Aesthetics of Defiance

Queer Subjectivity in the Films of Xavier Dolan

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Abstract

This master's thesis is an investigation into Xavier Dolan's depictions of queer and non-normative characters. Through close analyses of the director's first five films, this study identifies Dolan's recurring stylistics and narrative techniques, and how they relate to his cinematic representation of individuals who do not conform to society's norms. The question of how queer subjectivity is presented to the spectator of the films guides the study, which outlines different kinds of subjective images and ways of expressing the inner worlds of the protagonists.

As one of the first extensive academic studies of Dolan in English, the thesis carries out a dialogue with the few existing scholarly sources on the filmmaker, while also employing theories put forward by Deleuze, Pasolini, Bonitzer and Foucault, among others. Whereas previous writings on Dolan have focused almost entirely on national aspects of his work – interpreting the films as typically Québécois – this study considers the filmmaker from an international perspective. Although being an auteur study, the thesis highlights current issues of queer self-representation and the voices of the marginalized, proposing that Dolan's work offers non-normative alternatives to heteronormative narrative structures, patriarchal storytelling conventions and traditional family constellations.

Keywords

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1. Introduction

Canadian filmmaker Xavier Dolan has since his directorial debut with *I Killed My Mother* (*J'ai tué ma mère*, 2009) at the age of twenty, received considerable praise and attention for his work. Apart from the habitual interest in the director's young age, the focus has mainly been on the highly aestheticized nature of his films, as well as on their somewhat challenging themes. Dolan's protagonists are always outsiders in one way or another. Whether they are queer young individuals in the process of forming their identities, a transsexual teacher facing society's prejudice, or unconventional single mothers trying to communicate with their troubled teenage sons, they all have in common a sense of being displaced in a normative, ultimately hostile world. Dolan's portrayals of these non-normative individuals are never stereotypical or pedagogically "positive"; he allows his characters to be multi-layered and difficult, defying simple definitions. Instead of presenting them as "types", Dolan gives his protagonists agency in a way that many films that deal with, for instance, gay characters do not. In Dolan's representation, their sexuality is not the issue at stake but just one of many (often contradicting) aspects of their identity. Dolan demonstrates that gender identity, family constellations and love relationships of today are oftentimes hard to define and unconventional in nature.

Dolan's striking visuals and eclectic cinematic style have made him stand out among other new filmmakers, while at the same time causing some critics to dismiss him as being "too much". He seems to provoke strong responses in people. That his latest film, *It's Only the End of the World* (*Juste la fin du monde*, 2016), was awarded the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival yet booed by journalists and critics at the ceremony, is a good illustration of Dolan's effect on viewers.[1] However, as this thesis suggests, it is through his expressive and extensive use of style elements that Dolan has managed to capture the inner lives and perspectives of contemporary queer and otherwise nonconformist individuals. The eclecticism of Dolan's aesthetics and narrative modes works in favor of nuanced, subjective character depictions.

Despite the attention that Dolan has gathered, there are hardly any academic texts written about him. Apart from interviews, film reviews and shorter magazine articles, the are only a handful of (very recent) dissertations and essays that discuss the filmmaker's work seriously and on a theoretical level. Notably, these few academic texts are all written from a Québécois angle, emphasizing Dolan's nationality. This general lack of serious study of Dolan's work and the focus on Québécois aspects make it relevant to carry out an in-depth analysis of the director's films.

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1 André Picard,"Canadian director Xavier Dolan scores polarizing Grand Prix win at Cannes," *The Globe and Mail*, accessed August 10th, 2016, http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/canadian-director-xavier-dolan-takes-home-polarizing-grand-prix-win-at-cannes/article30116024

Instead of only being interpreted from a national perspective, Dolan's work benefits from a study of its specific stylistics and how they relate to his queer thematics.

It seems fair to call this thesis an auteur study, although one that does not focus on the filmmaker's personality or biography. The authorship approach – criticized and re-evaluated over the course of the past five decades – is still in use, albeit in more critical and self-conscious forms than during the heydey of *Cahiers du Cinéma* sixty years ago. The post-structuralist critique of the author has forced us to examine the concept more closely, which has resulted in important revisions to the contemporary take on auteurism. We have learnt to separate the individual from the artist; today we are careful not to draw conclusions based upon the filmmaker's biography or to assume that a film by default is a reflection of the director's personality. Furthermore, the collaborative nature of filmmaking is frequently and rightfully stressed nowadays. There is, however, a risk of missing potentially interesting studies of films if we are not allowed to do close analyses of a director's work. After all, many of the prevailing ideas and theories within cinema studies were conceived through the writings on the oeuvres of individual filmmakers. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that previously marginalized groups need the agency that the author label entails. As Janet Staiger notes in her nuanced examination of authorship in *Authorship and Film* (2003): "[...] the attempted death of the author comes at a time particularly nonadvantageous for some individuals – feminists, gay and lesbian activists, and antiracists. Depriving us of our voices just as we are speaking more loudly seems a plot".[2]

Dolan, who writes all his screenplays, does the editing (on four out of five films), and even designs the costumes for his characters, is indisputably a qualified candidate for the auteur label. Moreover, his films provide cinematic depictions of marginalized individuals. Bearing all this in mind, I consider it fruitful to engage in an auteur study of Dolan, that may seem traditional on the surface but which places emphasis on current issues, such as queerness on film and the voices of the marginalized. With this thesis, I hope to highlight Dolan's importance as a filmmaker within the still very limited representation of queer and non-normative individuals in the contemporary cinema.

1.1 Research purpose and aims

The purpose of this thesis is to propose that Xavier Dolan is an important voice in the contemporary world of cinema, in that he depicts non-normative and queer individuals in a non-stereotypical manner, which provides the characters with a high degree of agency. I want to suggest that Dolan through stylistic means creates complex, subjective character portrayals and captures some essence

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2   Janet Staiger, "Authorship Approaches", in *Authorship and Film*, ed. David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 29.

of being "different" in today's Western society. In his films, Dolan offers queer alternatives to heteronormative cinematic representations and patriarchal narrative structures. Dolan's work presents a non-normative view of the world, in which female and queer male characters are allowed to impose their subjective visions upon the viewer. My aim is to investigate *how* Dolan achieves this highly subjective quality in his work. This thesis is guided by the questions:

By what stylistic means are Dolan's protagonists portrayed?

How are their subjective perspectives presented cinematically to us?

To what degree and in what ways do the subjective visions of the characters and the filmmaker coincide in the films' aesthetics?

An additional aim for this thesis is to provide a first extensive English-language academic study of Dolan, without interpreting his work from a national perspective.

