THE GENDERED CITY

Feminism in Rozema’s Desperanto (1991), Pool’s Rispondetemi (1991), and Villeneuve’s Maelström (2000)

Dominant social ideologies and established customs around gender roles create ideals and normative practices that challenge filmmakers to make critical responses. The cinematic representation of gender in the city contributes to our understanding of how diverse individuals respond to Canadian urban environments. For example, Léolo is a male coming-of-age film infused with male orality (the male narrator and the songs with male vocals), the heterosexual male gaze (the female as either maternal or sexual object), and the preoccupations of the male psyche with patriarchal power as articulated by Freud (patricide). Heterosexual masculine desire drives the main trajectory of the narrative. The stage for this portrayal is a clearly delineated working-class urban setting that is claustrophobic and oppressive. Death, either physical or psychological, is the only liberation from its grasp. Because the film is
presented in the form of an autobiographical statement (the diary), it may be read as articulating male consciousness formed by that class and urban setting. What account of their existence would Léolo’s sister or mother have written if they had kept a diary? I suspect it would have been radically different.

Arcand’s film _Jésus de Montréal_, while also telling a masculine story, works with a different focus and a different consciousness. The application of a sacred text to a particular contemporary setting means that the thrust of that text’s views on gender are the ones articulated in the film. The female players in the biblical story have significant roles, which are enhanced by the film’s supposedly heretical interpretation of Christ’s death and resurrection. The women in Léolo’s life are represented from the viewpoint and experience of a youth. Both _Jésus_ and _Léolo_ have significant roles for the feminine, but they lack subjective articulation. The construction of Montréal as either Jerusalem (Arcand) or the id (Lauzon) portrays the city as a place of patriarchal authority, driving business, and religion.

The filmic re-creation of Montréal from a female perspective leads to a different city altogether. The reading of streetscapes, domestic life, hierarchical power, sexual relations, and social possibilities is rooted in an experience different from the male one. Several factors differentiate a female auteur’s cinema from that of a male auteur. First, the female auteur’s film is more likely to feature a predominant array of female characters, including the protagonist. The story often revolves around the struggles of a woman or girl in a restrictive social, familial, or personal relationship. This generalized claim does not exclude male auteurs from creating female leads in their films, as this chapter clearly shows through a discussion of Denis Villeneuve’s _Maelström_. Nor does it preclude female directors from alternate storytelling. Female directors direct all sorts of genre films with formulaic plots and characterization, as do numerous male directors. However, when a contemporary Canadian female director has the freedom to tell an auteur story, the record shows that she gravitates to telling women’s stories that express the issues and ideologies to which she is drawn. Since the Canadian and Hollywood film industries are male dominated, there is an impetus for female auteurs to represent a feminist perspective. The auteur films of Mina Shum set in Vancouver or Léa Pool’s films set in Montréal are good examples of how diverse female grammars can be when they are combined with other cultural factors. A film like Deepa
Mehta’s *Heaven on Earth* (2008), set in Toronto and telling the story of a South Asian arranged marriage, is a statement about female solidarity in the face of tradition-based domestic abuse; it is reminiscent of Anne Wheeler’s *Loyalties* (1986), which is set in a completely different class and ethno-racial setting (northern Alberta). Both films speak to women’s issues.

A second factor differentiating between female and male auteur cinema is that the consciousness of contemporary Canadian female directors has been informed by feminism, which has been the ideological norm since the 1980s in female-directed Canadian cinema. Feminist films often highlight the achievements of a female character in the face of adversity, the overcoming of barriers, and the rejection of patriarchal norms that foster images of victimization requiring male protection. Third, female-directed Canadian films often contain a strong theme of woman-to-woman relationships, which parallels the tropes of male bonding developed in traditional road movie and war film genres. Most often, this cinematic exploration of female relationships involves mother-daughter generational issues or friendship and support among female characters threatened by patriarchal conventions and power. In a nutshell, one could say that Canadian female auteurs tend to celebrate emancipatory womanhood. Postmodern Canadian cinema is strongly associated with the attitudes of both second- and third-wave feminism and with the diverse sexual orientations of prominent Canadian female auteurs who have contributed to that cinema.¹

