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Patricide or Mourning the Nation-State in Francis Leclerc's *Looking for Alexander*

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Abstract

This article examines two closely connected dimensions of Francis Leclerc's 2004 film, *Looking for Alexander*: a psychoanalytical dimension and a political one. Freud's theories on the murder of the primal violent father in his essay *Totem and Taboo* provide the framework for a psychoanalytical interpretation of the protagonist's fate: Alexandre Tourneur, a veterinarian struck by amnesia, embarks on a quest for his lost identity. Facilitated by the totemic figure of the deer, the act of remembering gradually leads to a conscious awakening to the events of an abusive childhood and the crime of patricide he committed as a boy during a hunting trip. The difficulty of achieving autonomy and self-determination finally points to the film's political subtext, namely Québec's failed attempts at independence and the ensuing loss of the dream of a Nation-State. The film's conclusion however calls for reconciliation with First Nations and immigrant cultures within a post-referendum Québec.

Keywords: Francis Leclerc; Sigmund Freud; psychoanalysis; patricide; memory; totemism; Québec; national identity; film noir; Freud

À mon père

Francis Leclerc's 2004 second feature film—simultaneously released in Canada in its original version, *Mémoires affectives*, and its subtitled version, *Looking for Alexander*—tells the story of Alexandre Tourneur, a veterinarian who awakens amnesic and aphasic from a coma caused by a hit-and-run accident. While tending to a wounded deer on the side of the road, Tourneur is hit by a reckless driver. The film opens with the awakening scene, as a mysterious man walks into Tourneur's hospital room and disconnects him from the artificial respirator which was keeping him alive. Against all odds, Tourneur awakens from his coma and is faced with the challenge of tracking down his past, of recovering and reconstructing his identity.

The film's themes, visual settings and narrative structure clearly borrow from the psychological thriller and film noir genres, as attested, for instance, by the focus on the police investigation of Tourneur's accident. However, the spectator's expectations for resolution in this regard are never quite met—a narrative choice that triggered not only perplexity, but also irritation among certain critics who subsequently interpreted the film as a failure.¹ I believe that such a reaction evades an essential question. It is true that the police investigation fails to resolve the enigmas it was designed to crack: who is responsible for the hit-and-run accident and, consequently, for Tourneur's coma? And who made an attempt on his life by unplugging him? A third question, however, is implicitly superimposed on the preceding ones, a question that constitutes in itself the film's real issue: who is Alexandre Tourneur? The film's true focus is the main character and the question of his lost identity.² As such, the answer to the question "Who is Alexandre Tourneur?" simultaneously provides the answer to the central question "Whodunit?" when it is revealed that Alexandre is in fact the culprit, the ultimate culprit. Although not guilty of the two criminal acts the police are investigating, he is nonetheless guilty of another, far more important crime, a crime forgotten, repressed for decades. Through a series of flashbacks, Alexandre will gradually recollect the crime of patricide he committed as a boy during a hunting trip: the killing of his violent, alcoholic father with a hunting rifle, rapidly disguised as a drowning accident by his older brother, literally resurfaces in the film's denouement.

In what follows, I will examine two closely connected dimensions of Leclerc's film: drawing on Freud's theories on the murder of the primal violent father in his essay *Totem and Taboo*, I will first offer a psychoanalytic reading of the issues at stake in *Mémoires affectives*, a reading that will subsequently lead me to unveil the film's political subtext and demonstrate how the question of patricide and the mourning for a Québécois Nation-State are intimately intertwined.