1.2 Method and thesis structure

Since the main concern of this thesis is Dolan's stylistics and how they help crafting subjective and resonant depictions of queer and non-normative characters, this could perhaps be called a style study. By "style" I refer to all aesthetic, narrative and technical choices made by the filmmaker (and his collaborators). I want to stress that I do not separate style from "content", as many people have a habit of doing. The "content" of a film in itself involves stylistic choices. After all, every story could have been told differently, or the film could have told another story. I largely agree with David Bordwell's definition of style:

> In the narrowest sense, I take style to be a film's systematic and significant use of techniques of the medium. Those techniques fall into broad domains: *mise en scène* (staging, lighting, performance, and setting); framing, focus, control of color values, and other aspects of cinematography; editing and sound. Style is, minimally, the texture of the film's images and sounds, the result of choices made by the filmmaker(s) in particular historical circumstances.[3]

He further considers "narrative strategies or favored subjects or themes" as part of a filmmaker's style.[4] This broad definition of style means that I will discuss Dolan's visuals as well as his thematics and narrative techniques. In other words, attention will be devoted to all aspects of the films that I find relevant to his character depictions, regardless of whether they are of the clearly aesthetic kind (what some would call the "surface") or of a thematic and topical nature (the

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3   David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 1997), 4.
4   Ibid.

narrative "content" or the "messages" of the films). Since my purpose is not to simply list the key stylistics of Dolan's work, but to analyze their relations to his queer themes, it is perhaps too narrow to label this a "style study", which is why I want to address these issues already at an early stage. It should also be noted that, in contrast to Bordwell, I will not place the style elements discussed in a historical context, since the aim of this thesis is not to locate Dolan's place as a director within a historical canon or to speculate on his possible influences.

I will carry out close analyses of Dolan's first five films: *I Killed My Mother*, *Heartbeats* (*Les amours imaginaires*, 2010), *Laurence Anyways* (2012), *Tom at the Farm* (*Tom à la ferme*, 2013) and *Mommy* (2014). *It's Only the End of the World* is left out since it had not yet had its world-wide release when work on this thesis was initiated. Because of the stylistically and thematically eclectic nature of Dolan's work, this investigation into his style will also have to be somewhat eclectic. However, this "eclecticism" is not an excuse for being vague, but rather a constructive tool to be able to cover varying types of images, narrative modes, use of music, cinematography etc. in order to identify the forces at work in Dolan's cinema. Since it would be too wide an approach to analyze every aspect of Dolan's style, I have chosen to focus on the aesthetics and techniques that have a decisive effect on the filmmaker's character portrayals – particularly issues related to queer subjectivity.

The examination of Dolan's style is divided into five chapters, in which the films are analyzed together, allowing for comparison and discussion of internal relations. The first of these is **Framing and deframing**, where I establish some of Dolan's recurring techniques and aesthetics, with a special emphasis on the filmmaker's use of framing and the filmic space. In the following chapter, **Interior images**, scenes of an explicitly mental or imaginary nature are analyzed, since their inclusion in the films increase the subjectivity of the character depictions. In **Music video aesthetics** Dolan's frequent use of slow-motion in combination with music is investigated. These music video-like sequences constitute one of the filmmaker's key stylistics and play a crucial role in his representation of queer resistance to the norm. This is followed by the very brief chapter **The limits of access**, which addresses Dolan's peculiar tendency of both inviting and alienating the viewer, as a means of expressing a non-normative world-view. Although it upsets the symmetry of the thesis structure by being so short, I deem it necessary to put this discussion in an individual chapter, as it is not directly related to any of the previous chapters yet essential to my arguments. Additionally, this discussion provides a logical transition from the analyses of specific style elements to the final chapter's presentation of Pasolini's concept, **The free indirect subjective**. Here, Pasolini's theories are employed in an attempt to define the special kind of subjectivity that permeates Dolan's films. The complicated relationship between a character's vision and the

filmmaker's style is discussed at length. In this chapter, the similarities between Pasolini's concept and the theories introduced in the previous film analyses are brought to the fore in an attempt to tie the threads of the thesis together.

Over the course of these chapters of film analysis, I introduce theorists and concepts that I find relevant to the discussions at hand. Instead of detailing these in a theoretical framework at the beginning of the thesis, I find it more beneficial to bring them up along the way. By doing so, I am able to engage in a dialogue with theorists who seem pertinent to the study of Dolan. Furthermore, since this thesis is one of the very first longer academic texts about Dolan, part of my mission is to carry out a discussion with the few existing sources on the director. The purpose of this is both to substantiate my own observations by finding similar views, and to correct notions on Dolan that I consider erroneous or insufficiently analyzed. These sources are presented in the chapter titled **Framework**, along with some definitions of terms frequently used in the thesis.

1.3 Literature

As stated in the previous section, a substantial part of the literature used in this thesis are the existing texts on Dolan, which I will discuss, agree or disagree with throughout my film analyses. Considering the amount of publicity devoted to Dolan and the international spread of his films, it is surprising how little academic attention he has garnered so far. Naturally, film reviews and interviews with Dolan do exist, but these will be of no relevance to this thesis, as I will not be doing biographical readings of his films, nor engage in reception studies. The few existing academic texts on Dolan have surfaced in very recent years, which is unsurprising since the filmmaker has only been active since 2009.

I have been able to track down four English-language essays on Dolan, published in academic journals. Bill Marshall, professor at the University of Glasgow, is the author of the most theoretically sophisticated of these. His "Spaces and Times of Québec in Two Films by Xavier Dolan"[5] deals with Québécois aspects of Dolan's work, with special attention to *Laurence Anyways* and *Tom at the Farm*. Marshall notes that scholarly interest in Dolan to date is "very limited", stating: "The first stirrings of academic attention have focused on the queer angle, as we shall see, including this director's take on the family and mother/son relationship, on his ability to reach a diversity of audiences beyond the frontiers of Québec, and on his relation to music."[6] Another theory-heavy and elegant essay on Dolan is Mercédès Baillargeon's "Romantic Disillusionment,

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5   Published in *Nottingham French Studies* in June of 2016.
6   Bill Marshall, "Spaces and Times of Québec in Two Films by Xavier Dolan," *Nottingham French Studies* 55, no. 2 (June 2016): 189.

(Dis)Identification, and the Sublimation of National Identity in Québec's 'New Wave': *Heartbeats* by Xavier Dolan and *Night #1* by Anne Émond"[7], in which the author compares the two films and discusses the lives of young people in contemporary Québec. Jason R. D'Aoust's essay "The Queer Voices of Xavier Dolan's *Mommy*"[8] is the most recent of the academic sources on Dolan. However, it deals exclusively with Québécois language-use, which limits its application to my study. The earliest academic text on Dolan seems to be Jim Leach's essay "In-Between States: Sarah Polley's *Take This Waltz* and Xavier Dolan's *Laurence Anyways*"[9], a brief comparison between the two films that does not discuss Dolan at depth but has its interesting observations.