The above comments are not meant to contribute to a ghettoization of female auteurs around women’s issues. Gender is no different a category than the other culturally constructed forces such as class, ethnicity, generation, religion, or nationality. Just as these other identities are not meant to limit an auteur’s art, gender should be viewed as a contributing, not a determining factor in a film’s creation. In fact, there are many possible influences on any filmmaker, and discussing them is meant to enhance our understanding rather than to essentialize a filmmaker into one or two simplistic categories. When discussing the role of gender in any film, that role must be related to a multiplicity of other cultural influences that are at play. Gender, like other cultural identities, is an interpretive tool, not a prescriptive one. As part of any cultural fabric and its mosaic of different threads, a filmmaker is both formed by that fabric and formative of it because the culturally informed film is a form of feedback to a culture, even when it is confrontational and subversive.
The influence of gender in a film is equally applicable to women and to men. I consider it perfectly reasonable to expect Canadian auteur directors to tell stories out of their specific experience, using the language of their time, which, in turn, is informed by the conflicting ideologies and intellectual currents of the day, whether they be politically, socially, or aesthetically rooted. The only caveat is that of genre. In numerous cases, the demands of genre in film take precedence over auteurist storytelling. Both male and female directors work with various factors in their diverse storytelling and range of characters. However, female auteurs are a demographic minority in the film industry, and, as Canadian directors, they must face not only the daily onslaught of American cinema, with its full range of generic material from animation to thrillers and from which they may wish to distinguish themselves as artists, but also the overall male domination of the industry in Canada. In this patriarchal context, it is not surprising that they should want to orient their auteur films toward expressing female voices that offer an alternative perspective to the essentially male viewpoint embedded in most Hollywood films. However, gender is not being presented here as a simple answer to a filmmaker’s identity or as an all-encompassing determination of a film’s sources of inspiration. It is only one aspect worth exploring.

THE FEMALE AUTEUR AND THE URBAN: PATRICIA ROZEMA AND LÉA POOL

In 1991, a film titled Montréal vu par... (Montréal Sextet in the English-subtitled version) was made in honour of Montréal’s 350th anniversary. The film fit the same time frame as Jésus de Montréal and Léolo. It comprised six short fictional films about the city made by prominent Canadian directors. Of the six films, five were written or co-written by women, which in itself is a strong statement of the notable role of women in Canadian cinema and Montréal urbanity. Patricia Rozema, a non-Montréalér, and Léa Pool, a 1975 francophone immigrant to Montréal from Switzerland, were two contributors who wrote and directed their own films. Rozema, born and raised in Ontario, had already made an auspicious debut with her auteur film I’ve Heard the Mermaids Singing (1987), set in Toronto. The film features a female lead, an almost completely female cast, and a strong same-sex erotic undercurrent.
Rozema’s lead actor in her short fictional piece for Montréal vu par . . . , titled Desperanto, is Sheila McCarthy, who also plays the lead in Mermaids. In Desperanto, she appears as a similar character—an awkward, single “everywoman” in search of escape from the mundane. She is described pejoratively by an insensitive francophone male character in the film as someone looking for sex. Her problem is compounded by her lack of French. The film is Rozema’s commentary on the language divide in Canada, exemplified by the split between the character of Ann Stewart (Sheila McCarthy), who is from Toronto, and members of the francophone Montréal intelligentsia, whom she meets by accident. The film is an anglophone outsider’s view of Montréal.

Desperanto is a comedy that plays on the stereotype of Gallic culture in an English society that sees both French and Québec culture as sexually liberated, in contrast to the older stereotype of Toronto as a white Anglo-Protestant site of primness. When Ann Stewart crashes a sophisticated francophone party wearing an inappropriate white dress with red accents (white for innocence and red for passion), she tries to play up to the men at the party, but her limited French leads to a comedy of errors based on her poor language skills. Humiliated, she seeks revenge. She pretends to fall asleep and then has an out-of-body experience in which her white dress is transformed into a lavish gown and her hair is coiffured in a stylish way. She floats through the room with a wine glass in hand; as French words bubble up from the glass, she drinks up the language that has left her tongue-tied. When she returns to her body, two ambulance medics, one female and one male (the latter played by Denys Arcand), take her downstairs, where they indicate that she is fine.³ She confesses who she really is (Ms. Suburbanite Toronto) and tells them that all she wants to do on her last night in Montréal is dance. So, in a rhapsodic scene, the three of them dance on the rooftop of the building and then rise into the sky atop a line of text that reads “Teach me, oh please, teach me,” the lyrics of a French song to which they are dancing. The film ends on this note of fantasy fulfillment. It is through the act of dancing that Ann overcomes all barriers—linguistic, national, class, and gender.

This is Montréal from an outsider’s perspective, and the title of the film—Desperanto—plays on the name of the purported “universal” language of Esperanto, while also being linked playfully to the desperation of the main character. The title of the English-subtitled version, Let Sleeping Girls Lie,
suggests the danger in awakening someone too quickly or prematurely. The supposed “reality” of her awakened state at the end is simply a continuation of her dream but at another level. At this stage, she no longer imagines herself as a Cinderella-like sophisticate but as herself, joyfully fulfilling her wish to dance. She has found a bond with the other outsiders, the working-class paramedics, who don’t “belong” to the cultural elite whose party it is. Her identity is affirmed as positive and normal, and that of the Montréal intelligentsia as offensive.

