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Coming of Age in Quebec: Reviving the Nation's "Cinéma orphelin"

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Abstract

The current essay offers a critical reflection on the contemporary resurgence of Quebec's "*cinéma orphelin*," or orphan cinema, through an analysis of the films *C'est pas moi, je le jure!* (Philippe Falardeau, 2008) and *Maman est chez le coiffeur* (Léa Pool, 2008). Given that films such as these are typically read allegorically as indicative of a particular national imaginary, I argue that these two films from 2008 reflect broader shifts within the cultural memory of Quebec. Their specific interventions reveal a will to move away from earlier articulations of its history as both exceptional and characterized by a history of trauma and rupture.

In 2008, Quebecois cinema garnered media attention for what critics described as its retrospective gaze: of the province's four films listed in *Canada's Top Ten* for that year, all were set in the past, from the 1950s onward [1]. Two of these, *C'est pas moi, je le jure!* (Philippe Falardeau, 2008) and *Maman est chez le coiffeur* (Léa Pool, 2008), were particularly similar to one another, and not only for their shared mid-1960s setting: based on the writing of siblings Bruno and Isabelle Hébert, respectively, and featuring children caught in the middle of their parents' separations, both films effectively contribute to a contemporary reimagining and reinterpretation of Quebec's *cinéma orphelin*, or "orphan cinema." Given the well-documented ties between this influential genre of Quebec cinema and the national imaginary, I argue that these particular films reflect ongoing shifts and ambivalences in the state of contemporary cultural memory, which in turn echo longstanding debates within Quebec historiography. Specifically, these films speak to a broader discursive move away from "the traditional view of Quebec as lagging behind economically and socially, and of the French Canadians as backward or out of step in their mentality and aspirations" (Létourneau, p. 30), and instead reflect a shift towards what Ronald Rudin (1997) has criticized as the model of the new historical "revisionism" that began to take hold during the 1960s (p. 172) [2]. This revisionism, which seeks to locate Quebecois history within the larger context of North American and Western historical and societal shifts, has arguably been gaining traction in Quebec's historical imaginary for decades. Yet, Claude Couture maintains that a "large gap [still exists] between the collective and historical imaginary construct that Quebeckers adhere to today and the work of this new historiography" (p. 32)

[3]. These films speak to an ongoing reconciliation between this model and the popular imaginary; by working within and yet subtly altering the orphan film genre, they demonstrate that a recognition of Quebec's *américanité* does not necessarily preclude a simultaneous acknowledgement of its distinctiveness.

***Cinéma orphelin* and Cultural Memory in Quebec**

In the context of Quebecois film culture, the term *cinéma orphelin*, or “orphan cinema,” connotes both the perennial popularity of the orphan figure in many of its best loved and most critically acclaimed films – for example, *La petite Aurore l'enfant martyre* (Jean-Yves Bigras, 1952), *Mon oncle Antoine* (Claude Jutra, 1971), *Les bons débarras* (Francis Mankiewicz, 1980), and *Léolo* (Jean-Claude Lauzon, 1992) – as well as the national cinema's own complicated lineage of American and European influences. First applied to Quebecois film in the context of Christiane Tremblay-Davault's 1981 book by the same name, *cinéma orphelin* has since been employed more commonly as a way to describe the persistence of the figure of the rootless foundling in many of Quebec's most well-known films. This articulation of orphan cinema, often understood within the broader tradition of the “*roman familial*” or family melodrama with which Quebec cinema has been entangled since its inception, is characterized by the high frequency of both adult and child protagonists who are either orphans or near-orphans [4]. The central drama of orphan cinema is usually intergenerational conflict and absence, as well as a concomitant quest for one's origins. The orphan protagonists of such films usually represent what Bill Marshall describes as “perverse” children (p. 116) whose fascination with issues such as morbidity and sexuality sets them apart from the happy, ‘normal’ children more commonly associated with coming-of-age stories in other national cinemas.

Many Quebecois cinema scholars see an unresolved tension and ambiguity in Quebec's own colonial history (e.g., Marshall, Weinmann) playing out within the domestic setting of orphan cinema. The parent/child relationship becomes the stage upon which questions of collective memory and national identity are posed (Poirier, “Le cinéma québécois et la question identitaire”, p. 13), what Nadeau describes as the “dramatique familo-nationaliste” (2008, p. 1). From the psychoanalytic perspective, Weinmann argues that the ubiquity of these troubled parent/child relations in Quebec film signals the legacy of Quebec's unfinished business with its own colonizing ‘parents’: France, England, the Catholic Church, and the Federation of Canada, successively (p. 19). As a result of these ties, which Weinmann argues have never been properly severed due to the deferment of sovereignty, Quebec instead transfers its psycho-affective links from one ‘parent’ to the next in a type of unfulfilled Oedipal relationship; the resulting collective imagination is then actualized by its national cinema in the form of the “*roman familial*” [5].