S*ynoptique* is an online film journal, edited by the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema at Concordia University, Montreal. Its winter 2016 issue specializes in Québec-oriented themes, and features several essays on Dolan's work. Of these I have used the three that are in English (the rest are in French): Fluvia Massimi's '"A Boy's Best Friend is His Mother': Québec's Matriarchy and Queer Nationalism in the Cinema of Xavier Dolan", Katrina Sark's "The Language of Fashion and (Trans)Gender in Dolan's *Laurence Anyways*" and Àngela Urrea's and Mariana Gil-Arboleda's "*Laurence Anyways*: The Transgression, Narrative and *Mise-en-Scène* of Transition".

It appears that the only Ph.D dissertation in English on Dolan is Hannah Christine Vaughan's "Reimagining the Family in French and Quebeois Cinema" (2014), which devotes just one chapter to Dolan. Finally, Christopher Heron's video essay "Xavier Dolan: Exercices de style" (for the online film journal *The Seventh Art*) is an insightful albeit brief presentation of stylistic elements in the filmmaker's work. It should be added that there are two essays on Dolan in French which I for language reasons have not been able to use.[10]

In addition to the sources on Dolan, I have found a handful of texts on film theory to be of use in my investigation into Dolan's style, techniques and thematics. Gilles Deleuze's philosophical take on film theory, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1983), is a fascinating and at times frustrating source of ideas on the medium and its possibilities. Since Deleuze's book does not offer any exhaustive taxonomies or concrete methods of film analysis, it functions more as an inspiring work-in-progress – something that Deleuze, who liked to emphasize the "becoming" of things rather than ideas being fixed, would probably agree with. Interestingly, several of the texts on Dolan which I have used for this thesis refer to Deleuze, suggesting that there is a natural connection

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7   Published in *Québec Studies*, 2014.
8   Published in *European journal of American studies*, 2017.
9   Published in *Brno Studies in English*, 2013.
10 Valérie Mandia's "Le septième art hors des frontières nationales: le pouvoir de la langue et de l'imaginaire culturel dans les films du cinéaste Québécois Xavier Dolan" (published in the journal *Francophonies d'Amérique*, spring 2014) and Gabriel Laverdière's "L'esthétique rock queer, de *C.R.A.Z.Y.* à Xavier Dolan" (published in the online journal *Nouvelles Vues*, spring-summer 2015).

between the French philosopher's open-ended theories and Dolan's eclectic stylistics. That Dolan's films often deal with the process of "becoming", the formations and re-formations of identities, further confirms this relation. Donato Toraro, writing about Deleuze in the online film journal *Offscreen*, notes: "While his two cinema books argue for the practice of philosophy and concept building through cinema, the particular and varied philosophical sensibilities he discusses across his panoply of directors relate in the deepest sense possible to style."[11] This works well together with my style analysis of Dolan. Moreover, Deleuze discusses several of the other theorists that I employ in this thesis – such as Pascal Bonitzer and Pier Paolo Pasolini – which creates a sense of coherent theoretical context in my otherwise somewhat diverse study of Dolan.

Bonitzer's influential writings on off-screen space, framing and deframing have been helpful in trying to map out the style of Dolan's framing and cinematography. I have used two of Bonitzer's 1970s essays for *Cahiers du cinéma* which deal with these issues. Although Pasolini's theories are only introduced in the last chapter, his concept of the "free indirect subjective" has guided my way of looking at Dolan's films. Additionally, ideas are borrowed from Michel Foucault at some points, although the thesis is not a strictly Foucauldian analysis. I find that the most creative use of theories and concepts is made when parts from different theorists go together. Instead of completely subscribing to one method or theory, the best academic texts seem to be able to carry out a dialogue with various other texts, extracting the most useful ideas while rejecting others. This is what I have attempted in my analyses, which is why I see no contradiction in utilizing some of Deleuze's notions, while not deploying his entire Bergsonian categorization of types of film images. The same is true for Pasolini, whose "cinema of poetry" and related attempts at forcing linguistic analogies upon the medium seem to be of little use in contemporary film theory. Hopefully, this mix of separate yet related ideas makes sense to the reader of this thesis, and works in service of establishing some important aspects of Dolan's work.

1.4 Film summaries

Here follows a brief overview of the five films by Dolan that will be discussed in the thesis, to facilitate understanding of the often detailed analyses of scenes.

I Killed My Mother

Dolan's first film tells the story of sixteen-year-old Hubert (played by Dolan) who lives with his divorced mother Chantale (Anne Dorval) in suburban Montreal. They do not get along very well

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11 Donato Toraro, "Gilles Deleuze's Bergsonian Film Project: Part 2," *Offscreen* 3, no. 3 (March 1999), accessed April 14th, 2017. http://offscreen.com/view/bergson2

and Hubert constantly analyzes their relationship and his love-hate feelings for his mother, whom he sees as embarrassing and unsophisticated. Hubert has a boyfriend, Antonin (François Arnaud), whose mother is open-minded and fun-loving – a sharp contrast to his own strained domestic situation. Chantale eventually finds out that her son is gay, which further complicates their relationship, although she does not really seem to have a problem with his sexuality. Another important person in Hubert's life is his teacher, Julie (Suzanne Clément), who manages to win the introverted teenager's affection by taking him seriously. The animosity between Hubert and Chantale increases as the narrative progresses and reaches a climax when she decides (together with Hubert's uninterested father) to send her son off to a boarding school in the country despite his protests. However, when Chantale learns that Hubert has run away from the school after being gay bashed, her love for him resurfaces.

Heartbeats

In his second feature, Dolan investigates the complicated relationship between two friends and the young man that they are both attracted to. Francis (Dolan) and Marie (Monia Chokri) are Québécois friends in their twenties who fall in love with beautiful, charismatic Nicolas (Niels Schneider), although they keep pretending to only have friendly feelings for him. As the trio spend more and more time together, Marie's and Francis' friendship deteriorates to the point of antagonism – while Nicolas keeps his motives and feelings to himself. In the end, both Francis and Marie are disappointed in Nicolas' lack of response and manage to mend their relationship.

