

“READING THE GROTESQUE IN QUÉBEC CULTURE”

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the issue of social class and class conflict in Jean-Claude Lauzon's film *Léolo* (1992). My focus throughout this analysis is primarily directed towards the grotesque as a mode of social and political critique to show how this mode is employed in the texts under study to subvert and challenge the existing social and political power structures. The grotesque, as might be noticed, permeates Lauzon's text; it is strategically deployed by the characters to transgress and resist the seemingly powerful hegemonic order that occludes their aspirations and yearnings for a better life. In fact, the characters cling to the grotesque mode to trespass the confinement, the oppression, and the exclusion imposed by a colonial order either within or outside their domestic sphere. This mode therefore emerges as a necessary mechanism of survival that offers the characters, especially through dreams, disruptions, and subversions of the existing social hierarchies, the possibility to go beyond the limitations, the fragmentations, the alienations, and the oppressiveness at the level of both an “unhomely” home and or nation. In brief, my analysis will be informed by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, David Sibley, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Mary Douglas, and Homi Bhabha.

Keywords: sovereignty, social class, identity, oppression, transgression, power structures.

DEVELOPMENT:

The Representation of Social Class and Class Conflict in Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Léolo*

The question of social class is foregrounded in Lauzon's text to depict and question the critical socio-economic status of the urban-working class, especially in Québec's most populous city (Montréal) in the late 1950s, early 1960s and 1970s. In fact, these socio-economic conditions were the main precursor that alerted the population to reject the oppressive living conditions and strive for drastic and profound transformations within Québécois society at all levels (social, economic, and political). The narrative of Lauzon's film thus directs us towards the bleak reality of his protagonist Léo Lozeau, who lives with a dysfunctional working-class family in the Mile-End neighbourhood of Montréal, wholly ravaged by madness and poverty. *Léolo* thus unfolds the semi-autobiographical coming-of-age story of a 12-year-old school boy named Léo Lauzeau, played by Maxime Collin. He is the youngest child of a typically dysfunctional, working class family in Montreal's Mile End district. The protagonist's feelings of alienation and exclusion permeates the film from its opening sequence to its end. Not only does he feel imprisoned within the borders of his own nation, but also within his locality and home, which should normally provide a safe haven or a secure environment for normal and healthy growth.

His brother Fernand (played by Alex Nadeau), for instance, is bullied and humiliated twice by an Anglophone; at home, Léo's every movement is controlled by his parents. His father (played by Roland Blouin) goes so far as to control his daily visits to the bathroom. His two sisters Nanette (played by Marie-Hélène Montpetit) and Rita (played by Geneviève Samson) keep vacillating between home and the psychiatric ward where they remain enclosed and isolated from the rest of the world. His grandfather, played by Julien Guimar, however, tries to drown him in the wading pool for inadvertently splashing him while having fun and playing with his sisters and brother. Caught in this complex familial environment, Léo resorts to his specific world of fantasy and dreams, to reading, and above all, to daily scribbles to escape his precarious conditions, his alienation, as well as the hereditary mental illness that threatens his existence. Most significantly, Léo rejects his name and his French-Canadian identity in order to adopt a new Italian one. Italy becomes his idyllic dreamland that he associates with liberty and sovereignty; that is, all that he lacks in his own homeland. In short, Léo's lone search for an authentic identity coincides with a strong desire for freedom and empowerment.

Though madness seems the most critical issue in Léo's family, I would argue that social class constitutes the core of all their miseries and isolation from the rest of the world. The close link between poverty and madness in the film might indeed suggest that living in extreme poverty and constant deprivation may engender a kind of madness. Or, perhaps, the recurrence of the theme of madness might insinuate that the hitherto irresolvable issue of Québec's political sovereignty may lead the Québécois society to madness especially that the whole family ends in the psychiatric hospital.

