The opening sequence in Jean-Claude Lauzon’s Léolo begins with the peaked cornice of a Montréal tenement embossed with the year of its construction: 1909. The camera pans downward to a boy in a cowboy outfit, sitting on an iron staircase and aiming his toy rifle onto the street and at the camera. He aims the rifle at the camera and so at us—the audience. We are about to be shot by the vision of the film’s writer and director, who was once that boy. Yet we are an unvisualized target of his gaze, a chimera of his imagination. He can only dream who we might be.

Using the lens as our eye, Lauzon brings us down onto his street in the inner city. We follow the camera as it descends from the world of reality represented by the higher echelons of historical fact and consciousness (the date of 1909) to the murkier ground or street level of costumed identity, of play.
and fantasy, of daydreaming, where we will be assaulted by the filmmaker’s fictionalized memories. Eventually, the film will take us below ground level to the darkened cellars of the subconscious, where the phantasmagorical swims freely. This is Lauzon’s tripartite universe of heaven/eternity, the realm of the desired ideal, of hope and joy; earth/time, the realm of physical limitations and the angst that leads to despair and defeat; and finally, our subconscious hell, the realm of the demonically magical power that seeks to destroy. The tenement becomes a metaphor for all three levels because it copies the three levels of the psyche: it rises above the earth to be silhouetted against heaven, it is entered at street level via a staircase, and finally, it contains a basement that is the foundation on which the person’s identity stands.

This structuring of the building is also transferred by Lauzon to the structure of the city. The psychological constructs of a Freudian universe comprise the controlling superego, which offers an ideal way of being (heaven); the ego, which brings the ideal and the subconscious together (earth); and the id, with its subterranean outpourings and anti-rational desires (the underworld). The city is a construct that shares this structure. It has its idealized locales like churches, schools, and courthouses, which represent human ideals of justice, love, and learning. It has its mundane locales like suburbs, shopping malls, and office towers, which represent our physical or earthly needs and desires. And it has its sexually charged side, represented by nightclubs, bars, and brothels.

The psychological framing that Lauzon uses to equate the human personality with a building and a city also embraces the metaphorical territory occupied by the stern patriarchal father on one side, the embracing matriarchal mother on the other, and the entrapped space between them occupied by the Oedipal and incestuous son. From this rich humus of Freudian emotions and desires arises another world of Jungian archetypes, in which time and its product, history, slip away. In this archetypal universe, Lauzon’s life is converted into a personal mythic space in tune with a universal male psyche. The coming-of-age narrative in the film is universalized as a statement of every pubescent male’s entrance into sexuality. While the cultural framing of Léolo is similar to that of Arcand’s Jésus de Montréal in terms of Québec nationality, the heterosexual male gaze, and Catholicism, it is quite different in terms of its prime ethos: the psyche and its torments. Rather than creating a connection between the old Québec and the new Québec, which was Arcand’s
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generational project, Lauzon, who was born in 1953, preferred to connect his individual psyche with a collective unconscious that lies beyond questions of national and religious identity. While Arcand’s narrative embraces his francophone identity, Lauzon’s narrative rejects it. While Arcand built a narrative edifice on his religious upbringing, Lauzon used the categories of twentieth-century secular psychology rather than Christian theology. This does not mean that *Léolo* is bereft of Catholic religious symbolism: like Arcand, Lauzon could not escape his Québec upbringing. The film is full of Catholic imagery, but it is there as an external signifier rather than an expression of a core identity. Both filmmakers rebelled against their orthodox upbringing but in different ways. Where Arcand found a city of faith and a moral compass, Lauzon found only failed dreams. They shared a mutual disillusionment with the new Québec but from different perspectives. The irony of all this pessimism is that Lauzon himself is an example of the success of the Québec artist. Unlike the protagonist in his film, he exemplifies personal triumph and achievement. That his art demanded, at least in his eyes, a tragic ending is more a statement about the culture he came from than about his career.

Lauzon used the image of the building in which he lived as a boy to situate his audience between the factual and the imaginary. The shot moves seamlessly from “history” or “age” (1909) to about 1960, when he was seven years old. History is only a backdrop to this youthful story, he seems to be saying. What and where things happened in our personal histories make the spaces that we occupied central to our identities. This brief autobiographical nod at the beginning of the film is an intentional foil to the film’s unerring focus on the primacy of timeless dream life that is the film’s ideological mantra. Using the genre of the confessional, autobiographical, coming-of-age story, the film brings us into a heterosexual male, inner-city working-class childhood in a way that is totally unconventional and anti-sentimental. Several critics have even turned the portrayal of Léolo’s hetero-abnormality (the wimpy artist figure) into a discussion of the film’s queer qualities.1 The film exposes hetero-male fantasies and sexual practices through magic realism; Lauzon’s magic realist constructions are a tribute to the autonomous power of the dream to construct its own confused and contradictory realities. For the viewer, rationalizing the how and the why of events portrayed in the film is frustrating, counterproductive, and ultimately fruitless because the film is constructed as a disturbing
dream with numerous non sequiturs and loose ends. Linear narration and physical laws are meaningless in fantasy because the reasoning of the unconscious and its associations do not require either to generate meaning. The kid in Montréal’s historic Mile End district, dressed in a now-dated cowboy outfit, stands for the truth of the human condition, which Lauzon saw as costumed and fantastical. The boy living in fantasy signifies everyone who is creative. In this equation, urban space is palpably psychological rather than architectural. In fact, while much of the film is taken up with the presence of physical realities of all kinds, from buildings to parents, these “real” places and “real” people are either discounted or made grotesque or absurd. From Léolo’s claiming to have been conceived by a tomato on which a Sicilian peasant had masturbated and on which his mother had accidentally fallen while shopping, to the amazing contraption he concocts with which to strangle his grandfather, symbolic constructions projected by dream states and their emotional roots permeate the film.

“The unconscious is an autonomous psychic entity,” Carl Jung wrote, “beyond the reach of subjective arbitrary control.”² The prime realm of the unconscious is the dream, which Jung considered a purposive balance to the “rationalizations of consciousness” that reject dreams as irrelevant and invalid.³ Both Lauzon and Arcand explore the meaning of love, but for Arcand love is asexual, while for Lauzon, love is pubescent eroticism and infatuation. Arcand uses the specificities of an urban space (Montréal today) to provide a context for the Passion, while Lauzon views the specificities of Montréal as a psychological arena of explosive emotions. Lauzon’s Montréal is a world overwhelmed by an intense psyche that consumes all in its path. Matter is crushed by the mind, and fantasy rules. There is nothing sacred in his Montréal.

