

## Léolo (1992): An Insane Family Portrait

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### Resumen

In Montreal, deep within the suffocating universe of the depressed Mile-End District, Leo Lozeau, a member of a disturbing schizophrenia-ridden family leads his distressing existence. The young man, in an attempt to escape from the harsh everyday reality that torments him, builds a delirium which can paradoxically keep him free from so much madness. The denial of his origins will be such that he will even make up a new freedom, becoming the Italianised Léolo Lozone.

*Keywords:* Familial schizophrenia, Catatonic schizophrenia, Delirium.

"Because I dream, I am not"...  
 "And I shall rest my head between two words, in the Valley of the  
 Vanquished."  
 [Dialogues from Léolo (1992)]

### Technical details

**Title:** *Léolo*

**Original title:** *Léolo*

**Country:** France and Canada

**Year:** 1992

**Director:** Jean-Claude Lauzon

**Photography:** Guy Dufaux

**Film editor:** Michel Arcand

**Screenwriter:** Jean-Claude Lauzon

**Cast:** Gilbert Sicotte, Maxime Collin, Ginette Reno, Julien Guiomar, Pierre Bourgault, Giuditta Del Vecchio, Andrée Lachapelle, Denys Arcand, Germain Houde, Yves Montmarquette, Lorne Brass, Roland Blouin, Geneviève Samson and Marie-Hélène Montpetit.

**Color:** Color

**Runtime:** 107 minutes

**Genre:** Comedy, Drama

**Production companies:** Alliance Films Corporation, Canal+, Centre National de la Cinématographie, Flach Film, La Ministre de la Culture et de la Communication, La Societe de Radio-Television Quebec, Les

Productions du Verseau, National Film Board of Canada, Procirep, Super Écran and Téléfilm Canada.

**Synopsis:** Léolo, a child with an overwhelming imagination, leads a crude existence in the bosom of his humble family in Montreal. Little by little, to escape from reality, with oneiric, literary and surrealist pieces he builds a delirium which will allow him to survive in such a hostile environment.

**Awards:** Golden Spike at the International Festival of Valladolid (1992)

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0104782>

Some of us film lovers have often wondered what would have happened if in 1997, Canadian director and scriptwriter Jean-Claude Lauzon had survived the unfortunate plane accident that cut off his life and that of his girlfriend, actress Marie-Soleil Tougas<sup>1</sup>; because it turns out that just one artistic piece of work can elevate its author to the highest peak of success. *Léolo* is a clear example of this, in the same way as the book *L'avalée des avalés* was in its time, written by the unsociable *Quebécois* author Rejéan Ducharme, a story which would partially be of inspiration to Lauzon himself while conceiving his excellent film.

It is said that the creative flash of inspiration which led to *Léolo* came to Lauzon while among the

audience at the Taormina Film Festival, in Sicily<sup>2</sup>, a beautiful tourist town harbouring the magnificent ruins of what once was a thriving Greco-Roman theatre. The most illustrating images of *Léolo's* love delirium were filmed on these beautiful stages.

### The foundations of a delirium

*Italy is too beautiful to belong only to the Italians;* young Léolo (Maxime Collin) expresses his delirium by means of images and characters that are always related to this Mediterranean country; from the absurd idea of his *Fellinian* gestation, from a tomato contaminated by the sperm of a Sicilian farmer that had accidentally penetrated his mother's vagina when she fell on a grocery stall at the market, through Bianca (Giuditta Del Vecchio), his immodest little Italian neighbour, the platonic love of his childhood, who will suddenly vanish when Léolo finds her peddling her sexual favours to his own grandfather (Julien Guiomar), and ending with the adoption of a new identity, Léolo Lozone, thus renouncing his reviled Franco-Canadian ancestors.

