

# Of Mothers and Others: Decoding Queer Discourses in the Cinema of Xavier Dolan



Neon installation "visibility is a trap" (Laurent Grasso, 2012)

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To my sister E.

To my “editor-in-chief” R, to whom I shall be eternally grateful.

And to all my *professoras* and *professoras*, from A to Z.

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## Introduction

*I'm looking for a person who understands my language and speaks it.  
A person who, without being a pariah, will question not only the rights and the value of the marginalized,  
but also those of the people who claim to be normal.*  
—Laurence Alia (Melvil Poupaud), in *Laurence Anyways*<sup>1</sup>

With precise words, we are introduced to *Laurence Anyways* (2012), the third film of French-Canadian filmmaker Xavier Dolan (born 1988). *Laurence Anyways* follows *I Killed My Mother* [*J'ai tué ma mère*, 2009] and *Heartbeats* [*Les amours imaginaires*, 2010]. In his semi-autobiographical debut, Dolan immersed into the mysteries of the relationship between mother and son, a film heaped with bourgeois family drama, pseudo-intellectual zest and a hotchpotch of pleasing aesthetics. A year later, his sophomore film turned Dolan into the favourite director of a new generation — an influence that I believe only happens once a decade, like it arguably did to Pedro Almodóvar in the 1980s, Wong Kar-Wai in the 1990s and Jean-Pierre Jeunet in the 2000s. Vibrant colours, attention to detail, eccentric characters to witty stories: their style is ingrained in their authorship and creates a signature that is generally expected to endure every next project. In an interview over *Laurence Anyways*, Dolan was asked to describe what would entail the faddish term *Dolanesque*, which he replied: “[S]trongly tempered women, flamboyant costumes, buoyant colors and kinetic scenes, and *clips*” (“Interview: Xavier Dolan”). Today, it could be said these stylistic foundations survived his seven features and were drastically sharpened in the period of three consecutive years, with the films *Laurence Anyways*, *Tom at the Farm* [*Tom à la ferme*, 2013] and *Mommy* (2014).

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<sup>1</sup> In the original “Je recherche une personne qui comprenne ma langue et qui la parle même. Une personne, qui, sans être un paria, ne s’interroge pas simplement sur les droits et l’utilité des marginaux, mais sur les droits et l’utilité de ceux qui se targuent d’être normaux”.

With *Laurence Anyways*, Dolan won his first Cannes' Queer Palm – independent award introduced to Cannes Film Festival in 2010. The accolade rewards films for their artistic qualities and their treatment of gay, lesbian, bi, trans or gender-related questions. Albeit its prestige, Dolan refused to get the award and uttered his disdain on multiple occasions, claiming “[t]here’s no such thing as queer cinema. . . . It’s time to . . . erase some of those labels, because no one wants to be an ambassador for a ghetto” (“Xavier Dolan: Crossing Over”). He has reasoned that even if queer awards may impact cinema positively, “labels [are] deleterious. They’re not helping. They’re ghettoizing, they’re putting things in boxes, and reminding people constantly that there are labels and there are tags and there are communities and there are groups of people. That is a sort of modern homophobia” (“Director Xavier Dolan on ‘Laurence Anyways’”).

Two years later, when he was once again nominated for the Queer Palm, this time with *Mommy*, his fifth feature film, the nomination culminated with an incensed interview in which Dolan further denigrated the award:

Que de tels prix existent me dégoûte. Quel progrès y a-t-il à décerner des récompenses aussi ghettoïsantes, aussi ostracisantes, qui clament que les films tournés par des gays sont des films gays? On divise avec ces catégories. On fragmente le monde en petites communautés étanches. La Queer Palm, je ne suis pas allé la chercher. Ils veulent toujours me la remettre. Jamais! L'homosexualité, il peut y en avoir dans mes films comme il peut ne pas y en avoir.<sup>2</sup> (qtd. in Guichard 10)

The aggressive repudiation by Dolan has intrigued me. The reason why the word queer and its implications are such a nuisance to Dolan is perhaps associated to the reclaiming of the term since the

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<sup>2</sup> In Ursula Grisham's translation: “That such prizes even exist disgusts me. What progress is there to be made with awards so marginalizing, so ostracizing, that claim that films made by gays are gay movies? We divide with these categories. We fragment the world into hermetic little communities. I didn't collect the Queer Palm. They still want me to. Never! Homosexuality can be addressed in my films or not” (“Xavier Dolan & the Queer Palm”).

early 2000s as an umbrella term for LGBTQ+ individuals – a word which prior to that was recorded as a slur.<sup>3</sup> This synonymous use, however, does not seem to be representative of what the Queer Palm, and others like Berlin’s Teddy Award and Venice’s Queer Lion essentially mean to celebrate.

In this thesis, I urge for queer to be understood in the way it was originally reclaimed in the 1980s as a reaction to and against the assimilationist conduct gays and lesbians started to present back then.<sup>4</sup> In 1991, the word queer was fully introduced in academe, being theorised by important scholars such as Teresa de Lauretis, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler and Alexander Doty. Queer theory essentially investigates how queerness unfolds in spaces restricted to straight people (Burston and Richardson 1-2). Many have attempted to define the meaning of queerness. Amongst them, Doty has offered a combination of previous works by Lauretis, Butler and the activist group Queer Nation:

Any “queerer than thou” attitude, based on politics, style, sexual behavior, or any other quality, can only make queerness become something other than an open and flexible space. Queerness ... is a quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight.  
(*Making Things Perfectly Queer* xv)

Doty also avoids queer and queerness as a shorthand for LGBTQ+ because this use inevitably provokes the erasure of elements specific to gay, lesbian, bisexual (and other) orientations, identities and expressions (xvi-ii). In other words, the umbrella term assumes similarities, also when specific attention should be given to the differences. More importantly, though, the use of queer as an independent, political identity promotes intersectionality when combined with different elements and theories of sexuality, gender, class and race. Therefore, queer and queerness are used unrestrictedly throughout this thesis to represent unconventional, antiassimilationist aspects of various identities. Initialisms such as LGBTQ+

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<sup>3</sup> And before that, of course, it simply meant unusual or strange.

<sup>4</sup> This reclamation also needs to be considered in relation to the advent of AIDS and conservative politics of the 1980s.

and any of its singular forms the term comprises (gay, lesbian, etc) are reserved to characteristics inherited to those individuals.

Queer, in Doty's words, "should challenge and confuse our understanding and uses of sexual and gender categories" (xvii). A queer cinema, more precisely, should generate "different accounts of the world, offering alternatives to capitalist aesthetics and social life" (Schoonover and Galt 88). On the basis of these lines, my intention is to explore queerness in Dolan's filmography – whether he is aware of them or not – and how – regardless of his own interpretation of his body of work – his films are eligible to be part of a so-called queer cinema and thus, queer awards' nominations. My argument will be based on the chronological analysis of the aforementioned *Laurence Anyways*, Dolan's fourth film *Tom at the Farm* and lastly, *Mommy*. The three films together create an unexpected yet riveting Québécois triptych that deals with matters of urban, rural, and suburban alienation; gender, sexual and social otherness; taking place in recent past, present, and near future, respectively.<sup>5</sup> His films are a mirror of contemporary Québec, but also allow for a read on various societies, with their current, universal themes.

Using a wide range of theories from film, gender and queer studies, with a particular emphasis on feminist authors, chapter 1 presents *Laurence Anyways* through the discussions of camp and alternative femininities. Chapter 2 turns to masculinities and bisexual desires in *Tom at the Farm*, signalling initial crossovers between content and form. In Chapter 3 these approaches play a more prominent part to the promotion of queer readings of *Mommy*, stressing the compelling critique of normativity and its interposition in a more global environment like the movement New Queer Cinema of the 1990s.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Note that in the predominantly white Canadian society in which Dolan's films are inserted, there is the presumption that an adult individual *is* cisgender and heterosexual; therefore there is no reason to question any other possibility. This is known generally as heteronormativity and it plays an important role throughout his films' universe.

<sup>6</sup> As well reminded by Doty, "[q]ueer readings aren't 'alternative' readings, wishful or willful misreadings, or 'reading too much into things' readings". Rather, "they result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along" (*Making Things Perfectly Queer* 16).

The intermingling of topics supports how Dolan's films convey important deliberations on sexuality and gender – amongst other things – that perhaps are discordant to his avid discourse against the word *queer*. Given queer's political implications against assimilation and hetero- and homonormativities,<sup>7</sup> my aim is to present why those reflections are all the more paramount to the development of cinema, individuals and society as a whole.

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<sup>7</sup> Homonormativity is the acceptance of heteronormative values by gay people and movements, which can be perceived as an assimilationist process that accepts and ape of values and standards of this society.



## Transcending Femininities: Alienation and Assimilation in *Laurence Anyways*

The second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century brought to mainstream cinema a focus on an ostracised group which previously had only been labelled by and observed through the lens of the patriarchy. Be it for the scrutiny on Caitlin Jenner's and The Wachowski's gender transitions or the sudden stardom of actress Laverne Cox, transgender people have achieved more visibility, representation and occasional exploitation – especially in North America's entertainment industry – in the last five years than ever before.

Part of this visibility also comes from the production of films that tackle trans issues in various manners, such as Dolan's *Laurence Anyways*, his almost three-hour epic love story between Laurence Alia (Melvil Poupaud) and Fred Belair (Suzanne Clément) which covers Laurence's transition over the course of ten years. The film is Dolan's only epic to date, and notably the most female-orientated of his films, with basically every main character being a woman.

Whereas Dolan particularly seems to have integrated the styles of influential directors, like the aforesaid Almodóvar and Wong, into *Heartbeats* and *Laurence Anyways*, he has done so without paying much attention to the consequences of *camping* these stories. In order to understand why camp is important to *Laurence Anyways* and also for the lack of common definition of the concept, several different authors are analysed: from Susan Sontag, who in 1964 presented the most widespread theory of camp known today, to more recent approaches (up until the 1990s) that integrate camp more strongly into gender and queer studies. The difference between the two lines of thought centres on the intentionality and the impact of its use both formal and narratively. Since the 1990s, the focus has changed to other aspects and little has been added to camp, making its definitions and theories dated but still relevant, and in different ways, they all shed some light on *Laurence Anyways'* politics of gender and femininity.

This chapter reflects on the characteristic camp element of the first phase in Dolan's oeuvre and develops on how the camp formula is used as a channel to dispute heteronormativity and to discuss progressive viewpoints of gender and sexuality, particularly issues of transgender and the feminine.

### Camping Gender in *Laurence Anyways*

Although the term 'camp' is already in use as an adjective since at least 1909,<sup>8</sup> Sontag's article "Notes on 'Camp'" has been fundamental to the definitions and connotations implied today. Since its publication in 1964, it is used avidly as the flagbearer of what camp is. In it, Sontag defines camp as a "sensibility", a "mode of aestheticism" (516). Favouring exaggeration and artifice; through its emphasis on style, camp is "disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical" (517). Sontag makes a distinction between an unintentional and a deliberate version of camp. The pure examples are naïve and "dead serious", yet being of a "seriousness that fails". The "wholly conscious" deliberate camp, on the other hand, is "usually less satisfying" (521-22).

Sontag implies (in very few words) that camp shares many elements with the taste of gay men, and that they, through aesthetics and humour, use it to present their take on society (529). This seems to be particularly pertinent to Dolan's case. With his attentive eye to fashion and music in *I Killed My Mother*, and the addition of humour in *Heartbeats*, his work certainly seems to connect to elements of a more deliberate camp.

*Laurence Anyways* feels almost like the spiritual sequel to *Heartbeats*, with its same stylised qualities and music video-like atmosphere. Echoing the aesthetic choices from its predecessor, *Laurence Anyways* maintains some of the campy atmosphere, but tones down the comedic aspect heavily

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<sup>8</sup> "Camp" *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 14 Aug. 2018.

embedded throughout Dolan's second film. It can be said that the blatant use of camp has harmed *Heartbeats*, making the film shallow in its essence.<sup>9</sup> Dolan seems to use camp in a fairly more serious way in *Laurence Anyways*, which, through its genre, length and subtleties, is more analogous to Sontag's characterisation of pure (or unintentional) camp.