The first movie to underline the importance of the orphan in the family melodrama is *La petite Aurore l'enfant martyre*, which, in spite (or perhaps because) of its disturbing and unsavoury subject matter, is one of the most commercially successful films in the nation's cinematic history. André Loiselle recounts how, in the years since its release, “*Aurore* has often been interpreted as a most

striking metaphor of French–Canadians during *la Grande noirceur* [...] Abandoned by the *mère patrie* (France) and controlled by an evil tyrant (Britain) and a complicit patriarch (Duplessis)” (2007, p. 22). The earlier examples of orphan cinema listed above have all been variously subjected to similar allegorical readings: *Mon oncle Antoine* has been described as a representation of Duplessis-era French Canada (e.g., Leach, p. 22; Marshall, p. 142); *Les bons débarras* has been read as a condemnation of the colonized Quebecois mentality that voted non to the first referendum on Quebec sovereignty (Cuierrier, p. 29; Marshall, p. 109–111); and *Léolo* has alternately been viewed as a critique of a lazy and self-interested post-referendum Quebec (Garrity, p. 56) and a refutation of a *pure laine* society closed off to its ethnic Other (Gittings, p. 126). In short, all of these films, or at least the discourses surrounding them, have attempted to negotiate the painful processes of decolonization and societal change through the dynamic of the intergenerational relationship. Within the ‘nation’ of the family, uncertainties regarding the fate of cultural memory and futurity can be articulated through the complex and often fractious relationship between the past (as represented by parents) and the present (as represented by the child) as she or he moves into the future.

This tendency to liken a uniquely Quebecois subjectivity to that of the orphan or child is echoed within Quebec historiography; as Schwartzwald describes, “the writers of decolonization resigned themselves to being *orphans*, but *anxious* orphans whose commitment to national liberation could not inscribe itself within a patrimony of successful struggle” (p. 188). Similarly, Jocelyn Létourneau criticizes the “moral propensity of the (francophone) Quebec intellectual” to “support his country as one does a child” (p. 45), a metaphor that he argues generates a condescending understanding of a stalled Quebec subjectivity as “incomplete... slow to grow up and refus[ing] responsibilities” (p. 124). Within film studies, the link between Quebecois subjectivity and childhood is often made explicit as well: in an interview from 1971, Claude Jutra suggested “*une psychanalyse collective des Canadiens français en retournant à son enfance. Un peuple, tout comme un individu, découvre les chocs et les bouleversements qui ont façonné son caractère; il arrive à se comprendre lui-même et à résoudre ses contradictions*” (quoted in Patry, p. 21). In a statement that further clarifies the rhetorical stability of the orphan as metonymous with Quebec subjectivity, filmmaker Bernard Émond describes the Quebecois as “*doublement orphelins, coupés à la fois de ce qui a fait notre identité et de ce qui permettrait son dépassement*” (Loiselle et Racine, 2003, p. 8). In this understanding, the subjectivity of the orphan is conflated with that of the victim of history, resulting in the fear that the youth of today will suffer from a pathological cultural amnesia, cut off from any meaningful “*repères*” (*id.*). This fear is heightened, Poirier argues, in a national cinema such as Quebec’s where “*un manque de (re)pères,*” (2007, p. 201) illustrates a lack of formative models for becoming. Privileged within these articulations is the understanding of the child as necessarily lacking in agency, a victim of terrible circumstances, such as the depiction of the children in *La petite Aurore* or *Mon oncle Antoine*; or conversely, in what is sometimes seen as a reaction formation to these earlier examples, a child so pathologically “perverse” that their fate is equally dreadful, such as the protagonists of *Les bons*

débarras and *Léolo*, a binarism that I argue here is troubled by these more recent interventions [6].

Falardeau and Pool's films from 2008 are certainly not the first in the past decade to delve into the province's past, whether through their content or setting. André Loiselle (2007, p. 133) and Marcel Jean (p. 111–112), among others, have remarked that the 1990s and 2000s saw a proliferation of retrospective biopics, such as Charles Binamé's *The Rocket* (2005), as well as nostalgic remakes of old classics, such as the same director's *Séraphin, un homme et son péché* (2002) and Luc Dionne's *Aurore* (2005). However, unlike the almost mythic rural and traditional Quebec evoked in these earlier films, *Maman est chez le coiffeur* and *C'est pas moi, je le jure!* portray the province as contiguous with the modern day even while being explicitly set in its past. Both films take place in unnamed rural suburbs outside of Montreal during the 1960s; as such, the countryside is rendered more obliquely than in the earlier films, which tended to cast the rural landscape as either a site of malevolence and isolation, as in *La petite Aurore*, or conversely as the timeless Arcadia to which the city-dweller returns in an attempt to find happiness, as in Gilles Groulx's seminal film, *Le chat dans le sac* (1964). This latter interpretation is the one that Loiselle argues has almost become a cliché in Quebec cinema, or at least in English Canada's interpretation of it, with critics eager to find evidence of Quebec as a timeless folk-society that "assimilates the landscape and embodies values antithetical to the ideology of greed that competing cultures promote" ("Reading 7", 2006p. 108). In *Maman est chez le coiffeur* and *C'est pas moi, je le jure!*, the quasi-country setting is figured (at least for the children in the films) as neither completely stifling nor idyllic; it no longer signifies only tradition and the past, but the modernizing thrust of urban development.

Maman est chez le coiffeur and *C'est pas moi, je le jure!* are more likely to be compared with Jean-Marc Vallée's *C.R.A.Z.Y.* (2005), which is likewise set primarily in 1960s Quebec, though within Montreal specifically. Aside from this geographic distinction, the 2008 films might also be distinguished from their popular predecessor by the latter's more sweeping and epic diegesis: *C.R.A.Z.Y.* spans roughly thirty years of protagonist Zac's life and foregrounds the more typical familial dynamic of doting mother and difficult father, while both movies from 2008 take place during one decisive summer in the sixties, and are focused on the disappearance of the protagonists' mothers. Unlike the film from 2005, *Maman est chez le coiffeur* and *C'est pas moi, je le jure!* are not recounted by an adult narrator in the present day; while Falardeau's film does make use of an *acousmètre*, it is the boy-voice of its protagonist speaking from the not-so-distant future of the film's conclusion.