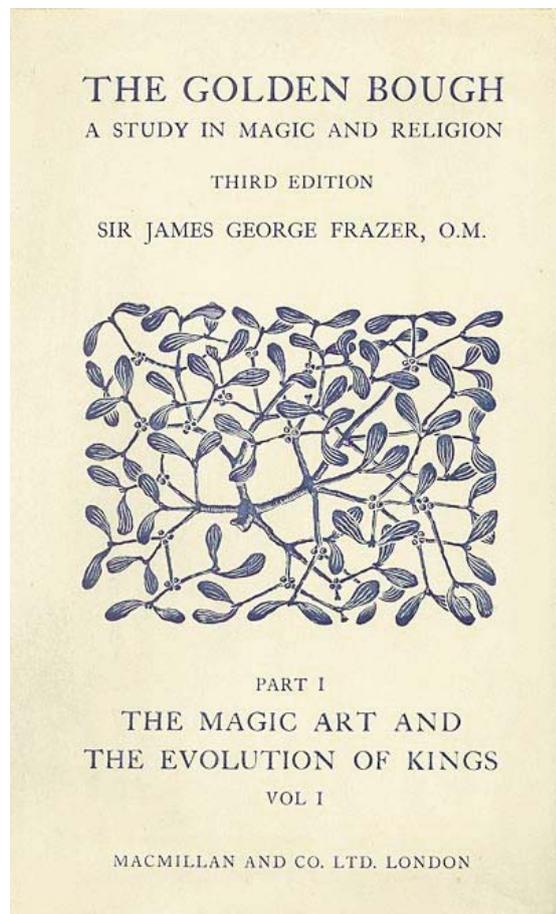


Figure 1: In "The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion" Frazer described the myths relating sex to plant fertility

There is probably a peculiar underlying symbolism behind the scenes which relate the sperm-charged tomato to the pregnancy of Léolo's mother. In his book "The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion", the exceptional historian and philosopher J.G. Frazer described the myths that relate sex to plant fertility (Figure 1). The Italian *pomodoro*, the golden apple, charged with the fertilising power of the southern sun, becomes the male gamete's means of transport towards the yet to be fertilised ovule. Concerning this, the learned British anthropologist wrote: "To the student who cares to track the devious course of the human mind in its gropings after truth, it is of some interest to observe that the same theoretical belief in the sympathetic influence of the sexes on vegetation, which has led some peoples to indulge their passions as a means of fertilising the earth, has led others to seek the same end by directly opposite means"<sup>3</sup>.

And precisely that contrasting relation between sex and vegetables is repeated in different scenes of *Léolo*, as, for example, when our hero secretly uses a piece of fresh liver to masturbate in the bathroom, or when the young thugs rape a defenceless cat. *Candida pax homines, trux decet ira feras...*

In the history of film, the most characteristic reference to "The Golden Bough" appears in the last moments of *Apocalypse now* (1979) by Francis Ford Coppola: the myth of the priest of Diana in the forest of Nemi (Kurtz – Marlon Brando), waiting for a successor (Willard – Martin Sheen) to sacrifice him in order to occupy his privileged position<sup>4</sup>.

Finally, as a definitive ground to refute his own identity, there is a pun in *Léolo*; a kind of phonetic anagram made up by the triad "Lauzon – Lozeau – Lozone". Thus, the director and scriptwriter's surname would become the main character's surname in fiction, as if he meant to give the spectator certain clues concerning the possible autobiographical origin of such a fabulous story. The final metamorphosis of the Italian surname, to which the syllable "ne" was intentionally added, would serve to reinforce the idea about rebellious Léolo's real origin, that is "Lozeau no, no Lozeau", the denial of the father's name<sup>5</sup>.

### A place in the history of film

*Léolo* is a disturbing film. Its complex cinematographic structure contains at the same time arcane comic and dramatic elements: love, voyeurism, onanism, extermination, bestiality, theft, bitterness and hatred. It is a film full of sickness, foolishness,

poetry, pestilence and cruelty, madness, tenderness, malice, violence and pitilessness, scatology, naivety, life, death and freedom.

If we pay attention to its devastating criticism of the family as an institution, it would represent the counterpoint of family sagas such as *The Godfather* (1972) by Francis Ford Coppola (Figure 2) or *La Gran Familia* (1962) by Fernando Palacios. It could easily be the reverse side of a hypothetical coin whose face would be occupied, undoubtedly, by the magnificent work called *La Famiglia* (1987) by Ettore Scola.

However, because of its crude and merciless vision of human nature, there are critics who have compared it with the barbarous and pitiless *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975) by Pier Paolo Pasolini, the necrophiliac *Singapore sling: O anthropos pou agapise ena ptoma* (1990) by Nikos Nikolaidis, the feverish *Sweet Movie* (1974) by Dusan Makavejev or the irreverent and coprophiliac *Pink Flamingos* (1972) by John Waters.