Set in Montreal, Canada, *Laurence Anyways* follows its main characters during a span of ten years (from 1989 to 1999): from the day Laurence and Fred meet, through the protagonist's male-to-female transition, and to the recognition of Laurence as a renowned writer. It is a pertinent period to wrap the film in because of the rapid, worldwide evolution and visibility starting to be given to minorities and women, especially in academic circles – post-AIDS epidemic crisis of the early 1980s. The same period marks the birth of the so-called New Queer Cinema, with attuned films that changed the perception of LGBTQ+ people, posing them in a newfound positive light.<sup>10</sup>

Dolan's filmmaking at this point of his career is heavily engaged with aesthetic tricks and treats he can present. So, visually, the film delivers throughout its course the camp aspects and elements described by Sontag: bright palette, focus on fashion, loud and dramatic dialogues – the artificiality of everyone's life. In the first fifteen minutes, there is a notable attention to clothes, hairdos and colours. In one of the early scenes, Laurence wakes up Fred, who sleeps in a blue room, by pouring over her a basket full of clothes. Fred then asks what Laurence will be wearing that evening during an award ceremony, to which she amusingly replies "nothing".<sup>11</sup>

Later in the car, post awards, the couple discusses colours and their function and likeability while listening to the song "Bette Davis Eyes".<sup>12</sup> This is also the first moment in which Fred's vivid red-dyed

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<sup>9</sup> As Sontag states: "Probably, intending to be campy is always harmful" (521).

<sup>10</sup> To be discussed more extensively in chapter 3.

<sup>11</sup> Laurence, as a trans woman, needs to be addressed by the correct gender, pronouns and name, when applicable. In *Laurence Anyways*, as the film title suggests, there is no case of deadnaming.

<sup>12</sup> Sontag mentions Bette Davis, especially in her performance in the film *All About Eve* (1950), as a camp icon (522).

hair is seen. “[C]lothes, furniture, all the elements of visual décor”, “artifice”, “love of the exaggerated” are intrinsic to camp (Sontag 517-18). The car dialogue sets the tone (and standard) for the interactions between the two main characters. The theatricality with which they make their lists and talk to each other illustrates basic precepts of the camp: seriousness about trivialities (Sontag 527), behavioural intensity, extravagance, flamboyance (522-25).

After her 35<sup>th</sup> birthday, Laurence comes out to Fred as transgender. The declaration, once again during a car discussion, is done in a very hysterical and exaggerated way. “I’m going to die”, she says. The desperation in her voice is not for dying – naturally, she is talking about the death of her old self – but for feeling like an “criminal” for all these years. The coming out to Laurence’s mother Julienne adds comic relief – probably due to Nathalie Baye’s nuanced acting –, with a television joke (“Can you still move the TV upstairs?”) and the lack of surprise at Laurence’s revelation. The conversation between the two characters starts off dramatic, but later on, there is an apparent comedic note throughout their dialogues (“Are you becoming a woman or an idiot?”).

Although the film’s text reinforces its camp qualities and it is not demeaning to transgender people on the most immediate level, some microaggressions do come about throughout. For example, at one time Fred insistently interrogates Laurence on which of her clothes Laurence may have been using secretly. There is a combination of dissatisfaction and humour to the scene, but at the same time the solemn focus on the wardrobe of a trans person operates too as device “to highlight ways in which they are different from cis[gender] women” ([Mis]Representation). The connection between looks and social roles continues on various occasions – from Laurence’s use of wigs just to please and get validation from Fred to Fred urging Laurence to publicly dress in *feminine* clothes as soon as possible, up to the point they got into an argument because Fred feels that Laurence is not transitioning rapidly enough (“You’re

still wearing your old clothes! What went wrong?”).<sup>13</sup> In a society which stigmatises those who are not willing to take and perform their social roles, Fred’s acceptance is quite oppressive.

When it comes to perspectives on transgender, and the ever-increasing interest around the theme at the time of *Laurence Anyways*’ production, it is relevant to consider the distinction between the film’s release year (early 2010s) and the film’s diegetic years (1990s). Sontag addresses the effects of time over artistic creations. She writes:

[...] the process of aging or deterioration provides the necessary detachment – or arouses a necessary sympathy. When the theme is important, and contemporary, the failure of a work of art may make us indignant. Time can change that. Time liberates the work of art from moral relevance, delivering it over to the Camp sensibility. (524)

Of course, Sontag speaks of the nature of the camp object per se, and not the time period it encloses, but given the temporal qualities of cinema, the film may carry certain qualities and characteristics ingrained to the decade it is diegetically inserted in. So, in place of the blatantly heightened camp of the contemporary *Heartbeats*, Dolan utilises time and detachment to supply *Laurence Anyways* with a camp sensibility. Incidentally, this also makes him less vulnerable in regards to how frustrated and punitive viewers might be of the way he manipulates an important present-day theme such as being transgender.

Naturally, to keener audiences, what may first come to mind is the casting of actor Melvil Poupaud, a cisgender man playing a transgender woman. In a way, this adheres to the camp sensibility described by Sontag, for instance: “The convertibility of ‘man’ and ‘woman’”, and how “[c]amp sees everything in quotation marks. ... not a woman, but a ‘woman’”. In sum, camp “consists in going against the grain of one’s sex”. But even though Sontag romantically claims that “[w]hat is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; ... in feminine women is something masculine” (519), this common casting

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<sup>13</sup> Note that not all transgender people decide to match their gender and gender expression and defining one right way of doing so is hazardous.

practice in contemporary cinema brings up several issues: stereotypical views, employment discrimination, experience inaccuracies, to name a few. In the film, the performative aspect, the role-playing ingrained to gender roles is in line with the aforementioned traits that support camp, but brutally denies and corrupts the transgender experience, promoting a rather transphobic depiction.

While the acceptance of her lover, family, friends and co-workers comes with disclaimers, Laurence only finds true acceptance from an unexpected place. Just after getting herself involved in a fight – apparently sparked by intolerance and transphobia – she meets and befriends *The Five Roses*, a put-together family of performers. The introduction of The Five Roses in the film and in Laurence's life can be comprehended as the turning point in the film's camp discourse. From then on, Dolan stops using the sensibility as one of its structures to actually promote it as its main narrative device.

This shift requires an understanding of camp's uses beyond what Sontag has to offer. As seen, camp can be created from unintentionality, but it can also be used to make serious points. Whereas Sontag only touched upon the influence and impact of one's sexuality into camp, her successors reclaimed the power and position camp has to be "used defiantly by queers against straightness" (Dyer 51). Heightening the significance of queerness to the composite of camp, Jack Babuscio has outlined four essential characteristics to the camp sensibility, being them "irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humour" (119). While these features are present throughout the production, they only get to be simultaneously perceived when Laurence gathers with the Five Roses, or, as Richard Dyer acknowledges, camp's importance lies precisely in the "gathering of queers (51). The group is constituted by Mamy (Mama) Rose, Baby Rose, Dada Rose, Tatíe (Auntie) Rose, and Shookie Rose. The eclectic combination displays "incongruous contrasts": masculine and feminine, youth and elderly, sacred and profane, elements through which the ironic aspect of camp becomes visible (Babuscio 119). Amongst the Roses

are only two men: the androgynous Baby Rose,<sup>14</sup> Mamy Rose's son, who is also the youngest of the troupe and Dada Rose, a drag queen who is referred as Mamy Rose's 1970s lover. The film presents the characters as deviants who exist apart from society, in a sort of campy, whimsical location only known to them.

Promptly and affectuously accepting Laurence into their family, The Five Roses live in a warehouse uncannily similar to a church, adorned by sparkly, kitsch and old-fashioned objects and furniture. This heavy aestheticism further shapes the ironic qualities of the group as well as heightens the protected environment Laurence wishes so much to be able to have herself. This confirms that to emphasise style is more than only a decorative or vain property. According to Babuscio, it serves to project one's self, to convey meaning, to set the emotional tone (122).

Additionally, there are other scenes, not featuring the Rose group, in which a high level of aestheticism can be recognised. Take for instance Laurence and Fred's break-up, where a butterfly comes out of Laurence's mouth or the moment when Fred's living-room turns into waterfall as she reads for the first time Laurence's poetry book. Those instants stylise "states of mind" and moods in ways that are not only "appropriate to the plot" but also "fascinating in themselves" (Babuscio 121).

Like drag queen culture, camp transforms "the ordinary into something ... spectacular", giving more importance to "performance rather than existence" (122). The performative element of The Five Roses shows not only through their wardrobe but also through their "life-as-theatre" attitude, essentially by not conforming to their expected (sex-)roles or gender expression in society. At this point, Laurence herself, still doesn't fully identify to what is expected from a woman, just as Baby Rose and Dada Rose don't conform to the idealised version of masculinity which is acceptable and "appropriate for men"

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<sup>14</sup> Sontag attributed androgyny as "one of the great images of Camp sensibility" (518).

(123). Functioning as a “weapon against the mystique surrounding art, royalty and masculinity” (52), camp protects these deviations and incites them to the foreground of a film’s text.

Finally, the use of humour sums up and permeates all the other characteristics. It deals with a “hostile environment” while it also defines a “positive identity” (Babuscio 126). The humour in *Laurence Anyways* embodies the camping of the film, just as it is a take on Canadian society’s behaviour and an implicit manner of criticising the oppression and struggles faced by a person who is transitioning.<sup>15</sup>

Babuscio argues that:

Camp can thus be a means of undercutting rage by its derision of concentrated bitterness. Its vision of the world is comic. Laughter, rather than tears, is its chosen means of dealing with the painfully incongruous situation ... in society. Yet it is also true that camp is something of a protopolitical phenomenon. ... [T]hrough its introduction of style, aestheticism, humour, and theatricality, [camp] allows us to witness 'serious' issues with temporary detachment, so that only later, after the event, are we struck by the emotional and moral implications of what we have almost passively absorbed.<sup>16</sup> (128)

It is important to realise that the use of camp in *Laurence Anyways* has a seriousness that not only balances up the humorous aspects but also reveals the political undertones of the film. Sue-Ellen Case understands the importance of camp in its articulation of the lives of gay men “through the obtuse tone of irony” and inscription of “their oppression with the same device”, destroying thus “the ruling powers of heterosexist realist modes” (60). Diverting from the sheer triviality of the campy *Heartbeats*, *Laurence Anyways* does attempt to bring to light a part of society that is most of the time marginalised, discredited and ridiculed.

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<sup>15</sup> This connection between a formal element and its implication over society also returns in chapter 3.

<sup>16</sup> So, contrary to Sontag’s idea that time results in detachment and delivers works of art to the camp aesthetic, for Babuscio, detachment is a temporary outcome of camp’s fundamental elements.



Unfortunately, the film attempts this through the comfortable seat of white middle-class lives. According to Andrew Ross it is no surprise that camp is a privilege exclusively given to those with a superior level of cultural wealth ("Uses of Camp" 63), those who are able to flaunt poor taste without having to cope with the significances it implies. In his study *No Respect*, Ross claims:

If the pleasure generated by bad taste presents a challenge to the mechanisms of control and containment that operate in the name of good taste, it is often to be enjoyed *only* at the expense of others, and this is largely because camp's excess of pleasure has very little, finally, to do with the (un)controlled hedonism of a consumer; it is the result of the (hard) *work* of a producer of taste, and "taste" is only possible through exclusion *and* depreciation. (153)

Exclusion and depreciation are fundamentally tied to the whiteness of creators and their subjects, since, as reminded by Pamela Robertson, "[m]any critics ... equate camp with white, urban, gay male taste..." (2).<sup>17</sup> That, however, does not signify that camp and whiteness are intertwined, but camp is enclosed to the dominant order and it is important to remember how predominantly white this order is.

Just as camp – as a mechanism and in what it aims for – is chiefly white, it is also chiefly queer (although in most instances, simply gay). The latter comes to importance because in *Laurence Anyways*, Dolan manages to achieve sharp wittiness through camp essentially because of its (and his) *gayness/queerness*. Many critics agree that camp becomes blunt when appropriated by non-queer people (Dyer 60; Meyer 12; Ross, "Uses of Camp" 62), simply meaning that the reason why camp is relevant is because it translates LGBTQ+ experiences and traumas in a more elegant and accessible manner. In addition, Dyer sees style and humour predominantly used by gay men as a result of their own

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<sup>17</sup> Born of a Canadian mother and an Egyptian father, Xavier Dolan passes as white, and his choices as a director are essentially those of a white director, having the vast majority of actors in his films to be white. Ross affirms that the camp "intellectual expresses his impotence as the dominated fraction of a ruling bloc in order to remain there ... while he distances himself from the conventional morality and taste of the growing middle class" ("Uses of Camp" 64). Dolan seems to fall into this description as he completely neglects racial aspects in his white-dominated camp films.

oppressive experiences (59): it is not because they are gay that they were gifted with good taste or attention to details, but because they had to police themselves at all times, it resulted in extra attentiveness to the shape of things. In other words, “when taken over by straights [camp] loses its cutting edge”, reapproximating itself more to heterocentric experiences rather than those of non-dominant groups, such as queer individuals, but also women.

In order to comprehend more deeply the queerness throughout the film, the role of women, in particular, is the subject of the next section, as they play a fundamental part to camp and its politics of gender.

