Title
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Publication Date
2014

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Reimagining the Family

in French and Quebecois Cinema

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements of the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in French and Francophone Studies

by

Hannah Christine Vaughan

2014

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Reimagining the Family in French and Quebecois Cinema

By

Hannah Christine Vaughan

Doctor of Philosophy in French and Francophone Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Patrick Coleman, Chair

In my dissertation, I investigate representations of the family as an institution undergoing reconstruction, re-imagination, and renovation in contemporary French and Quebecois cinemas. My project provides an historical overview of the abundant sociological changes beginning in both Quebec and France from the 1960s to the present, which reinforces the subsequent discussion of contemporary cinematic explorations of family organization. I argue that the changes borne out of the 1960s oblige filmmakers to rethink the style and techniques through which they represent members of these societies on screen. The selected filmmakers in my project experiment with alternative cinematic forms to explore new, and at times controversial, concepts of the family. Given my emphasis on films that underscore social behaviors among family members and the dynamics of contemporary coupling, the theoretical framework of my dissertation is based on French and Quebecois sociological paradigms, and in broader terms,

gender studies, queer theory, and film theory. My work is driven by the conviction that transformations of the social construct of the family are crucial to our current understanding of creative cultural production. In my dissertation, I pose the following questions: To what degree do selected filmmakers explore narrative structure in order to portray changes to the way that family is defined, and how do they experiment with the medium of film to convey such definitions? How do structural changes in social composition modify family narratives? How does individual "fantasy" play out on screen within families with shifting gender roles?

My preliminary findings support my hypothesis that both French and Quebecois filmmakers are rethinking cinematic technique in order to convey new and controversial family dynamics. Selected filmmakers are increasingly taking advantage of this ambiguity to explore the shifting boundaries between the intimate and social spaces of the family in new aesthetic ways. My work will have impact on both film and cultural studies within the academic domain of French and Francophone Studies, particularly in terms of exploring how the medium of film has the capacity to inspire cultural awareness and social change through both narrative and technical creativity.

The dissertation of Hannah Christine Vaughan is approved.

Allyson Field

Andrea Loselle

Patrick Coleman, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2014

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my family, Linda Vaughan, Tim Vaughan, and Phoebe Vaughan, to my friend and colleague Alisa Belanger, and to my dissertation committee members, Patrick Coleman, Allyson Field, Andrea Loselle, and Dominic Thomas. I am immensely grateful for all of your unyielding support throughout the dissertation process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Fragmented Fantasies

VITA

Education

Seattle University   Bachelor of Arts, 2007

Publications

Filming Fracture in Xavier Dolan's "J'ai tué ma mère." Québec Studies Journal, 2014

Conference Participation

Colloquium Participant: "Xavier Dolan: Rethinking Family and Sexuality in Quebec's "New" New Wave Cinema." Sarasota, Florida, November 2012.

Paper presenter: "Xavier Dolan: Rethinking Family and Sexuality in Quebec's "New" New Wave Cinema." 110th PAMLA Annual Conference. Seattle, Washington, October 2012.

Paper presenter: "Young Quebec Filmmaker Breaks from Tradition in *Les amours imaginaires*." 21st ACSUS Biennial Conference, "Ottawa, a Capital City." Ottawa, Ontario, November 2011.

Paper presenter: "Re-gendered Dreams: Fantasy and Family Relations in Quebec Cinema." 17th ACQS Biennial Conference, *"The French North American Experience: Tributaries and Confluences*." Burlington, Vermont, November 2010.

Paper presenter: "Remembering Tomorrow: Tradition and Modernity Reconciled in Jean-Marc Vallée's *C.R.A.Z.Y.*" 20th ACSUS Biennial Conference, *"North by Northwest, South by Southwest: Canada and the United States, Past, Present and Future."* San Diego, California, October 2009.

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INTRODUCTION

The family is no stranger to the cinema. For filmmakers, the family provides a wealth of narrative and thematic possibilities such as marriage and parenting, divorce and reconciliation, sibling rivalry, illness, death, or mourning. The noticeable penchant for films about the family, as well as the narrative and formal inventiveness in the contemporary cinemas of France and Quebec is the focus of my dissertation. In each society, filmmakers are taking new risks with style, content, and form in order to rethink, reinvent, and reimagine the concept of the family. Identifying Quebec and France as two sites where the connection between family and the cinema is culturally significant, my goal is to show how representations of the family in both cinemas have taken new form in the twenty-first century. More precisely, I am interested in filmmakers who offer original—and sometimes provocative—insight into family dynamics, and who also deviate from structural and formal convention. In the chapters that follow, I consider the following questions: How do structural changes in social composition modify family narratives? How does individual "fantasy" play out on screen within families with shifting gender roles? To what degree do filmmakers explore similar or different narrative structures in their efforts to portray changes to the way that family is defined?

My project provides a brief historical overview of family organization in Quebec and France from the 1960s to the present which will buttress the subsequent discussion of the family in contemporary films. My topics will include cinematic representations of mothers, fathers and children, questions of the "dysfunctional" family, redefining gender roles, sexual coming of age, and the increasing visibility of the *famille recomposée*. I argue that contemporary filmmakers are

rethinking standard plot structures and experimenting with alternative cinematic forms to explore new, and often controversial, concepts of the family.

Since the 1960s, France and Quebec have both undergone immense social change. In a short period of time, French marriage and fertility rates declined as divorce rates increased, all of which gave rise to the *famille recomposée* and to PACs (*Pacte civil de solidarité*), or legal civil unions, as well as the emergence of new conceptions of the family unit. In Quebec, the family institution experienced a particularly rapid evolution during the same time, beginning with the broader social and political changes brought about by the Quiet Revolution and the women's rights movement. Whereas traditional rural life along with the Catholic Church had long demanded the production of large families, the Quebec population demanded political changes that inevitably propelled the region toward increased urbanization and secularization, and away from traditional gender roles. Inevitably, this cultural revolution on both sides of the Atlantic affected the very root of society: the family.

In the last several decades, the family has emerged as a salient research topic in Quebec and France in both the arts and sciences. In Quebec, however, interest in the family is more predominant given the relatively rapid sociological developments following the Quiet Revolution. Increased secularization, along with declining marriage and fertility rates, was particularly instrumental in shaping new configurations of the family unit. Accordingly, scholars have shown an increasing interest in related social phenomena in Quebec—such as the "crisis" in masculinity (especially in terms of the role of the father), new conceptions of motherhood, and recent challenges to parent-child relationships in a rapidly modernizing society—investigating how these transformations come to surface in artistic mediums such as cinema, literature, or

music. While some researchers focus primarily on close readings of films to analyze patterns of character development, plot structure, etc., others explore national allegory and the social commentaries it implies.

In the recent scholarship on the family in Quebec, where concepts of fatherhood and manhood are being reconstructed, one of the foremost topics tends to be "rethinking masculinity." Literary and film scholar Lori Saint-Martin argues that Quebec cinema has witnessed a surge of films based on the theme of fatherhood since the year 2000, many of which go far beyond their predecessors in exposing increasingly complicated father-child dynamics, while at the same time suggesting the possibility for reconciliation and renewal.[1] Moreover, she notes that many of these films (*De père en flic*, *Les invasions barbares*, *C.R.A.Z.Y.*) concentrate solely on father-son dynamics and thus overlook the role of the mother or daughter, whereas contemporary Quebec literature has seen a revival in feminist themes, with many works centering on mothers and mother-child relationships. Saint-Martin's studies consistently address historical conditions that link cinematic/literary representations of gender roles in families to the specific Quebec situation—particularly men's difficulty in finding their place in an anglo-dominated world and perceiving new "threats" to their masculinity as women gained more control in and outside of the home.[2]

Film scholar Bill Marshall suggests in *Quebec National Cinema* that although Quebec's status as a "nation" or "nation-state" is highly controversial, Quebec can indeed be conceived as a nation; he therefore explores how both the imagined and real "community of the nation" is

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[1] Lori Saint Martin. "Figures du père dans le cinéma québécois contemporain," in *Tangence*. Marie-Hélène Larochelle, Ed. (Sainte-Foy: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2009, No. 91), 95.
[2] Ibid. "The Other Family Romance: Daughters and Fathers in Quebec Women's Fiction of the Nineties," in *Doing Gender: Franco-Canadian Women Writers of the 1990s*. (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001), 96.

constructed in its cinema.[3] His interests cover the entire spectrum of Quebec history and culture, but much of his work involves the reconstitution of gender, identity, sexuality, and family in the realm of the cinema. Like Saint-Martin, he recognizes the predominance of father-son relationships in recent films, suggesting that there is often an allegorical correlation between characters, plot, and the Quebec situation. However, he does not adopt a narrowly nationalistic point of view in configuring contemporary questions of family in film, and instead detects two basic strands of Quebec cinema: one that creates "a national position read in unified, masculine, heterosexual, and Oedipal terms; and one that is more heterogeneous, challenging that dominant masculine position, qualifying it by seeking to articulate with it other key terms such as class or jettisoning unity and the national-Oedipal scenario altogether."[4] He argues that privileging the reading of Quebec films as allegories of national identity at the expense of other possibilities tends to ignore plot and character development for its own value independently of the Quebec situation. However, in regards to the so-called "crisis" in masculinity, Marshall (like others in the field) finds its cause in Quebec men's supposed failure "to attain phallo-national maturity" in the face of English domination.[5]

Most scholars agree that from the onset Quebec film has revolved around the relationship between the State, the individual, and the collectivity. Like Marshall, film critic Scott Mackenzie recognizes the prevalence of national allegory in Quebec cinema, particularly in terms of reconstructing masculinity, noting that although its Catholic past and colonial history inspire most contemporary films, it is also mediated by its own cinematic voice in the present.[6] He

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[3] Bill Marshall. *Quebec National Cinema*. (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2001), X.
[4] Ibid., 109.
[5] Ibid., 106.
[6] Scott Mackenzie. *Screening Quebec: Québécois moving images, national identity, and the public sphere*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 140.

argues that addressing the question of identity in Quebec film is inevitable, and that national cinema is "a site of contestation over narrative," or that it is the repatriation of the classical Hollywood film narrative and a mediation of the relationship between cinema, memory, and identity.[7] Together, these critics agree that Quebec film is traditionally a hybrid of documentary and fiction that rejects the star system and the conventions of strictly linear film.

This is not to say that cinematic representations of fathers and children are not complemented by mother-child storylines in Quebec film as well, some of which generate levels of thematic intensity that reach extremes as sinister as maternal violence. Literary scholar Paula Gilbert has written extensively on the subject of family in Quebec, particularly in the area of women, mothers, and children. The works examined in my project portray a vast array of mother figures, but several stray from the classic image of the nurturing and altruistic mother. One explanation that Gilbert suggests is that as families adapted to changing gender roles, economic climates, and social phenomena, mothers began to resent the image of the omnipotent patriarch that was their father, husband, or even son.[8] Abuse inflicted upon these women or their loved ones resulted in their own fantasies of violence against men, which in some cases ended in acting out on their violent imaginations. Overall, contemporary films demonstrate that mothers have taken on new roles in cinema and literature of Quebec, particularly in terms of asserting their own independence, defying patriarchal power structures, playing the role of the tolerant parental figure who contrasts with the obstinate father, and even opting out of motherhood altogether.

Although inconsistencies in family structure have become a major theme in contemporary French film and literature, positing the family as an object of research within these

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[7] Ibid., 141.
[8] Paula Gilbert. *Violence and the Female Imagination*: *Quebec women writers reframe gender.* (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2006), 125.

realms in much less common than in Quebec. However, Fiona Handyside argues that the family

is often at the center of French cinematic narratives, and rather than focusing on the marriage

plot, the emphasis is on a kind of Freudian "family romance".[9] She explains that,

> […] the defining romance for the psychoanalytic narrative is not that of marriage, but that
> of a family romance—father, mother, and child […] In this discourse, the successful
> socialization of an adult is signaled indeed by their desire to reform their own triangle.
> The family then forces us to reconsider the way in which individual subjectivity is
> negotiated: not between Self and Other, but rather in a more complex set of inter-
> relationships between various manifestations of the self and other.[10]

Despite its reputation for romance within the couple, then, French film is also concerned with

how love is manifested within the family, and how the family shapes individual character. In

fact, with the possible exception of *New Wave* films, family drama has played a central role in

French cinema ever since Pagnol's 1930s *Fanny Trilogy*.

In developing her position on the role of the triangular family, Handyside refers to Jill

Forbes' statement that,

> French cinema uses the triangular relationship in order to undermine the traditional
> function of the family in popular cinema. By revealing the family to be a set of unstable
> and differing roles through recourse to the figure of the triangle, French cinema
> challenges the hegemonic status of the family both in cinematic representation and in
> society more generally, because it allows roles to shift across generations and genders
> and uncovers the conflicting needs the family tries to service.[11]

In considering Handyside and Forbes' argument, it is important to account for the difficulty in

drawing a parallel between American ("Hollywood") and French cinema, given that each

industry is subject to vastly different economic pressures, that France produces films that might

never get made in the United States, and vice versa. Forbes' comments, however, speak directly

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[9] Fiona Handyside. "Girls on Film: Mothers, Sisters and Daughters in Contemporary French Cinema," in *Affaires de famille: The Family in Contemporary French Culture and Theory*. Barnet and Welch, Eds. (New York: Rodopi, 2007), 221.
[10] Ibid., 221.
[11] Jill Forbes. Quoted in Handyside, 223. Examples of films with the triangular relationship include *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (Demy, 1964) or *Jules et Jim* (Truffaut, 1961).

to the films in this project, whose narrative dramas revolve specifically around an unstable

family unit. These films make no attempt to disavow the social and sexual ambivalence that is

often glossed over in what Handyside refers to as "the smooth workings of the marriage plot."[12]

Like Handyside, scholar Phil Powrie affirms that contemporary French cinema is

preoccupied with the family, and that, "While there are undoubtedly some films which show the

more traditional extended French family as a stable social structure whose constituent members

are fulfilled, the bulk of recent French cinema seems to work on the basis that this stereotype of

the utopian family is unachievable."[13] Powrie expounds upon the historical changes that led to

new ways of thinking about the family, and specifically addresses what he judges to be Elisabeth

Roudinesco's dismal construct of the modern French family as a "nucleus of chaos and

uncertainty [that] is simply in a state of collapse."[14] However, he argues that instead of

collapsing it is merely evolving and transforming. He explains that, "The decline of patriarchal

authority, women's control of their bodies, and the relatively recent possibility of gay marriages

as a result of the PACs, when taken together suggest a major reorientation of what might be

understood by a 'family'. Roudinesco's point is that this poses problems for individual

identity."[15] Both arguments are equally relevant to my project, as they will allow me to develop a

more nuanced take on the overall *effect* of new French family configurations as neither fully

liberating, nor entirely prone to confusion and insecurity. Instead, I will argue that filmmakers

have taken advantage of this ambiguity to explore the shifting boundaries between the intimate

and social spaces of the family in new aesthetic ways.

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[12] Handyside, 225.
[13] Phil Powrie, "La Famille (du cinéma) en désordre: Roudinesco and Contemporary French Cinema," in *Affaires de famille: The Family in Contemporary French Culture and Theory*. (Barnet and Welch, Eds. New York: Rodopi, 2007), 284.
[14] Ibid., 285.
[15] Ibid., 283.

Powrie does give Roudinesco credit for identifying another important addition to the rethinking of the family, which is the notion of the "tribe," or an extended social-group that constitutes a non- (or partially non-) biological family.[16] For Roudinesco, "tribe" films are those which "focus on […] an extended social group of individuals, functioning as a substitute for the traditional extended family".[17] Although Powrie does not agree with Roudinesco's bleak vision of the modern French family, he does identify and discuss the "dystopian family group" represented in modern cinema and literature that is indeed in a mode of disintegration.[18] Dissolution may, according to him, arise either from inside or outside the family structure (such as a political or social invasion versus dysfunctional emotional relationships). On a positive note, he adds, there are also several "utopian" family, such as the time-travel comedy *Les Visiteurs* (Poiré, 1993), the optimistic father-daughter travels in *Mon père, ce héros* (Lauzier, 1991), or the school as family film *Les choristes* (Barratier, 2004). The question, of course, is to what extent these "tribes," which inspire a relatively greater consensus from critics take on similar or different forms in cultural production from Quebec and France. In other words, the family structure may serve not only as a microcosm of society and evolving cultural norms, but also as a vehicle for investigating how social change plays out on paper and the big screen. To what extent are authors and directors influenced by the nuanced variations in social change that tend to occur at varying rates or in different manners in Europe and North America? Given this perspective, I have divided my dissertation into chapters that cover broad categories of new conceptions of the family, and of roles played within those families that speak to the rethinking of the family in Quebec and France.

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[16] Ibid., 287.
[17] Ibid., 287.
[18] Powrie, 294.

My first chapter explores father-son and mother-son relationships in Quebec filmmaker Jean-Marc Vallée's *C.R.A.Z.Y.* (2005), a nostalgic film about a large, traditional family struggling with changing social norms during the 1970s. In this chapter, I examine the father's reduced power in the family, along with other cultural influences that radically affected the father-child relationship, opening up an often explosive dynamic between fathers and sons. To evoke main character Zac's fantasy world during his turbulent coming of age, Vallée utilizes techniques of magical realism and unexpected musical sequences that render his experiences more palpable to spectators. Vallée uncovers all the complex layers that unite and divide a family: the disdain of siblings, a mother's unconditional love, and a father's obstinate distaste for homosexuality. In this film, incursions into fantasy allow the child and, by extension, the filmgoer to overcome feelings of powerlessness. I challenge one popular reading of *C.R.A.Z.Y.* as a negative portrayal of a "traditional" Quebec patriarch who may or may not become a better, more "modern" man thanks to his relationship with his children. I argue that the opposition between traditional and modern values fails to account for the continuity between generations underscored by the cinematic techniques of the film (narrative, camera angles, lighting, music, etc.). These techniques indicate that there is no clear-cut transition from one generation to another, but rather unresolved tensions. Moreover, though this certainly is not the first film to explore the difficulties of queer characters "coming out" after the period of the Quiet Revolution, the film's originality lies in the way in which it employs cinema, as a medium, to convey the protagonist's oscillation between fantasy and reality in an attempt to deal with his sexual identity. I link the technical and narrative elements of the film to show that it is by way of the imaginary that concepts of the self and of the self in a society can overlap, evolve, and actualize.

My second chapter explores Christophe Honoré's *Dans Paris* (France, 2006), in which the fractured state of a Parisian family's physical and emotional realities is depicted by way of innovative film techniques each akin to a mini-crisis on film—all within the framework of a nonlinear narrative structure. Throughout the chapter, I investigate father-son relationships, contemporary coupling, fraternal intimacy, and loss. As a close analysis of Honoré's film will demonstrate, this particular on-screen mixed family is indeed "broken," but its experience with trauma, loss, and rupture is what ironically unites it in the end. Despite the everyday agony that serves as the driving force of its plot, the family members in *Dans Paris* exhibit a genuine love for each other that proves stronger than romantic ties.

I argue that Honoré's film urges viewers to think, to create, to imagine the "in-betweens" in his film as a metaphor for the ways in which current family relationships forge and flourish, since they likewise follow discontinuous, scattered, and elliptical patterns. Such in-between moments are abundantly visible in *Dans Paris*, where Honoré transcends cliché to address the problem of defining the modern couple by systematically linking content to form. In other words, formal and narrative discontinuity go hand in hand. While it is true that many films by Honoré revolve around troubled family relationships, they also dramatize the idea that blood is the tie that binds, and that even the most visibly dysfunctional or disjointed family maintains some kind of unconditional support network. Using experimental techniques drawn from New Wave cinema, as well as referring directly to the Surrealist experiments that once inspired that movement, Honoré transforms the unhappy ending of the couple into an opportunity to reaffirm the unexpected stability of the decomposed family.

In my third chapter I explore questions of loss and nostalgia in Arnaud Desplechin's 2008 *Un conte de Noël* ("A Christmas Story"). In this film, extended family members reunite for the holidays only to face various unresolved grudges that allow the film to explore marriage, divorce, sibling rivalry, illness, loss, regret, blame, and forgiveness. Like *Dans Paris*, Desplechin's film navigates family crises by way of a non-linear narrative and emphasizes characters' behaviors through experimental techniques that rethink traditional cinematic conventions. The lens through which I view *Un conte de Noël* is two-fold. On the one hand, it is a film in which all narrative and formal elements draw out contrasts and contradictions, and on the other hand, the underlying tension that is in part developed by these contrasts is one of loss, but more precisely, self-mourning. I show how the two factors work together in making the film more about a family that, on an individual and collective level, mourns itself, rather than one that mourns the loss of and child who died long ago. I also suggest that because there is ultimately no resolution to many of the family's problems, the film does suggest that blood is not the tie that binds, at least not metaphorically speaking. In the film's final scenes which show one of the protagonists undergoing the transplant thanks to her son's donation, blood is literally the tie that binds insofar as it allows a son to save his mother's life. Yet, the film's previous events suggest that this blood is purely biological, and lacks any deeper emotional or psychological significance.

My last chapter examines mother-son relationships and an adolescent's process of coming out in Quebec filmmaker Xavier Dolan's 2010 film *J'ai tué ma mère* ("I Killed my Mother"). In the film, main character Hubert's thoughts about his mother are repeatedly portrayed through experimental film techniques such as non-diegetic video and image inserts, fantasy sequences, and flashbacks that offer viewers a more intimate portrait of his character.

This chapter argues that Dolan's film challenges conventional social and cinematic constructs in its use of narrative, visual, and sound techniques that reflect contemporary social phenomena in Quebec, such as the struggle to overcome Anglo-Canadian authority and to symbolically "come of age."

Considering that one of the film's major turning points is a mother's discovery of and reaction to her son's homosexuality, it is not surprising that critics often label it a "coming out" film, or situate it within the queer cinema genre. Yet it is also worth noting that in several interviews, Dolan confirms the fact that he has no intention of creating films that fit neatly into any category, including queer cinema. To respect the director's firm point of view, this chapter aims to read the film from a flexible perspective that does not pigeonhole it as 'queer,' and that recognizes its thematic complexity.

Although non-normative and anti-conformist filmmakers have long emphasized the content-form relationship, Dolan goes beyond his predecessors, as Honoré has done in France, by employing new, experimental techniques in his film—such as non-diegetic video and image inserts, fantasy sequences, slow and accelerated motion, or the intentional confusion of diegetic and non-diegetic images—that systematically link image, sound, and story. Moreover, the film frequently disregards the classical continuity editing system by introducing visual and narrative breaks to mirror Hubert's constant fluctuation of emotion, and to reflect the fractured nature of the mother-son (and father-son) relationship.

Taken together, my chapters explore a wide range of innovative film techniques and thematic components in contemporary Quebecois and French films that convey unique representations of the family. While some seem to insist on the permanent significance of

biological ties in the family unit, others suggest the arbitrariness of filial ties. What is worth noting is that regardless of how each filmmaker conveys the meaning of familial connections, they all address in credible ways the shifting cultural norms that have reshaped the construct of the family over time. What distinguishes them from their filmic peers is their unyielding ambition to depict changes in the contemporary family by experimenting with the form of cinema itself.

CHAPTER ONE

Remembering Tomorrow: Tradition and Modernity Reconciled in Jean Marc Vallée's'
C.R.A.Z.Y.

Introduction

Memories of the past have long pervaded Québécois cinema, underscoring the loss of

France as the *mère-patrie* through the motifs of reverie, nostalgia, illusion and fantasy. Quebec

film makers' penchant for the documentary tradition, as well as for the spectacle of magical

realism, brings these motifs to life on screen in culturally specific ways. Denys Arcand's

theatrical film *Jesus de Montréal* (1989), for example, merges Quebec's Catholic tradition with

contemporary progressive culture by showing a community uniting around a man whose

modern-day journey parallels the life of Christ. Likewise, Robert Lepage's *Le confessionnal*

(1995) portrays a young man's quest for self-understanding by unlocking a long-held family

secret, merging the past with the present, and the individual with the family. While these films

often broach topics of self-transformation and quests for individual identity, they also evoke

Quebec's specific cultural heritage and bring into question the notion of collective—or familial

and social—identity.

Though one could point to many events in recent history that have helped define

contemporary Quebec society, the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s was one period that particularly

affected both individual identity and the constitution of the family in Quebec. Firstly, coupled

with the feminist movement that was occurring throughout North America and Western Europe,

it led to a questioning of male roles in society that some scholars designate as a "crisis in

masculinity," and created what some saw as either a liberation from or a threat to traditional male roles. The gradual secularization of Quebec's political and educational systems beginning in this era led to two analogous effects: As the power of the "the "Holy Father" in the average household diminished, so too did the omnipotence of the domestic father. His reduced ultimate power in the family, along with other cultural influences affecting family within and outside of Quebec, drastically affected the father-child relationship, triggering an often explosive dynamic between fathers and sons, and an often surprising bond between fathers and daughters. In this chapter, I will focus on one film that addresses father-son relations in the post-Quiet Revolution family: Jean-Marc Vallée's *C.R.A.Z.Y.* (2005). The film unravels through a series of flashbacks that follow the Beaulieu family in 1960s and 70s Quebec as it struggles to face new individual and social realities, focusing primarily on the strained relationship between a father and son whose bond weakens as the boy comes of age in a rapidly modernizing society.

Zac Beaulieu, the protagonist and narrator of the film, is born on December 25, 1960, the fourth son of loving parents Gervais and Laurianne. As a young boy, he idolizes his father, but must compete for his attention when his athletic, bullying brothers overshadow his timidity. His happiness culminates in outings with his music-obsessed father, whose vinyl record collection comprises albums by Patsy Cline, Charles Aznavour and Buddy Rich. As Zac grows up, he negotiates conflicts with his brothers, embarks upon motorbike escapades to impress girls, smokes cigarettes in secret, and endures a complicated estrangement from his father which he tries desperately to resolve. Vallée delves beneath all the complex layers that unite and divide a family: the disdain of siblings, a mother's unconditional love, and a father's obstinate distaste for homosexuality. In this film, incursions into fantasy allow the child and, by extension, the filmgoer to overcome feelings of powerlessness. After a cathartic mental break, Zac returns to

his senses and temporarily reconciles with his father. The film's final and unexpected scenes follow Zac on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where he connects the disparate pieces of his identity; bringing deep emotional power, as well as precise narrative closure, to the film.

It might be tempting to read *C.R.A.Z.Y.* as a negative portrayal of a "traditional" Quebec patriarch who may or may not become a better, more "modern" man thanks to his relationship with his children. However, the opposition between "traditional" and "modern" values fails to account for the continuity between generations underscored by the cinematic techniques of the film (narrative, camera angles, lighting, music, etc.). These techniques indicate that there is no clear-cut transition from one generation to another, but rather unresolved tensions. Moreover, though this certainly is not the first film to explore the difficulties of queer characters "coming out" after the period of the Quiet Revolution, the film's originality lies in the way in which it employs cinema, as a medium, to convey the protagonist's oscillation between fantasy and reality in an attempt to deal with his sexual identity.

Alongside the father-son storyline, the film also tackles the complicated subject of coming of age and sexual identity formation. At the age of five, protagonist Zac is found in his parents' bedroom dressing up in his mother's clothes, and by the age of thirteen, is "caught" sexually experimenting with both males and females, much to his parents' chagrin. Their reaction to his sexuality speaks in part to the historical moment in which the majority of the film is based: 1970s Quebec, a decade in which the ramifications of the Quiet Revolution were pervasive. Though times were changing, tradition still dominated and Quebecers were not necessarily prepared for the fundamental changes in social conventions that accompanied the progression into a more "modern" era.

Moreover, given the protagonist's struggles with his sexual identity, many critics associate the film with queer cinema, and focus on the ways in which it exhibits either a tolerance of—or an anxiety about—homosexuality. Dominique D. Fisher, scholar of queer studies and cinema, argues that many aspects of the film display a kind of "latent homophobia," and rather than promoting tolerance, end up confirming homophobic judgments and behaviors. This underlying homophobia, she claims, is particularly surprising given that Vallée co-wrote the screenplay with François Boulay, based on the latter's autobiographical story of coming out.[19] Wondering whether Quebec cinema is making adequate headway in its representations of queer characters, she asks, "Dans quelle mesure les representations cinématographiques de l'homosexualité reflètent-elles les angoisses ou au contraire la tolérance d'une nation vis-à-vis de la communauté gaie et des probématiques "queer" [To what extent do cinematic representations of homosexuality reflect the anxieties or the tolerance of a nation in relation to its queer community and queer issues]?[20] Though her analysis of the film ultimately emphasizes its weaknesses in this domain, she does acknowledge where it also makes headway. She argues that, like the French film *Le Placard* (2001)—which more obviously reinforces homophobic behaviors while pretending to promote tolerance—*C.R.A.Z.Y.* at least raises the question of the queer person's place in the family institution.[21] By contrast, film scholar David A. Powell discusses the ways in which *C.R.A.Z.Y.* explores a father's anxiety as he struggles to accept his son's sexuality, reminding us that "1960s and 70s social changes in North America unleashed a

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[19] Dominique D Fisher. "Invisibilités et mises en scenes de l'homophobie: variations françaises et québécoises, ou du *Placard* à *C.R.A.Z.Y.* » in *Cinematic Queerness: Gay and Lesbian Hypervisibility in Contemporary Francophone Feature Films*. Ed. Florian Grandena and Cristina Johnston. (Bern: Peter Lang), 2011.
[20] Ibid., 247.
[21] Ibid., 248.

paradoxically disturbing breakdown of tolerance."[22] For Powell, the film is a painful reminder of the backlash of conservatism that rose up in the face of a shift in social mores.[23] These shifts within society at large were not only affecting individuals, but also their families and communities at large. In short, the change unfolded in both directions.

Sociological interpretations of the Quebec family's transformation also merge with theoretical perspectives on how the family theme plays out in cinema, particularly in regards to sexuality and gender roles. Marshall, for example, discusses representations of sexuality and gender in modern Quebec cinema, yet he gives a different twist to the question of tolerance, and on how Quebecers adapted to potentially confronting social changes. He reminds us that in analyzing cinema's representations of sexuality and family relations in terms of gender roles, it can be useful to look to Freud, stating that the "advantage of the [Freudian] family romance is that it seems, temporarily, to conjure away that castration threat, for the father is not 'killed' but simply eliminated from the family circle while an *ideal father* is imagined and taken as model to aspire to."[24] In *C.R.A.Z.Y.*, this "imagined ideal father" is undoubtedly present in Zac's fantasy or dream world, coupled with the fantasy of his own escape into a better individual life free from the agony of the real world. It is the nostalgia for his childhood during which his relationship with his father was still untainted that further provokes his desire for a rebirth into a new life or era.

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[22] David A. Powell. "*C.R.A.Z.Y.* Québec: Vallée's Performance of Masculinity and Sovereignty," *Cinematic Queerness: Gay and Lesbian Hypervisibility in Contemporary Francophone Feature Films*. Ed. Florian Grandena and Cristina Johnston. (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), 265.
[23] Ibid., 265.
[24] Marshall, 104.

Zac's nostalgia, moreover, transcends the personal and enters into the collective by evoking Quebec's societal shift from one stage of existence into another. Interestingly, Vallée achieves this by way of both realism and magical realism, using techniques that at times depict every precise detail of the film's real world, and at times evoke otherworldliness, or the representation of characters' fantasies as part of the film's real world. *C.R.A.Z.Y.* is also at once fictional and historical, recounting the trajectory of a fictional family that is meant to represent a very real Québécois family at a crucial moment in history. In regards to the changes in social mores taking place during this period, Powell notes that *C.R.A.Z.Y.* "offers a polyvalent depiction of the changes [...] that typify a social as well as a personal identity search."[25] Vallée's *C.R.A.Z.Y.* is indeed a contemporary exemplar of this convention, insofar as it continues the quest for cultural and personal identity and illustrates the changing landscape of Quebec's religious, social, economic and artistic heritage. However, it outdoes its filmic predecessors in both narrative and technical innovation, drawing the viewer into the realm of the fantastical through visual and psychological illusions. Since the film's release, most criticism has revolved around the chaotic trajectory of the main character, Zac, an adolescent whose conflicting relationships with family, Catholicism, and sexuality tend to categorize the film as a classic "coming of age" or queer piece. However, I will argue that the film also tackles the question of self-acceptance at a collective level, in which the individual, the family, and society situate themselves in the present by reconciling nostalgia with dreams of the future.

First, I will analyze the film's symbolic imagery and narrative structure to demonstrate how it simultaneously reflects Quebec's history and also summons its future, all without mocking tradition or idealizing modernity. Next, I will show how Vallée's authentic replication

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[25] Powell, 278.

of 1970s aesthetic phenomena, including music, costumes, props, and dialogue, captures a specific moment in time where Quebec was transforming from within—but most significantly from without. I will insist on the importance of the embodied moment, wherein popular culture from the United States, England, and beyond was perceived as an "invasion" that threatened to collapse once-unified structures. Then, I will examine how the visual inventiveness of magical realism is crucial in emphasizing identity transformation, drawing on images of Zac's persistent reverie of a liberated, actualized self—images such as imagined rebirth, levitation, psychic powers, and a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Finally, I will link the technical and narrative elements of the film to show that it is by way of the imaginary that concepts of the self and of the self in a society can overlap, evolve, and actualize.

A Cross too Heavy to Bear? Renegotiating the Power of the Holy Father(s)

In his collection of essays on memory and identity in Quebec, Jocelyn Létourneau underlines the necessity to rethink the past, in a way that "[…] allows man to resist the forces of the infinite past and the indefinable future by opening up, in the interval of the present moment where he stands, a breach that liberates him from heritage and expectations without breaking his solidarity with the cause of the ancestors or that of the descendants."[26] Vallée's approach to Quebec's transformation into the modern era recalls this kind of "rethinking," underscoring the link between the individual and the collective search for identity in the present moment. Situated in the era just following the Quiet Revolution, *C.R.A.Z.Y.* speaks to the relationship between memory and modernization, albeit from the perspective of an adolescent searching for his own

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[26]Jocelyn Létourneau. *A History for the Future: Rewriting Memory and Identity in Quebec.* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), xiii.

rebirth in a changing society. One of the most significant transformations is the growing influence of American and European (especially British) pop culture, inspiring the younger generations to exchange religious devotion for activities deemed less virtuous: sex, drugs, and rock and roll.

At the very beginning of the film, the predominance of religion is obvious, and indicates the hostility toward religious convention that will manifest in Zac's character. As the film opens, Zac declares, "Ever since I can remember, I've always hated Christmas," and goes on to recount the events of his birth on December 25, 1960. Just hours after his birth, one of his older brothers dropped him on the hospital floor. Because his fragile body managed to survive, his mother, Laurianne, believes him to be a miracle baby, an unmistakable reincarnation of Jesus, and she is convinced that he will be gifted with the ability to heal. Like Arcand's *Jesus de Montreal*, *C.R.A.Z.Y.*'s primary plot follows the trajectory of a Christ-figure, depicted in all of its modern complexity.

Laurianne's insistence on Zac's "gift" puts immense pressure on her son, since she believes he can heal others' wounds simply by holding them in his thoughts. His father, Gervais, far less devout than his wife, dismisses her belief as religious superstition, and claims that she is simply desperate to discover something remarkable about her unexceptional son. However, when Laurianne visits a psychic referred to as "Madame Chose," or the Tupperware lady[27], her belief is confirmed when the psychic claims that Zac can "help other people, even heal them." He does in fact appear to psychically heal a distant relative simply by thinking of the person, and,

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[27] "Madame Chose" (Mrs. Thing, literally) is loosely translated as "Tupperware lady" in the film's English subtitles because her only known source of income is selling Tupperware.

consequently, Laurianne's intimate bond with Zac based on his resemblance to the divine becomes all the more potent.

Perhaps this fixation on a telepathic bond between mother and son could be read as an allusion to a cultural bond between Quebec and France, suggesting an attachment between the mother country and the orphaned territory. In "Un Cinéma orphelin," Christiane Tremblay-Deviault maintains that two opposing value systems continue to persist in Quebec: nostalgia for historically grounded roots on one end, and a feeling of alienation on the other.[28] Reading the film allegorically, one could argue that this struggle is embedded in Laurianne and Zac's mother-son co-dependence. For the mother, religion serves as the primary source of comfort, but for Zac, it becomes a barrier to his individual expression. His spirituality, fluctuating throughout the film, eventually manifests itself in music. However, he unfailingly supports his mother, never mocking her religious habits, recognizing that she is his only source of unconditional love. On one hand, he submits to the religious pressure to incarnate Jesus, the perfect son, wearing his cross every day and attending Christmas mass even though it falls on his birthday. Yet, he will eventually revolt against these religious rituals in the realm of fantasy, and in this way, will generate an individual "quiet revolution."