Laurence Anyways

Dolan's third film tackles the love story between a transgender woman and her girlfriend over the course of a decade. Laurence (Melvil Poupaud) is a thirty-five year old literature teacher living in Montreal, who has a passionate relationship with his girlfriend Fred (Clément), until the day he finds the courage to tell her that he is a woman on the inside and wants to begin a new life. After the initial shock, Fred assumes a supportive attitude and encourages Laurence to go dressed as a woman to work – which eventually ends in him losing his job. They break up and start separate lives with new partners but are reunited many years later in one last effort to be together. The film explores multiple aspects of their stormy love, as well as the titular character's difficult relationship with his unsentimental mother, Julienne (Nathalie Baye). I will for the remainder of the thesis refer to Laurence with female pronouns only, in accordance with the film's position that she has always been a woman internally.

Tom at the Farm

Based on a play by Michel Marc Bouchard, *Tom at the Farm* is a psychological thriller about a young man, Tom (Dolan), who after the death of his boyfriend Guillaume attends the funeral in a rural area. He is invited to visit his partner's family who lives at a remote farm. The mother, Agathe (Lise Roy), does not seem aware that her son was gay, while her older son, Francis (Pierre-Yves Cardinal), knows about his deceased brother's secret and is determined to hide the truth from her. Francis forces Tom to pretend that Guillaume was just a close friend and that he in fact had a girlfriend who will perhaps arrive soon. Tom is verbally threatened and physically abused by Francis, yet experiences a strange fascination and even attraction for him. The longer Tom stays at the farm, the less possible it seems for him to leave the devastated Agathe and the violent but vulnerable Francis. The tension escalates until Tom fears for his life enough to try for an escape back to the city, which he manages within an inch of his life.

Mommy

Mommy is a study of the complicated and emotionally intense relationship between single mother Diane (Dorval) and her fifteen-year-old son Steve (Antoine-Olivier Pilon), who displays signs of ADHD and violent behavior. When he is thrown out of a center for juveniles, she takes on the responsibility of letting him live with her, while at the same time struggling to get her economy together. They become friends with the neighbor Kyla (Clément), a teacher who is withdrawn partly because of her stutter and depressed after losing one of her children. The three of them have brutal fights but ultimately manage to build their own private sphere, where Steve is able to find inner peace and Kyla is distracted from her problems. In the end, however, the unempathetic reality breaks down their fantasies of a bright future and Diane feels forced to place Steve in state-sponsored hospital care (based on a new Canadian law invented by Dolan for this story).

2. Framework

The purpose of this chapter is to establish what has been written about Dolan academically so far and to situate my position among these voices. I will additionally offer my definitions of some of the terms that will be recurring throughout the thesis.

2.1 Previous writings on Dolan

In all the academic sources I have found on Dolan, the picture of Dolan as an uncompromising filmmaker with a distinctive personal style emerges. Marshall asserts: "The success of Xavier Dolan since his breakthrough film, *J'ai tué ma mère* (2009), made when he was only nineteen, has been one of the most striking developments in Québec cinema over the past decade."[12] Leach notes the unusual circumstances surrounding Dolan's debut: "The film went on to win prizes at the Cannes Film Festival, but it came under attack from some critics in Quebec, who resented Dolan's presumption in daring to write, direct, star in, produce, edit and design the costumes for his film."[13] Sark similarly underlines Dolan's artistic vision when discussing his use of costumes: "Having full artistic control over his film productions, Dolan conceptualized the costume design on all five of his films released to date. This allows him to use all creative techniques at his disposal to craft multi-layered, captivating, and visually original and innovative films [...]."[14]

Notably, almost every single academic publication on Dolan has a national perspective. However interesting these texts are, I consider it somewhat problematic that they all read Dolan's films as typically Québécois. For instance, Marshall sees *Laurence Anyways* and *Tom at the Farm* as Dolan's comments on the social climate of Québec, and focuses his analyses on filming locations and their symbolic meanings. Leach, similarly, discusses *Laurence Anyways* as a characteristically Canadian film, a view that colors his every interpretation. It is perhaps worth noting that both of these writers have a previous connection to Canada.[15] The self-expressed purpose of Baillargeon's essay is to examine "(post)nationalism in recent Québécois cinema",[16] which naturally results in the author looking for nation-specific aspects. Likewise, the title of Vaughan's dissertation, "Reimagining the Family in French and Quebeois Cinema", clearly states its national perspective.

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12 Marshall, 189.

13 Jim Leach, "In-Between States: Sarah Polley's *Take This Waltz* and Xavier Dolan's *Laurence Anyways*," *Brno Studies in English* 39, No. 2 (2013): 92.

14 Katrina Sark, "The Language of Fashion and (Trans)Gender in Dolan's *Laurence Anyways*," *Synoptique* 4, no. 2 (Winter 2016): 129, accessed August 17th, 2016.

15 Leach is professor at Brock University, Ontario, and Marshall is specialized in Québec cinema (he published the book *Québec National Cinema* in 2001).

16 Mercédès Baillargeon, "Romantic Disillusionment, (Dis)Identification, and the Sublimation of National Identity in Québec's 'New Wave': *Heartbeats* by Xavier Dolan and *Night #1* by Anne Émond," *Québec Studies* 57 (2014): 171.

Accordingly, Vaughan's film analyses focus on (queer) depictions of family in French language films and how they are related to their respective nations. And, as mentioned previously, D'Aoust's highly theoretical publication on *Mommy* is exclusively concerned with vocality and the use of Québécois slang.

The articles in *Synoptique* firmly put Dolan in a Québécois perspective. Massimi's ambitious text traces Québec's past, its fight for independence and its social climate, where she sees "[...] the history of Québec's nationalism as a site of strong masculine values – prompted in the 1960s by the nationalist design of the Quiet Revolution [...]".[17] She describes the Quiet Revolution as "[...] the modernization and secularization movement that occurred in Québec in the 1960s to overcome the Catholic regime of the previous first century of its history – said regime having been identified as the main obstacle to the province's independence".[18] Massimi suggests that this period in history, while bringing development to Québec, also cemented a heteronormative patriarchy which marginalized the role of women and of non-heterosexual individuals. She reads Dolan's filmmaking as a reaction to these historical circumstances, despite the director being born decades later. Massimi's observations on Dolan's themes and stylistics are interesting, albeit obstinately set on interpreting his work as typically Québécois. Notably, she proposes that Dolan engages with "crucial discourses of identity politics" and sees the director's anachronistic use of costumes and decors as "a coherent strategy of queer historiography".[19] The two *Synoptique* articles on *Laurence Anyways* by Sark, Urrea and Gil-Arbodela are a little less concerned with national aspects – yet, the journal issue's subtitle "Locating the intimate within the global: Xavier Dolan, queer nations and Québec cinema" makes it clear what the context is. In short, the authors of the academic texts on Dolan so far clearly aim to highlight Dolan's national belonging and to interpret his work as somehow representative of Québec.