¹ Critics generally acknowledge Leclerc's undeniable talent to visually render atmospheres, most especially that of the harsh Québécois winter. See Pierre Barrette: Mythes et mémoires. In: *24 images* 119 (2004), p. 57. Serge Gauthier: Le film *Mémoires affectives*: mémoire de chevreuil et région-mémoire. In: *Action nationale* 94/9-10 (2004), p. 29-33, p. 30. Chantale Gingras: *Mémoires affectives*: Flashes mnésiques. In: *Québec français* 136 (2005), p. 95-96, p. 96. Pierre Ranger: *Mémoires affectives*: poésie ésotérique. In: *Séquences: la revue de cinéma* 234 (2004), p. 42. However, they express divergent opinions on his treatment of the plot, interpreting the oscillation between psychological thriller and police investigation as either clever and shrewd (Ranger), or as incomplete and incoherent. See Jean-Philippe Gravel: Trous de mémoire. In: *Ciné-Bulles* 22/4 (2004), p. 6-7, p. 6.

² Of all reviews of the film, Barrette's assessment is perhaps the most perceptive when he states that the objective investigation, the *inquest* or "enquête," in effect conceals a subjective *quest* or "quête" (Barrette, Mythes et mémoires, p. 57). In this regard, what might first seem like yet another regrettable translation of film title—*Looking for Alexander*—proves in hindsight to be quite fitting.

Over the course of his quest for his lost identity, Alexandre is confronted with the people who knew him before his accident and who reappear, one by one, in his life: his ex-wife, his daughter, his colleague, and his girlfriend. During his numerous encounters with these people, he is able to remember neither them nor the emotional bonds they shared. He finds himself all the more confused since the people supposedly the closest to him behave in a disconcerting way: while they all initially display benevolence, even affection, their attitude then shifts—sometimes within a matter of seconds—to abrupt withdrawal and emotional coldness. When Alexandre informs his psychiatrist of this situation, the latter suggests that these people are perhaps unintentionally passing on to him fragments of their memory, thus allowing themselves harsh remarks about the man he used to be. This notion of “memory transmission” is taken up again later when Alexandre submits himself to a hypnosis session with the same psychiatrist. During this session, he is able to describe the scene preceding his accident, but from the deer's perspective as though he was the animal. Still under hypnosis, he even starts speaking in Innu-aimun, a First Nation language, prompting the psychiatrist to suggest that he may have inherited the archaic memory of a First Nation hunter and even —why not— of a deer. If these questions revolving around paranormal phenomena are left unanswered, other —very real— memories deeply anchored in his family's past assail Alexandre throughout the film, memories that will eventually bring him back to the trauma that sealed his fate as both orphan and murderer.

In his 1913 essay entitled *Totem and Taboo*, Sigmund Freud looks into the establishment of two universal taboos that regulate societies: incest and patricide. Freud imagines civilisation's mythical origins in which hordes of men lived under the domination of a violent and jealous father whose powers were unlimited: not only did he keep all the females for himself, but he also chastised or even drove away his disobedient sons. Freud further envisions how the brothers who had been driven out came together and rebelled against the father by killing and devouring him during a meal that celebrated the end of the patriarchal horde. The crime of patricide however generated among the brothers intense feelings of guilt that they tried to allay by erecting an emblem in honour of the feared, and yet loved, father: a totem. The totem can thus be interpreted as assuming two different functions: it is an object of worship as well as an object of reconciliation. In Freud's view, the totem must be construed as the beginning of social organization, of moral restrictions and the first manifestation of religion. God thus appears after the murder of the primal father and stands as his nostalgic substitute, as it were, the sign of an

attempt to atone for the crime of patricide. In order to prevent reproducing the reign of the almighty father, the sons imposed the taboo of incest and dictated a fundamental law: thou shalt not kill (thy father). The sons' reassembling after the collective crime of patricide represents the first form of sociability and allows for the development of a collective ideal.