The difference in Gervais and Laurianne's religious beliefs also informs their coping mechanisms regarding Zac's sexuality. One might assume that the more religious of the two would be more inclined to judge homosexuality to be inherently unnatural and/or immoral, yet in this case it is Gervais who moralizes and judges Zac. Unfortunately, Zac fears judgment from both parents knowing one is devout and the other is intolerant. According to Fisher, his father's

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[28] Christiane Tremblay-Daviault, *Un cinéma orphelin.* (Québec: Éditions Québec/Amerique, 1981), 26.

homophobia is ultimately rooted in his fixed notion of masculinity and a selfish desire to see his

virility reflected in his son, and for his mother, the concern is religious puritanism. Together, the

two complete the picture of homophobia as described by Fisher, who claims that: "La

représentation de l'homosexualité dans le cinéma québécois est dans la plupart des cas

confrontée à la morale religieuse et à son corollaire, 'le contre-nature' [The representation of

homosexuality in Quebec cinema is in most cases confronted by religious morality and to its

corollary, the 'it's not natural' argument].[29] In this film, Laurianne plays the role of the religious

enthusiast and Gervais is fundamentally anti- what he conceives of as 'unnatural.' Because of

this deeply ingrained moral system each of his parents maintains, Fisher argues that Zac is

obligated to "réprime[r] son identité gaie sous la pression de la figure paternelle et de

l'homophobie religieuse" [repress his homosexual identity under the pressure from the paternal

figure and of religious homophobia].[30] Though his mother is the one who is unquestionably more

religious, nothing will allow her to abandon or neglect her son, while his father refuses to accept

his son's difference because he perceives it as abnormal.

Vallée repeatedly uses iconic imagery and symbolism within the film's *mise-en-scène* to

underscore the omnipresent religious pressure on Zac. Linked closely to his relationship with his

mother, the image of the cross dominates several shots of the film, providing a constant reminder

of the prevalence of Catholicism not only in the Beaulieu family, but in the society in which they

live. Zac's own cross is mirrored on the walls of his home and in that of the mysterious

"Tupperware lady." Close-up shots of the cross mounted on the hospital wall where Zac is born,

or suspended from his mother's neck, serve as important visual cues that insist on the central role

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[29] Fisher, 252.
[30] Ibid., 249.

of the Catholic religion for the larger social network in which the Beaulieu family lives. Early in the film, for example, Gervais announces during dinner that he and Laurianne are sending Zac to summer camp, much to Zac's chagrin. When he cries out in protest that he doesn't want to go and runs to his room, the camera zooms in to show Laurianne anxiously rubbing the cross on her necklace, suggesting that perhaps this is her way of discreetly praying for her son, or even attempting to comfort him telepathically. Directly following the close-up of Laurianne's cross, the camera fades to a shot of Zac in bed at summer camp; anxiously rubbing his own cross necklace that his mother gave him when he left for summer camp to ensure that he will not forget that both she, and God, will protect him. The visual connection between the two crosses further emphasizes the mother-son bond.

At this turning point in the film, however, the cross also symbolizes an emotional severance, rather than union, between Zac and his mother. When Zac wets the bed at camp, a group of bullies attack him in the swimming pool, and the precious cross comes loose from his neck and is lost in the depths of the pool. We also see a shot of Laurianne waking up from a deep sleep, panicking, at the same time Zac is being forced under water, suggesting an extrasensory bond between the two. To dramatize this important moment, Vallée films the scene underwater, in slow-motion, creating the illusion that the cross, and therefore Zac's innocence, disappears into oblivion. Once the cross has fallen, the camera zooms in to a close-up of Zac's face underwater, which then dissolves into an image of the new, older Zac, suggesting that perhaps Zac's vulnerability has transformed into rebelliousness. Similar to the earlier scene in which he survives being dropped on the floor as a newborn, he undergoes a sort of "rebirth," and is given another chance**.** This time, though, it is his cross that falls, indicating that his relationship with both his mother and with religion is no longer the same.

The following shot jumps to Zac as a teenager, raging to The Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil" and smoking cigarettes in his bedroom. At this moment, however, he sports a modern version of the necklace—a wooden cross attached to a leather cord worn over a Pink Floyd tee-shirt. Religious faith is now coming into conflict with social and political trends that rise out of modernity. The image of Zac's rebellious lifestyle contrasted with the cross around his neck suggests that despite his being influenced by popular culture of the 70s, he remains nostalgic, or at least respectful, of his religious heritage and of his mother's traditional proclivities. Like his father, Gervais, Zac finds his connection to a higher power through music, idolizing and imitating his favorite musicians behind closed doors. Gervais blithely disparages religion, particularly Catholic priests, stating that as the head of the family, he is the one to whom his wife and children should turn in times of trouble. He dismisses priests as lonely strangers claiming to be blessed with divine powers. Laurianne's attempt to enlighten him with the Tupperware lady's evaluation of Zac's healing powers is swiftly rejected. According to Gervais, Zac's gift, like his own, is musical. In this sense, his rejection of religion forges a bond between him and his son, since they both find their most spiritual moments while listening to music. For them, music is an authentic and palpable entity, but also allows them space to dream.

A Not-so-Quiet Revolution: Music as Divine Ecstasy

Religion is not the only conduit through which characters in *C.R.A.Z.Y.* seek connection to a higher power. For Gervais and Zac, it is music, rather than religious faith, that connects them to something 'bigger'—something ethereal yet emotionally grounding. It also creates a private universe in which Gervais reminisces about less troublesome times, and Zac escapes his role as

the outcast and feels a sense of belonging. For both father and son, it also provides a sort of 'divine ecstasy' that relieves them from the tension at home about Zac's sexuality. Moreover, music is a recurring theme that captures the embodied moment throughout the film and, in its own way, connects memories of the past to a present moment that is racing toward modernity. The role of music in the film could also perhaps affect present-day viewers as much as it does the characters in the film, particularly in terms of creating a sense of nostalgia for those who lived in the 1960s and 70s. Not only can viewers re-experience music that they too might have listened to as teenagers (David Bowie, Led Zeppelin, etc.), but they are also able to relate to Gervais's penchant for both American stars such as Patsy Cline, and French legends such as Charles Aznavour, given this shared longing for the music of their youth. The soundtrack, therefore, creates layers of nostalgia by exposing the complexities of the characters' inner struggles while simultaneously connecting these characters to the spectator.

With obsessive attention to detail, Vallée aspired to reveal through the soundtrack the cultural phenomenon that music created in this era. In an interview in 2005, he explains that the soundtrack was essential for creating the atmosphere of nostalgia in the film, and that it reflected his own experience and development during this time period.[31] In the 1960s and into the 70s, the influence of American and British pop culture was beginning to infiltrate into Quebec's cultural domain, affecting the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of his generation. According to him, such great shifts are not easily forgotten. The music of the past, particularly the classic tunes (Cline, Aznavour) revered by Gervais, marks the film at several moments, and continually reinforces the father and son's shared musical interest that at times connects them, and at times,

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[31] Eve Martel. « C.R.A.Z.Y., le DVD zone 1. » Uneporte 28 December 2005. http://www.uneporte.net/C-R-A-Z-Y-_,-le-DVD-zone-1_a915.html.

pulls them apart. At the opening of the film, music is a force that connects Gervais and Zac in an intimate father-son bond as they drive through the countryside singing these timeless hits. Gervais' bliss is most visibly authentic in these shared moments of joy, as he closes his eyes to reflect on the lost days of his youth, contrasting his reality as the father of five who can only find joy vicariously through music.

We witness his nostalgia for the past when he sings Aznavour's 1964 hit "Hier encore" (*Only Yesterday*), beaming with joy—or so it appears—on Christmas when Zac turns six. Ironically, the lyrics to the song express nostalgia for the past when the singer was young, and regret for not having done everything he would have liked to do. He admits having wasted valuable time, and finds himself now unable to have the life he could have had, warning his sons not to repeat his mistakes:

> Hier encore / J'avais vingt ans / Je caressais le temps / Et jouais de la vie / Comme on joue de l'amour / Et je vivais la nuit / Sans compter sur mes jours […] Hier encore / Je gaspillais le temps / En croyant l'arrêter / Et pour le retenir / Même le devancer / Je n'ai fait que courir / Et me suis essoufflé […] Mais j'ai perdu mon temps / A faire des folies / Qui ne me laissent au fond / Rien de vraiment précis / Que quelques rides au front / Et la peur de l'ennui / Par ma faute j'ai fait / Le vide autour de moi / Et j'ai gâché ma vie / Et mes jeunes années.[32]

> [Only yesterday, I was twenty years old/ I caressed time / and I enjoyed life / Like one savors love / And I lived for the night / Without counting my days / Only yesterday / I wasted time / thinking I could make it stop / And in order to retain it / or even get ahead of it / I did nothing but run / and I ran out of breath / But I've wasted my time / by doing foolish things / That in the end leave me nothing / nothing really specific / Except for some wrinkles on my forehead / and fear of boredom / Through my fault I've build an empty space around me / And I've wasted my life / and my young years]

Despite the dismal lyrics to most of the songs Gervais adores, he remains visibly elated when singing the songs out loud. It is as though he is does not personally identify with the lyrics even

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[32] Charles Aznavour. <u>Hier Encore</u>. Barclay, 1964.

though he recites them so passionately. In his analysis of Gervais' complex relationship with music in the film, Powell points out that, "Gervais performs the song karaoke style at every family gathering, scenes which are recorded with an echo effect, reverberations that symbolize the unsettling effects of the constantly shifting gender performance of masculinity."[33] In other words, Powell suggests that part of Gervais' problem is that despite having produced a large family, he feels worthless and unsatisfied. Music, then, allows him to at least experience a degree of personal fulfillment. This joy reaches its zenith when he listens to Patsy Cline's "Crazy" on his headphones, hiding in his own internal world, in a private experience of dreaming, far from his reality he deems "crazy" in the most disruptive sense of the word.

At this moment, Vallée creates another layer of nostalgia that crosses from the film's internal world into the external world of the viewer. Since the film was made in 2005 yet takes place in the 1960s and 70s, present-day viewers who were young during that era might feel nostalgic for Patsy Cline's 1961 hit "Crazy," (as well as the rest of the soundtrack) and therefore simply feel nostalgic for the music of their past. Yet on a deeper level, this nostalgia might allow them to feel surprisingly empathetic toward Gervais, a father who represents the culture and attitudes of his day, including a strict parenting style and a narrow view of human sexuality. However, despite the fact that modern-day viewers' might find him too severe given their progressive perspectives on parenting, they can nonetheless identify with Gervais, knowing that he represents a particular generation, that he typifies a father 'back then' who was reacting to his son's behavior the best he knew how. Viewers today who are also parents would most likely react very differently to their children's behavior, specifically to their sexuality, not because they

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[33] Powell, 276.

are 'better' parents but because they too are a product of their generation in which being gay is not necessarily a taboo.

The function of Cline's "Crazy," though, goes beyond creating nostalgia. The first clue is found in the film's title, *C.R.A.Z.Y.*, which is an acronym for the five boys' names in the Beaulieu family: Christian, Raymond, Antoine, Zac, and Yvan. One must assume that the song inspired the names of his sons, which indicates an obsession with the song that could partially account for his intolerance of Zac's sexual identity. Just as the lyrics to Aznavour's songs evoke emotions of regret, nostalgia, and discontent that clash with his joyful act of singing—Cline's song also might suggest contradictions within his character, or draw out a blindness he has toward his son's development into manhood. For Powell, one of the song's many symbolic functions in the film includes the lyrics which

> […] manifestly characterize Gervais's troubled attitude toward Zac: 'I'm crazy for crying, I'm crazy for trying, I'm crazy for loving you.' The song and its importance for Gervais's nostalgic feelings of better, easier times belie a transparent depiction of his struggles to accept his son in this period of confusion.[34]

In addition to noting the song's lyrics, Powell also remarks that the title "refers to the craziness of the era, in the midst of the Quiet Revolution, as well as to the madness of coming out and of more open discourse on sexuality."[35] While Powell's observations are indeed sound, I would also argue that the history of the song's release provides an analogy for the relationship between Gervais and Zac. When "Crazy" was released in 1961, critics and fans claimed Cline was 'crossing over' from country to pop and therefore abandoning her country roots, creating a major controversy in the music industry.[36] Yet despite the fact that some people were angry about

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[34] Powell, 276.
[35] Ibid, 276.
[36]"Patsy Cline." Available from: Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patsy_Cline

Cline's transition, others loved it, and the song was eventually called a 'crossover' success. In other words, it straddled the country and pop genres, thereby maintaining nostalgia for the past but also moving into the new modern pop genre emerging during that era. If we think of Zac's coming of age as another kind of 'crossing over' from the innocence of childhood into the complexity of adolescence (during which he comes out), perhaps from his father's perspective, he essentially crosses over from straight, or prepubescent, to gay. Much like Cline's fans who felt abandoned, Gervais, too, feels abandoned by his son who he thought aspired to be just like him. Moreover, the fact that Cline died young might also affect Gervais' desire to hold onto both the image of the singer and also of his son.

Though Zac still attempts to emulate his father's masculinity during his teenage years, he becomes markedly more interested in embodying the style and behaviors of his musical idols. However, Zac's spiritual connection to music develops gradually throughout the film, and begins with bonding over music with his father. Unlike his brothers, Zac gazes adoringly at Gervais, and eventually learns the lyrics to his father's favorite songs, which develops into his own passion for music. Ironically, this connection ends by estranging the two once Zac grows older and acquires new, transgressive tastes which his father interprets as threats to his son's masculinity. In this way, the social and aesthetic evolution of music becomes both a type of aural shorthand for their relationship, as well as a synthesis of its dynamics.

Like his father, Zac finds an interior retreat in music, but unlike his father, he also finds a space in which he can realize his true identity, where his family ties and his individuality can be at peace within the same being. Music becomes a domain of revolution and rebellion. He seeks to escape not only his controlling father and his cruel brothers, but also social conventions that

have grown increasingly confining. Zac becomes particularly passionate about David Bowie, a musician who speaks directly to his own identity struggle, both spiritually and sexually. Hidden in his room, bellowing out Bowie and Led Zeppelin tunes, in a manner that recalls his father's intimate moments with Aznavour (except that he is alone), Zac loses himself in reverie of a life beyond his present reality, where he would be accepted once again by his father, his peers, and by society at large. While Gervais' taste in music embodies nostalgia for his generation, Zac's musical interests represent his generation's principles. Because Bowie challenges social convention, creating lyrics and melodies that traverse cultural and musical traditions, he becomes a kind of demi-god in Zac's life. His song "Space Oddity" captures the struggles of this troubled adolescent, almost taking the form of a litany that relieves his feelings of isolation. The song also relates to Zac's fantasy to escape his own tormented reality in which he is bullied by his father and brothers, and outcast because of the femininity or 'otherness' that they detect in him even before he is caught experimenting with a boy. Powell remarks that the song's message was twofold, since it was "written in a period of international obsession with the race to space," and also "exploits the predictable metaphors of leaving behind the comfort of a conventional life."[37] In the song, the lyrics describe fictional astronaut Major Tom's launch into space as he observes the Earth below. When ground control reports to Tom that they have lost contact with him, Bowie sings, "Can you hear me Major Tom, can you hear me?" Not receiving ground control's message, Major Tom's last words are: "Here am I sitting in a tin can far above the moon / Planet Earth is blue and there's nothing I can do," suggesting that he is not going to survive. Like Gervais' wishes to escape via Aznavour and Cline's lyrics, Zac designs his own escape route

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[37] Powell, 276.

through Bowie's song. If looking at lyrics alone, one could deduce that both father and son are experiencing a deep sense of isolation, wondering if anyone can hear them crying for help.

By drawing on the music of Bowie, Zeppelin, Jefferson Airplane, The Rolling Stones, and Pink Floyd, Vallée succeeds in rendering Zac's inner revolution visible to the spectator. The lyrics, melodies, images and political and social messages of all these bands have now entered the Quebec public sphere, and play a major role in the crossing from one cultural space to another. Gervais and the other brothers find Zac's music threatening and foreign, and fear that the views about sexuality openly expressed in the lyrics are turning him into a misfit or a sexual heathen. When Zac is in his room singing passionately along to "Space Oddity," for example, his brother Antoine barges in, shuts off his music, and punches him. Immediately afterward, a crowd of kids outside apparently hears what happens and begins to cheer for Antoine, thereby ganging up against Zac. The group of teenagers might represent the part of society that was caught between resisting and accepting changes, targeting the individual who, for them, embodies those transitions. Despite their hostility toward Zac and their fear of his immorality, in reality, he is simply exploring youth and the gradual and unsteady development of human sexuality, and makes every attempt to ignore the hostility of his family and peers.

Once again reminding us of the film's ability to explore both the individual and the collective transformation developing in Quebec during this era, Vallée both opens and closes the film with father and son bonding over music—suggesting Gervais' eventual acceptance of his son's sexuality, which is also indicative of his acceptance of new social conventions. In voice-over narration, Zac informs viewers that it took ten years for his father to accept Zac's (male) partner into his home, but claims that now his father has come full circle. Fisher and Powell,

though, read this as potentially homophobic, since it took him ten years to change his mind about homosexuality being "contre-nature."[38] For them, it is not enough that he ultimately has a change of heart, since the majority of the film focuses on his intolerance of homosexuality. Despite the validity of their observation, I would argue that the closing scene still shows progress in the father-son struggle, and confirms that music remains the tie that binds them. It is precisely this acknowledgment of their original, perhaps primordial, bond that allows the layers of nostalgia to accumulate. This father-son connection is the only counterpart to Zac's twofold psychic-spiritual bond with his mother, who is oddly excluded from the male family members' musical union. It is as if Zac and his mother's telepathic relationship precludes other types of social bonding.

A Sign of the Times: Nostalgia and Realist Aesthetics

Just as the soundtrack matters in a film's aural world, objects matter in the visual world of cinema. In his explanation of the significance of cinematic motifs, David Bordwell states that, "Repeated objects, colors, lines of dialogue, elements of lighting or setting or costume, recurrent framings or musical passages—all translate semantic structure into architectonic unfolding."[39] Vallée embodies this notion of the cinematic architect in his precise design of the film's visual atmosphere that allows viewers to truly experience the Quebec of the 1960s and late 70s. Much of what creates the sense of nostalgia in this film about the Quebec transformation on an individual and collective level is established through an original and highly realist aesthetic, including the entire *mise-en-scène* (décor, costumes, props, etc.). Without such authenticity,

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[38] Fisher, 261.
[39] David Bordwell. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 186.

Vallée would not have accomplished this high degree of verisimilitude. According to film critic Martin Bilodeau, the film is "une chronique folle, vertigineuse, magique, par laquelle Vallée nous fait revisiter le Québec 'modern' d'autrefois, depuis la Révolution tranquille jusqu'au lendemain du referendum de 1980" [a, crazy, vertiginous, magical chronical by which Vallée makes us revisit the 'modern' Quebec of yore, from the Quiet Revolution up to the 1980 referendum][40]. In other words, the film is about a typical Québécois family living in a transforming society, and despite the fact that it is set 30-40 years before the present day, the messages continue to hold meaning for contemporary viewers.

Vallée's realist aesthetic is so precise that without knowing, one might almost not be aware it was filmed in 2005. Filmmakers often exaggerate an embodied moment to the point where it becomes a caricature of reality, perhaps for humoristic charm, but Vallée wanted something more authentic than that. He wanted to show the era in all of its beauty, ugliness, and humor. He maintained that, "le thème du film est celui de la reconnaissance personnelle…Il s'agit de la lutte à s'exprimer et d'être honnête dans le moment" [the theme of the film is that of personal recognition/renewal…It's about the struggle to express oneself and to be honest in the moment].[41] Simply put, there is no shaming implied in the aesthetic of the film; it is designed not to mock or exaggerate the mode of the era, but rather to remember and honor its specificity.

The 'look' of the era is most manifest in the film's costume design. One could point to the scene of Zac's older brother Christian's wedding which perfectly captures the sartorial flavor of the period, including bell-bottoms, shaggy hairdos, and huge collared shirts. Not only does the clothing speak to the dominant style of the era, it also represents the period's predominant male

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[40] Martin Bilodeau. « C.R.A.Z.Y. ou la verité folle d'un amour fou." <u>LeDevoir</u> March 2005. http://www.ledevoir.com/2005/05/21/82309.html.
[41] Martel, 1.

and female gender roles, and in this film, it particularly evokes the expression, 'the clothing makes the man.' Gervais is of course the archetype of macho masculinity, and in the opening scenes we see frequent close ups of his tight bell bottoms, his cigarette smoke rings meant to impress his sons and their friends, and his aviator sunglasses. In one scene, he smokes a cigarette and dons a cool hat to complement his stylish ensemble, simply to wash the car.

As a young boy, Zac gazes at both his mother and father in admiration, and attempts to emulate each of their styles and behaviors. As early as age six, for example, Zac experiments with dressing in his mother's clothes, and enjoys pushing around toy strollers. Just as Gervais typifies the macho 'man of the house,' Laurianne epitomizes the image of female domesticity. As an adolescent, Zac no longer dresses in his mother's attire; he conforms to the established codes of masculine dress, but also rebels against them by dressing like his rock idols. Powell reminds us that he is already engaged in what Judith Butler calls gender performativity; that is, in playing the role of male or female regardless of his biological sex.[42] Powell remarks that "masculinity emerges as a double desire: not only is Zac attracted by both the culturally dominant image of the Marlboro Man mixed with the eye-shadow-wearing, gender-bending likes of David Bowie, but because of its cultural acceptability, his masculinized drag can also, he thinks, he hopes hide from the world, from his father, from himself, his true desires."[43] Between his father, mother, and his cultural icons, Zac drifts in and out of various fashions that express his identity at a given moment. Although his male family members do not find his acts of gender-bending 'acceptable,' they can at least identify them as imitative of social trends of the moment, primarily those of the hippie and the British rock star.

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[42] Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 22.
[43] Powell, 272.

In addition to costume design, the film's décor—especially within the Beaulieu residence—also conveys this particular 1960s and 70s aesthetic. Vallée took great care in the selection and placement of every lamp, appliance, chair, or rug, tinted with the garish hues so popular at the time. The Beaulieu boys lazily stretch out on the olive green sofa, smoking cigarettes and watching television, enjoying the seemingly careless days of youth in the 70s, as their mother served up hot ironed toast. Modern-day viewers who experience nostalgia for the music in the film's soundtrack would also likely feel nostalgic, or perhaps rueful, for this distinct style of décor reminiscent of their childhood homes.

Among the myriad objects the camera captures throughout the film, both era-specific and commonplace, the mirror stands out as a dominant motif that perhaps carries symbolic import. Though mirrors are often used in film for visual effects, they also risk becoming cliché indicators of the characters' internal contemplation. In *C.R.A.Z.Y.*, the mirror is used more subtly in several scenes with Zac as both a child and a teenager, particularly at moments when he is forced to reflect on his identity. Forcing the viewer to ponder the multiplicity of character, identity, and reality itself, mirror images provide important moments of self-reflection, and allow the film's characters to see themselves in the moment, reflect upon the past, and fantasize about the future.

Early in the film, for example, we see a close up of Zac sitting in the family car, watching his parents talk on the sidewalk by way of the car's side mirror. He overhears his father say he is returning the baby carriage his mother got him for his birthday; fearing that the carriage will encourage Zac to become a "fairy," he is going to replace it with a hockey stick. The delicate nature of the conversation involving sensitive information about Zac's gender identity might have inspired Vallée to emphasize the event through an unusual visual technique. It is precisely

the emotional impact the conversation has on Zac that warrants the use of the mirror as a messenger for the painful admission from his father. Likewise, later in the film, we see Zac as a teenager in his bedroom, singing passionately to "Space Oddity," and as the music intensifies, the camera glides behind him so we see his face in a round mirror. The camera zooms in to capture his painted face as he sings "Can anybody hear me?" followed by a direct shot of his face when he turns around and gazes into the camera. Again, the mirror functions as a window into Zac's internal identity struggle, and as Powell suggests, the use of the mirror in this scene "clearly indicates subconscious introspection."[44] While Powell's assertion is valid, it is also possible that the mirror motif plays various roles throughout the film, and perhaps even evokes both individual and collective reflection— where Zac's self-examination in the mirror also represents his family and the society he lives in reflecting on its transition from the past into the present moment. Zac acknowledges the present embodied moment, accepting who he is and where he comes from, but he also feels compelled to transform, transgress, and develop outside of cultural and familial constraints.

This emphasis on reflection through the use of the mirror is reinforced further by an inventive visual technique that brings nostalgia to the fore yet again. By combining a freeze-frame technique with the sound of a camera shutter, Vallée creates the illusion throughout the film that photographs are being taken of characters, capturing them in carefully framed still shots. Because photographs are the exemplary token of nostalgia, this technique forces viewers to reflect on, and to remember, a particularly poignant moment. Moreover, the film is already in and of itself a recording of the past, so the still shots act as another, perhaps meta, layer of nostalgia. A close examination of the film's *mise-en-scène* alongside its camera techniques

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[44] Powell, 276.

underscores how Vallée's film goes beyond describing one particular family in 1970s Quebec; it diligently explores the visual composition of a society's past and future. The clothes and objects that fill the screen reflect more than stylistic preferences of different time periods; they reflect the gradual transformation of socio-cultural attitudes.

Navigating an Escape Route through Fantasy and Magical Realism

Finally, Vallée employs the dramatic effects of magical realism to emphasize the union of past, present and future in both the individual and the collective domain. The most striking of these effects are the moments wherein Zac traverses the border between ordinary reverie, or daydreaming, and hallucination. The spectator sees exactly what Zac envisions when desiring to escape a difficult moment: At Christmas mass, he dreams of levitating, singing his own rock song instead of the church hymn, and imagines Jesus' eyes moving upon him from paintings on the wall. Told from a young age that he is endowed with psychic powers, Zac indulges in fantasy in ways that appear to truly transcend reality. It should be noted that Zac's parents as well as Madame Chose continually remind him that he is "different," that he possesses something special that his brothers do not. The only evidence of his powers is not highly believable, however. For example, when he is about six years old, his aunt calls the Beaulieu household to ask Zac to think of her husband (Zac's uncle) Lucien who cut himself and is bleeding. Two minutes later, Zac's aunt calls back to report that the bleeding has stopped. Zac's mother looks very pleased, assuming Zac performed a miracle on his uncle, yet we know that the bleeding could have stopped on its own. It is difficult not to assume that the adults in Zac's life

are referencing his sexuality and/or gender difference, but are masking that by designating psychic powers as his difference.

At the end of the film, Zac's surprising voyage to Jerusalem, during which he nearly dies of dehydration in the desert, makes the viewer question if what we are seeing is reality, or simply the character's hallucination. Because Zac returns home after the trip and brings physical evidence of his travels, we know that his experience was at least partially authentic. It is plausible that his desire to unite the divergent aspects of his identity should culminate in an attempt to establish some kind of connection to his roots, to a space of origin. Again, having been raised believing that he was a reincarnation of Christ, a pilgrimage to Jerusalem becomes the ideal way to escape from his daily routine and spearhead the process of self-actualization. His announcement via voiceover that he is finally able to walk in Christ's footprints and therefore fulfill his mother's dream of him experiencing the Holy Land reinforces the beginning of this process. In addition, his sexual encounter with an Israeli man during his stay proves that he cannot escape the reality of his sexuality, and confirms that his holiness and his sexuality are not incompatible aspects of his character. The transformation continues when he sneaks out of his lover's apartment, wanders through the desert where he becomes severely sunburned and dehydrated, and nearly dies. Yet when a nomadic man on a camel finds and saves him, he enters another phase of life we only begin to witness at the end of the film, where he connects all of the previously disparate parts of his life. His last near-death experience is crosscut with a scene in which his mother wakes up in a panic and runs to the sink to splash water on her face, paralleling the image of the man dripping water on Zac to rehydrate him. At this moment, the mother-son connection is stronger than ever. Moreover, his bond with this father is also reinforced at the end of this scene when, back in Jerusalem, Zac wanders through a market and comes across a copy of

his father's original Cline album he had broken as a child. In voiceover, he declares that everything finally makes sense to him now. In short, the journey across the world and the near-death experience—that appear to be illusory—paradoxically reestablish his reality.

Zac's journey to Jerusalem does not therefore destabilize his sense of self, and in fact creates a connection among the competing identities imposed upon him since birth. Moreover, because of the surreal quality that Vallée imparts to the filming of this scene, Zac's penchant for fantasy and reverie show that it is in the space of the imaginary that one can self-actualize and evolve. The film, in a way, imagines his birth.

Conclusion

Since its release in 2005, *C.R.A.Z.Y.* has gained popularity across North America in university film and culture courses, and has become relatively well-known among American film experts. As such, it has undergone a series of both divergent and analogous interpretations by film critics and scholars alike. While many researchers in queer film studies express frustration with Vallée's denial of the film's categorization as a queer film, other scholars appreciate the subtle representation of Zac's coming of age in conjunction with the story of his family's progression into a more modern era. While this chapter could not encompass every aspect of the film's narrative and visual world, it aimed to recognize not only the significance of Zac's sexuality in the film, but also the importance of the film's study of the Quebec family and society at a specific moment in time. Essentially, I have argued that the film rejects the dichotomy between "traditional" and "modern" values, and showed that there is continuity between generations despite socio-cultural mores that emerge in different eras. In addition, I explored

how Vallée underscores the theme of overcoming intergenerational misunderstanding by way of cinematic techniques to create a sense of nostalgia for both the characters in the film and for present-day spectators.

Moreover, I have argued that the film transcends a typical "coming of age" film by symbolically tackling the question of self-acceptance at a collective level, in which the individual, the family, and society situate themselves in the present moment by reconciling nostalgia with dreams of the future. Vallée achieves this by linking the technical and narrative elements of the film to show that it is by way of the imaginary that concepts of the self—and of the self in a society—can intersect, progress, and become actualized. As a study of the soundtrack demonstrates, music is one element of the film that functions as a conduit to self-understanding, and creates an escape into the imaginary. This in turn allows viewers to empathize with both father and son, because they too could imagine the power of music to inspire our future and to remind us of the past.

While some of Zac's fantasies are relatively familiar (they include clear references to notions of freedom, or to gaining positive attention from family), some are not as simple to interpret. One problem to be resolved is the matter of Zac's fantasies of "curing" himself of his difference, because the idea of being "cured" suggests that he does not have gift, but rather an illness or a curse. Though he does not explicitly state that he is trying to rid himself of his homosexuality, there is arguably some indication that this is indeed what he wished to be absolved from. It is in part for this reason that some scholars, such as Fisher, find a troubling undertone of homophobia within the film's narrative, and wish that perhaps Zac's father would not remain obstinately homophobic until the film's closing scene. While her reasoning is logical,

I would also argue that Vallée's insistence upon the film as a father-son story suggests that he might have overlooked some of the issues that specialists in queer studies might read into the film. In this chapter, I attempted to resolve this problem by showing how the film's originality lies in the way in which it employs cinema, as a medium, to convey the protagonist's fluctuation between fantasy and reality in an attempt to escape conflict with his father. Furthermore, I suggested the complexity of the father-son relationship was a metaphor for the different generations within Quebec as it shifts into a more modern era. Also, the undertone of homophobia is highly plausible for the historical moment in which the film is set; it does not mean that Vallée endorses it. Perhaps *C.R.A.Z.Y.* can thus be seen as a symptom of nostalgia for the old days, while emphasizing the individual and collective advantages of living in a more open, tolerant, and progressive society.

CHAPTER TWO

Reading the In-betweens in the "New" New Wave: Crisis and Discontinuity in Christophe
Honoré's *Dans Paris*

Introduction

Romantic dramas are often known for their predictable humor and the comfort of a neatly

wrapped boy-meets-girl storyline with a happy-ending bow on top. The protagonists likewise

tend to enjoy the benefits of a picture-perfect family united against all odds, despite the

occasional reference to a deceased parent or spouse to milk extra sentiment. These mainstream

crowd pleasers are not uncommon in contemporary French cinema, but they are balanced out by

films with less trite storylines. More than ever, the couples and family members face irresolvable

challenges in films that reach dismal or bittersweet conclusions at best. If not entirely

pessimistic, the narrative twists and surprising conclusions of these films defy viewers'

cinematically hetero-normative expectations. They require a rethinking of both the ideal couple

and the ideal family that such a couple presumably embodies. Though the historical roots of

these changes are multidimensional, young French filmmakers seem to be responding more or

less directly to a gradual evolution in French family life: marriage and birth rates are on the

decline and more children are born out of wedlock than ever before; divorce rates and mixed

families (*familles recomposées*) are on the rise, as are same-sex relationships.[45]

In France, family structure has evolved especially rapidly since the women's rights

movements in the 1960s and 70s. Unsurprisingly, there is no agreement among historians,

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[45] Helen Drake. *Contemporary France*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 126.

sociologists, or other scholars whether these changes have had primarily positive or negative

effects on contemporary French family life. Helen Drake, a leading scholar in contemporary

French studies, notes that:

> The family remains central to France's social fabric, but the typical French family today
> is increasingly likely to be less nuclear, more 'recomposed' (*la famille recomposeé*)
> around second or third marriages, step-children, half-siblings and ex-partners. In 2005,
> nearly three million children aged under 25 in France (amounting to nearly 18% of all
> children in that age group) lived in single-parent families (*les familles monoparentales*)
> and over one million in *familles recomposées*.[46]

With these statistics in mind, it is plausible to argue that filmmakers are not necessarily

revolutionizing the concept or definition of the term "family" when they depict less than perfect

families in film; rather, they are coming to terms with the on-going social realities that continue

to transform French families today. This is further evidenced by recent debates concerning *le*

mariage pour tous, as well as assisted pregnancy and adoption rights for same-sex couples, after

Hollande's 2013 bill for same-sex marriage was accepted by the French National Assembly. In

many ways, the French debate about homosexual marriage and reproduction highlighted social

anxieties regarding heterosexual couples and family as well.

Among the sociologists and scholars who have offered theoretical perspectives on

changes to family structures in France, Evelyne Sullerot takes a radical stance in arguing that in

France, "la famille est en crise," (the family is in crisis).[47] Feminist, social scientist, and co-

founder of *Maternité Heureuse*, a progressive organization for family planning, Sullerot goes

farther than Helen Drake by proposing that the *famille recomposée* might often be better

described as a *famille décomposée*. Sullerot explains that children from families divided by

divorce often suffer from a "contaminated" environment, affirming: "Pour l'enfant de famille

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[46] Ibid., 126.
[47] Evelyne Sullerot. *Le grand remue-ménage: la crise de la famille*. (Paris: Fayard, 1997), 7.

recomposée, sa famille à lui est "décomposée " : son père est d'un côté et sa mère de l'autre. Pour les enfants qui y vivent, les ménages recomposés font des familles décomposées." Of course, the term "décomposées" implies strong negative connotations, as its many translations into English suggest: distraught, terror-stricken, deformed, or, most accurately, rotten. It also sounds strikingly similar to the American conservative argument for maintaining "traditional" families. What most concerns Sullerot, however, is the future of such families in the French Republic. Anticipating the increased instability of their structures, she asks "Comment fera-t-on face aux coûts financiers, humains et sociaux des désintégrations familiales ? Que pourra être une démocratie d'individus déconnectés ?" [The family is in crisis. Because the family is a fact of nature and of culture, a private and a public affair, what will we do in face of the financial, human, and social costs of the disintegration of the family? What would a democracy of disconnected individuals be like?].[48] In other words, if the couple supposedly serves as the source of the family, and the state of the couple is approaching collapse (due to divorce, opting out of marriage, open relationships/non-monogamy), is the family itself not in peril?