The national perspective is perceptive but not necessarily relevant when analysing Dolan's work, especially since my purpose is not to trace the director's sources of inspiration or to locate his place in Canadian film history – an undertaking that ultimately poses other questions than the ones that I want to investigate. As Andrew Higson, among others, has pointed out, the label of "national cinema" should be regarded with skepticism, since it does not properly take into consideration a large number of issues. The fact that the population of a nation does not form a coherent group of people that can be accurately represented on film is only one of many problematic aspects. Higson notes that "[...] the concept of national cinema is hardly able to do justice either to the internal

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17 Flavia Massimi, "'A Boy's Best Friend is His Mother': Québec's Matriarchy and Queer Nationalism in the Cinema of Xavier Dolan," *Synoptique* 4, no. 2 (Winter 2016): 8, accessed August 17th, 2016.
18 Ibid., 11.
19 Ibid., 19-20.

diversity of contemporary cultural formations or to the overlaps and interpenetrations between different formations".[20] Grouping films in terms of "national cinemas" must always involve a high degree of generalization, since they are neither representative of an entire nation nor produced in a cultural vacuum, without influences from the outside world. In addition to this, many films are transnational collaborations, either financially or artistically. As Higson asserts: "The cinemas established in specific nation-states are rarely autonomous cultural industries and the film business has long operated on a regional, national and transnational basis."[21]

However, the greatest danger of declaring a filmmaker's work as typically "Québécois", as in the case of Dolan, is that this classification tends to exclude other possible readings of the films. Once in place, the national label overshadows the aspects of a film that are not nation-specific. To Dolan's work this seems especially limiting, since his films address issues that are identifiable for audiences across many nations (without specific pre-knowledge of Québec's history); issues that are much too globally relatable to be reduced to a Canadian context. Since Dolan's films – apparently – have the ability to affect and engage audiences in different parts of the world, his work needs to be considered also from perspectives unrelated to nationality. In my view, Dolan's films evoke a general sense of living in an age where national borders present less of a boundary. Even Massimi admits: "It could be argued indeed that Dolan's 'special relationship' with France, evidenced by his involvement in the Cannes Film Festival and the French co-production and distribution opportunities, intervenes to shape his cinema as an international product, rather than a national one."[22] I would also point out his use of famous French actors, like Nathalie Baye and Melvil Poupaud (in *Laurence Anyways*), as well as his all-French ensemble in *It's Only the End of the World*. In addition to this, Dolan is making his next film *The Death and Life of John F. Donovan* in Hollywood, with an English speaking cast of famous non-Canadian actors. This makes the question of nationality – although still important in its own right – seem like only one of several possible approaches to Dolan's work, and perhaps not the one best suited for stylistic enquiries.

Another lack in these early academic texts on Dolan, is their very limited attention to the director's style – which arguably is a consequence of their focus on national aspects. This has resulted in a difficulty for me to use these sources in my thesis, as they typically only take note of Dolan's style in passing. Additionally, the majority of the texts deal with only one of Dolan's films each, sometimes two. Only Heron's video essay brings up all five films. This is another element that is missing from the study of Dolan hitherto: a comprehensive analysis and discussion of his films

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20 Andrew Higson, "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema", in *Cinema and Nation*, eds. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 70.
21 Ibid., 67.
22 Massimi, 23.

together, with the ability to notice larger themes, recurring stylistics, narrative techniques and visual motifs. Heron notes:

> [....] the readings of Dolan's style from critical notices tend to be as hysterical as they perceive the film. This perhaps stems from the narrative projected upon him with the release of each film continually shifting, rather than a look at all of his films with a focus on the films' forms. With that perspective, it's not sporadic flourishes or mercurial shifting of technique that one witnesses, but rather a sustained, evolving use of techniques that we might call the style of Xavier Dolan.[23]

Nevertheless, the writers of these first academic texts on Dolan do make some interesting observations on his themes and techniques that are relevant to this thesis. Marshall's Foucauldian and Deleuzian readings of Dolan's films have proven to be inspiring, despite dealing only in part with the subject of my research. Similarly, Urrea and Gil-Arbodela make some clear-sighted observations on the representation of non-normative gender roles in their Judith Butler-inspired analysis of *Laurence Anyways*. Baillargeon's Lacanian reading of *Heartbeats* does not offer a great deal of useful material for me, but unexpectedly brings up Pasolini's concept of the "free indirect subjective", which works in favor of my application of it on Dolan.

Although I refer repeatedly to the chapter on *I Killed My Mother* in Vaughan's dissertation when discussing some of that film's aesthetics, it should be noted that her text has several major problems. One of these is Vaughan's dependency on quotes and opinions from Dolan, which she at multiple points uses as validations of her interpretations. Even more frustrating are her factual errors in several passages. Besides describing scenes incorrectly, she for instance claims that Vive La Fête's track "Noir désir" (which is played in one of the film's key scenes) is called "C'est la manie" and performed by Yelle. She furthermore includes value judgments, as when she notes in what ways *I Killed My Mother* "falls short"... However, being the only academic English-language analysis of Dolan's directorial debut, Vaughan's text functions as a point of departure for some of my discussions of certain scenes. And in all fairness, Vaughan's argumentation that Dolan should be taken seriously as an experimental auteur is rather convincing. She suggests that *I Killed My Mother* "[...] exhibits innovative film techniques that buttress its thematic construction, resulting in a relatively 'radical' content-form relationship [...]", concluding that "[...] Dolan establishes his own place amongst Quebec's young generation of 'Modern' or 'New' New Wave filmmakers who challenge stereotypes, speak to contemporary social issues, and perhaps most importantly, revel in

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23 Christopher Heron, "Xavier Dolan: Exercices de style" [video essay, pdf version]. The Seventh Art, accessed: August 1st, 2016: 1. http://www.theseventhart.org/essays/The-Seventh-Art-Xavier-Dolan-Video-Essay.pdf

breaking the rules of conventional filmmaking".[24]

Quite surprisingly, the source that has proven to be most in line with the perspective of my thesis is Heron's video essay. Although brief, the voice-over of the video (which is available as a written essay on the film journal *The Seventh Art*'s website) manages to mention and sketchily interpret many of the most important stylistic aspects of Dolan's work. Heron's observations are all the more useful because of their international approach; his essay is the one source that disregards Dolan's nationality. Despite arguably not being a proper academic publication, I refer frequently to Heron's text throughout the thesis since it deals with exactly what I am investigating – namely, Dolan's style and its relation to his depiction of marginalized characters. Heron makes a strong case for the pertinence of studying Dolan's style, emphasizing that the director's techniques and stylistics "[...] are present consistently throughout Dolan's filmography, rather than seemingly random elements injected into each film. Instead, even new developments of past techniques or the introduction of new ones contribute to this overall literal balance between form and content – or rather, form and characters – that can be labelled Dolan's style."[25]