Rozema plays on the stereotype of Montréal as a site of sexual games and libertine attitudes, and ensures that the female stranger, as a generic cinematic character, becomes as dominant a presence on the filmic stage as her male counterpart might be in the Western or private eye genre. Using a female Chaplinesque character, the film critiques the cultural and linguistic divide of the two solitudes with humour, entertainment, and a self-deprecating persona that appeals to both female and male viewers—especially English Canadians, who can readily identify with her awkwardness and sense of inferiority in the face of francophone snobbery. Rozema’s use of the comedic genre allows the audience to laugh at the typical English Canadian anxieties. Urban space is gendered in this film in a way that allows the everywoman to triumph over those who feel, for one reason or another, that they are superior. The scenes are all indoors except for the final dance sequence overlooking the city, which is meant to be an image of liberation from the claustrophobic consciousness of francophone interiority. Rozema, like the character she creates, is an anglophone outsider, and she raises that sense of alienation to a heart-warming comic level that plays to the audience.

The level of critique aimed at Montréal in Desperanto is raised substantially by the “insider” vision of Léa Pool in Rispondetemi (1992). Pool, a European migrant who had lived in Montréal for fifteen years (since her mid-twenties) before making this short film, speaks out of an almost feverish sense of self, which she ties inextricably to a distinct North American urbanity. Arguably Québec’s most famous female auteur filmmaker, Léa Pool, when she made this short, had already created her original trilogy of feature films—Strass Café (1980), La femme de l’hôtel (1984), and Anne Trister (1986)—that had established her as a powerful new voice in Québec cinema. Her films deal with the lives of women struggling with displacement, same-sex desires, and
urban alienation. She has gone on to make nine feature films, including several in English, the best known being *The Blue Butterfly* (2002).

The title *Rispondetemi* is another linguistic word game, like Rozema’s title. It seems to be an Italian word that echoes the imperative “Answer me,” which is directed by a male ambulance medic to a young woman who is being rushed to hospital in a dying state after a traffic accident. The title suggests another kind of “answering” in which one must answer for one’s acts. The film begins with a sense of joyful freedom as two female lovers are driving parallel to Montréal’s skyline. The city is presented at a distance, an urban outline that does not impinge on the two women. The drive ends in a single-vehicle crash with only one survivor, who is rushed to hospital bleeding and comatose. As the survivor is being attended to by two male medics, her life flashes before her. It begins as a crying baby, moves to her adoption from an orphanage and suggested sexual abuse in a nuclear family, and ends, finally, with Sapphic love.

The ambulance ride is presented negatively. The camera’s gaze is dominated by two views—first, repeated overhead shots of the woman on the stretcher, and second, repeated scenes in which the camera moves through the city streets shrouded by high-rise office buildings, with their dark, menacing, phallic shapes forming a looming, satanic forest. These two camera angles create a sense of disturbance and threat. The overhead shots show the medics opening the woman’s blouse in order to apply a medical apparatus, but the lingering shot suggests eroticism. The repeated views of the cityscape on either side of the ambulance are not seen by the accident victim, whose eyes are closed and focused on her inner images, nor do they represent the gaze of the medics because the sides of the ambulances are windowless. Rather, it is what the woman would see if the ambulance was roofless, which it is not. So the realism of the scene is discounted. Instead, we are made aware of the metaphorical statement of these buildings as representing a judgmental, patriarchal world that looks askance at her sexual orientation. This is the filmmaker’s view adopted by the camera.

In the opening shot of the film, the two lovers are joyfully driving in a convertible with its top down, suggesting freedom from an oppressive universe. The convertible’s openness is replaced by the enclosed space of the ambulance. These two conveyances represent motion under one’s own control and direction versus motion controlled by strangers. The first vehicle is symbolic of
passion and freedom, while the second symbolizes pain, suffering, and death. These are the conflicting worlds that Pool is contrasting. The attempt by the two male attendants to “save” this woman is not presented in the heroic light normally associated with discourse about paramedics. Instead, it is presented in a suspect way, although the attendants do nothing unprofessional. One can’t help but contrast these two male paramedics with the male and female paramedics of Rozema’s film, who are valorized as not only medically component and able to diagnose the protagonist’s condition but also as psychologically sensitive. In constructing the two male paramedics as dominating, patriarchal figures. Pool creates a gender tension that is absent in Rozema’s film. Pool’s medics are insensitive to the accident victim’s emotional needs, and both the medics and the city exude an overbearing patriarchy—the medics stand over her body and the buildings over the ambulance.

The heterosexual relations portrayed in Respondetemi during flashbacks are filled with conflict and trauma. But there is also a sense of impending retribution for what some would consider illicit desire. When one of the medics, who has just administered a jolt to her failing heart, calls out aggressively, “Answer me,” and then says, “It’s okay,” meaning that they will soon be at the hospital where she will be saved, we get an inkling of some sort of confessional absolution by the dominant society, of which they are official representatives. The film ends abruptly with the ambulance’s arrival at an antiquated stone structure with a sign “Urgence” (Emergency). The building looks more like a castle or a prison than a hospital; it is ominous rather than salvific.