### Gay Camp, Female Troubles

Women and their struggles are a central part of *Laurence Anyways*. Laurence, a trans woman transitioning, must learn about herself and the world around her while also redefining her relationship to her female lover, her mother, her male co-workers and virtually anyone else who crosses her path. The film also follows Fred, the protagonist’s counterpart, as she adapts to a new situation, also learning about herself and the world around her, more attentively in relation to her lesbian relationship and heterosexual desires.

Most of the female characters in *Laurence Anyways* benefit from the film’s camp theatricality, especially Fred, who does not conform to the roles expected from a Canadian woman back in the 1980s and 1990s. After their formal break-up, most of the scenes Fred is in are permeated by a whimsical tone. This reinforces the camp sensibility and aesthetic features of the film, but most importantly, helps to decipher Fred’s feelings and thoughts.

As already mentioned, camp examines the correlation between artificiality and naturalness, which also influences discussion of sexuality and gender identity (Ross, “Uses of Camp” 72). Fred is open-

mindful, independent, and extravagant. Together with most of the female characters of the film, she does not fall into the most classic and stereotypical versions of femininity. As indicated by Ross, “to *perform* a particular representation of womanliness ... is to demonstrate ... why there is no ‘authentic’ femininity, why there are only representations of femininity, socially redefined from moment to moment” (“Uses of Camp” 72). Similarly, and much earlier, Joan Riviere supports in her pioneering essay “Womanliness as a Masquerade” that there is no distinction between masquerade and “genuine womanliness” for “they are the same thing” (94).

This (re)definition of femininity gains new importance once Laurence comes out as transgender. What once seemed an ordinary heterosexual relationship turns out to be a lesbian one, and therefore not only gender roles but also performative roles are (re-)defined. In *Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic*, Case presents the roles of the butch and the femme as outfits to free the female subject from the heterosexist system. These roles become vital in *Laurence Anyways* when the unexpected lesbian relationship forces one of the characters to *butch* up while the other tries to be as female (and femme, consequently) as possible. Both the roles of the butch and the femme are dependant on one another (Case 56) and in *Laurence Anyways*’ case, they are unleashed together, in the course of Laurence’s coming out and transition.

While the absent-minded – and somewhat transphobic – spectator may think that Laurence assumes the butch and Fred the femme, the situation is ironically the other way round. At the moment Laurence comes out as transgender, Fred (in order to salvage their relationship) feels compelled to become the most masculinised version of herself, by *butching herself up*. Whereas Laurence, in the process of becoming the real version of herself, needs to find a balance between her ideal femininity and female image.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The importance of this becoming should be perceived in the light of the discussions found in chapter 3.

Laurence's search could be interpreted as a modern version of Riviere's masquerade, as the woman puts on the mask of womanliness "to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it" (94). Fearing illegitimacy and consequential transphobia, Laurence enhances her own femininity "to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men" (91). Riviere's theory of the masquerade, according to Case, is "consciously played out in butch-femme roles ... the butch is the lesbian woman who proudly displays the possession of the penis, while the femme takes on the compensatory masquerade of womanliness" (64).

Bear in mind, however, that the relation between masquerade and Laurence's external anatomy at birth is null – the concept is drawn upon Freudian ideas of castration and the feminine. Also, the theatricality implied in the masquerade is not a gendered privilege: it just "mimics a constructed identity in order to conceal that there is nothing behind the mask; it simulates femininity to dissimulate the absence of a real or essential feminine identity" (Robertson 12). In other words, Riviere's theory is not used to invalidate transgender experiences, it is essentially a manner of "reading femininity differently" (Doane, "Masquerade Reconsidered" 47), a destabilisation of the female image that confuses the masculine organisation of the gaze (Doane, "Film and the Masquerade" 82) and thereby corrupting it. Essentially, Laurence readjusts her own femininity through the construction of a distance between herself and her image.

At this point, it is imperative to once again acknowledge the importance of the gender of the actor who plays Laurence and the performative undertones that it brings to the text's narrative. Similar to what was discussed in the first part of this chapter, one could argue that Dolan somewhat benefits from the use of a cis actor in *Laurence Anyways* to accentuate the idea that camp is "antimasculine" (Ross, "Uses of Camp" 64), or at least a tool against "conforming to the drabness and rigidity of the hetero male role" (Dyer 49). Generally speaking, the film succeeds in warping the stereotypical image of

masculinities by presenting several characters that do not fall in the conventional, heteronormative portraits of men (like Laurence's father Pierre [played by Vincent Davy], an apathic man, far from the typical patriarch of the family or The Five Roses' performer Dada Rose [Jacques Lavallée], who is always in drag) as well as not presenting conformed and submissive femininities, creating a better range of gender expression portrayals.

As far as Laurence is concerned, the situation gets more complicated. Given that the separation of being and acting (or playing a role) is blurred to some audiences – especially because gender is also intrinsically connected to the way one presents oneself to the world – to have Poupaud play a (trans) woman is problematic. A misgendered representation onscreen allows the audience to believe a trans woman, for example, is just a man in a dress.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, these portrayals can be “one dimensional, stigmatising, and actively harmful” ([Mis]Representation). Although it is commonly supposed that actors are able to play anything, there is a general consensus in the transgender community that cis actors lack the knowledge needed to create an accurate portrait of trans people (Dolan-Sandrinio). One way to avoid this is by hiring people who can bring their own, lived perspectives to the table, creating more true-to-life, authentic stories – both in front of and behind the cameras. Regarding Laurence's experience, this is not the case, therefore the result should not be recognised as a legitimate transgender one.

Nor is it beneficial that when it comes to readjusting femininity, the second half of the film significantly gives more prominence to a similar process that Fred goes through. With Laurence's transition scaled down to some physical transformation throughout the years, Dolan decides to focus on the brief encounters between Fred and Laurence, continuously reinforcing the impossibility of their (same-sex) love. After the coming out, Fred initially comprehends Laurence's struggles and, besides all the adversities, is willing to salvage her relationship by adopting the role of butch and, unbeknownst to

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<sup>19</sup> For lack of better term, *misgendered representation* is used here to indicate a work in which the gender of the artist is not the same of their character.

her, by *imposing* the role of femme on Laurence. “Our generation can take this. We’re ready for it”, she tells her sister. But, in a sudden event of trans panic, Fred finds out she is pregnant by Laurence and decides to secretly get an abortion. Later, this leads to post-traumatic distress and ultimately culminates in the end of the relationship.

Fred is subsequently seen living a rather conventional and financially comfortable life of marriage and motherhood, taking care of her child and husband while throwing small parties to keep herself entertained. Her adjustment to what is expected of a woman is then subtly revealed to be an unhappy life as she yearns for an escapade<sup>20</sup> – which she manages to get once Laurence returns. Laurence and Fred re-engage in an affair, which again ends in a painful split-up, this time not only because of Laurence’s transgender experience, but also given the consequences for the monogamous relationship Fred maintains with her husband.

To switch to Fred’s struggles throughout the years coherently aligns to the gay camp tendency to give “power and prestige” to the female characters, especially by the appropriation and use of “straight Hollywoodiana” imagery “to make sense of the everyday experience of alienation and exclusion in a world socially polarised by sexual labels”, as ingeniously put by Ross (“Uses of Camp” 70). However, this idolisation of the female body does not come gratuitously – to have female characters behave with what is usually perceived as masculine behaviour “is usually directly met with punishment and chastisement” or a “radical desexualisation of the female body” (71). In other words, as a response to Fred’s empowerment and *butching*, she is denied her happiness and her family.

Furthermore, like Fred, although Laurence is given power and prestige, her female body is never given real care. Rather, the focus seems to orbit on the clothing aspect of her persona, from beginning to end (to the point Fred asks “Why are you dressed like this? Why? Why not normal, as a woman?” To

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<sup>20</sup> Possibly one of the strongest signs of the character’s queerness.

which Laurence replies “To please you, baby”). As a matter of fact, during Laurence and Fred’s trip to the fictitious Isle of Black, Dolan offers his most *Antonionesque* piece – *Zabriskie Point* style –, with female clothes raining over the couple’s head, in a surreal slow-motion, music video-like scene. The whimsical explosion of colourful clothes could well signify the end of gender boundaries based on one’s wardrobe, the end of the Western spectacle around one’s appearances. However, it ultimately reveals to be just another visual gimmick since, later in the film, the clothing obsession gets emphasised again. This focus is prejudicial to the positive camping of transgender bodies: precisely *because* Laurence receives some female authority, she gets punished with chastity (not being able to find happiness with another woman) and never gets to have her body positively validated past her choice of clothes.

The occasion which best supports the transgender experience comes in the film’s penultimate scene (and last one, in chronological order). Throughout *Laurence Anyways*, parts of an interview are revealed in voice-over, with the entirety of it exposed only in the final twenty minutes of film. This interview concisely entails some of the most central ideas of the film’s discourse – especially regarding the act of looking and being looked at, the basics of spectatorship. While giving an interview, Laurence requests the journalist’s (Susan Almgren) sparkly glasses so she can read/write something. This simple, small action may pass by the audience unattentively, but for Mary Ann Doane, it is a symbolic “appropriation of the gaze” by a woman. She affirms:

Glasses worn by a woman in the cinema do not generally signify a deficiency in seeing but an active looking, or even simply the fact of seeing as opposed to being seen. The intellectual woman looks and analyses, and in usurping the gaze she poses a threat to an entire system of representation. It is as if the woman had forcefully moved to the other side of the specular. (“Film and the Masquerade” 83)

So, while being interviewed by the journalist – being dissected alive by this cisgender woman, her cisgender gaze, her light transphobia – Laurence is observed, judged, scrutinised.<sup>21</sup> By asking for the journalist's glasses, she takes over not only the item but also the right to look at, and not be looked at only. The pair of glasses have absolutely no function in the film other than show the instant Laurence wears them and removes them. Importantly, this removal must be displayed for its erotic value (Doane, "Film and the Masquerade" 83). By the time Laurence has removed her just-borrowed pair of glasses, she has not only reversed the relation and appropriated the gaze for her own pleasure but also revealed herself to be a sensuous woman who is no longer the object of the voyeuristic or fetishist gaze to the characters or the viewers. At the final instants of film, Laurence becomes the protagonist of her own story: as a woman who is finally revealed a spectator rather than a spectacle – only for a few moments, naturally, because the film then ends bittersweetly, with when Fred and Laurence's first meet, an introduction – the audience knows by now – of a finite love story.

As far as camp is concerned, the masquerade, *butching* and *femming* of characters reveal performative elements in one's gender that are impossible today not to be connected to Butler's studies of performance of gender.<sup>22</sup> Based on Butler's investigations, Moe Meyer affirms that the queerness does not have to be a sexual identity as it is more associated to gender identities, which do not require sexual practices (3). To him, "social identities", such as gender, "are always accompanied by ... public signification in the form of specific enactments, embodiments, or speech acts which are nonsexual..." (3), in other words, performative elements.

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<sup>21</sup> Moments before, the journalist herself is seen putting on her glasses and only then acknowledging how beautiful a woman Laurence is.

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of gender performativity, see Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Undoing Gender* (2004).



Hence, according to Meyer, queerness is the only producer of camp as critique, and the function of camp is exactly the “production of social visibility”, through camp’s “total body of performative practices and strategies”.<sup>23</sup> If these elements are performed without the “queer self-reflexivity” inherited to them, then it fails to produce camp (4). So, although *Laurence Anyways* does tackle the sexual incompatibility of characters in relation to their gender, it does not need the sexual aspect to still deliver a queer and camp story.

Additionally, Robertson suggests that although “women are camp”, they do not “produce themselves as camp” and “not even have access to [the] camp sensibility”, making them “objects of camp” and “subject to camp”, but not “camp subjects” per se. With regards to this, it is possible to affirm that *Laurence Anyways* spotlights women and their diverse femininities and unleashes the female camp in ways that do not deliver “images of female excess that are blatantly misogynistic” (5). That is to say, to reclaim camp as a feminist “political tool”, with its in-yer-face qualities, would not only benefit “feminists discussions of gender construction, performance, and enactment” and offer a “model for critiques of gender and sex roles” (6) but also help to “better understand gay male camp” and “[its] reliance on feminine images and styles” (7). What lacks in this feminist camp viewpoint, though, is intersectionality: the camping in *Laurence Anyways* places women in a good light, but not *all* women. At the expense of a transgender character, white, cisgender women get to have their struggles fully validated.

The film does deliver positive cisgender female events, but never quite surpasses its transphobic and transmisogynistic overtones against the so-called “hero” of the story (Poupaud qtd. in “Laurence Anyways Press Kit” 7). Laurence, with her transition and struggles, is repetitively and constantly overshadowed by Fred’s emotions and traumas, that are certainly given more attention and depth.

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<sup>23</sup> Meyer also criticises Sontag for sanitising camp for “public consumption”, and by doing so, managing to kill off “the binding referent of Camp – The Homosexual”, which was, earlier than Sontag’s famous essay, an “unmistakable” bond to camp’s discourse (6).