Sark's fashion-related analysis of *Laurence Anyways* provides only some peripheral observations to my discussions, but her comments about what makes Dolan an important filmmaker to study are nonetheless worthy of inclusion. She highlights his "[...] foregrounding [of] strong women, young gay men, and trans people as his leading protagonists [...]", and asserts that "[...] Dolan challenges the traditional cinematic and social conventions of colour, gender, and identity, allowing us to re-negotiate various representations of inner and outer worlds [...]".[26] In a similar vein, Massimi suggests: "Queer subjects, maternal figures, and marginalized individuals, traditionally linked to culpability and national failure, have been rediscovered by Dolan's cinema as the repository of national change and strength."[27] And while Marshall, too, adopts the national approach, he highlights Dolan's "[...] lack of resolution in queerness (between identity and its undoing) [...]" and the director's "[...] refusal of normative, Oedipalized identity trajectories (Dolan famously focuses on the gay or trans-/mother dyad) [...]".[28] Engaging with these early academic sources on Dolan, it becomes apparent that his depictions of marginalized individuals and his queer alternatives to heteronormative narrative structures are what stand out most in his work – regardless of whether you want to see it as a typically Québécois phenomenon or, more convincingly, as a fundamental aspect of human societies, where some people do not conform to the norm.

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24 Hannah Christine Vaughan, "Reimagining the Family in French and Quebeois Cinema" (Ph.D diss., French and Francophone Studies, University of California, 2014), 179.
25 Heron, 5.
26 Sark, 133-134.
27 Massimi, 27.
28 Marshall, 193.

2.2 Queerness and non-normativity

Since this essay will be dealing extensively with cinematic portrayals of non-normative and queer individuals, it seems appropriate to briefly address the meanings of these words. There is certainly a potential for interesting applications of queer theory on Dolan's films, but this thesis will discuss gender identity and sexuality in more general terms, in relation to the films' stylistics and narrative techniques. This means that an extended presentation of gender performativity or a historical outline of queer theory seem somewhat beside the point in this context. While Urrea's and Gil-Arbodela's text on *Laurence Anyways* is a self-expressed Butler-oriented discussion of gender transition and its cinematic depiction, my analyses of Dolan's films are not from one single theoretical perspective and do not have as their aim to apply queer theory on the filmmaker. Thus, I deem it sufficient to briefly explain my usage of the words "queer" and "non-normative" within the context of this thesis, and to save the more detailed discussions of non-normative gender roles for the passages in the film analyses where they have immediate relevance.

It is apparent enough what we mean when we say homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual or transsexual/transgender, but this thesis will engage also with characters that are not clearly defined by the filmic narrative as belonging to any of these categories. This is where the term "queer" can be useful, since it does not define a person's sexual orientation and – more importantly – does not even have to relate to sexuality. Being queer has more to do with being outside of the heteronormative hegemony, about not fitting in – or choosing not to. While a gay person logically can be labelled queer, so can also a heterosexual individual who has a queer personality. S/he can voluntarily play with conventional gender roles and apply an ambivalence to her/his appearance. Marshall makes a clear-sighted definition of queerness in relation to Dolan's work that I feel is very much in lieu with my approach in this thesis: "At one level, 'queer' can simply be a shorthand term that is understood to assemble the categories collected under 'LGBT', with the added piquancy of a general challenge to heteronormativity and its assimilations [...]".[29] Marshall adds: "'Queer' might also be used more productively here for the way in which it problematizes identity itself [...]".[30]

So, the term "queer" is vague by nature, which is why it is frequently used by individuals who feel that sexuality should not be a factor when defining one's identity. However applied, it is a word that seems unavoidable when discussing Dolan's work, since so much of the films' attitudes, the characters' personalities and the on-the-outside-looking-in nature of the director's aesthetics display what Marshall calls a "challenge to heteronormativity". Interestingly, writers on Dolan seem to be able to identify this queerness even in characters that are not depicted as gay and who do not

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29 Ibid, 192.
30 Ibid.

deviate from sexual or gender norms. Steve, the teenage protagonist of *Mommy*, is a telling example of this. He is not defined as either hetero- or homosexual in the film, but he does express sexual attraction to women at some points. Nevertheless, D'Aoust labels Steve as queer in his essay, based on the fact that the boy does not fit into normative society. Through a discussion of "queer vocality" and the marginalized's lack of voice, D'Aoust argues that Steve should be regarded as a queer character:

> Failed vocality, in this case, demonstrates how Steve does not have "voice," if one employs the term as a metaphor for social agency. Steve's failed vocal identification is not simply the linguistic symptom of his social misery or of his mental disorder, but also foregrounds blatant gender struggles in a heteronormative culture […]. In this sense, one might say that Steve's vocal identifications are queer even though the film is unclear about Steve's sexual orientation.[31]

D'Aoust's claim is somewhat validated by the scene in which Steve performs a lip sync to a Céline Dion song, wearing make-up – an act that has nothing to do with a person's sexual preferences but which suggests a queer identity. (More on this scene later.)

"Non-normativity" is perhaps an even vaguer term. By using it, I want to draw attention to the aspects of Dolan's work that are clearly unconventional in nature. There are many characters in his films that are not precisely queer, but who still do not quite follow society's norms. The most obvious examples are the mothers in Dolan's narratives, who are frequently in opposition to their environment. These women are regarded as strange because they are rebellious, make unorthodox life choices and refuse to accept their given roles. This is for example the case with Laurence's mother Julienne in *Laurence Anyways*, who confesses to not having motherly feelings and says that she does not care if she is regarded as a "bad mother". While distinctly dissimilar to Julienne, Nicolas' showbiz mother in *Heartbeats* expresses no regret over having chosen her career over her marriage and parenthood. And both Diane and Kyla in *Mommy* are "failed" mothers in the eyes of society. These women are unconventional, non-normative individuals not in a sexual or a strictly queer sense, but in a fundamental way which relates to their identities, experiences and choices.

Since these definitions are rather abstract it is, of course, difficult to clearly draw the line between who or what is and is not "conventional" or "normative". I will try to make individual cases as I go along, but the focal point will be the portrayed individual's relation to the outside world, her experience of herself, her attitude towards her surroundings and other people's views on her. It should additionally be pointed out that my purpose with this thesis is not to offer a

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31 Jason R. D'Aoust, "The Queer Voices of Xavier Dolan's Mommy," European journal of American studies [online version] 11, no. 3 (2017): 13, accessed: January 30th, 2017. DOI : 10.4000/ejas.11755

classification of Dolan's characters, nor to use them as representatives for certain "types" of identities. The very fact of their ambiguity is an important aspect of Dolan's films, which is why they should not be forced into some inflexible taxonomy, but regarded as alternatives to fixed gender roles and sexualities.