These Freudian theories, very briefly sketched out here, prove a useful tool for the interpretation of Francis Leclerc's film, the plot of which is based on the fundamental question of patricide. Alexandre Tourneur *is* the rebellious son who refuses the violence of the primal father and commits the act that can set him free; his autonomy is rendered possible inasmuch as he makes himself responsible for, indeed guilty of, the sin of patricide. But the film demonstrates how, from a symbolic standpoint, Alexandre's conscious memory bypasses this process: having lost all trace of his past, the protagonist is unable to claim the crime he has committed and is thus unable to lead a life in the company of his fellow brothers. Indeed, Freud insists on the importance of remembering within totemism, the importance of being consciously awakened to the events of the past:

Totemic religion not only comprised expressions of remorse and attempts at atonement, *it also served as a remembrance of the triumph over the father*. Satisfaction over that triumph led to the institution of the memorial festival of the totem meal, in which the restrictions of deferred obedience no longer held. Thus it became a duty to repeat the crime of parricide again and again in the sacrifice of the totem animal, whenever, as a result of the changing conditions of life, the cherished fruit of the crime—appropriation of the paternal attributes—threatened to disappear.³

It is precisely this memory of the triumph over his father Alexandre is missing; his state of amnesia signifies not only the erasure of his history, but also the rupture of family ties and, ultimately, of all social cohesion. But if amnesia plunges Alexandre into an emotional no-man's land that keeps him cut off from the people and the events that make up his past, the only event of this past truly worth remembering is the murder of the father. It is thus no coincidence that at the very moment when he does finally remember the murder scene, Alexandre tells his brother: "I remember, Joseph. I remember it *all*" (italics mine).⁴ The crime of patricide Tourneur committed constitutes the foundation of his identity, so much so, in fact, that once the memory of it resurfaces, the mystery of culpability is solved and the film, logically, ends soon after.

³ Sigmund Freud: *Totem and Taboo*. London: Hogarth Press, 1964, p. 145.

⁴ Francis Leclerc, *Mémoires affectives*, DVD, 101 min., Montréal: Palomar 2004, 1:35:53-1:35:59 (chapter 14).

As explained above, the totem is an object of worship *and* reconciliation—a role played here by the deer, an animal closely tied to the protagonist's fate. Tourneur's amnesia begins while tending to a wounded deer, a moment evoked through flashbacks in the opening scene: already here, Alexandre is clearly identified with the deer. In a montage sequence, the camera alternates between close-ups of Alexandre lying on his hospital bed and the deer's carcass covered with snow. Immediately after, the camera follows a man, later identified as Joseph, Alexandre's older brother, entering the hospital room and surreptitiously unplugging Alexandre from the artificial respirator; this scene is followed by a flashback of the deer Alexandre finally had to euthanize with a syringe. As will later become clear, Joseph's gesture must be interpreted as one of compassion and not aggression as the viewer is first led to believe. A direct parallel can thus be drawn between Joseph's will to free his younger brother from his psychological and physical suffering and Alexandre's decision to put down the wounded animal, stressing again Alexandre's and the deer's commonality. As a matter of fact, if the deer is lying injured on the roadside, it is because it was hit by a vehicle, just as Alexandre will himself be hit while trying to rescue the animal. The totemic quality conferred on the deer is further confirmed when Alexandre returns to the scene of his accident with a police woman and starts recovering, ever so faintly, his memory. When he voices the vivid impression of having been in this place before, the police woman suggests he may have hunted here in the past; Alexandre however dismisses this possibility, explaining that the mere sight of her gun frightens him. Being a veterinarian, Tourneur sees himself as a defender of animals and naturally loathes the practice of hunting as sport. This a position recalls Freud's description of totemism as a religious system, in which he explains that "the members of a totem clan call themselves by the name of their totem, and *commonly believe themselves to be actually descended from it*. It follows from this belief that they will not hunt the totem animal or kill or eat it."⁵

Finally, the plot's denouement is linked to the deer. When Alexandre meets with his lost brother in the film's conclusion, Joseph recounts the story of their hunting trip but tries to disguise the truth. Joseph thus delivers two different versions of the their father's death, both times depicting it as accidental—a white lie clearly meant to protect Alexandre from reliving the trauma and realizing his guilt. However, at the sight of a horned animal displayed on Joseph's medallion, Alexandre slowly starts remembering and accessing the truth; he then interrupts Joseph and