Needless to say, some of Fred's sufferings are also intrinsically connected to Laurence's coming out and transition. As the film's subtext implies, the failures of the relationship happened precisely because Laurence decided to be who she really is. The impossibility of their love has nothing to do with the existence of a transgender experience, rather, it has to do with the assumed inexistence of a bisexual desire.

In *Laurence Anyways*, although Dolan does not avoid the negative consequences to his film, on and offscreen, he deepens the political aspect of his oeuvre by examining what heteronormativity means to his characters and by presenting alternative femininities that are hardly given visibility, given how indisputably controversial these themes still are. His following film (and next chapter) gives further thought to the matter, though the focus shifts now to masculinities and sexual invisibilities, the other side of the same coin.

## Confusing the Spectator: Blurred Boundaries and (In)visible Ambiguities in *Tom at the Farm*

*Tom at the Farm* is an important, transitional film in Dolan's career. It stands out from his first three films, which had a clearer and more noticeable approach to LGBTQ+ topics, moving into a more mature phase with a bigger production targeted to more mainstream audiences. As inappropriate as it is to talk about a turning point in the career of a young filmmaker, *Tom at the Farm* brings notable new elements to Dolan's highly stylised mise-en-scène. The first of his films to not be written by himself, it is based on a play by Michel Marc Bouchard, who also co-wrote the film's screenplay. Also, for the first time, Dolan eclipses female perspectives to enter a male-dominated world, investigating the masculinities of both main characters: Tom (played by Dolan himself) and Francis (Pierre-Yves Cardinal).<sup>24</sup> Compared with his previous films, *Tom at the Farm* indicates a shift in directorial methodology and themes – with attention to it also being his first excursion into genre cinema.

This chapter will present ideas on bromance and bisexuality (in)visibility through the analysis of *Tom at the Farm*.<sup>25</sup> The purpose of the study is to comprehend how the politics of sexual identity and male bonding boundaries work in a cinema practice that – in the first instance – does not define itself by its sexuality. In the first part, *Tom at the Farm* is juxtaposed to two film genres from which it borrows characteristics: the buddy films from the 1970s and the bromance, originated in mid-2000s. Bromance, according to Michael DeAngelis, is the intimacy bonding between two (supposedly) straight males without particularly recognising, developing or expressing it through sex (1). The connection between the two main characters of *Tom at the Farm*, however, is between a purportedly straight male and a non-straight

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<sup>24</sup> Eventually, these elements return once again in Dolan's *It's Only the End of the World* [*Juste la fin du monde*, 2016].

<sup>25</sup> Bromance is a term born and raised within the United States' context of Hollywood cinema. Nevertheless, regardless of geographic or cultural limitations, the influence of U.S. cinema in western countries is undeniable and therefore it is fair to analyse such a concept in a broader context.

male.<sup>26</sup> Through small variations in regards to buddy films and bromances' commonalities, Dolan achieves something quite distinctive from what is expected of the genre(s).

In the second section, the film is analysed through a bisexual reading. This aims to give insight into issues of (mis)representation and (in)visibility – themes that encompass this thesis in a broad manner. Bisexuality's simultaneous visibility and invisibility, according to Maria San Filippo, is “due to the slippage between its representational pervasiveness and the alternating measures of tacit acceptance, disidentification, or disavowal that render bisexuality discursively un(der)spoken” (4). In other words, while *Laurence Anyways* attested that Dolan has understood the impact of deliberate camp, with *Tom at the Farm* he moves away from the gay-straight binary dynamics. To revisit the characters of Tom and Francis and their interaction allows for a deeper understanding of the relation between representation and identity, as well as the role of spectatorship and the film industry, in the genre in which ambiguity is used as a strategy to satisfy crossover audiences.

### Reclaiming the Homo-

At first sight, *Tom at the Farm's* premise is very basic: a young man (Tom) travels countryside to the home of his late boyfriend (Guillaume, played by an uncredited and then-unknown Caleb Landry Jones), in order to join the mother (Agathe, played on film and stage by actor Lise Roy) and older brother (Francis) to a ceremony in the memory of the dead, only to find out that the mother neither knew about the relationship between the two men nor her son's orientation. Tom is surprised by this fact and promptly wants to tell the truth to his mother-in-law; however, Francis prevents this by threatening Tom not to say anything *queer*. At odds with their hostile introduction, over the course of just a few days, Tom and Francis

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<sup>26</sup> There is now a new label for the sort of friendship between a straight and a non-straight male: “bromosexual” (Farber). This word will not be referred here for a number of reasons, including the fact that the relationship between Tom and Francis is definitely more intricate than a friendship (as it will be elucidated ahead) and also because of the problematic use of terms as they have nothing to do with one's sexuality.

*bond*, developing a rather complex relationship that could be perceived as male homosociality – generally drawn here from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s idea of a desire men get to connect but not in a sexual manner. Sedgwick outlines the homosocial desire as a form of male relationship that through women, men express their intense (albeit non-sexual) bonds with the constant interchanging of affection, homophobia and competition to one another (1). These patterns align with Tom and Francis’ relationship and are manifested by means of rough interactions, mostly with physical and psychological violence – in particular through Francis’ homophobia. Despite his homophobic behaviour, Francis does signalise pleasure in the company (and harassment) of Tom. Eventually, this leads to the question of whether the bonding between the two crosses from the homosocial into the homosexual.

Also, *Tom at the Farm*’s text shares some of the characteristics associated with a genre predominant in Hollywood of the early 1970s: the buddy film. As defined by Robin Wood, the typical buddy film contains six recurring elements: a) a “journey”, in which the main character(s) arrive and depart; b) an “explicitly homosexual character”; c) the “marginalisation” of female characters; d) “absence of a home” to which the male characters can return and/or feel safe; e) a “male love story” with *love* in this case meaning emotional discharge; and finally f) the “death” of one of the main male characters – death being the impediment necessary for the relationship (between the two main male characters) never to be “consummated” (203-4). With exception to the last trait, all buddy film elements are present in *Tom at the Farm*.<sup>27</sup>

The film starts with Tom’s trip to the title-mentioned farm and it ends with Tom leaving for Montreal during the night, while “Going to a Town” plays non-diegetically as the credits roll up. Without explicitly referring to any particular place, the song serves as a commentary to Tom’s destiny (or destination). Also, even though neither self-proclaimed nor unequivocally demonstrated by any romantic

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<sup>27</sup> Curiously in Bouchard’s play, death actually occurs as Tom ends up killing Francis. Dolan opted for subtracting the event.

or sexual attraction throughout the film's 102-minute run, Tom is a queer character. From the way he dresses, and dyes his hair to him being in a place he has no familiarity to. His portrayal, however, is not like the "blatantly, stereotypically homophobic representations of such characters in buddy films" (DeAngelis 8).

While the foundation of the plot, as described above, implies that the mother has a significant role in the development of the story, the film's screen time and text chiefly focus on the two male characters. The central female character, Agathe, and her important struggles, such as the grief for a beloved one, depression and dementia are only explored in relation to the male characters, and even so, in a belittling style (as Francis complains: "Can't leave her alone... She's five years from a full-on basket case"). DeAngelis notes that in buddy films, the narrative concentrates almost solely on the relationship between men, leaving women to be seen as relief to males' sexual tension, which is suggested by critics as a possible "backlash against feminism" (8). Arguably, the female voices in *Tom at the Farm* and in other films by Dolan – as has been made clear in the previous chapter – are not as empowering and independent as one would expect them to be.

The use of the domestic space in *Tom at the Farm* is directly related to the above. One can argue that the farm is the home in the film. While understandable, that viewpoint does not take into account who *feels* at home there. Tom clearly senses alienation throughout his whole stay, and only seems to relax once he is returning to an urban environment at the credits of the film. Francis, despite being one of its residents, also no longer accepts the farm as his home. He is literally stuck taking care of the farm and his mother, claiming "I could leave, but I can't" while tangoing with Tom.<sup>28</sup>

While *Tom at the Farm* undoubtedly presents similarities to the buddy film, there is little reason for a Canadian arthouse director to return to the genre in 2013, especially because, as pointed out by

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<sup>28</sup> For many, the tango scene represents one of the most recognisable moments in which there is a *male love story*. However, as it is argued later in the chapter, its presence and purpose should be understood in a different way.

Wood, buddy films were Hollywood's response to "the crisis in ideological confidence generated by Vietnam and subsequently intensified by Watergate" (204). Additionally, and more significantly, the buddy elements in *Tom at the Farm* are not as defined as the ones found in classic examples like *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) or *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (1974). Even though these films were produced in a climate of revolution and counter-culture, they are not nearly as progressive in terms of (homo-)sexuality as Dolan's alternative filmmaking back in 2013. Consequently, to take into account society's altering views on marginalised sexualities, it makes sense to also see the film in relation to the more current rise of *bromantic* films in North American cinema from the mid-2000s onwards.

Bromance embodies many of the characteristics established in the buddy film, and it goes beyond those, appropriating "cultural codes connected to homosexual bonding" in order to explore "the possibilities of homosocial bonding" (Becker 236). As buddy films reacted to a particular ideological crisis, bromantic films can be considered a direct reaction to the increased visibility of post-millennial homosexuality in Western society, with more tolerance to gay marriage and (possibly) less stigmatisation of gay behaviours. DeAngelis argues that the greater acceptance of non-heteronormative expressions, together with notions of same-sex intimacy that go beyond the sexual interaction, allow for homosexual cultural codes to be incorporated in bromance (9). This general open-mindedness, however, is neither specifically focused on non-straight communities, nor specifically favourable, as the bromantic cinema's target audience still is the predominantly heterosexual filmgoer. Moreover, the appropriation is also racially charged. As Jane Ward argues: "Straight white men ... can draw on the resources of white privilege ... to circumvent homophobic stigma and assign heterosexual meaning to homosexual activity" (21).<sup>29</sup> *Tom at the Farm*, in this respect, can be seen as poignant variation of bromance by turning one character's homophobia into activities which forward homosexual meaning.

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<sup>29</sup> This is akin to the suggestions made in chapter 1, relating camp and white privilege.

While, contrary to buddy films, women and homes have a more prominent place in bromance, they are often represented in stereotypical, misogynistic ways. In *Tom at the Farm*, Agathe and Sara (Evelyne Brochu) – who is invited to the farm by Tom to act as his lover’s girlfriend – are indeed figures that are warm and carefree, yet also “controlling and annoying” and always managed or overlooked by the male characters (DeAngelis 12). Neither of the two women are more than agents to advance the bonding between the two men. Both of them are subjected to manipulation and/or oppression and never really accomplish the disclosure one would expect from their characters.

Bromantic films, such as comedies directed and produced by Judd Apatow, and various of TV series which feature male duos, not only focus on the bonding between (allegedly) heterosexual white men but are also determined to figure out the underlying urgencies to establish those types of ties. In *Tom at the Farm*, this urgency to bond with someone of the same-sex is clearly present in Francis’ persona. He is a troubled, secretive man, who finds perfect opportunity to understand more about himself as Tom arrives at the farm – an arrival he had anticipated (“I thought you’d be stopping by... I fucking knew it”). He chooses, intriguingly, to make use of homophobia and emotional blackmail as the main tools to achieve this self-assessment. This may signal to the widespread “association of repressed sexuality with violence” (Straayer 116). However, as Ward indicates, “... for straight men, violence is a key element that imbues homosexuality with heterosexual meaning” (43). The developing bond between Tom and Francis is violent from the very first encounter, when Francis wakes Tom up in the middle of the night, shaking him down in order to keep his sexuality secret to Agathe. And throughout the film, Francis expresses great physical, mental and verbal aggression not only to Tom but to everyone who is around him, characterising an almost impeccable example of *angry white male*.<sup>30</sup> This violence, as stated by David

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<sup>30</sup> Dolan returns to the angry white male more deeply with Vincent Cassel’s character in *It’s Only the End of the World*.



Greven, is the only manner eroticism between men can be imagined (84, 91).<sup>31</sup> More expressly, his homophobia and misogyny is also the ultimate source of validation for his white masculinity – and consequently, his patriarchal power – towards Tom, his mother, his brother's so-called girlfriend, society and, above all, himself.

One may argue the film does not fall into the bromantic genre, because one part of the male pairing is actually a gay man. Notably, as Dolan's portrayal of Tom is not particularly *effeminate*, it facilitates the bonding between a straight man and one that could be considered a *straight-passing* man. Ron Becker claims that television's bromances, for instance, are most of the time between two heterosexual men "because the value and clarity of the gay analogy would weaken if one of [them] were actually gay" (251). Even so, he does not deny the possibility of a bromance between a gay and a straight man, as long as the gay man "really act[s] like a straight dude" (252). Although *Tom at the Farm* does not completely nullify the difference between homosocial and homosexual, it still bridges the gap (a gap that a homosocial discourse wishes to praise). The film might be camouflaged, out of strategic reasons, but in fact, it could be too comprehended as an intriguing critical pastiche of an Apatow bromance.