Like Sullerot, Jean Viard notes the significant changes to the family in the last half century and finds it equally troubling that "disconnected individuals" increasingly compose French society. However, he disagrees that the portrait of the contemporary family should be framed in terms as extreme as *crisis*. In his text *Nouveau portrait de la France*, Viard focuses largely on the notion of *discontinuity*, instead.[49] Along with the causes and effects of France's inconsistent family atmosphere, he is also interested in the economic and geographical changes that have affected French life in general, including modes and habits of communication. A

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[48] Ibid., 9-10.
[49] Jean Viard. *Nouveau portrait de la France: La société des modes de vie*. (Paris : Editions de l'Aube, 2011).

sociologist and researcher at Paris' *Institut d'études politiques*, or Sciences Po, Viard argues that, in a highly mobile society, individuals take advantage of a wider range of life choices (career, lifestyle, etc.) and therefore initiate critical changes more often and more abruptly than in the past. His central conclusion is that, as people have become more mobile, moving from city to town and vice versa, changing jobs and location more often, French society has become increasingly fragmented and "discontinuous."[50] Viard states : "nous sommes sortis des sociétés sédentaires pour nous réorganiser dans une société, une culture, un territoire mobile, discontinu et imprévisible."[51] Pointing to the effects of increased mobility and uncertainty, he emphasizes the current ambiguity of the term "couple" and, even, "family." He claims that there no longer exists a distinct definition for either, asking simply, "Qu'est-ce enfin qu'un couple, voire une famille?" [What in fact is a couple, or even a family?].[52]

Though stories about "typical" families are and have always been the subject of much French cinema (as well as stories about orphaned children), some contemporary filmmakers are noticeably attracted to family themes that may be considered non-normative, but which nonetheless belong to the realm of the real. Indeed, the dyadic relationship between crisis and discontinuity in the family can effectively illuminate the real-life fragmentation cinematically expressed by leading *auteurs* in the most recent generation of French filmmakers. Such directors include, among others, Francois Ozon, Arnaud Desplechin, Olivier Assayas, André Téchiné, and especially Christophe Honoré, who stands out as a prolific director, novelist, and playwright fascinated by the social structures of the family and couple. Born in 1970, Honoré moved at age 25 from his hometown in Carhaix to Paris, where he began writing for the *Cahiers du cinéma*

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[50] Ibid., 21.
[51] Ibid., 21.
[52] Ibid., 26.

and, shortly thereafter, started writing novels for young adults, some of which he adapted for the screen. An openly gay member of the artistic community, Honoré has directed ten films to date, nine of which he also wrote. His already substantial body of work covers a vast array of themes including love, loss, friendship, forgiveness, memory and commitment. Moreover, he explores sexuality in unconventional or non-normative ways.

The majority of Honoré's films indeed explore the good, bad, and ugly realities within the realm of French family life, and they combine a relatively high degree of realist cinematography with musical dialogue or other experimental techniques that deviate from conventional form. While some of his films touch on controversial themes (LGBTQ family members, polyamorous love triangles), many simply examine how families and partners value love or cope with loss. Among them, *Dans Paris* (2006) opens a window into one family's life in the modern-day French capital. In the first scene, Jonathan, played by Honoré's muse,[53] Louis Garrel, announces directly to the viewer that he is about to narrate the progression of his family's recent disasters. These begin with his brother Paul's decision to flee Paris in an attempt to save his relationship with his girlfriend Anna. This move to a small town in the country speaks to Viard's claim that the French have become more inclined to impulsively abandon their old lives in search of renewal. Needless to say, this failed attempt to rebuild the relationship elsewhere leads to a series of impassioned breakups and makeups, following which Paul returns to Paris in a deep depression. After he survives a suicidal jump into the Seine, the remainder of the film covers the span of a single day during which he is nurtured back to health by Jonathan, as well as by his slightly clumsy father and fair-weather mother. Juxtaposed with his depressive inertia at

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[53] Garrel has played a leading role in several of Honoré's films: *Ma mère*, *Dans Paris*, *Les Chansons d'amour*, *La Belle personne*, *Les bien-aimés*.

home are several scenes in which Jonathan embarks upon three different sexual escapades (still in the course of that one day), turning the streets of Paris into his erotic playground.

Despite the everyday agony that serves as the driving force of its plot, the family members in *Dans Paris* exhibit a genuine love for each other that proves stronger than romantic ties. The central couple is unable to reconcile, yet Paul survives, his bonds with his brother and father made stronger by the nearly tragic event. The film thus offers what French cinema usually lacks: a relatively neat ending that may not be "happy," but perhaps "contented." Yet this limited optimism only takes form thanks to Honoré's skilled use of disruptive experimental techniques that create mini-crises on film: unprovoked musical sequences, accelerated motion, direct address, stark realism, asynchronous sound, the intentional confusion of diegetic and non-diegetic sound, and fantasy sequences. Blended into the framework of a nonlinear structure, the film becomes the paradigmatic anti-Hollywood narrative. In 2002, Honoré published an article in *Cahiers du cinéma* that Nick Rees-Roberts summarizes as a diatribe "against conformist French cinema," in which the director affirms "je n'aime pas les films où la camera prétend se rendre invisible."[54] Simply put, Honoré considers avant-garde style essential to anti-conformist filmmaking.

More often than others of his generation, Honoré has been compared with the *Nouvelle Vague*, or New Wave directors. To this day, the bulk of criticism dedicated to his work insists that his style is strikingly similar to that of Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Demy, and François Truffaut. This comparison is apt, given Honoré's repeated admission of his veneration for these directors. Openly expressing his admiration of New Wave filmmakers, Honoré cites *Les*

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[54] Nick Rees-Roberts. *French Queer Cinema*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 94.

parapluies de Cherbourg (1964) as his favorite film, and Demy as his foremost inspiration. In

one interview, when asked why he identifies particularly with Demy, Honoré responds:

> The fact that when I was a kid and everyone was saying, "It's not going to be possible for
> you to become a filmmaker," the fact that Jacques Demy had come from the same region
> and was able to do it gave me something to hang on to. It made me feel like it was
> possible. […] Also, his vision of the family that is a little bit particular, that is not quite
> conventional. There's a relationship to reality that is a little bit similar in the sense that it
> takes place in the present, but the reality is always a little bit transformed.[55]

In light of his reverence for these predecessors (and, perhaps, his ties to *Cahiers du cinéma*,

where New Wave directors first found their footing), critics tend to debate Honoré's originality.

They are generally divided concerning the aesthetic value of his stylistics, frequently judging

him to be either innocently nostalgic or blatantly imitative. Some (including Rees-Roberts)

accuse Honoré of relying too heavily on New Wave techniques, while others argue that he

simply pays homage to his predecessors without stooping to imitation or redundancy.

Despite this strong connection to Demy and other New Wave directors, which Honoré

himself embraces, there is little evidence (nor would he claim) that he is attempting to create

contemporary "remakes" of their films. Like them, he falls into the *auteur* category of

filmmakers since he is both the writer and director of nearly all of his films. His style is

nonetheless far less self-involved than theirs: he pays heed to diverse social and familial

dynamics rather than focusing on an autobiographical character, such as the Antoine Doinel of

Truffaut's films. Hence, his films are not *auteur* in the sense that they are not all about himself,

or about his own political agenda. Moreover, he tends to integrate the romantic trajectory of the

couple (often at the center of New Wave film) within a broader plotline involving other familial

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[55] Colline Kelsey. "Christophe Honoré's Lost (and Found) Loves," in <u>Interview Magazine</u>. Available at:
<u>http://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/christophe-honore-the-beloved#</u>

and social relationships. I would argue that Honoré works within the *auteur* tradition but also moves beyond it.

Furthermore, Honoré draws on more distant references to surrealist cinema (dream-like sequences, unexpected, implausible images, general chaos) for which he has never been criticized. His style proves to be more than simply a byproduct of the New Wave in part because these surrealist allusions also inform his style, contributing to his originality. What is most interesting about his stylistically *surrealist* moments is that they may arguably render the scene that much more "real" by contemporary standards, in that it reflects how people indeed think, react, and behave in the current day. Due to increased mobility and new communication technologies, individuals now experience the world in an elliptical way that tends to reveal mysteries otherwise hidden within the subconscious. Social reality is now closer to the *sur*real than the real due to the prevalent propensity for distraction, daydream, fantasy, selective listening, and selective memory. Perhaps paradoxically, Honoré uses experimental techniques to create an image of the present-day family which is all the more realistic given that French society now faces the challenges of disconnected individuals finding their way within the *famille décomposée*. Ultimately, the cinematic gaps in human perception that he creates evoke a kind of Freudian "in-between," or a moment in which the conscious and unconscious overlap, and subconscious thoughts are exposed.

I would argue that Honoré's film urges viewers to think, to create, to imagine the "in-betweens" in his film as a metaphor of the ways in which current family relationships forge and flourish, since they likewise follow discontinuous, scattered, and elliptical patterns. Such in-between moments are abundantly visible in *Dans Paris*, where Honoré transcends cliché to

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address the problem of defining the modern couple by systematically linking content to form. In other words, formal and narrative discontinuity go hand in hand. The persistence of rupture within this love story clearly exemplifies Viard's assertion that "Nos vies sont des aventures de conquêtes, de ruptures, de discontinuités" [Our lives are adventures of conquests, ruptures, and discontinuities].[56] More than a derivative of the New Wave—or any one genre in particular— Honoré's unique style responds to social changes that have occurred since the 1950s in France. But does it therefore suggest that the French family is in crisis? Citing Honoré's interests in family re-configuration and queer sexuality, Rees-Roberts affirms that the director proves "dismissive of films that see desire as harmonious, defending his own brand of unruly, chaotic sexuality."[57] Kee Chang concurs that Honoré has made a career out of writing and directing "intimate dramas about families in crisis."[58]

While it is true that many films by Honoré revolve around troubled family relationships, they also dramatize the idea that blood is the tie that binds, and that even the most visibly dysfunctional or disjointed family maintains some kind of unconditional support network. In *Dans Paris*, the central family is technically *décomposée*, or "broken up," yet its experience with trauma, loss, and rupture is what ironically unites its members in the end. Instead of plunging the family itself into a state of crisis, the protagonists' personal crises strengthen rather than weaken family bonds. Using experimental techniques drawn from New Wave cinema, as well as referring directly to the Surrealist experiments that once inspired that movement, Honoré

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[56] Viard, 28.
[57] Ibid., 94.
[58] Kee Chang. "Q & A with Christophe Honoré," in <u>Anthem Magazine</u>. Aug. 12, 2012 http://anthemmagazine.com/qa-with-christophe-honore/

transforms the unhappy ending of the couple into an opportunity to reaffirm the unexpected stability of the decomposed family.

From the New Wave to the *New* New Wave: Inspiration vs. Imitation

New Wave History and Thematic Content

Articulating a succinct definition of the New Wave is difficult given its filmmakers' refusal to identify with a fixed genre, or to prescribe to formulaic constraints; it makes more sense to describe the New Wave as an era. In the early 1950s, Hollywood and major European studios were creating films that would appeal to the widest numbers of viewers, hiring only famous actors and writing predictable, conciliatory plotlines, all of which showed little artistic vision on the part of the writer or director. Near the beginning of the decade, the five most celebrated directors associated with the movement, Chabrol, Truffaut, Godard, Rohmer, and Rivette, met at the Cinématheque and made their way into filmmaking through their work in the film journal *Cahiers du cinema*.[59] Their primary goal was to rebel against commercial Hollywood cinema and the major local studios, arguing that they sacrificed artistic integrity for financial gain. Unwilling to conform to big studio demands, New Wave directors sought independence and creative license. Eventually, they developed into a new category of filmmakers called *auteurs*, largely influenced by André Bazin. As Phil Powrie points out, Bazin

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[59] Dorota Ostrowska. *Reading the French New Wave: Critics, Writers, and Art Cinema in France.* (London: Wallflower Press, 2008).

was "a passionate advocate […] of the *politique des auteurs*," or the insistence upon the artistic vision and autonomy of the director.[60]

Without the support of the major studios, New Wave artists had to work within drastic budgetary constraints and film almost entirely on location. The lack of access to studios did not necessarily inconvenience the directors since filming on location provided the natural lighting and spontaneous images that give their films the feel of a documentary. They therefore had to include random passers-by in the street as extras, and could only hire unknown actors, though many of these actors (Anna Karina, Jean-Paul Belmondo, Jean Seberg) later became famous thanks to their films. This anti-establishment attitude of the *auteur* developed into a new framework that informs the majority of popular criticism applied to the movement's films to this day.

First and foremost, *auteur* theory was based on the principle that film directors should be considered as much the author of their text as are great writers of their novels. This direct link between the director's thoughts and what is projected on screen stemmed from Alexandre Astruc's comparison between the film camera and a pen ('la caméra stylo') that equated a screenwriter with a poet.[61] In focusing more on the individual director or screenwriter's vision, many of the films became semi-autobiographical explorations of his childhood, or of his adult experiences with love and sexuality. Although some New Wave directors also wrote the screenplays for their films, some did not; yet, since *auteur* theory underscored the superiority of directing to writing, directors often imposed their vision on their writers. The idea was that each director would brand films with a personal touch that gave it its artistic authenticity. Francois

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[60] Ibid., 21.
[61] Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake. *Film Theory: An Introduction*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 107.

Truffaut, for example, both wrote and directed his series of films starring Jean-Pierre Léaud that were largely based on events from his own life, following character Antoine Doinel's trajectory from childhood through adolescence and adulthood. Whether or not these directors favored autobiography, the most universal element among their films was singularity of vision— political, artistic, or otherwise. Alongside self-referential content, some films were intended to promote—or at least express—the director's political perspectives, as for example Godard's vehement anti-war sentiments.

In addition, the trend of adapting novels to the big screen meant that *auteur* directors sought to transcend literal readings of established texts, a goal which, as Truffaut insisted, could only be achieved by creatively going beyond the literary predecessor—a clear way to differentiate New Wave directors from mere 'metteurs-en-scene' who remained loyal to the story and style of the original author.[62] For example, Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1962; based on Henri-Pierre Roché's 1953 semiautobiographical novel of the same name), and Godard's *Pierrot le fou* (1965; based on American crime-fiction writer Lionel White's *Obsession*, 1962), remained relatively faithful to textual plotline, but were each transformed into a unique work of art that underscored the era's cinematic ingenuity.

In *Pierrot le fou*, Godard added graphic images referencing consumerism (neon signs, advertisements) and anti-war messages (violent images and sounds), using the audio-visual aspects of cinema for a sensory effect not available in the novel, as a means through which to voice his own political perspectives. Anti-war messages were in fact popular: they ranged from Godard's gross caricatures of American soldiers taking advantage of Vietnamese women in

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[62] Ibid., 106.

Pierrot le fou, to the portraits of characters traumatized by war in *Jules et Jim*. While the first image in Godard's *À bout de souffle* (Breathless, 1960), a close-up of an ad for women's undergarments, famously expresses Godard's anti-consumerism, Godard was not alone in personally lamenting the woes of marketing as well as war. Many New Wave films poked fun at the American advertising industry, inserting close-ups of neon signs or billboards to mimic the "in your face" quality of commercialism. In an era that was undoubtedly marked by intense political turmoil, such an effort informed numerous artists' technical and thematic choices, but particularly those of the New Wave directors.

Despite these serious political and economic commentaries, most New Wave films revolved around romantic themes. Often, they followed a couple's downward spiral into discord, suggesting none too optimistically that true love is doomed. For example, Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* recounts the story of two male friends who, both having fallen in love with Catherine, decide to share her. Ultimately, all three end up miserable, and two of them die in a murder-suicide. Likewise, Godard's *À bout de souffle* follows a petty criminal, Michel, and his American girlfriend Patricia as they embark upon adventures in Paris that leads to Michel's demise when he dies at the hands of the police. Love stories in the most iconic New Wave films rarely end happily, and death—by suicide or murder—usually befalls one or several protagonists. This kind of ill-fated romance also resonates in Godard's *Pierrot le fou*, which according to Jean-Pierre Esquanazi, constitutes "une expérience de régénération des valeurs de l'amour 'fou'."[63] The

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[63] Jean-Pierre Esquanazi. *Godard et la société française des années 1960*. (Paris: Armand Colin, 2004), 207.

couple's interpretation of the concept of *l'amour fou* (crazy love)[64] causes their downfall when they undertake a killing spree before dying of murder and accidental suicide.

Owing to the heteronormative standards of their times, these films often assigned fixed gender roles to male and female characters that perpetuated traditional stereotypes. Indeed, Godard is now known for his binary gender oppositions, supremely clear in his 1966 *Masculin Féminin*, an examination of sexual politics in Paris during the Vietnam War that symbolically wages another war between the sexes. As Ed Gonzales argues, "women do not *follow* men in Godard's films; they're inextricably bound *to* them."[65] Perhaps Gonzales is suggesting that in Godard's work, women rarely enjoy subjectivity or independence, and instead become shadows of the men they are connected to. Both *A bout de souffle* and *Pierrot le fou* portray the male/female binary as an entrenched reality: males are macho, intellectual, or brooding, while females are insecure, fickle, or simply confused. At the time, Godard was not subjected to substantial criticism for his depiction of women, as most of his fellow *auteurs* followed suit, depicting male and female protagonists engaged in similar conflict. Yet, in the years to come, critics would often remark on his films' sexist and chauvinist ideals.[66]

Given the New Wave penchant for plotlines involving heterosexual couples, larger stories that incorporated family members, friends, or colleagues proved rare. The questions about the family that arise so often in contemporary films were then the exception, rather than the rule. However, as Forbes remarks, toward the end of the 1960s, several New Wave directors began to question the somewhat limiting conventions of *auteur* cinema, and began "reinserting familial

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[64] Coined by surrealist André Breton. Breton, André. *L'amour fou*. (Paris : Gallimard, 1945).

[65] Ed Gonazalez. *Slant Magazine*. Dec 29, 2003. http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/masculin-feminin/849

[66] Genviève Sellier. *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 53.

structures" into their post-1968 films.[67] In Truffaut's *Domicile conjugal* (1970), for example, parenting is just as central to the plot as are infidelity, divorce, and romantic turmoil. The director includes not only the story of a couple falling apart when Antoine cheats and leaves his wife Christine, but also the repercussions of his actions. Thus, he went further in acknowledging the problems of the family than did most of his peers who limited their dramatic focus to the couple. While the film is still essentially the work of its *auteur*, it goes beyond the typical qualities of *auteur* cinema by returning to questions of the family at large.

New Wave Technique

Even if none of these thematic elements had drawn critical attention, the New Wave would doubtless have become famous for its cinematic experimentation alone. Its directors explored camera and sound techniques that broke several canonical codes, not the least of which was the spatio-temporal continuity of classical film editing. In conjunction with their refusal to collaborate with major film studios, they also refused to adhere to established cinematic codes of visual and narrative coherence. Not only were storylines discontinuous and elliptical, but the images and their arrangement were also erratic, rendering the films confusing—if not shocking—to viewers at the time. Inspired at times by Surrealist filmmakers, New Wave directors experimented with photographic stills, color filters, voiceover narration, sound distortion, asynchronicity, masking, dolly shots, and more. Godard became famous for his jump cuts in *À bout de souffle*, and Truffaut for panning shots, wipes, and freeze frames in films such as *Les 400 coups* (The 400 Blows, 1959).

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[67] Forbes. "*Pierrot le fou* and Post-New Wave French Cinema," in *Jean Luc Godard's Pierrot le fou*. David Wills, Ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 113.

Considering the New Wave preoccupation with politics and anti-commercialism, most critics at the time agreed that these audio and visual effects were not intended to produce meaning, but simply to serve as markers of individual cinematic style. For example, when asked why Godard creates such visual chaos through jump cuts or disorients viewers with traveling shots filmed by shaky handheld cameras going against oncoming traffic (creating a vertigo effect), French film critic Luc Mollet claimed that Godard was like a young boy playing with his toys, and that his oeuvre appeared generally "insupportable, bavard, moralisateur (ou immoralisateur)"; nonetheless, he affirmed: "je ne voyais qu'une chose, une seule, et c'est que c'était beau. D'une beauté surhumaine."[68] While it is important not to overlook the ways in which critics have dissected Godard's films for hidden meaning, many consider the beauty and artistic ingenuity of his films more central to their impact. For the latter group, the films' meaning may be found precisely in their meaninglessness. It may well be in this respect that Honoré most resembles the New Wave generation, since his films also represent both art for art's sake and art that aims to generate meaning in the socio-political realm.

Christophe Honoré: Beyond the Limitations of the New Wave

When asked where he thinks contemporary French cinema is going today, Honoré expresses disappointment that the seventh art is no longer at its zenith. For him, the majority of new French films hark back to an era when cinema predominantly served as little more than a pleasant distraction from reality:

> The values that are put on cinema today in France are the same as, I would say, during the war (WWII) and just after the war. What it means is that the filmmaking today is at odds with the spirit of the New Wave. So what I'm trying to say through my films is that

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[68] Luc Moullet. "Jean-Luc Godard," in *La Nouvelle Vague*. (Paris : Cahiers du Cinéma, 1999), 70.

the golden age of French cinema was the New Wave and I want to keep that spirit alive. But I realize that's a very minority viewpoint.[69]

In other words, Honoré identifies contemporary film production with classic post-war narrative cinema that avoided the serious issues of its day. In contrast, the "spirit" of the New Wave that engaged with socio-political concerns is what allowed it to become "the golden age" of French cinema. Perhaps in an effort to compete with the crowd-pleasing, lighthearted American films of the 1970s and 80s, French filmmakers slowly began to abandon the seriousness of the New Wave. The question therefore becomes whether his goal to "keep the spirit alive" translates into a form of imitation that limits his own innovation by placing him in the less illustrious shadow of the gilded *auteurs* that preceded him.

Since Honoré has written the screenplay for the majority of his films, including *Dans Paris*, he can indeed be considered an *auteur* according to the traditional definition. Yet, he otherwise holds little in common with his predecessors in terms of preserving the tenets of *auteurism.* First, he is less preoccupied with self-referential and autobiographical material in his films; and, when he does choose to include personal material, his approach is more subtle. For example, his 2002 film *17 fois Cecile Cassard* integrates semi-autobiographical references from his own life, including his family's experience of traumatic loss, a prevalent theme in his oeuvre.[70] In interviews, Honoré openly discusses personal inspiration for his films, yet, until now at least, none of his films has been *about* him. None tells his life story as Truffaut's series did his, and none blatantly reflects his own social or political beliefs, even if they are woven into the fabric of the narratives.

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[69] Christophe Honoré. Interview with Dustin Chang, "Sing your Life: Christophe Honoré Interview," in Twitch Film. August 16, 2012. http://twitchfilm.com/2012/08/honoring-french-new-wave-christophe-honore-interview.html

[70] Honoré's father was killed in a car accident when the director was a child. Source: Taiyo Okamoto. "The filmmaker's portrait series: Christophe Honoré," in *Cool: Bilingual Art Magazine*. Online: http://www.cool-ny.com/en/archives/1353

Instead, Honoré seems more interested in diverse social dynamics—not exclusively limited to the individual or the couple—since he explores atypical family configurations, intricate social networks, and friendship, as well. While many of his films touch on difficult themes of loss, death, or divorce, others also emphasize hope, lasting love, family bonding, and human connection. The New Wave's dismal leitmotif of doomed or crazy love is far less prevalent in Honoré's oeuvre. While he investigates a wide variety of subjects, he stamps his work with his own personal style and technique that distinguish him from other contemporary French directors.

In some instances, there remains substantial thematic cross-over between Honoré and the New Wave, including the themes of troubled couples and families, triangular romances, divorce, and suicide. Yet, the plotlines and endings in Honoré's films are less disastrous than in New Wave narratives, notwithstanding the occasional inclusion of attempted suicide. Families usually remain united even when love or romantic relationships fail. Characters grieve for deceased lovers or family members, yet they do not commit suicide (much less murder). For example, like Truffaut's triangular love story in *Jules et Jim*, Honoré's *Les chansons d'amour* (Love Songs, 2007) recounts a love story in Paris between one man (Ishmael) and two women (Julie and Alice), which evolves from a lighthearted three-way romance into a grief-stricken study of friendship, family, and loss. When Julie dies outside a nightclub, Ishmael is driven into depression during which he rejects Alice because he only truly loved Julie, officially breaking their love triangle. In the end, Ishmael continues to suffer the loss of Julie, yet he experiments with homosexuality and falls for a new male lover, Erwann. Although he fears falling in love again, he is reassured during a fantasy sequence in which Julie's ghost accompanies him to Erwann's apartment, confirming that she has granted him permission to move on with his life.

While infidelity is also common to both Honoré and his forefathers, it plays no role in the troubles faced by the couple in *Dans Paris*. Examples of infidelity in New Wave cinema are as legendary as they are unsurprising, given the prevalence of this theme throughout conventional French cinema, as well. In Godard's *Pierrot le fou*, Ferdinand leaves his wife for a younger woman, Marianne, who in turn is unfaithful to him. In Truffaut's *Jules et Jim*, Catherine cheats on her husband with several other men in addition to the title characters and, in his *Domicile Conjugal* (1970), Antoine betrays his wife Christine both while she is pregnant and after their baby is born. Like these directors, Honoré occasionally touches on infidelity, yet it is rarely the central focus of his narratives. In *Dans Paris*, Paul and Anna's relationship illustrates the common phenomenon of the troubled couple that has spent years together, has almost built a life together, and tries almost anything before giving up. In most mainstream films, this kind of tumultuous relationship would end in resolution, but here, it serves as the impetus of the broader narrative conflict: their breakup proves their love impossible, and the viewer is denied the classic happy ending—without the easy explanation that it was infidelity that caused the breakup.

In fact, the tortured disintegration of Paul and Anna's love is offset by a far more libertine tale of twenty-something Jonathan and his three-women-in-a-day adventure. It introduces this ambiguous trio of intimate (or at least physical) encounters unfolding in the active sex life of Jonathan, a sort of modern-day gigolo whose only commitment is to his hedonistic desires, well outside the context of a devoted relationship. Whether motivated by a willful choice or a subconscious need, Jonathan is the archetype of Viard's *zappeur*: he is a fickle, capricious youth who acts out patterns of ambivalence and non-commitment in today's 'discontinuous' society. Concerned for contemporary youth and its lack of progeny, Viard states that, "La jeunesse, plus que les autres âges, a saisi la discontinuité et la force 'zappeuse' de notre société"

[The younger generation, more than other age groups, has seized the discontinuity and the 'fickle/capricious' force of our society].[71] Indeed, Jonathan never pretends to enter into the kind of sustained relationship with any of these women in the film that might demand monogamy.

Moreover, the pains of divorce taint the mood of several of Honoré's films, whether or not they are caused by infidelity. In *Dans Paris*, its presence strongly marks the film with the tone of failed love. While it would be difficult to make assumptions about the reasons why Mirko and his ex-wife divorced, considering the minimal information provided about their past, they clearly maintain a contentious relationship. In the only revealing scene between the two characters, Mirko prepares dinner while his ex-wife smokes, commenting on how poor he must be based on his peasant-style meal: chicken noodle soup. Thus far, Honoré has depicted her only as an absentee parent, but now he portrays her as an uncaring and insolent ex-wife. Mirko's responds that her new boyfriend is the only reason she has any money, suggesting that she, too, struggles financially. Mirko's bitter resentment brings to mind Sullerot's argument that, "[i]ndeed, woman has never been truly viewed as an individual, a citizen endowed by the constitution with inalienable rights, but as part of the family unit."[72] After all, his ex-wife remains unnamed throughout the film, and is only referred to as "*la mère*," denying her any autonomous subjectivity. On the whole, her limited interactions with Mirko serve to confirm the film's overarching theme of discontinuity.

The disturbing subject that perhaps most closely ties Honoré to New Wave directors is suicide. Although not as predominant in Honoré's films, it was certainly a common theme in his forefathers' work. Why should it be a prevalent theme in either case? Surprisingly, France has

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[71] Viard, 44.
[72] Ibid., 89.

always had a relatively high suicide rate in comparison with the rest of Europe, and that rate has only slightly decreased over the last fifty years, with the exception of a sharp rise in the 1980s.[73] Today, the overall suicide rate is 14.6 per 100,000 people—twice the rate in Britain and 40% higher than those found in Germany and the United States. During the New Wave era, a sense of desperation and youthful *malaise* undoubtedly accompanied social discontent, yet the suicide rate was only slightly higher in 1965 than the current rate at 15.0 per 100,000.[74] For Honoré's generation, suicide is almost as common as in the 60s, but, it seems, some of the motivations for suicide have changed over time. In *Dans Paris*, suicide haunts the central family in two ways: the depression that Paul just barely overcomes, which leads him to attempt suicide, and the memory of losing his older sister, Claire, who committed suicide twelve years earlier. Because of the twofold narrative that relates the love story to the family uniting to save Paul, the denouement neatly ties the end of his relationship with Anna to his readiness to recover emotionally from his longstanding grief for Claire.

Although Honoré thus has much in common with the themes addressed by New Wave directors, his choice of subject matter dramatically strays from theirs when he tackles intricate family dynamics, such as brotherhood and fraternal bonding. While questions of contemporary coupling and parent-child relationships form a major part of the narrative, the bond between Paul and Jonathan is also portrayed with poignancy in the film. Other recent films, such as Assayas' *L'heure d'été* (2008) and Desplechin's *Un conte de Noël* (2008), have explored contemporary fraternal relationships within the framework of bereavement. Like *Dans Paris*, *L'heure d'été* treats the transition away from melancholy toward healing, while heightened family dysfunction

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[73] Christian Baudelot. *Suicide: The Hidden Side of Modernity*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 44.
[74] Ibid., 44.

during the holidays is common to *Un conte de Noël* and Honoré's film. The difference between brotherly relationships in these examples and *Dans Paris* is that they explore what could be considered "traditional" fraternal kinship, without further complications.

In *Dans Paris*, however, fraternal connections are surprisingly intimate. While Jonathan and Paul are in many ways typical brothers who display expected patterns of sibling bonding and rivalry, they also display affection that borders on the homoerotic. In several scenes, their support for one another crosses expected lines of closeness (such as sharing the bathroom while using the toilet). Despite these very palpable moments of homoerotic intimacy, Honoré doesn't seem to be suggesting that there is sexual tension between the brothers, or that they have an incestuous relationship. Instead, I would argue, their unusually sensual interactions indicate a mutual codependency like that between a parent and child. Due to a lack of real parental guidance and support, as well as failing romantic partnerships, they look to each other as siblings for comfort. Jonathan's dual role as brother and seducer reinforce the idea that the family is not based on the couple after all, but on kinship, and that the *famille décomposée* may in point of fact be oddly functional after all.

In addition to fraternal bonding, another family-related theme not particularly explored in New Wave cinema, yet ever-present in Honoré's oeuvre, is that of fatherhood**.** Since the women's rights movement of the 60s and 70s, the role of the father (and the mother) in the nuclear family has changed considerably. Global economic and technological changes have further shifted expectations of gender roles in the last decades. Some refer to this transition in power dynamics between the sexes as a "crisis in masculinity," claiming that men are no longer certain of their place in society and, therefore, they are at a loss when faced with romantic and

family relationships.[75] French films have increasingly explored this theme: some focus on the failure of the father to raise his children (*Monsieur Ibrahim,* 2003), or to stay committed to the mother of his children (*5x2*, 2004), while others show him resorting to suicide (*Le père de mes enfants*, 2009). As Viard points out, the instability that men face is further exacerbated by rising unemployment rates, where all workers (regardless of gender) struggle to find an adequate job in a deteriorating economic climate, let alone to select and sustain a career. In *Dans Paris*, the father embodies this kind of pathetic figure who, despite considerable effort to lead his household, has failed to raise sons with the self-confidence, motivation, and strong sense of morals that he considers necessary for them to become upstanding men. And yet, viewers sympathize with him because of his sincere effort to perform his paternal duties, however faltering this effort may be.

To explain the inadequate fathers now cropping up across film genres in France, Powrie cites Elisabeth Roudinesco who argues that the "dead" patriarchal father-figure falls at the "dead center" of French cinema.[76] He contends that the once idealistic image of the father-as-omnipotent-leader is in fact no longer an ideal and filmmakers are at times reveling in the exploitation of this "failed" father figure. Powrie identifies a tendency to "ritualize" this changing paternal image, suggesting that, "in some respects, contemporary French cinema is a ritual immolation of the totemistic father."[77] According to Powrie, the flawed father figure—no longer the linchpin of the family—becomes in turn the explanation for the family' dysfunctional family, or, as the French call it, *la famille à problèmes*. In contrast to the utopian family that

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[75] Powrie. *French Cinema in the 1980s: Nostalgia and the Crisis of Masculinity*. (Oxford University Press, 1997), 284.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.

occasionally still surfaces in contemporary cinema, this "dystopian family group," already found

in Klapisch's *Un air de famille* (1996), disintegrates either from within (inherent behavioral or

emotional dysfunction) or from without (political or social invasion).[78] Finally, Powrie adds,

utopian family films generally focus on nostalgia for times past, or on schools that function as

family (Pierre Boutron's *Messieurs les enfants*, 1997), thereby choosing another time period or

institution to substitute for current family structures.

In sum, fathers play a central part in contemporary films not only because of the changing

gender roles within the family, but also due to the increased scrutiny of parental roles since the

1960s. At any rate, Honoré seems to attribute little importance to the mother in *Dans Paris* in

order to focus on siblings in this imaginary family. It may be tentatively deduced that the men

here resent the mother for leaving and for taking a new male partner, as if she chose her needs

over theirs. This interpretation contrasts with Sullerot's (arguably somewhat outdated)

affirmation in 1971 that "concepts of the female role are set in rigid patterns which cannot

change rapidly, because people insist on describing woman as the cornerstone of the family, the

guardian of tradition and the defender of social stability."[79] Like many feminists during that

period, Sullerot was concerned about women's changing role in society, at once theoretically

liberating and confining, since society condemned mothers who chose to work outside the home,

as well as those who might seek individual fulfillment in the arms of a man not the father of her

children, while it was somewhat accepted that husbands leave their wives for other women.

Yet, even though Honoré's films depict a shift from fixed to fluid gender roles, Lucille

Cairnes reminds us that the young director is often criticized for ignoring female subjectivity, an

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[78] Ibid., 294.
[79] Sullerot. *Woman, Society and Change*. Trans : Margaret Scotford Archer. (London : World University Library, 1971), 88.

accusation easily leveled at *Dans Paris*.[80] Honoré does pay some attention to Alice's subjectivity

in the last scenes of the film, when she discusses the nature of love with Paul while they wait for

Jonathan to return from his final affair. That said, Alice is far from subversive in terms of

traditional female gender roles in this male-centric film. During most of the film, she is trying to

convince her unfaithful boyfriend to take her back, and in the end cries herself to sleep waiting

for him to come home, unaware of his sexual adventures. Like Cairnes, Darren Waldron suffers

from what he calls *tradition fatigue*: he expresses frustration with French filmmakers—

especially queer-identified ones like Honoré—who reinforce traditional gender roles by returning

"to the normative values of monogamous romantic commitment and collective responsibility."[81]

Seen in this light, *Dans Paris*' Alice may indeed reinforce conventional stereotypes of the

desperate, dependent woman chasing the man she desires, but I would argue that Jonathan is far

from traditional. He is less a predator than a rule-breaker, a modern revolutionary liberated from

the conventional standards of commitment, irrespective of his sexual preference. Honoré indeed

defends himself against accusations of social conformity by arguing that he is highly "concerned

with imposed values in terms of sexuality," and that he attempts, as much as possible, to

challenge sexual normativity, but only to the extent that it subjugates certain members of

society.[82]

The following sections will investigate how the various themes outlined above are treated

in *Dans Paris* through Honoré's use of narrative, visual effects, and sound techniques, and will

help us decide whether or not he endorses the claim that the French family is currently in crisis.

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[80] Lucille Cairnes, Ed. *Gay and Lesbian Cultures in France*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2002.
[81] Darren Waldron. *Queering Contemporary French Popular Cinema: Images and their Reception*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009.
[82] Honoré. " 'Love Songs' interview with Christophe Honoré," in <u>Indiewire</u>. March 12, 2008.
<u>http://www.indiewire.com/article/indiewire_interview_love_songs_director_christophe_honore</u>

Just as clear distinctions between Honoré's oeuvre and New Wave films emerge in their respective treatment of common themes, so, too, the young director pursues new avenues of cinematic experimentation more or less directly inspired by earlier directors.

Storytelling: The (Dis)continuity Editing System: *Pierrot le fou* and *Dans Paris*

Every film is shaped by edits, cuts, flashbacks, ellipses, or other narrative devices that inflect the story. In order to analyze the differences between Honoré's films and those of the New Wave, one may begin by comparing his storytelling and editing techniques in *Dans Paris* to Godard's in *Pierrot le fou*. These films have much in common in terms of cinematography and sound. *Dans Paris* could in fact be deemed a modern rewrite of Godard's film, the violence and petty crime that mark *Pierrot le fou* notwithstanding. While the films offer many interesting points of comparison, I will focus on how each director navigates the storytelling process, paying particular attention to the effects of their editing and narrating techniques. Each film has a relatively clear beginning and end, yet both adopt a nonlinear form that departs from the continuity editing system to create a sense of fragmentation.