Pool, who is of Jewish and Catholic origins, uses numerous images of large, hulking churches in dark outline in the film, as well as images of nuns. She is adept at creating moods of separation and distance in all her films: Respondetemi includes a reference to the main character being Jewish, which is associated with a vivid image of not belonging—standing in the corner of a classroom and crying. The film portrays religion as problematic and homogenizing, and equates it with patriarchal power. The dark, foreboding buildings of the city, including the towering churches, are meant to symbolize phallic power. While Rozema ends her comedic film on a high note, showing that the challenges of the city can be transcended (figuratively and literally) by sympathetic human contact, Pool’s choice of the drama genre ends in a sense of defeat, punishment, and irresolution. The film begins with joy but ends with
despair as the ambulance approaches the forbidding stone walls of the hospital. The choice of a female-male paramedic team in Rozema’s optimistic film contrasts with Pool’s all-male team in her pessimistic film. While Rozema’s anti-hero rises into the night sky, beaming as she rides off on a subtitle (like the stranger in a Western riding off alone into the sunset), Pool’s lead is brought to a dungeon-like structure in order to be saved, and she has no say in the matter. There is a hint of Inquisitorial burning-witches-at-the-stake symbolism here that includes the stripping in the ambulance and the final prison-like destination. While Rozema’s character stands triumphant and smiling in the company of new-found friends, having overcome Montréal’s barriers to communication and met her goal of dancing, Pool’s is lying down, battered, bloodied, and near death, unable to help herself. She has been beaten down. She is about to be imprisoned by the city, and her only freedom is in the dreams that recount her life up to that moment.

This divergence in approaches is striking and informative with regard to not only the conventions of different genres (the comic sketch versus the tragic drama) but, more importantly, the diversity of approaches involved in creating the gendered city. Pool is known for expressing urban space in her films as “non-spaces” through which her characters move, unable to connect because of systematic barriers to their desires.\(^6\) *Rispondetemi* is a perfect example of this construction of urban space, which is meant to symbolize negativity. The city is a place of foreboding when one loses one’s ability to act in that world. The harsh operating-room light of the ambulance penetrates and exposes, forcing the self to live in dreams rather than reality. The lack of triumph in Pool’s film comes from the perceptions of an insider using the dramatic genre to present gender issues and social realities about the dominant society’s sexual norms in a way that conveys the world as seriously problematic and difficult to overcome. Although both Rozema and Pool share a similar sexual orientation, their film treatment of Montréal is diametrically opposed. While Pool creates a lesbian character, Rozema does not.

Bill Marshall concludes that “the gendered nature of urban space goes to the heart of debates about modernity and its development into the contemporary postmodern.”\(^7\) These two short films have moved our discussion of Canadian films about Québec closer to postmodern norms emphasizing gender equality and diverse voices. Both directors give their female leads a sense of
happiness when they are in motion, whether they are dancing or driving. This suggests that only when a woman is self-directed and self-expressive is she truly fulfilled. Otherwise, she is trapped. And in both cases, it is the body that is the main vehicle of self-expression. In Rozema’s film, the protagonist is linguistically inept, and in Pool’s, the protagonist cannot speak. The world of the ambulance in Rispondetemi is one that goes in a “straight” line down the streets (emphasized by one shot that portrays the driver’s view down a very long straight street), and these straight urban canyons are framed for the audience as devoid of humanity and communication. The message from the patriarchal city, the film suggests, is that any deviation from this straight-and-narrow space is proscribed.

Likewise, the emphasis on body language in Desperanto suggests that it is a way of overcoming linguistic barriers. It becomes a form of sign language. When the three characters conclude the film in a dance with a strong diegetic vocal score, the audience feels liberated from the entrapments of language and its power to exclude. The film suggests that music and dance are the universal languages that reduce social alienation and division. In Rispondetemi, a flashback to a tender love song provides a comforting, relaxed mood and an alternative to the frantic scene in the ambulance. Both films, then, argue that music and dance liberate the body from the strictures of urbanity. The flashback song in Rispondetemi is in Italian, suggesting the importance of the allophone identity to Montréal, and is sung by the older (now dead) female lover of the francophone woman who is now comatose. Pool is suggesting that lesbian love in a hetero-normative, patriarchal society is doomed to a tragic end.

With these two short auteur films, the female gaze is presented forcefully, making the urban world a site for problematic gender relations. But in each case, the female gaze is different. While the comedic genre provides a positive narrative enclosure in Rozema’s film, Pool’s use of the dramatic genre offers the same city as a disturbing site of imprisonment for a woman. Rozema’s film also presents the city as a form of imprisonment (through language), but freedom is achieved through dance. Rozema’s choice of genre (comedy) is more important than the protagonist’s gender, while for Pool, gender, sexual orientation, and feminist ideology are paramount. The everywoman role created by Rozema is a nonthreatening one for audiences, who can revel in the comedic genre and its clever special effects, while Pool’s overt imagery associated with tragic drama is
more challenging and confrontational. *Risondetemi* relates its subject matter to the medical sciences and to architecture, while *Desperanto* is more about psychology, although it too has a medical aspect. Neither film offers a historical commentary like Arcand’s *Jésus*, nor do they have a Jungian archetypal structure like Lauzon’s *Léolo*. The differences in constructing female characters displayed by these two female directors become more complex when a male auteur creates a female protagonist in the same urban environment.