Léolo presents us with a constant flow of metaphoric imagery that juxtaposes the traumas of personal history with the dreams that are meant to liberate identity from those traumas. Lauzon acknowledges that we are made by family, history, and society, but that this self generates alternate fantasies about who we might be, fantasies arising from archetypal forms that we share with all other humans. Because they are archetypes, they embrace codes that are accessible to the audience. To help the audience make sense of the film’s fantastical images and their supposed rationality in a dream-world, Lauzon creates a voice-over narrator who is our guide to the “reality” of the film, an
authority figure who guides the narrative for the audience. The voice of the narrator reads from a diary, an autobiographical text that seeks to “explain” the film’s events through a highly idiosyncratic interpretation provided by its purported author, Léolo, the boy in the film and Lauzon’s alter ego. The narrator’s reading of the diary allows the authorial voice a presence in the story and suggests that the only interpretation of life that matters is one’s own. That a diary is typically an expression of its writer’s innermost thoughts and feelings is meant to convey the authenticity and importance of the subjective viewpoint.

Lauzon seems to be saying that the physical and the psychological are bound together. In publicizing the private self, he makes use of sombre music and vocals that serve to heighten the depth of youthful angst. The audience is asked to gaze on the world as the boy gazes on it, to feel his reactions, to experience the traumas of his life, and thus to enter his psyche as deeply as the filmmaker wants us to. The initial scene of the boy in his cowboy outfit sitting in front of Lauzon’s ancestral home establishes the inside/outside paradigm that frames the whole film and that makes urban existence a battleground between the physical and social on one side and the mental and personal on the other. Urban life, like any other physically “located” life, can only be escaped through dreams, which come with a price. By juxtaposing the rather brutish reality of urban life for a working-class francophone boy with the boy’s escapist fantasies, the filmmaker turns the city into an antagonist, a reality that generates antithetical responses in his protagonist.

The opening shot continues panning right over an urban landscape, while the authorial voice-over explains, “This is my place, Mile End, Montréal, Canada.” The place is immediately situated in a geographic and historical reality for the viewer and the viewer’s interpretations of Québec, however limited or profound. But this geographic identity is immediately dismissed as irrelevant by the authorial voice-over, which claims that the spatial and ethnic identity that is represented in the urban images is unimportant. “Because I dream,” the voice emphasizes, “that is not what I am.” Just as Arcand used religious imagery to universalize Montréal, so Lauzon uses psychological categories to do the same. He tells us that the main signifier of identity is the dream.

The boy’s consciousness is formed through a voice-over that seems spectral: the voice reading from the boy’s diary sounds too mature to be that of the young boy on the screen, as is confirmed when he actually speaks. In the film,
the diary is discovered by a rather silent, or wordless, figure, the “Dompteur des vers,” who is something of a cross between a derelict and a priest. His dual character is apparent in the ambiguity of his name, which some translate as “Word Tamer” (with vers understood in its liturgical sense, as “lines” or “verse”) and others as “Worm Tamer” (with vers taken as the plural of ver, “worm” or “maggot”). Perhaps, then, the voice of the narrator is that of the Word/Worm Tamer. The viewer is therefore conflicted about how to read the voice. It is first-person singular, but it is the voice of another, which could even be a representation of the audience as it “reads” the film. This clash of the autobiographical with the biographical, the internal with the external, is what Lauzon plays out for us. Although we are guided by Lauzon the storyteller, we are bound primarily by the viewing of the film, so his storytelling ends up enmeshed in our own voices and how we imagine Québec, Montréal, young males, and families. Spectators have their own story through which they read the young Léo. Each of those stories is different.

Within the film itself, the dichotomy between the objective and the subjective is quickly established. Dates and history are always “lying” because they mean different things to different people. These are our own “truths” that balance collective narratives of truth. “Those who trust only their own truth call me ‘Léolo Lozone,’” the boy cries defiantly at the world. His “real” name is presented as Léo Lozeau or Léo Lauzon, depending on the version of the film. Who I am, young Léo declares, is not who you or my family think I am; I am who I dream I am. The reality of the city and the reality of a lived life (one’s familial history and place in it) are positioned against the created truth of the individual mind that rejects the strictures of the given. In Léolo, the struggle between the viewer’s inner voice trying to make sense of the film’s world and the inner voice of the lead character, who demands that we see reality through his eyes, creates the fundamental tension of the narrative. The viewer’s desire to make sense of what is being viewed and heard, the act of integrating imagery and sound into something coherent and understandable, is constantly being challenged by a deep tension between the visual and oral narratives of the film. The constant flow of dark imagery, the litany of voice-over pronouncements, and the powerful, moody music create a spirit of tension, even angst, in the viewer. The anxiety expressed in the film mirrors our own inner anxiety about our secret lives. The film highlights a battle between our public identities and
our private ones. The film’s auditory privileging of dream through music and
voice clashes with the visual in the film, because the visual (seeing is believing)
prejudices us toward its representations of reality.

Léolo’s heroic struggle to live inside his dream ends in his final coma in
a bathtub full of ice water in a psychiatric institution, where his relatives also
reside. The water represents scientific reality’s cold and bitter anti-amniotic
fluid (death) in stark contrast with the warm and protective womb from which
he emerged (birth). The voice of the diary stops; the film ends with an English-
language lament. Both the boy and the film become wordless, and the viewer
is left, like the reader of the diary, with an internalization of the filmmaker’s/
author’s creation. The spectator is suspended, like the character of Léolo him-
self, between the mental and the physical worlds. When we reach the end of
the film, we understand that Léolo’s pointing his phallic toy rifle at us in the first
scene is Lauzon’s way of saying that we, too, can be killed by our fantasies. Eros
leads to Thanatos. The film posits a choice between the treacheries of reality
and the treacheries of dreams. The refrain of dreams defining our inner being is
a salute to the creative, artistic life. The sombre and grief-like mourning of the
closing scene equates the “entombment” of the diary by the Word/Worm Tamer
at the end with the “burial” of Léolo in the insane asylum. These burials are met-
aphors for a state of wordlessness, the end of narrative, a story that is over.