The nonlinearity that characterizes *Dans Paris* is doubtless influenced in part by New Wave films. Much of the original movement's intention was to disrupt continuous narration and coherent narrative style by using scattered storylines interrupted by shifting narrators, voice overs, direct address, etc. Yet, the New Wave alone fails to account for the full range of influence on Honoré's films, as facets of his fragmented form (visual, narrative, aural, etc.) also trace back to other eras of European cinema, such as German Expressionism, Italian Neorealism, Dada and Surrealism, Film Noir, to name only a few. In *Dans Paris*, Honoré disrupts each sub-plotline to mirror the characters' rapidly fluctuating emotions with jump cuts, narrative gaps or

ellipses, and rapidly interjected flashbacks, often leaving the viewer confused about where characters are in time and space. These techniques thwart the viewer's ability to comprehend the turn of events; yet, the degree of fragmentation is far greater in *Pierrot le fou*, a film that reinforces Deleuze's assertion, as paraphrased by András Bálint Kovács, that, in modern cinema, "the narrative (or 'storytelling') aspect no longer represents 'reality,' but concentrates on showing how the act of narration falsifies reality itself."[83] Although Honoré appears not to share Godard's taste for cinematic chaos, Deleuze's notion of the "power of the false"—or the ability for phenomena such as fantasy and subconscious reflection to be perceived as reality—comes into play during moments of heightened emotion throughout the film, continually emphasizing a subjective reality.[84]

While the fractured narrative of *Dans Paris* at times destabilizes viewers, it rarely leaves them ignorant of the ways in which one event leads to the next. Paradoxically, the "power of the false" that Honoré shares with Godard serves not to illustrate how the camera *falsifies* reality, but rather how it *encapsulates* lived experience better than coherent narrative. Honoré indeed juxtaposes scenes in a seemingly illogical way that represents the space-time dimension that Deleuze defines as "a dimension to which the only reality one can attribute is a subjective reality as part of some function of consciousness."[85] While this definition itself may appear somewhat abstract (if not tautological), Deleuze points here to a rejection of any objective reality beyond that of individual consciousness that indeed underlies *Dans Paris*. However, the space-time dimension that Honoré navigates differs drastically from Godard's more radical rejection of objective reality. To be more precise, it offers a different semblance of interconnectedness in the

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[83] András Bálint Kovács. "The Film History of Thought," in *The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*. Gregory Flaxman, Ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 161.
[84] Ibid., 162.
[85] Ibid., 161 .

narrative of *Dans Paris*, one which requires the viewer to imagine the subjective reality of the characters, without falling into the coherent narrative that forges traditional forms of cinematic continuity.

To look first at narrative devices that thwart viewers' expectations in *Pierrot le fou*, it should be noted that there are not one, but two omniscient narrators: Ferdinand and Marianne. Because Godard's film is far more fragmented than Honoré's, there is no clear exposition of the story. Rather, Ferdinand begins to narrate after a quarter of an hour of footage, when the lovers have already taken to the road, indulging in a spree of murder and theft. Then, the camera abruptly cuts to a close up of Marianne outside in an unknown location, the wind dramatically blowing her hair. Viewers hear Ferdinand, now as narrator, murmur "Marianne Renoir," then Godard cuts to an image of a Renoir painting. While this jump cut suggests a resemblance between the character and the subject of the painting, it hardly advances the plot. Broadly speaking, impressionist painting and New Wave cinema have more in common than do Renoir's canvases with bank heists and bloodshed. In other words, interpreting this allusion to Renoir as an aesthetic analogy to an appreciation for classic feminine beauty makes more sense than a thematic interpretation that focuses on a prolonged cops-and-robbers chase.

Throughout the rest of the film, Ferdinand and Marianne share the role of narrator, yet neither assists the viewer in understanding the film, as might be expected of a traditional narrator. Instead, they insert commentaries at surprise moments, or speak simultaneously, all of which may confuse viewers. Often distorted, overlapped, or out of sync with the images, their narrations further exacerbate the discontinuity already prevalent throughout *Pierrot le fou*. For instance, in an early scene, the couple ignores an unknown dead man on their bed, as they proceed to sing to each other a song about their own love story. At first, we see their lips moving

as they sing in sync with the music, but then we suddenly only hear them through voiceover. Rather than seeing them, we see close up images of paintings and other objects in the apartment, compromising the synchronicity of image and sound. Yet it is probable that this confounding narration style did not have a serious purpose for Godard, given that most scholars and critics claim that his attempts to confuse the audience do not have a higher function, and simply align with the controversial New Wave style. In my reading of his work, I too presume that Godard's unequivocal attempts to thwart viewers' comprehension of the narrative and visual world within his films is inspired to provide just that: an unpredictable viewing experience.

In *Pierrot le fou*, linear narration is also broken by the use of direct address which amuses, but also disconcerts, viewers, as though awaking them from a daydream to remind them that the characters are fictional. As Jean-Clet Martin suggests, cinema can create a dream-like experience for viewers, much like a Van Gogh painting in which "[t]he canvas becomes the surface on which the artist's vision projects itself and where the texture of the world is woven together; it realizes a plane where it is no longer possible to distinguish dream from reality, the cerebral from the perceived image."[86] This dream-like realm of thought is therefore interrupted when, near the end of the film, Marianne looks at the screen and says, "They're still here," prompting Ferdinand to ask, "Who?" When she answers, "the audience," he looks back at the camera and replies, nonchalantly, "Oh, yeah." By breaking the "fourth wall" of the camera lens the couple provides viewers with a self-reflective pause within their murderous rampage. Moreover, it makes sense that these characters elicit a greater reaction when they directly address the audience since, unlike *Dans Paris*, this entire film centers on a volatile series of illegal

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[86] Jean-Clet Martin. "Of Images and Worlds," in *The Brain is the Screen*. Gregory Flaxman, Ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 75.

escapades. Both Godard and Honoré use direct address to manipulate viewer subjectivity, turning it into a lighthearted means for the viewer to bond with the insouciant protagonists. Godard differs from Honoré, however, insofar as the laconic commentaries from his pair of narrators suggest that they notice the presence of the viewers, yet they discuss them as though their presence does not matter.

In addition to unconventional narrative devices such as direct address, *Pierrot le fou* also contains visual ellipses, such as jump cuts, that disrupt the film's visual continuity. Godard's seminal film *À bout de souffle*, produced in 1960, gave the director his name as the king of the jump cut**.** Five years later, he was apparently less interested in this technique as he used it only occasionally in *Pierrot le fou*. However, as Bordwell notes, contemporary film criticism sometimes uses the term jump cut very broadly, applying it not only to slight changes in one image, but also to abrupt transitions between shots within a scene, or even between separate scenes. *Pierrot le fou* is certainly replete with this latter kind of disjunctive editing; nonetheless, the entire film is based on a rapid editing tempo and a high incidence of discontinuities, such that the jump cuts (or ellipses, according to the stricter definition) are less disorienting, as they hardly diverge from the rest of the film's design.

In Godard's film, events are rarely explained, and sequences rarely make it possible to imagine transitions between scenes. Early in the film, an image of Ferdinand and Marianne driving at night leads directly to the two of them comfortably inhabiting an apartment, without any clues as to how much time has elapsed, where they traveled, or how they procured the living space. While such details might not preoccupy viewers overmuch, their inexplicable journey is followed by a shot of Ferdinand sleeping in a bedroom, then Marianne preparing breakfast in a make-shift kitchen, just before she nonchalantly passes by a dead man on another bed with a

72

knife in his back. Undisturbed, she delivers breakfast in bed to her lover, leading viewers

suddenly to take interest in the omitted specifics of their trip. The temporal and narrative

discontinuity that accompanies their story functions as a reflection of their tumultuous

relationship. For this reason, it provides an example of the ways in which New Wave cinema

inspires Honoré's use of similar jump cuts in *Dans Paris*.

To further upset the logical flow of events in *Pierrot le fou*, Godard occasionally uses the

flashback technique in addition to jump cuts. In many ways similar to ellipses, flashbacks are a

common tool used even by conventional cinema to inform viewers of events outside of the plot.

As Bordwell notes, they serve many purposes in narrating a film, and can "create a relatively

communicative narration with a small degree of self-consciousness […if] the narration

motivates the presentation of the flashback realistically, letting us eavesdrop on the character's

memory."[87] Flashback may not have been a crucial element in New Wave films specifically

because it tends to favor plot development in conventional films. It follows that in *Pierrot le fou*,

flashbacks occur only rarely, yet in an unusual way that makes the order of events unclear. In

one scene, for example, Ferdinand gazes into the distance upon discovering that the police are

looking for him and his accomplice, at which point viewers see an image of him in a bedroom

with his wife before he ran off with Marianne. Although this flashback suggests that he is

reflecting upon what he abandoned for his new life of criminal delinquency, it nonetheless seems

that, unlike similar moments in *Dans Paris*, subjectivity does not matter much in this case, as

Godard's characters are far from realistic portraits of human beings. Nothing about Godard's

characters or their story is supposed to be more than marginally believable, and he was far more

interested (in *Pierrot le fou*, at least) in the present unraveling of events than in what caused

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[87] Bordwell. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 79.

them. By contrast, Honoré's use of flashback will suggest more about the actual subjectivity of a character, particularly in the case of Paul, whose mental subjectivity, or inner voice and thoughts, are reified through flashback (and other) techniques.

Godard also employs dialogue as a narrative tool that at times takes the form of logical conversations, and at times creates purposely irrational ones—particularly in regards to conflicting feelings of love and resentment between Ferdinand and Marianne—that add to the film's generally confounding effect. The following conversation echoes two odd verbal exchanges in *Pierrot le fou*. First, Ferdinand asks Marianne if she plans to leave him, to which she replies "mais non, bien sûr" (of course not, of course). He then asks "bien sûr?" (of course ?) and she replies, "Oui, bien sûr, oui bien sûr" (yes, of course, yes, of course). After each "oui, bien sûr," she looks at the camera in direct address. A leading scholar of Godard's cinema, David Wills, explains that "[s]omewhere in there, between her first 'non' and second two 'oui's, between her 'no' and her 'yes,' [...] between him and her, or between her and the camera or audience, the truth should lie. But it remains an enigma, or at least divided into half-truths and lesser fractions whose disintegrating force structures the whole film."[88] Later, toward the end of *Pierrot le fou*, Marianne explains to Ferdinand why she did in fact leave him—if only temporarily—to which he responds with an obviously self-contradictory remark: "Je te crois, menteuse" (I believe you, liar). Marianne seems unfazed by the sarcastic response from her lover, just like Anna, who smiles when Paul swears at her in *Dans Paris*.

Although they use similar stylistic techniques, Honoré and Godard usually mobilize them to achieve different diegetic goals. If the failed dialogues between their respective lovers stand

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[88] David Wills. *Jean Luc Godard's Pierrot le fou*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 10.

out as impressively similar, it is precisely because so many other influences from *Pierrot le fou* on *Dans Paris* relate more globally to the overall impression made by these similar techniques, rather than to direct allusions or to specific stylistics employed for analogous reasons. That said, many of the differences that appear when we analyze these films closely reflect social changes that allow Honoré to use the same techniques in comparable ways without thereby falling into the trap of imitation. Since he takes up new family themes relevant to contemporary society, each of the cinematic practices that he borrows from New Wave directors resonates differently. Unlike Godard, he applies the *dis*continuity editing system to kinship ties that *cannot* be broken merely by verbal dissent.

In terms of general narrative devices that depart from conventional narrative form, Honoré includes a few seemingly non-logical scenes within the otherwise coherent storyline. To take an especially compelling example, in a peculiar scene, Paul suddenly strolls through the woods with an unknown woman, singing (rather than speaking) a personal monologue that ponders love, and sharing intimate information with the apparent stranger, who never reappears in the film. Her identity remains an absolute mystery; no explanation of their quick woodland jaunt is ever provided. Yet, the preceding and following scenes depict Paul in a state of tremendous anxiety and depression, so that the only logical explanation to the otherwise random "in-between" forest scene is that it represents his own subjective reality.

Here, Honoré bears out Deleuze's claim that, when cinema blurs the boundaries between fact and fantasy, "time-images and forms of subjectivity converge […] in the visions, imaginations, memories, or failures of memory (amnesia, ellipses) that come to dominate modern cinema."[89] Paul's fantasy, daydream, or subconscious desire to connect with another

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[89] Ibid., 161.

woman strangely surges up—seemingly from nowhere—to become an integral part of the film's plotline, as fragmented as it may therefore be. This narrative discontinuity is made more easily comprehensible to viewers if we consider its context: Jonathan, who serves as an omniscient narrator, interrupts the *vraisemblance* of the film as early as its first scene, when he introduces himself and explains that he will play a role in the film about to be watched. Exactly like the narrator in *Pierrot le fou*, he combines direct address with his role as narrator; denying viewers their role as anonymous observers who keep their distance from the conventional narrative.

In *Dans Paris*, the narration begins by way of a rather transparent direct address, but this technique also adds to the film's overall fractured quality. At times, it contributes useful information about events, but—more often than not—the narration simply reminds viewers that they are watching a fiction film whose events are predetermined and whose characters are actors. It invites viewers into the creative process, allows them feel that they are part of the story, and playfully teases those who trust in the 'reality' of the characters or believe that the events unfolding might be authentic. Honoré throws viewers into the film's pervasive state of romantic collapse in its opening scene when Jonathan announces by way of direct address that his brother Paul and his long-term girlfriend Anna left Paris for the countryside, along with her son Loup. According to Jonathan, Paul justified the move by assuring his family that life would be easier for him there, since he could distance himself from Jonathan. In his first personal commentary, Jonathan adds that he should have stopped Paul from leaving, which suggests that their fraternal relationship involves nearly as much ambivalence as the couple's troubled love.

In a scene later in the film, Jonathan reverts to childish antics to get Paul out of bed, betting his brother that he can arrive at the *Galeries Lafayette* in fifteen minutes on foot. He then bolts out of the apartment to get a head start, slamming the door behind him. The next shot

shows him on the balcony, back in his role as the narrator, addressing the camera as he exclaims "I didn't slam the door that hard!" In this moment, Jonathan abruptly breaks the boundary between diegetic and non-diegetic continuity for the sole purpose of reminding viewers that they are watching a fiction. On the one hand, the notable lack of closure to this infantile game and trivial detail merely offers comic relief. On the other hand, it reinforces the subjective time-space dimension identified by Deleuze. Here, Honoré again seems to be playing with the medium of film simply to experiment with technique and to amuse his viewers.

Throughout *Dans Paris*, Honoré creates narrative ellipses similar to the "in-between" spaces in the plotline of *Pierrot le fou* that complicate the viewing experience. They prove much more prevalent in sequences that recount the fractured love story between Paul and Anna than in other sequences involving the rest of the family in Paris. In their country house, the couple's interactions often disrupt continuity so severely that the narration is difficult for viewers to follow. As a result, there is a link between emotional fragility and temporal disorder. Roughly cut transitions from one scene to the next leave viewers perplexed, such as the jump from a post-coital disagreement (in what appears to be the bedroom), to a shot of the couple driving. Viewers cannot know whether this scene precedes or follows what was witnessed in the bedroom. Moreover, the conflicting emotions displayed from one moment to the next deprive viewers of chronological precision. The bedroom scene ends in complete misunderstanding and animosity, whereas the car scene shows the couple happy, with no transition from one emotional state to the next. The formal and thematic discontinuities reinforce each other and typify Honoré's style in this film.

Furthermore, the elliptical chaos achieved through form reflects the strange sexual dynamics within the couple, underscoring their ever more disharmonious and toxic relationship.

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When Paul reads aloud a book passage about a couple falling out of love, a hyperbolic embrace between Paul and Anna is one of several failures at intimacy initiated by each of them. At one moment, Paul rejects Anna; another, he aggressively rubs his groin on her face as he asks "C'est ça que tu veux?" (*Is that what you want*?). At one moment, they engage in a hostile confrontation; at another, they laugh together. The gaps created by these ellipses never prevent viewers from seeing the sublimation, or the conversion of a negative impulse into a more productive use, that gradually channels conflict and demeaning behavior toward resolution. Temporal continuity is similarly thrown by the wayside in scenes where Paul takes pictures of himself swallowing pills, then sobs as he studies those pictures. The scenes are interspersed by abrupt jumps with a makeup scene (in which the lovers confess their continued affection), viewed from different angles, as though the situation has not changed; only the camera-determined perspective on that situation is different.

Much like the deliberate insertion of direct address, or the use of ellipses to contort temporal and spatial continuity, jump cuts also appear at first blush to highlight the "power of the false" of the film. By creating the sense of gaps, or in-betweens, that the viewer cannot directly experience but may potentially fill in with narrative explanations tied to the characters' subjectivity, Honoré transforms these "in-betweens" into part and parcel of the viewing experience itself. Bordwell calls these cuts "blind spots" because they make viewers feel as though they blinked and missed something on screen, when in fact they did not.[90] He suggests that we grasp jump cuts as "a change within the diegetic world where normal laws of physics do not apply," so that our brain cannot make sense of what our eyes perceive.[91] In *Dans Paris*, this kind of jump cut only occurs occasionally. In moments of heightened emotional tension or

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[90] Bordwell. "Jump Cuts and Blind Spots," in <u>Wide Angle</u> (Vol. 6, No. 1. 1984), 4.
[91] Ibid., 5.

trauma, characters perceive reality only partially; there are gaps in their gathering and processing of what is taking place around them. As viewers, we then experience the film events from the characters' point of view, which creates an incomplete perception of reality. The jump cuts, then, appear quite appropriate when Paul is accused by his partner of not loving her, or listening to her; they indeed act as gaps in his reception of her comments, suggesting that he is not entirely conscious of their interaction. Because *Dans Paris* exhibits a far less pervasive sense of chaos, its jump cuts disrupt the viewers' sense of cohesion just enough to draw their attention. As a result, these cuts serve a relatively clear diegetic as well as stylistic purpose.

Angelo Restivo reminds us that, for Deleuze, cinema "functions in the way consciousness does—dividing things up, reassembling things into sets, framing its interests, forming wholes"; it "posits a virtual wholeness or continuum of the world […] while at the same time necessarily— by the very requirement of the motion-picture camera—subjecting the whole to discontinuity, dissemination."[92] It follows that each film "frames its interests" in unique ways that provoke viewers into developing differing strategies in their attempts to construct a "whole." Just as accepting some degree of discontinuity is a necessary component of the willing suspension of disbelief in any film viewing, the "frame" constructed by a director may incorporate the very functioning of consciousness into the manner of constructing a "virtual wholeness." In this respect, Honoré exhibits a greater concern for the thematic justification behind aesthetic choices than does Godard, who less often used jump cuts for the purpose of advancing plotlines, developing the psychological depth of his characters, or illustrating emotional relationships between them.

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[92] Angelo Restivo. "Into the Breach," in *The Brain is the Screen*, 176.

If ellipses prove useful in *Dans Paris* for expressing imaginative escape from strife, then flashbacks (including their complex forms, such as embedded flashbacks or meta-flashbacks), which permeate Paul and Anna's story, illustrate the ways in which memory impedes such an escape. To an even greater degree than in *Pierrot le fou*, they thoroughly disorient viewers precisely because they make it unclear whether the narrative is moving forward or returning to the past. In one example, we jump from the couple fighting in the living room to a shot of Paul picking up Anna at the train station. Next, we return to the apartment and learn that she went to Paris, but we never learn why or for how long. In the next shots, we move from their house in the country, to the woods. All of these flashbacks are "nested" within the confines of Jonathan's flashback as narrator to the story.

Nonlinearity is not limited to the love story, but also marks the troubled father-son relationships in the film. In a particularly moving father-son scene, Paul recounts his suicide attempt to Mirko, his father. He temporarily usurps his brother's role as narrator as we hear his voice describe what occurred and observe how it unfolded by way of flashbacks. By allowing a character internal to the story to narrate events despite having established an omniscient narrator at the outset, Honoré progressively blurs still further the narrative structure of the film, yet another fracture that dissolves any sense of continuity. Viewers are placed in the uncomfortable position of attempting to reconstruct some type of narrative coherence as a way to imagine a stronger the father-son bond. Burdened with this task because Paul has lost sight of reality in his state of emotional upheaval, viewers may well realize that this confusion encourages them to feel similar sentiments, turning the flashback into a cinematic tool for promoting viewer-character bonds, even as it suggests the aesthetic self-awareness of the director. In the end, I would argue that Honoré's relatively consistent use of flashback in *Dans Paris* is inspired not by the New

Wave, but by German Expressionism[93] and *film noir*, two genres that consistently employed this technique (as well as omniscient narrators) to convey a strong sense of subjectivity through the memories of their characters.[94] For example, Billy Wilder's 1944 *Double Indemnity*, the story of a man guilty of murder and insurance fraud, is told primarily through flashback, which both heightens the film's suspense and also sheds light on the protagonist's subjective experience. In addition to flashback, directors associated with these styles, such as Alfred Hitchcock, also used high contrast lighting and other highly stylized visual techniques to exaggerate a film's mood or the characters' subjective experiences (fear, anxiety, etc.).[95]

Finally, as Paul's flashback emphasizes, Honoré's storytelling often relies upon dialogue, which reveals conflicting feelings of love and resentment between Paul and Anna in *Dans Paris*. When they arrive at the train station, she tells him that she plans to call him as soon as she arrives in Paris, and then she gives him a kiss. He smiles, but replies "Va te faire foutre" (Fuck you). This exchange might well be interpreted as a contemporary twist on the classic Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin song, "Je t'aime... moi non plus," yet it seems likely that viewers are not privy here to an actual dialogue between the protagonists. Instead, Paul's subjective reality seems to take over, imposing on the screen what he was thinking, rather than the words uttered. This conversation echoes the odd verbal exchange mentioned earlier in *Pierrot le fou*, when Ferdinand asks Marianne if she plans to leave him, to which she replies "mais non, bien sûr" (of course not, of course).

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[93] Andrew explains that German Expressionist cinema preferred to reject realism in exchange for the portrayal of the subjective experience of characters through objective techniques.
[94] Dudley Andrew. *Concepts in Film Theory*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 50.
[95] Ibid, 50.

In this analysis of narrative techniques often shared by Godard and Honoré, I have proposed that despite the similarity of their stylistic techniques, Honoré and Godard often activate them to achieve different goals. In short, Honoré takes Godard's techniques, originally aimed at creating a confusing viewing experience, and uses them to offer social commentaries specific to his viewers' reality. Honoré's film is therefore not a mere imitation or reproduction of Godard's. Honoré thematically integrates the "in-between" moments created by fragmentary techniques into his narrative for the purposes of character development in a manner that is all but absent from Godard's film. What *Dans Paris* inherits from the destructive couple in *Pierrot le fou*, it applies to the family in order to achieve newly constructive outcomes.

Filming Fracture: Cinematography in *Dans Paris* and Godard's *À bout de souffle*

In cinema, the power of montage to create meaning cannot be understated, yet the images themselves carry as much import as their arrangement. Perceived meaning can change profoundly either based on the images, or on their order. Dudley Andrew reminds us that "the structure of cinematic representation from beginning to end is one of process, where fragments are ruled by the wholes they add up to, and where belief and unbelief keep our eyes on the screen while our mind glides into the world of the representation."[96] Mindful of his responsibility as the *auteur* of this cinematographic process, Honoré is meticulous in constructing the visual world of *Dans Paris*. From the opening to the final image, he succeeds in joining the film's many fragmented units into a cohesive whole. Despite the sense of disorganization that characterizes the film's narrative, the composition, or the frame of each image, and the mise-en-scène of the

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[96] Ibid., 42.

elements that appear in it, are all carefully organized. Although his manipulation of the camera consistently exhibits an identifiable purpose, that purpose is to reflect the fractured nature of the characters and events in the film's narrative world.

In its attention to cinematography, *Dans Paris* closely resembles another iconic Godard film, the aforementioned *À bout de souffle*, a mash-up of the romantic comedy and the gangster flick, filmed entirely on location in Paris using a handheld camera. Andrew calls this black and white masterpiece—famous for its frequent jump cuts, natural off-screen sounds, and references to American gangster films—a "fundamentally illogical eruption" whose disorder nonetheless does not undermine its superior quality.[97] The film recounts the story of Michel, a young thief who idolizes American film icon Humphrey Bogart. After embarking on a stealing and shooting spree in the country, he returns to Paris and hides out with his American girlfriend, Patricia, a journalist working for the *New York Herald Tribune*. When Patricia eventually discovers that Michel is a petty criminal hiding from the police, she turns him in. When he attempts to escape by running through the streets of Paris, a policeman shoots him. He dies moments later, which recalls the film's title, "À bout de souffle" (literally out of breath).

Like *Dans Paris*, the underlying principle of the film is fragmentation, which serves both to convey the chaos in the male protagonist's fictional life, and to challenge cinematic convention. It constantly reminds viewers that they are watching a film, not a recording of real people and events, as images in the film do not always directly correspond to its diegetic world. Just like its storytelling techniques, its montage refuses to follow a rational or linear path and, therefore, often appears not to make sense.

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[97] Andrew. *Breathless*. (London: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 3.

What distinguishes Honoré from his New Wave predecessor is that whereas Godard uses his radical techniques to display fantasy, fiction and hyperbolic drama, Honoré is more focused on using visual fracture to represent reality. Given that their two films involve romantic couples, it is especially relevant to analyze the manner in which these directors film gender—that is to say, how each one frames his shots to focus attention on bodies, in relation to notions of gender roles during different time periods. While narrative and dialogue can offer substantial information about male and female characters on screen, visual cues may well prove even more influential in informing our perceptions of gender, since they often convey tacit messages. It is indeed remarkable how differently men and women are shot, framed, and positioned in scenes showing couples—especially for a 21st century viewer watching a 1960s film. Of course, in *Dans Paris*, the three main characters are male, while all the minor characters are female, a discrepancy that applies to many, though not all of Honoré's films. As a queer-identified man, he is primarily interested in male sexuality and subjectivity, which doubtless inflects his filming. Regardless of sexual preferences, however, Honoré's visual technique applies to the construction of both male and female gender roles, forging a gender-image relationship that deviates from Godard's in *À bout de souffle*. On the one hand, I would argue that Honoré has come a long way in adapting to more flexible concepts of gender; on the other, I would claim that some depictions of men and women seem as conventional as those created half of a century ago by Godard. Their similarities and differences reveal as much about the *subject* of the cinematic gaze over time as they do about their male and female objects.

In Godard's film, one of the most noticeable cinematographic elements is the portrayal of sexual intimacy between the two main characters. Though Michel does test boundaries in his physical relationship with Patricia, the tone is playful, and lacks the air of sexual violence found

in Honoré's later film. It is characteristic more of a new couple's excitement than of a troubled couple's resentment. For example, when Michel warns Patricia in bed that he will strangle her unless she smiles by the count of eight, viewers are at no moment afraid that he will actually perform the violent act. The irony is that she does not at that point know he has killed a police officer and is therefore the object of a manhunt. A close-up of his cunning facial expression is followed by one of Patricia's face and neck, his hands grasping her throat. This kind of image, more common in a thriller or horror film, leads to a reversed conclusion: after the count of eight, she smiles and slaps his face. He laughs, unfazed, and slaps her behind—a repeated act of dominance that he exhibits throughout this bedroom scene. Such gender-specific foreplay is as far as New Wave films went in depicting sexual intimacy. Sexual acts were not normally portrayed explicitly during the 1950s and 60s, but rather only hinted at in the images and storylines.[98] In terms of screening sexual intimacy, Honoré explores arenas unavailable to Godard due to the standards of propriety in his day.

Aside from sexual games explicitly or implicitly suggesting violence, or male domination and female submissiveness, other visual cues, such as symbolic objects, also inform the depictions of gender in Godard's film. Michel's addiction to cigarettes, for example, implies an emotional attachment, if not an obsession, emphasized by close-ups of him puffing like Humphrey Bogart in American crime dramas. The cigarette here is a sign of male bravado and mysteriousness. More significantly, the incessant smoking and the cloud that surrounds Michel at all times offers a cryptic foreshadowing of his impending breathlessness, his state of literally ending up *à bout de souffle* when the police finally kill him (even if viewers in 1960 were less aware of the fatal effects of smoking). I would also argue that the title of Godard's film makes

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[98] Phil Powrie and Keith Reader, Eds. *French Cinema: A Student's Guide*. (London: MPG Books Ltd., 2002), 27.

the cigarette an obvious allusion to "breathlessness," **a**nd that it becomes a polymorphous motif throughout the film—in fact, it could almost be considered a character. Both protagonists smoke in bed, in the bathroom, in the streets, or anywhere they please. Some shots of the two together become so clouded with smoke that details of the picture become obscured, giving the images a dreamlike quality.

Furthermore, Godard constantly links exterior images to characters in the film, utilizing close-ups, zooms, and image inserts that liken them to subjects of paintings, photographs, or other films. By suggesting a symbolic connection between the characters and historical or popular figures, he affirms the cultural artistry of his own New Wave cinema. For example, he repeatedly jumps from close-ups of Patricia's face to close-ups of postcards around her room: women in Renoir or Picasso paintings, or in unknown photographs. When she calls Michel a liar, the camera travels up to a poster of a Picasso painting above his head that pictures a distorted male face, then back down to his, suggesting his likeness to the deformed figure in the painting, and confirming his mendacity. Talking to Michel, Patricia hangs a new poster of a Renoir painting, poses next to it in medium close-up, and asks if she resembles the woman that is its subject. Godard never shies away from the objectification of women, yet, since he cannot film Patricia nude, he substitutes a shot of Michel reading a nude magazine to allow that the male gaze to fall on the female body. The scene offers no corresponding insight into female thoughts on the submissive role women were then often required to play in society.

Another dominant motif throughout *À bout de souffle* is the mirror, also carrying multiple symbolic meanings, some of which comment on the gaze—how we see male and female characters and how they see themselves. Godard's use of the mirror in *À bout de souffle* is more

deliberate than Honoré's in *Dans Paris*, since he shoots characters gazing at themselves in mirrors for extended periods of time, often imitating others or experimenting with silly facial gestures. Michel, for one, gazes at himself repeatedly during the film: utilizing hand or vanity mirrors in his first lover's apartment, he emulates the iconic Bogart expression as he cryptically drags his thumb across his lower lip. Unlike Jonathan's in *Dans Paris,* Michel's self-interest does not imply self-absorption, but rather the idea that he is out of touch with who he is. In his fragmented reality, he is playing the role of the criminal. Hiding out from the police, he pretends to be a gangster from the American movies he knows all too well, living out adventures he has seen on screen. Later in the film, at Patricia's apartment, he finds her gazing at herself in the bathroom mirror and instructs her to make silly faces. Viewers only see her from behind, but her face is reflected in the mirror. Once she experiments with the facial expressions, she returns to the bedroom, and Michel takes his turn in the mirror. This long focus on the two playing in front of the mirror may well express their desire to remodel each other in new forms, but—as many Godard scholars claim—the New Wave director was often not concerned with meaning. I must agree with this argument, since although his visual style was intentionally jarring at times, he wanted viewers simply to perceive images at face value, so to speak. Whatever his intentions might have been, the film can certainly convey meaning on its own: its home-video or documentary style realism depicts a moment of quotidian playfulness between two lovers in which self-exploration perhaps represents a closer bond than shared intimacy. Moreover, although Michel and Patricia fit neatly overall into gender-specific categories of the time period, their experimentation with self-gazing at least deviates from the conventional male cinematic gaze.

Not surprisingly, much of Honoré's cinematographic technique evokes various aspects of

Godard's *À bout de souffle*. Yet, as in the narrative domain, Honoré exhibits his own originality

by a unique combination of other techniques. Notably, he draws on the visual effects from other

film genres that explore the depth, proximity, and proportions of the characters and objects. In

addition, he establishes particular moods through lighting and decor, all of which help viewers

comprehend relationships among various elements in the diegetic world.

Like Godard, Honoré repeatedly provides viewers with visual cues that comment on

gender norms in the present-day. Given the overarching theme of rupture in *Dans Paris*, it may

come as no surprise that sexual intimacy is captured largely through awkward images that

suggest divisiveness rather than bonding, fracture, rather than cohesion, between the lovers.

Unlike those in *À bout de souffle*, partners here experience shame, humiliation, and

embarrassment when partially or fully nude; kissing or other intimate gestures are carried out

with hesitation or unexpected forcefulness. For instance, the framing seems intentionally divisive

when Paul and Anna first appear on screen. Paul leaves bed in a state of post-coital

misunderstanding in order to shower, implying that he has been dirtied and plans to 'wash

himself off.' In a scene that would normally evoke intimacy, the camera captures the bedroom

and adjacent bathroom, so that Anna and Paul are seen simultaneously, yet apart. She props

herself up in bed, putting the viewer in face-to-face contact with her, perhaps allowing us to

better empathize with her. Though she seems to address the viewer, she speaks to Paul,

producing a moment of semi-direct address that emphasizes the distance between them.

Since viewers see both characters, but they fail to see each other, this initial scene recalls

the Lacanian concept of the gaze and sexual intimacy: "we see, in the dialectic of the eye and the

gaze, that there is no coincidence, but, on the contrary, a lure. When, in love, I solicit a look, what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that—You never look at me from the place from which I see you."[99] This idea of the incongruity of perspective likewise arises in a scene in which Anna attempts to lure Paul into lovemaking by dancing topless for him—making herself highly vulnerable—only to be rejected. The gaze on Anna's partially nude body defies the traditional ways in which films objectify women for male pleasure. While it is certainly plausible that men would find her topless dancing stimulating, Honoré uses unconventional framing and rapid montage to inspire above all a sense of uneasiness. Although the director seems intentionally to avoid objectifying her in ways that typically attract the male gaze, he still represents her as inferior and subject to male humiliation, which is more extreme than any sexual encounters in Godard's film. While expressing such a reality does not necessarily condone it, the female subjugation pictured here is in no way liberating or transformative.

Like *À bout de souffle*, *Dans Paris* also contains other visual cues, such as symbolic objects, that inform the depictions of gender in *Dans Paris*. Before Jonathan's third sexual encounter, he lies in bed with Alice, his recent ex-girlfriend, beginning a very Godard-esque bedroom scene that is both realist and theatrical, reminding us of the long, playful bedroom scene that comprises over thirty minutes of *À bout de souffle*. The mood is immediately frictional, as Alice sentimentally gazes at him, while he ignores her, smokes his cigarette, and reads Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*. This textual reference offers a sly way to suggest that Jonathan—an insincere lover—takes interest in Franny, a girl disillusioned by the selfishness and capriciousness of those around her. This dramatic irony adds to the scene's theatrical tone,

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[99] Jacques-Alain Miller, Ed. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1981), 103.

inserting female subjectivity into a story which otherwise discredits Alice's perspective. Written closer to the time when New Wave cinema developed, *Franny and Zooey* inscribes Honoré's film into a tradition of exploring youth angst in literary as well as cinematic production. Using such a visual reference, Honoré can simultaneously express male domination and female revolt against submission, even as Alice remains subjugated to her former boyfriend. Meanwhile, Jonathan's cigarette juxtaposes this female subjectivity with the epitome of phallic symbols—namely, the obligatory post-coital cigarette, an omnipresent symbolic object in *À bout de souffle*.

The mirror that serves as another dominant motif throughout *À bout de souffle* also carries symbolic meaning in *Dans Paris*, yet in a more subtle way. Here, the image of characters' faces in mirrors often replaces the image of the characters themselves in front of the camera. When it replaces a direct shot, the mirror reflection creates a fractured point of view and forms a deeper gap between viewers and the protagonists. The mirror—or the characters studying themselves in the mirror—reinforces the impression of a fractured reality. It is as if the protagonists live in one reality, but see themselves as potentially inhabiting another. It is often Jonathan, for example, whom we see by way of a mirror reflection, either washing up, or wandering past store windows in the streets of Paris. Given his inconstancy (sleeping around, being dishonest, skipping school, lacking empathy for others), he could embody Lacan's notion of compensating for an inherent lack. By this interpretation, his visual identity in the mirror gives imaginary "wholeness" to the experience of a fragmented reality.[100] In much simpler terms, the repetition of his mirror images comments on his vanity and propensity for narcissistic behavior. Moreover, Honoré's focus on Jonathan in the mirror creates a double gaze on the male body: as he gazes at himself, and viewers see him both from a frontal and rear view. Moreover, I would

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[100] Lapsley and Westlake, 221.

suggest that in scenes such as this one, he is perhaps objectified by the female and/or gay gaze. Interestingly, none of the female characters are filmed in this way, except for a brief image of Anna gazing in the mirror as she breaks up with Paul over the telephone. In this moment of emotional intensity, her interest in looking at herself in the mirror might suggest that she must satisfy her own need for interpersonal closeness, or that she confronts the state of estrangement in their relationship with disbelief that it might truly reflect her reality.

Honoré not only uses the mirror to comment on the romantic relationship between Paul and Anna, but also frequently uses mirrors as conduits of meaning to illustrate fraternal bonding. The first bathroom scene, for example, shows a glimpse of Paul in the mirror, looking disheveled and catatonic, before the camera cuts to Jonathan in the shower, also seen by way of the mirror. In sharp contrast to Paul, who silently lets the hot water pour over his shivering body, Jonathan gaily sings to himself. Here, the mirror suggests both a gap and a strange connection between the brothers, creating the sense that the disconnectedness in their lives makes them incapable of truly seeing or hearing each other. However, their contrasting behaviors within confined spaces allow us to perhaps think of them as two parts of *one* subjectivity, as though they complete one another.