Pool and Falardeau's films follow the remarkably similar stories of their respective protagonists, preteen Élise Gauvin (played by Marianne Fortier) in *Maman est chez le coiffeur* and ten-year-old Léon Doré (played by Antoine L'Écuyer) in *C'est pas moi, je le jure!*, during a summer spent in the wake of the sudden collapse of their parents' marriages and their mothers' subsequent departures. Perhaps more striking than their similar plots, funding structures, and release dates [7], Falardeau and Pool's films share a closer link: novelist Bruno Hébert, upon whose loose autobiography *C'est pas moi, je le*

jure! is based, and Isabelle Hébert, *Maman est chez le coiffeur*'s screenwriter, are themselves brother and sister. Their father was the late writer, activist, and Liberal senator Jacques Hébert, and as such, both films recount the (thinly-veiled and variously modified) history of a well-known political family from the province's past.

Like their *cinéma orphelin* forbears, these films from 2008 foreground the typical themes of intergenerational strife and absence and identify primarily with the subjectivity of their characteristically "perverse" child-protagonists. Though the sexuality of the children is mostly quite chaste, with only a few kisses and bawdy jokes to speak of, they are nonetheless represented as prone to self-harm, depression, and even suicidal tendencies in the case of Léon (*C'est pas moi, je le jure!*) and Élise's youngest brother Benoît (*Maman est chez le coiffeur*). Both films deal with the decidedly 'adult' content of divorce, women's increasing independence during the 1960s, and in the case of Pool's film, homosexuality. Though they are films about children, like earlier orphan cinema, they are definitely not films for children.

While there are important differences between Pool and Falardeau's films, especially in terms of the gendered dimensions of the children's reactions to their mothers' absences [8], the interventions that they make into the genre of orphan cinema are quite similar. Given the familial relationship of the films' writers, it is easy to dismiss these similarities as inevitable: they are bound to share many details as both films recount altered versions of the summer the Héberts' own parents separated. However, the texts upon which the productions are based are not nearly as similar as the finished films: both screenplays represent major departures from their source material, with the resulting films being more similar to each other than their original texts would suggest. Pool, for example, relocates the narrative of *Maman est chez le coiffeur* from its original setting in the 1970s to the 1960s [9]. In both films these changes have the principle effect of making the mother's absence more traumatic and consequential than it was in the Héberts' original texts. In Pool's film, this meant removing the governess character from Hébert's original treatment (Perron, p. 9), who might have mitigated the trauma of the mother's departure while also alleviating Élise's feelings of responsibility for her younger siblings; in Falardeau's film, the director changed the original makeup of the family from Bruno Hébert's novel, wherein Léon was one of five children, to Léon being the youngest of only two brothers, effectively turning the Dorés into "*une famille de gars; ce qui fait que c'est encore plus triste quand la mère s'en va*" (Ruer, "Entrevue avec Philippe Falardeau", p. 4). While these alterations are in some way explained by the need to create heightened drama, they also underscore the need for the films to be analyzed within the broader parameters of Quebec's orphan cinema. Through their inclusion within this canon, we can likewise discern particular interventions and re-workings that both *Maman est chez le coiffeur* and *C'est pas moi, je le jure!* introduce to the genre. These subtle changes reflect larger tensions in the national imaginary, caught between historical representations of Quebec's past as either completely singular and exceptional, and revisionist accounts of its utter 'normalcy.' Furthermore, they speak to the contemporary ambivalence around the project of national

memory in general by calling the driving force of the genre — its quest for resolution and *re(pères)* — into question.

Though both films are set during that mythic period of Quebec's Quiet Revolution, they avoid repeating the now-clichéd representations of Expo-era Montreal as a rapidly modernizing metropolis emerging out of the Dark Days of Duplessis. Rather than positing it as an isolated era of transition and rupture, *Maman est chez le coiffeur* and *C'est pas moi, je le jure!* develop nuanced articulations of their period's ongoing relationship to its past. This is analogous to similar shifts in the new historiography, which seeks to contextualize these years in terms of changes that were already underway in the preceding years, as well as through similar movements that were taking place across the rest of North America and the Western world (e.g. civil rights, decolonization, and gay rights) [11]. Though it is true that the children's parents are separating and the children are experiencing rupture within the domestic setting, the circumstances leading to the dissolution of these marriages is shown to precede the beginnings of both films, with the mother's departure representing only the final in a series of painful concessions. The effects of these subtle changes are heightened by the seemingly arbitrary choice that both directors made to set their respective films in the summertime, as well as their coinciding depictions of the Dorés and the Gauvins as members of that eras' burgeoning professional or middle-class. These minor alterations are surprisingly efficient in conveying major changes in a cinema long marked by its winter settings and depictions of Quebec subjects as working-class.

Becoming Bourgeois: Affluence and Authenticity

Quebec's minority status, isolation, and relative dearth of economic and political capital have arguably furnished nationalists with much ammunition (Dickinson and Young, p. 284). As such, it is not surprising that Quebec's national cinema has long been preoccupied with working-class depictions of French-Canadian subjectivity. This is partly a reflection of the very real material inequities that have for so long characterized anglophone and francophone relations both within the province and in the rest of the country, as well as of the systemic and institutionalized oppression that has kept French-Canadians from reaching the same economic and political heights as their anglophone contemporaries. In Quebec cinema, however, this association between the working-class and Quebecois perspectives has grown from a general concern with verisimilitude to a type of shorthand wherein "[w]orking-class disempowerment and alienation can be made to stand in for a general national oppression" (Marshall, p. 108).