THE EMBODIED DREAM

Flight from the body has been a basic element in Western thinking for millen-
nia. Descartes’s “I think, therefore I am” is Western philosophy’s most famous
statement of subjectivity and an affirmation of a split between mind and body.
Lauzon cleverly introduces his own postmodernist take on this philosophical
epigram by adding a refrain, “I dream, therefore I am not,” which he has Léolo
repeat, mantra-like, throughout the film. Being alive implies dreaming and
imagining. Lauzon’s own name is suggested in the boy’s “real” name, Lozeau,
and his “imagined” name, Lozone. This cascade of association suggests the
masks that humans generate for themselves as they cope with reality. We are
dealing again with three levels: the historical Lauzon, the fictive Lozeau, and
the imagined Lozone. Art lies layered between fantasy and reality, between the
imagined and the remembered. “I wanted my film to be a kind of homage to dream,” Lauzon explained in an interview. “And I wanted to make a film that paid homage to creativity.”

Lauzon’s sublimation of his own life’s transformation from a working-class troublemaker in East End Montréal into a heralded filmmaker using a narrative of an imagined failure is indicative of the ironies of art. If the film had accurately portrayed his real worldly success, it would not have had the same impact. Twisting the film’s narrative into a fabulist statement about the constant war between dream and reality limits the importance of the historical, the geographic, and the specifically autobiographical in the film. It raises human psychology to a metaphysical level on par with the religious power of *Jésus de Montréal*.

And yet the historical and autobiographical reality of Lauzon as a product of Montréal and its urban landscape cannot be dismissed since it is the world that the protagonist denounces as unreal. Montréal is embodied in the narration and the visual imagery as a site of negativity and violence to the self. It is a place where dreams are drowned by the constant outpourings of reality, to which the diary repeatedly refers as an assault on the psyche. By equating the externalities of urban life (home, family, jobs, streetscapes, institutions, etc.) with the limitations of the boy’s body as it struggles to achieve sexual maturity, Lauzon has created a powerful metaphor of the body/mind dichotomy. In this case, the mind-body split is a division between the boy’s fantasy of the self and the self’s imprisonment in its socio-urban landscape. Léolo insists on the superiority of his imaginary narrative over that of his family, whose narrative is grounded in francophone Montréal. And yet narrative closure is the destiny of any story just as death is the destiny of any life. Like any pubescent boy’s desire to escape into maturity, into full and unfettered sexuality, away from the parental eye and familial strictures, Léolo’s desire for freedom symbolizes transformation. Is the city only a prison whose walls are parents and siblings, language, ethnicity, and class, all of which must be transcended? At one level, it is; otherwise, the mind could not and would not want to invent an otherness, which Lauzon represents as bucolic country scenes in Sicily. But on another level, embodiment in a city is fundamental to creating the conditions for desire and flight. It is the girl-next-door figure that is his love object, and it is the back lanes of his neighbourhood that give him an urban framework. Lauzon posits
Montréal as the driver of his anti-hero’s imagination, and it is in Montréal’s institutional framework (the asylum) that the story ends. Both Arcand and Lauzon have created homages to Montréal and transferred its urban dominance to a suprageographic and supranational realm.

The Canadian philosopher Mark Kingwell describes cities as “free-ranging, energized conversations, restless and inventive confabs.” Their role is incubational, and it is dreaming that allows the new to emerge. That is how Lauzon reads Montréal—as a space that is filled with dreams that seek to recreate the self. The only self that can triumph over the city is one that does not accept its strictures. That is why Léolo’s father is presented as a failure—because he accepts his lot in life. So the city is both enemy and friend, both womb and tomb. The energized conversation that the young Léolo has with his diary—and through it, with us—is restless and inventive; it is a source of insight into the human condition. He is an inner-city boy, driven by pubescent heterosexual desire and in active rebellion against his family and its working-class dilemmas. That Lauzon eventually freed himself of his class origins may appeal to the mythology of American success, but in Lauzon’s claustrophobic Québec universe, that liberation cannot be trumpeted from the rooftops. It carries a burden of guilt, especially when his lead character denies his Québec identity. Léolo urinates from the balcony of his tenement in symbolic denunciation of his rotten world. Piss on you, he says. I can be whatever I want to be. But in the end, he can’t. In spite of Lauzon’s personal triumph, Québec is presented in Léolo as a statement of failure rather than an American statement of triumph over adversity, which indicates how deeply the cultural parameters of his society are embedded in his psyche and that of his prime audience.

In his role as diarist, Léolo represents the figure of the artist, a figure who, in Lauzon’s world, is a denizen of the classless imagination rather than of an ethnocentric, class-conscious reality. For example, after the opening scene with the boy and his toy gun, the narration moves to an image of a sweaty, rotund man carrying a sack of coal in a foundry, the epitome of blue-collar drudgery. He is the father figure, a lowly worker who is rejected by the narrator in favour of a conjured “real” father, a Sicilian peasant, who masturbated on a tomato that was shipped to “America” and then miraculously impregnated his mother in the market when she tripped over a vegetable stand. Léolo’s creation myth—for that is, in essence, what it is—is a brilliant parody of the biblical
Eden (the round tomato as the round apple) as well as a statement of how we are all “adopted” here on earth. The Father and the Mother (Adam and Eve) have been driven out of blissful existence in an Eden-like Sicily into the slavery of working-class Québec. The way the film idealizes rural life as a fantasy is part and parcel of the urban imaginary, in which the urban consciousness seeks to escape a world that it views as a concrete jungle.¹¹

Léolo Lozone/Lozeau/Lauzon’s creation myth also carries non-Christian Freudian baggage: rejection of the father and embracing of the mother. While his dream of idyllic rural Sicily, beautifully filmed, represents a lost Eden, his earthly father’s working-class, factory-dominated city is a purgatory out of which he must dream himself. The son wants to return to the Edenic garden because his real life—brutish and bookless, as he tells us—is only worthy of escape. He argues that one would have to be insane to accept reality as he knows it. This reasoning uses the logic of the subconscious to subvert conscious reality. Considering some of the escapades portrayed later in the film, one might perceive Lauzon’s Montréal as a monstrous world. Yet it is this very world that holds the viewer enthralled with its darkly rich, deeply textured, mesmerizing visuality. The bucolic scenes from Sicily are emotionally empty for the audience; they are too dreamy in their presentation. Instead, the audience is enthralled with the rich “Old Masters” lighting of scenes of Montréal and the tenement apartment, especially when lit by candlelight or fires. It is this earthly world that makes the film interesting and engaging, rather than the world of pure love that Léolo dreams. So Lauzon undermines visually the dream-reality that is praised orally in the film. In this way, he foreshadows the ending.

