

AUTOBIOGRAPHY, FICTION AND POLITICS
IN JEAN-CLAUDE LAUZON'S *LÉOLO*

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(Resumen)

Tanto *Un Zoo la nuit* como *Léolo*, películas ambas de Jean-Claude Lauzon revelan un doble juego de estructura y significado. Por medio de la manipulación creativa de hechos autobiográficos de su niñez en un Quebec corrupto, el director consigue múltiples voces narrativas -narrador extradiegético subjetivo, narrador documental objetivo...- que permiten una interpretación política de la historia, ya que representan un conflicto entre la vida de Léo documental y el ficticio.

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"Je suis un auteur et j'ai conté un tas de mensonges dans ce long métrage [*Un Zoo la nuit*]. Le film est plus autobiographique du point de vue des émotions que celui des événements" (*Séquences* 13).

[I am an author and I've told a bunch of lies in this feature. The film is autobiographical more from the standpoint of its emotions than of its facts.]

Jean-Claude Lauzon's explanation on his 1987 fictional/autobiographical *Un Zoo la nuit* explains much about his 1992 *Léolo*, just as auto-biographical and, doubtless, just as fictional. The personalized fusion of fiction and fact define the two, superficially different films as structurally similar works of the *auteur* Lauzon declares himself to be. One point of similarity is their subliminal political message, a second their multiple-voiced conflict between the truth of autobiography and its fictional expression. Together, structure and meaning reveal both film narratives to be true lies.

In the 1987 interview cited above and published in *Séquences* following the opening of *Un Zoo*, Lauzon already telegraphs the subject of the future *Léolo*: "Je suis né au Mile-end, rue Saint Dominique . . . A 16 ans j'ai quitté la maison et les études pour aller travailler en usine à la Domtar . . . Jusqu'au jour où tout à fait par hasard quelqu'un est tombé sur un de mes textes" (Bonneville 11) [I was born in Mileend, on Saint Dominique Street . . . At 16 I left home and school to go work in the Domtar factory . . . Until the day when completely by chance some found something I had written]. In *Léolo*, the young Léo Lauzon's drab, working-class neighborhood is director Lauzon's Mile-end where Léo's writings are found by someone who plays the role of the Dompteur de vers (the Word Tamer) and who, just as in Lauzon's case, becomes Léo's mentor and guide, whose "sculpture and literature lair offers a surprisingly graceful reminder of art's transcendent power" (Maslin C11). The Dompteur is another

point of autobiographical truth and represents teacher and filmmaker André Petrowski who is credited in the film's production notes with having told the young Jean-Claude Lauzon: "In 15 years, you're going to be either very well known or in a psychiatric hospital" (5). Although Lauzon denies his films have structures (Brunette), both have narratives which find expression in multiples voicings. In *Un Zoo*, the voicings work on two levels. One is fictional; another is psychological: the Oedipal conflict between father and son. The initial dissonant father-son relationship of *Un Zoo* moves, however, toward harmony, understanding and reconciliation. In *Léolo*, the conflict is defined through rejection and escape. *Un Zoo*, double-plotted and double-voiced, narrates parallel stories, one of the father Albert, one of the son Marcel, signifiers of old rural and new urban Quebec. Albert lives in traditional Montreal; Marcel, an electronic-keyboard musician, part-time drug dealer, and recent convicted felon, lives surrounded by the generational emblems which signify his break with his father's tradition: an elaborate sound system, black leather furniture, a Harley Davidson, a loft with panoramic views of Montreal.

Father and son are what the other is not. Separated by generational attitudes and lifestyles, Albert and Marcel eventually find communication, however, through male ritual behavior: fishing and hunting. In the double-voiced narrative of *Un Zoo*, the father-son ritual is paralleled emblematically in the bating, hooking and shooting of Marcel's prey George, the corrupt policeman.