In addition to highly sexualized images of men and women in *Dans Paris*, there is also a notable focus given to the male body in non-sexual scenes, such as those between the brothers or with their father. All exchanges between Paul and Jonathan place them in close physical proximity inside the family's apartment, where they are at times nude in the bathroom or bedroom in borderline homoerotic positions. Some argue that Honoré has a tendency to highlight the homoerotic in his films, but that he never indicates an incestuous relationship. Instead, their

intimacy suggests a parental-fraternal bond that allows them to be fully open and vulnerable with each other in ways that they fail to share with their female lovers. On this point, Nick Rees-Roberts notes that, in an interview with Honoré before his film *Nous deux* (2000), the filmmaker explained his desire to explore contemporary fraternal relationships where the brothers seek to father or mother each other, or, to relate in a way similar to a couple.[101] At moments, the brothers cuddle and caress each other intimately, tickle each other in bed, or frolic in their underwear as young boys might do. They exhibit no explicit desire for each other, but their inordinate closeness seems to compensate for the lack of structure in their lives (divorced parents, etc.). The disconnectedness of the decomposed family forces them to substitute each other for the parents that they find incompetent and, it seems, motivates them to reenact early childhood scenes well into adulthood. Moreover, the brothers appropriate a female gender role by 'mothering' one another in order to make up for the absence of their real mother. Although she appears mid-way through the film to comfort Paul, it is implied that she is a largely absent and fair-weather mother figure.

One scene of almost maternal intimacy transpires when Jonathan finds Paul naked, sobbing, and shivering in the bathtub after having jumped into the Seine: fully clothed, he joins his brother in the bathtub, faces him, and caresses his body to warm him. The close-up shots of the brothers embracing in the bathtub bring us into the most vulnerable emotional sphere of the siblings, curled in the fetal position next to each other. Jonathan's exceptional tenderness underscores the stark realism of the entire sequence of traumatic images that make up Paul's account of attempted suicide given to his father. Honoré further captures moments of familial intimacy in a breakthrough moment of bonding when Paul finally allows Mirko to comfort him

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[101] Rees-Roberts, 94.

even though their relationship is relatively disconnected and unstable. The characters'

misunderstandings create yet another "in-between" space where clumsy attempts to

communicate lovingness are juxtaposed with conflict. After Paul verbally assaults his father for

trying to force him to eat, the two embrace, the camera travels from their heads down to Mirko's

waist, and it zooms in on Paul's hand around his father's side, clinging to him for support. Here,

Honoré uses montage to capture a momentary seal over the fractured wounds between father and

son. Contrary to the close-up of Michel's hand on Patricia's neck in *À bout de souffle*, this tight

hold illustrates a bond that the protagonists work to maintain in the womb-like private space of

the home, hoping to be able to nurture each other despite their uncertainties and hesitations.

An analysis of the visual "wholeness" in both *Dans Paris* and *À bout de souffle* would be

incomplete without a discussion of the city of Paris as a significant backdrop for both films'

events. Each film portrays a protagonist who spends significant time wandering the streets,

sidewalks, hidden passages, or parks of the French capital, treating the city like a playground. In

À bout de souffle, images of Paris are more consistently positive, bright, charming—until Michel

is killed on the road by the police. There is no doubt that Godard's shooting of this film presents

an iconic vision of Paris, complete with traveling shots along bustling roadways, as well as rapid

progressions of still shots of shops, cafés, and monuments. Images of the Eiffel Tower, the *Arc

de Triomphe*, and other world-renowned monuments appear in the background to add to the

romantic atmosphere. Andrew reminds us that, for Godard, Paris was a profoundly personal

location, where he was himself a monumental figure in 1960. Moreover, he underscores the fact

that Godard followed the tenet of authenticity that was at the heart of Paris' creative culture, so

the fictional narratives of his films are coupled with a realist visual representation of Paris seen

through the director's eyes.[102] Like Jonathan in *Dans Paris*, several scenes in *À bout de souffle* show Michel as he wanders (or runs) through the sidewalks, alleys, etc., at times dodging spies or police. It is hard not to compare Jonathan to Michel given their philandering ways and interest in treating the streets of Paris as their playground. Early in Godard's film, viewers see a close up Michel's hand holding coins at a café; he then pretends to pay for his coffee, but instead pulls the 'dine and dash': as he runs out, a traveling shot follows him out the door and across the street. The camera does not start and stop to follow him smoothly; as the camera follows his trajectory, a wall momentarily blocks him from view, yet Godard includes all of this arguably disordered footage taken on location with a handheld camera. As Michel crosses the street, a jump cut reveals him running toward camera in another location, adding to the fractured image viewers retain of his reckless behavior. In each shot, we sense that Michel navigates the city of Paris as if it were his own backyard.

While Godard seems to want to glamorize or idealize the "City of Lights," Honoré is not so one-dimensional in his depiction of the Paris, despite its importance in his title. Jonathan is the only character who spends a considerable amount of time outside, in Paris, and his relationship to urban space varies from joyful, romantic, and exciting to dark, melancholy, and tainted. In *Dans Paris*, Jonathan begins his jaunt around Paris in an apparent effort to coax Paul out of bed. At first, viewers follow him from behind as he runs down narrow staircases between old buildings, then weaves in and out of alleyways, treating the city like a playground or a maze. Unlike Michel in *À bout de souffle*, Jonathan never runs out of breath. After a minute or two, he stops an attractive woman on a scooter in a tunnel, hops on, and begins his first affair of the day. After having sexual relations with this anonymous woman in her apartment, Jonathan continues

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[102] Andrew (1997), 5.

to prance around the city, at times running up and down narrow staircases as if in a maze or a video game, suggesting that love and life are all a game to him. After a brief run-in with his father who is buying a Christmas tree on the street, Jonathan escapes the duty of helping him, and continues to run until he encounters his ex-girlfriend Alice. Up to this point, Honoré exploits the labyrinth-like quality of Paris' urban landscape, depicting it as a modern playground made of ancient buildings, secret passage ways, and winding staircases.

Suddenly, Honoré shifts gears. Jonathan and Alice begin their encounter on an iconic Parisian bridge, where they appear vulnerable to the open space and the intricate backdrop of sculptures and monuments. Once they appear to reconcile, Honoré films them in accelerated motion as they gallivant around various gardens and monuments, reminding us of Michel and Patricia's wanderings at the Champs Elysées and Arc de Triomphe. Reverting to the childish antics we saw earlier in the film, Jonathan woos Alice by dancing and pretending to ice skate on the cement in a series of jump cuts that shows him in slightly different positions in the same courtyard, adding to the disorienting effect of the scene. When Alice joins in his dance, the color filter switches to black and white, creating a nostalgic vision of romantic Paris, with *Les Invalides* rising behind them in the shot. Here, the accelerated motion and playful games may suggest joy and excitement, yet in the scene's final shot, the two lovers appear blindfolded, searching for each other's embrace. Then they kiss blindfolded, an image that suggests a persistent distance between them. Recognizing that they are unable to gaze at one another, despite their physical intimacy, viewers cannot help but wonder if the lovers will rekindle their romance.

To render the images yet further destabilizing, Honoré makes it appear as though Jonathan and Alice are aware of being filmed, as they reach out and pretend to wash the façade of *Les Invalides* with the palms of their hands. He creates a disorienting optical illusion using the depth of field, which gives viewers the impression that the building is much smaller and right in front of them, a popular technique for tourist photographs of Paris that suggests the couple is "visiting" the city together. Viewers can see this falsified image, yet they cannot access it, as if they are confined to an imaginary bubble. This scene therefore supports Bordwell's discussion that describes characters as "imprisoned" when they are intentionally framed to suggest their lack of freedom.[103] Again, imaginary physical boundaries reflecting the real psychological boundaries between the ruptured members of the couple sustain the sense of visual fracture.

Perhaps the overall contrast between *Dans Paris* and *À bout de souffle* could be summarized in terms of their portrayals of "high" versus "low" culture. Honoré employs visual techniques that liken his characters to literary figures or American pop stars, while Godard compares his protagonists to subjects of classical painting and sculpture. Moreover, whether sexual or not, cinematic images often depict human bodies in ways that create meaning and provide insight into social norms of the time during which they are made. In both films, it is men who enjoy the privilege of movement, of action, and given that cinema is about moving images, it makes them more complete cinematographic subjects. This tension between "high" and "low" culture is also therefore exposed through the male characters (who enjoy the "high" status) and female ("low" status) characters in each film. In Godard's film, however, one should note Patricia's active role in distributing the New York Herald Tribune in the streets of Paris, as well as her desire to become a journalist. While this may arguably elevate her intellectual status, it

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[103] Bordwell (1989), 174.

does not change the dynamic between her and Michel. Ultimately, the reasons for the gender disparity differ in each film, because while the couples in both inhabit a fractured world, Honoré's cinematography attempts to create coherence, while Godard's does not.

Musical Dialogue and Aural Chaos in *Dans Paris* and Jacques Demy's *Les parapluies de Cherbourg*

Although often defined as a visual art, cinema also infuses a story with sound. This aspect of its multi-media character affects viewers' perception of the narrative, the characters, and the overall tone and genre of the film. As Bordwell notes, the spectator relies on sound as much as on image when making sense of a film's events, and "assumes a direct link between acoustic clarity, narrative relevance, and spatial coherence."[104] Yet, Restivo cites Michel Chion who claims that a "quiet revolution" has occurred in contemporary cinema since the 1960s such that "the increasing density of sound mixes creates a hyperreal cinematic space such that the boundaries of inside and outside are blurred."[105] Not surprisingly, much of what transpires in terms of sound in *Dans Paris* reflects the New Wave: jazz music makes up most of the score; characters sing rather than speak portions of the dialogue, and images that are out of sync with dialogue or other diegetic sound underscore the film's discontinuity. Of course, it is the combined cinematographic, visual and aural effects that help viewers relate to the characters' emotional turbulence, but sound is arguably the most compelling of these elements since it often ties together sequences otherwise dissociated by jump cuts. Unlike the voyeuristic distance afforded to viewers by visual effects, sound tends to draw them into *Dans Paris*.

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[104] Bordwell (1985), 119.
[105] Restivo, 172.

Like Godard and Truffaut, Honoré employs non-diegetic jazz music to accompany characters as they wander the streets of Paris (Jonathan in *Dans Paris*; Michel in *À bout de souffle*; Antoine in *Les 400 coups*). Like his forefathers, he also makes sound incoherent by intentionally confusing apparently non-diegetic music with diegetic music and experimenting with sound/image asynchronicity so that we hear characters' speak over still-lipped faces. Most important, Honoré harks back to the musical comedies of Jacques Demy in which characters sing rather than speak their dialogue. Since Jacques Demy is one of Honoré's major inspirations, the latter's use of sound appears especially inspired by one of his favorite films, *Les parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964). Demy's choice of an all-sung dialogue resembles decisions made by other New Wave directors who demonstrated a strong penchant for questioning the real by distorting notions of fantasy and reality. Taboulay, for example, claims that in *Les parapluies*[106], "Demy a durement éprouvé cette manière dont les personnages défient, en chantant, le poids du réel."[107] While other elements of his film are not particularly unconventional (the narrative is linear, cinematography is unobstructed by jarring visual techniques), Demy's use of sound goes far beyond his cinematic forefathers and compatriots by inextricably linking it to his films' plotlines. In particular, the saccharine quality of his musical narratives begs an emotional response from viewers, unlike the less demonstrative musical sequences in Honoré, whose use of sound techniques is meant to have a disorienting, rather than emotional, impression on viewers.

Moreover, because Demy's *Les parapluies* uses music throughout, there is no shock value to the characters' perpetual song and dance. In his 1967 *Les mademoiselles de Rochefort*, Demy blends spoken and sung dialogue in a typically theatrical way, where song and dance tend

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[106] Henceforth *Les parapluies*
[107] Ibid., 48.

to ensue in moments of heightened passion. It is in films like Godard's *Pierrot le fou* that singing and/or dancing are not smoothly integrated into the narrative, but rather abruptly interjected, blurring the boundaries between fantasy and reality. At the end of *Pierrot le fou*, for example, Ferdinand encounters an unknown man on a seaside dock who, rather than speaking, introduces himself and recounts (without any logical explanation) the tale of his broken heart all through song. Sung dialogue is abruptly inserted into some of Honoré films, such as *Les chansons d'amour* or *Les bien-aimés* (2011). Yet in *Dans Paris*, the musical interludes fit somewhere between the seamlessness of Demy's work and the disjointedness of Godard's.

While music also plays a major role in Demy's other films, sung dialogue is most ubiquitous in *Les parapluies*. This film is exceptional in that all dialogue is sung as recitative, from the most passionate sentiments ("Non jamais, je ne l'oublierai" [I'll never forget him]) to the most banal ("Il a quel âge?" [How old is he?]). All characters in all scenes sing to each other, or to themselves, musicalizing life in a way that feels awkward at times (mechanics quarreling with one another in the garage through upbeat, dramatic tunes), and at other times feels natural, such as when lovers sing to each other while confessing their love or bidding farewell. As Camille Deboulay explains, for Demy, "le chant est une autre forme de convention, un autre moyen de transcender (transformer) la parole et le réel. En chantant, les personnages excèdent la réalité qui les entoure et la portée de ce qu'ils disent."[108] For Demy, music not only transcended reality, but was also the conduit for emotion, particularly between lovers. For example, when Guy finds out he is drafted for the Algerian War and has to leave for two years, his news initiates an emotional farewell that he sings with Geneviève. Here, the musical conversation fits logically

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[108] Camille Taboulay. *Le cinéma enchanté de Jacques Demy*. (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 1996), 48.

into the film's world since the rest of the dialogue is sung, as well. It is far from disconcerting for viewers familiar with the conventions of musical comedies.

Though Demy does not blur the boundaries of diegetic and non-diegetic sound in as destabilizing a way as Honoré (or Godard, for that matter), he does insert diegetic music and other sounds into the film in ways that subtly subvert viewers' attention. The entire film is sung and accompanied by music; there are but two or three moments of silence in all its 91 minutes. Therefore, when the music suddenly subsides in one scene midway through the film, the loud and abrupt sound of a train whistle at the moment of Guy's departure for war shocks spectators' ears. This reverse effect where silence or natural sound interrupts the musical score seems to imply a desire for sound experimentation on the part of Demy, a desire echoed later in Honoré's film. In addition to the train whistle, another moment of surprising diegetic sound occurs when Guy and Geneviève attend a play at the theater. Here, the non-diegetic jazz score continues as they enter, then it hardly fades out before live orchestra music fades in, creating a momentary overlap of aural distortion. To offer another example, when the couple is dancing at a Cuban club, music plays in the background and the two sing their dialogue to that diegetic music. This is the only instance in the film in which music from within the film's reality accompanies the characters' song. Finally, toward the end of the film, the jazz score is rather abruptly interrupted by the sounds of a marching band. We soon see a parade passing by the windows of the umbrella store and realize the music we hear is again diegetic. However, our immediate comprehension is undermined by the fact that we heard the sound before we could attach it to its source.

The film serves as an exemplary point of comparison for *Dans Paris*. Just like the consistently high-tempo jazz that permeates the score of *Les parapluies*, much of *Dans Paris'*

score from the opening of the film onward is comprised of light, easy-listening jazz music written by Honoré's friend and collaborator, Alex Beaupain, who also composed most of the additional songs in the soundtrack specifically for this film. As Jonathan introduces himself as narrator, the up-tempo jazz score kicks in, accompanying his speech softly in the background. Its mellow tempo reminds us of the jazz score that served as a musical backdrop to many New Wave films. The same music escorts Jonathan on his adventures in the streets of Paris and parallels his experience of bliss as he conquers three different women in one day. On its own, there is nothing jarring about this aspect of the score; it is pleasantly uncomplicated until interrupted by diegetic music, from a radio or an album played by the characters. Moreover, the jazz score usually feels like an appropriate accompaniment to the film's events. At moments, however, it contrasts ironically with the somber atmosphere of the scene. For example, the invigorating nondiegetic piano music that breaks the silence of Paul and Anna's initial fight scene in the bedroom creates discord between the emotional mood and the sound associated with it, a device which concedes to the film's disjointedness.

The kind of "quiet revolution"[109] described by Chion becomes manifest when Honoré overlaps the nondiegetic score with diegetic music, confusing viewers as to the source and location of the sound. For example, rather than reducing the volume of the jazz score before introducing new music, he sometimes allows the two to overlap for a few moments, creating a subtle yet disorienting cacophony that confuses the diegetic and non-diegetic worlds within the film, similar to the jarring train whistle in *Les parapluies*. In the country house, for example, Paul studies and swallows a pile of pills, then takes a picture of them in his mouth, begins to cry, spits the pills out, and aborts his second suicide attempt, events all accompanied by the same jazz

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[109] Restivo follows Michel Chion in describing sound discontinuity as a "quiet revolution." 172.

score—lively jazz now ironically accompanies suicide. As he sobs, Anna enters, and indie rock music begins to play while she suggestively dances toward him.[110] This diegetic indie rock then fades out as the recurring jazz score momentarily resumes until Anna turns up the radio again, drowning out the jazz in aural confusion. When a director like Honoré undermines aural coherence through experimentation with such overlapping sounds, Bordwell argues, "the spectator must be more attentive to pick out the narratively pertinent and spatially informative sound events."[111] However, it seems contemporary viewers may have become accustomed to these types of demands on their attention, particularly because they are likely to have already experienced watching New Wave cinema. In other words, Honoré exacerbates overlapping sounds that were already present in *Les parapluies*, but each use of this technique requires its own individual reconstruction of meaning by the viewers, depending on its context on film.

Just as Demy obscures the source of a sound in *Les parapluies*, Honoré experiments with sound/image asynchronicity by playing dialogue over still-lipped characters or by using voiceover—at times two voices speaking simultaneously—to destabilize viewers' sense of cohesion. In certain instances, this occurs when viewers might expect aural dissonance; in others, viewers are likely shocked when what seems like an everyday conversation is illogically complicated by sound. For example, when Jonathan and Alice frolic outside in Parisian courtyards during their emotionally intense reunion, Honoré employs a voiceover technique so that we hear a faint conversation between the two men, but we cannot discern what they are saying. They appear to dance and play, not talk. As they engage in all sorts of games, we continue to hear snippets of their conversation in the background, accompanied by nondiegetic

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[110] Alex Beaupain. "Flavor." Performed by Girls in Hawaii.
[111] Bordwell (1985), 119.

music that nonetheless appears to rhythm their dance steps; yet, the music and dialogue weave in and out asynchronously. Here, the discontinuity implies that the two characters are lost in a whirlwind of thought, emotion, physical contact, and confusion.

A similar instance of sound/image asynchronicity occurs when Jonathan meets his third conquest of the day while gazing into the shop window at the Galleries Lafayette. In the reflection of the window, the young woman approaches him, and we see them converse flirtatiously, then kiss. However, we hear nothing: Honoré deprives us of their dialogue. Instead, their lips move but we hear only the same jazz music that dominates the film's score. Silencing the dialogue in this scene could suggest that their conversation is too banal to merit inclusion into the audio track, given that Jonathan is simply pursuing a romantic liaison without emotional attachment. The full scene reads like an illusion; we neither see nor hear the characters directly. Like the narrative ellipses, the intermittent silence here allows us only to outline the perimeters of their relationship. We are deprived of the in-betweens.

In an additional effort to sustain his cinematic "quiet revolution," Honoré permeates an intimate scene between Paul and Jonathan with a similar technique of sound/image asynchronicity that continues to undermine aural coherence. In this case, there is a loss of objective reality; we slip into an ambiguous space between the real and the imagined, a space in which, for Deleuze, "every perception is hallucinatory."[112] Here, Paul describes to Jonathan how he explained his suicide attempt to their father, but after Jonathan asks a question, Paul's voice responds while the screen shows his face unmoving. Furthermore, when the camera shows both of them, the sound and image once again come into sync. Rendering the scene yet further

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[112] Gregory Flaxman. "Introduction," in *The Brain is the Screen*, 31.

confusing is a shot of Jonathan lying down on his back on the bed, looking at the screen from an inverted position. Again, as he asks Paul questions, his lips are still; the sound is heard as a voiceover. The actual sound of his voice is distorted here as well; its muffled texture suggests that it was recorded separately and threaded back into the soundtrack. This device evokes Viard's notion of contemporary French society idea in which the family unit is both united and disjointed. Or, viewed in another light, Paul and Jonathan become what Gregory Flaxman calls modern cinema's "visionaries": characters who typify narratives that "diverge from the solidity—which is to say the conventions, the habits—of the sensory-motor schema."[113] In other words, their mismatched gestures and sounds fit perfectly into a film that deliberately rejects a solid sense of direction.

Finally, recalling the recitative dialogue in Demy, Honoré escalates sound experimentation when characters in *Dans Paris* sing along to music in the film's diegetic world, reciting lyrics that correspond to emotions they are experiencing. Here, the phenomenon functions as a musical substitute for what would otherwise be a theatrical monologue. For example, in one of Paul's moments of solitude, he puts on a popular 80s American album by Kim Wilde, and sings along to her song "Cambodia." Honoré indeed occasionally includes a nod to American pop culture in his films. In this instance, the French character sings in English, creating an embarrassing but endearing image of his vulnerability. This kind of code-switching could also potentially act as a linguistic "in-between" characteristic of our globalized world. In the song, Wilde sings about love's disappearance and the impossibility of recapturing 'what used to be,' clearly reflecting Paul's thoughts about his breakup with Anna:

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[113] Ibid., 31.

It was the easy life / But then it turned around and he began to change / She didn't wonder then / She didn't think it strange /And as the nights passed by / She tried to trace the past / The way he used to look / The way he used to laugh / I guess she'll never know / What got inside his soul / She couldn't make it out / Just couldn't take it all / He had the saddest eyes the girl had ever seen / He used to cry some nights as though he lived a dream / And as she held him close / He used to search her face as though she knew the truth / And all the love she knew has disappeared out in the haze.[114]

Although specifically about a couple broken apart by the male lover's extended stay in Cambodia, the song's theme of lost love foreshadows Paul's telephone call to Anna shortly after his solo bedroom recital. Notably, the line "as though he lived in a dream" also underscores the imaginary nature of Paul's previous jaunt in the woods, reminding us of the surrealist nature of the moments where he slips from an objective into a subjective reality.

This mysterious woods scene stands out since it has no rational logic within the film's diegetic world. It follows Deleuze's concept of "virtual cinema" in which "we cannot tell what is real and what is imagined, what has happened in the past and what is happening in the present."[115] The musical theatrics leave viewers out of the loop as the film slips into a strange poetic fantasy scene directly following Anna's departure at the train station early in the film, which jumps without transition from Paul kissing an unknown woman, to the latter pair strolling through the woods. Breaking into song, Paul half-sings rather than speaks to the anonymous woman, declaring, "I don't trust myself in love." As the two gambol through the woods, Paul continues to sing theatrically about his tormented relationship with Anna, reminding us that Honoré prefers to thread elements of the musical into otherwise non-musical films, especially at moments of heightened emotion. However nostalgic it may be for the bygone genre of the musical comedy, the musical dialogue, I would argue, takes all seriousness out of Paul's speech,

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[114] Kim Wilde. "Cambodia." RAK music label. November 1981.
[115] Flaxman, 32.

making his emotional outburst rather comical, and suggesting that life and love are simply a sordid and futile comedy. Moreover, because this woman never reappears in the film, we are left to wonder if this event even happened at all, or if it exists only in Deleuze's "virtual plane" as a figment of Paul's imagination. This scene might be read simply as absurd, as evoking a dreamlike Surrealist art that is not intended to make sense. Either way, Honoré innovatively represents our fantasies by way of music and sound distortion, creating what we could call *cinematic refrains*, where the unmelodic chorus of reality is broken, punctuated by moments of fantastical musical expression.

Similar to the way Guy literally sings his breakup in Demy, the central lovers in Honoré's film sing theirs as well, but in a way that deviates from reality. The disorderly effect of Honoré's final implementation of sung dialogue in *Dans Paris* occurs during the film's dénouement, when Paul telephones Anna from Paris to break up. As soon as she answers the phone, the two engage in a conversation that seems to mark the end of their relationship—"seems to" because nothing in the exchange explicitly signals a breakup. Their entire conversation consists of singing another Beaupain original song to each other. The fact that they break up over the phone is in itself not particularly strange, and perhaps speaks to Viard's assertion that today's younger generation is the victim of an increasingly isolationist technological world. What is unexpected, however, is that they perform a musical duet rather than engaging in dialogue, given that the film is not itself a musical. The melodic goodbye is one of the most striking scenes in *Dans Paris* because, as in the previous musical-in-the-woods scene, Honoré experiments with mixing genres and undercutting viewers' expectations by incorporating unanticipated musical bursts.

This classical shot-reverse shot sequence offers intimate portraits of each character:

Pathetically slumped next to the bed on the floor, Paul begins by reading poetry to Anna in

French, which turns out to be the lyrics to Beaupain's sentimental love song "Avant la haine":

> (Paul): J'ai une idée inattaquable / Pour éviter l'insupportable / Avant la haine, avant les coups / De sifflet ou de fouet / Avant la peine et le dégout / Brisons-là s'il te plait.
>
> (Anna): Mais je t'embrasse et ça passe / Tu vois bien / On s'débarrasse pas de moi comme ça / Tu croyais pouvoir t'en sortir / En me quittant sur l'air / Du grand amour qui doit mourir / Mais vois-tu je préfère / Les tempêtes de l'inéluctable /A ta petite idée minable.[116]

Allowing the two lovers to sing rather than speak this conversation makes room for a

poetic sensibility lacking in everyday speech. That is to say, while the lyrics to this song are

arguably relevant to the event and emotions involved, they would not work as spoken dialogue

without seeming hyperbolic or illogically theatrical. Here, music's seductiveness has more power

than words to "carry one away." Moreover, such expressive reactions predicting the imminent

demise of doomed love indicate yet again an in-between space for characters—as well as

viewers—to process reality as a function of perception, rather than an objective series of events.

Thus, by using sound not only as a creative device for conveying meaning, and also to

push the limits of cinematic convention, both Demy and Honoré challenge traditional cinema.

The difference is that the former breaks boundaries of genre while Honoré disrupts our

separation of sensory domains. In this way, Honoré's use of music in an otherwise non-musical

drama evokes a kind of "quiet revolution" that awakens, perhaps, a sixth sense on our part,

forcing us to make sense of the objectively nonsensical. Rather than making meaning obvious to

viewers, he forces us to see both what is, and is not, readily comprehensible.

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[116] Alex Beaupain. "Avant la haine." Album : *Pourquoi battait mon cœur*. Label : Naive. May 2011.

Conclusion

In this chapter I set out to define Honoré's identity as a veritable *auteur* in his original way, without entirely dismissing the original definition of the term. Along similar lines, I have argued that although his work is influenced by the New Wave, to pigeonhole him as derivative is unjustifiable. The New Wave was exceptional in its particular combination of techniques and values, yet it was not the only movement to deconstruct film form**.** Whereas New Wave directors endeavored to "stamp" their films with a personal touch, and used surprising techniques consistently, Honoré uses them more sporadically so that viewers never know what kind to expect and must constantly re-attempt to make sense of the techniques. In his work, these techniques largely seem related to the plotline, unlike in New Wave cinema, where they have an independent importance in the film—beyond their use in the plot.

To return to another core question posed at the onset of this chapter, I would conclude based on the preceding analyses that in *Dans Paris*, Honoré, contrary to Sullerot's claims, does not presume that the French family is in crisis. Chang observes correctly that Honoré writes "intimate dramas about families in crisis,"[117] but this does not necessarily indicate a conviction that the family as a construct, or as a cultural entity, is in crisis. In fact, it seems most reasonable to refer to Honoré's own explanation of his work as given repeatedly in interviews, he wants to open a space for new visions or interpretations of the family, and to draw attention to the present reality in which human relationships—platonic or not—are increasingly diverse. Thus Honoré's depictions of relationships offer alternative visions of the family, rather than simply diagnose a crisis within the traditional family. Indeed, in his films, we see that love is born out of

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[117] Chang, 1.

unexpected circumstances, forcing characters to question their loyalties or their identity, to accept the possible inconstancy of affection, and to struggle with the impermanence of sexual desire. While it is true that many of his films to date revolve around troubled family relationships, they also convey the idea that unconditional bonds of kinship surpass sexual love during times of crisis, and that even the most fragmented family can provide an unrestricted support network. In *Dans Paris*, the protagonists' personal crises reinforce rather than diminish family bonds.

Beyond this, though, one must wonder what Honoré is ultimately trying to accomplish with this film, or what he want viewers to feel. Why is it, for example, that instead of the two love stories, it is the brothers' relationship that closes the film, thus becoming the central focus and arguably upsetting viewers' expectations? It has been established that blood is the tie that binds, but is this the film's fundamental underlying message? In part, it is. However, there seems to be a more subtle insistence on the notion of renewal and hope, on the possibility of overcoming life's most devastating obstacles. Loss, as we have seen, is treated throughout Honoré's oeuvre, and rather than ending films on cynical notes, it becomes an occasion for self-transformation and for strengthening social and familial connections. His penchant for fracture and discontinuity creates visual, thematic, or narrative gaps so that viewers must create the connections in all of their possible forms. His goal is not to create chaos in the same way Godard and other New Wave directors did; he wants to represent the fact that our lives *and* our ways of thinking and behaving are nonlinear and fractured. Perhaps this acknowledgement could be liberating in an increasingly individualistic world where people are both more and less connected by the advent of social media and other technology.

In Honoré's transformative and liberating agenda, there is still room for growth, for stretching the limits of social and cinematic norms. It might be pointed out, for example, that what he leaves out of his work could, if included, render it even more transgressive and original. For example, he could make a greater effort to create female roles that do not represent women as disasters, or at the mercy of men's caprice. Moreover, as a queer filmmaker, he could no doubt go further in depicting the increasing diversity of family structures including gay parents, transsexual or transgender family members, or other romantic or familial phenomena that are currently undertreated in French cinema. Perhaps he deliberately does not tread this ground, whether in an effort to reach a wider audience, or to avoid broaching topics too controversial for commercial film. Whatever the reason, he would stand out even further as an innovator if he were to weave more provocative themes into the fabric of his work.

In the next chapter, I turn to another French filmmaker who portrays visions of the contemporary family through experimentation with the medium of film. Arnaud Desplechin's 2008 *Un conte de Noël* ("A Christmas Story") shows how structural changes in social composition modify family narratives. Desplechin's exploration of mourning, in particular, underscores the family as a construct, and suggests that the family is ultimately united by biological, and not emotional, connections.

CHAPTER THREE

A Family in Mourning, or Mourning the Family? Contrasts and Contradictions in Arnaud Desplechin's *Un conte de Noël*

Introduction

Contemporary French films often portray flawed images of the family. Yet the degree to which families are represented as less than ideal varies greatly: while some films simply explore quotidian misunderstandings or sibling rivalry, others examine more sinister problems of infidelity, mental or physical illness, abuse, incest, or suicide. The latter issues often appear in films about families that one might label "dysfunctional," although defining this term with scientific or theoretical accuracy is problematic since it depends on how one defines a "normal" family and the deviations therefrom. The French term *famille à problèmes* is perhaps a more useful designation, as it refers to any family in difficulty, and it lacks the pejorative quality of the term "dysfunctional." In the last few decades, French filmmakers have developed a noticeable penchant not only for representing the *famille à problèmes*, but also for the portrayal of the imperfect family of any kind, designing films that revolve around the troubled, complicated, and often humorous, trials and tribulations families currently face.

Among such complications, afflictions of physical and mental illness have emerged as salient topics in French films about the family. New films tend to broach these topics with a high degree of realism. Examples include Christophe Honoré's *Tout contre Léo* (*Close to Leo*, 2002), Mona Achache's *Le Hérisson* (*The Hedgehog*, 2009), Oliver Nakache and Eric Toledano's *Les intouchables* (*The Intouchables*, 2011), and Michael Haneke's Franco-German co-production *Amour* (*Love/Beloved*, 2012). All of these films scrutinize the suffering associated with mental or

physical illness, yet they also underscore the unconditional love of family members, friends, and life partners.

Since characters often endure various forms of illness in many new French films, it follows that some of these characters do not survive through the end of the film, and are then mourned by the loved ones they leave behind. Films such as Julia Bertuccelli's 2004 *Depuis qu'Otar est parti* (*Since Otar Left*), or Olivier Assayas' *L'heure d'été* (*Summer Hours*, 2008) explore the complicated emotional processes of loss and mourning. In addition to these themes, which may be grouped together in the category of the tragic or 'what is beyond our control,' other more controversial themes such as broken marriages, infidelity, or incest also take center stage in recent French films. This includes Christophe Honoré's controversial film *Ma mère* (*My Mother*, 2003), André Téchiné's far less provocative *Les temps qui changent* (*Changing Times*, 2004), and François Ozon's *5 X 2* (2004). Although these films cover a broad range of family problems, they all point to a certain tendency toward fracture in the contemporary French family, and particularly in the couple.

Along similar lines, the macabre theme of banishment also arises in many new French films that underscore the trajectory of a family's 'black sheep.' Whether they are alcoholics, convicted criminals, or mentally ill, those who become the black sheep often remain banished, but are occasionally readmitted into the family unit. Philip Claudel's *Il y a longtemps que je t'aime* (*I've loved you so long*, 2008) is one case in which the banished protagonist eventually regains her family's trust, and is allowed to reintegrate into her family's lives.

Most of the films above are realistic in style, and therefore contain thematic content that may leave viewers overwhelmed with melancholy or pessimism. However, one group of

filmmakers puts a charming twist on the dismal topic of the *famille à problèmes*, adding a surprisingly lighthearted tone to darker narratives. More than any other group of filmmakers, the cinematic movement known as *le jeune cinema français* produces a wide range of comedic, melodramatic, and, at times, realist films particularly focused on the *famille à problèmes*.

La famille à problèmes and *"le jeune cinéma français"*

In chapter one, I argued that Christophe Honoré's *Dans Paris*, a family story including divorce, infidelity, suicidal characters, and depression, demonstrated how family bonds are ultimately more resilient than romantic ones. Honoré, a "new" New Wave director, complicates any fixed concept of how the family, and the individuals that it is composed of, functions, and reveals its fragmented, non-cohesive nature. Like "new' New Wave films, those belonging to the movement coined *le jeune cinéma* (young cinema; cinema of youth) that began in the mid-1980s but truly burgeoned in the 90s and continues into the present day, also deconstruct traditional representations of the family on screen.

Defining the characteristics of this 'genre' is a complicated task. Rene Prédal, leading scholar of *le jeune cinéma*, underscores the movement's thematic and technical complexity, and its lack of definite temporal boundaries.[118] Since the end of the *Nouvelle Vague* in the late 1960s, Prédal explains, French cinema has experienced several *ruptures*, or schisms, beginning specifically during the student and labor protests of May 1968.[119] He argues that a spirit of revolution took hold in the population in general, but especially in French youth—including young filmmakers—who began diverging from their New Wave forefathers in both form and

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[118] Prédal, René. *Le jeune cinéma français*. Paris : Nathan/VUEF, 2002.
[119] Ibid., 7.

content. The films of the late sixties weren't necessarily directed against the New Wave, he

notes, but were taking new routes, restructuring the way cinema was made just as Godard,

Truffaut, and others of their generation had done. For Prédal, the films of the 70s and 80s were

turning "délibérément vers le futur" [deliberately toward the future], particularly with the

emergence of *beur* and feminist films, even if they were not very formally innovative or

interesting.[120] Furthermore, he claims that "détachés de l'emprise d'un passé désormais

patrimonial et mal à l'aise dans l'isolement autarcique de la réaction cinématographique des

années quatre-vingt, quelques cinéastes retrouvent en effet, en 1985, l'esprit fonceur des

précurseurs de la Nouvelle Vague" [Detached from the influence of a patrimonial past and

uncomfortable in the autarkic isolation of the cinematic reaction of the 1980s, certain filmmakers

find indeed, in 1985, the dynamic spirit of the precursers of the New Wave].[121] Filmmakers such

as Olivier Assayas, Léos Carax, Laurent Perrin, François Ozon, and Arnaud Desplechin are

among those who Prédal designates as "les pionniers de ce qu'il convient aujourd'hui d'appeler

le jeune cinéma français…" [the pioneers of what one calls today *le jeune cinéma français*].[122]

Like Predal, French film scholar Bruno Taque suggests that defining the parameters of

the movement is challenging because they simultaneously encompass the age of the directors, the

time the film was made, the themes and form of the films themselves, as well as the target

audience. Of particular interest for this chapter, Taque points out that thematically, "la famille et

son cortège d'horreurs semble être le terreau dont se nourrit ce courant cinématographique

purement français, apparu pendant la seconde moitié des années 80" [The family and its

procession of horrors seems to be the soil that feeds this purely French cinematographic

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[120] Ibid., 8.
[121] Ibid., 8.
[122] Ibid., 8.

movement appearing in the second half of the 1980s].[123] Among the dozens of filmmakers

loosely labeled *jeune cinéma*, Arnaud Desplechin stands out for the technical and narrative

originality with which he treats the French family on screen. He has written and directed ten

films to date, many of which revolve around complicated family dramas.