The film displays a metaphysical or ethereal quality that suggests to the viewer that the main character’s rather one-sided narration of reality lacks substance. As we watch the magic realism of an amazing Montréal unfold before our eyes, we are attracted by its imagery, magnetized by its music, and engaged with the physicality and visuality that is represented as urban life. The visual elements of the film represent exaggeration and ritualization. Its oral narration, augmented by deep sonorous music, is equally rich and enchanting. It holds our attention even though it is disembodied. The truth that emerges from the film for the spectator is a triangle composed of authorial intent, filmic reality, and the audience’s reading. It may be that some in the audience can see elements of their own existence in the cri de coeur that emanates from the
troubled mind and volatile emotions of this young lad. Even if this is not possible, the audience is captivated by the visual representation of the depths of the psyche.

The diary (narrative) is a text that Léo’s family cannot read because it is hidden from them. (The cultural construction of juvenile confession has as its major theme not being understood by adults and being hidden from them.) But we, the audience, are included in the world of the diary’s “readers” because we are listening to the diary as it “confesses” to us. This confessional mode turns us into priests who must pronounce judgment on its transgressions. The diary is a form of forbidden knowledge. Like the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, it is only available to those who partake of it, which Léolo’s family does not, but which his guardian angel, the Word/Worm Tamer, does. The biblical allusions that underlie the film’s text are evidence of the power of religious Catholicism in the Québec identity. The avuncular figure of the Word/Worm Tamer is played by the late Pierre Bourgeault, a firebrand orator in his nationalist days but reduced in this film to an ironic silence. He (in the film) and we (in the audience) are asked to treat the diary like a sacred text, which the Word/Worm Tamer later carries in a pseudo-religious procession to its final entombment on a shelf in the cellar of his home, illuminated by a thousand candles found at the end of a seemingly endless spiral staircase, which represents the subconscious. It is enshrined as a holy object to be venerated, just as a film can be enshrined as a classic text that all should revere. As a religious memento or icon, it stands for the memory of its author, who has been raised to a level of martyred sainthood in the film. The diary is “saved” by the Word/Worm Tamer, but it is now dead since it no longer speaks to us. When Léolo is silenced, the diary stops, the voice-over stops, and the film ends because the film itself parallels the diary—from the first page to the last. This equating of the two art forms (diary and film) is simply one more creative link between Lauzon, his city, and his imaginative reconstruction of his own life.

While the film, via the diary, can be considered a meditation on all kinds of love—filial, maternal, sexual—it is more a meditation on the benefits and costs to those who live the creative life. The world of Léolo is a dialogical engagement in which we can try to understand the director of the film through the characters he has created for us. Everything of consequence that has spurred his imagination has some connection to his life. Lauzon’s desperate

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urban upbringing and its visual and dramatic richness underly the creation of the dream world that is a film. Dreams are most often constructed out of experiences in the real world but are rearranged in archetypal ways. The film implies that any historical moment, with its buildings and streetscapes, can be mythologized, universalized, and made archetypal because of the human psyche’s ties to the collective subconscious. The cultures associated with Catholicism (religion), the Quiet Revolution (generation), male heterosexuality (sexual orientation), Québec nationality and the French language, and, of course, class figure prominently in Léolo because this is the culture in which Lauzon grew up. These elements of this culture also influenced Arcand, albeit in a different way. Arcand was twenty in 1960, when the Quiet Revolution began, while Lauzon was only seven. The two filmmakers are separated by less than a single generation, and yet Lauzon was educated within the newly secularized Québec, while Arcand was not. Lauzon was much more a child of the Quiet Revolution than was Arcand. This meant that, for Lauzon, the world was framed in a more secular manner than Arcand’s education allowed. Léolo belongs to a modern myth, while Jésus belongs to an ancient one, and so expressions of class, nationalism, and language in each film differ radically.

AUTHORSHIP AND THE DIARY

This 1992 film looks backward into the collective realities of the twentieth century and forward to a future that neither the character in the film nor its director was to experience because Lauzon died in a tragic plane crash five years after the film was released. The boy never comes of age and Lauzon left us with only two feature films, which serve as his diary to us. The diary form, like this film, is the place of an articulated life, of a self-reflecting narrative that is as irrational as it is rational because it is based on a singular viewpoint. Diaries are often the textual home of the dreams we have about ourselves, and they contain the universe of self-creation and self-interpretation that society either ignores or rejects. The dreams expressed in Léolo’s fictional diary are partially the site of the idealized heavenly fantasy of another, more glorious world, and they are also an expression of trauma—of growing up in working-class Montréal in the 1950s. Unlike Arcand’s Montréal, which was formed by
the halls of Jesuit higher education, Lauzon’s Montréal was formed by a low-income, industrialized, blue-collar working-class universe of street thugs, fishmongers, and recycled newspapers. In this situation, one makes one’s life out of what is discarded, a metaphor for the status of the district’s inhabitants. This francophone class that is integral to Montréal’s identity is completely different from the snobbish, educated elite that populate Arcand’s Montréal. There are no rural retreats for the denizens of Mile End. Instead of the spacious lakeside cottage for weekend relaxation that Arcand’s characters enjoy in Le déclin, Léolo’s “escape” to a rural rest consists of taking the bus to the Montréal docksides for a Sunday family picnic. In Jésus de Montréal, Mont Royal is the site “outside” the city that hosts the Passion play, but even this prominent urban park is missing from the inner-city lives portrayed in Léolo. They have no green space at all, so if they are to have it, they must dream it.

The device of the diary creates a highly textualized narrative thread for the film. The authorial autobiographical voice that is sometimes youthful and sometimes aged forces the audience to reflect on authorship, on the power of narrative, on the “truth” of text and the filmmaker’s fictional reconstruction of the nonfictional. The diary is not a memoir because it presents the author as engaged directly with events as they happen. These events and their author’s role are recreated on the screen. Because its narrative spans an indeterminate period of time in Léolo’s life, the sense of time’s passage is compressed. The account sandwiches the audience between a young body seeking to overcome its pubescence and the rational reading offered by the much older Word/Worm Tamer figure, who wanders the garbage-strewn lanes of the urban jungle searching for the textual remnants of other people’s lives. The Word/Worm Tamer can only relate to humans through their texts, the way an archivist might. He is the incarnation of an understanding father figure (another version of Léolo’s dreamed and anonymous father, the Sicilian peasant), who does not exist in Léolo’s “real” family. He is an outsider, like members of the audience, who treats Léolo’s words with attentive reverence because they form a manuscript. The Word/Worm Tamer’s salvaging of the diary from the garbage provides it with significance and authenticity. The filmmaker wants us to react to his film in the way the Word/Worm Tamer reacts to the diary because he believes that art deserves reverence. But the diary is an imaginary entity that signifies the autobiographical memory. While the outside world considers such
musings garbage, its creator does not. While Léolo’s family tries to “save” him from his escapist imagination with repeated calls to return to their reality, the eccentric Word/Worm Tamer also fails to save the boy’s life because he cannot intervene effectively. Guardian angels simply watch. Through the Tamer, who is the memoirist and the archival aspect of Lauzon, the text is kept from the worms (dust to dust, ashes to ashes) by saving it from a destructive and ignoble resting place in a trash can and thus from its return to the earth. Lauzon’s ironic play on words in the name “Dompteur des vers” (ver and vers are homonyms) implies that worms and words have a mutual covenant of destruction and ultimate transformation.