Though separate, both father and son confront similar realities: the dislocation of modern Quebec life, the disintegration of the family as icon of traditional Quebec, and as index of French-Canada facing its traditional view of itself in the light of encroaching foreign immigration. Abandoned by his wife, the sick and dying Albert is being evicted from his home by an expanding Italian community. The double voice is indexed also in the confrontation with languages of Others: French and Italian in Albert's world, English and French in Marcel's. For Marcel, all traditional icons are subverted: police are criminals, sexual love is brutal rape whether hetero or homosexual, and family togetherness is synonymous with isolation. For both Albert and Marcel, the language of Others represents a threat.

When *Un Zoo la nuit* premiered, the director disclaimed any political intent. Lauzon's protestation notwithstanding, the film is easily interpreted as a sardonic commentary on corrupt and corrosive elements in modern Quebec society. Although reviewers believe they see similar political implications in his second feature *Léolo*, Lauzon again asserts the contrary: "Some Quebecers, who have seen *Léolo*, are interpreting it as a big political statement," he says. "With the referendum coming, people think that's political," referring to the film's Anglo bully beating up the Franco body builder. "Well, it's not," Lauzon insists "because the guy who beats him up was not supposed to be English. I couldn't find the right French-Canadian actor to do it," he claims (Johnson, *World Press Review* 51). Nevertheless, the actor, Lorne Brass, as the body builder's nemesis, is the same actor who plays George, the corrupt, homosexual, drug-addicted, Anglophone police bully, Marcel's enemy in *Un Zoo*.

Even disregarding the casting of the political PQ icon Pierre Bourgault in the role of *Léolo's* Dompteur de vers, Lauzon's political disclaimer rings false. Inescapably political are the director's disobliging comments about Quebec, his preference to be called a Canadian rather than a Quebec filmmaker, and his initial intent to film the quintessentially québécois *Léolo* in English (Johnson, *Maclean's* 51).

A highly styled portrayal of psychic pain and moral degradation, *Léolo* has much in common with *Un Zoo la nuit*. Both fictionalized, autobiographical accounts of their director's childhood experiences have, at their heart, a dysfunctional family, whose grotesque proportions in *Léolo* rival those Lauzon emulates in the work of Italy's Federico Fellini. Indeed, the elements and relationships portrayed in *Léolo* constitute a dark and bitter French-Canadian *Amarcord*.

Where Fellini's *Amarcord* is a gentle view of a boy's passage to manhood, Lauzon's is a brutal and wrenching search for an avenue of self-expression in which even the film's humor leads to contemplating madness. At base, Léo and his family display classic signs of schizophrenia, the escape from the molar structure of family culture into self-delusion. In Léo's case, literature constitutes his flight to become other than what he is through self-denial and to the point of madness.

Although it is doubtful that *Léolo* flouts narrative convention as Brian Johnson believes (*World Press Review*), the film's multi-voiced narrative, at times synchronic, at others diachronic, is more complex than its predecessor in *Un Zoo*. As autobiography, the film speaks objectively of the facts and tells a québécois documentary; as fiction, it speaks subjectively by undercutting the facts when the Narrator rejects the truth of the facts. *Léolo's* narrative finds its voices on three temporal levels. Visually, the narrative distinguishes two dramatic pasts, Léo at 6 and again at 12. A third visual joins the voice-over narration of the Dompteur des vers whose voice doubles Léo's thoughts at age 12. Finally there is, in the soundtrack's present, the documentary voice-over of the Narrator/Lauzon/Léo.

Multiple voicing begins the diegesis with the words of the extra-diegetic/diachronic narrator who comments and interprets the facts of Léo's life. He is the synthetic voice of the visualized Léo and the extra-diegetic Director. The narrative purports to documentary objectivity showing Léo/Lauzon's Mile-end neighborhood. Yet, here as elsewhere, the narrative voice-over is distanced temporally from the images. The clash between soundtrack and image is compounded by the presence of two Léos at two difference ages. At base, *Léolo* represents a confrontation between documentary and the alternative, fictional Other, whether language, nationality or blood.