In "*Look like a Worker and Act like a Worker*," Loiselle proposes that "working-class characters in a number of Quebec feature films function . . . as stereotypes" (2006, p. 207), in that they work to reduce a reality that is otherwise too complex to be fully understood. He articulates an ambiguity in Quebec filmmakers' approach to the working class in that, while,

[o]n the one hand, workers are seen as being more genuine and honest than members of the upper

classes [...] they are [simultaneously] shown as lacking social awareness, as displaying bad taste, and as being often politically ineffectual and at times profoundly conservative (p. 210).

Loiselle proposes that this is partly explained by the fact that most of these Quebec directors have come from “the dominant classes” (*id.*), and that they are often fascinated by the working class to an extent that borders on fetishistic. Loiselle credits Falardeau's first feature-film, *La moitié gauche du frigo* (Philippe Falardeau, 2000) [11], with bringing these “exploitative good intentions” (p. 212) to light, intentions similar to those that characterized Jutra's interest in Clément Perron's childhood memories of growing up in a poor mining-town, which eventually became *Mon oncle Antoine*.

Unlike the earlier examples of orphan cinema mentioned above, which all located French-Canadian and Quebecois subjectivity within a particular working-class, proletariat sensibility (thus linking the liberation of the nation to class struggle), the Gauvins of *Maman est chez le coiffeur*, and the Dorés of *C'est pas moi, je le jure!* are both shown to be fairly affluent, professional families: in *Maman est chez le coiffeur*, Simone Gauvin (played by Céline Bonnier) works as a journalist for a broadcaster similar to Radio-Canada, while her husband (played by French actor Laurent Lucas [12]) is a doctor; in *C'est pas moi, je le jure!*, Madeleine Doré (played by Suzanne Clément) is an aspiring painter who feels stifled and unfulfilled in her role as a “glorified waitress” to her human rights activist/lawyer husband Philippe Doré (played by Daniel Brière).

Depictions of a francophone middle-class or bourgeoisie as morally bankrupt, narcissistic and lacking in authenticity, which reached their apotheosis during the post-referendum cinema most often associated with Denys Arcand's filmography from the 1980s to the present day, reinforced stereotypes around the “authenticity” of the working-class subjectivity and further associated material comfort with national indifference (to borrow from the title of Arcand's 1982 documentary, *Le confort et l'indifférence*). In important ways then, the families depicted in *C'est pas moi, je le jure!* and *Maman est chez le coiffeur* conform to a post-referendum vision of the middle-class, professional francophone couple that is insufficient in the ways that ‘count’: they cannot make their marriages work, they put their careers ahead of their families, and they do not always selflessly put their children first. However, both the Gauvins and the Dorés are rendered more sympathetically than the stock representations of earlier films. Their woes neither stem from, nor are they negated by, their material comfort, but rather from a variety of other, more complex dynamics, such as repressed sexual desires or the stifling constraints of gendered roles in families. Simply by focusing on the children of such families, instead of using them as foils for a more stereotypical depiction of working-class children, such as the protagonists of *Mon oncle Antoine*, *Les bons débarras*, and *Léolo*, the films mark a slight but decisive shift away from thinking the nation in the agonistic terms of the haves versus the have-nots.

The Thaw: Orphan Cinema's Shifting Seasons

In a similarly modest but consequential change, *C'est pas moi, je le jure!* and *Maman est chez le*

coiffeur are both set almost exclusively during the summertime. This small seasonal detail is actually incredibly telling in a cinema that has long privileged the “backdrop of the characteristically ‘national’ landscape of winter and its attendant rituals and practices” (Marshallp, 68). Winter is something that evokes Quebec’s exceptionalism, if not in Canada then at least in relation to France and other members of the Francophonie. Snow has often played a central role in films from the birth of Quebec’s national cinema onwards. Without it, *Les raquetteurs* (Michel Brault, 1958) would not have stumbled their way into the cinematic canon; *Mon oncle Antoine*’s Benoît would have nothing to hurl at the town’s wealthy anglophone mine-owner; and the snow-plow-operating, eponymous hero of *La vie heureuse de Léopold Z.* (Gilles Carle, 1965) would not be able to afford a new fur coat for his wife (not to mention the incredible importance of ice and images of people skating and playing hockey). Snow instantly connotes the resilience and toughness needed to survive and thrive in such an inhospitable climate for centuries; as such, it serves as an embodiment of the *survivant* culture that for so long characterized the French-Canadian collectivity, as well as its isolation. Blankets of snow also fulfill a democratizing function; as Marshall observes, it “is not only iconic of the national climate, it manages to elide many differences between urban and rural” (p. 22–23). By obscuring important material differences between classes and blurring the distinction between the city and the country, snow, and by extension winter, is the great equalizer. In *Mon oncle Antoine*, winter, and the long Christmas Eve on which the narrative unfolds, is also said to evoke the deep freeze and dark days of Duplessis, the season then synonymous with *la Grande noirceur*. By this seasonal logic, it would follow that the Quiet Revolution be depicted as the “springtime” of Quebec, as one of Létourneau’s survey participants described the period (p. 23); instead, in *C’est pas moi, je le jure!* and *Maman est chez le coiffeur*, that era is aligned with the listless, oppressive *canicule* of summer.