Lastly, considering this film as a sample of the ritual which dominates the passage from happy childhood into bleak youth, there are those who place

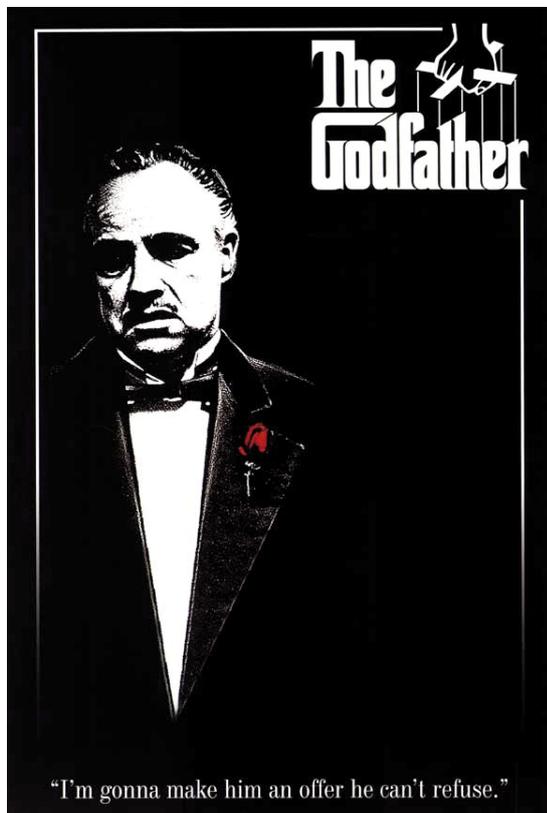


Figure 2: *Léolo* represents the counterpoint of parental sagas such as *The Godfather* (American poster)

*Léolo* at the same level as *Les quatre cents coups* (1959) by François Truffaut, one of the founding milestones of the *Nouvelle vague* starring that unforgettable character of Antoine Doinel, the real *alter ego* of Truffaut himself, the needy *Pixote: A Lei do Mais Fraco* (1981) by Héctor Babenco, the brutal *Padre Padrone* (1977) by Paolo and Vittorio Taviani or the mythical *Shane* (1953) by George Stevens, a *western* starring the implausible Alan Ladd (Figure 3).

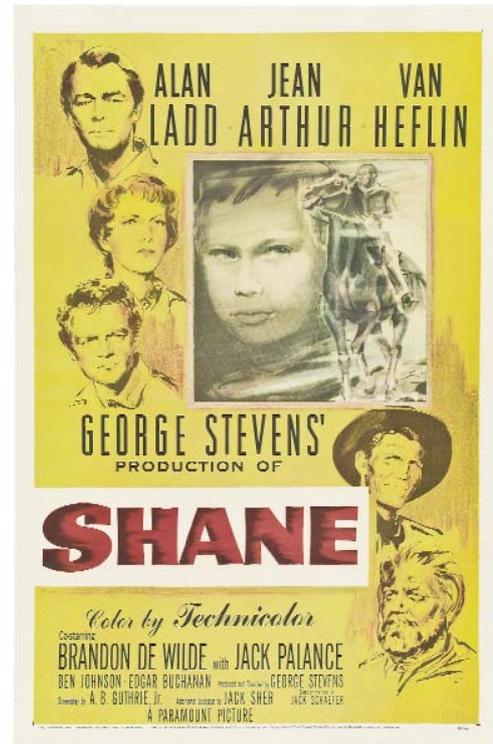


Figure 3: *Léolo* has been placed at the same level as films like *Shane* (American poster)

### Familial schizophrenia

From its beginnings, maybe a prisoner and subsidiary of its mere commercial and popular eagerness, film has treated mental illness and its sufferers unfairly. In this sense, there are authors who are openly belligerent towards this behaviour: "If you want to see what happen when the brain goes out of whack please don't go to the movies. Movie characters are continually getting themselves into neurological scrapes, losing memories, changing personalities, and getting schizophrenia or Parkinson disease (not to mention sociopathy and other psychiatric disorders). The brain haywire in Hollywood far more often than in real life..."<sup>6</sup>.

If this were always the case, *Léolo* would have been of poor service to the 7th Art. Perhaps without wishing to do so, Jean-Claude Lauzon recreated in his film the true portrait of a schizophrenic family.

However, what are we talking about when we refer to familial schizophrenia? Is there a hereditary determinism, or is the influence of the environment, on the contrary, the main axis of this illness? On this matter, experts still speak about an extraordinarily complex psychiatric pathology, with interwoven genetic and environmental factors.

The aetiopathogenic key could be in the interaction between several low expressed genes and other non-genetic factors. To a certain extent, we can find patients who present a high familial prevalence of the disorder, in contrast to others with no record of this kind, in which the illness appears sporadically<sup>7</sup>.