2.3 Whose subjectivity?

When analyzing Dolan's representation of non-normative individuals, my emphasis will be on subjectivity. To avoid misunderstandings, I want to stress that the subjectivity referred to throughout the thesis is *not* the viewer's. This means that I will not be taking into account actual spectators' subjective experiences of the films. When I mention "the viewer", I do so in a theoretical sense to point out how a scene is constructed and what kinds of images the person watching the film is subjected to. To be clear, since the interpretations and analyses in this work are my own, I am the viewer, so to speak. However, I will in some passages discuss how different groups of (hypothetical) viewers might react to the films. For instance, I bring up the fact that a normative viewer may find Dolan's portrayals of non-normative characters difficult to identify with.

The subjectivity dealt with in this thesis is, of course, the characters'. What I am interested in, is in what ways and by what stylistics Dolan expresses these characters' subjectivities. How does he present their self-images? By what means are their subjective perceptions (i.e. their way of seeing) visually represented to us? As I have stated previously, this study of Dolan's work is not a biographical reading of his films. Since Dolan frequently acts in his own films, some find it tempting to speculate on the similarities between the characters and the filmmaker, but this is not something that I will be doing. Even in the chapter on the "free indirect subjective" – where the merging of the protagonist's subjective vision and the director's style is discussed – I am careful not to make assumptions about Dolan's personality.

3. Framing and deframing

Dolan's work displays a close attention to image composition and the use of the filmic frame. Through symmetrical arrangements and experiments in framing which highlight both the on- and off-screen space, Dolan intensifies the subjective nature of his depiction of queer and non-normative characters. Instead of just situating the protagonists and their actions within the frame, Dolan uses the possibilities of the film medium to enhance the spectator's understanding of the characters' inner lives, as well as their perception of the outside world. The aestheticized nature of his compositions mirrors, in various ways, the characters' mindscapes. Dolan's very particular work with framing and symmetry are important areas of investigation in a study of his overall style. I will not have the space to deal exhaustively with each of these stylistics and techniques; the main purpose of this chapter is to establish some of Dolan's recurring aesthetics and cinematographic practices as a starting point for further analysis of his work.

3.1 Symmetry and portraiture

One of the first things that strikes a viewer of a Dolan film, is arguably the symmetrical nature of the director's shots. As Heron states: "The framing of shots and the blocking of characters within them is paramount to the investigation of Dolan's style and this is perhaps no clearer than in his use of symmetrical framing."[32] In Dolan's films, the characters are usually positioned in the center of the frame. If there are two or more of them in the shot, they are symmetrically distributed within the filmic space, for instance one at each side of the image center. This practice is at its most noticeable in his debut, *I Killed My Mother*, where Dolan's placement of the characters becomes almost unnatural, evoking a theater stage with the actors situated beside each other, facing the audience. This tendency towards tableau-like images is less frequent in Dolan's following films, but the positioning of characters within the filmic space and the framing of them (often in close-ups) do exhibit a palpable degree of calculation and intention in all of his work. Yet, it is not a matter of pure aestheticization or a fixation with symmetry for its own sake, but rather a method of crafting portraits (in a double sense) of the characters. They are portrayed both narratively and figurally. Furthermore, not only is the composition of each frame constructed with apparent attention to symmetry, but this symmetry is also used as a tool in the narrative progression. Heron addresses this aspect of Dolan's style:

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32 Heron, 4.

When a frame is composed with complete symmetry, it illustrates all of the points discussed: portraits of characters and their relationships to one another, and the awareness of mediation between the character and the audience. Each of Dolan's films centres around key and sometimes overwhelming relationships and as such, so too does the formal representation. Oscillating between antagonistic and interdependent, these relationships are visually mapped out through symmetrical groupings within shots or shot-reverse-shot systems. They develop an aesthetic harmony that can then be juxtaposed with gaps in the frame when this balance is upset within the story, resulting in an off-kilter atmosphere in the image when that same lack is felt by the characters.[33]

These perceptive observations outline some of the key aspects of Dolan's aesthetics. However, as is the case with his entire video essay, Heron does not go into further detail.

There is a strong element of portraiture in Dolan's films; a character is often framed in such a fashion as to resemble a photographic or painted portrait. Dolan's extensive use of close-ups in combination with his portrait-like aesthetics frequently result in images that focus entirely on a face and its expressions. It has often been noted in film theory how the close-up is a powerful and even grotesque kind of image, distorting or fragmenting the filmed object or person. In her comprehensive essay on the subject, Mary Ann Doane notes that the enormity of a face in close-up paradoxically risks rendering the image of the person *less* individual: "The scale of the close-up transforms the face into an instance of the gigantic, the monstrous: it overwhelms. The face, usually the mark of individuality, becomes tantamount to a theorem in its generalizability. In the close-up, it is truly bigger than life."[34]

Dolan, for his part, is not afraid of the "grotesque" qualities of the close-up, usually offering a large amount of extremely close shots of his characters' faces. This practice follows the same logic as the director's other stylistics. Dolan seems to reason that a non-normative individual can only be convincingly portrayed through unconventional and daring aesthetics. Yes, Dolan risks being regarded as "too much" in his extensive use of close-ups – as well as all his other "flamboyant" stylistic touches – but looking closer at the manner in which these are employed, it becomes clear that they serve the narrative rather than being included for their own sake. This means that there is a peculiar kind of restraint to Dolan's "excess". He is not afraid to include an extreme close-up, a stylized sequence in slow-motion or a mental image – but only if it has a narrative purpose, only if it helps our understanding of the characters.

Dolan's close-ups of faces and portrait-like medium close-ups have become increasingly

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33 Ibid., 4-5.
34 Mary Ann Doane, "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3 (2003): 94.

loaded with emotional significance throughout his work. While being stylized and connected to the characters' mental states in *I Killed My Mother* and *Heartbeats*, the close-ups of the protagonists' faces in *Laurence Anyways*, *Tom at the Farm* and *Mommy* express deeper levels of meaning as these films tackle, respectively, the complex issues of gender identity, homophobia, psychological violence and the inability to conform to society's norms. Still, even in a film like *Heartbeats* – possibly Dolan's most heavily aestheticized and least topical work – there is a relation between the highly colorful images of the characters and their position in society as young, non-normative individuals. In other words, the images are not *just* visually arresting; they express youthful defiance against conformity, as well as the experience of alienation in a normative world. These aesthetics of queer self-representation will be further analyzed in the chapter on Dolan's "music video" sequences.