⁵ Freud, *Totem and taboo*, p. 104.

delivers the true end of the story. At the heart of Alexandre's recollection is the deer: in the murder scene, the deer is the trophy the hunter will proudly exhibit to prove his masculinity. In the case of Alexandre's father, this masculinity finds its expression in gratuitous violence, first toward the animal that suffers because he is too drunk to kill it with one clean shot and, second, toward his son, Alexandre, whom he forces to finish off the deer in order to "make a man out of him." Alexandre will deliberately reverse the elements of this rite of passage toward manhood⁶ by killing not the deer but, in its stead, the violent father. It is important to note here that Alexandre is not motivated by the desire to take revenge but rather by the desire, albeit unconscious, to arrest the father's senseless violence. A triangular relationship among the father and the two brothers is revealed in the scene of patricide. Alexandre shoots his father to defend his older brother, Joseph, who is being severely beaten for rebelling against the patriarch's tyrannical humiliation of the younger brother, Alexandre. In short, Alexandre kills the father to defend Joseph who, in his turn, was defending Alexandre. The deer mediates Alexandre's relationship to his father: in place of the father who is killed, the deer, as totemic animal, will hereupon be respected to appease the father's anger and initiate the reconciliation process, as Freud reminds us:

The animal struck the sons as a natural and obvious substitute for their father [...]. They could attempt, in their relation to this surrogate father, to allay their burning sense of guilt, to bring about a kind of reconciliation with their father. The totemic system was, as it were, a covenant with their father, in which he promised them everything that a childish imagination may expect from a father—protection, care and indulgence—while on their side they undertook to respect his life, that is to say, not to repeat the deed which had brought destruction on their real father.⁷

The act of remembering triggered by the totemic figure of the deer illustrates the protagonist's conscious re-entry into the Symbolic Order and the initiation of a healing process following an

⁶ Leclerc is certainly not the first film director to use the sport of hunting as a metaphor for the transition into manhood and ultimately for the triumph of civilization over wilderness. One needs only to think of John Boorman's 1972 *Deliverance* or Michael Cimino's 1978 *The Deer Hunter*, two classics of the genre. In both cases however, what appears at first sight as the central topic, namely survival of the strongest, slowly recedes behind another very Freudian topic: men's discontent with twentieth century's civilization. Québec's cinematography makes ample use of the hunting metaphor but tackles the subject from the opposite angle; it primarily depicts weak, alienated individuals who fail at acceding to true adulthood, a situation interpreted by most critics as a direct reflection of Québécois nation's inability to attain political independence. In Francis Mankiewicz's 1972 *Le temps d'une chasse* [*The Time of the Hunt*], the immaturity of a group of three friends ultimately leads to one of the group's accidental death. A decade later, Pierre Perrault's *La bête lumineuse* [*The Shimmering Beast*], another eloquent example, starts off as a documentary on a hunting trip as the site of male bonding, but soon turns into a sociological study on the dynamics of scapegoating.

⁷ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 144.

abusive childhood. Struck with amnesia as well as aphasia, Alexandre must not only relearn language but also assume responsibility for his revolt and triumph over the father, thus finally achieving a life of fraternal alliance with his family, his friends, and nature. There remains no doubt for the viewer that at the end of this cathartic process, Tourneur recovers his long lost identity and is ready to embark upon a life spent within the community, as he explains in voice over in the film's optimistic last sequence: "I am the sum of my memories. I am my father's anger, my brother's courage and my daughter's hope. I am Wolf that Dreams, the son of our land."⁸