Born in 1960 in Roubaix, Desplechin comes from a long line of actors, novelists, and

screenwriters. This apparently hereditary trait emerges not only in the quality of his oeuvre, but

also in his semi-autobiographical narratives, which reference works of literature, film, and

theater that his family has been involved in. He studied film directing at the Sorbonne in Paris,

graduating in 1984, and after working on other directors' films for a few years, began making his

own films in 1990, beginning with *La vie des morts* (*The Life of the Dead*, 1991). This debut film

won a Prix Jean-Vigo that year for best medium-length picture, and revolves around a young

man in the country whose family reunites to support him after he attempts suicide. He was

applauded for his fearless approach to exploring provocative themes, and immediately created a

buzz about the up and coming director. As Claude-Marie Trémois argues, "1991 est l'année

Desplechin. Ceux qui ont vu *La vie des morts* se souviennent du choc" [1991 is the year of

Desplechin. Those who saw *The Life of the Dead* remember the shock].[124] She notes that in the

film, suicide touches all the characters at some point, yet ironically, "ces blessures, en

déclenchant sursauts et convulsions, semblaient apporter un surcroit de vie. Comme si la vie

naissait de la mort" [these wounds, triggering bursts and convulsions, seemed to bring an

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[123] Taque, Bruno. « Le jeune cinéma français ». Online source : http://www.clermont-filmfest.com/03_pole_regional/lyceens07/film2/img/cinema-francais.pdf. P. 1.
[124] Trémois, Claude-Marie. *Les Enfants de la liberté : Le jeune cinéma français des années 90*. (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1997), 31.

abundance of life. As if life arose out of death].[125] It is indeed this convergence of life and death that permeates much of Desplechin's oeuvre.

The fine line between the living and the dead emerges, for example, in his first full-length feature, *La sentinelle* (*The Sentinel*, 1992). In this film, Mathias, a boy whose deceased father was a German diplomat, is confronted with questions about the past, with lost memories, and an eerie sense of obligation to follow in his father's footsteps when he goes to Paris to study forensic medicine. Departing from this macabre ambiance, his next film, *Comment je me suis disputé…ma vie sexuelle* (*My Sex Life…or How I got into an Argument*, 1996) explores a young man at a crossroads in his life, in which he must make difficult decisions about his career and romantic life. His fourth film, *Esther Kahn* (2000), was an English language period piece that recounts the story of a young Jewish woman in late 19th century London, who, estranged from her family, strives to become a leading actress in the theater. Considering the broad thematic range of his work, it is difficult to pinpoint a precise quality that characterizes Desplechin's narratives. In an attempt to characterize the director's defining attribute, Marie-Anne Lieb argues that, "[l]es récits de Desplechin cherchent à traduire la complexité humaine" [Desplechin's stories aim to articulate the complexity of the human condition].[126] In other words, his films cover a broad spectrum of intellectual themes, all of which demonstrate an interest in human experience.

Desplechin indeed conveys an interest in the broad spectrum of human experience, often dramatizing dichotomous emotions, perspectives, or personality types in his films. Many critics

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[125] Ibid., 105.
[126] Lieb, Marie-Anne. « Voix off et voix(e) narrative : la conscience entre les lignes dans l'œuvre de Arnaud Desplechin » in Cahiers de Narratologie, No. 22, 2012.

point to the director's penchant for confrontation, a particularly predominant theme in his films about the family. In his study of the filmmaker, Jean Douchet asserts that:

> [Desplechin] has made confrontation the focus of his work. Overgrown adolescents, his characters are subject to and invaded by reality. They are forced to undergo a succession of humiliating trials to prove their existence and gain access to an adult perception of their environment. [His films] expand beyond the narrow and sophomoric universe that characterizes the work of many young directors in France. […] his use of narrative possibilities and voice-over, make Desplechin's cinema one of the most experimental successors of the New Wave seen to date.[127]

Like Douchet, Prédal insists on Desplechin's originality amongst other directors associated with *le jeune cinéma*. He argues that the director became part of the movement with his debut film, *La vie des morts*, and along with his fellow filmmakers, created, like the New Wave artists did in their day, "un nouveau cinéma" [a new cinema].[128] More important, he notes that Desplechin "impose dans ses films cette idée de clan, de famille, de tribu, peut-être davantage encore que celle de génération, car si les jeunes constituent le centre du groupe [dans ses films], les 40-50 ans sont loin d'être absents et jouent même un rôle determinant" [establishes in his films this idea of clan, of family, of tribe, maybe even more than that of generations, because if young people comprise the center of the group (in his films), the 40-50 year olds are far from being absent, and even play essential roles].[129] In other words, even if Desplechin is part of the *jeune cinéma* movement, his themes are not limited to the challenges facing the younger generation.

In addition to recurrent themes, Desplechin's films are also known for specific visual and narrative qualities that distinguish him from other contemporary French directors. He is particularly celebrated for his attention to detail in the design of each film's *mise-en-scène*, and for his creativity in overlapping different narration styles. Trémois argues that for Desplechin,

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[127] Jean Douchet. "The French New Wave: Its Influence and Decline," in *Cinéaste*, Vol. 24, No.1 (1998), 16-18.
[128] Prédal, 8.
[129] Ibid., 40.

mise-en-scène is always paramount, and even overrides the importance of camera technique. She

explains that, "Desplechin lui-même, dont la mise en scène est pourtant d'une extrême précision,

choisit toujours la vie contre la technique" [Arnaud Desplechin himself, whose *mise-en-scene* is

indeed extremely precise, always chooses life over technique].[130] The idea is that Desplechin

avoids relying on technique as the principal conveyor of emotion, and prefers to develop

characters through *mise-en-scène*, and as I will argue, also through dialogue and narration. The

degree to which Desplechin's films achieve verisimilitude creates the sensation that we know the

characters, particularly through dramatic dialogue and voiceover narration that opens windows

into their conscience. As Trémois suggests, "Desplechin ne donne pas à voir, mais à sentir […]

Nous ne sommes pas spectateurs, mais acteurs. Nous ne sommes pas devant eux, mais avec eux.

Nous sommes eux" [Desplechin doesn't make you look, but makes you feel (…) We aren't

spectators, but actors. We aren't in front of them, but with them. We are them].[131] On occasion

spectators identify with characters so deeply that they feel they "become" them, yet in these

exceptional cases, the process occurs almost seamlessly.

It is precisely this feeling of 'being' the characters that surfaces in Desplechin's most

popular film to date, *Un conte de Noël* (2008). In this dramatic comedy, the Vuillard family,

arguably a *famille à problèmes*, reunites for the Christmas holiday in their hometown of

Roubaix, a small town in northern France. Like her first son Joseph who died at the age of six

from leukemia, Junon, the matriarch, has recently been diagnosed with a rare blood disease and

is told she must undergo a transplant in order to survive. Unresolved tensions between the

siblings stir up an emotional storm of resentment, jealousy, and indifference while they wait for

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[130] Trémois, 51.
[131] Ibid., 98.

Junon to choose between the compatible donors. Abel, Junon's husband, tries to keep the peace among the quarreling adult children while coping with the imminent loss of his wife. Elizabeth, the eldest child, is a successful playwright who struggles to pinpoint the source of her general malaise, and whose teenage son Paul suffers from depression and suicidal thoughts. Her predicament is further exacerbated by a largely absent husband, whose work requires frequent travels, leaving her alone to handle Paul's psychological problems. Henri, one of Elizabeth's brothers, is the family's alcoholic black sheep whom she banished five years earlier in return for paying off his debts. While most of the film focuses on Junon and Elizabeth's emotional struggles, it also creates a sequence of dramatic events involving the other characters' personal lives. The central plotline revolves around finding a donor for Junon's transplant, which is ultimately feasible thanks, ironically, to Henri, whose compatibility could potentially lift his curse of banishment. In the end, we do not know if the procedure was successful, but a narrative monologue delivered by Elizabeth in the last scene suggests an optimistic outcome.

The tension surrounding Junon's illness and impending transfusion plagues the family's Christmas preparations and rituals, which are riddled with terse verbal exchanges and even physical confrontations. That the family members and their relationships are far from ideal—and arguably 'dysfunctional'—is only half the story. What is most shocking is the fact that the conflict, hostility, and verbal abuse rarely seems to affect anyone. The harsh dialogue and insidious offenses inflicted upon one another are often met with a laugh, a scoff, or a look of indifference.

Insults and injuries met with laughter or ambivalence are just one instance of the film's contrasting qualities. Tim Palmer offers a vivid summary of the film's opening sequence during

which several characters narrate the family's history via voiceover, bringing visual and narrative

juxtapositions to the surface:

> Part of the family's history is recounted with silhouetted marionettes, stick figure
> shadows moving above grainy footage of faded photos, zoom in and outs over abstract
> forms from X-rays and children's paintings, out-of-focus home movie footage, and an
> unsituated shot of a tine theatrical proscenium. Then we meet Junon herself, bustling
> about the family house, making breakfast; a series of dissolves moves us sinuously from
> her apparently functional body, to a steam from a kettle, wan beams of morning sunshine,
> and lines of photos of her children; but now the image loses definition as Junon leans
> back against the wall, breathing heavily, dropping her tray while axial cuts go in and out
> of focus, studying the troubled face from either side, quivering like the actress herself.
> While Desplechin represents something concrete here—Junon's illness; the brittle
> complex of individuals within this fragile family unit—the sequence itself is playfully
> evasive and evocative, almost deliriously focused on warm and cold textures, the vivid
> materiality of memories, the tactile dimensions of emotional and physical pain.[132]

The "fragile family unit" Palmer describes is, as he says, both warm and cold, and is brought to

life in its darkest moments of illness or animosity and its brightest moments of health and joy.

Perhaps the only consistent thematic and technical element, then, is that of contrasts, since every

dismal image, event, or conversation is countered by one with unexpected buoyancy.

Some critics argue that of the various contrasts in the film, the one between life and death

is the most significant. It culminates in the final scenes when Henri (supposedly) saves his ailing

mother's life via blood transfusion, upsetting the film's recurrent theme of mourning and

resentment. For André Roy, for example, the film is:

> […] une histoire de généalogie […] de refondation familiale, de famille désunie que la
> maladie et la mort (toujours présentes chez ce cinéaste) ressoudent, non dans la joie et
> l'exultation, mais dans la souffrance, les rancœurs, la haine. Et en conséquence histoire
> de deuil, de dette, d'oubli nécessaire. Donc de réconciliation, qui survient tout à la fin,
> presque inattendue, qu'on croyait impossible.

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[132] Tim Palmer. *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University
Press, 2011), 201.

[a story of genealogy…of familial reconstitution, of a broken family strengthened by disease and death (always present in this filmmaker's work), not in joy and exultation, but in suffering, in resentment, in hatred. And as a result a story of mourning, of obligation, of necessary forgetting. Therefore of reconciliation, that occurs right at the end, almost unexpected, that one thought impossible].[133]

In short, Roy claims that the film optimistically reestablishes at least part of the family's unity by connecting a mother and son through a life-saving surgical procedure. While his observation of antagonistic emotions and events is well-founded, my interpretation of the transplant at the end of the film diverges substantially from such an optimistic interpretation, precisely because it confirms only biological ties and does not suggest the development of any emotional bond.

It is not by accident that the film's events take place during the Christmas holiday, a moment that provokes a broad range of responses in different individuals and families: while some revel in sharing decadent meals, exchanging thoughtful gifts, and singing carols by the fire, others find all of the holiday rituals burdensome, and riddled with anxiety. Touching on this concept of mixed emotions associated with Christmas, critic Martine Leroy-Terquem argues that Desplechin purposely exposes the problems in the film through the prism of "les affects contradictoires," or conflicting affects, that the holiday has.[134] The film's myriad contrasts and contradictions are indeed conveyed through every aspect of the film: story, dialogue, narration, *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, sound, and editing. Each filmic element produces unexpected, abrupt displays and changes of emotion. Taking Leroy-Terquem's insistence on the contrast/contradiction leitmotif one step further, I would argue that because the image of the family in this film constantly contradicts itself, and therefore fluctuates between the plausible

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[133] André Roy. "Un conte de Noel d'Arnaud Desplechin : La vie des morts et des vivants." <u>24 Images</u> (No. 138, 2008), 35.
[134] Martine Leroy-Terquem. "Un conte de Noël, d'Arnaud Desplechin," <u>Dialogue</u> 4/ 2008 (no. 182), 161-164. www.cairn.info/revue-dialogue-2008-4-page-161.htm.

and the hyperbolic, the film is more a dramatic construct than a mirror of the (French) family. The film's narrative and formal contrasts at once authenticate and fabricate both the family unit in its entirety and the conflicted individuals it is composed of. In this 'pièce familiale,'[135] or family drama, family members symbolically, and almost literally[136], fight to the death, rendering filiation both a blessing and a curse. Thus the film suggests that in the Vuillard family, filial bonds have negligible value beyond that of merely genetic connections.

Moreover, I would also like to problematize the categorization of this film as a "mourning" film, one in which the central theme is the loss of Joseph whom we see buried in the film's opening scene. The characters' dialogue and voiceover narration repeatedly exhibit a lack of sentimentality for the loss of Joseph that suggests they are rather unaffected by the boy's death. This indifference reemerges when they claim not to love other family members who are still alive. Therefore, if indeed in mourning, I would argue that the film, or the family it portrays, mourns the concept of family itself. The slightly optimistic tone at the end of the film is only a fragile glimmer of hope for renewal in the physical realm. In the psychological domain, while Henri's status as the black sheep may be in part reversed by the transfusion, there is no verbal proof of his reentry into the family unit. In short, most of the fractured relationships remain unrepaired, and we are left feeling skeptical about the family's ability to reconcile in any profound way.

Mourning the Living: Self-grieving in the Mythical Family

Loss is undoubtedly a leitmotif in many cinematic genres, and some argue that it is inherent to film as a medium. Richard Armstrong, for example, a specialist on loss in cinema,

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[135] François Rouquet. "*Un conte de Noel* d'Arnaud Desplechin," in <u>CLIO : Histoires, femmes, et sociétés</u> (Vol. 34, December 2013), 219-230. http://www.cairn.info/revue-clio-2011-2-page-219.htm. P. 225
[136] Henri engages in physical conflict with family members twice during the film.

writes that, "[w]hile the theme of loss finds the aesthetics of a film addressing an experience which is very real and very quotidian for many people, and will be very real for everyone in due course; it is also intrinsic to what cinema is as an apparatus. Put simply, the cinema is a space in which we see someone who is no longer there."[137] He argues that all films are recordings of the past, of actors who are no longer in the setting we see them in, or who have even passed away; therefore all films are connected to some kind of loss. Along similar lines, in her work on psychoanalytical interpretations of loss in cinema, Andrea Sabbadini argues that "*all* films represent some sort of loss and, indeed, are themselves […] forms of mourning and of recovering lost objects."[138] *Un conte de Noël* may be intrinsically a film about loss, but it is also more particularly about loss and mourning than the average film. Armstrong also differentiates that generic kind of loss in cinema from films that are specifically about mourning. He writes, "[w]hat I am calling the 'mourning film,' that film in which the drama revolves around a loss grieved over, looks beyond the cinema's myriad spectacles of death at the feeling death engenders in the living, and by ghastly implication, the prospect of mine and your own finitude, what [Lacan] has called the indescribably, unmentionably 'Real' of human experience."[139] The theme of loss plays a significant role in *Un conte de Noël*, yet the characters demonstrate vastly different coping mechanisms, and embody loss in distinctive ways. In part, Desplechin's film fits Armstrong's description insofar as the characters experience 'the feeling death engenders in the living,' yet how this affects them, or how it plays out in the 'real' of the human experience, is

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[137] Richard Armstrong. *Mourning Films: A Critical Study of Loss and Grieving in Cinema*. (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012), 1.
[138] Andrea Sabbadini, Ed. *Projected Shadows : Psychoanalytic Reflections on the Representations of Loss in European Cinema*. (London : Routledge, 2007), 4.
[139] Armstrong, 1-2.

explored in a complicated way that seems to have more to do with mourning some part of oneself than with anticipating or grieving the loss of someone *else*.

For example, the film's opening scene takes place in a cemetery, as Abel flashes back to the burial of his first son Joseph. While this scene indeed plays a role in the film's real-time events, it does not, I would argue, imply that the family currently mourns his death. There are, however, several indications that some family members—such as Elizabeth—never fully processed Joseph's death and question whether or not their own personal struggles are rooted in that particular loss. As psychologist Elisabeth Darchis explains, the "traumatic violence" (childhood cancer) that killed Joseph means that "the process of mourning is likely to fail," and this failure indeed surfaces in the characters' actions and words.[140] Yet despite the fact that they hardly (or never) knew the brother who died, the adult siblings—especially Elizabeth and Henri—express a very self-interested kind of mourning in which they use their brother's death as an excuse for their own dysfunctional behaviors. This mirrors Darchis' argument that film embodies a "suffering family organization, revealing psychical mechanisms that evolve around denial and cleaving, perverse alliances and exclusions, and confusion about roles and belonging across generations."[141] Although the film contains various 'real' cases of mourning, and also foreshadows death and mourning (Henri mourns his first wife; Elizabeth fears her son Paul's suicide and her mother Junon's death), aside from Joseph, much of the mourning is experienced in a self-referential way that pretends to, but does not in reality, center on Joseph. If the Vuillard family, as Darchis suggests, has failed to properly mourn Joseph, perhaps this is what leads to their general state of suffering, to their refusal of reconciliation, to their ambivalent emotions,

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[140] Elisabeth Darchis. "Corps familial souffrant et deuils pathologiques," in <u>Le Divan familial</u> (No. 25, 2010), 143-154.
[141] Ibid.

and ultimately, to their mourning of themselves, and of their own disjointed family. In this way, the family is mythologized rather than made "real."

Indeed, the film's mythical references contribute to its status as a paradigmatic family drama. Several of the characters names, for example, are drawn from either biblical or mythological sources: Junon is typically the mother of all gods in Roman mythology; Abel is drawn from both the Bible and the Koran.[142] The opening sequence introduces the family's "original mourning"[143] of Joseph by way of shadow play, a form of Chinese puppetry, which, complemented by Elizabeth's voiceover, immediately mythologizes and theatricalizes the family's history. Martine Leroy-Terquem notes that in this scene, "le mythe officiel de la famille est déroulé en ombre chinoises: des silhouettes stylisées, noires et blanches, coincées dans le binaire, agitées, malmenées par les événements comme par le montreur de marionnettes" [the official family myth is unwound in shadow puppetry: stylized black and white silhouettes, caught in the binary, agitated, mistreated by the events and the puppeteer].[144] This shadow puppet scene indeed juxtaposes benign childlike craft with ghoulish images and horrific narrative details, likening disease to a mythical monster that attacks innocent children and devastates an entire family.

In speculating on the identity of this unknown monster, Leroy-Terquem writes, "Quelle est la menace qui ne peut être ni vue ni entendue ? Que ne peut-on voir, et qu'est-ce qui *fait écran*?" [What is the threat that can't been seen nor heard ? What can we not see, and what is it

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[142] Elise Domenach, "Un conte de Noël. La nouvelle Arcadie d'Arnaud Desplechin." <u>Esprit</u> (August 2008), 191-207. www.cairn.info/revue-esprit-2008-8-page-191.htm
[143] Rouquet. 220.
[144] Leroy-Terquem, 1.

that blocks our view?].[145] Though her article leaves the question unanswered, I would argue that the monster that blocks our view is this specter of the Vuillard family that they are all unknowingly mourning. They may reason that they are mourning Joseph, but it seems as though they are mourning the family that never was. Raised by a mother who claims to never have loved any of them, Junon's children are searching for something they never possessed: the unconditional love of a "normal" family, and the ability to love themselves. As an analysis of the film's dialogue, narration, and *mise-en-scène* will show, characters in the film experience an absence of self-understanding, and some suffer from a lack of belonging in their own family. The film therefore suggests that any sense of familial belonging exists only by pure chance, and is therefore meaningless.

Subconscious Revelations

The question of loss surfaces on multiple levels in *Un conte de Noël*, particularly through intermittent voiceovers, monologues, and moments of direct address, all performed by characters within the film. Unlike most conventional films which use omniscient narrators, *Un conte de Noël* allows only characters within the film's diegesis to recount the story, and to comment on other characters' behaviors. In chapter two, we saw how Godard's use of voice-over narration in *Pierrot le fou* alternated between the main characters' voices in inconsistent patterns, which could potentially both confuse and inform viewers. While there is some crossover between Godard's and Desplechin's techniques of narration, the latter creates a new level of confusion that paradoxically maintains an overall narrative coherence. As they alternate not between two,

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[145] Ibid., 2.

but between six characters who narrate *Un conte de Noël*, viewers must determine whose interpretation of the family's history and current events they choose to trust. The onus is therefore on us to differentiate between characters who we believe are more transparent and those who we suspect to be dishonest or delusional. Desplechin's arrangement of the film's narration allows characters to explore the relative morality of their choices, and also to reveal their subconscious fears and desires, which informs us of their internal motivations. Moreover, we discover the contradictions inherent in their words and actions, and the inconstancy of their grieving and coping skills.

In his text *The Sense of Film Narration,* Ian Garwood cites Sarah Kozloff's definition of the voiceover in film, which can be defined as "'oral statements, conveying any portion of a narrative, spoken by an unseen speaker situated in a space and time other than that simultaneously being presented by the images on screen.'"[146] Expanding Kozloff's unembroidered definition into broader terms, Garwood develops the idea that "voice-overs have material qualities, that they are arranged in a hierarchy with other sounds that have their own materiality, and that these combinations of sound can be significant in terms of how the viewer makes sense of the fictional world which the soundtrack helps to foster."[147] In other words, when viewers are asked to adapt to unconventional uses of sound, such as voiceover narration by multiple characters in *Un conte de Noël*, they must work harder to "[flesh] out the film's fictional world."[148] We as viewers should not simply assume there is a direct, true, real connection between what we see and what we hear, nor should we assume such correlations between any diegetic and non-diegetic images and sounds.

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[146] Ian Garwood. *The Sense of Film Narration*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 102.
[147] Ibid., 100.
[148] Ibid., 103.

In viewing *Un conte de Noël*, we must intentionally perform this organization of image

and sound, and adapt to playing a new role in the viewing process. This kind of exposure allows

us to form an intimate bond with the characters, as if they were entrusting us with their personal

secrets. In the opening scenes, for example, we see images of a burial, and find out via Abel's

narration that he was emotionally unaffected by his first son's death, whose funeral we are

witnessing via flashback. Oddly, he does not address the camera directly but is filmed as if he

were speaking to an audience or talking to himself in a dramatic soliloquy. The first lines he

utters are:

> Mon fils est mort. Mais j'ai regardé à l'intérieur de moi et donc me suis aperçu que
> n'éprouvais pas de chagrin. La souffrance est une toile peinte. Mon fils s'est détaché de
> moi comme la feuille d'un arbre, et je n'ai rien perdu. Joseph est désormais mon
> fondateur. Cette perte est ma fondation. Joseph a fait de moi son fils [My son died/is
> dead, but I searched inside and realized I don't feel any sorrow. suffering is a painted
> backdrop. My son was detached from me like a leaf from a tree, and I lost nothing.
> Joseph from now on is my founder. This loss is my foundation. Joseph has made me his
> son].

Not only do we meet one of the film's several narrators in this scene, we also immediately sense

the tone of frankness that characterizes the film's narration: characters immediately delve into

their subconscious to speak the unspeakable. Standing above his son's grave, Abel stoically

announces that he feels no sorrow or loss for his deceased son. However, by claiming that he

now conceives of his son as his "founder," and also as his father, we see that he is reconfiguring

the mourning process, reversing it in order to take something positive out of the otherwise

devastating experience. We eventually see how Joseph's death has impacted several members of

the Vuillard clan, yet I am not convinced that this event catalyzes rebirth—on an individual or

collective level—nor that it has a definitive positive effect on the family. Rather, I would argue

that Abel's brutally honest proclamation explains, in part, why his adult children lack

compassion for each other, for their mother, and for their own children. In this scene, the patriarch unknowingly admits playing a role in his family's repressed, detached approach to handling conflicts and problems. In a way, Abel symbolically kills off the family, yet at the same time he suggests there is hope for the family's renewal by claiming Joseph as his new "founder." Ironically, however, it is Abel who throughout the rest of the film's events is the only source of comfort for both Junon and their children. His approach remains passive, nonetheless, which parallels the detached tone of his opening statement.

Elizabeth also plays a prominent role as narrator in the film, and prompts several questions about self-contradiction and self-mourning, all within the framework of the *famille à problèmes*. Just after Abel's opening monologue, Elizabeth recounts the family history via voiceover as we cut to an image of Chinese shadow puppets that represent each member of the Vuillard family. The camera zooms in and out on the little black figures that appear to move over a red, muted background. Here, her description of the family is rather straightforward, unaffected, and neutral. She begins by stating, "En 1965, Abel et Junon a eu un fils: Joseph, le premier né. Deux ans après, une petite fille a été née, Elizabeth » [In 1965, Abel and Junon had a son : Joseph, the first born. Two years later, a little girl was born, Elizabeth]. She continues to explain that Joseph, the first born, developed a blood cancer and needed a transfusion, so Abel and Junon had another child in the hope of producing compatible blood. But Elizabeth, the second born, was not compatible, so they had a third child, Henri, whom Elizabeth describes in one word: "Inutile" [useless], referring to his incompatible blood, but also foreshadowing her resentment of him as an adult. Then, she explains, Joseph died at the age of six, and soon after that, the last son, Ivan, was born. Mirroring her father's sterile emotional state, Elizabeth adds

that "Lentement le souvenir de Joseph s'effaçait" [the memory of Joseph faded slowly], which also suggests the family's gradual loss of attachment to Joseph over time.

Moreover, her use of third person in referring to herself—"Elizabeth was born," not "I was born"—signals her internal conflicts and lack of self-understanding that surface throughout the film. Moreover, Desplechin's choice to have Elizabeth narrate the family history ironically highlights the fact that she, more than any other character, explicitly searches for but cannot find the source of her sorrow, and is unwilling to articulate why she is consumed with bitterness toward her brother Henri. Since she reveals many conflicting emotions and thoughts to us throughout the film, some of which make her seem harsh and unsympathetic, while others reveal her state of suffering, the degree to which viewers are encouraged to empathize with her remains ambiguous.

The second instance of Elizabeth acting as the voiceover narrator occurs during a scene in which her therapist asks her, "Pourquoi vous haïssez votre frère ?" [Why do you hate your brother?], which transports her into a flashback in which she explains why she banished Henri. As the therapist speaks to her, a close-up shot of Elizabeth turning her face away from his gaze fades into a shot of a courtroom, with an epigraph reading "Five years earlier, Paris, Tribunal de Commerce." In this flashback, Elizabeth explains that, "Avec les années je ne supportais plus mon frère. Est-ce que Henri était devenu vil, ou est-ce je ne n'avais jamais aimé ?" [Over the years I could no longer stand my brother. Had Henri become vile, or had I never loved him?]. She then explains that he had bought a theater and had produced several of her plays, but that she eventually felt indebted to him, which weighed heavily on her. Meanwhile, the scene includes dialogue that is intermittently commented upon by Elizabeth's voiceover narration, in which

130

Abel attempts to come to Henri's rescue, but Elizabeth won't stand for it. She insists on paying

Henri's debts, in exchange for his permanent banishment from the family. Once the settlement is

made in the courtroom, the camera cuts to Henri waiting in the hallway, and Elizabeth's

voiceover resumes as she states, "Henri fut aquitté. Il a disparu de ma vie" [Henri was acquitted;

he disappeared from my life].

In this scene, it is clear that Elizabeth resents her brother, but rather than reconcile she

chooses to banish him and ends up suffering for it. This also reveals that a significant amount of

her malaise is due not to the loss of Joseph, the brother she never knew, but to the virtual death

of Henri, the brother with whom she has a genetic but no emotional relationship. She is

mourning the living, and the loss of the family she could have had. She not only lost him as an

individual, she created a negative dynamic within the entire family by banishing him, and makes

no attempt to reverse her choice. As viewers, we are tempted to side with her, since she paints

him to have been a vile monster during the events in question. However, she only mentions his

petty theft and dishonesty in his business affairs; she does not suggest he had offended her

personally.

Henri also has a chance to speak for himself in one particularly poignant scene in which

he plays the role of the narrator and not only reveals his own character but also contributes to the

plethora of contradictions within the Vuillard family. His narrative contribution comes relatively

early in the film, when he reads a letter aloud announcing he is coming home for Christmas.

Rather than through voiceover, he narrates via direct address. The scene opens with an iris-in

capturing Elizabeth walking to her mailbox, with an epigraph reading: "La Lettre" [The Letter].

When she opens the mailbox, the camera cuts to a high angle shot of her opening a letter. The

camera then cuts to a shot of Henri sitting on stool in front of a solid blue backdrop, wearing a grey suit. The somber colors surrounding Henri mirror the dismal lines he delivers in his dramatic soliloquy. He reads aloud the contents of his letter to Elizabeth, declaring, "La démesure, la folie, la violence de cette nouvelle structure familiale ont atteint des limites que je n'imaginais pas. Nous sommes ici en plein mythe et je ne sais pas de quel mythe il s'agit" [The excess, madness, and violence of this new family structure have reached limits I never imagined. We're in the midst of a myth and I don't know what myth it is]. As he reads, the camera crosscuts between images of Elizabeth reading (visually) the letter, to images of Henri, facing the camera as it slowly zooms in on his face. Henri asserts that this conflict with his sister has turned his life into a novel, into something unreal, and as he grows more emotional, the camera slowly zooms in on his face to an extreme close up of eyes, and then his mouth, as he dramatically utters:

> Je te regarde aujourd'hui avec une pitié fraternelle, sœur imprudente, oh! tu as grandement offensé ton sang, et comme une petite fille devant un vase cassé, tu ne sauras le recoller. C'est pas ta faute, ni celle du vase; c'était un jeu idiot qui a mal tourné.
>
> [I see you today with fraternal pity. Reckless sister, you have offended your blood. Like a girl with a broken vase, you cannot fix it. It's not your fault, nor the vase's, just a silly game that backfired].

Not only does the reading of his letter give him the opportunity to directly address the viewers and deliver a sort of monologue in self-defense, it also reinforces the mythical, unreal nature of the family relationships in this film. Until this moment, we only know of Henri as the bad person, the user, the black sheep his sister makes him out to be. When we witness him in the mode of self-preservation, we are now allowed into his own subconscious, his own personal experiences. He has suffered not only the loss of his family members, but also the loss of himself

132

as a son, a brother, and an uncle. Moreover, the sibling rivalry turned feud harks back to classical tragedy in which family members are banished, and eventually a greater chaos (usually deadly) ensues. It is worth noting here that Henri's reading of his letter to viewers switches modes of narration previously used in the film (such as voice over), intensifying our connection to his internal struggles. The reading of a "plot-turning letter" in David Lean's *Great Expectations* (1946)[149] is a good example of a deeper viewer-character relationship than voiceover narration or internal dialogue.

Like other filmmakers associated with *le jeune cinéma*, Desplechin often blurs narrative devices in *Un conte de Noël*, so that voiceover, interior monologues, and direct address overlap to produce a wide range of aural and visual experiences for viewers. For example, near the end of the film we see a close up of Elizabeth in her bedroom at her parents' house, writing a letter. As she writes, she reads what she is writing via voiceover, a device that recalls Henri's reading of his letter, creating a parallel through the epistolary motif. As she reads, Desplechin uses shallow focus to draw our attention to a dollhouse in the foreground of the image, and a blurred outline of Elizabeth at her desk in the background. She then gets out of her chair, walks toward the camera, kneels down, and in a medium close up, we see her gaze into the dollhouse. The camera remains on her face, yet we hear her speak via voiceover when she says, "Henri, tu es là? En te rejetant je savais que tu ne me pardonnerais jamais. J'avais accepté le prix, pour construire un monde plus harmonieux pour mon fils et mon mari. Je savais qu'un jour, je devrais assister à l'enterrement de mes parents, et que tu ne serrerais pas la main" [By repudiating you I knew you'd never forgive me; I've accepted the price, to build a more harmonious world for my son

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[149] Sarah Kozloff. *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-over Narration in American Fiction Film*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 5.

and husband. I knew that one day, I would have to bury my parents, and that you would refuse to shake my hand]. Oddly, although we hear her via voiceover, her lips are still. We then cut to a medium shot of her sitting on the bed, looking into the camera, and she transitions to direct address, continuing her speech (addressed to Henri). As the camera slowly zooms in to a close up, she looks at the camera and declares, "C'est toi qui étais le voleur. […] Tu m'as volé ma vie entière" [*You* are the thief. […] You've stolen my entire life]. As tears well up in her eyes, we finally have confirmation that Elizabeth indeed feels as though she has lost her own life, as well as her brother(s). She is virtually among the non-living, and is therefore unknowingly in a state of self-mourning. Elizabeth indeed justifies every choice she has made, but she claims no responsibility for her perpetual state of suffering and loss. By blaming Henri for all of her troubles, she never reaches a true state of closure.

In addition to Abel, Elizabeth, and Henri, Junon also takes part in narrating the film's events. Junon is indeed a central character who, like the others, reveals contradictions on several levels. Although she is in a state of physical and emotional vulnerability, we are forced to dislike her as much as we admire her. At times we cannot believe that she is a mother, and at times we empathize with her because of her suffering and anxiety as an ailing cancer patient. She reveals more about her unconscious thoughts through dialogue than through narration, yet in both cases, we both gain and lose sympathy for her. Twenty minutes into the film, the camera abruptly cuts from a conversation between Elizabeth and Ivan regarding their mother's transplant, to a shot of Junon standing in front of the mantle in her living room, looking directly into the camera. She then uses direct address to give spectators a virtual tour of her home, explaining where she and Abel perform certain activities: "C'est la fauteuil où Abel lit le journal; c'est la petite table où j'écris mes correspondances" [That's the chair where Abel reads the newspaper; that's the desk

134

where I write my letters]. Then, in contrast with these banal descriptions, she smiles as she reports, "Il y a cinq ans ma fille Elizabeth a banni son frère Henri, et la maison est devenue un peu moins vivante. Cette année grâce à ma maladie la famille va se réunir" [Five years ago my daughter Elizabeth banished her brother Henri, and the house became a little less lively. This year, thanks to my illness, the family will reunite]. The contradiction here is twofold: she smiles while reporting unresolved family disputes, and she uses her illness as a positive pretext for a family reunion. As she concludes her moment of narration, she stands in front of a window, surrounded by lush green plants, glowing in the bright sunlight pouring in through the window. Again, Desplechin establishes contrasts between the living (thriving plants bathing in sunlight), and the dying (Junon). While part of her delivery is given through direct address, the camera also cuts from her face to various objects in the house, such as framed photographs on the mantle that the camera slowly pans by in soft, high-key lighting. Her voice-over is complemented by the camera's slow pans of the photos, recalling Garwood's description of a similar scene in the film *The Travels*, in which he noticed "a complementarity in tone between the measured voice of the narrator and the smooth and slow movement of the camera past the emporium's various collected treasures."[150] This harmonious tone evokes the sensation that we are traveling through Junon's slowly fading memories of her life and family, as if she is already saying her goodbyes. Oddly, there is a sense of solemnity in her speech that implies she is speaking about relatives who have already lost her. She, like Elizabeth, engages in her own self-mourning.

As these examples show, Desplechin's multiple uses of narration conveniently allow us to discover the characters' conscious and subconscious motivations, and the moral justifications for their actions. This allows us to identify so closely with them—subconsciously or not—that

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[150] Garwood, 99.

we may feel like we almost become them. Moreover, the contradictions inherent to their thought and behavioral patterns contribute to the overarching theme of mourning and loss in the film, but not in the traditional sense of mourning someone else. Their admissions to the audience ironically reveal that they are grieving not only for those who have died, but also for those who are living, including themselves. We gather evidence through their subjective statements that suggests that we all have our own interpretation of our role in our family, and that we may indeed be oblivious to other family members' subjective experiences.

Speaking the Unspeakable: The Unrestrained Dialogue of Love/Hate Relationships

While my analysis of the film's narration underscores the *drama* in this dramatic comedy, an exploration of the dialogue in *Un conte de Noël* will show how the film manipulates the resources of language to produce humor as well. As in most classical narrative cinema, the film's dialogue helps advance the plot and explain character motivation, but Desplechin also uses it to shock viewers' sensibilities. For example, critics often remark on the level of *franchise* in the characters who display little or no tact when speaking to family members. In fact, they utter the unspeakable. Ironically, however, the absurdity of what they say is more likely to make viewers laugh than cringe. As Rouquet attests, "Desplechin joue avec le cinéma comme il joue avec son sujet en nous rappelant sans cesse avec légèreté que les membres d'une famille sont soumis à un processus contradictoire d'attraction-répulsion forcément générateur de trouble" [Desplechin plays with cinema like he plays with his subject in constantly, humorously reminding us that the members of a family are submitted to a contradictory process of attraction-repulsion that indeed

generates trouble].[151] The ensuing conflicts in much of the film's dialogue divide the family unit,

often revealing two opposite perspectives, and eventually creating a concatenation of unresolved

tensions. Many critics call this the dialogue of 'franchise,' where one speaks without restraint.