At the core of the film's embrace of the Other is the boy Léo's rejection of his identity revealed by The Narrator's voice-over. At first, the Narrator/Lauzon/Léo reassures us of the documentary autobiography: "Ça c'est chez moi, dans le quartier du Mile-End à Montréal, Canada / This is my place, the Mile-End section of Montreal." In immediate contrast, the Narrator undercuts the illusion of documentary through his

insistence that he is not what he seems to be: "Tout le monde croit que je suis un Canadien Français. Parceque je rêve, je ne le suis pas / Everybody thinks I'm French-Canadian. Because I dream, I am not."

The Narrator—the Other, fictionalized Léo—claims to speak the truth about his parentage as he rejects his father and his family name: "Les gens qui ne croient qu'à leur verité m'appellent Léo Lauzon / Those who trust only their own truth call me Léo Lauzon." Commenting the image of his factory-worker father, the Narrator's voice continues: "On dit de lui qu'il est mon père. Mais moi, je sais que je ne suis pas son fils parce que cet homme est fou. Parce que je rêve, je le ne suis pas / They say he is my father. I am not his son. Because this man is crazy, I am not. Because I dream, I am not."

Rejecting his name and his Father, Léo creates a fiction in which his father is doubled by his grandfather. The father, interested, as David Stratton suggests, only in the bodily functions of his family, is a mute and passive substitute authority for the watchful eye of the mother. Having rejected his father, all that remains for Léo is to act out his Oedipal aggression. In revenge for what Léo interprets as his grandfather's attempt to drown him in his plastic wading pool and his grandfather's relationship with the young Bianca, Léo's ideal woman, Léo determines to kill his grandfather, the familial primogenitor. To eliminate his last connection to his race, Léo completes his rejection of his paternal genitors by devising an elaborate conceit which makes him the son of his mother and of a tomato upon which she fell, a tomato impregnated with the sperm of an Italian peasant. This accident of birth gives Léo the right to a new nationality, to a new language and to his Other name: Léolo Lozone.

Léo's acts of rebellion are universal. In a house with only one book which nobody else reads, Léo reads constantly. Reading, symbolic of what his family does not do, distinguishes him from them. "Tout ce que je demande à un livre, c'est de m'inspirer ainsi de l'énergie et du courage de me dire ainsi qu'il y a plus de vie que je peux en prendre, de me rappeler d'urgence d'agir / Books . . . give me energy and courage and remind me of the need to act," says the Narrator. To act is to rebel, even if it leads to the rejection of the family. By objectifying his family as characters in his fiction, he divests them of all reality.

Léo's writings, resulting from his voracious reading, are culled from the rubbish of the dustbin and appreciated by the magical *Dompteur de vers* who is another erstwhile narrator of Léo's texts, thus doubling Léo's roles as child and as Narrator. The multi-voiced narration reinforces the fictional and interpretive subjectivity of the film. The factual, documentary Léo does not understand what he is writing. Only as the older Narrator does he understand that writing is his salvation achieved through a relationship with the printed word and self-expression.

The Narrator's voice is doubled also in its dramatic function. Although the viewer is led to believe that the truth spoken by the narrator (the traditional voice of authority in Canadian documentaries) reflects the collected wisdom of the older

Lauzon/Léo, the viewer knows that the voice also repeats the text of the book left for him by the *Dompteur des vers*. It is in the words underlined for him in this book by the *Dompteur des vers* that Léo finds the joy of solitude ("Je trouve mes seules vraies joies dans la solitude"). The *Dompteur's* book teaches Léo to express emotion, and, in the solitary activity of self-expression, Léo can withdraw from his family.

However, the existence of the book is also the source of falsehood. The Narrator disavows any knowledge of how the book came into his house. Yet, the observer sees the *Dompteur des vers* put the book under a table leg in the Lauzon kitchen. The observer must conclude either that the older Lauzon/Léo is deliberately lying, or that the visual text constitutes still another point of view, and another, unvoiced, narrator.