In one of *Mémoires affectives*' most haunting scenes, the protagonist stands on a wharf in the cold wintery twilight. At his feet, ice blocks float away on the pitch dark waters of the Saint Lawrence River. This very short sequence first strikes the viewer with its powerful, almost palpable, rendering of the bitter cold of the Québécois winter. Its evocative power lies in its visual translation of Alexandre's congealed state of mind and thus indirectly points at psychoanalytical thought, in particular at its—almost commonplace—comparison of the unconscious to the submerged part of an iceberg. As such, the floating blocks of ice intimate the "thaw" Alexandre will undergo when the memory of his crime resurfaces. The metaphorical substitution of a body of water for the unconscious occurs, again, when both brothers seal a pact of secrecy after depositing their father's corpse in the waters of the Lac à l'Écluse. They vow never to reveal the true cause of his death and never to speak, let alone think, about the event. Here, again, the film hints at memories repressed deep into the unconscious, drowned as it were, but that can no longer be kept under water if Alexandre is to recover his identity.

Parallel to the psychological dimension it brings to light, Leclerc's winter imagery bears profound political significance with respect to Québécois national identity. A superficial analysis might brush aside this interpretation as far-fetched, but the ethnologist Serge Gauthier interprets the scene described above as an allegory for a nation still searching for its identity, for a country yet to be born, hibernating, as it were. His analysis of Leclerc's film further argues for the centrality of the Charlevoix region, where the action takes place, as a "région-mémoire," a mythical region that conjures up images of ancestral memory rediscovered and retransmitted

⁸ Francis Leclerc, *Mémoires affectives*, DVD, 1:37:27-1:37:48 (chapter 15).

over the course of the twentieth century and that helped shape contemporary Québécois identity.⁹ On a more global level, at least one that encompasses the whole province of Québec and not just the geographically very circumscribed region east of Québec City, the Québécois winter officially made its entry into historico-political discourse when sociologist Fernand Dumont elaborated the concept of “hiver de la survivance” [winter of survival] in his 1993 *Genèse de la société québécoise*. In this seminal study on the formation of Québécois identity, Dumont explicates this concept as the French-Canadian nation’s reaction of withdrawal and of clinging to its cultural—mostly linguistic—identity following the British Conquest of 1763. This posture lasted at least until the Quiet Revolution of the sixties, but Dumont believes it was never truly abandoned and might help explain Québec’s powerlessness to assert itself as a *political* nation, as a Nation-State.¹⁰ In fact, Dumont associates this state of withdrawal with a state of hibernation, hence his coining of the term “*hiver de la survivance*,” a period in time during which the Québécois nation underwent a historical cooling and fled the political realm, surviving on its cultural traditions. In his conclusion, Dumont cautions against a derogatory interpretation of Québec’s past, calling instead for an exploration of the underlying reasons that may have led, on the one hand, to a certain degree of inertia but, on the other hand, to the powerful resilience and resistance of a whole population. His analysis implies that this very same population should aim to reappropriate the hibernation tactic. In a sense, Dumont is carefully suggesting that the Québécois nation undergo psychoanalytic therapy when he states: “As if history took place on two levels, the sediments of the formation phase remaining active underneath the events of later periods. So that in acceding to this deep layer of history, one would have the ability to better grasp the significance of the present.”¹¹ These words could readily be applied to *Mémoires affectives*’ main character, Alexandre Tourneur.¹²

In his 2002 study, *Passer au rang de père* [Acceding to Fatherhood], literary scholar François Ouellet offers a psychoanalytic reading of Québécois society, which he diagnoses from the outset

⁹ Gauthier mentions among others the documentary filmmaker Pierre Perreault referred to earlier (see note 6) whose 1963 masterpiece *Pour la suite du monde* [Of Whales, the Moon and Men] captures the tradition of beluga hunting in Charlevoix. Through his direct cinema approach, Perreault foregrounds and immortalizes the oral transmission of this tradition. By so doing, he gives a voice to the ancestral memory of ordinary people that would have been otherwise lost. Coinciding with the beginnings of the Quiet Revolution, his entire work contributed to the awakening of a collective sense of identity and pride. (Gauthier, *Mémoire de chevreuil*, p. 29)

¹⁰ Fernand Dumont: *Genèse de la société québécoise*. Montréal: Boréal, 1993, p. 326-330.