THE MALE GAZE, THE FEMALE LEAD, AND THE MALE AUTEUR: DENIS VILLENEUVE

Denis Villeneuve’s *Maelström* (2000) forges a female lead conceived by a male auteur. The film won five Genies: Best Film, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Cinematography, and Best Actress. It also won Best Canadian Film at the Montréal Film Festival and two Jutra Awards from the Québec film industry, for Best Screenplay and Best Direction. For the thirty-three-year-old auteur, this was a singular triumph, and for Québec cinema, it heralded a new generation’s engagement with urban life.

*Maelström* was Villeneuve’s second feature film. The first, *Un 32 août sur terre* (1998), has an American setting and a theme of youthful escape from urban alienation.8 The film has important parallels to *Maelström*, including a female lead, a life-changing car accident, and a female-male relationship driven by peculiar circumstances. Villeneuve has continued his orientation toward female leads with *Polytechnique* (2009), which is about the massacre of female students at the École Polytechnique in Montréal by a lone male gunman, and with *Incendies* (2010), shortlisted for Best Foreign Film at the Oscars in 2011. Although both films focus on female characters, *Polytechnique* is based on historical material, while *Incendies* is adapted from a play by another writer. For this reason, I will focus on *Maelström* as a purer expression of auteurism.

Villeneuve was born in Gentilly, Québec, near the St. Lawrence River town of Trois Rivières, in 1967. He went to Montréal to study at the Université du Québec à Montréal, beginning in science and ending with communication and film. He joined the Office national du film du Canada and also became well known for producing music videos for bands and singers. Along with his
colleague André Turpin, who was the director of photography for *Maelström*, he represents a generation born into an emancipatory, secular, and economically dynamic post–Quiet Revolution Québec. Unlike Arcand and Lauzon, both of whom experienced the dark age of the reactionary Duplessis era, which stretched from the 1930s through the 1950s, Villeneuve was a product of a new and seemingly different society. Yet his encounter with Montréal was similar to that of another internal immigrant, Arcand: both had a small-town upbringing on the St. Lawrence, followed by a Montréal education and a stint at the ONF. The key difference between the two men is the new, secular, and francophone-dominated Montréal that was the womb of Villeneuve’s generation.

A journalist who interviewed Villeneuve in 2000 described him as “a boyish, thirtysomething father of three.” He and his family were living outside Montréal at the time. Although Villeneuve expresses a generational viewpoint about Montréal that can be distinguished from that of Arcand and Lauzon because his generation didn’t experience the earlier cleric-driven, francophone Montréal, his film is linked closely to the imagery and psychoanalytical and mythological content of *Léolo*. An important connection between Lauzon’s film and Villeneuve’s is the Jungian archetype of water. “Water is about the relationship with the subconscious and fiction,” Villeneuve is quoted as saying, “and the relationship with the beginning of life.” And symbolic water abounds in his film, as it does in Lauzon’s. Like Lauzon, Villeneuve also uses the gravelly voice of the American singer Tom Waits in his film. The distinguishing characteristic of Villeneuve’s filmic Montréal is having a female heroine, which links him to Pool and Rozema. But the youthful female characters in both *Un 32 août sur terre* and *Maelström* are alienated and filled with discontent. They are both searching for fulfillment beyond the professional rewards they have in the city. In *Un 32 août sur terre*, the heroine decides—after a traumatic car accident, which she survives—to do something more meaningful: she wants to conceive a child, but it doesn’t work out. In *Maelström*, the car accident results in a painful attempt to escape guilt brought on by the protagonist’s sense of responsibility for the accident.

One critic considers Villeneuve’s work to be a pure expression of “psychospiritual urban estrangement.” The Canadian film scholar Brenda Longfellow situates cinematic alienation in a re-imagining of Canadian cities “in relation to global flows of capital and architectural traditions. In each, the city has been
transformed by the power of global corporate culture into a dystopian, soulless site of claustrophobic anonymity and redundant functionalism: chrome, steel and glass, food courts and malls.12 But how does the alienation rooted in the economies and built-environments of contemporary cities compare to the alienation expressed by Rozema and Pool in their short films about Montréal a decade earlier? Maelström’s opening scene is that of a sterile, technologically induced abortion that has emotional consequences for the woman who has just undergone the procedure—the central character, Bibiane (Bibi) Champagne (Marie-Josée Croze). Bibi is a successful businesswoman in her mid-twenties. In dealing with the emotional fallout from this act, Bibi hits and kills a man while driving in a distracted, inebriated state. The accident only adds to her sense of confusion and guilt.