When characters converse in this way, we might infer that they feel they have nothing to lose

because they have already lost anything they had to begin with. The contradict themselves; they

contradict each other, and their speech is often at odds with the atmosphere or setting in which

they are placed.

While many dramatic comedies emphasize image and dialogue equally, the latter often

occupies a subordinate position in the cinematic hierarchy. In her text on dialogue in film, Sarah

Kozloff claims that, "Because of their ability to photograph the physical world, films rarely need

to rely upon dialogue to the same extent [as theater]."[152] *Un conte de Noël* indeed relies upon

dialogue not only to advance the plot but also, and more importantly, to develop the characters,

to render them more substantial, to open windows into their unconscious. In Desplechin's film,

we certainly encounter a hotchpotch of each character's conflicting personality traits thanks to

the *franchise* of the dialogue. Just as the family becomes more of a construct than a reality in the

film, so too does each character, whose motivations and desires are born out of multiple

contrasting signs.

Although I have up to this point referred to *Un conte de Noël* as a dramatic comedy, I

should note that it also could be classified as a melodrama, a genre which traditionally centers

around families, and particularly around themes of love and loss.[153] In melodramas, characters do

not hesitate to say exactly what they are thinking, regardless of the effect it will have on their

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[151] Rouquet, 228.

[152] Kozloff. *Overhearing Film Dialogue*. (Berkeley : University of California Press, 2000), 35.

[153] Ibid., 237.

interlocutor. Kozloff cites Peter Brooks who writes that, "The desire to express all seems a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode. Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; the characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatize through their heightened and polarized words and gestures the whole lesson of their relationship."[154] Following Brooks' definition of melodramatic dialogue, we could look to an exemplary moment in the film when we encounter a mutual declaration of non-love between Henri and Junon, as they smoke cigarettes on a porch swing in the backyard. The conversation unfolds as follows:

> Junon: Tu m'aimes toujours pas, eh?
> Henri : Je ne t'ai jamais aimée.
> Junon : Moi non plus. Je n'étais pas une très bonne mère ?
> Henri : Non.
> Junon : J'aimais un peu tes frères et sœurs, mais moins que ton père les aimait.
> Henri : […] Est-ce que j'étais laid quand j'ai été né?
> Junon: Toi ? Je sais plus. Je n'ai aucun souvenir.
> Henri: […] Tu as besoin de moi maintenant! J'ai ce dont tu as besoin, la moelle osseuse !
> Junon: Que tu es prétentieux! Paul est compatible aussi.
> Henri: Paul, le fou? Mais tu plaisantes ! Il est complètement con!
> Junon: Si tu le dis […] Je ne veux rien de cette substance blanche, surtout pas la tienne !
>
> Junon: You still don't love me, huh?
> Henri: I never loved you.
> Junon: Me neither. I wasn't a very good mother, was I?
> Henri: No.
> Junon: I loved your brothers and sisters a little bit, but less than your father did.
> Henri: Was I ugly when I was born?
> Junon: You? I don't know. I can't recall.
> Henri: You need me now! I have what you need, the bone marrow!
> Junon: You are so vain! Paul is compatible too.
> Henri: Paul, the fool? You must be kidding! He is a complete idiot!
> Junon: If you say so […] I don't want any of that white stuff, especially not yours!

The conversation, although very hostile, also reveals conflicting emotions on the part of both speakers. By asking her son if he still doesn't love her, Junon exposes her own vulnerability, suggesting she wishes he loved her. Yet when he says "No," she quickly retorts

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[154] Ibid., 238.

"Me neither." Yet she then asks if she wasn't a very good mother, again suggesting that she feels responsible for the fact that her son does not love her. Likewise, although Henri does not hesitate to spite his mother, he also asks if he was an ugly baby, perhaps trying to unearth the source of his mother's ambivalence toward him. Furthermore, one would think that a mother telling her son that she never really loved him would be a shameful confession, yet here they both laugh as they admit their feelings, apparently finding the situation comical. Junon appears to have a corrupt conscience, and Henri seems like a damaged soul. Junon points out to her son that he has no one, but that she is liked by everyone, and that she would rather receive anyone's blood marrow but his. On the one hand, we could assume she is merely joking, since in the end she agrees to accept Henri's marrow. Why, then, does Junon seem so detached from any emotion, as if it would invade her in the same way cancer has? Again, she behaves as if she is already gone, as if nothing matters anymore. Her way of processing her illness goes beyond the realm of normalcy, becoming self-indulgent and harmful to others. Perhaps we could look to Kozloff's claim that sometimes dialogue is simply meant to "work on the viewer's emotional state," testing our emotional sensibilities and asking us not to be shocked by a verbal interaction that most would find unforgivable.[155] Like the characters, we must laugh it off. Moreover, this is another example of melodrama, since the intensity of the moment is more important than its narrative coherence.

In contrast with this mother-son conversation, much of the film's dialogue is deliberately funny, rather than ironically so. Two instances occur at the dinner table, and draw a sharp contrast between a joyful holiday meal and the impulsive verbal conflicts that ensue. For example, when Elizabeth's husband, Claude, arrives to Vuillard home after a business trip, the

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[155] Kozloff (2000), 51.

family finally sits down for dinner. When Elizabeth announces to Junon that Paul, her son, is compatible for the transplant, Junon begins to cry and leaves the table. Henri, who is visibly intoxicated, provokes an argument with his sister by suddenly shouting, "Elizabeth, tu as un vrai problème relationnel! Tu fais pleurer Junon ! Tu étais entichée stupidement trop jeune à un homme [Claude] qui ne cesse de fuir son foyer, et puis tu as cet enfant…" [Elizabeth, you have a serious interpersonal problem…you make Junon cry…you were infatuated too young with a man who constantly skips town, and then you have this kid…]. Cutting him off before he insults their son, Claude warns Henri, "Ferme ta gueule, je suis là" [Shut up; I'm right here]. Henri replies "Oui, je sais, mais toi, tu comptes pas" [Yeah, I know, but you don't count]. In response to Henri's insult, Claude punches Henri in the face, knocking him to the ground. Seeing that Henri is wounded, everyone bursts into laughter, as cheerful nondiegetic music plays, all of which contrasts with the violent circumstances. Claude simply gathers his bags and leaves, while Elizabeth, ironically, tends to Henri's bloody nose. However, when Henri insults Elizabeth as she is helping him, shouting, "tu fais fuir tout le monde!" Elizabeth's cousin Simon slaps him across the face and he falls yet again. Clearly, this kind of melodramatic dialogue combined with physical conflict is farcical, reminding us that what we are seeing is a theatrical representation of the real. Henri's drunken insults are answered with a swift punch in the face which is met with uproarious laughter from his family. Unlike the conversation between Junon and Henri that makes us cringe, this scene seems to intentionally create verbal and physical conflict for the sake of comedy.

The second example of dinner table farce occurs on Christmas Eve, just as the family sits down to eat. The tranquil, candlelit ambiance is interrupted by Claude's announcement via voiceover that Henri is about to have another drunken outburst. Awarding himself the honor of

making the Christimas Eve toast, Henri stands up at the head of the table, and sarcastically

dedicates the toast to his sister and his mother whom he calls, **"con-capitaine et con-lieutenant."**

The French word "con" can be translated in many ways—idiot, moron, etc.—each with varying

degrees of derogation, but the English subtitles offer the most vulgar translation: "cunt captain

and cunt lieutenant." Immediately following this ineloquent toast, he then collapses to the floor,

knocking over his chair. This kind of crude outburst (combined with the physical humor) inspires

laughter more than repulsion, making light of an alcoholic's verbal eruption at an elegant

Christmas Eve dinner. Moreover, the recipients of his insults react unexpectedly: Elizabeth

simply laughs, while Junon smiles speechlessly. After a moment of reflection, she scoffs, **"Bon**

débarras! Henri m'a épuisé ce soir" [Good riddance. Henri wore me out tonight]. Again, the

characters react to disturbing situations with either laughter or nonchalance, suggesting no harm

has been done, since love and trust were hardly there to begin with.

In addition to humor, Desplechin also uses melodramatic dialogue to maintain a certain

degree of verisimilitude. Some of these conversations convey the characters' private thoughts or

honest confessions, and some of them simply portray "normal" interactions to balance out the

onslaught of "abnormal" exchanges that punctuate the film's narrative. As Kozloff confirms,

some films include quotidian conversations for the sole purpose of convincing viewers that what

they are seeing is real.[156] In one scene, for example, Elizabeth privately asks Junon not to accept

Henri's blood, and instead to take her son Paul's, since he too is compatible. Explaining that her

thirteen year-old son has never been good at anything (he has struggled academically, socially,

athletically, etc.), she argues that he is finally fit for something. Yet Junon replies, "Ton fils est

trop fragile. Henri vient de mon ventre. Je reprends ce qui m'appartient" [Your son is too fragile.

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[156] Kozloff (2000), 47.

Henri comes from my womb. I'm going to take back what belongs to me]. Unlike the way she speaks to Henri, Junon is more sensitive with Elizabeth, and openly explains her reasoning. A few moments later, Elizabeth confesses to her mother, "J'ai trop voulu que tu m'admires. Les hommes pour moi n'ont pas compté. Mon fils m'a été un étranger" [I've always yearned for your admiration. Men never counted for me. My son has been a stranger to me]. At this moment, Elizabeth partially exposes the reasoning for her behavior toward Henri, since men "never counted" for her. Yet she also contradicts herself by suggesting she wants her son to be valued, but then admits he is a stranger to her, implying that he too "doesn't count." Elizabeth's bitter tone recalls Junon's earlier confession to Henri; she ultimately shows little compassion for her son or for her brother. Moreover, admitting that her son was always a stranger to her suggests yet again that she mourns her son instead of taking action to improve his life.

On the other hand, the dialogue also adheres to the codes of realism[157] early in the film when Elizabeth attempts to articulate the source of her depression with her therapist. The scene opens with a black and white photo of Elizabeth as a young girl, smiling, with an epigraph reading "l'ainée" [the eldest]. We cut to a medium close up shot of adult Elizabeth, now frowning, as she stares blankly into the camera, stating, "Je suis sterile. Je suis malheureuse. En colère. Je bous de colère. Même vous je vous haïs. Je ne comprends pas à quel deuil je survis" [I'm sterile. I'm unhappy. Angry. I'm seething with anger. I even hate you. I don't know whose death I'm mourning]. Following this blunt confession, the therapist replies—dramatically—"le deuil" [death]. Elizabeth continues: "C'est pas mon frère Joseph, de lui on ne cesse de parler. Personne ne souci de mon fils, qui est vivant lui. J'ai l'impression que quelqu'un est mort mais je ne sais pas qui" [It's not my brother Joseph; we always talk about him. No one cares about my

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[157] Ibid., 33.

son Paul, who is still alive. I feel like someone died but I don't know who]. Rather than addressing the details of what Elizabeth just said, her therapist asks, "Pourquoi vous haïssez votre frère ?" [Why do you hate your brother?], which leads to the voiceover narration of the court proceedings previously discussed. In this scene, the dialogue conveys both a sense of realism and of melodrama, since Elizabeth confesses in one breath "I'm unhappy, angry," and also "I even hate you," directing her anger irrationally at the therapist. His laconic response, "death," simply reiterates one aspect of what she has just expressed, without pushing the envelope any further, which seems highly unrealistic.

Moreover, Elizabeth's declaration that she feels like someone has died, but doesn't know who, suggests that the person she "feels is dead" is herself. I would argue that she, more than any character, unknowingly mourns herself; she mourns that smiling little girl from the photo whom she no longer knows. The dialogue in this scene allows us to come face to face with her unconscious thoughts and fears, revealing aspects of her character of which even she is unaware. Every admission she makes through dialogue or narration portrays her as a deeply conflicted person teeming with resentment and unresolved anger. Although she constantly puts the blame on others, particularly Henri, she ultimately reveals that she feels dead inside, reconfirming the juxtaposition of life and death that haunts the entire film.

In addition to the humorous and realist conversations in *Un conte de Noël*, a notable example of theatricality occurs in a scene that evokes a Shakespearian love triangle, revealing secret rivalries and injustices from the past. The semi-incestuous triangle involves Ivan, the youngest Vuillard brother, his wife Sylvia, and his cousin Simon. On Christmas Eve, Roseaimée, Abel's deceased mother's lesbian partner, discloses to Sylvia about how it came to be that Ivan

proposed to her years ago. Roseaimée explains that Ivan, Simon, and also Henri, all wanted to marry Sylvia, and that they essentially flipped a coin to decide who got to be with her. Ivan and Simon, she explains, both loved her, so Henri bowed out of the competition, allowing Simon and Ivan to battle it out. Upon learning the truth, Sylvia immediately confronts Simon, who admits having said to Ivan that fateful day, "Elle est à toi, je te la donne" [She is yours; I give her to you]. Furious, Sylvia accuses him of being fickle, of carelessly passing her on, as if he was ever his property to begin with. As she begins to cry, she asks, "Est-ce que tu m'aimais ? Est-ce que tu m'aimes?" [Did you love me ? Do you love me]. When he responds affirmatively to both questions, she retorts, "Tu es une ordure. Tu as choisi à ma place. Tu as joué à ma place et tu as triché. Ma vie n'est pas la mienne" [You are trash. You made my choice for me. You played my hand and you cheated. My life is not mine]. As she yells at him, he smiles and laughs nonchalantly, setting up yet another unexpected contrast of emotions. When she declares, "My life's not mine," we learn that like Elizabeth, Sylvia is mourning the life she didn't know she could have had. She too is suddenly confronted with a sense of mourning her own death.

In another scene, the dialogue shifts yet again in a conversation between Elizabeth and Abel in which the latter draws on philosophical theories of morality to help his daughter understand the source of her sorrows. As Elizabeth sits across from Abel at his desk, staring at him in silence while he works, the camera zooms in to a close up of her tearful eyes as she utters, "Pourquoi je suis tout le temps triste? C'est normal? Quand j'étais un enfant je n'étais pas tout le temps triste. Mais c'est une vraie question, qu'est-ce que j'ai perdu ?" [Why am I always sad? Is it normal? When I was a kid I wasn't always sad. What did I lose?]. Her father does not hesitate to reply: "Ton frère" [Your brother]. Interestingly, Elizabeth does not ask which brother he is referring to, yet it is most plausible that he means Henri, given the recurrent conflicts between

the two siblings throughout the family reunion. Rather than offering personal—or paternal—wisdom, Abel reaches for a book and begins to read aloud to her from Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality*, creating a sense of intertextuality as he reads about Nietzsche's philosophy of identity. The camera zooms in on his face as he reads, "Nous, chercheurs de la connaissance, nous sommes pour nous-mêmes des inconnus […] Nous nous sommes jamais cherchés. Nous restons des étrangers à nous-mêmes. Nous nous comprenons pas" [We, seekers of knowledge, we are strangers to ourselves […] we have never searched for ourselves. We remain strangers to ourselves. We do not understand ourselves]. Momentarily lifting his head from the book, he looks at Elizabeth to adds that knowledge is the key, the "le trésor" [the treasure] to self-understanding.

Abel's reading of Nietzsche speaks to one aspect of Kozloff's theory about the melodramatic mode in which a character with a particular authority interrupts normal dialogue to deliver a monologue, or read from a text, creating an "authorial commentary."[158] As the family patriarch, Abel enjoys the position of the wise sage who is only willing to discuss emotion superficially, and then chooses to ask deeper philosophical questions about the human condition to prompt his listener to discover her own answers, to achieve self-awareness. In this scene, his reading from Nietzsche to encourage his daughter interrupts the act of mourning that dominates the film, and helps her move toward closure. As I mentioned earlier, however, her current, real-life animosity toward Henri outweighs the loss of a brother who died when she was so young. Her explicit reference to her sense of loss demonstrates that she is at least aware of part of her problem, yet she is still in the process of uncovering the manifold layers of the mourning she experiences. Perhaps this father-daughter conversation could be read as the promise of closure

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[158] Kozloff (2000), 58.

for Elizabeth, arguably the film's most tormented character. Kozloff follows Peter Brooks in noting that the melodramatic genre "is about the drive toward recognition of the hidden moral significance of our lives and actions."[159] With this in mind, we could see this moment as a catalyst allowing Elizabeth to recognize what has been in front of her all along, but that she has been completely unable to see.

Whether it is funny, sad, or disturbing, the dialogue in *Un conte de Noel* is consistently full of surprises. We must be prepared for characters to utter the crude, the unexpected, or the brutally honest. Proving that they have nothing to lose, the family members never cease to speak candidly. Rouquet sums it up concisely when he quips, "Chez les Vuillard, on ne se tait pas" [At the Vuillard household, no one shuts up].[160] Like the film's use of voiceover and direct address, its use of verbal exchanges uncovers multiple layers of contrasts and contradictions within and between characters, and between characters and their environment. Moreover, it assembles the puzzle of mourning that many of the characters struggle to piece together.

Visual Poetry and Virtual Puppetry: The Art of *mise-en-scène*

In his analysis of *Un conte de Noel*, Roy argues that Desplechin's use of *mise-en-scène* establishes characters in their surroundings by juxtaposing the fragmented pieces of their lives.[161] He suggests that the *mise-en-scène* creates the sensation that viewers are watching a play in the theater, rather than on screen, and in this way, it both mythologizes and compartmentalizes the Vuillard family members. Following Roy, I would argue that this compartmentalization

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[159] Ibid., 243.
[160] Rouquet, 222.
[161] Roy.

146

contributes to the overall tension between contrasting characters and events throughout the film, and that Desplechin turns his characters into caricatures to highlight exactly how different they all are. After focusing on the film's verbal elements of that contribute to its overarching themes, I would also argue that the *mise-en-scène* (décor, costumes, props, setting, objects, lighting, etc.) also plays an essential role in underscoring the film's pervasive sense of loss and self-mourning.

To offer a particularly complicated example, Junon is a character whose surroundings Desplechin carefully designs as a space of purgatory, a space in-between life and death. The space she inhabits appears wholesome and beautiful but is in fact tainted by visual reminders of her disease. When she prepares herself for bed, we find her surrounded by the light pink walls of her bathroom, donning a pink, fluffy robe, with glowing light that shines on her delicate perfumes and powders. Yet when the camera cuts to an image of her torso in the mirror, we see in front of her on the shelf the small handbook on cancer that she reads before falling asleep. Propped up against glass jars of perfume on a shelf above the sink, the notebook introduces a jarring contrast between the medicinal and the luxurious. In one scene, we see Junon in her bedroom from a high angle shot that captures her reading in bed, wearing a white silk camisole, draped in white linens, glowing in soft, white high-key lighting. The camera then zooms in to a close-up on her book, which is again the handbook on her blood disease. As we continue to zoom in to an extreme close up of the text, the camera lens is slowly covered by a red filter— evoking blood—that taints the white, glowing light, creating an eerie, ominous effect. We are put into the position of feeling what Junon feels: a perpetual state of anxiety about her death that contaminates the purity of her environment.

As one of the central characters in the film, Junon is surrounded by space that is particularly conspicuous in comparison to other family members' spaces. In a word, one might define her space as 'heavenly,' even utopian, except when it is interrupted by signs of illness. When we first meet her, the camera zooms out from a shot of the garden seen through the kitchen window. We see a woman's midriff as she carries a pot of tea to the sink; the camera then tilts up to reveal Junon's face in a calm, peaceful expression. As she pours the tea, mellow guitar music plays non-diegetically, and bright sunlight from outside pours into the room, creating a soft, serene atmosphere. As she prepares the tray of tea, she begins gazing at pictures of children on a corkboard above the counter. Throughout this short scene, images continually dissolve from one into another, creating a dreamlike atmosphere. The camera then cuts to a close up of the photographs, then zooms out to show the back of her head, in focus, with the photos in background, now blurry. We watch her gracefully arrange blue and white ceramic cups on the tray, with a vase of colorful flowers on table in foreground. In this scene, the lighting, objects, and colors combine with Junon's delicate movements to evoke a sense of femininity, liveliness, and radiance. However, as we follow her out of the kitchen with the tray of tea, the serenity is abruptly broken: Junon stops mid-step, drops the tray, and as the camera's focus blurs, she falls to the ground. When Abel rushes in to ask what happened, she brushes it off, saying, "C'est idiot, je suis tombée" [It was stupid; I fell], denying that the fall was related to her illness. This disturbing ending contrasts sharply with the heavenly, tranquil ambiance of the entire sequence. Like the glowing light in her bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen, a glow also surrounds her during the tour of her home that she narrates via direct address, in which she speaks about family members she has lost.

In contrast with the utopian ambiance of Junon's visual space in the film, Elizabeth's space is relatively bland, and at times, dismal. She wears plain, neutral-colored clothing that never draw attention to her beauty or femininity. Hunched over her desk in dark rooms, secretly writing resentful letters to Henri, or sulking in the dark corners of her father's office, staring blankly in silence, Elizabeth evokes sullenness through her placement and posture in each setting. Furthermore, in two poignant scenes, she is linked directly to childlike objects that signify her own place in purgatory; not between life and death, in literal terms, but in the sense that she seems to have symbolically died after childhood. Her unresolved hatred for Henri stands out as the principal root of her unhappiness, but we cannot help but wonder what else contributes to her loss of any sense of self in her adulthood.

As the film opens, we meet Elizabeth via voiceover narration when she describes the family via shadow puppets. When we later learn that she is a playwright, her narration of the puppet scene makes more sense, yet the latter also associates her with a childlike world. Near the end of the film, this sense of a lost childhood is paralleled in the dollhouse scene in which she privately accuses Henri of having "stolen" her life. The camera captures her behind the closed doors of a dimly lit room, as she gazes into a dollhouse, passively indicting her brother by whispering his crimes to miniature figurines rather than speaking to Henri directly. This motif of children's objects in the form of puppets and dollhouses draws further attention to her character's arrested emotional development. Some might say she is a woman who needs to reawaken her "inner child" to find the source of her angst. The combination of confining spaces and children's objects continually evoke a state of immobility, and perhaps death. We sense she mourns the child she once was, and perhaps the brother she once knew before adulthood, according to her, ruined him.

149

Despite the differences in light, color, and décor, both Junon and Elizabeth are always filmed in inclusive spaces within the Vuillard home. Elizabeth may isolate herself voluntarily, but she is never excluded by anyone. Both mother and daughter are linked to the notion of home, whether it is Junon's household or the dollhouse Elizabeth gazes at longingly. Henri, by contrast, is often situated on the exterior—whether inside or outdoors—highlighting his lack of belonging in the family. He wears dark, funereal clothing and is filmed in dim, ominous light. The only objects he regularly touches are cigarettes and bottles of wine that confirm his status as the black sheep and the family alcoholic. We first meet Henri in the street, stumbling around drunk. We see him from behind, in a following shot that shows him wearing a black trench coat, hunching forward and walking very slowly. He is surrounded by gray, desolate streets, and gray, dismal skies, in contrast with the glowing light that surrounds his mother. The camera then cuts to a medium close up as he drinks from a bottle (presumably something alcoholic), then cuts to a high angle shot that captures a slanted image of his feet as he stumbles along in dirty leather shoes. We then cut to a close up of his hand jutting out of a dirty sleeve, flexing, as if preparing for a fall. Foreshadowing the many falls Henri will take throughout the film, a long shot from across the street captures him falling face first onto the ground. This short but informative scene visually encapsulates all the character's dominant traits. Even at his parents' home, he remains on the margins, escaping the tension by climbing out of second-story windows, down brick walls, and into the snowy streets. His black trench coat comes off in the house to reveal a black suit, a uniform he wears in almost every scene. When he delivers his monologue to Elizabeth via direct address, he is placed in front of a dark blue backdrop, wearing a dark suit. Like the other characters, the design of the *mise-en-scène* visually establishes his place within the family.

Like the dollhouse Elizabeth gazes into, we could think of the Vuillard home as a life-size dollhouse that Desplechin meticulously decorates and in which he carefully places his "dolls" according to individually specific settings. Each character's tastes, habits, and anxieties are mirrored in the colors, light, clothing, and objects that surround them. The embellishment of the mise-en-scene, combined with the theatricality of the film's events, all work together to create a make-believe story that in some ways feels all too real, and in other ways, exaggerates the real, making a myth of the Vuillard family household.

Conclusion

The conclusion I would draw from *Un conte de Noel* is two-fold. On the one hand, it is a film in which all the narrative and formal elements emphasize contrasts and contradictions, and on the other hand, the underlying tension that is in part developed by these contrasts is one of loss, but more precisely, of self-mourning. I have shown how the two factors work together in making the film more about a family that, on an individual and collective level, mourns itself, rather than the loss of the child who died long ago.

I have also situated Desplechin within the framework of *le jeune cinéma* in order to emphasize his role in a larger movement of contemporary French writers and directors who make films about the family. Rather than claiming that Desplechin is trying to make an argument about the current state of the French family today, I argue that *Un conte de Noel* simply opens a window into the life of an imaginary family, seen in all its beauty and cruelty. We could perhaps read into the film's events to create a commentary on the *famille à problèmes* in France today, but there seems to be a deeper purpose. The Vuillard family in this film clearly suffers from

some forms of dysfunction, but it does not seem that the director is assigning blame. Nor is he using the Vuillards as a model of the typical family. I would suggest that because there is ultimately no resolution to many of the family's problems, especially the rift between Elizabeth and Henri, the film suggests that blood is not necessarily the tie that binds, metaphorically speaking. In the film's final scenes, which show Junon undergoing the transplant thanks to Henri's donation, blood is literally the tie that binds insofar as it allows a son to save his mother's life. Yet, the film's previous events suggest that this blood is purely biological. It lacks any deeper emotional or psychological significance.

Finally, I have argued that the film problematizes its own generic mode by fluctuating between the plausible and the hyperbolic. Rather than striving to maintain verisimilitude, the film approaches the family as a construct, not as a concrete reality. That said, the way in which the family portrait indeed adheres to the codes of realism is chiefly by emphasizing biological, and not emotional, filial connections. Desplechin uses the film as a platform to experiment with contrasting cinematic techniques and traditions, imbuing the cinematic image with rich layers of intertextuality and theatricality. In the end, we don't know whether to laugh or cry, since the entire film is a rollercoaster of conflicting emotions and personalities. In the end, perhaps Desplechin says it best: "[U]ne famille, c'est fait pour dysfonctionner" [A family is made to malfunction].[162]

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[162] Rouquet, 228

<center>**CHAPTER FOUR**</center>

<center>Filming Fracture in Xavier Dolan's *J'ai tué ma mère*</center>

<center>**Introduction**</center>

The family has always played a central role in Quebec cinema. From the early days of *cinéma direct*, through the pre-and post- Quiet Revolution era films to the present day, Quebec filmmakers have employed the medium of film to record the transformations of the Québécois family. Such changes accelerated when the family as an institution experienced a relatively rapid evolution in the early 1960s with the broader social and political developments brought about by the Quiet Revolution. Traditional rural life had long demanded a devotion to the Church and required large families to tend to the land. However, as Quebecers ultimately grew frustrated with the inequalities born out of English domination, the changes they demanded inevitably propelled Quebec into a state of increased urbanization and secularization. Undoubtedly, this cultural "revolution" eventually affected the very root of society: the family. As marriage rates declined, divorce rates grew, birth rates dropped, and a neutral territory expanded in which more individuals chose to cohabitate, with or without having children, and opted out of marriage altogether.[163]

Among the scholars who have proposed theoretical perspectives on changes to family structures in Quebec, sociologists Benoit Rapoport and Céline Le Bourdais follow Roderic Beaujot in noting that in the last several decades, families in Quebec (as in Canada at large) have become subject to a higher risk for disunion, in part because "entry and exit from relationships

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[163] Kevin McQuillan and Zenaida R. Ravanera, Eds. *Canada's Changing Families: Implications for Individuals and Society.* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 34.

has become more flexible, as shown by the rise of divorce and cohabitation."[164] For Rapoport and Le Bourdais, changes in family configurations also stem in large part from changes in gender roles over the decades that have led to more mothers joining the work force, and to more demanding work schedules that allow parents much less time to spend with their children.[165] Their research also suggests that to some degree, for both married and single individuals, a preoccupation with career advancement has superseded the focus on partnership, marriage, and family.

Despite the potentially adverse aspects of high divorce rates, declining fertility rates, and the growing prevalence of "disunion," some scholars argue that there are also favorable aspects of the Quebec family's transformation. For example, film scholar Janis Pallister suggests that the changes have led to liberating social mores and values that are less restrictive than traditional ones.[166] To illustrate what she understands as a cinematic embodiment of the Quebec family's decline, Pallister cites Claude Jutra's *Mon oncle Antoine* (1971) as a film that focuses "on the intimate life of the Quebecois, whose traditional view of the family as the nucleus of the society is in a state of collapse."[167] Not unlike Evelyne Sullerot's assertion that the French family is in "crisis," Pallister's use of the term "collapse" suggests that the Quebec family in the 1960s and 70s was not simply enduring everyday challenges, but was indeed falling apart.[168] However, she subsequently points to a constructive outcome of Quebec's sociological transformations, namely, the distinct progress toward a more freethinking society. To explain how these productive—as

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[164] Céline Le Bourdais and Benoit Rapoport. "Parental Time, Work Schedules, and Changing Gender Roles," in *Canada's Changing Families: Implications for Individuals and Society*. Kevin McQuillan and Zenaida R. Ravanera, Eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 76.

[165] Ibid., 95.

[166] Janis L. Pallister. *The Cinema of Quebec: Masters in Their Own House*. (Cranbury: Associated University Press, 1995).

[167] Ibid., 109.

[168] Sullerot (1997), 7.

opposed to destructive—changes are manifested in Quebec cinema, she cites Dominique Noguez who differentiates between films that represent two divergent cultural categories within Quebec: "the traditional, closed, Catholic, sexually taboo society," and simply, "the new one."[169]

In other words, the cultural tension between tradition and modernity became increasingly palpable in Quebec cinema beginning in the 1960s and 70s, although many films were still relatively conventional in terms of thematic content. It was not until the 1980s and 90s that the transformation of social mores led to new and liberating concepts of gender roles, more flexible notions of romantic partnership and family structures, and to wider visibility of LGBTQ (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer) persons in the public sphere. Films such as *Marie Chapdelaine* (1934, 1983) or *Les Plouffe* (1981) that reflect Quebec's traditional loyalties to Church, family, and land have been followed by films that depict various characteristics of the "new" Quebec. These include Denys Arcand's *Le déclin de l'empire américain* (1986) in which several adult friends spend an evening discussing their provocative sexual experiences and controversial political views, or Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Léolo* (1992), which recounts the story of a boy growing up in a dysfunctional family in a decaying quarter of Montreal, or *De père en flic* (2009), the story of a father-son police team who track down wanted criminals at a father-son therapy camp and are forced to reevaluate their troubled relationship. Certain films have managed to depict both the before and after, or the old and the new, such as Jean-Marc Vallée's *C.R.A.Z.Y.* (2005) in which flashbacks from the 1990s to the 1970s indicate the magnitude of Quebec's cultural transformation. Though the Beaulieu family in *C.R.A.Z.Y.* still meets traditional expectations in maintaining a dedication to the Church and producing several children

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[169] Pallister, 145.

in a household with married parents, this "typical" family eventually faces difficult modern-day problems that force it to reevaluate its belief systems.

Though stories about "typical" families are and have always been a frequent subject of Quebec cinema, Pallister is indeed on course in observing that contemporary filmmakers have become noticeably attracted to family themes that fall outside of the norm. For example, while films continue to expose ongoing transformations of the nuclear family, they also provide an increasing visibility for LGBTQ persons and their families. Since the 1970s, filmmakers, screenwriters, and dramatists have gradually facilitated a path to wider visibility of queer subjectivity, which has allowed twenty-first century artists greater freedom to represent non-heteronormative identities on screen. Some filmmakers investigate how individuals cope with the "coming out" of family members, while others navigate the complicated processes of gender transition. Whereas some underscore the subversion of heteronormative sexualities or identities, others remain innocuous by recounting ordinary stories that simply include queer characters. They all, however, indicate the gradual transformation of social norms and values over time. Such directors include Claude Jutra, Gilles Groulx, Robert Lepage, Jean Baudoin, Denys Arcand, Léa Pool, Paule Baillargeon—and Xavier Dolan, who stands out as Quebec's youngest *auteur* director.

The majority of Dolan's films explore themes of family dysfunction, friendship, and romantic love, often treating sexuality in unconventional ways. His films also tend to combine a relatively high degree of realist cinematography with fantasy sequences, non-diegetic confessional interludes, or other experimental techniques that deviate from conventional form. An openly gay member of the artistic community, Dolan has directed four films to date, three of which he also wrote. His cinematic debut *J'ai tué ma mère/I Killed my Mother* (2009) earned

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Dolan three awards at Cannes at the age of nineteen, and immediately established him as one of

Quebec's newest successful filmmakers.

In this semi-autobiographical film, the main character Hubert (played by Dolan) grows

up with a socially conservative mother (Chantale) and a largely absent father, maintains a secret

homosexual relationship with a boy from school whose mother inadvertently "outs" him to his

own mother, and is subsequently sent to boarding school in the country. Though the film

explores the volatile relationship between a teenage boy and his mother, paternal bonds are

equally tenuous, reaching the breaking point when Hubert's apathetic father joins forces with his

ex-wife to inform Hubert they are sending him to boarding school. Embittered by their

intolerance, Hubert deliberately fails his classes, turns in a paper entitled *J'ai tué ma mère*, and

runs away shortly after surviving a violent hate crime from local teens.

> Despite its serious subject matter, critic Michael Giltz suggests that
>
> The film is a brutally funny look at a maddeningly precocious teenager and his long-suffering single mother. Hubert criticizes the way she eats, the way she dresses, the way she drives, the channel she listens to on the radio… [However] she's not a disaster mom. Hubert is genuinely cruel, but he's so funny about it you can't help laughing.[170]

That is to say that while the film frequently inspires an emotional response on the part of

spectators, Dolan's comic relief adds levity to the film's arguably bleak subject matter, and also

provides richer character development by exploring Hubert and Chantale's idiosyncrasies.

Contentious dialogue is not the only tool Dolan uses to underscore the fractured mother-

son dynamic in the film. For example, Hubert's thoughts about his mother are repeatedly

portrayed through experimental film techniques such as non-diegetic video and image inserts,

fantasy sequences, and flashbacks that offer viewers a more intimate portrait of his character. In

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[170] Michael Giltz. "Matricide Movie Wins Plaudits at Cannes." <u>Huffington Post</u>. 24 February 2011. http://michaelgiltz.com/scans/HuffPo-Heartbeats_and_the_Rise_of_Xavier_Dolan-2-24-2011.pdf

contrast, his mother's story is told primarily through narrative and dialogue, but without equally illustrative film techniques that would provide viewers with more insight into how she perceives her son and the world around her. If there is area where the film falls short, then, it might be in its disproportionate interest in the characters' subconscious. We may be equally irritated with Hubert's recalcitrance and Chantale's passive aggressiveness, yet we are provided far more insight into Hubert's psychology to substantiate his behavior.

Considering that one of the film's major turning points is Chantale's discovery of and reaction to Hubert's homosexuality, it is not surprising that critics often label it a "coming out" film, or situate it in the queer cinema genre. It is also worth noting that in several interviews, Dolan confirms the fact that he has no intention of creating films that fit neatly into any category, including queer cinema. Although he is an 'out' gay man whose first film recounts events surrounding his own 'coming out,' he affirms, "I can't believe people told me it was queer. Is this movie about a gay son or a son? Is it about a son fighting for his homosexuality? […] No, not at all. It's a mother-son dynamic and it has nothing to do with homosexuality."[171] Moreover, independent of Hubert's sexual preferences, *J'ai tué ma mère* also contends with other difficult themes of divorce, single-parenting, and family disputes. In line with the director's point of view, this chapter aims to read the film from a flexible perspective that does not pigeonhole it as 'queer,' and that recognizes its thematic complexity.[172]

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[171] Tyler Coates. "Flavorwire interview : Director Xavier Dolan on Laurence Anyways and the Ghetto of Queer Cinema." Flavorwire June 27, 2013. http://flavorwire.com/400845/flavorwire-interview-director-xavier-dolan-on-laurence-anyways-and-the-ghetto-of-queer-cinema

[172] However, I also arue that claiming the film has nothing to do with homosexuality minimizes the fact that the already turbulent mother-son relationship is further exacerbated by Hubert's coming out. In other words, my discussion of his film as 'queer' is meant to be inclusive of other genres, and is not intended to overlook qualities of the film that could allow it to be otherwise categorized. If the film is understood to produce social commentary on queer sexuality, identities, or experiences, it is because the spectator (or myself), not the director, has formulated this interpretation.