That these two films are both set so firmly in the dog days of summer is indicative of an important shift in the popular imagination and a move away from thinking of Quebec in solely exceptionalist terms. Winter is nowhere to be found in these films. There are no shovels, sleds, snowshoes, sugar shacks, and most spectacularly, no reference at all to hockey. While there are a few extraneous references to local art and politics [13], there is little in the plot of either film (other than the obvious linguistic dimension) to suggest to the uninitiated that these stories take place in Quebec. The lush landscapes they depict could ostensibly be anywhere in North America. The Americanization of the setting and landscape indicates the waning necessity of depicting Quebec’s national aspirations against the Other that is the rest of the continent. This is reinforced by the muted *québécoisité* of the films; unlike their progenitors, they never explicitly locate their stories, and specifically cultural or Quebecois references are buffered by references to American and European material and popular culture. While this change might be understood to mirror concurrent shifts in Quebec historiography in terms of emphasizing its inherent *américanité*, both films also foreground a particular ambiguity, both thematically and aesthetically [14], as to whether this characteristic is to be embraced.

Generational Ressentiment

Though these films represent a movement away from stock characterizations of the Quiet Revolution, this is not to say that the perspective they offer on the era is somehow devoid of emotion. However, more than the nostalgia one might expect from the Bildungsroman, the tone that both films evoke is one of resentment, which is in turn represented through the tacit characterization of the parents as inherently selfish. This generational antipathy is well-illuminated by the following statement made by Bruno Hébert surrounding the *C'est pas moi, je le jure!*'s release:

Mes parents viennent d'une génération où, quand ils sont sortis de l'université, ils étaient quatre finissants [...] La libération de la femme, le moi d'abord, le gros ego, les choix de carrière, les bonnes à la maison : dans mon milieu, on ne s'occupait pas de l'enfant, on l'abandonnait [...] Alors, pour toutes ces raisons, je pense que l'on doit faire encore plus de films sur l'enfance, sur ces années-là, pour faire débloquer une génération (Ruer, "Entrevue avec Bruno Hébert", p. 9).

Hébert's comments attest to a discernible hostility felt by his generation toward that of their parents, those older intellectuals born in the 1920s and 1930s who are most commonly associated with the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s and its ideals.

Like Hébert's parents, those of *Maman est chez le coiffeur* and *C'est pas moi, je le jure!* represent the newly emerging professional class in Quiet Revolution-era Quebec: they are successful and ambitious, they want to travel and 'find themselves,' they have respect and sympathy for the global struggles of women's rights, national liberation, decolonization, and civil rights, but they nevertheless stand accused of fundamentally abandoning their children. The mothers' quests for self-fulfillment (at the cost of self-imposed exile and the effective neglect of their children), and the fathers' blind self-interest (whether through their commitment to 'saving the world' as in Falardeau's film, or through a quest for sexual fulfillment through the father's homosexuality in *Maman est chez le coiffeur*) make them vulnerable to the resentment of their children, who, if we are to take Hébert as a spokesperson, feel let down, abandoned, and entitled, as it were, to reparation through repetition and representation on screen. Given the cultural context of these films, there is also a certain condemnation of those older intellectuals associated with the Quiet Revolution; what these films offer, in effect, is not nostalgia for those days at all, but rather a distinctly bitter regret.

It is not inconceivable that this regret is deepened and legitimated by the ostensible futility of what many take to be that era's prime objective of political independence. As Lauren Berlant observes with regard to films dealing with traumatic events in American history,

[in] this mode of national narrative, stories of mass trauma [...] are encoded in plots of familial inheritance, wherein citizens of the posttraumatic present are figured in a daughter's or a son's coming to public terms with a generational past that defines her/him and yet does not feel fully personal (p. 32).

The promise of a pre-referendum Quebec similarly "pulsat[es] like an exposed wound long after [it

has] officially ended" (*ibid*). In *Maman est chez le coiffeur* and *C'est pas moi, je le jure!*, this wound is articulated and negotiated through the mothers' violent and emotional departures, figured simultaneously as understandable escape and reprehensible abnegation.

Maternal Ambivalence

While both parents are tacitly condemned for abandoning their children, either physically or psychologically, it is nonetheless the mother's departure that is foregrounded in both narratives. The importance of this cannot be overstated in a cinema that has for so long been distinguished as much by the constant presence of mothers as by its absent or inept fathers. Here again, the case of *La petite Aurore* is telling: not only is Aurore's biological father portrayed as ineffectual and complacent in the film, but her priest is held up as equally useless. As such, the film was considered a damning portrayal of Catholicism and the insular community it reproduces through its reigning "*pères en jupe*/fathers in skirts" (Marshall, p. 105). These "false fathers" (*id.*), along with the absent or complicit biological father, are always considered in relation to the long-suffering, constant mother. Poirier suggests that it is this surfeit of maternal presence that accounts for paternal absence and a lack of *re(pères)*: effectively, the huge space occupied by the matriarchs in these families does not leave sufficient room for the father-child relationship to form (*Le cinéma québécois*, p. 272).

Though it is the defining drama of both films, the filmmakers each go to great lengths to make the mothers of both films sympathetic, which leads to a great deal of ambivalence in their portrayals [15]. Léon's unwavering devotion to Madeleine Doré affirms her qualifications as a "good mother," even though her absence throughout the film often makes this position untenable for the audience. While her character is presented only cursorily, contemporary audiences are solicited, "across the caesura of the Quiet Revolution and its aftermath" (Marshall, p. 142), to feel sympathy for the feelings of isolation and repression engendered by her homogenous community, terrible marriage, and the general lack of choices available to women at this time. Those familiar with Quebec films from the era in which Falardeau's film is set could likewise make the intertextual connection between Madeleine Doré and Monique Mercure in Fernand Dansereau's *Ça n'est pas le temps des romans* (1967), a film set in a similar time and place.