Rivers of ink have coursed through the specialised media on studies about the relationship between family and schizophrenia. The first great works of Bateson, Lidz and Wynne stem from the fifties of the last century. Despite their differences, those authors managed to share a general hypothesis: the conditions of family life, in particular certain ways of interaction among family members, can predispose an individual towards schizophrenia<sup>8</sup>. Cross-sectional research, characterised by the observation, recording and encoding of models of family interaction (Waxler – 1974, Jacob – 1975, Doane – 1978, Wynne – 1977, Liem – 1980) suggested that breakdown of communication arose more often in schizophrenic families. However, they were unable to differentiate between the family behaviours that appeared before the onset of the illness and the later different adaptations.

Longitudinal studies examining family relations before the beginning of the disorder tried to throw greater light on the darkness of this controversy. The main research groups were: the UCLA project (Goldstein – 1985), the Israeli high-risk study (Marcus, Kugelmass, Nagler – 1985, 1987) and the Finnish adoption study (Tienari et al., 1987). Analysis of their data led to the notion that disorders in the family environment do indeed contribute to predicting the future appearance of disorders in the schizophrenia spectrum<sup>9</sup>.

In *Léolo*, the paternal branch is accused directly by the finger of the young protagonist. His grandfather and his father are held responsible for bringing misfortune into the family in the shape of mental illness: “My grandfather was not a mean man. Yet, he'd already tried to kill me..”, “As if my grandfather's legacy had exploded within the family and that little extra cell had lodged itself in everybody's brain...”, “They say he is my father, but I know I'm not his son...”. His sisters, first

Nanette (Marie-Hélène Montpetit) and later Rita (Geneviève Samson), are permanently hospitalised. His brother Fernand (Yves Montmarquette) roams through the various psychiatric consultancies, a victim of diagnoses as diverse as oligophrenia or psychotic obsessive-compulsive disorder. Tragicomic scenes of family therapies are frequent. The spectator has the impression that a considerable part of Léolo's family life unfolds within the walls of a psychiatric hospital, where his siblings, his father and his grandfather managed to remain hospitalised all at the same time. Only the mother and the main character stay free from so much madness.

### The mother

This is the maternal figure *par excellence*: comfortable, protecting, kind, indulgent... The gift of female fertility has been praised by man since the dawn of time. In this sense, we could describe Léolo's mother as a modern personification of the so called “Venus of Willendorf”<sup>10</sup>, which together with those of Lausell and Grimaldi constitutes the most famous Palaeolithic statuettes, perhaps used in fertility rituals. Her prominent abdomen, together with her exaggerated breasts and buttocks (steatopygia) are also part of the character played by Ginette Reno, the successful singer and popular Canadian actress who let Jean-Claude Lauzon persuade her to play this difficult role (Figure 4).

Along the film, she will exert her good-natured matriarchy from the epicentre of her kitchen, in the fashion of the traditional Galician mother or of the Italian *mamma*: smug, full of energy, permanently involved in the protection and defence of her unusual offspring. Sitting upon her throne, an indescribable toilet-bowl, she becomes baby Léolo's persistent “guardian angel”-as it were-



Figure 4: Léolo's mother, played by Ginette Reno

so that he can manage to use his chamber pot on a stormy night (Figure 5). She will also save Léolo from his grandfather's absurd attacks, when the latter attempts to drown him in a paddling pool. She will be the constant companion of Fernand, her other son, in his endless visits to teachers, educators, doctors and psychologists in her attempts to free him from the grip of his persistent idiocy. Finally, she will also be the "guardian angel" who keeps vigil over her catatonic children's sick-bed during their frequent hospitalisations. In the words of the young protagonist: *"My mother had the strength of a frigate plowing through troubled waters..."*, *"She was warm and loving. I loved it when she pulled me into her fat. The smell of her sweat soothed me..."*



Figure 5: Léolo using the chamber pot

### The end of a dream: catatonic schizophrenia

In the final scenes of the film, we are witness to an enlightening metaphor. In his delirium, Léolo travels around the Sicilian landscapes in search of his ungrateful lover Bianca. He desperately cries her name, but the redeeming image does not answer his call. Eventually, night falls over the mythical scenario and a fabulous and captivating full moon rises in full splendour. Léolo collapses, seized by stupor; his eyes

remain open and his look is lost in space, his mouth hangs half open, overflowing with vomit, and his face acquires the rictus of stupefaction. The young man has indeed become a "lunatic".