¹¹ Serge Cantin: De notre double identité: exercice de pensée politique. In: *Liberté* 37/3 (1995), p. 11-29, p. 23.

¹² Fernand Dumont, *Genèse de la société québécoise*, p. 331.

as suffering from an impaired sense of collective identity due to its incapacity to attain political independence, to “accede to fatherhood”.¹³ Through his analysis of numerous filmic and literary works, Ouellet identifies the recurring symptoms of Québec society's malady in the motifs of the broken, alienated man, and when not altogether absent, of the childish, powerless father—in short, the born loser—crushed by the oppressor.¹⁴ Inspired by Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, Ouellet further postulates that these motifs bespeak the Québécois nation's deep sense of guilt—a sense of guilt, not for having killed the tyrannical father, but rather for having failed to do so. From this sense of guilt then follows a painful sense of failure and self-denigration. Because it never dared pursue the project of its political self-determination to its ultimate outcome, namely (symbolic) patricide, Québec society lacks the founding myth necessary for a nation to assert its collective identity and fulfil a collective ideal. For Ouellet, the socio-historical reasons for this eternal “posture of the son,” for this blocked access to fatherhood, are to be found in the two consecutive colonial regimes Québec was subjected to: the French colonial regime (1534-1760) and the British colonial regime established with the 1763 Treaty of Paris that officially sealed the conquest of New France by the British Empire. Ouellet does recognize a few rebellious moments in Québec's history but none that would impart true independence: while the Quiet Revolution of the sixties was marked by the elimination of the clerical father, the symbolic murder of the *Canadian* father never took place.¹⁵ The political significance of Ouellet's conclusion is anything but subtle: the only solution to Québécois nation's identity crisis—or “psychodrama” as he terms it—lies in the independence project, in the formation of a Québécois Nation-State. And for that

¹³ François Ouellet: *Passer au rang de père: Identité sociohistorique et littéraire au Québec*. Montréal: Éditions Nota bene, 2002.

¹⁴ This pessimistic interpretation of masculine representation in Québec's cultural production is nothing new and Ouellet himself delivers a comprehensive literature review on the topic. For more on the topic of the absent or failed father in Québec's most recent films, see Denis Bachand: ‘Le prisme identitaire du cinéma québécois. Figures paternelles et interculturalité dans *Mémoires affectives et Littoral*’. In: *Cinémas: revue d'études cinématographiques/Cinémas: Journal of Film Studies* 19/1 (2008), p. 57-73. François Ouellet: ‘La fiction identitaire du nouveau cinéma québécois’. In: Nicole Côté et al. (eds.): *Expressions culturelles des francophonies*. Montréal: Nota bene, 2008, p. 89-107. Lori Saint-Martin: *Figures du père dans le cinéma québécois contemporain*. In: *Tangence* 91 (2009), p. 95-109.

¹⁵ Ironically, one of the most spectacular assassination attempts on a Canadian politician was perpetrated not on a federal Head of State, but rather on a provincial, and moreover, separatist one. In 1984, Denis Lortie, a corporal in the Canadian Armed Forces, entered the National Assembly in Québec City and shot three people before being arrested. Based on later testimony, it became clear that his ultimate goal was the assassination of then Prime Minister René Lévesque. The political significance of his gesture was somewhat relativised after Lortie was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Lortie's uncanny confession that “the government of Québec had my father's face” however calls for an inevitable conflation of the political and the psychoanalytical. For more on the topic, see Pierre Legendre's brilliant essay, *Le crime du caporal Lortie. Traité sur le père*. Paris, Fayard, 1989.

to happen, it must go through the process of symbolically murdering the father in order to put in its place the collective figure of sociocultural, political and spiritual maturity: a reassembling of the sons ready to take on their own destiny.¹⁶