Alongside the question of sexuality that constitutes one of the storylines in *J'ai tué ma mère*, the film's narrative and thematic emphasis on the mother-son relationship opens the film to another, more traditional, topic . While one can point to several films that focus on mother-son relationships, it must be noted that far more father-son films have emerged in Quebec, such as *Un zoo la nuit* (1987), *C.R.A.Z.Y.* (2005), or *De père en flic* (2009), to name only a few. Although mothers may not share equal time on screen with fathers, Quebec scholar Heinz Weinmann argues that the mother is "omniprésente dans l'imaginaire québécois sous sa forme de mère phallique (la belle-mère de *La petite Aurore*), de la mère couveuse (mère Plouffe) ou de mère monoparentale (*Les bons débarras*)" [omnipresent in the Quebec imaginary in the form of the phallic/Oedipal mother (the step-mother in *La petite Aurore*), the incubatory mother (Mrs. Plouffe), or the single mother (*Les bons débarras*)].[173] Weinnmann's last example, Francis Mankiwicz's *Les Bons débarras* (1981), recounts the story of Michelle, a single mother who struggles against all odds to raise her troubled teenage daughter Manon. Pallister's discussion of the film underscores the notion of mother-child antagonism by suggesting that the film "has a subliminal reference to the emergence of young Québec, and its ambivalence toward as well as its revolt against the greater motherland, Anglophone Canada (and perhaps, too, against the concept of the queen, from whom the French Canadian has always been fundamentally alienated)."[174] This mother-child antagonism emerges along with father-son problems in films such as *Léolo* and *C.R.A.Z.Y.* The first depicts a loving but incapable mother raising several children amidst poverty and mental illness, while the latter portrays the intimate bond between a teenage son and his religious mother who believes he is Jesus reincarnated, and who also protects

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[173] Heinz Weinmann. *Cinéma de l'imaginaire québécois: "De La petite Aurore" à "Jésus de Montréal."* (Montreal: L'Hexagone, 1990), 107.
[174] Pallister, 246.

him from the overbearing father who rejects him. A few years later, Simon Lavoie's adaptation of Anne Hébert's *Le Torrent* (2012), (set in 1920s rural Quebec) would recount a son's refusal to fulfill his authoritarian mother's wishes of becoming a priest, leading her to deal him a violent blow that leaves him completely deaf. In short, notwithstanding the relative dearth of mother-child films in Quebec, there is a palpable interest among filmmakers in exploring these relationships.

Despite the noticeable trend toward problematic representations of women in the cinema and literature of Quebec, recent scholarship shows that by and large, there is a rising trend among filmmakers to depict images of the 'emancipated' woman. Mothers in particular have taken on new roles in terms of asserting their own independence, defying patriarchal power structures, playing the role of the tolerant parental figure who contrasts with the obstinate father, and opting out of motherhood altogether. Alongside film critics, literary scholar Paula Gilbert has also written extensively on the subject of family in Quebec, particularly in the area of women, mothers, and children. Gilbert suggests that as families adapted to changing gender roles, economic climates, and social phenomena, mothers began to resent the image of the omnipotent patriarch that was their father, husband, or even son.[175] Several of these tensions arise in Dolan's *J'ai tué ma mère*, which continues to explore the complexities of mother-son dynamics complicated by divorce, single parenting, and an absentee father. Though Chantale occasionally displays a certain maternal tenderness toward Hubert, she also impulsively engages in verbal combat with him, or abuses her authority by withdrawing promises such as allowing him to have his own apartment, or to return to public school. However, despite her independence

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[175] Gilbert, 2006.

from Hubert's father, her actions appear to be explained by a lack of coping skills in this "new" Quebec, to borrow Pallister's term, rather than by a desire to punish her son.

Alongside the film's emphasis on coming of age and the mother-son bond, *J'ai tué ma mère* also adopts innovative film techniques to buttress its thematic components, effectively merging content and form. Although non-normative and anti-conformist filmmakers have long emphasized the content-form relationship, Dolan goes beyond his predecessors, as Honoré has done in France, by employing new, experimental techniques in his film—such as non-diegetic video and image inserts, fantasy sequences, slow and accelerated motion, or the intentional confusion of diegetic and non-diegetic images—that systematically link image, sound, and story. Moreover, the film frequently disregards the classical continuity editing system by introducing visual and narrative breaks to mirror Hubert's constant fluctuation of emotion, and to reflect the fractured nature of the mother-son (and father-son) relationship.

Also worth noting is that it is not uncommon to witness a distinct symbiotic relationship between content and form in queer-themed films. Images and sounds mirror characters' experiences of identity formation, their struggle for acceptance, or their social exclusion. To emphasize the particular significance of the content-form relationship in New Queer Cinema, Barbara Hammer claims that for these kinds of films, "radical content deserves radical form."[176] In other words, a film's controversial messages—political, personal, sociological, or otherwise— might have a higher potential for reaching viewers if they are conveyed through analogously provocative techniques. Although calling the content of *J'ai tué ma mère* "radical" might be stretching the limits of the term, it could be argued that the process of "coming out" to arguably

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[176] Barbara Hammer. "The Politics of Abstraction," in *Queer Looks : Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*. Martha Gever, Pratibha Parmar, and John Greyson, Eds. (New York : Routeledge, 1993), 70.

conservative parents in a society that is only beginning to adopt more socially progressive mores is radical in the local context.

Finally, while critics point to Dolan's themes to justify classifying him as a queer filmmaker, they also frequently suggest that his techniques are strikingly similar to those made famous by French New Wave directors such as Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Demy, and François Truffaut. While this claim is somewhat justified (certain scenes from his second film, *Les amours imaginaires*, bear a strong resemblance to Godard and Truffaut's work), it is perhaps more accurate to say that Dolan fits into what some are now calling the "Modern" or "New" New Wave, or what critic Patricia Bailey designates as a new

> […] generation of thirtysomething Québécois filmmakers, coming to be referred to as the "Quebec New Wave," who explore the disquiet and confusion of life on this continent. Although these young filmmakers justifiably reject being labeled as a collective, taken together, their work reflects a new sensibility in Quebec cinema.[177]

While some aspects of these filmmakers' work echoes their cinematic forefathers, such as experimental film techniques and nonlinear narratives, they also tackle new, often controversial, subjects specific to their generation that were previously unexplored. At the time Bailey wrote her article, Xavier Dolan did not make her list of modern *New Wave* directors. However, he indeed challenges norms and creates new frontier for conceptualizing romantic love, queer experiences, and conceptions of the family through a combination of narrative, visual, and sound techniques. Moreover, given his propensity for technical experimentation, his penchant for macabre themes, as well as his *auteur* status, Dolan could indeed be categorized as a "New" New Wave director. Though this categorization could also prove limiting, it does not reduce his work

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[177] Patricia Bailey. "A new generation of Quebec filmmakers captures a culture adrift." <u>This Magazine.</u> 6 July 2010. http://this.org/magazine/2010/07/06/quebec-film/

to the queer category based on its thematic elements alone, a perspective which may obscure its technical qualities.

It is precisely Dolan's merging of thematic and technical innovation that allows *J'ai tué ma mère* to contribute to the rewriting of the Quebec family's transformation as it is depicted on screen. We could perhaps think of the film as a rewrite of what Weinmann calls Quebec's "roman familial," or the historical family novel (similar to Freud's "family romance"), insofar as Hubert becomes the orphaned child in Quebec's collective family when his absentee father and unreceptive mother reject him, punishing him for his sexuality (under the guise of poor report cards) by sending him to boarding school.[178] As film critic Morgan Charles explains, "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."[179] In other words, *cinéma orphelin* reflects the notion that Quebec continues to struggle with a sense of abandonment dating back to the separation of its historical 'parent' (France), creating an inherent family drama. *J'ai tué ma mère* then becomes a rewrite of this "roman familial" through its use of narrative, visual, and audio techniques, because it transforms the largely failed mother-son relationship into an opportunity to reaffirm the surprising functionality of a broken family. We expect the mother to abandon Hubert, to fail as a parent, and for the family to ultimately "collapse," to borrow Pallister's term. The film, however, closes on a relatively optimistic note, suggesting mother-son reconciliation and proving that this family

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[178] Weinmann. « Cinéma et l'imaginaire collectif: le Québec ou 'la naissance d'une nation' ». <u>Erudite</u>. http://www.erudit.org/livre/CEFAN/1992-1/000354co.pdf P 267.

[179] Morgan Charles. "Coming of Age in Quebec: Reviving the Nation's 'Cinéma orphelin.'" <u>Nouvelles Vues</u> 18 October 2011. http://www.nouvellesvues.ulaval.ca/fileadmin/nouvelles_vues/fichiers/Iconographie/Reviving_the_Nation_s_Cinema_orphelin___par_MORGAN_CHARLES.pdf

indeed wavers but does not collapse. Like Honore's *Dans Paris*, it is a testimony to the fact that families who do not conform to normal patterns still have the potential to reconcile and ultimately remain the tie that binds.

Video Confessions as Cinematic *mise-en-abîme*

In cinema, montage plays a crucial role in creating meaning. While individual images achieve an intimate rapport with the viewer's eye, the import of their arrangement cannot be understated. Dudley Andrew reminds us that "cinema is above all things a representation of visual life itself," and suggests that although we only experience a representation of the 'real' in cinema, we nonetheless replicate the process of vision that we use in viewing objects in our 'real' world.[180] The onus is therefore on filmmakers to fulfill their role as artists of this cinematographic process by selecting and arranging images that will allow viewers to construct meaning. In *J'ai tué ma mère*, Dolan indeed meticulously constructs the film's visual world by joining its apparently fragmented units—images, video inserts, fantasy sequences—into a cohesive whole. Although his manipulation of the camera may at times test viewers' perceptual capacities, his techniques eventually exhibit a discernible purpose which is to connect the narrative and visual worlds' perpetual sense of instability throughout the film.

As in most fiction films, in *J'ai tué ma mère*, Dolan utilizes dialogue to create meaningful connections between characters and events, yet he also employs unconventional visual and narrative methods to depict the intricacies of the mother-son conflict that dominate the film's plotline. For example, he intermittently inserts non- or meta-diegetic monologues into the

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[180] Andrew (1984), 35.

otherwise linear narrative, temporarily creating intimate self-portraits of Hubert in what appear to be moments of direct address (at first it is unclear if the videos break the expected character/viewer boundary, or if they are meant to remain "inside" the film's diegesis). At these moments, viewers must make sense of the transition from the film's narrative world to this other, unidentifiable space, which defies Deleuze's contention that in cinema, "narrative relies on the unproblematic bridging of gaps."[181] Yet the problem of identifying meaning within and surrounding the video inserts eventually dissipates as the film evolves. Throughout the first half of the film, they remain mysterious: where are they being taped, by whom, and are they internal or external to the plot? It is not until midway through the film that we realize Hubert has been recording himself in the bathroom (which provides the prison-like stark white background) with a small video camera, confessing longstanding frustration with his mother.

Shot primarily in black and white close-ups of Hubert's face, the monologues read like personal video journal entries, or perhaps confessions, allowing the main character to participate in narrating the film's events, and reminding us of the *auteur* designing and directing the film. Dolan plays the main character, and in filming himself (as Hubert) in the monologues, viewers are offered not only special access to the film's protagonist, but also to its writer, director, and principal actor. To differentiate this footage from the majority of the film's scenes, Dolan shoots it in a distinct yet minimalist documentary style, establishing an intimacy between character and spectator in which we are allowed to read between the lines—to catch a glimpse of his subconscious. Rapid zooms in and out of his face, eyes, and hands, coupled with abrupt changes in focus from blurry to clear parallel his frenetic, unstable emotional state. The camera captures

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[181] Jean-Clet Martin. "Of Images and Worlds," in *The Brain is the Screen*. Gregory Flaxman, Ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 75.

extreme close-ups of his fingernails, hands, and eyes performing nervous gestures such as scratching, smoking, or blinking, all of which convey his state of nervous tension during these private confessions. Viewers will, of course, interpret these videos in many different ways, because, to Cite Deleuze's comparison between cinema and literature, "the encounter between spectator and text is an experiment, an exploration of possibilities." [182] It is precisely this unanticipated collaboration Dolan creates between himself and viewers that also evokes Hammer's notion of 'radical' cinema.

Along similar lines, a hint of the 'radical' also materializes in Hubert's testimonies during the video confessions. While a sense of poetic contemplation infuses both the images and the statements in each video installment, Hubert's declarations are often severely unforgiving in his disclosure of fluctuating feelings of love and hatred toward his mother. This see-saw of erratic emotions emerges, for example, when he claims, "Quand j'étais petit, on s'aimait. Je l'aime […] mais je ne peux pas être son fils [When I was little, we loved each other. I love her…but I cannot be her son]. Likewise, in the next video, he states "Elle ne voulait pas m'avoir…elle n'est pas faite pour être mère. Elle s'est mariée puis elle a eu un enfant, parce que c'est ce que tout le monde attendait d'elle" [She didn't want to have me…she's not made for motherhood. She got married, then she had a kid, because it's what everyone expected of her].[183] Although he declares that societal expectations essentially forced her into motherhood , he does not elaborate on the nature of these expectations. Yet he undoubtedly points to a cultural gap between his generation and his mother's, and in this way, incorporates the phenomenon of intergenerational misunderstanding into Weinmann's 'roman familial.'

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[182] Lapsley and Westlake, 247.
[183] Xavier Dolan, Dir. *J'ai tué ma mère*. K-Films Amérique, 2009.

At times, Hubert complains about his mother with conviction, yet his emotions are as conflicting as the black and white color scheme, and as sporadic as the framing of objects in rapidly changing scale, reminding us again of Dolan's linking of content to form. For example, in one recording Hubert utters, "J'imagine aux yeux des gens, haïr sa mère c'est un pêché. C'est hypocrite quand même. Eux aussi ils ont haï leurs mères, c'est sûr" [I bet that for a lot of people, hating your mother is a sin. It's hypocritical though. They too have hated their mothers, for sure].[184] As he begins his statement about his own mother, the camera remains at a medium-close up distance, but as he concedes that he is not alone in occasionally detesting his mother, the camera zooms in to capture a close up of the somewhat guilty expression on his face. Unresolved resentment also dominates one of the final monologues, when the camera zooms in on an extreme close up of his eyes and then his mouth as he utters:

> *C'est vrai que je l'aime, mais pas d'un amour de fils. C'est bizarre parce que si quelqu'un lui faisait du mal, c'est sûr que je voudrais tuer cette personne. En même temps, je peux penser à une centaine de personnes que j'aime plus que ma mère.* [It's true that I love her, but it's not a son's love. It's strange because if someone hurt her, I would definitely want to kill the person. At the same time, I can think of a hundred people I love more than my mother].

This happens to be the recording his mother sees when she finds the camera in his room, and upon briefly viewing it, is traumatized. It is at once devastating in that he claims to love many others more than her, and encouraging in that he claims he would always protect her from harm. Ultimately, these repeatedly interspersed videos deviate from the filmic norm, breaking the "fourth wall" of the camera lens to provide viewers with a self-reflexive exposé on his secretive, shameful, and all-encompassing love/hate relationship with his mother. As if he were literally "in the closet," he must resort to hiding in the bathroom behind closed doors to confess his unresolved feelings. Yet, despite the obvious analogy, he never refers to his sexuality in these

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[184] Ibid.

video confessions; he speaks, rather, about his relationship with his mother, which reinforces the claim that this film is really about a mother-son bond more than it is about Hubert's "coming out."

Fragments of the Real: Non-diegetic Still Shots

In addition to the recorded monologues, several non-diegetic image inserts also interrupt the narrative continuity of *J'ai tué ma mère*, creating a vertiginous effect that allows us to absorb what we are seeing only subconsciously. The film evokes Eisenstein's principle according to which the "collision" of images is meant to "impose a shock on its audiences" prompting them to formulate new ideas, creating idea-images that recall bizarre Dada/Surrealist juxtapositions.[185] These inserts vary from the literal (objects belonging to Hubert or his mother) to the metaphorical (Hubert's fantasies), and provoke viewers into searching for implicit meaning, which, as David Bordwell notes, is a "cognitive activity" that varies depending on the spectator's experience and perspective.[186] The spectator paying close attention might notice either the immediate or delayed reappearance of these fleeting objects within the film's setting, usually in a character's bedroom where we see the most personal belongings. We witness again the recurrent link between content and form, because the details within the images inform viewers of each character's identity, but perhaps more importantly, the order of their appearance on screen underscores the fragmented nature of both the characters' thought patterns and the mother-son relationship.

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[185] Arthur McCullough. "Eisenstein's Regenerative Aesthetics: From Montage to Mimesis." *Critical Studies, Vol. 1: The Montage Principle: Eisenstein in New Cultural and Critical Contexts*. Eds. Jean Antoine-Dunne and Paula Quigley. (New York: Rodopi, 2004).
[186] Bordwell (1989), 11.

In one scene, for instance, unexpected images of James Dean, dried roses, a vintage bikini, a pair of haunting eyes, a bird in flight, and a metal wheel suddenly appear on screen, hardly giving viewers' eyes enough time to apprehend each object. The items may, perhaps, possess symbolic import, though none is explicitly accounted for. Immediately following the flash of the James Dean photograph, for example, is a shot of Hubert perched upright in bed with his boyfriend, Antonin, with a large poster of Dean hung above their heads, directly linking the image to the characters' surroundings, and suggesting the boys' infatuation with the handsome icon of teenage angst.

We could easily assume that the boys are fascinated with Dean's physical beauty, but we could also see the 1950s idol—particularly his role as Jim Stark in *Rebel without a Cause* (1955)—as an embodiment of Hubert's preoccupations, particularly his disillusionment with a family where he is punished for fundamental aspects of his identity. Similarly, after the series of still photographs, we see Hubert from behind, sitting at his desk typing poetry, surrounded by walls plastered with photos and posters, many of which we recognize from the previous stills. One can associate each image with a particular meaning (dried roses/romance; vintage bikini/Hubert's interest in women's fashion; pair of haunting eyes/a macabre vision of the world; a bird in flight/the desire to flee from reality), yet the images are imbued with a sense of arbitrariness common to the New Wave or Dada/Surrealist cinema, eras during which directors often included fleeting images on screen that carried no immediate relevance other than perhaps reflecting the characters' subconscious thoughts. This penchant for creating ambiguous signs reminds us that Dolan is, in this regard, a "New" New Wave director. Moreover, Hubert repeatedly asserts throughout the film that he and his mother having "nothing in common,

nothing at all," which suggests that the images associated with him and his mother are intended, above all, to underscore a disparity between the two.

At first glance, these images might also appear to serve as a conduit to Chantale's subconscious, given the meticulous filming of the interior of her home that suggests correlations to her character. We see objects such as ceramic angels, paper butterflies, porcelain dolls, and miscellaneous collectibles, all of which appear more sentimental than deeply symbolic. Yet, rather than exposing her subconscious thoughts like the images in Hubert's room may do for him, the decorative objects associated with Chantale appear to illustrate what Hubert identifies as her bad taste in décor. Once again, then, the focus returns to him because viewers do not ultimately gain substantial information about Chantale from the close inspection of her surroundings. Rather, they gain insight into a disenchanted son's perspective on his mother.

Although Dolan does not offer explicit meaning for these images, the seemingly arbitrary objects associated with each character help to communicate a deeper knowledge of their motivations and preoccupations to viewers, and for Hubert in particular, they even manage to penetrate his subconscious. More precisely, the intermittent extreme close-ups of identificatory objects are attached to the people who occupy the majority of the boy's thoughts (himself, his boyfriend, and his mother), and provide commentary on Hubert's personal fixations and what he believes are his mother's outdated taste and unpleasant idiosyncrasies. In effect, they destabilize an otherwise calm progression of thoughts, just as they do a logical progression of images. Together, they force viewers to continually reflect on the technological, psychological, and sociological properties of representation.[187] While the images here derive from objects in the

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[187] Andrew, 35.

characters' real worlds, and at times reflect their psyches, the film is also studded with images of the main character's daydream or fantasy world.

Fragmented Fantasies

David Bordwell asserts that in cinema, "the master metaphor is the dream."[188] Cinema has of course long been equated with the dream state, particularly since the 1930s with the onset of psychoanalytic terminology (trauma, fixation, regression, the Oedipal crisis, etc.) that became pervasive in the study of cinema. Fantasy certainly plays an integral role in this discourse, reflecting the conscious or subconscious desires of both characters and spectators. If cinema was already replicating a dream experience for spectators, cinematic fantasy advanced to a new level when the characters' fantasies within the film were projected on screen, creating a kind of meta-fantasy. Andrew reminds us that for Freud, cinema, or art in any form, "mediates the subconscious" to satisfy the spectator's desire to experience fantasy through characters and events on screen.[189] In Dolan's film, not only is the development of the characters' "real" world and at times, their subconscious impulses, captured through non-diegetic still shots, but Hubert's fantasy world is also explored by way of intermittent still shots that could read as indications of his more conscious desires. Because Dolan portrays much of the film's mother-son conflict by way of disturbingly antagonistic dialogue, the non-diegetic fantasy images and sequences often interrupt the chaotic arguments and shed light on the inner workings of Hubert's mind. Within or directly after many of these disputes, a rapid fantasy image or a longer fantasy sequence in slow- or accelerated motion parallels Hubert's volatile emotions, and underscores the film's 'radical' content-form relationship.

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[188] Bordwell (1989), 76.
[189] Andrew, 143.

To take a particularly striking example, after Chantale retracts her offer to let Hubert move into his own apartment, the camera jumps directly from Hubert's face to a high angle shot of Chantale's body in a casket, ghost-white and obviously dead, surrounded by flowers, revealing his fantasy about his mother's death. While this macabre image evokes the film's title, *J'ai tué ma mère*, there is no direct inference that Hubert actually wants his mother to die. It may even signal an adolescent experience of separation anxiety. Despite his palpable frustration with her, it could be that the image of her dead body satisfies both Hubert's and the spectator's fantasy of her suffering, for we are repeatedly given cues to sympathize with him more than with her. As Andrew reminds us, "Film narrative […] is fueled by and satisfies to varying degrees the unconscious drives of its audience."[190] In this case, however, viewers recognize Hubert's bias toward his mother whose personal history is unrevealed, yet their own unconscious drives most likely mirror his subjective reality.

To undercut the film's verisimilitude yet further, the macabre fantasies recur when Hubert learns that his parents are sending him back to boarding school, which subsequently drives him to imagine destroying his mother's bedroom. This apparently fantasized scene is filmed in slow and accelerated motion and accompanied by the song *C'est la manie* (It's Mania) by the popular contemporary French band Yelle. The disharmonious screeching and fast tempo of the music express the vehemence of Hubert's destructive behavior, maintaining the content-form correlation. After tearing apart her bed, we see him lift a large ceramic bowl over his head in slow motion, followed by a ghastly still shot of his mother in a nun's habit with tears of blood streaming from her eyes. Following this image, Hubert lowers the bowl and sets it on the ground, deciding not to shatter it, suggesting that the thought of his mother suffering dissuades him from

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[190] Ibid.

further demolishing her personal space. Though disturbing, the image is highly stylized. Nothing about it appears real; her bloody tears are clearly painted on, she holds fake red roses, and faint white strings and clouds made of cotton surround her, transforming her into a sort of theater puppet.

Unlike many Quebec films where sexuality (or sexual repression) and religion (usually Catholicism) are deeply interwoven on screen, such as in Vallée's *C.R.A.Z.Y.*, Dolan's film rarely employs overt religious symbolism, so the image is particularly remarkable. It is tempting, then, not to scrutinize the meaning of the image since Dolan does not directly connect the image to the film's storyline or themes. Still, it could suggest Hubert's guilt and his moment of selflessness in acknowledging his mother's grief. In short, these brief outbursts combined with the personally imprinted fantasy images intermittently offer insight into Hubert's character throughout the story's unfolding. Not surprisingly, moments of heightened emotion throughout the film activate his imagination and therefore emphasize his subjective reality. Yet for viewers, these moments blur the boundary between the real and the imagined and rupture the film's vraisemblance. Again, the spectator reenters the realm of Hubert's 'radical' fantasies that go far beyond our expectations for acceptable behaviors and desires.

Despite the powerful content-form relationship forged throughout the film, Dolan asserts that his intention in making this autobiographical film was not to demonize his real mother and present himself as angelic. In one interview, he states, "I just wanted to evacuate some anger, some hatred I had towards my adolescence and my mother."[191] His use of fantasy sequences and images incorporated into the dialogue helps maintain this objective, and provides more

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[191] Giltz, 4.

metaphorical and less literal meaning than the still shots of images taken of characters' personal surroundings.

Early in the film, for example, mid-fight with his mother, a dreamlike slow-motion sequence interrupts the dialogue: we see Hubert open a kitchen cupboard, grasp a stack of ceramic plates, heave them onto the floor and watch them shatter, as classical violin music plays non-diegetically, creating a radical collision of emotional cues. At first we think he's actually breaking the plates, but when the film returns to normal speed and there are no broken plates on the floor, we realize we had been invited into his temper-induced daydream, and were only momentarily fooled by what Deleuze calls the "power of the false."[192] He then says to his mother, *Je te hais* [I hate you]. More disturbing than Hubert's outburst is his mother's reaction: *Bon, hais-moi, c'est pas grave*! [Fine, hate me, I don't care]. She then begins humming and singing as she washes the dishes, as if nothing has happened. Her nonchalant reaction enrages Hubert even further as he shouts at her to stop singing when she is uncomfortable. In this scene, viewers could empathize with both Hubert and his mother, as neither is able to communicate productively, increasing the severity of family dysfunction. Within Weinmann's "roman familial," we are at a virtual standstill in the progression of the mother-son relationship, as parent-child tension seems impossible to mitigate.

Not all fantasies are macabre in the film. Others add levity and humor to an otherwise dark storyline, revealing Hubert's potential for optimistic thinking. Moreover, navigating the passages of Hubert's thoughts and fantasies allows us to travel through what Deleuze calls each "circuit" of (Hubert's) consciousness, or "a zone of recollections, dreams, or thoughts" that

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[192] Kovács, 161.

corresponds to a particular facet of his character.[193] At a far more placid moment later in the

film, for instance, we journey through one 'circuit' of Hubert's imagination: His mother invites

him to dinner with her friend after their visit to a tanning salon, and as we zoom in on Hubert's

stunned face reacting to an invitation he finds utterly unappealing, a sudden and very stylized,

bizarre image appears of his mother and her friend covered in gaudy orange makeup, sandwiched

by two men in leopard print speedos partially covered by palm leaves. Reading like a satirical

postcard from an unidentified tropical location, the image evokes the arbitrariness celebrated by

Dada/Surrealism, throwing images at us of bronzed bodies holding pineapples and iguanas that,

unless they are somehow triggered by the notion of tanning beds, have no apparent logical

association with the current scene or with the plot in general. For a moment, the image allows us

to visualize some kind of utopia filled with happy mothers and sons, but once the camera returns

to the film's 'real' world, the vulnerability of our senses is underscored by the persistent parent-

child tension when Chantale discovers her son's homosexual relationship with Antonin.[194]

Speaking to this oscillating effect that cinema can have on spectators' sensibilities, Angela

Restivo reminds us that for Deleuze, cinema virtually posits a 'wholeness,' or unity, of the

world, while simultaneously "subjecting the whole to discontinuity, dissemination."[195]

Travelling yet further into Hubert's fantasy world, the film's final dream sequence occurs

shortly after Hubert is attacked at boarding school, and although it apparently represents a

daydream, the sequence reads more like a nightmare. We see Hubert begin to write a letter at his

desk, then the camera jumps to a shot of a forest in autumn, where Hubert stands in front of a

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[193] Gilles Deleuze. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. (London: The Anthlone Press, 1989), 46.
[194] At the tanning salon, Chantale happens to see Antonin's mother who refers to their sons as 'boyfriends,' thereby outing Hubert to Chantale.
[195] Restivo, 176.

row of trees wearing a suit; we then cut to a shot of his mother in front of similar trees wearing a white wedding gown. She gathers the train of the dress and runs into the trees as Hubert chases after her, all of this shot in slow motion. He catches hold of her but she forces herself away, pushing him to the ground, and continues to run away through the forest in slow motion.

Much less obvious than the fantasy image of his mother in a casket, for example, this scene invites more interpretive speculation, especially given the costumes and the setting. Hubert is seen at the age he is now, yet his mother seems to be in a flashback to her wedding day. Is Hubert then somehow trying to connect with her at the time she said she did not want children? Was this some kind of fantasy plea for acceptance from his mother? The scene recalls one of his earlier video confessions in which he claims that his mother never wanted to have him in the first place. The new video shows her in her wedding gown, with an image of Hubert at his current age, gazing at his young mother, chasing her, trying to connect, yet she only pushes him away, evoking the kind of painful, repressed fears that occur in a nightmare. Although the sequence is again not directly linked to the film's events, creating yet further discontinuity, the final scenes include flashbacks to time spent in the forest with his mother as a child, perhaps connecting current and past yearnings for the mother-son bond. Viewed together, the fantasy images and sequences evoke Dolan's New Wave forefathers, and verify that this "New" New Wave director continues the tradition of requiring viewers to put together the pieces of arguably unsolvable cinematic puzzles.

By way of screening internal contemplation, Dolan's film also carries on the tradition of looking to one's past to make sense of one's present, an inherent aspect of Quebec cinema's self-reflexivity. This signal to the past reappears somewhat surprisingly in the film's final scenes,

176

when Chantale finds Hubert in the family cabin in the country, and a series of flashback images and home video-like sequences imply a peaceful compromise. We see Hubert as a child running through a field, as Chantale runs longingly after him, and eventually picks him up, embracing him. The images are treated with a crackly, retro filter that, together with the twilight setting, increases the sentimentality and verisimilitude of the images and, in accordance with Bordwell's standards, presents the flashback "realistically, letting us eavesdrop on the character's memory."[196] In the final shot, young Hubert lies down in grass with a tiara on head, smiling, as his mother reaches out to grab her son's hand, signifying the end of a long history of mother-son resentment. The film has now added a new chapter to Quebec's roman familial by reminding us, through flashback, that he remembers, evoking Quebec's motto "je me souviens." Despite the ongoing turbulence in his relationship with his mother, her presence with him in this final scene allows him to remember their shared history and particularly his mother's loyalty. Despite the visual discontinuity produced by non-diegetic video, image, and fantasy sequences, the flashback allows us to follow one phase of the mother-son relationship from beginning to end—or perhaps to a new beginning.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to accomplish several goals, one of which was to establish that Dolan's *J'ai tué ma mère* carries on the Quebec cinematic tradition of exploring the tension between the past and present, between tradition and modernity. By way of video confessions and flashbacks, the protagonist's recurrent reflection on his own past with his mother eventually

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[196] Bordwell (1985), 79.

rekindles his love for her and allows for resolution. Though Dolan tells the story of his own experience growing up in a troubled family, his film does not, in the end, confirm Pallister's notion that the Quebec family is in a state of "collapse." Rather, it demonstrates the power of determination for a son and a mother to overcome their love-hate relationship, and to ultimately reconcile. Despite the imbalanced attention given to the two main characters, the film is still emotionally effective in treating sensitive topics such as "coming out" and the hardship that single-parent families often face.

This chapter also drew attention to the fact that the film maintains a consistent focus on the volatile mother-son relationship, and therefore should not be categorized too narrowly as a queer or "coming out" film. In fact, there is no actual "coming out" in the film at all—but there is, rather, an "outing" of Hubert's sexuality by his boyfriend's mother. Critics are perhaps eager to designate a film such as *J'ai tué ma mère* as "queer" in order to increase the visibility of LGBTQ subjectivities in cinema; however, it is important to remember that as films continue to include, or focus on, queer characters, there is a point at which identifying the film as "queer" can be limiting rather than liberating. Many mainstream viewers, for instance, might overlook a film categorized as queer assuming that they would not be able to identify with the characters' experiences. Dolan's film is indeed an example of a film that does not speak exclusively to gay-identified male audiences, since the core of the story simply revolves around one son and one mother, regardless of the protagonist's sexual orientation. There is no doubt, however, that the film provides awareness of the internal conflicts of a young closeted gay person, the emotional turbulence caused in part by guilt and repression, and the hostility generated when parents alienate their LGBTQ children. Perhaps more importantly, it simply recounts the story of a mother-son bond that fluctuates throughout Hubert's sexual *coming of age*. His film confirms

that although inevitable, genre categorization can prove unnecessarily limiting, and can allow outsiders to judge a film with unwarranted assumptions.

To return to another core question posed at the onset of this chapter, I would conclude based on the preceding analyses that *J'ai tué ma mère* also exhibits innovative film techniques that buttress its thematic construction, resulting in a relatively "radical" content-form relationship. In part because of this consistent technical and thematic correlation, Dolan establishes his own place amongst Quebec's young generation of "Modern" or "New" New Wave filmmakers who challenge stereotypes, speak to contemporary social issues, and perhaps most importantly, revel in breaking the rules of conventional filmmaking.

The nonconformist *J'ai tué ma mère* comes paradoxically to a close with a relatively happy ending that seems at odds with Dolan's otherwise "radical" style. When woven together, the various elements of visual and narrative fragmentation reinforce, rather than undermine, the characters' relationships. In other words, Dolan transforms the ruptured mother-son relationship into an opportunity to show how a dysfunctional family can still indeed function. In this respect, Dolan's thematic and aesthetic choices demonstrate that a concern for cinematic innovation does not preclude cinematic coherence.

CONCLUSION

The central aim of this dissertation has been to explore how contemporary French and Quebecois filmmakers experiment with the medium of film to convey original cinematic representations of the family. To this end, I have undertaken a close analysis of the formal techniques and narrative content in films that are particularly exemplary of this innovative approach to tackling questions of the family on screen.

In each chapter, I have acknowledged the selected filmmaker's striking similarity to his filmic predecessors, such as New Wave directors. This is especially true for Honoré and Dolan. However, I have argued that although they pay homage to films that have inspired them, their work is not merely derivative. While the directors studied here may have borrowed from other filmmakers—as all filmmakers do—they have also created new ways of seeing how the family functions through both technical innovation and through taking risks with broaching controversial thematic content. My goal has been to show how these two approaches merge to create unconventional yet realistic images of contemporary French and Quebecois families. In this way, I conclude that all the films in my dissertation fit into the loosely defined category of "New" New Wave films. However, I would not limit any of them to this or any other classification, since part of my point throughout the dissertation is that genre categorization can prove to be limiting.

In chapters one and four, for example, I showed that reducing films that have queer thematic content to the genre of Queer Cinema can have a negative effect of overlooking the films' other important narrative qualities, such as mother- or father-son relationships, or the convergence of individual and collective identity formation. Likewise, in chapter three, I

explored *Un conte de Noël*, which critics often call a "mourning" film, as a film more about the loss of oneself, and of family bonds, than about mourning the loss of a deceased family member. In each case, the typical genre classification is relatively justifiable, yet it has the effect of pigeonholing the film into a category that ignores its narrative complexity.

While I set out to explore the intricacy of the contemporary family in Quebecois and French cinema, I have confined my focus to themes of gender and sexuality, as well as loss, nostalgia, suicide, and mourning. It also happened that I selected films by male directors, whose narrative emphasis was often on the trajectory of male characters. In a more comprehensive study, I would include films by female directors, and films that focus more on the experiences of female protagonists. Moreover, I think it would be important to investigate questions of race and ethnicity, immigration, or transnational family dynamics. Although France and Quebec now have ethnically diverse populations, exploring Francophone cultures in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean would no doubt provide cinematic representations of the family that differ vastly from those in Quebec and France.

Finally, I have chosen to analyze films that diverge in one or several ways from normative concepts of the family unit. This is still an emerging trend, but it is not necessarily the norm in neither France nor Quebec. My interest in filmmakers who challenge heteronormative family structures was not only to underscore poignant stories of queer characters, but also to show that in families, there is no norm. Every family has its own social dynamics, emotional and biological bonds, and ways of coping with everyday problems. The films analyzed here explode what has traditionally been a relatively narrow definition of the family; they ask viewers to rethink or reimagine the family as a broader concept that does not necessarily conform to a particular model. Additionally, each film is original in the way it conveys a wide array of themes

181

through innovative camera and audio techniques, generating a new symbiotic relationship between content and form. The directors of each film drew inspiration from his cinematic forefathers, yet maintained a level of originality that distinguished his film as something *new*. Together, these films point the way toward the future of cinema in France and Quebec, and deserve further scholarly investigation.

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