglophone neighbourhood of the nineteen-fifties Mile-End, Montreal, where Léolo can be seen targeting passers-by, cloaked in his American-cowboy costume, and dreaming of an Italian heritage. This mixing of iconic idiosyncrasies establishes the Canadian condition of multiculturalism. And to reinforce *Léolo*'s transgressive national appeal, Lauzon himself complained that *Léolo* was more positively received by English Canada than Québec: “English Canadian [...] critics write dithyrambic reviews, saying that it is a masterpiece. And yet, in the Quebec press, reviews are lukewarm” (Loiselle, 80).

In *Scott Mackenzie's Screening Québec* the issue of national identity within Canada's entirety is discussed. MacKenzie engages with the officially recognized duality of the nation but further posits that Canada is much more diverse than this, with not only every separate province desiring to be a separate nation but also the indigenous peoples as well (MacKenzie, 20). This leads to “each group defin[ing] itself as the absence of the other, although the other is always needed to validate the definition of self” (MacKenzie, 21). Mackenzie summarizes,

Regardless of one's national status with Canada, the one notion that unites Canadians and Québécois alike is the fear that they are no different from those who surround them. So, while nationalists continue to produce countless images that demarcate their difference, within these images lie the

very anxieties which they are attempting to assuage; the lack of an empirically motivated, essentialised difference that the image can embody. (MacKenzie, 24)

It appears an elision between Québécois and English-Canadian filmic representations is not only possible, but quite apt as a condition of the nation's grander disposition.

At the time of Fothergill's article, he believed there were no strong, constructive examples of the Canadian heteromale in cinema. He states that the main “problem, in trying to psychoanalyse the younger brother's dreamlife[aspirations], is that one is caught between advocating the dramatization of a more aggressively ‘masculine’ individualism, and seeking to make a virtue of impotence” (Fothergill, 248). Of course, Fothergill naively assumes this energetic resistance will always result in failure. These negative conclusions serve as a platform from which many contemporary writers diverge.

In his article “*Queerly Canadian: Perversion Chic*” Jason Morgan scrutinizes Fothergill's assertions: “because the heroic ideal, as a manifestation of patriarchal ideology, necessarily excludes the ‘feminine,’ Canadian ‘heroes’ tend to be weak, plagued with self-doubt and crippled by their own excesses and, consequently, are prone to reckless self-destruction and sexual deviance” (Morgan, 214). And Lee Parpart, from her article “*Cowards, Bullies, and Cadavers: Feminist Re-Mappings of the Passive Male Body in English-Canadian and Québécois Cinema*” furthers this, pointing out that this manifestation of patriarchal ideology is based on the assumption that there is some sort of essential and functional centre from which to govern the deviation of the margins (*Cowards, Bullies...*, 268). As mentioned above, *Léolo* occupies the marginal space between the static conditions of the younger brother. Because it is impossible for the younger brother to attain the position of the older, the only functional positions available are those of the coward, bully, or clown. These positions are only deviant in relation to the older brother, but they serve as markers of stability in the subjugated position of the younger. An examination of the heteronormative, older brother representations surrounding *Léolo* will determine the sorts of functionality and normativity presented to him, and how he must react.

First of all, *Léolo*'s grandfather, Albert, appears to be the alphas of the family: his influence governing the Lozeau children is explicitly disclosed in the film. *Léolo*

states, “my grandfather had convinced my father a shit a day kept the doctor away.” This excerpt of voice-over narration is heard while Léolo hides from his father, who is trying to perform a forced enema on him. In addition to this, Léolo vilifies Albert as the primary source of the family’s torment. Though distinguished as genetic in origin “as though my grandfather’s legacy had exploded in the family, and that little extra cell had lodged itself in everybody’s brain,” this still positions Albert as dominating male figure – if not literally, then, in its own way, pathologically. He of course occupies the position of bully, not only attempting to murder Léolo but also generally connoting a negative presence. This is especially pertinent to Léolo when witnessing his grandfather’s pedophilic behaviour with Bianca. Léolo rejects the metaphorical example of this older brother and unsuccessfully attempts to murder Albert.