Ouellet's theories, when applied to *Mémoires affectives*, allow for a further unveiling of the film's political subtext. Central to the story are indeed the questions of identity, alienation, and of course, patricide; only inasmuch as he finally remembers and consciously faces the consequences of his revolt against the father can Alexandre gain access to his true identity and ultimately to fatherhood. Also central to the story is, consequently, the question of autonomy, of self-determination, and such a question when set in a Québécois context is always already political by definition. That Québec's eventual separation from the rest of Canada is indeed hinted at, implicitly and explicitly, throughout Francis Leclerc's film can hardly be a coincidence. Considering the importance given here to the father-son relationship and to notions of memory transmission, it might be appropriate to mention that the film's director is the son of Félix Leclerc, an emblematic figure of Québec's cultural and political landscape: singer-songwriter, poet, writer, and political activist for Québec's sovereignty project. It therefore stands to reason Francis Leclerc should inscribe numerous references to Québec's identity as a "distinct society" and its failed attempts at independence, political references that can be found in the mnemonic devices that help the protagonist toward recovery: landscapes, folk songs, photographs and newspaper articles. Indeed, halfway through the film, Alexandre starts writing a timeline on a wall to locate, record, and ultimately, reappropriate the key moments of his life. Starting with point zero —his birth in 1963— Alexandre moves along in his personal history: 1975 marks his father's death, 1982 his wedding, a year later his daughter's birth, and so on until 2004, the year he awakens from his coma. Parallel to these intimate bits and pieces he is able to gather, Alexandre inscribes as well two key dates in Québec's national history, namely 1980 and 1995, the years when referendums were held to ask the population whether Québec should become an independent state. Under the year 1980 thus appears a newspaper article showing a defeated Prime Minister, René Lévesque, and the voting results: 40.5% in favor of sovereignty and 59.5% against. Finally, the year 1995 can be seen accompanied by another newspaper

¹⁶ In an interesting aside, Ouellet concedes that the only maturity the Québec nation ever had is "in the contradictory form of children born old, as the expression goes" (Ouellet, *Passer au rang de père*, p. 144; my translation), an expression that beautifully illustrates the notion of inherent impairment, of deeply-rooted alienation that characterizes the representation of masculinity in Québec's cultural production. Incidentally, when Alexandre awakens from his coma, among his first words are: "It's as if I was born an old man."

headline announcing the second referendum which turned out to be an extremely close race: 49.4% in favour of independence and 50.6% against. These results clearly reflect the ambivalence of a nation “born old,” one that has long defined itself through this very ambivalence. The way the other characters’ feelings toward Alexandre oscillate between sincere concern and hostility, referred to above, can thus be interpreted as symptomatic of the Québécois psyche. In this regard, it is significant that the only relationships not tainted by this ambivalence are the ones Alexandre develops with characters who are not “Québécois pure laine,” most notably with his psychiatrist of African origin and Pauline Maksoud, the police woman he befriends, daughter of Lebanese immigrants. In an effort to convince Alexandre that he is not going crazy but is simply confused due to his amnesia, she explains: “I know who I am, I’m from the North Shore, my dad’s Lebanese, and I’ve never been to Lebanon. I know it, because I remember it. You’ve forgotten about things like that.”¹⁷ In this context, Québec’s official motto, “Je me souviens [I remember],” shown on the license plate of Alexandre’s recently bought used car, should be interpreted not only as an ironic allusion to the protagonist’s amnesia but also as a conjuring-up of the fears that haunt the Québécois nation, namely the fear of losing touch with one’s history and the fear of assimilation through the loss of the French mother tongue. These two fears are embodied by both Tourneur brothers: Alexandre Tourneur has lost his memory, and Joseph Tourneur, in his Toronto exile, goes by the name of Jo Turner.¹⁸ It is no coincidence that Joseph, now a jeweller, rents a workshop in what used to be a textile factory (East Toronto Textile clearly appears on the building’s façade): this location references the thousands of French-Canadians who left Québec in the second half of the nineteenth century to work in New England’s textile industry. Most never came back and chose to anglicize their surnames. In

¹⁷ Francis Leclerc, *Mémoires affectives*, DVD, 1:21:48-1:22:02 (chapter 12).