Additionally, in *Tom at the Farm*, Dolan plays with the limits and notions of homosexuality, homosocial bonding, homophobia and homoeroticism, in order to confuse the more attentive spectator – the latter two being used more as a smokescreen than the former two. For example, the fact that Francis is a strong, handsome man who likes tango and apparently *hates* gays is not immediately important to the development of the film. These are elements included partly to please the audience not interested in the political aspects of the film or perhaps lured into watching *Tom at the Farm* because of a previous experience with other Dolan's films (which while dealing with camp elements also cater for a

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<sup>31</sup> The idea has also been brought up by Sedgwick in her seminal book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985).

non-straight audience), partly to intrigue the audience, with the thriller and its Hitchcockian elements of classic cinema. Either way, to define the film by these particularities, would be to miss its point.

On the other hand, that the line (and its possible crossing) from homosocial to homosexual is much more central to the plot can be noticed by the framing of the three key scenes of *Tom at the Farm*: the aftermath of cornfield chase, the drunk choking, and Francis' desperation with Tom's departure. In these scenes, the aspect ratio of the film changes from the usual 1.85:1 to 2.35:1, tightening both characters to one another. This sudden change reveals the queer subtext in *Tom at the Farm*, perhaps even in a too obvious manner.

First, in the confrontation in the cornfields, while Tom struggles to free himself from Francis' strangling arms, Francis spits in his mouth and tells Tom: "Don't tell me what my game is". The scene uncomfortably changes tone from extremely violent to somewhat erotic. The combination of action and words strongly denotes the atmosphere's change, aside from the use of letterboxing. The fight is in retaliation for comments Tom has made beforehand, which could be perceived as an affront to Francis' masculinity. Here, "heteronormative violence" is intensified not only for self-satisfaction but also to reclaim heterosexuality (Ward 44).

The second physical interaction and arguably the most complex one in the film adds the element of alcohol to the equation, and could be observed as another case of "accidental homosexuality" (111) or, again, another smokescreen to hide the actual situation.<sup>32</sup> After some drinks, Tom comments that Francis smells bad because of his perfume. Francis then strangles Tom, but in a different way than the first time in the cornfield, because now he proclaims Tom as the boss, giving to him power to decide when to stop the little game. However, when Francis is compared to his late brother, he is the one to interrupt their interaction and return to his car. The scene draws on elements of gay subcultures of dominance

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<sup>32</sup> Ward also notes that accidental homosexuality is a current recurring factor in bromantic films, and it serves well when justifying homosexual behaviours (111).

and submission, but those are not the first references of the sort in the film. Earlier depictions of leather culture, sado-masochism, bathroom encounters, and sexual, consensual violence such as spitting already show how queer elements might and ought to be present in a film, even if for mainstream audiences. Perhaps, these components serve as a provocation and even a reaction to the bromantic genre and its appropriations, and could be interpreted as a form of reclaiming the queer code that has been assimilated into homosocial, comedic films for traditional families.

Finally, the third and last letterboxed scene, running in the concluding part of the film, displays Tom hiding while he tries to escape the farm, and Francis – visibly disturbed – trying to lure him back. Francis degrades himself, crying that he actually needs Tom (“I fucking need you here!”) and he is genuinely trying to be a better person. The emotional discharge is unexpected from a character who has been portrayed the entire time as the epitome of masculinity and detachment, and who cannot deal with his feelings, particularly when interacting with women. Sally Robinson attributes that to the dominant sense of “a particular construction of male heterosexuality and the male body”, wherein a man is “emotionally blocked”, and the blocking of the “uncontrollable sexual energies” might lead “either to psychological and physical damage or to violent explosions” (135). This could clarify why the character of Francis is embedded in frustration and anger – most likely for his sexual repression. In the end, by *declaring* himself to Tom, he also frees himself from the retained violence and internalised homophobia that has followed him for years. But to no avail, Tom steals his truck and drives away from him and his farm.

Dolan seems to be conscious of the politics behind cinema and sexuality, especially in *Tom at the Farm*, as the film borrows from both the buddy discourse and the bromantic one, without fully falling into either category. There is a hybridisation of both strands, which causes a disruption in the understanding and expectations of the film on the part of the audience. Dolan does not seem to be

particularly interested in shedding light on homophobic perspectives or eroticising violence, as some have been led to believe when the film was released (Buder; Rooney; Holden). Rather than a pseudo-Stockholm syndrome thriller, in *Tom at the Farm*, the patchwork of elements of both buddy films and bromance could be comprehended as a highly stylised pastiche that creates possibilities of reclaiming homosexual codes.<sup>33</sup>

### *Tom at the Farm* and the Problem with Bi

The arrival of the character Sara – Guillaume’s bogus girlfriend – in the third act of *Tom at the Farm* reveals a side of Francis not seen up to this point: the way the character interrelates with a woman other than his mother. It does not take long for Francis’ patronising and predatory behaviour towards a young woman to show. Also, the occasion serves to introduce Francis’ sexual interest in women (although he has been trying to ascertain it prior). Sara’s presence helps Tom with his mother-in-law issues but complicates the relationship between him and Francis. Up to this point, the film keeps a fairly consistent path between homosocial and homosexual, as described in the previous section. Still, this path assumes and strengthens the standard binary systemisation of sexuality, conforming to either heterosexuality or homosexuality. The result, San Filippo argues in the prologue to her book *The B Word: Bisexuality in Contemporary Film and Television*, is “[m]onosexuality, signaling desire enacted with partners of only one gender” thereby “keeping bisexuality (in)visible” (10).

In two particular moments of the film, the simple mention of a woman works as a channel to further the bonding between Tom and Francis. First, when Agathe wonders why Sara wasn’t present at the memorial service of her son, Tom disguises his own eulogistic words as Sara’s. During this, Francis

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<sup>33</sup> Pastiche, as Fredric Jameson sees it, is a result of postmodern codes preventing sufficient critical distance from becoming a parody (Duvall 375). In Jameson’s own words, “[p]astiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style ... But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives” (17). While not a parody, *Tom at the Farm* arguably is motivated to accomplish something critical.

looks at him in a rather candid manner, confusing the spectator. Is this gaze one of appreciation for the protection of his mother's feelings, or one that indicates tenderness and identification with Tom's words? The make-believe depends on the existence of the absent girlfriend to function correctly, creating a triangle man-woman-man.

Another notable scene, in which the presence of a woman's absence mediates the homosocial tendencies between Tom and Francis, is the tango dance sequence. First, Francis shows Tom a silky piece of clothing and vaguely talks about an anonymous girl – this evolve towards the perfect excuse for them to dance. And secondly, while dancing, Francis voices what a nuisance it is to take care of his mother. Here, women serve as justification for the men to bond.

Based on Sedgwick's concepts, a homosocial triangle happens when the desire of two males for the same female turns out to be a deeper desire for one another, yet unbeknownst to both of them (Forster 212). But, as observed by Todd W. Reeser, "these kind[s] of triangles do not always function in a neat or stable way and rarely do the examples simply confirm the model" (64). In *Tom at the Farm*, the model is certainly not strictly applied, just like it has distorted and reclaimed elements of bromance and buddy films. But Sedgwick's model and commentaries can still offer insight here. Take for instance, the brothers Francis and Guillaume and the way they disturb traditional concepts of (mono)sexuality, masculinity and sociability. So perhaps there is more to the triangle than homosocial and homosexual desire alone, and the question could be asked if it represents something other than hetero and (repressed) homosexuality. While Sedgwick's homosocial triangle incidentally brings a woman to its discourse, it does not give her a role other than being a mediator to male monosexual desires. Allowing a different approach to the women's presence and role, as Dolan does in *Tom at the Farm*, not only

disturbs Sedgwick's theory but also notions of monosexuality, making space for a bisexual reading of the film, which complicates the rupture between homosocial and homosexual.<sup>34</sup>

Marcy Jane Knopf proposes to read bisexually not through the classic scrutiny of "the sexual orientation of characters ... based upon the desires or relationships at the end of a text", but instead by "looking at the fluctuations and variations of desire throughout the novel [or film]" (157). With that in mind, in most occasions when Francis interacts with someone, he mentions a person of the opposite sex of whom he is speaking to. This triangular constant in Francis' interactions can be seen as an example of "time-saving structures that overcome the problem of temporality by allowing for a character's simultaneous exploration of same-sex and opposite-sex desire". Moreover, throughout *Tom at the Farm* it is never explicitly questioned where Francis falls on the sexual spectrum. This allows the film to be a stronger representation of (unclaimed) bisexuality, without the common "stereotypical notions", such as "indecisiveness" and that it is "a phase to be outgrown" (San Filippo 37).<sup>35</sup>

Although Dolan avoids sexuality as theme and spectacle of his films, he does plant curious particularities in details. For instance, the only time Guillaume's face is seen is through a photograph Francis keeps in his wallet "like a trophy", according to Tom. But it is not an ordinary image, it displays a passionate kiss between Guillaume and Sara, and could be easily interpreted as a take on sustaining heteronormativity. After all, Francis asked for the picture in exchange for not telling Agathe about her son's sexuality. On the other hand, it also shows a peculiar attentiveness to the male/female binary aspect of the photograph.

Another deceptively meaningless detail is Francis' heterochromia. In a Hitchcockian shower scene, director of photography André Turpin's extreme close-up assuredly shows the distinct eyes of the character, reinforcing his otherness as well as a potential sexual ambivalence. Francis' brown and blue

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<sup>34</sup> Not that a film needs direct suggestions in order to be read as bisexual.

<sup>35</sup> But not without flaws, as will be seen ahead.

eyes are the disconcerting element in the scene, but the reason for them to be there is never clarified, bewildering the spectator since actor Pierre-Yves Cardinal is naturally brown-eyed. Most explicitly, perhaps, Sara hints on Guillaume's non-monosexuality, revealing to Tom that not only she but "everyone fucked him". Even so, in the film the term *bisexual* is never pronounced, neither is any sexual identity whatsoever.<sup>36</sup>

All these suggestions to the characters' sexuality make one wonder why they must be kept in the field of suggestion, and not made explicit, openly-stated in *Tom at the Farm*. The answer to this may lie in the role of the audience and their own sexual identity, as enlightened by Wood:

Bisexuality represents the most obvious and direct affront to the principle of monogamy and its supportive romantic myth of "the one right person"; the homosexual impulse in both men and women represents the most obvious threat to the norm of sexuality as reproductive and restricted by the ideal of family. (65)

Therefore, homosexuality and bisexuality respond rather differently to heteronormativity. Moreover, bisexuality's affront to monogamy does not only threaten heterosexuality, but also homonormative homosexuality. Or, "[t]he dearth – and death – of confirmable bisexual characters has to do both with compulsory monosexuality and with the correlated issue of bisexual *representability*" (San Filippo 19). To put it differently, in a society in which one is expected to either be gay or straight, being something else renders one automatic invisibility. Being anything other than monosexual troubles normativity and its ideologies – which also entails the tactics behind the production, distribution and marketing of a film. San Filippo states that:

The presence of bisexuality is not limited to bisexual characters and plot lines involving bisexual relationships; bisexuality is also a crucial component in the strategies and processes involved in

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<sup>36</sup> Yet, during the same dialogue between Sara and Tom, she does use the term *boyfriend*, when referring to Guillaume.

selling and experiencing screen media. Yet this key presence goes almost entirely unacknowledged and undiscussed. Media scholars and critics occasionally appear to notice it, but they call it by other names: gay, lesbian, homoerotic, homosocial, queer . . . To a surprising extent, bisexuality remains the orientation that dares not speak its name. (4)

In Dolan's path from *hipster* and alternative arthouse films to more mainstream Hollywood productions, not only the celebrity status of the actors and the spoken language (may) change, but also, and most importantly, the audience of his films. If with *I Killed My Mother* and *Heartbeats* there was a tendency to prioritise millennial and LGBTQ+ audiences, *Tom at the Farm* provokes a shift towards a less specific viewership, conceivably, a greater inclusion of straight spectators. As reminded well by Doty, once "heterocentrism" takes over a mainstream text, any "queer erotics" are reduced to subtext and become invisible to most people (*Flaming Classics* 132). By accommodating heterosexual viewers, heterocentrism does not engulf *Tom at the Farm*, but it does oblige its nuances on sexuality and identity. This proves to be dangerous especially when considering the politics behind heteronormativity and queer assimilation. Even to this day, these politics remain crucial to fulfil one's desire to enter the universe of films in Hollywood, a *heterocentric* space per se.<sup>37</sup> And because bisexuality is seen as a menace to *traditional* families, maintaining its (in)visibility or illegitimacy in mainstream cinema can be seen as justified.