New York Times critic Stephen Holden makes the alienation specific when he describes Maelström as “a meditation on the disconnection between the glossy surfaces of high-end urban existence and the life-and-death realities they camouflage.”13 This suggests a parallel between scenes involving architecture in Pool’s Rispondetemi and scenes in Maelström, where corporate architectural anonymity seems to scream “masculine culture.” The film’s association of birth, amniotic fluid, water, life, and the organic reality of human existence is heightened by the curious device of a talking fish, who has the task of being the narrator and the representative of all storytellers. The fish raises Villeneuve’s film to a mythic level, but not quite to the same exalted level as the sacred storytelling of Jésus de Montréal. The audience is asked to accept this implausible talking fish as a necessary, philosophical part of the film. The fish, the fishmonger (the man struck by Bibi’s car), a woman in the fashion industry, and an underwater diver, who is the son of the fishmonger, are linked in the story. Otherness is represented by the Norwegian ethnicity of the fishmonger and his son. The fact that both Lauzon’s Léolo and Villeneuve’s Maelström use the white ethnic as the symbol of Otherness rather than immigrants from countries like Haiti, which by 2000 were prominent in Montréal, indicates a Eurocentric mentality that reflects Villeneuve’s own origins outside the metropolitan centre. It was not until his 2010 film, Incendies, that he engaged with the Other outside a Eurocentric world view (in that film, Middle Eastern).
Additional commonalities to those mentioned above link *Léolo* and *Maelström*. For example, the scene of Bibi’s sublimated suicide (she unsuccessfully tries to push the car off the dock to be rid of it, like Lady MacBeth’s “damned spot,” and then drives it off the dock with herself in it) occurs at the Montréal docks. As she sinks into the realm of a watery unconscious, we are reminded of the Montréal dock scenes in *Léolo*. Likewise, the use of dark lighting and *noire* characteristics are prominent in the cinematography of both films. By adopting the symbol of water, both filmmakers explore subterranean consciousness, with strong Jungian archetype overtones. The son of the fishmonger strengthens the water associations through his name, Evian, and his profession as an underwater diver.

The final scene of the film, when the two lovers from two different cultures are alone on a ship’s deck at sea, serves as a signifier of openness to the world, as well as a sense of freedom from the claustrophobic city with its entrapments and threatening presences. Brenda Longfellow suggests that, in *Maelström*, Villeneuve ultimately resorts to a “romantic fantasy of non-coded, non-territorialized spaces of nature.” She considers the film’s final shot to be an expression of “the romantic sublime and archaic pre-modern that can only be ironic given the absolute irrelevance of both to everyday life in a post-modern Québec.” This is one possible reading of the basic tension in the film, but it may also be the case that Villeneuve is expressing the conflicted nature of the garrison mentality, in which the natural world is both an alternative to urban anonymity and a reflection of it. While Longfellow contends that the film is “a graphic embodiment of the specularity of late capitalism,” I will focus on the kind of female character created by Villeneuve in contrast to those of Rozema and Pool.14

Villeneuve’s desire to explore the emotional trauma of having an abortion is to be applauded, but his reading of the trauma comes from someone who can never experience it other than as an observer. In watching Bibi’s reaction to the events of her life, I do not have the sense that I am positioned in a female gaze informed by contemporary feminism. Unlike Rozema and Pool, who speak out of a certain level of personal understanding of the female experience, Villeneuve gives us a protagonist who is in a state of high emotion, so much so that male intervention is required to rescue her from her anxiety. The bluish lighting in her bedroom, the sterile and bleak colours used in certain
scenes, and the emptiness of her personal space, the apartment, suggest that this female is awash in a mood of despair and, by extension, that she easily succumbs to emotion and lacks self-control. In contrast to Bibi, the male lead, Evian, generally controls his emotional responses, even though it is his father who has been killed. Little fazes him, while everything distresses Bibi. This is quite different from the portrayal of women found in the work of Canadian female auteurs. The implied vulnerability, emotionality, and dependence on male strength in Villeneuve’s film is anathema to feminism. Yet these characteristics are at the core of his portrayal.

When the actor Marie-Josée Croze was first offered the part of Bibi, she turned it down because she didn’t like the character that she was being asked to play. Villeneuve admitted that he himself had problems with the character he was creating (he said that he had based her on women he knew), but by the time he had finished the production of the film, he felt that he had made the character likeable enough to the audience. The cultural topographies that Villeneuve chose to present as male and female characteristics suggest a certain cinematic stereotyping that reflects the male gaze rather than the gaze of a self-assured female author. The challenge facing a male auteur wanting to represent the female gaze should not be underestimated. When he was interviewed about his previous film, Villeneuve claimed, “I can’t make an image if it was not profoundly important to me.” This would suggest that he has integrated his own subjective sensibility (heterosexual, patriarchal masculinity) into the objective character of a fictional woman.