The next male in line of descent, Léolo’s father, also occupies the space of bully. He is warden to the regulation of the family’s bodily functions, imposed by Albert. In his article “*Queering the Québécois and Canadian Child in Jean-Claude Lauzon’s Léolo*” Alain Chouinard points out, in this imposition of surveillance, the parental figures in *Léolo* destroy any potential for sexual exploration by essentializing the role of the body to one that is purely functional. However, Léolo’s father is also presented as clown. The ways in which Léolo describes him are always exaggerated to a comedic extent, with his “forehead stretched beyond his chin into a neck that clung desperately to bulging shoulders.” Lauzon presents this character as a simple buffoon. He constantly eats, while displaying a mime-like silence, which emphasizes his grandiose actions; his chewing of food appearing to be something which commits absolute concentration. And in contrast with Albert, of sullen face that would not allow a smile to surface, Léolo’s father only presents a facial expression somewhere between puzzlement and joy. This clownishness affects his relationship with Léolo’s mother. Where Léolo’s father is completely subordinate to Albert, Léolo’s mother challenges Albert’s behaviour, managing domestic responsibilities: she organizes, feeds, and generally looks after all. But the constant infantilism and unquestioning adherence to Albert’s governance constructs Léolo’s father as a further obstacle in the push and pull of parental guidance. And of course, by definition, Léolo’s mother cannot fulfil the position of a strong, hetero-male roll-model. Léolo’s father is the perfect example of subjugation, not only in his presumably dangerous working conditions as a ill-paid manual labourer but also in his lack of contempt for his general disposition; he is neither apathetic as Albert nor hopeful as his

son Fernand. Though Léolo does not attempt to kill his father, his disdain is apparent: “I want to stick a firecracker as big as the universe up his ass. Just because I’m waiting for the bus.”

Fernand is most relevant in comparison to Léolo, not only because of his literal older brother position, but also, for most of the film, he is at an age nearing the solidification of the heteromale identity. Essentially, Fernand becomes the machismoridden example of the American cinematic male; he aspires to be a sort of Schwarzenegger or Stallone. He also enjoys the approval of his family that Fothergill attributes to the older brother, praised as “strong” for eating the liver Léolo refuses to eat (because he has previously defiled it in secret) and receiving approving glances from his father while intimidating Léolo with his sheer bulk. Strength is a recurring theme throughout the film, and of course stereotypically embodies hetero-masculinity.

For a significant section of the film, Léolo identifies and embraces this masculine identity: “cursed be those who will not bow as we walk by. [...] So tall will I be on my brother’s shoulders.” Most important however is the eventual destruction of Fernand’s identity and its effects on Léolo. Mirroring a scene from earlier in the film, Fernand flexes his muscles as an act of intimidation, aimed at a bully who had previously caused him physical harm. In constructing this repetition of an earlier exchange, Lauzon brings attention to a typical cinematic revenge narrative pattern. However, expectations are disappointed when and the bully is once again victorious. This time, the outcome puts Fernand in an existential crisis. In the earlier instance, the violence enacted inspires Fernand to reimagine his identity. Fernand, in a similar event of the little brother syndrome, becomes a bully himself through years of physical training and discipline. But this second instance of physical exchange definitively destroys Fernand’s identity. He becomes the weak boy he once was, lying in a foetal position, nursing a broken nose, and sobbing uncontrollably. Léolo realizes that Fernand’s attempts to be the older brother have also failed.

Symbolically, Fernand regresses to a state of infantilism. As this second bully scene ends, the transition between space is marked by a dissolve from Léolo leaning over, trying to coddle Fernand, to a black and white photograph of the younger Fernand lifting his set of home-made weights. The photograph evokes the complete identity of Fernand before his passage into the world of overt masculinity and also suggests that this is still the Fernand that exists in the lump of muscles

now sobbing in a heap. As Léolo states in the next shot, “that day I understood fear lived in our deepest being.” This transition is important for two reasons in defining who Léolo is after this point. First of all this scene makes Léolo understand that the projection of identity is riddled with deception. And secondly, if the dissolve does represent Léolo’s mental identification of Fernand, the whole of the transition suggests that Fernand is neither the hulking behemoth he recently was nor able to revert to the boy he once identified as. This is suggested by the dissolving image of Léolo and Fernand as the photograph fades-in and the immediate fade-to-black of the photograph, representing the permanent disappearance of that identity, further supported by the extra-narratological relationship between this formal stylistic in combination with voice-over. The present Fernand becomes a recluse from this point on.¹ He neither leaves the bedroom for the remainder of the film nor is he seen clothed in anything but his underwear. He evokes the image of an invalid with no one to dress him, and, later in the film, helplessly screams for his “ma” as Léolo lies paralysed on the floor. His exchange with the bully has redefined his position from bully to coward. Léolo, now devoid of any hetero-normative icon for which to aspire, is now more confused than ever.

This metaphorical death precipitates Léolo’s descent for the remainder of the narrative. After seeing the strong, hetero-normative identity of Fernand murdered before his eyes, he decides to destroy all images of this sort. It is only after Fernand is beaten that Léolo engages in violent discourse with both his father and grandfather. As a rebellious response to these broken-down structures, Léolo engages with queer sexuality to a heightened degree; he successively watches the rape of a cat, and then mutually masturbates publicly with friend’s of both sexes. All of these aspects reflect the reckless self-destruction and sexual deviance earlier mentioned by Morgan. This montage of sexual confusion, void of traditional functionality, is punctuated by the Rolling Stones *You Can’t Always Get What You Want* in a crescendo which presumably ends with Léolo’s ejaculation. He departs from aspirations of hetero-normativity and shifts desperately for a new definition of identity.