In the case of *Maman est chez le coiffeur*, Simone Gauvin is characterized initially as a 'supermom,' a working woman somehow still able to bake her three children their favourite cake to celebrate their last day of school, and who is much more in tune with their needs than her frequently absent and adulterous husband. At the same time, she is portrayed as somewhat hypocritical, evocative of Bruno Hébert's critique of his parents' "me-first" generation: though she condemns the Church (she tells Élise that it is what "kept them in the dark for so long"), she nonetheless wants to send her daughter to a Catholic Boarding school to be taught by nuns who, admittedly, "smell like cat piss." Though she works as a reporter for a major news outlet, she remains (willfully) ignorant of her husband's infidelity until her daughter forces her to acknowledge it. Pool even suggests that the mother likely suspects her husband's affair and might have been amenable to ignoring it, were it not

for the aberrant nature of his homosexuality (Perron, p. 10).

In describing why she chose to make the mother's actual departure so sudden and almost violent in the film, Pool similarly tells her interviewer, "[a]utre^{ment}, elle ne pourrait pas partir. En fait, elle est une sans-cœur d'une certaine façon. C'est tout de même extrêmement violent de partir. Moi, je serais incapable d'abandonner un enfant" (*id.*). Despite her strong feelings about the mother's choice to leave, Pool describes the desire and necessity to make her a strong and sympathetic character [16]. This is exactly the choice that some critics have found to be the script's main inconsistency: Why would this wonderful, caring mother (and an independent woman of means, unlike Madeleine Doré) not just pack up the kids and take them with her to London? Or kick her cheating husband out of the house, even if it was the 1960s? The lack of preamble or any allusion to previous unhappiness on the part of Simone Gauvin makes her sudden departure even more implausible than that of Léon's mother (despite the former having a 'better reason,' namely, her husband's homosexuality and infidelity); unlike the Gauvins, the Doré family is never initially portrayed as "happy."

Through their reversal of the myth of the absent father, these films represent a radical break with the nostalgic interpretation of the mother figure as infallible and omnipotent. Furthermore, it is not a simple role reversal that sees the father as the site of comfort and security in the mother's absence, but rather a more porous and diffused understanding of their roles. The 'all-powerful mother,' long the mainstay of Quebec's family melodrama, is revealed to be a fiction: in both films, her departure is precipitated by the father's behaviour or neglect. By sending the mother away, these films expose the fallacy that a closer relationship between father and child (now made possible by the mother's absence) was ever the cause of any existential national angst, and implicitly show how laughable the idea of a matriarchal pre-Quiet Revolution Quebec always was [17]. If anything, the paternal relationships in both films suffer as a direct result of the mother's absence, as the children in both films blame their fathers for her sudden departure. The fathers are shown to struggle significantly in their roles as newly single parents: in *Maman est chez le coiffeur*, Docteur Gauvin resorts to wanting to institutionalize his youngest child, while in *C'est pas moi, je le jure!*, Monsieur Doré is easily duped by Léon, whose lies are rewarded with a brand-new bicycle. The wound of the mother's absence does not heal within the narrative of either film; at the end of both films, the children are shown to be resolutely waiting to be reunited with her, though the audience is left unsure whether this will happen anytime soon.

The "Anti-Aurorification" of Orphan Cinema

In adapting Hébert's novel, Falardeau stated that he wanted to create, in the character of Léon, a type of "anti-Aurore" (Ruer, "Entrevue avec Philippe Falardeau", p. 3). In other words, he wanted to avoid characterizing his protagonist in the manner of the child-as-victim made famous by that earlier film: "*J'ai horreur des films qui mettent en scène des enfants qui sont uniquement des victimes innocentes [...] Tout à fait. Il sait où il s'en va et il dirige lui-même sa propre destinée*" (Defoy, p. 18). Falardeau makes this assertion in several interviews, especially in relation to his decision to change Hébert's

ending where Léon wakes up in a mental hospital: "*Même s'il a clairement des tendances à l'autodestruction, Léon n'est jamais une victime*" (Castiell, p. 38). Most likely, this change was also motivated by a desire to avoid comparisons between his film and *Léolo*, which ends with its title character institutionalized with the rest of his family (with the notable exception of his stoic mother) [18].

Pool's characterization of Élise [19] shows a similar will to displace the myth of the child-as-victim: despite her misery over her mother's departure, Élise goes on to enjoy a summer of unprecedented freedom and experimentation, at the end of which she seems to have matured significantly. Similarly, by removing the governess from Hébert's screenplay, Pool ascribes greater agency to the children themselves. Élise is rendered as self-sufficient, and the audience sees her step into the role of 'woman of the house,' taking care of her younger brother, and to some extent, their overwhelmed father.

If Manon (of *Les bons débarras*) can be conceived of as "*la revanche d'Aurore*" (Weinmann, p. 91), what might the anti-Aurores of these two contemporary films indicate? Initially, one might see within this strategy a desire to move away from the "narrative of lack" and the vision of Quebec as an innocent victim of its own history, as described by Létourneau (p. 41). However, it is not as simple as this; just because Léon is never diagnosed with a mental problem, it does not necessarily mean that he is not a victim of circumstances beyond his control. In fact, Falardeau describes how, "*[à] partir du départ soudain de sa mère, Léon vit une véritable tragédie. Les conséquences sont terribles pour lui*" (Castiel, p. 39), a description that would tend towards a characterization of Léon as a victim of his family's dysfunction. In a move that is similarly inconclusive, and despite her desire to foreground the solidarity of the children, Pool nonetheless forces them, and the audience, to bear witness to what she characterizes as the unthinkable and violent nature of the mother's departure.