“My family had become caricatures—characters in a fiction,” the voice of the diary tells us. Lauzon is warning us that his film is a fiction filled with caricatures of his family. But these caricatures symbolize universal figures with archetypal qualities: the father, the mother, the brother, the sister, and so on. This “familial” structure is equivalent to the familiarity of the city structure for a young person for whom an apartment or a small neighbourhood is a total universe. The rest of the city does not exist. Cartooning the mother or the father or the sister is part of the young mind as it lives in a comic book universe. Such constructions of the family do not detract from the essential role that each person plays in the family drama. Likewise, the gang of pre-pubescent boys, smoking and sniffing glue, represents the clan culture of adolescence. The visual elements in the film recreate the immediacy of each episode, while the authorial voice, which is sometimes the Tamer’s reading and sometimes Léolo’s, creates a temporal distancing for the audience so that the subject in the writing becomes objectivized. We gaze upon Léolo and his stories as curious bystanders positioned as judge and jury. The diary is Léolo’s statement of his subjective voice, while its being read to us creates the illusion of an objective statement that can be analyzed and reflected upon. The diary is a metaphor for the film itself in the sense that the film is simultaneously a subjective statement of the auteur and an objective work of art that can be analyzed and interpreted by the audience.

The diary and the film are Léolo’s ghosts, his words from the grave. When Léolo and his diary are finally silenced at the end of the film, we are so far underground in the subconscious of his psyche (reflected in the endlessly downward spiralling staircase that the Tamer descends, holding the diary as
The emphasis on the word “dream” as the basic mantra of the film adds to the film’s ghostly aura. The diary as the great explainer is the voice from the beyond, disembodied and ethereal. The co-relation between the dream-life of a young boy and its narration in a diary suggests that a good part of an adolescent’s life is spent dreaming up bio-tales. Léolo reminds us over and over that dreaming is the way in which reality can be negated. It is quite common for adolescent daydreaming to justify its inherent narcissism through the manufacturing of a love object. The dream or fantasy wants to be realized by reaching out to its other or beloved that is a real person. Léolo’s Bianca is not just his fantasy; she is a flesh-and-blood object of desire. The dream-world projects beauty next door as a way of rejecting the ugliness it perceives in its own life. If his family apartment is the embodiment of ugliness, then Bianca becomes the embodiment of unattainable beauty. In this way, the city fills with the dreams of its inhabitants. Lauzon recreates Montréal’s urbanscape in a dream-like way—confused, convoluted, emphatic, and manic. The parts are easily identifiable, but they are often lacking in rationality. Montréal embodies mental processes that become endless conflicts. And that is what the film offers—conflicts that are internal to families and conflicts with the flotsam of urban life.
existence. Both are shut out by dreaming, and dreams find their embodiment in the diary, which turns into a castle in which Léolo lives. The desires and opinions that he offers create an alienation/attraction paradigm. Bianca is real enough, but she is also a fantasy creature, an idealized persona conjured up from his own desire. Although he fails to destroy his opponent, the grandfather, who pays Bianca for sexual favours, Léolo is energized by his life-and-death struggle to achieve sexual equality with adults. While he seeks the solitude of his dream-life, of his inner self, that selfhood is contextualized and made meaningful by the external world to which he is reacting. The solitariness of his world is accentuated by two entities: the one book that supposedly exists in the family home and, of course, his diary. The former he reads; the latter he writes. But the result is always the loneliness of the person as artist or as an art appreciator. Léolo obviously wants to overcome this solitariness through an engagement with Bianca, but it remains an unfulfilled desire.

Curiously, his infatuation with Bianca only makes him more alone and isolated. The more he wants her, the greater the obstacles to his connecting with her. The family apartment in which he lives is a symbol of urban life, of loneliness and struggle in the midst of overcrowding. The apartment, like the city, is filled with people and furniture and happenings, but these only drive Léolo further into himself, since the world of the flat is an affront to his desired identity. Only by dreaming of not being a boy, of not being a kid in a tenement, of being strong enough to kill his grandfather can he be his idea of an adult, an equal to those who are oppressing him. The inescapable solitariness of his life is symbolized by the ice water-filled tub that entombs him at the end of the film. Lauzon’s urban world is made up of exactly this contradiction between urban crowding and solitariness. It’s a universe of strangers walking past each other, filled with their own dreams.

A dream is a disjointed, contradictory remembering of the vaguely familiar. In each dream, there exists a play of opposites in which the future (dream-wish) and the past (nightmare) are combined into a restless and tormented present. Lauzon is a genius in portraying this dichotomy through religious metaphors. The family’s fetish for regularity in bodily functions and its ritualistic repetition of defecation as a form of cleansing that has to be repeated week after week are held up as insanity by the diary, while the life of reading, the absorption into the cleanliness of a book that has no bodily waste,
the life of the mind and the understanding friendship it generates with a man like the Tamer are held up for their purity and eternity. The book is the home of the ideal, while the home is the realm of ugly reality.

Léolo’s juvenile perception of the human condition, which always seeks to elevate the self beyond the restraints of the given (not realizing that its aspirations are just a biological tool for his entering adult conventionality and restriction), involves a diminution of the social and an elevation of the personal. Two important scenes in the first twenty minutes of the film explain this solipsistic vision. Both occur in darkness—the darkness of the bathroom (inside) and the darkness of the street (outside)—which indicates that the city is the same indoors and outdoors. In the first scene, Léolo’s mother sits as a colossus on the toilet, her skirt raised and legs spread, while she encourages the boy (here a toddler) in potty-training. The crying child looks at her massive bulk (he is only a toddler, after all) and his gaze turns to her pelvis and the mystery of birth. The scene is a difficult one to watch because of its invasion of normative privacy. The loving mother encourages the boy with the words “push, push,” just as she may have been encouraged (and cried) while giving birth to him. The two different acts of birth and defecation are equated clearly in a Freudian way. Growing up and taking control of the self is a process of effort and pain.