There is one more role-model that Léolo may look to: the Word Tamer. The Tamer, aware of his marginal existence, is by no means the example of a hetero-normative male. Parpart explains that critics “often viewed the absence of empowered male film heroes as signalling a crisis in Canadian masculinity, the same

conditions have been re-read in the 1990s as symptoms of a Canadian talent for tolerance and heterogeneity” (*Cowards, Bullies...*, 255). The Tamer, of course, embodies this heterogeneity. Léolo becomes caught up in the romanticism of the Tamer’s actions. To turn people’s words into ashes on a pyre of symbolic reincarnation and to search through the waste of others in order to find those shining examples of humanity would be just too strange and removed from the boundaries of what the other male characters are capable or willing to do. Though the companionship of the Tamer and Léolo raises questions of intergenerational eros, it appears that the Tamer is more concerned with Léolo’s writing than the boy himself; the majority of the film presents him not with Léolo but with his writing. Ultimately, the Word Tamer, though existing in the margins, is the real inspiration for Léolo to form his own identity at the end of the film. Just before Léolo collapses into catatonia, the voice-over narrative reveals that Bianca has not appeared to him in a long while, though he “spent entire nights reading and writing dozens of pages” in hopes of seeing her. His reading and writing, influenced by the Tamer, becomes the means by which he will transcend the hetero-normative pressures surrounding him.

Léolo finally formulates an identity of utter romanticism. He escapes the insistent nightmare-reality of hetero-normativity into a dream-world in which sexuality does not and cannot exist. Léolo essentially becomes asexual, accepting a position in his dream-world Italy, never occupied with Bianca at the same moment – or any other person for that matter. In this film sex is a characteristic of a nightmare reality and only exists from the margins in non-functional forms. Bestiality, masturbation, and pedophilia make up Léolo’s sexual knowledge. His aspirations for Bianca suggest a sort of hetero-normative desire, but Léolo ultimately rejects this because of fear: “because I was afraid to love, I no longer dream.” But what does this fear entail? It is the surrounding tumult that repels him from the hetero-normative, and forces him to give up Bianca. Léolo may desire her, but not at the cost of the nightmare-reality subjugation. Instead, his love for her will forever remain unsullied.

Shifting to another space, Léolo retains his version of love for Bianca: one stifled in sexlessness. The transgression into his subconscious permits a new and separate existence, defined by its own boundaries. That this conclusion is a positive progression is supported by Lauzon’s own comments: “the ending is a ‘liberation’ that affirms ‘the power of the imagination,’ insisting that what is important is not the boy’s body but his

writings that provide the film's voice-over narration" (qtd. in Leach, 12). Léolo revokes the hetero-normative space as a false reality, influenced by the attempted, suggested, and witnessed murders of his hetero-masculine surroundings, and slips into the marginal space of his dream-world. As Ramsay points out, "[t]he negative element of a system (Leo's catatonia) is an enabling condition of the system, [...] it provides a place where negativity, contradiction, ambiguity, excess, transgression, and abjection are dramatized as the theatre of the divided subject, and where the authority of the larger cultural system is also thrown into question" (Ramsay, 24-5). What this all suggests is that the Canadian hetero-normative space is a fiction, but one that still has a spectral influence on identity politics.

It is the desire of the cinematic Canadian heterosexual male to be queered that enables Léolo to establish an identity. In *Nostalgic Nationalisms and the Spectacle of the Male Body in Canadian and Québécois Cinema*, Parpart states,

The nostalgia for a pre-colonial past which structures certain nationalisms around a sense of masculine loss and humiliation has at times coincided with strategies for keeping the male body veiled or dramatizing both its vulnerability to destruction and its hoped-for invulnerability to threats from the outside. Meanwhile, a different experience of neo-colonialism can lead to a more oppositional approach. (Nostalgic Nationalisms, v)

Parpart does not suggest destroying this influencing and imposing effect but instead tries to reveal that this phenomenon is not as predestined and determinant as thinkers like Fothergill would believe. Its impact can be renegotiated through what she refers to as the performative space of the margins (*Cowards, Bullies...*, 255).

Léolo transcends, his new identity existing in the performative space which he has always occupied as Léolo, not Léo Lozeau. In the dream-world Italy he can continue to search for Bianca. Léolo's love exists for Bianca in his romantic ideal of her, in a dream-world Italy which they never occupy at the same moment. Because he was not strong enough to exist in the nightmare-reality, he departs from the hetero-normative space of his family. In the desire to find an identity from which to satisfy the indeterminate and imposing force of hetero-masculinenormativity, Léolo queers himself into another reality, free of this subjugation. Affirming

the success of this identity transcendence, his mother cries out after her son, "Léolo!"

FOOTNOTES

1 I use the phrase "present Fernand" here because there exists one more scene in the narrative where Fernand is seen outside of his bedroom, but it is a scene from the past with the younger version of Fernand.

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