Although this may be true, an alternative traditionally applied to confront these normative audiences while also conforming to them is ambiguity. San Filippo identifies "a mode of queer commodification, that mobilizes bisexuality to appeal to a queer audience without threatening straight spectators" (22). In Dolan's case, the adoption of non-queer new audiences may have been an attempt

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<sup>37</sup> In fact, the film took virtually two years from its date of release (2013) to its arrival in the U.S. cinemas (2015).



to benefit the numbers in the box office as intentional ambiguity plays an important role in bringing different viewers together.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, shaping the narrative construction and directing the (in)visible sexuality of its characters, a film guarantees its acceptability to heterosexual mass audiences “while also refraining from alienating viewers who do not identify as heterosexual” (DeAngelis 13).<sup>39</sup>

By puzzling the limits and limitations of desires, gender and sexuality, a film is able to draw more attention to itself without ever having to wave the flag or represent more radical, socially deviant queer readings. Doty believes “it makes sense that mainstream films produced within a capitalist system keep the range of erotic responses available for audiences as open as possible” (*Flaming Classics* 132). Despite that, it is rather imperative to reflect on the choices characteristically made by the industry and filmmakers, since crossover viewership may aid a production’s success, but does not produce social change with the same pace.

While the confusion of genres, boundaries and masculinities benefits *Tom at the Farm*, as far as homosexuality is concerned, it essentially works as a response to and reclaiming of the appropriation of gay codes by mainstream white Hollywood. At the same time, it is worrying to realise that a young filmmaker as Dolan might accept the ways “Hollywood and other prominent mainstream cultural institutions process homosocial intimacy in a way that retains the phenomenon’s potential for widespread marketability” (DeAngelis 13) over more affirmative depictions of bisexuality. Especially when “art cinema has proven [to be] the richest site for bisexual representability, primarily because of that cinematic form’s propensity for candidly addressing alternative sexualities and eroticism more generally (San Filippo 42). As important as *Tom at the Farm* is as a transitional milepost in Dolan’s career, defying and challenging both the film’s form and content and the audience, it does not necessarily succeed in addressing the

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<sup>38</sup> While it is unknown how successful *Tom at the Farm* was in this endeavour, Dolan’s next film *Mommy*, examined in the next chapter, might be a more irrefutable example.

<sup>39</sup> DeAngelis refers to how bromantic films function, but as already analysed in the first section of the chapter, it is still insightful here.

political consciousness his previous film *Laurence Anyways* endeavoured to. Rather, it acts as a preparatory exercise to the potentiality unleashed by *Mommy* to deepen queer discourses while being the most successful film of the director's career. How pivotal it is for the film to financially and critically triumph rather than to confront norms and question roles, is a question yet to be answered.

## Queering Straightness: Expectations and Spectatorship in *Mommy*

With *Mommy*, Dolan takes a step further, for the first time portraying a suburban mother-and-son story with different problems than the ones found in his previous films. This broad perspective also resulted in his most successful production to date, acclaimed by both audience and critics. With *Mommy*, he has earned the Jury Prize at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival and Best Foreign Film at the 40th César Awards, amongst other accolades.

Dolan has endeavoured through an autobiography with his first feature film, a campy rom-com with the second, a surreal drama by the third, a thriller with the fourth and a new tragicomic drama by the fifth. Instead of following the path of more traditional directors, Dolan risks plenty by trying something different every time he releases a new work, be it text-wise: with artisanal characters, mothers and no fathers; or be it form-wise: with innovative approaches to subjects, videoclip-like sequences, heavily stylised slow-motion and playful aspect ratio or soundtrack.

Although the film does not explicitly address its characters' sexuality and gender, this chapter argues that through its filmic components and directorial approaches, it heightens the queerness embedded in their lives. This is not say that only the form of the film makes it a queer film, but more complexly, that formal and textual elements in relation to one another define the disparity and defiance of queer being (Getsy 254).

Whereas *Mommy* signifies a break from Dolan's featuring of LGBTQ+ characters, it continues his experimentation in form, what could be seen as the most consistent element in his body of work. The first part of the chapter therefore discusses how aesthetic choices for plot, language use and soundtrack connect and ponder with the expectations of the public and their role as spectators. The second part draws parallels between the film and the New Queer Cinema movement from the early 1990s, detecting similarities and reverberations to queer discourses, especially concerning the political and social

dimension of the film's text. Moreover, the chapter debates the absence of a conventional happy ending, and whether *Mommy* can be seen as an example of a successful failure.

### Deviating the Medium with *Mommy*

The turbulent drama between single mother Diane "Die" Després (Anne Dorval) and mentally-ill son Steve Després (Antoine-Olivier Pilon) has been coined as being Dolan's most mature work (Kane; Taylor; D'Alto). Some choices, such as the large and odd selection of pop songs not seen in any of his earlier films, disjoint from his previous style and indicate a more commercial approach to not only the film's text but also its production. The arrival of three cisgender characters to whom little is given regarding their sexuality breaks with the constant presence of LGBTQ+ main characters as an important thread in his work.<sup>40</sup> In fact, by presenting a narrative free of the usual sexuality and gender issues, *Mommy* is turned into a one-of-a-kind product in his oeuvre. It provoked various responses in the audiences. Some focused on the lack of parental skills in the relationship between Die-Steve or how it borders incest. Through observation and discussion of the most critical elements in *Mommy*, it is possible to anticipate a certain spectatorial response, especially from a spectator familiar with Dolan's previous films.

From all the elements presented in *Mommy*, the most perceptible one might be the use of the 1:1 aspect ratio, shot by *Tom at the Farm's* Turpin. The framing of the practical space of an image in film has always been of extreme importance in cinema, leading discussions of all sorts, from the ratio modifications provoked by the addition of the optical soundtrack in the 1930s to the regained importance in the 1990s with the introduction of home cinemas and enhancement of the cinematic experience by the

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<sup>40</sup> Naturally, Die has had a son, Steve transpires teenage sexual drive, and Kyla is married with children, but the film never tackles those characteristics as it is usually central of more mainstream films. More importantly, as already delved in chapter 2 (on *Tom at the Farm*), they should not be seen as dogmatic representations of human sexuality.

adoption of widescreen formats: more than ever, it became important for a film to be presented the way intended by its creators. Regarding Dolan's works, scholar Sebastian Malmquist believes that these frame adjustments are tools used to connect image with the character's world perceptions (20), which increases the importance of consistency between narrative and style.

Although Dolan had already played with the ratio of his films before, those early efforts only laid the foundations for what would later be *Mommy*'s most striking feature. Notably, the already discussed *Tom at the Farm* played with the straightening of the screen in crucial moments, with *Laurence Anyways*, the now sporadic 4:3 aspect (also known as Academy ratio) was utilised as though to create a more portraiture-like composition. *Mommy* arrives with a completely different approach to the framing, obliging "the viewer ... to overcome the initial shock of the very limited field of vision – which, in effect, means adapting to another way of seeing" (Malmquist 21). The film stays in this squared, suffocating environment until a little more than one hour, when the screen is expanded by Steve, in a videoclip-like sequence. This sudden freedom comes as a result of the friendship between mother and son and their neighbour Kyla (Clément), who enters their lives and affects them for the better. For the first hour, all there was to the characters was anger, despair, contempt with a few minutes of mutual appreciation. And then things seem to be finally getting better, resulting in a long-term happiness (or normalisation) that is translated as and with the broadening of the filmic frame. Subsequently, the viewers starts to re-adapt their eyes to the widened image, but not for long, because shortly the screen tightens back to the square – at the precise moment when Die receives an indictment letter from the family of a teenager who had his face disfigured due to Steve's criminal acts.<sup>41</sup> The donation of only a few minutes of bliss might provoke even a bigger frustration to the viewer once the screen returns to the 1:1 initial size. If the spectator felt outraged by this directorial choice, the film temporarily succeeds in awarding to the public

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<sup>41</sup> *Mommy* features a second ratio widening, which will be commented at the chapter's following section.

the first-hand experience of having dreams shattered by an unexpected disappointment, just like it happened to Die. Similar to *Tom at the Farm*, the aspect ratio in *Mommy* is intrinsically connected to the film's plot and any third-part alteration of the aspect ratio would designate serious issues of authorship and film form. For instance, back in 2016, Dolan found himself in a quarrel with distribution and production company Netflix, when *Mommy*'s streaming had been displayed with the incorrect aspect ratio (Jagernauth). Rightfully so, Netflix apologised and rectified any modifications to the film.

Part of the successful delivery of the tightening scene may also be attributed to the song choice, not only of the scene in question but the of the film throughout. The music in Dolan's films has continuously been one of the essential and most recognisable elements of his aesthetics, gaining comparisons to his predecessors, as Wong and Almodóvar and their use of music, amongst other resemblances (Dunks; Zayas; McGovern). Even though since the debut *I Killed My Mother* Dolan has flirted with pop music and culture, *Mommy* enters a new and more effective level of "music methodology", as pointed out by Moze Halperin: a so-called "'90s sentimentalism" ("Maudlin '90s Music").<sup>42</sup> *Mommy* is laden with North American mainstream anthems from the 1990s, which not only creates an anachronistic movement (since the film is set to be in a near future) but also aids the storyline, deepening emotional responses (Knecht 34) and providing hints to the meaning of crucial scenes.

To pick these '90s songs to background the experiences and emotions in *Mommy*, is also a take on the recurring themes these songs were dealing with back in that decade, rather than "the display of numbness, of an over-medicated-seeming emotional void" created and explored in the 2000s (Halperin). Needless to mention, the use of Oasis' 1995 hit single "Wonderwall" in the moment of serendipity/optimism and (first) wide-screening of the film, serves too as a producer of nostalgia, "secur[ing] a bond between consumer and product while also arousing a feeling of generational

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<sup>42</sup> Dolan affirms that by utilising almost every song in the film from a diegetic mixtape, it helps the audience to engage with "authentic, naked truth of the characters" and to "forget about a director's ideas and desires" ("Mommy Press Kit" 16).

belonging in the audience” (Shumwa 37).<sup>43</sup> Consequently, a potential spectatorial frustration caused by the return of the boxed vision at the end of “Wonderwall” can be assumed as such a tune holds numerous meanings and memories to the film and to a good number of filmgoers.<sup>44</sup>

Another critical use of the soundtrack in *Mommy* comes with two sequences featuring Steve’s relation to music and its emotional impact: the first being Steve’s singsong to Céline Dion’s “On ne change pas”, later followed by an emotive rendition of Andrea Bocelli’s “Vivo per lei” in a karaoke bar. Both songs are featured in a compilation cd (or mixtape) called *Die+Steve Mix 4ever*, made by Steve’s late father. Dion’s song comes after a turbulent day in Die and Steve’s house, culminating in an anger outburst that wounds Steve and introduces mother and son to Kyla. After taking care of Steve’s leg, Die offers Kyla a thank-you dinner, which is unexpectedly followed by her son’s performance in the kitchen. Wearing black singlet, eye make-up and nail polish, he sings and dances flirtatiously to both his mother and the newly acquainted neighbour. Jason R. D’Aoust understands this sequence as an example of the “denaturalization of normative gender identities” that happens through vocal identification instead of the more classic Butlerian visual identification approach (11).<sup>45</sup> By knowing the song and singing it various times in the past and emulating Dion’s moves while doing it, Steve has created a vocal bond similar to the effect of a drag queen’s, and therefore, as he sings to the song over its playback, his natural voice challenges vocal prejudices (or the gender normativity of bodies and their voices) and disturbs the notions of vocal naturalness. For D’Aoust, vocal identifications mediated by “voice-objects of media” – meaning here the use of a CD player – to bring Dion’s voice to life – “integrate and remind us that our vocal identities are always already denaturalised” and for this reason, these vocal identification processes

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<sup>43</sup> Although David R. Shumwa refers to rock soundtracks on a genre he calls “nostalgia films” (36), it is easily acceptable to assume the same effect in a film so ingrained in its anachronistic characteristics such as *Mommy*.

<sup>44</sup> “Wonderwall” is currently the most streamed 90s single on streaming service Spotify and the most streamed song released before the year 2000, with more than 515 million plays as of August 2018. It is also featured in Rolling Stone’s and VH1’s lists of Greatest Songs of the ‘90s.

<sup>45</sup> D’Aoust refers here to Butler’s classic example of a drag queen lip-synching to Aretha Franklin’s “(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman”, found in Butler’s “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” (27-28).

defy “the prejudiced notion that natural voices are matched to natural bodies” (10) and “are queer processes at heart” (Jarman-Ivens 37).