The second scene has Léolo walking joyfully with the Tamer in a rain-soaked industrial area; both are dressed in worker’s rain gear and are carrying pails. The water glistens with film noir lighting as the two figures stride forward in a mood of confidence. Then they are shown seated by a fire fed with books that the Tamer gives the boy. There is, after all, only one book that matters, and that is the personal diary. The two are presented as perfectly happy and content. The music is rousing and triumphal. The voice-over, which introduces the Tamer, describes this adult as someone who knows how to sift through the garbage of the world and pick up what is precious. This is the knowledge that the boy hopes to acquire. And the only wisdom that the Tamer imparts to him is “You have to dream, Léolo.” Of course, that advice is the opposite of what his family tells him, which is to adjust to the real world and stop daydreaming. Léolo responds by describing the Tamer as a “reincarnation of Don Quixote.” This is a play on both the romantic hero-worshipping, role-model desires of youth and an adult understanding of the uselessness of tilting at windmills. In
this scene, just like the bathroom scene, there is a bonding between the two individuals, but it is clear that the bonding with the Tamer is simply another stage in the life of a heterosexual male, who must bond with those outside the family to become an adult.

The play of light and dark in these two scenes is vital to the philosophy of the film: it presents both the internal world of the home and the external world of the city street as dark and foreboding places. The street has the advantage of movement, of an illusion of freedom, represented by the hobo imagery of the two sitting outside, homeless, and enjoying the vagabond life free of domesticity and its particular violence to the self. The scene symbolizes escape into manhood. The next important urban scene, shot in daylight, is Léolo and his brother picking up discarded newspapers in an alley. Day is the time of work and manual labour, as in the world of his father. There is no joy here, just economic necessity. They are unknowingly imitating the Tamer, who also prowls urban alleys, but they are forced to do this for money, while the Tamer sifts through garbage for philosophical reasons. Their work is of a lower order. In the street, they are part of a multicultural, ethnic, allophone environment, which is played differently in Jésus de Montréal. In Arcand’s film, the same elements exist but are portrayed as separate worlds that barely touch. In Lauzon’s film, the class nature of the neighbourhood brings Italian, Jewish, and English characters close together in direct conflict. These are not distant ghettos but entities that share a contested space. The life of labour includes the Jewish fishmonger, the English bully, the Italian beauty next door, and what unites them and their mutual struggle for survival is proximity itself. In darkness, the city can be a place where companionship and solitude can be celebrated. In daylight, the city is a place of prying eyes, of jostling bodies, of turf wars. Because work life (daytime) is the site of struggle, it is sleep life (nighttime) where imagination can bring peace, can free one from enslavement to manual labour and so from the city. In dreams, one can overcome class, filth, and familial demands. Only through dreaming can the city of a working-class kid move beyond its normative ugliness and hopelessness.

The urban in Léolo does not have the reverential sense of the sacred found in the Montréal-Jerusalem equation of Jésus de Montréal. In fact, religion is either parodied or made ironic—as, for example, when a crucifix falls to the floor while Léolo is masturbating. While Arcand wishes to save the city from
its secularity, to raise it to a spiritual level, Lauzon brings it down to its sordid depths: enjoyment is sought only at night, lit by primitive fires (outdoors) or candles (indoors). That lighting is not part of a typical urban technological fix like centrally supplied electricity: these are ancient and individual illuminations from earliest times. Even so, Lauzon’s Montréal is much more grounded in the sociological and the psychological than in the mythic structure created by Arcand. His city is a derelict existence redeemed through individual imagination rather than through Christ, and that imagination is itself constructed from twentieth-century psychological insights. The flame of creativity that Lauzon offers us transforms art into salvation and the diary into a holy book.

THE ELEMENTAL CITY OF FIRE, EARTH, AIR, AND WATER

Lauzon takes an urban working-class tenement environment, which is as far from natural elements as one can imagine, and breaks it down into fundamental archetypes: fire, earth, air, and water. The only treasures that Léolo finds within his home are buried deep below the floorboards in that metaphorical basement of the subconscious, where he and his sister hide out with his bug collection. This incest-alluding scene, filled with the candlelight and comparable to scenes in the home of the Tamer, creates a sense of ritual and mystery, coming as close to religiosity as possible in a world infused with psychological rather than moral categories. With his sister dressed as a kind of priestess, the scene is highly reminiscent of the confused figures and allusions found in dreams. The bug collection is a precious object to the young Léolo, though disgusting to his mother, who prefers that he collect discarded newspapers with his brother because they have some financial value. The bugs are worthless in the real world, but to the child, they are sacramental. In the alchemy of family values, reality imposes the importance of money, while in the universe of individual values, the bug collection is of inestimable value because it represents caring and self-affirmation. Léolo cares for the bugs in the way a mother nurtures a child. It is a kind of ersatz adulthood. At one point, he brings the jar to his institutionalized and catatonic sister as his only gift of love. He “owns” nothing else.

The candlelight of the basement plays a similar role to that of the book-burning bonfire that he shares with the Tamer. This primal lighting (fire
and flame rather than electric light) signifies reverence for the archetypal scene and can, with a stretch, be related to the originating human art found in the caves of Europe. In fact, Lauzon makes much of this detechnologized, deindustrialized environment, which he offers as a return to fundamental soul-affirming humanity. The symbolic value of elemental fire and water are central to the film’s imagery. Earth, another in the quartet of elements, is present in a different way. The most earthly thing in the film is excrement.

It would seem that this emphasis on shit is also carried over to his view of the city as a place of shit—of money (filthy lucre), dirt (filth), blood, and grime. Shit means worthless. In one scene, Lauzon has the father eating his lunch from a lunch pail while sitting on the toilet of the factory where he works. Conceiving work as shit, life as shit, the working class being treated like shit means his father’s life is worthless and a waste. In the family’s universe, art is also shit. Léolo’s diary is treated like shit by family members. This bowel movement metaphor continues when the diary describes his going into the basement to see his sister as “hidden in the bowels of the earth.” The motion is always downward, where one can be rid of physical limitations and so rise up again to float in the delightful and airy daydreams of youthful imagination. And to do that, one must enter secret worlds, places transformed and hidden far from the prying eyes of family and peers. One must descend into the world of the id and the subconscious libido in order to be free of the shitty, earthy world. Only by going below can one rise above the daily mess.