Léolo is a case study and a condemnation of the schizophrenic withdrawal in which the characters become personnages, caricatures in Léo's fiction. None of Léo's family is normal by the accepted definition of the term. The grandfather, authority and bearer of the name Léo rejects, is a foot-fetishist. Léo's three siblings recede into self-delusion, motivated to escape into otherness. His two sisters spend most of their lives in mental hospitals. Fernand, Léo's older brother, who is afraid of the neighborhood bully who humiliates Fernand while Léo watches, turns to bodybuilding to no avail because Fernand's weakness is not physical. The scene of humiliation which constitutes a turning point in Léo's understanding of human motives is once again interpreted by the other voice, the Narrator, Lauzon/Léo distanced in time from the event.

The futile act of escape is not always subjective. As counterpoint to their grim existence in the East-end Montreal flat, father and children participate in Sunday summer ritual, a picnic on Ile Sainte Hélène. In ironic commentary, this weekly ritual of movement becomes an exercise in stasus, connected in Léo's mind with waiting for the bus: "Parce que j'attends le bus et que c'est tout, parce que j'attendrai la semaine prochaine, j'attendrai toujours / Because I'm waiting for the bus, I'll always be waiting." Part of the ritual of the family picnic involves similar passive participation, watching ships arriving and leaving the port of Montreal. The Narrator interprets the ritual of movement and stasus: "On s'ennuie près des quais regarder passer des bateaux qu'on ne prendra jamais / We got bored watching ships we will never sail on."

Fear is at the core of Léo's plight and flight. He sees it finally in the cowardice of his brother Fernand, whose muscles cannot hide his dread of the bully. Fear is also the cause of Léo's withdrawal into comatose insanity--lying in an ice bath, unresponsive, condemned to take his place beside his race: "Vous le placerez avec les autres membres de sa famille dans la salle commune / Put him beside the others of his family in the common room," says a nurse in a Montreal mental ward. It is the Narrator in his subjective, interpretive function who understands Léo's withdrawal into the familial coma. For Léo, it is flight into the dream world of literature where everything is what his real world is not, through which he discovers his own fear of love: "Parce que j'ai peur d'aimer, je ne rêve plus / Because I am afraid to love, I do

not dream any more." Léo's love is expressed only in his fictitious life created on the pages he composes. In a final narrative sequence, the multiple voices of the narrative speak at the same time. The words "je ne rêve plus" are repeated by the voice of Léo, the narrative Lauzon/Léo, and the Dompteur de vers.

If *Léolo* were the political film Lauzon assures us it is not, what might it be telling us? Perhaps the director's own words give us the embryo of an answer. In a *Maclean's* interview dated May 1992, when pressed to identify himself as a director working in Canada, Lauzon stated: "When I go to Toronto, I'm always well treated. People there dream about having a strong culture. Here [in Quebec] it's like rust, it's everywhere. And nobody gives you any encouragement. If I stay in Quebec, it's only because I'm lazy" (51).

Could it be that Lauzon is as comatose as the other members of his Quebec family? In the light ambiguous fiction of Lauzon's multiple-voicings, one is tempted to be pessimistic about the dreams of Léolo Lozone. Certainly, the film's Narrator ends on a note of Baudelairean despair: "Vous, la dame, vous l'audacieuse mélancolie, vous qui, d'un cri solitaire, fendez ma chair que vous offrez à l'ennuie . . . je vous ai payé cent fois mon dû / You the lady, you, audacious melancholy, you who rend my flesh which you offer to world-weariness . . . I've paid you my debt a hundredfold."

Nevertheless, there remains the question of identifying the multiple voices, of understanding who is speaking. Does the soundtrack narration reveal to us the objective Lauzon or the subjective interpreter of his own motivation, the voice of true Quebec anguish or of self-dramatization? In his multiple-voiced narration, Lauzon appears to document what it means to grow up French-Canadian of a certain class. But perhaps this too is one of Lauzon's true lies with which the Dompteur de vers ends the film's narrative: "Avec les braises du songe ne me restent que les cendres du nom du mensonge que vous-même m'aviez dit d'entendre / With the embers of the dream I have only the ashes of the name of the lie you yourself had told me to hear."

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