As a viewer, the issue of social class bewilders me for its static nature within the film. There is absolutely nothing that changes in the family's claustrophobic apartment situated in one of the most marginalized neighbourhoods in Montréal (Mile End).¹ Its very name denotes the systemic isolation and exclusion of the poor/abject Other far away from the center, particularly to the peripheries or forgotten spaces that are hardly visible. Throughout the film, nothing occurs to break the idleness, monotony, and relative stasis in the family's life that seems to be one aspect of urban working class lives: the same old shabby furniture, the same food, and the same routine. With a pessimistic, sarcastic tone, hence, Léo introduces his home: "Ça, c'est chez moi, dans le quartier Mile-End, à Montreal, au Canada." It is an old, tiny apartment fraught with repulsive smells and impure, polluted air; it is also ravaged by rats, dirt, and filth. It is, then, interesting to note that Lauzon deploys lighting and camera angles to elicit this peculiar monotonous mood about the setting and the home milieu. It is quite apparent that the lighting oscillates between artificial dim or dark lighting and abrupt natural

¹ Historically, Mile End is an Anglophone area in the city of Montréal where a diverse number of poor ethnic groups lived and worked side by side, including Jewish, Anglophone, Greek, Portuguese, and French. It is part of the Plateau-Mont-Royal district and has always been a home for successive new immigrants as well as artists, musicians, painters, and film-makers (including Jean-Claude Lauzon himself) who will profoundly mark Québec's culture and history. More recently, the Mile End has gentrified extensively and is one of the most desirable neighbourhoods in the city.

bright lighting that often breaks in to prey the door open for Léo's alternative world of dream, love, and hope. Yet, the oppressive mood that reigns in the Lauzeau home is constantly juxtaposed with the images of his dreamland (Italy) as an alternative home to cater for his acute lack of comfort and ease within his real home/nation, on the one hand, and with the images of underwater reverie, on the other. Such images underline an imaginary world totally different from the real world where Léo lives. In those prominent scenes, Léo leaves behind the world of the poor and the dispossessed to embrace a world he strongly aspires for - the world of bourgeois life that abounds with luxuries, wealth, and abundance. Such visual/narrative shifts articulate a carnivalesque vision that employs different ritual inversions to highlight the complexities of the world.

It is thus in this stifling, confined space that Léo lives under the same roof with his parents, grandfather, his drop-out brother, and two sisters, who kept vacillating between home and the psychiatric ward. Within this cramped and overcrowded home, Léo does not have a room of his own; he rather shares with his brother not only the bedroom but also the single, decrepit bed that was used and abused by his parents and grandparents. Notably, the only outing that Léo remembers from his childhood memories was a day in the park where he played with his sisters and brother on the grass and ate cucumber. Léo even connects the daunting stasis that permeates his life with the dullness and stagnation that he associates with the outing itself. To get to Ile Sainte Hélène, they have to wait for hours for the bus. Such waiting and the passivity and/or lack of movement become a salient characteristic of Léo: "Parce que j'attends le bus et que c'est tout, parce que j'attendrai la semaine prochaine, j'attendrai toujours." By contrast, Léo's attention was absorbed by the relentless movements of the boats while he regrets the negative attitude of the Québécois vis-à-vis the intolerable and excruciating material conditions: "On s'ennuie près des quais regarder passer des bateaux qu'on ne prendra jamais." Lauzon, in fact, uses the imagery of stasis in order to show the lack of class mobility of Léo and his family. But the affirmation that the Québécois "did nothing to change the status quo" does not take into account the massive changes that came from the Quiet Revolution: clearly they did something and changed things. In his most revolutionary article "La fatigue culturelle du Canada français," Hubert Aquin (1962) argues that these acute feelings of boredom, stagnant passivity, and idleness are linked to the Québécois' sense of inferiority and lack of pride in their own culture as a minority group caught within a colonial space that denies and refuses to recognize the distinctiveness and particularities of their culture. He thus stresses the importance "d'une culture propre ou du 'fait national'" to affirm their "québécoisité" and distinctiveness (p. 324). In this regard, nationalism, Aquin (1962) confirms, remains "une expression politique d'une culture: dans le cas du Canada français, il s'agit très nettement d'une aspiration à la politique" (p. 310).

In the opening sequences of the film, the voice-over narrative introduces Léo's father to us in a derisive manner that reveals, among other things, a revulsion that reflects the degree to which Léo hates and abhors his factory-worker father who first appeared in a black/white image sweating and could hardly move due to the heavy material that he carried upon his shoulders: "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. Et que moi

je ne le suis pas.” What Léo hates about his father is the image that he successfully incarnates; that is to say, the kind of work he does, his acceptance of being exploited and underpaid without raising a finger or protesting, without even expressing his wrath or anger at his grim, unbearable situation. By doing so, the father subtly contributes to the maintenance of his own exploitation and his own misery. Léo, in effect, held his father and, by extension, the urban-working class in Québec, responsible for sustaining the status-quo by simply enduring what must not be endured.