Catatonic schizophrenia is typified mainly by the presence of severe psychomotor disorders, which may oscillate between hyperkinesia and stupor, maintaining rigid atypical bodily postures for long periods of time. Oneiric states with very vivid scenic hallucinations are also very common<sup>11</sup>.

Léolo stops dreaming: *"Because at night, I abandon myself to my dreams...before I'm left the day. Because I don't love...because I was afraid to love...I no longer dream"*. The soothing space of physiological sleep becomes occupied by the nightmare of delirium. In a disturbing close-up the boy remains afloat in a bath full of water and ice-cubes. For his treatment, the doctor who is taking care of him uses the antipsychotic drug Largactil® (chlorpromazine), administered intramuscularly.

The trigger of mental illness in Léolo and his sisters could in fact be related to the sudden organic blooming of puberty; but the schizophrenia suffered by our hero is different.

In the first place, Rita, as large and plump as her mother (Figure 6), "rules over" her extraordinary vassals (insects, reptiles, amphibians...), hidden in the gloomy kingdom of the basement, hardly illuminated by dim candlelight. She has an affective disorder, with unprovoked, vacuous and uncontrollable fits of laughter. She tends towards solitude and isolation, a victim of her own dull apathy, showing fewer hallucinations and delirious ideas. These are the typical symptoms of hebephrenia or disorganised schizophrenia, which usually appears in young people and



Figure 6: Léolo and his family

which does not have a good prognosis<sup>12</sup>.

On the other hand, we have Nanette, thin, extremely short-sighted, submissive and expressionless. As if she were the tormented embodiment of the central figure of an impressionist painting ("The Scream" by Edvard Munch), she is the victim of a delirium which keeps her tearful, torn, hugging a doll, pleading desperately that her baby be given back to her. The figure of the hospitalised madwoman who clings onto a doll claiming her assumed lost motherhood is a stereotype commonly used by several film makers, such as in *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959) by Joseph L. Mankiewicz or in *Shock Corridor* (1963) by Samuel Fuller.

As a coda, "Léolo" is a good film, understanding as such the opinion established by film philosopher Stanley Cavell; for this North American thinker, a "good film" should be up to "the type of criticism promoted and expected by serious works of classical art, works that prove the cinema is the most recent of the great arts, works in which the passionate interest or lack thereof of the public will find a reward in the encapsulation of the conditions of that interest able to illuminate and amplify the awareness that the public might have of it.<sup>13</sup> *Melius sentire quam scire*.

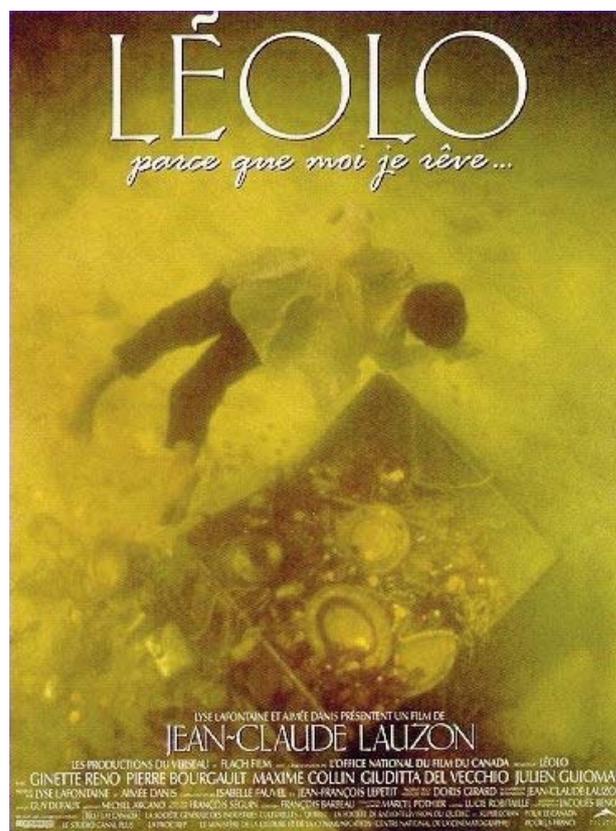
Part of this article has been published at: [http://medicinaycine.blogspot.com/2008\\_06\\_01\\_archive.html](http://medicinaycine.blogspot.com/2008_06_01_archive.html)

Translation by the team of the Languages Service of the University of Salamanca.

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French poster