¹⁸ A few critics have noted the protagonist’s unusual name and conjectured on its hidden meaning. Some simply take the name at its face value, Tourneur being either a semantic reference to one who “turns” his identity around (Saint-Martin, *Figures du père*, p. 101) or a metacinematic reference to the art of filmmaking since the French expression “*tourner un film*” means to direct a film, see Peter Hodgins: *The Haunted Terroir: Memory, Language, Landscape and Identity in Francis Leclerc’s Mémoires affectives*. In: *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 22.2 (September 2009), p. 215-234, p. 222. An allusion to film director Jacques Tourneur has also been suspected (Hodgins, *The Haunted Terroir*, p. 233; Barrette, *Mythes et mémoires*, p. 57) but the matter left unexplored. And yet, scattered information gleaned on the master of film noir reveals uncanny parallels to both Francis Leclerc and Alexandre Tourneur: Jacques Tourneur was following in his father’s footsteps, Maurice Tourneur; both father and son were fascinated with psychoanalysis; Tourneur Junior firmly believed in certain aspects of the paranormal and had a drinking problem. Ironically, Tourneur Senior, a French émigré, changed his last name to Tourneur because he believed his real name, Thomas, sounded too English; see Chris Fujiwara: *Jacques Tourneur: The Cinema of Nightfall*. Baltimore, London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998, p.13.

Joseph's case, however, the assimilation process is all the more troubling, as it takes place within his own country.

“J’ai perdu un autre pays/ J’étions seul de paysan” [I’ve lost another country/ I was the only peasant left], the lyrics of a folksong evoking a lost war and, finally, a lost country are heard in Alexandre’s car while he drives with his estranged daughter to his home in Charlevoix. She reminds him that the singer, Jim Corcoran—incidentally, an Anglophone who chose to pursue a career singing exclusively in French—was one of his favorites. This song resounds as a nostalgic reminder of the country that never was and never will be, that will remain a distant dream slowly fading against the white horizon, but perhaps making way for a new utopia. When Alexandre finally remembers, he covers the wall where he had written down his history with white paint. Dates on a wall have become superfluous since he now consciously bears his history within himself. His duty to remember is expressed in a mixture of French and Innu-aimun: “I am the sum of my memories. I am my father’s anger, my brother’s courage, and my daughter’s hope. I am Wolf that dreams, the son of our land.” Alexandre’s prolonged incapacity to claim the responsibility and consequences of patricide symbolizes, on the one hand, the mourning for a Québécois Nation-State. However, his final awakening to the past evokes, on the other hand, the political debate on Québec’s eventual independence as a goal that transcends the mere conflict opposing the Canadian father to the Québécois son. As such, the film’s denouement calls for resolution and reconciliation within a post-referendum Québec: reconciliation with a collective memory that opens up to and encompasses, albeit partially, immigrant cultures and First Nations. While I agree with the opinion that Leclerc represents First Nations in a romanticized, apolitical way, I do not share the view that he thus perpetuates First Nations’ exclusion from Québec’s collective identity.¹⁹ On the contrary, the tenuous presence of the lonely hunter in a barren wintery landscape, coupled with Tourneur’s voice reciting what sound like prayers in Innu-aimun, convey a ritualistic aura to the whole film and subtly point toward a spiritual dimension—beyond the political and the personal—toward the re-appropriation of an archaic memory pertaining to myth, essential for any nation to find and to found itself.

¹⁹ Bruno Cornéliier: Je me souviens (maintenant): altérité, indianité et mémoire collective. In: *Canadian Journal of Film Studies/Revue canadienne d’études cinématographiques* 19/2 (Autumn 2010), p. 99-127, p. 119-121.