This indeed partly explains why most of the male figures were silenced and denied moments of empowerment or agency over the course of the film. It is thus more accurate to say that these figures incarnate the iconic image of weakened masculinity in Québec that reinforces the concept that Québec men are unable to create or lead a nation. In his *National Manhood and the Creation of Modern Quebec*, Jeffery Vacante (2017) points out that nationalists during the Quiet Revolution focused upon reinvigorating this sense of weakened masculinity. This “new generation of men sought...to infuse nationalism with greater vitality so as to rehabilitate French Canadian self-confidence and pride—that is, manhood” (p.12). The emphatic emphasis upon the “masculine project of personal and political empowerment” is primarily due to the fact that it “represents the means through which the feminized, emasculated, and homosexualized man/nation can reassert his/its heterosexuality” (p.15). The process or act of decolonisation and reclaiming of power for either man or nation is, then, bound up with reclaiming heterosexual virility, for, as Mary Jean Green notes, “the image of the newly decolonized subject[w]as a virile, heterosexual man” (qtd. in Vacante, 2017, p. 15). The father could also be seen as a victim of the capitalist system that seeks to exploit and contain the working class. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault (1978) explores the mechanisms of regulations and control exerted upon bodies through what he referred to as bio-power or a bio-politics of the population.²

As Foucault (1987) explains:

One of these poles...centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was by the procedures of power that characterised the disciplines...The second...focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes...their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: a bio-politics of the population [...]. (p.139)

² This sovereign power over life and death has taken new dimensions in the modern era; it is primarily premised upon two distinct poles that simultaneously affect each other. While the first conceives of the body as a machine that must be disciplined through different mechanisms of political power to ensure its integration and docility (an anatomo-politics of the human body), the second has as its focal point the biological body itself: the body as a means of propagation of the species whose rates of births, deaths, and health should be under supervision and control to regulate the population (and to provide for the healthy renewal of the industrial workforce over succeeding generations).

Capitalism in this sense is contingent upon this concept of bio-power that reflects a primordial tactic of governmentality in Western societies. Yet, strikingly enough, Léo's hierarchical family, and through its excessive control, emerges as a key ideological state apparatus that subtly works to discipline and facilitate the process of socialization and integration in the established social order.

Though Léo is a school boy, there is no sequence in the film that shows him devoting just a little of his time to his school work despite his mother's insistence. In contrast, he spends most of his free time working with his brother in exchange for money. There is absolutely nothing that he does for his brother for free, even riding upon his brother's back while he exercises: "Il me payait pour que j'asseois sur ses épaules." This echoes, among other things, the values of the capitalist system that penetrate the private sphere of the characters too to the extent that they become part of their daily exchanges. This also echoes the fact that, being caught in an extreme poverty, gaining money turns into an obsession that preoccupies Léo even within the borders of his home. More than that, he seems ready to even endanger his health and life to earn money: accepting to dive in the filthy river is a momentous case in point. Such an act elicits the extreme penury and deprivation of Léo that are dramatized by Lauzon. More than that, Léo could even steal to get the luxuries he wants (such as buying his scuba diving-mask) that his working-class family could not afford to buy for him. Léo's struggle with poverty reminds us of Heather O'Neill's protagonist (Baby) in *Lullabies for Little Criminals* (2006) that subtly uncovers the hidden and poignant reality of Baby's complex childhood in Montréal due to a life marked by excruciating poverty.

The physical space that the characters inhabit reflects their extreme poverty as well; most of their furniture is old and decrepit. As the voice-over explains, the furniture was bought from the Word Tamer - a keen scavenger of dumps and rubbish bins. Strikingly, Léo dares to exhibit the hole in his blanket that kept expanding throughout the film. At first, only his toe could pass through it, but, shortly after, his whole foot could pass without difficulty. This telling image dramatizes Léo's material situation that is not improving at all, but only getting worse. At this very moment, Léo decides to act: "Je sens déjà que je dois quitter cette vie avant de m'étrangler dans ce trou."