While both films withhold a clear 'happy ending' or tidy resolution, the overarching tone of both conclusions is affirmative; unlike the majority of orphan cinema, including the earlier examples also discussed in this essay, the possibility of a more desirable outcome is not foreclosed in these films, whether by hospitalization, death, or crime. In *Maman est chez le coiffeur*, Élise and Benoît, having fled their father and his plan to separate them, crouch in the cornfield, hatching an unlikely scheme to get to London and find their mother. Meanwhile, their middle brother Coco makes a victory lap in his newly finished go-kart, while Patrick Watson's song "The Great Escape" swells with a somewhat discordant optimism. In the final scene of *C'est pas moi, je le jure!*, after a botched suicide-by-bowling attempt, Léon lies smiling in the fallen leaves, announcing his intentions to wait for his mother's return, no matter how long it takes. When he opens his hand and reveals an egg and his plans to "take care of Madame Brisebois" in the meantime, referring to an earlier scene where he eggs his neighbour's house, the audience is reassured that his indestructibility and "perversity" is intact. In the final in a long list of serendipitous coincidences between the two films, Falardeau also uses music by Patrick Watson to conclude his film, an Anglophone-Quebecker whose work, Falardeau (2011)

maintains, has been largely overlooked by francophone Quebec despite its international success.

Whereas in the earlier examples of orphan cinema in Quebec, intergenerational conflict and absence spelt disaster in terms of the lack of a model for becoming, both *Maman est chez le coiffeur* and *C'est pas moi, je le jure!* break with the idea of even using parents as reference points for the future at all. Calling this founding intergenerational principle into question amounts to a radical shift in and questioning of the value of the transmission of memory and traditions. Instead of offering only nostalgic images of the past, these films speak to a contemporary ambivalence about the veneration of generational *repères* as a scaffolding for the future, recalling Jean Larose's notion (as articulated by Schwartzwald) that "[b]eing an orphan is not only all right [...] it's the precondition for situating oneself" (p. 191). In this way, while not breaking radically with the form and conventions of the family romance and orphan cinema, the films signal a decisive move away from thinking of the nation in terms of "terminal lineages" (p. 188). Though the changes these films make are relatively slight, they cannot be easily dismissed: in a cinema and a history as preoccupied with questions of tradition and continuity as Quebec's, the most significant shifts are those involving cultural memory.

NOTES

[1] Established in 2001 by the Toronto International Film Festival Group, "Canada's Top Ten is a unique annual event . . . to honour excellence in contemporary Canadian cinema" ("Canada's Top Ten"). The four Quebec feature films in question from 2008's list are *Ce qu'il faut pour vivre* (set in the 1950s), *La Mémoire des anges* (a collage of NFB footage chronicling Montreal's evolution over the 20th century), *C'est pas moi, je le jure!*, and *Maman est chez le coiffeur* (both set in the 1960s).

[2] Rudin describes this "drive for normalcy" (1992, p. 31) as tainted by a presentism that seeks to downplay the role of Quebec's Catholic and rural past in favour of a modernizing and technocratic progress narrative. In contrast, historians such as Couture hold that far from revisionist, most of the "new" historiography cited by Rudin has "simply reproduced to the letter the dominant propositions about French Canada from history and social science" (p. 36). He argues that the reason new historical models have not been accepted by the general public is manifold: one hand, it would amount to "calling into question the universality of Anglo-American model ... [while on the other, the] deconstruction of the myth of the 'dark ages' is unacceptable to the sovereigntists as well" (p. 49-50).

[3] This is partially evidenced by an informal survey conducted by Létourneau, wherein a collection of quotes from undergraduate history students demonstrates the current prevalence of the teleological model of Quebec history as a series of struggles, and the ideology of *survivance*. Within this understanding, the Quiet Revolution is predominantly interpreted as the "springtime" (p. 23) or re-founding of Quebec, "a great collective move forward" (p. 21).

[4] By 'near-orphan,' I am referring to a broader understanding of the term within the literature on Quebec cinema that defines an orphan as anyone who is cut off physically, mentally, or emotionally

from either parent, or whose fraught relationship with them is foregrounded in the narrative of the film, such as in the ur-example of orphan cinema, *La petite Aurore l'enfant martyre*. The orphans are also not exclusively children; the prime example of the adult orphan is Gratien Gélinas' eponymous character in *Tit-Coq* (Gratien Gélinas, 1953).

[5] As Marshall explains “[The] Freudian model of the family romance [explains] the way in which the child develops from an exaltation of his or her parents to discovery of their imperfections, thus impelling the fantasy of in fact having a different, nobler birth... However, that fantasy of nobler birth takes first the asexual form of being a foundling, and then the sexual form of being a bastard, in which the ‘real’ father is a usurper. So the family romance partakes of the child’s entry in the Oedipal scenario” (p. 104).

[6] While Manon of *Les bons débarras* and eponymous Léolo signal a definitive move away from earlier characterizations of children as purely innocent victims of the adult world, they are nonetheless figured as somewhat tragic or masochistic figures: fatherless Manon, who suffers from an obsessive and jealous love for her mother, murders her mentally handicapped uncle Ti-Guy, the character some have suggested (Cuierrier, p. 28) is actually meant to represent her biological father, making her the product of an incestuous union between Michele and Ti-Guy. Despite her mastery of language and manipulation tactics, she remains trapped in her misery at the film’s end. Léolo, though he dreams of escape and adventure from the humiliations of his family life, ends up confined with them in a mental institute (though there is some hope for escape—attested to by the adult voiceover of the first person narrator).