Maelström strikes me as an expression of a male consciousness that considers itself sympathetic to and comprehending of gender issues. However, with regard to female characters, the gaze of a heterosexual male auteur inevitably lacks the experiential interiority that Pool and Rozema both draw on and express in their female characters. Insofar as it transcends conventions of genre, the female imagining of a female protagonist entails a form of self-expression. That cannot be said for the male authorship of female characters. For the male auteur working within a fundamentally patriarchal society, the mores, attitudes, prescriptions, and descriptions associated with prevailing cultural standards concerning gender are not as easily deconstructed as they are by auteur women filmmakers, for whom the experience of the impact of dominant ideologies is personal and real.
MASCULINITY, FEMININITY, AND THE ARCHETYPE OF WATER

The predominant image and metaphor in *Maelström* is water. The film begins with the watery wake in the opening credits, where the dark blue of the oceanic water mixes with the white splashes of a boat’s wake. The same image reappears at the end of the film. In between these opening and closing scenes, water maintains an inordinately symbolic presence, including in several shower scenes and a car wash scene, and in the midnight-black water in the Port of Montréal, which melds into the dark waters of a hydroelectric dam. The beginning postcredit scene depicts a young woman having an abortion, with a visual emphasis on the suction of bloody fluid from her uterus. This image can be considered gender specific by its very nature and establishes the female protagonist as the core of the story. The story itself is told by a talking fish, whom Villeneuve considers to be a figure representing storytellers from the beginning of time. This piscine narrator has a husky male voice and is situated in what seems to be an overturned wooden ship’s hull, where a man in medieval dress prepares to behead the fish. Since the fish presents the story as a riff on a Norse saga, one can read the fish as representing the auteur figure, just as the diary in *Léolo* represents Lauzon.

“The sea and the water element were growing stronger and stronger in the writing of *Maelström,*” Villeneuve said in an interview, later adding, “Water is about the relationship with the subconscious and fiction and the relationship with the beginning of life. It’s the roots of the world.” Villeneuve seems to be contrasting water as a symbol of organic nature with the waterless or lifeless city, which is portrayed as being composed of concrete buildings, concrete underground parking garages, concrete streets and sidewalks, and a concrete dock in the city’s port. The city in its concrete manifestation is immovable, hard, impermeable to water, and unbending to the human touch. It is the opposite of water with its fluidity, its softness and motion, and, as the film shows, its cleansing power. The city’s water comes out of hard places like pipes, spouts, and faucets, and the city, when it comes up against water (St. Lawrence River), meets it with concrete (the dock from which Bibi launches herself and the car in a failed attempt at suicide). The contrast is stark and is set up as a commentary on the urban world as a place that does not bend to human needs. Its rigid surfaces repel rather than embrace.
It is out of water—the same watery world in which Bibi almost drowns—that the male saviour, Evian, emerges. He works as a diver (a human amphibian) and comes to Montréal to collect the ashes of his deceased father, the same man she hit with her car. They meet and he falls in love with her without knowing about her role in his father's death. She is tormented by this love because of her guilt over having “killed” his father. She confesses, he forgives her, and they are healed by a trip to Norway, the home of the deceased, where they scatter his father’s ashes over the ocean while standing on the deck of a Norwegian ferry. The scene fades to water and the ship’s wake, and the movie ends with the beheading of the talking fish, killed before being able to offer the audience a moral for the story. The nature-urban split that Villeneuve wishes to evoke is emphasized in a telling episode: the young man tries to flush his father’s ashes down the toilet, saying that it doesn’t matter what happens after death, but he can’t do it and is reduced to tears (again, water).

Villeneuve’s only concession to female culture in the city is Bibi’s female friend who tries to console her after the abortion. The friend hugs her, invites her to her home, feeds her, and offers a place where she is not alone. This empathy and womanly solidarity stands in contrast to the cold-hearted business world of her brother and the professional relations with him that she must endure; his rationalized requirements for order and success are impossible for her to fulfill because of her emotional distress. But the support she gets from her friend is also painted in a rather rational way. She simply advises and expresses her opinions without really connecting with Bibi. In the end, the only healing that Villeneuve offers his character comes from a meaningful heterosexual love affair. This smacks of a Hollywood solution.

The Montréal experienced by this francophone female is a rather desperate and profoundly unhappy place that requires escape. In this case, the urbanite must stand on the deck of a steel ship, which is as rigid as the city, to return human remains (the body) to its natural state. But at least on the ocean, the human body is surrounded by life-giving water, while in the city, it is surrounded by concrete and inhumanity. The moral of the story might be that the circle of life is complete when life stops being about commerce or fame or materialism and becomes ecological—earth returning to earth or ashes to ashes, or in this case, the fishmonger’s human remains become fish food in exchange for all the fish that he has killed and consumed. Another “circle of
“life” moral is expressed by the unity of male and female humanity against the cruel urban world, a kind of Adam and Eve story. At the end of the film, the couple returns to the ocean, a natural Garden of Eden. And before this, Bibi saves Evian, her lover, from a fiery death in a plane crash by chasing after him and convincing him to stay with her rather than fly back to work. He calls her his angel when he opens the newspaper and sees what might have happened to him. Obviously, being away from water (in the air) results in danger. Evian is clearly a man of the sea, like his father, and a man from the depths. In a Jungian sense, he represents the *anima* of the subconscious, which Jung associated with the female gender and water.