Similarly, when Die finds out about the lawsuit against her son, her only chance to get a lawyer and avoid the reparation costs is by luring her neighbour Paul (Patrick Huard) into helping her. Steve is also inappropriately invited to the date, given his dislike for both the mother’s approach to the matter and the man who she is dating with ulterior reason. While at the karaoke bar, he decides to sing another of the songs from his father’s mixtape as to remind Die of what is actually important, or in D’Aoust’s words, an “attempt to liberate Steve’s voice” (12). Bocelli’s song’s general association to affection and camp does not land well on the bar’s normative ambience, with its high levels of toxic and intoxicated masculinities. Malmquist perceives this sequence as one of Dolan’s uses of music “to highlight the disapproving looks that the normative society casts upon the non-normative” (48). As a result of the friction created between Steve’s vulnerable position and the bar’s heteronormative crowd, Steve experiences a homophobic abuse, even though he does not identify himself within the community. Additionally, being himself an illustration of how toxic the bar’s atmosphere is, Paul displays patriarchal abuse by slapping Steve when this one voices how Paul has been objectifying his mother. In the karaoke bar’s zone, the drunk men do not intend to only control “their female companions, but also any male who does not conform to their standards of behavior” (D’Aoust 12).

Although not being (sexually) queer, it can be argued that Steve’s queerness is heightened both through the vulnerability provoked by Bocelli’s song and by singing it in the presence of heteronormative men who get angered by anything that escapes their concept of *normal*. Equally important, this pivotal sequence of events “forces the spectator ... to look at heteronormative behavior through the eyes of someone outside of normativity, ... [compelling them] to feel the humiliation and provocation experienced by Steve” (Malmquist 48). Namely, a straight spectator might, for a few seconds, experience



the very same experiences a queer person is prone to have known for their entire life. Whereas such a sequence, for a queer spectator, likely translates into empathy for having undergone a similar situation in the past. To some extent, that is a variation of what has always been the case in mainstream cinema, “with ... heterosexual narratives ... frequently serv[ing] as effective sources of gay male spectatorial pleasure” (Hart 14). Ultimately, the film –particularly in the bar sequence – succeeds in providing *any* member of the audience with Steve’s point of view and first-hand experience of the heteronormative world.

This “strange familiarity” (D’Aoust 10) also becomes contextualised through the language chosen for the film with its Anglicism, impoverished diction, and endless profanity. To some critics, particularly in Québec, this is excessively deprived and offensive (Gagnon; Warren; Sed). Taking interest in the latter, D’Aoust argues it is the “sonorous coarseness” of the local-flavoured swearing that results in an expression of emotions (and sexualities) which makes some spectators uneasy (5). Other scholars point out as well that vulgarity and crudeness may signal “the productive possibilities of thinking with the discarded and the deviant”, even calling them “queer and minoritized aesthetic weapons” (Tompkins 267).

Yet, to perceive Dolan’s choice for profanities and argots with the single purpose of addressing the social and mental distress of the protagonists, fails to take into account “the film’s larger problematic of vocality” (D’Aoust 5). The queering of voices, in relation to the vocal identifications aforementioned, creates an intimate space in which the characters can express themselves, ranging from fear and anxiety to Steve’s “filial love and his quietude at being reunited with his family” (D’Aoust 6).

The language between Steve and Die is specific to them, different from how they speak to other characters and how others speak.<sup>46</sup> A call to queer formalism puts forward the notion of “a paradoxically special bond” that can be forged through a “language of isolation”, one that includes “non-gay but racially, sexually, and culturally queer subjects... who refuse[s] the comforts of heteronormativity and shared a special relationship to language as formal” (González 275). In other words, Steve and Die stylised use of language is a means to “subvert and appropriate the traditional male space of Québécois swearing” (D’Aoust 13).

Aesthetics, it is necessary to realise, are crucial “to the work of queer artists, artists of colour, and ... artists concerned with the structural conditions of social violence”. As elucidated by Amin, Musser and Pérez, “[t]hese artists are often assigned the role of testifying to the sociological conditions of their own disempowerment” and within these spectatorial expectations there is little room to anything other than the provision of information. However, aesthetic endeavours and choices are, to some of these artists, precisely the manner to cope with social injustices and violences (“Queer Form” 227-28). In other words, it is through – firstly and chiefly (over-)examined and (mis-)interpreted – formal aspects that queer bodies and bodies of colour construct the path for resistance.

With this in mind, David J. Getsy reiterates that at some points in history, aesthetics was the one device used to provide queer defiance – for its possibility to penetrate censorship, with messages of illegal desire hidden behind form (255). And to talk about formalism should not imply the triviality of content. Rather, it permits further elaborations on the intertwining of form and content, which “foster[s] such queer tactics as subversion, infiltration, refusal, or the declaration of unauthorized allegiances” that

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<sup>46</sup> Canadian journalist Lysian Gagnon identifies a range: “Kyla, quand elle surmonte son bégaiement, parle un français correct. Le voisin avocat parle un français joualissant mais courant. La directrice du centre parle « à la française », ce qui, dans le contexte, accentue sa position de supériorité” (“La langue de Mommy”).

“by means of form [question] how content is shaped, transmitted, coded, patterned, undermined, and invested” (Getsy 255).

By – at first sight – not presenting the themes onscreen that were central to his earlier films, Dolan challenges the audiences’ experience of his film. Yet, the elements discussed above and what they may mean to the spectator, reveal the sense of queerness embedded in its foundation regardless of the public’s awareness.

### Successful Failures

As noted in the introduction of this chapter, experiments in form could be considered as the unifying element in Dolan’s films. That, and a strong presence of LGBTQ+ leading characters. So, at first sight, *Mommy* stands out, but a closer analysis of Dolan’s choices to design his three central characters with features that provoke various emotions in the audiences, and why the three of them are so complex is revealing about the politics of the film more so than being storytelling details. Looking at the advent of New Queer Cinema, back in 1992, when the term and soon-to-be genre was first coined by scholar B. Ruby Rich, might hint at where is *Mommy* placed in Dolan’s oeuvre. She first and foremost characterised New Queer Cinema as

a melding of style and subject . . . favoring pastiche and appropriation, influenced by art, activism, and such new entities as music video (MTV had just started). It was an approach in search of new languages and mediums that could accommodate new materials, subjects, and modes of production. . . . [It] embodied an evolution in thinking. It reinterpreted the link between the personal and the political envisioned by feminism, restaged the defiant activism pioneered at Stonewall, and recoded aesthetics to link the independent feature movement with the avant-garde and start afresh. (xv)

New Queer Cinema was very much a product of its time, and not only brought to light the lives of marginalised groups but also gave these groups a more positive portrayal and representation in a medium that often failed them. Filmmakers such as Isaac Julien and Todd Haynes broke new ground with queer themes tangled up with experimental approaches.<sup>47</sup>

*Mommy* introduces to the audience a new sort of experience: a near-future in a fictitious Canada, where smartphones and computers are virtually inexistent and fashion seems to be facing a new anachronic moment with a throwback to what could be easily regarded as, say, the year 2006.<sup>48</sup> With its obsolete elements, almost inserting itself into the first wave of New Queer Cinema, the film is a clear portrayal of social otherness. Kylo-Patrick R. Hart describes how

in melodramas specifically, it has frequently focused on ‘deviant’ character who, because of their noteworthy forms of ‘difference’, produce within the story world fears and anxieties of ‘the other’ in relation to the self as well as to mainstream norms of patriarchal society. (132)

Here we can cast each main character in *Mommy* as an *other*, rejecting “both the heterosexual patriarchal family and the larger society within which it exists” (Hart 133).<sup>49</sup> Single mother Die is a widow and a chaos of a person, constantly trying to make ends meet. Her financial struggles worsen once her son Steve is expelled from the juvenile centre he had been held. Dealing himself with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and extremely violent behaviour, Die only finds some peace of mind when her neighbour Kyla gets closer to the family and aids both mother and son’s different needs. Kyla herself is in a dark place, having lost a child and facing such a heavy depression that it induced a stuttering

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<sup>47</sup> With the development of cheaper technologies, “[a] new generation emerging from art school seized the tools to reimagine cinema with a video eye” (Rich xvii). Video has come and gone as the predominant medium and by now newer and even cheaper technologies have taken place.

<sup>48</sup> The few electronics seen in the film remind the technology available between 2005 and 2007. The same technological choices were made when Dolan directed singer-songwriter Adele’s music video “Hello” (2015).

<sup>49</sup> Hart refers specifically to the characters in Ang Lee’s film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), yet the parallel seems appropriate.

condition which forced her to withdraw from her job as a teacher. During the film, the point of view passes from one character to the other, although it is sustained most by its hero: the mother.

Films tend to use otherness (notably when featuring queer characters, as described by Hart) to reaffirm the patriarchal norms, rather than celebrate their defiance. *Mommy* does not utilise Steve, Die and Kyla's complexity and non-normative representation in a way as "to effectively restore the patriarchal social order" in its diegetic world (Hart 133). Instead, the obliteration of the patriarchy and its repressive forces allows for the characters to achieve different and deeper grounds of inter- and intrapersonal growth. Take for instance the alternative composition of the relationship between the three protagonists in *Mommy*. They quickly bond to a companionship in which they support one another in different ways: Die is the friend Steve and Kyla never before had; Kyla is a tutor to Steve and a confidant to Die; and Steve is the lost son to Kyla and the male figure in Die's life. In their own manner and inside their own world, they have found distinctive roles to each other, yet complementary and fulfilling to all of them.

To Fulvia Massimi, these relations are a result of and a reaction to the Québécois nationalism, which was prompted in the 1960s, and is fundamentally attached to heteronormative, patriarchal, sexist discourses that exclude women and minorities.<sup>50</sup> Massimi believes that from Dolan's debut onwards, he was already presenting "alternative images of family unit" and purging "patriarchy from the national scenario" (21) as if to expose the incompetence of male figures as national representatives of Québécois identity and to propose a "reconfiguration of Québec's imaginary" (27).<sup>51</sup> Challenging the familiar dispositions (and subsequently nationhood) in *Mommy*, nonetheless, does not come to pass without struggle. Society perceives mothers Die and Kyla as both incompetent themselves: their alienation towards the social turns them into peculiar beings with unorthodox lifestyles, that reflect "in a fundamental

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<sup>50</sup> Malmquist perceives this reading as a threat to more global viewpoints (12), but this should not be the case as these power structures are found in profusion worldwide and Massimi's interpretation can only promote a richer understanding of the film.

<sup>51</sup> This reading is especially beneficial to *Laurence Anyways*, as it allegorically transforms Québec's heterocentric nation from a "rejected masculinity" into "fierce womanhood" (Massimi 23).

way ... [on] their identities, experiences and choices” (Malmquist 16). Generally speaking, to be an exemplary person, at all times successful, positive and civil is seen in Western civilisation as the pinnacle of one’s life. Becoming anything other than what is anticipated is synonymous to professional, private and public failure, neglectful and rebellious at best and at heart. Some scholars, such as Claire Colebrook, beg to differ, calling attention to the fact that “no notion has been more normative than that of becoming”. At first, it may seem as the very mechanism “that would free us ... from moralizing normativity and rigid identity politics”, rather, it ends up being reinforcement to conventional “notions of the political, the ethical, and the aesthetic” (25). As Jack Halberstam sums up:

Heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope. Other subordinate, queer, or counterhegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique. (89)

To be fair, Steve, Die and Kyla are simply trying to press ahead with their lives, but from failing to conform to rules and responsibilities, they are inferred as deviants by both diegetic society and the cinema audiences.<sup>52</sup>

E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen suggest that one thing established by queer academics is that “queer thought must be characterized by becoming”, which is translated as “the constant breaking of habits” (10). Conversely, this *becoming* is not a synonym to complying to the rules; on the contrary: it calls for rupture of the “clock-based existence of the social mainstream”, or to live “on the margins of social intelligibility”, where “one’s tempo becomes at best contrapuntal, syncopated, and at worst, erratic,

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<sup>52</sup> In essence, the characters are seen as deviants by most of the people, what differs – and actually matters – is the negative or positive implications behind this deviation.

arrested” (1). In sum, the referred becoming here is to become queer, to *not* become, to be unbecoming.<sup>53</sup> McCallum and Tuhkanen describe this as following:

...as youth are slow to be pulled into the rush to become fruitful, to embrace historicity, to smother life with history by producing offspring who in turn will stand on their shoulders monumentally, cherish them antiquarianly, or oedipally and critically seek to overthrow them — as they refuse “becoming,” these youth become queer. (6)

The struggle with normativity, the acceptance of failure and, consequently, freedom conquered by not becoming culminates — just like in *Laurence Anyways* — in the ultimate half-hour of *Mommy*. After having unsuccessfully seduced the neighbour-lawyer to assist with her son’s case, Die and Steve violently clash over their roles as mother and son, which ultimately leads to a brief reconciliation — still not strong enough to avoid Steve’s suicide attempt. Overwhelmed with despair, Die is left with no choice other than succumbing to what she was so desperately trying to avoid: handing Steve over to the government, namely, surrendering to state assimilation for failing to successfully deal with Steve’s own failure. This is her official concession to failure as a mother: Die has attempted everything within her power not to accept the governmental aid, which in the diegetic society she lives in, is akin to an admission of incompetence.<sup>54</sup> “Failure”, reminds Halberstam, “is also unbeing, and ... these modes of unbeing and unbecoming propose a different relation to knowledge” (23). Unbeknownst to both Steve and the spectator, Die and Kyla surreptitiously plan for the teenager’s admittance, disguising it as a holiday trip. And, with regret, off they go to Steve’s capitulation. As the trip commences, in what can be contemplated as *Mommy*’s most significant moment, a second screen-widening (unexpectedly) occurs. Comprehended by Dolan

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<sup>53</sup> Note that nothing fundamentally ties queer people to unbecoming, but, as Halberstam reminds, “the social and symbolic systems that tether queerness to loss and failure cannot be wished away; some would say, nor should they be” (97-98).