Film scholar Georges Toles describes Léolo as an “exploration of the sensuous surfaces of the decaying material world.” The film equates the body with organic matter and material reality. Each urban space has its human counterpart—the business owner, the neighbourhood bully, and the psychiatrist. The material world is presented as a site of decay, demoralization, and, ultimately, death. The idealized dream world is presented as a site of soaring flight, exhilaration, and fulfillment. The city entombs the body through its grotesque reality, while flights of fancy are the only tools allowing one to soar above its decay, demoralization, and death. The city as reality is a gravitational force that is always trying to pull poor little Léolo down to earth.

But Lauzon’s city is also sensuous, especially at night, when, in the rain-slicked reflections of its streets, it shimmers with moonlight. In daylight, it is a mutation of sensuality, a kind of cancer. The city in daylight is an illness, or
what Toles calls an “affliction.” The city in darkness merges with the dream world and so reflects freedom from reality and the world of sunlight. The only illumination that one needs in the world of dreams is primitive candlelight or a fire. Fire, the symbolic element of individual creativity, exists in the city, but it also threatens urban life. Fires such as those created by derelicts to keep warm are a threat to a fire-wary public just as candlelight is associated with the danger of house fires. While electricity is safe when it is channelled through wires, an open flame is a worrisome, anti-urban threat. Through its association with fire, the flame of creativity can be read as a threat to the established order of things and as needing to be extinguished. That is why fire’s opposite, water, is equally prevalent in the film and becomes the symbol of extinguishment, of the end of individual creativity. Fire and water become the organic elements that bring the city to life or to death.

While fire is presented as a positive symbol because of its destructive, obliterating power, and earth is associated with defecation, water is the element that extinguishes fire and passion. Lauzon’s portrayal of water as a Jungian archetype is important. There is the water of the concrete-encased city docks, where the family spends its Sunday picnicking and where Léolo must dive for lost fishing lures as a pathetic economic enterprise that is almost worthless. There is the water of his summertime play pool, where his grandfather tries to drown him. Then there is the water of his grandfather's bathtub, where Léolo creates his amazing rope-and-pulley contraption in order to murder his grandfather because he views him as a sexual rival. There is the water of a fantasy sequence related to a near-death experience where he dives for buried treasure as his grandfather tries to strangle him. The shallow, outdoor, plastic blow-up play pool of the real world turns into a deep, magnificent, azure-coloured tropical ocean as Léolo loses consciousness and sees a buried treasure, which represents liberation from this world. In the film, water is both physical and metaphysical, both historical and archetypal, a representation of the conscious and the subconscious.

Yet another aspect of water in the film comes from its association with the womb and the amniotic fluid that surrounds the fetus. Water represents more than just the subconscious; it is also about birthing. The film is rife with images of passage, of tunnel-like entities, of canals that lead downward, as in the final scene, in which the Tamer carries the diary down into a seemingly endless
spiral staircase to a candlelit catacomb for burial. Even the St. Lawrence River, which surrounds Montréal, can be conceived as a birth canal that carries life. But this bringing-into-the-world sense of water has to be aligned with the negative connotations of the world for Lauzon’s film. The world’s brutality, its ugliness, pain, and suffering, are qualities given to the city. So water is associated with death, whether by drowning or by an ice bath–induced coma. Since fire and water are opposites, Léolo’s fiery desires must be quenched with icy water. If his dreams were to come true and his enraptured Sicilian self were to become realized, then Montréal, imagined as a francophone city, would be destroyed.

The city of Montréal is an island surrounded by the waters of the St. Lawrence River, which was and remains its lifeline—economic, recreational, and literary. The flow of the river equates with the flow of history: it is the river that brought initial French power, lost to the English when they massed on the river to scale the heights leading to the Plains of Abraham at Québec, which in turn made Montréal an important “seaport” and, up to the mid-twentieth century, a centre of English commercial power. If one takes the fire/water binary (comparable to the earth/air binary) and parallels it with the urban/rural split in Québec identity, we have a representation of the collective subconscious on several levels. Bill Marshall, in *Quebec National Cinema*, writes that “Montreal is at the heart of the national-allegorical tension in Quebec culture.” He considers Montréal to be the definer of francophone specificity and this specificity, in the 1990s, meant “a particular space in which European nostalgia, melancholy, and alienation co-exist with a North American utopianism.” Léolo is nostalgic because it looks back. A film made in the 1990s about the early 1960s does reflect on the francophone identity in Montréal in an earlier period. A mood of melancholy and disenchantment is palpable throughout the film, and the spirit of alienation is fundamental to its narrative. There is no triumphant Quiet Revolution here. Instead, we have an idealized alien landscape of “Italy” that is the core of Léolo’s fantasy because he only “knows” when he is dreaming.

Scott MacKenzie argues that Québec had to create “new public spheres” where collective definitions could arise to replace the old identities. One of the public spaces that encourages a dialogue on identity is cinema. Bill Marshall states that Montréal symbolized Québec's progressive identity. In the new culture, the city is presented as “crucial to an understanding of the
relationship between modernity and postmodernity” and to “the construc-
tion of the ‘national-popular.’” This is precisely the message of Léolo, which
deconstructs the “national-popular” with its undermining of the sanctity of
the francophone world by having its protagonist deny his French Canadian
identity in favour of an allophone one. His rebellion against the overpowering
mother, the enslaved father, and the emotionally weak brother—all of which
can be read as Québec—is a cry for freedom from the given. The fire of cre-
avtive individuality and the burning up of the past in the flame of redefinition
is extinguished by the icy waters of the concluding institutional-therapeutic
bath, where both the fevered brow and the fevered heart are cooled down to a
state of hibernation. The boy is locked down. Lauzon presents a battle against
the givens of Québec identity—its French language, its chansonnier music, its
Catholic religious heritage—because of its failure to create real individual or
collective liberation. Only art can achieve that.

The film presents the new public sphere as an ideological battleground.
The casting of Pierre Bourgeault as the Tamer is not accidental. It represents
the quieting of a turbulent era in Québec history, along the lines expressed in
Jésus by Arcand, who sees no redemptive power in Québec’s secularity. Léolo’s
desire to become the other or the allophone represents the creation of a creole
consciousness in Québec history brought on by ethnic diversity and racial
change. Otherness and diversity are already within us, Lauzon says, so why
not go all the way and become the Other, as symbolized by Bianca and Sicily.
Jenny Burman contrasts Montréal’s “multiculturalism” with Toronto’s “dia-
sporism”; she sees Montréal as a layered demographic with a coherent sense of
common history, while Toronto’s identity has become completely hybridized.
So Lauzon presents the Other from the still-dominant francophone perspective,
where Montréal communities are culturally layered rather than integrated.