Villeneuve originally claimed that he was creating a “dark comedy,” but the film certainly lacks the genre’s general characteristics. The comic element with its satirical or sardonic tone and laughter-inducing incidents is completely missing in the final product. The generic confusion that underlies the film may have contributed to its gender portrayal. It lacks the social gravitas and mythological stature of *Jésus de Montréal* and the sombre, introspective confessional exposé quality that characterizes *Léolo*; Villeneuve tried to suggest both, but rather unsuccessfully. First, he created a pagan Nordic myth structure for the film, but the talking fish and the Scandinavian and Viking allusions seem mock-heroic compared to Arcand’s Catholic religio-mythic sensibility. Second, he brought out the dark night of the human soul that is at the core of Lauzon’s film, but Lauzon portrayed this in a much more tragic way. While Arcand’s or Lauzon’s characters seem to “own” the city through their freedom of movement and their decisiveness, Villeneuve’s protagonist does not. Pool and Rozema, too, in their short films, provide more engaging and thought-provoking portrayals of Montréal using more complex metaphorical structures than does Villeneuve, who seems to read the city as nothing more than the “abstract spaces” highlighted by Henri Lefebvre.

Villeneuve could argue that the estrangement he imposes on the city is a purposeful reflection of Bibi’s depressed mental state. Through his character’s eyes, everything in Montréal is bleak and hopeless. To portray it otherwise would be to misrepresent the character. This means that an urban centre is, more than anything, simply a mirror of our psychological state and that it lacks autonomous existence or influence. We project onto the city rather than the city projecting onto us. What does influence human beings is water.
Gender and the Male Auteur

Of the three key elements of urban cinema—spatiality, visuality, and orality—the most important in Villeneuve’s film is visuality, the language of the camera as it expresses space and our attachment to the various scenes. While the film’s framing of urban space through sparse interiors or crowded sidewalks implies psychological and sociological detachment, even alienation, the camera’s eye offers a dystopian interpretation of urbanity because of its use of light and darkness and muted colour. The camera presents the urban world of the protagonist in a way that expresses her detachment, despair, and revulsion. Whether she is filmed from above, lying twisted in torment on a bed, or at shoulder height, Bibi is always anguished in her body language or facial expression. When comparing the visuality of Villeneuve’s film with that of Arcand’s or Lauzon’s, one finds its tonality flat and close to monochromatic, a mirror of Bibi’s mental state.

Maelström is closer in its visuality to Pool’s Rispondetemi because of its strong contrast between the dark, outdoor twilight urban scenes and the glaring, operating-room light inside the ambulance. In terms of spatiality, both films express enclosure, although Pool’s is more claustrophobic. Her claustrophobia, though, is externally induced, while Villeneuve’s expresses an internal psychological state. His sense of being hemmed in is expressed through emptiness rather than through the equipment-packed interior of the ambulance or the menacing buildings leaning onto the viewer. What seems to link Pool and Villeneuve is the dramatic genre, which is what separates Pool’s film from Rozema’s Desperanto. Visually, Rozema retains a much richer palette of colour, to convey positive comedic meaning, than do Villeneuve and Pool. In fact, the richest sense of colour in Maelström occurs in the fish scenes, which are beautifully lit in a way that is reminiscent of the medieval, candlelit scenes in Léolo. This richness symbolizes the eternality of the storyteller, who stands outside the story.

The complexity of rendering gender roles cinematically becomes evident when a film portrays unconventional sexual identities that redefine gender-based identities beyond a simple male/female heterosexual binary. While Léa Pool’s short does bring a gay theme into the urban sphere, the film’s very brevity mitigates against a full treatment of the subject, which Pool has
The association of the urban milieu with a diversity of lifestyles and communities, and the emergence of a strong egalitarian ethic in regard to sexuality allows the representation of gay identities on the screen. The editors of *New Queer Images: Representations of Homosexualities in Contemporary Francophone Visual Cultures* recognize this new cultural reality; in their introduction, they write, “The greater visibility and attention paid to queer communities and cultures throughout the world is striking.” The next chapter explores this sexual orientation as an aspect of gender and the construction of male gay characters in two important and critically acclaimed Canadian feature films: Atom Egoyan’s *Exotica* (1994) and Robert Lepage’s *Le Confessionnal* (1996). The gay characters whose stories are told in these two films have their sexual orientation situated in urban settings, yet the cultural framing emanating from disparate urban venues (Toronto and Québec City) suggests that sexual orientation is influenced by nationality, language, class, generation, ethnicity, and cultural history. It is the depth and richness of these multiple elements interacting with each other that generate the varied responses of the films’ audiences.