[7] Both films received funding from the major federal and provincial institutions (Telefilm and the *Société de développement des entreprises culturelles* [SODEC], respectively). As well, they both qualified for Telefilm’s most valuable funding program, the Canada Feature Film Fund (CFFF). According to a *Journal de Québec* article from 2007, when the films were still in production, Pool’s film received \$4.3 million and Falardeau’s received \$4.7 million for their budgets (“Financement de deux films similaires”). The mild controversy of Telefilm funding such similar films was compounded by the inclusion of a third remarkably comparable film that year, Francis Leclerc’s *Un été sans point ni coup sûr*, which is also a coming-of-age story set in a summer of the sixties, that also deals extensively with the tension between the young protagonist’s parents and a persistent fear of the mother leaving the home and the family.

[8] As the only daughter of three children, Élise briefly becomes the de facto caretaker of her entire family after her mother leaves, even though as a preteen going through adolescence, she arguably misses her in a more urgent way than anybody else. In contrast, Léon’s feelings for his mother border on the Oedipal; as the baby of the family, their relationship is portrayed as one of infinite understanding, in sharp contrast to his relationship with his father. While Léon’s story is that of an almost existential quest for his mother and larger meaning, Élise is more pragmatically concerned with the future of her family: as Bonnie Friedman aptly describes, “[t]he boy’s coming-of-age story is

about leaving home to save the world. The girl's coming of age story is about relinquishing the world beyond home" (p. 9).

[9] In the original application to Telefilm, Pool's film was called *Pieds nus* and was set in the seventies, not the sixties (Telefilm "Fonds du long métrage du Canada").

[10] In light of the father's sexuality and consequential separation of the parents in the film, it is also worth noting that the story takes place two years before Quebec's sodomy laws were repealed by Pierre Trudeau's federal government in 1968, effectively decriminalizing homosexuality (Marshall 120-121); that same year also saw long-awaited changes to the Canada's divorce laws, with the federal Divorce Act of 1968, and the subsequent decriminalization of divorce in Quebec in 1969.

[11] In Falardeau's first feature film, the relationship between the working-class 'subject' and the middle-class or bourgeois 'observer' is made explicit in its self-conscious portrayal of the leftist filmmaker, Stéphane, making a documentary about his unemployed roommate, Christophe.

[12] The father's Frenchness, which was an addition to the screenplay made by Pool, has caused some curiosity among Quebecois critics; Perron speculates that the fact that it accentuates the children's distance from their father, a theory that Swiss-born Pool, herself the product of a bi-national family, does not subscribe to, locating the interpretation as the result of a particularly Quebecois subjectivity (Perron, p. 11).

[13] In *Maman est chez le coiffeur*, Élise watches Quebec *chansonnier* Claude Léveillée on television, while in *C'est pas moi, je le jure!*, the mother destroys her husband's prized Marc-Aurèle Fortin painting. In another scene from this film, M. Doré absently remarks over breakfast with his disinterested sons, that René Lévesque has created the Parti Québécois.

[14] The cinematography of both films is quite different, though both negotiate the liminal space so emblematic of contemporary Quebec cinema, between the high-budget production values demanded by audiences, and the *cinéma direct*-style long associated with some of its most important films. The results are mixed: Pool's film, which utilizes film processes from the 1960s and a saturated colour palette, as well as beautiful scenery and interiors, has been criticized by critics (Kelly "The kids are doing fine, but where's Maman?") for using the beauty of the film to compensate for certain plot inconsistencies and flawed character development, as well as for "playing the nostalgia card" (Falardeau, 2009). Falardeau, who began in film by making documentaries, has a relatively stripped down approach to his film's aesthetics, though he likewise punctuates his scenes with reverential, wide shots of the mother's imagined home in the Greek isles, as well as long, panning shots of Léon riding his bicycle through the tall cornfields.

[15] This ambivalence extends to the casting of two well-known and popular Quebecoise actresses, Suzanne Clément and Céline Bonnier, in what amounts ultimately to small and largely unflattering roles.

[16] In the same interview, she says, "*Parce qu'on voulait que la mère soit sympathique, on ne voulait*

pas que ce soit un monstre qui abandonne ses enfants, on voulait que le spectateur puisse s'attacher à elle comme les enfants y sont attachés" (Perron, p. 10).

[17] This persistent fear, which Nadeau describes as the "Plouffe Family syndrome," (p. 6) is based on a nostalgic and macho exaggeration of the role and control that women had during la Grande noirceur, which she argues is a convenient myth which elides the sexism and masculinism which persisted throughout the Quiet Revolution to the contemporary sovereignty movement.

[18] Hébert's original novel bears many striking similarities to Lauzon's film, including a scene wherein Léon almost drowns in a kiddie pool, which Falardeau changed to the opening scene him almost hanging himself, in a deliberate attempt to avoid making *C'est pas moi* too similar to *Léolo* (Ruer, "Entrevue avec Bruno Hébert", p. 8).

[19] Marianne Fortier, the young actress who plays Élise in *Maman est chez le coiffeur*, also played the title role in the 2005 remake *Aurore*, directed by Luc Dionne. As such, and because it was her first role, she has become associated with that mythic character.

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