Both Arcand and Lauzon have embraced the urban imaginary as their
prime narrative vehicle and, in so doing, have filled it with amazingly inventive
content: the city of faith and the city of dreams. Both “cities” are aware of the
rural other in terms of Québec identity, but their sense of history means that
they relegate the rural to the past. Ironically, when Lauzon sought to escape
the pressures of urban life and his career in advertising, he earned the luxury
of flying his own plane to northern Québec to fish and hunt. In Jean-Claude
Lauzon: Le poète, photos of his last trip to the north show him with his fishing
and hunting buddies, looking like a Native guide.25 This flight to Québec’s primordial landscape and away from the urban world meant flying over the old peasant identity, which was irrelevant to a working-class kid from Mile End. Likewise, Arcand acknowledges the rural in *Le déclin* and *Les invasions* with his country retreat, where his cast of urbanites have no interaction with the old rural Québec and its denizens.

**DREAMING LOVE AND FAILURE**

The dream that urban life gives rise to in the film is a dream of primal love or lust. Unbeknownst to Léolo, this love is a tool for recreating the very reality that the individual seeks to escape. It is every person’s dream of family and adulthood. George Toles claims that the film’s dream is a love-dream, wherein the final silence of Léolo signifies the failure of achieving a mature love.26 The boy’s consciousness is stopped at the level of a juvenile infatuation. Lauzon configured Montréal as the site of fantasy as strongly as Arcand configured the city as the site of the sacred. That both auteur directors could represent such different Montréal is a reflection of disparate individual histories, their immersion in different classes, and the city’s own range of urban francophone identities in the artistic elite.

The visuality of *Léolo* is so Fellini-esque in its exaggeration that its urban identity takes on a phantasmagorical quality. The night street scenes and the dark interior scenes are intense and distorted. But one must compare the hallucinatory quality of the film with the equally magical escape that Lauzon himself effected from his destiny as the son of a worker who had tried to murder his own family.27 The orality of the film is expressed through the authorial voice-over of the diary and the non-Québec global music and song, which represent the otherness of Léolo’s consciousness. The theme song of the film, Tom Waits’ haunting “Cold, Cold Ground,” references the theme of death that underlies everything. The spatiality of the film, tied to the various rooms in the family apartment, reflects the film’s emphasis on the inner life of the psyche. When one combines the darkness of the interior spaces with the single narrative voice, one feels caught up in the self-identity. No wonder Lauzon was described posthumously as “un cinéaste sauvage, qui n’avait pas
Lauzon frames the city of dreams through perspectives based on gender, generation, nationality, and language. Centred on a heterosexual boy, the film creates numerous scenes of urban juvenile life associated with the male psyche, from prostitution to gangs. Its auteur is a Montréal male who is well aware of Freudian symbolism and Jungian archetypes. The main character’s denial of his francophone identity and his desire for a new identity represents a typical generational conflict. The young seek redefinition and a new identity separate from the family, whose perspective is considered irrelevant and damaging. Lauzon’s presentation of heterosexual coming of age in a blue-collar environment has been heralded by various filmmakers for its universality, as well as for its brilliance. The boy’s fantasy about a different national identity (Italian) questions Québec identity and its limitations. The English-language version released by Alliance in 1993, with its minimal use of French and subtitles, works very well because it puts us into Léolo’s interior mind, in which he denies he is a francophone. Alain Chouinard argues that Léolo’s “depiction of child sexuality and the protagonist’s hybrid cultural identity shapes a destabilized queer identity.” By this, he means that the artist-figure does not conform to typical representations of hetero-masculinity. The boy is an outsider, and Chouinard suggests that the boy’s alienation from the hetero-normative world creates a space for queerness, as do his explorations of sexuality. Self-assertion through utopian visions of another life is presented as futile in the film, but the path of self-assertion and experimentation that the film “documents” is presented as a noble quest that subverts the family’s, and so Québec’s, dominant narratives.

Montréal is framed negatively in the film as the antagonist because it represents those dominant narratives of class, religion, gender, and nationality that are embodied in the structures of the city. The city carries the burden of conformity and tradition that seeks to replicate itself with each generation. Its opponent is the next generation struggling for the new and the different, driven by fantasy, imagination, and dream. Does this mean that the city is purely destructive of aspiration? No. The city has positive elements and yields favourable outcomes. For example, resistance can only occur in the presence of a force to push against, a restrictive, superegoistic reality that generates resistance: one cannot dream without reality demanding that we not dream.
The city thus gives rise to art, and dreaming creates a diary, a record of emotion that at least one character other than Léolo—the Tamer—values. The city also provides the context for Lauzon to move issues of a certain boy’s identity in a certain place and at a certain time to a universal level. The ethnic and linguistic mix of his working-class universe is something Lauzon cannot overcome, but he can present that world as the context of a universal struggle that happens to every coming-of-age male.

The urban world of inner-city Montréal is the sum total of the main character’s real world, and its imprisoning power drives him to rebel. I do not think that Lauzon is condemning urban existence so much as he is critiquing the specificities of his monocultural family home and Québec society’s traditional ideal. We ordinarily wake up from our dreams, enter the real world, and then return in sleep to our dreams. Léolo does not wake from his dream. He is defined only by the dream in the same way that he, as a character, is defined only by the film. He does not exist outside it. It may be true that—as Lauzon’s friend Louis Grenier, who played the wild-eyed doctor in the film, commented—“the character of Léolo really existed, and it was Jean-Claude himself.” But it is also true that Lauzon’s cinematic homage to dreams transcends ordinary narrative, as well as the day-to-day realities of Montréal and Québec, and that, in its expression of the male psyche, it approaches (though does not match) the religious power of Arcand’s Jésus de Montréal. As a narrative of the self, it carries a disquieting universality.

The glue that binds the two films together is historical proximity. Both films stand on the cusp of the new age of globalization that emerged in the 1990s, both films speak of the new Québec identity as one oriented toward the rest of the world (where Daniel’s organs are sent and where Léolo projects his identity), and both films embrace their own versions of a universal message that is not ethnocentric, nationalistic, or expressive of a beleaguered minority. They are both stories for a wider audience. This orientation is carried on by Denis Villeneuve in Maelström, which appeared in the new millennium. The film, depicting the Montréal of 2000, has a female lead, an urbane sophistication, and a mythic undercurrent that embraces the global focus of Québec as the previous two films only suggest. With Maelström, Montréal remains primarily francophone, but it is wedded to an allophone reality that is important for the city’s future.