The outer space, too, does not differ from the character's domestic/inner space. In Lauzon's film, Mile-End's streets look exactly like a garbage dump. Waste invades the social universe of the defiled/residual Others who are geographically situated on the edges or margins of mainstream society. Through Léo's and Fernand's bike ride to the St. Lawrence River, Lauzon displays a scenery that uncovers the appalling reality that the Québécois working class was forced to endure for almost a century. Garbage bags, piles of debris, and decayed pieces of unwanted furniture lie on both sides of the streets in such a way that turns these discarded objects into obstacles that hinder the circulation of individuals and limit their freedom. Though far from Mile-End, the river, likewise, is rife with urban waste on its banks; strikingly, the corpses of dead animals and litter float at its surface. These scenes show Mile-End's working class living amidst their wastes and residues; that is, in an unhealthy and a strikingly polluted environment. More broadly, the urban working-class environment underlines the

existing social inequalities and the physical spaces that are marginalized through a mapping of cities based, as Sibley (1995) suggests, upon “a process of purification, designed to exclude groups variously identified as polluting - the poor in general, the residual working class, racial minorities, prostitutes, and so on” (p. 57).

To the same degree, Léo’s domestic environment abounds with filth and dirt. The family lives adjacent to abject animals and excrement as if to insinuate that there is absolutely no discrepancy between them. The presence of the filthy and smelly turkey in the bathroom’s tub is somewhat destabilizing, precisely because it is placed in a space that should be available for the family’s daily showers. Immediately after its sudden disappearance, a rat emerges to take its place. Other rats keep wandering in the kitchen’s sink, polluting and contaminating the pile of unwashed dishes and utensils. In short, it seems as though the family shares its home with these most polluting animals. Such conditions will undoubtedly expose the family members to real health problems, since these animals inhabit spaces that are frequented on a daily basis.

Léo’s father’s obsession with the family’s daily bowel movements adds to the polluted atmosphere within the house. The voice-over underlines to what degree the father relates his family’s health with a daily visit to the bathroom: he distributes laxatives to all members of the family and makes sure that the children swallow them. In a seemingly comic scene, the lined up children open their mouths for the father to verify whether the pills have been swallowed or not. Léo, however, always tricks his father and never swallows them, but gives them to his sister Rita in exchange for guarding his collection of insects. Indeed, Lauzon’s portrayal of Léo’s family as merging with defilement suggests Sibley’s theory that the poor are viewed by the privileged classes as abject: “The separations which the middle classes have achieved in the suburb contrast with the mixing of people and polluting matter in the slum. This then became a judgement on the poor. The class boundary marked out in residential segregation echoes the recurrent theme: ‘Evil ... is embodied in excrement’” (Sibley, 1995, p. 56). Sibley(1995), in fact, equates this tendency to maintain the self pure and defend its boundaries, mainly manifested by the father’s excessive control of the children’s bowel movements, with a “never-ending battle against residues- excrement, dead skin, sweat, ... a battle that has wider existential significance” (p. 8). Julia Kristeva (1982), in turn, stresses the impossibility of extricating the self from those impurities as they stand for “the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death” (p. 71).

In brief, Poverty, as depicted in Lauzon’s film, is a closed circle that subtly suggests the oppressiveness and class hegemony of the existing social order that continue to trap the working class within their limited universe. Still, and despite their myriad obstacles and difficulties, Léo insists upon deconstructing and transgressing the imposed boundaries through recurrent dreams of wealth. This tendency to transgress disturbs the traditionally rigid hierarchies between high and low or rich and poor. It also invokes the image of grotesque realism that, according to Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986), “is always in process, it is always becoming, it is a mobile and hybrid creature, disproportionate, exorbitant, and outgrowing all limits, obscenely decentred and off-balance, a figural

and symbolic resource for parodic exaggeration and inversion” (p. 9). These symbolic transgressions are much present in Lauzon’s film. Léo, particularly in his world of dreams and fantasy, imagines himself in a better world. He fancies himself a king in Italy’s vast valleys; he thus rejects any position of domination or oppression as he affirms himself as the ruler of that alternative land that offers the aspired-for sense of home - as someone in a possession of power.

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