<sup>54</sup> Even when Die has accepted her failure as a mother, she falters once more when delivering Steve to the state facility. Upon realising what she will inflict upon her son, she fails to call the deal off. “Let us do our job,” the men from the facility say, saying as much as *since you haven’t done yours*.

himself as “a sort of flash forward”, the sequence was also the film’s first passage to be written (Knecht 34). In it, Die fast-forwards her life with Steve. Steve finishes high school, introduces his girlfriend, is accepted by the art academy, leaves his mother’s home, fathers a child, gets married with a wedding party. In short, Die, like most parents, desires for an ordinary, normative life for her son – after all, she just wants his best and for him to be happy. Oddly enough, in Die’s fantasy, there is no automatic presence of a male partner as expected in heteronormative societies. Rather, Kyla is featured in all scenarios, supportive and cheery for Steve’s achievements.<sup>55</sup> This sudden happiness seems too good to be true, and after five jam-packed minutes of an unlooked-for future, the screen starts, once again, to tighten up. When it happened for the first time, the audience had no way of knowing that it would happen or what would be implied by the narrowing effect. Now, however, by the time the frame returns to its 1:1 aspect, the poignant damage to the spectator’s thoughts and feelings is already done. The expectations are immediately set for things to get worse.

To fantasise of a better future can also be a defence mechanism against an unhappy present (Ahmed 170). All the same, expectations lead to disappointments and that is sometimes too high a price to pay for something as uncertain as the future. For this reason, Sara Ahmed proposes the exploration of a “queer point”, where one no longer has “to choose between pessimism and optimism”. In this point, what counts is the exchanges between hope and despair, optimism and pessimism, more than visions of happiness and fulfilment. Calling for the embrace of a queer middle ground, Ahmed acknowledges queering the pessimism “*about* a certain kind of optimism, as a refusal to be optimistic about ‘the right things’ in the right kind of way” (161). She formulates further:

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<sup>55</sup> Just like it is the case for *Tom at the Farm*, Kyla’s firm presence in Die’s imagination allows for a bisexual reading, even without the explicit romantic involvement of the characters. Malmquist offers the same reading for bisexual love between Die and Kyla and uses this as argument for Die’s quest for normativity in Steve (38), which seems improbable.



[W]hen happiness is present, it can recede, becoming anxious, becoming the thing that we could lose in the unfolding of time. When happiness is present, we can become defensive, such that we retreat with fear from anything or anyone that threatens to take our happiness away. ...

[A]nxiety about the loss of the possibility of a future might give us an alternative understanding to both futurity and happiness. (160-61)

Ahmed applies the same balance in the close relationship between hope and anxiety. Whereas hope is a future-orientated object tied to the possibility of achieving happiness, at same time it channels the impossibility of it. In this impossibility lies the anxiety about losing the future, though it also gives room for alternatives. But not without contesting social norms of what entails a happy life, for “[t]he failure of transcendence [of alternatives] constitutes the necessity of a political struggle” (Ahmed 177). Resisting the impossibility of alternatives futures, Die clearly expresses her hopes in the penultimate scene of the film. Taking place after Steve has been admitted for already some time, Kyla stops by to tell that she will move to Toronto with her family. While Kyla admits that the previous months have meant a lot to her, this is a clear goodbye, meaning that not only the future Die imagined for Steve will not happen, but also the possibility of further development of the relation between the two women. After Kyla stutters that she “can’t just abandon [her] family”, Die offers an explanation for why she gave her son up to the state (“I sent him there because I have hope. I’m full of hope, okay?”). Die talks of hope, not for the imaginative future of (normative) success, but hope for a future with alternative happiness, perchance a *broken* happiness. By the moment Die – cynically? – declares victory to Kyla (“So I win. All the way. It’s a win-win. For everybody”), maybe she has already realised that “there is something powerful in being wrong, in losing, in failing, and that all our failures combined might just be enough, if we practice them well, to bring down the winner” (Halberstam 120). If not then, this realisation may arrive later, at the film’s last minute, when Steve, cleverly pretending to have given up, unleashes himself from a straitjacket and runs

to an uncertain destiny and future. This experience analogously illustrates that “failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods” (3). So, whether he can actually break free or not, for Steve the experience might already be considered a breakthrough.<sup>56</sup>

*Mommy* is no Hollywood film. Just as the credits roll, the film ends on a high note, even though no one truly knows Steve’s destiny. That is of no importance, clearly. His last maverick act suffices to deliver a happy ending – of sorts – to the eager spectator. As Rich argues, the expectations of queer audiences have shifted today: on the one hand older publics expect “prescribed... righteousness and legitimacy”, on the other hand, newer audiences search for “validation and a culture of affirmation: work[s] that can reinforce identity, visualize respectability, combat injustice, and bolster social status. ... nothing downbeat or too revelatory; and happy endings, of course” (41). In the past, the former demanding desire for the *right* sort of LGBTQ+ representation onscreen was abundantly investigated by researchers.<sup>57</sup> For a long time, non-normative audiences were invited to be satisfied with the gloomy depictions offered until the end of the 1980s, for it already being better than sheer invisibility. New Queer Cinema arrived and changed greatly the means of how filmmakers and filmgoers interacted to stories and characters. As the movement’s fresh excitement died out, it has changed once more to accommodate more mainstream models of representation, which inevitably – in the West – led to some assimilation: films that lost their razor-like sharpness against hetero- and homonormativities and turned almost *too* family-friendly for some: “Activism gave way to lifestyle, as the old defiance faded into homonormativity. ‘We’re here, we’re queer, we’re married’ is a very different war cry from the 1980s street chant ‘... get

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<sup>56</sup> Steve’s escape also releases him from the 1990s-soundtrack prison his journey was found to be, and yet again, Dolan defies expectations and wraps his film up with Lana del Rey’s 2011 record of “Born to Die”.

<sup>57</sup> Vito Russo’s book *The Celluloid Closet* (1981), for instance, tackles the issues of negative representation at length.

used to it” (Rich 261). Today, it can be said that the movement – in constant renovation – has found space to shelter the multiple strains. And regardless of what the audience is hungry for, Rich reiterates the utmost importance of “films that push the edge, upset convention, defy expectation, speak the unspeakable, grab ... by the throat and surprise with [something never before seen]” (41). While Dolan’s *Mommy* (and other of his films) may still be excessively twee and prudish in its depictions of queerness, this chapter has shown that it does have enough elements to be seen as part of this latest, broader wave of the New Queer Cinema movement. It is the result of “the harsh economic conditions of our time, the extremity of politics, and the disparity of wealth [which] have created an audience eager to be challenged, and to change” (Rich 281-82). The film tests notions of queerness, offering distinctive aesthetic approaches that question to which spectators it may speak to, and dares to trespass the definition borders of what a happy or sad ending is, vouching for a queer understanding of failure and success. Rich trusts that “it’s time for queer publics to broaden their vision once again, not shut it down for legal status, gender definition or genre formula” (281-82). More than ever, it is paramount for films to go where they create uncomfortable *and* non-conforming experiences. To remain limited by what is amicable, intimidated by what is uncommon, and distraught by films that give room to deviant philosophies is no longer enough to release one from the social and sexual restraints of the establishment – and it might have never been.

## Conclusion

*Fucking human nature, bro.*

—Guard (Pierre-Yves Cardinal), in *Mommy*<sup>58</sup>

From the spoken word presentation in *Laurence Anyways*, which I quoted at the beginning of this thesis, to the final sentence spoken before the credits of *Mommy*, Dolan has presented a (Canadian) society that is led and embodied by the broken ones: queers, social deviants, single mothers, sons-to-no-fathers, so forth. Little by little, he has been establishing himself as a world cinema auteur with considerable ideas on authority, nationalism, and queerness. Indeed, his cinema is queer. It might not be the queerest, most radical of the filmographies, but it has remarkable points throughout.

It is worth noting that Dolan does not aim to be a transgressive filmmaker, a title that some of his queer predecessors so wholeheartedly welcomed. Instead, he is looking for the same position his fellow countrypeople Denis Villeneuve and Jean-Marc Vallée, or his inspiration James Cameron, have earned. That is to say, LGBTQ+ cinema circuits do not seem to be part of his core objective as a filmmaker, his ambition goes more into mass fields — in sum, Hollywood.

Just like his comments on queerness do not correspond to his films, neither does this quest for a (more) mainstream cinema corresponds to the material Dolan has presented so far. There seem to be a conflict between the desire to tackle questions of sexuality, nation, gender and class and the urgency to become a Hollywoodian name. Hollywood, however, has an undeniable past of queer historiography

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<sup>58</sup> In the original “Putain de nature humain, mon gars”.

erasure, and to be part of the system is, at times, to give up on what has made one an individual. Or worse, to capitulate to normativities and assimilationism.<sup>59</sup>

As presented in this thesis, the peculiar characters who are given voice in Dolan's cinema are eligible candidates for the post of social figures of endurance and Québécois nationalism, but also global representations of queer worldliness. *Laurence Anyways* offers a new take on camp by intersecting it with transgender issues. *Tom at the Farm* works with what lies between established genre variants such as buddy film and bromance, to distort notions and limitations of these genres in favour of bisexual desires. *Mommy* scrutinises the lives of straight characters to expand the frontiers of queerness, rather successfully. Albeit the flaws that I have elaborated on in the preceding chapters, these films present – with intense aestheticism – those who are oppressed by the morals and values of the dominant order but also those who, in the eyes of society, have failed. Failure is, indeed, peripheral to Dolan's characters and films, as the attempts, that is, the constant exercise of questioning normativities and presenting queerness should suffice per se. Having said that, Dolan has achieved a remarkable evolution regarding the quality of the films' form and text, and his approach to the themes of alienation, assimilation, and otherness has certainly reached a higher level of sophistication.

*Mommy*, for instance, proved to handle queer themes in such an exemplary way that it could serve as a response to the question Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty posed back in 1995. “[H]ow to be ‘out in culture’: how to occupy a place in mass culture, yet maintain a perspective on it that does not accept its homophobic and heterocentrist definitions, images, and terms of analysis”, they enquired (2). Perhaps, the answer lies, as hinted at the final chapter, in a possible new wave of New Queer Cinema. While directly related to the Hollywoodian ecosystem, the movement still manages to preserve its transgressive identity and is continuously in renovation, without bowing down to no one. The alternative

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<sup>59</sup> It is worth remark that Dolan's first English-spoken, Hollywood-based film, *The Death and Life of John F. Donovan* (2018), is scheduled to have its international release in early 2019. Some critics have classified it as his worst film to date (Kohn; Lee).

Hollywood (that currently fills streaming services)<sup>60</sup> is also the place wherein postcolonial cinema has most likely found shelter: people of colour, female directors, provocative themes and peculiar aesthetics are transforming, yet again, the way we consume and produce films. In this prolific environment, Dolan's future cinema could establish the balance between mainstream and arthouse, and still satisfy crossover audiences. Nonetheless, in this well-adjusted universe, the realities of other outsiders await to be explored – possibly by examining race (in a more global context), indigenous decolonialism (local context) or diasporic trauma (personal context) – themes unaddressed in Dolan's cinema.

Rather than following the obvious road of sexuality and gender, Dolan has continuously experimented with alternative ways of interpreting queerness. Given how these new cinematic modes are clearing the way for various sorts of approaches in dealing with queerness, from subtle to radical ones, it seems fair to hope for a future cinema that challenges the medium in such refined and precise ways that to negotiate sympathy for and empathy with the queer ones becomes of little consequence.

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<sup>60</sup> Like video was part of the “technological changes ... lead[ing] to social and political transformation” that gave rise to New Queer Cinema (Rich xvii), streaming and distribution technologies might, too, have that role for the latest wave.

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