3.2 Exploring the possibilities of the frame

After the 1.85:1 widescreen format of *I Killed My Mother* and *Heartbeats*, the 1.33:1 (or 4:3) aspect ratio of *Laurence Anyways* marks the first time that Dolan adjusts the actual measurements of the frame to further match the characters' interiorities. The less wide format of *Laurence Anyways* means that Dolan's portrait shots become even more portrait-like, removing some of the "unnecessary" space around a character to focus on more intently on the face. Heron notes how Dolan's symmetry "[...] becomes even more entwined with the concept of the portrait, where the 4:3 framing allows for shots of one and two individuals to fill the frame – or rather, the frame is form fitting to the characters".[35] One illustrative example of this effect is the restaurant scene in which Fred shows her support for Laurence's gender transition by giving her a wig. Dolan films their conversation in classical shot-reverse-shot style, but without including a portion of the character whose vision we share – i.e. we are not looking over their respective shoulders. In a style reminiscent of Yasujiro Ozu's way of framing characters, each of them are alone in their respective frames, looking straight at the camera. This causes an increased awareness of the image composition, as well as a heightened subjectivity. As is frequently the case in *Laurence Anyways*, the viewer shares the subjective point-of-view of the protagonists in this scene. Additionally, the alternating medium close-ups of Fred and Laurence across the table are constructed with total symmetry; the characters are perfectly centred in the images, and framing them in the background are ornamental (symmetrical) patterns.

Dolan takes this technique one step further in *Mommy*, where the aspect ratio is the highly

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35 Heron, 5.

unorthodox 1:1 square. Making a film in this frustrating format in today's cinematic culture of extreme widescreen and often computer generated images is a bold choice. The viewer has to overcome the initial shock of the very limited field of vision – which, in effect, means adapting to another way of seeing. This way of seeing mirrors that of the characters, thus promoting a higher level of identification in the viewer. Both Heron and Marshall propose that the squared images of Instagram and cell phone cameras have influenced Dolan's choice of format for *Mommy*, but such a notion seems irrelevant since it is apparent that the film's aesthetics are in the service of expressing the protagonists' inner lives, especially Steve's. In fact, *Mommy* does not try to capture today's social media culture in any apparent capacity. On the contrary, the film exhibits Dolan's trademark air of anachronism in its lack of computers, cell phones or references to the Internet (one computer and only a couple of outdated cell phones can be seen in passing). The fact that the 1:1 aspect ratio is *expanded into widescreen* at two points in the film further confirms that the format is supposed to give us a better understanding of the protagonists' experience of the surrounding world.

This visually striking experiment with the filmic frame occurs for the first time in the music video-like sequence where we see Steve's, Diane's and Kyla's life together become easier for a brief while. As they experience some weeks of friendship, harmony and fun, the screen gets wider and we are momentarily released from the restricting box in which we have been caged up until now. But shortly after, the screen slowly shrinks back into a square, making us aware of the three characters' narrowing prospects for a happy future. The screen widens again at a later moment in the narrative, when the three of them do their last road trip together before Diane submits Steve to psychiatric care run by the Canadian state. Marshall points out how the employment of the 1:1 aspect ratio is part of a larger stylistic project of Dolan's, where framing, symmetry and the representation of spaces are intimately related to the films' queer themes:

> Space is a preoccupation in Dolan's films in terms of cinematic form, geographies of Québec, and queerness. The bravura moments, briefly marking euphoria, in *Mommy* when the 1:1 aspect ratio – associated with portraiture, mobile phone photography and confinement – is opened out to widescreen are just two examples of the way in which Dolan manipulates the frame to establish structure and pattern and to explore themes associated with movement and stasis.[36]

Although the unusual 1:1 format of *Mommy* draws attention to the instances where the screen widens, it is not the first time that Dolan tries this method to express character psychology. In *Tom at the Farm* the aspect ratio transforms in a similar fashion at two points in the narrative – both

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36 Marshall, 195.

connected to the protagonist's emotional experience. When Tom is chased through a cornfield by the violent Francis, the already widescreen (1.85:1) format slowly changes into the even wider 2.35:1 aspect ratio, rendering the image claustrophobic in a different yet similar way as in *Mommy*. Dolan combines this visually restricting format with jittery close-ups of the action as Francis wrestles Tom to the ground and spits in his mouth. The physical struggle between Tom and Francis gets alarmingly close to the viewer and we are unable to see anything beyond the painful close-ups of the violence and humiliation inflicted upon Tom. When the assault is over the screen widens vertically, marking a decrease in tension. This technique is repeated at the very end of the film when Tom finally escapes the farm and hides from Francis in the woods. Here, again, the horizontally wide but vertically narrow image expresses Tom's fear visually.

Overall, Dolan's choices of camera style have become more and more connected to character psychology. The director's first two films achieve their stylistics primarily through image composition, mise-en-scène and editing. Cinematographer Stéphanie Weber-Biron's camerawork in *I Killed My Mother* and *Heartbeats* is in service of Dolan's aesthetics and storytelling techniques, but does not draw attention to itself. This is particularly the case with the static camera of *I Killed My Mother*, where the style of the film lies almost entirely in the "content" of the images and Dolan's editing, while the cinematography avoids conspicuous flourishes. The less static camerawork in *Heartbeats* logically places greater emphasis on the camera movements and various technical solutions. For instance, there is a large amount of scenes where Weber-Biron uses tracking or dolly shots as the characters move through spaces. Yet, also in this film it is Dolan's manipulation of the images that primarily sets the tone. His extensive use of slow-motion, color filters and distinctive scenography, in combination with the dominating soundtrack of pop songs and classical pieces are the key style elements of *Heartbeats*. These colorful stylistics correspond to the protagonists' intense emotions, as they experience their unrequited love for Nicolas. As Baillargeon states: "The film's exaggerated aesthetic expresses the surplus of investment Marie and Francis have in Nico, allowing the viewer to see through their eyes."[37]

Cinematographer André Turpin's intrusive, highly mobile camera in *Mommy* seems designed to imitate Steve's emotional instability and underline the protagonist's strongly physical presence in the film. The camera movements are frequently nervous and jittery, as if Turpin is trying to keep up with the intense on-screen actions. The many close-ups of the characters' faces further increase the spectator's sense of being *confronted* with them, rather than merely observing their behaviour. This hectic style mirrors Steve's ADHD-affected vision of the world, his short attention span and the abrupt changes in his emotional state.

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37 Baillargeon, 177.

3.3 The threat of the invisible

In *Tom at the Farm*, Turpin's camera is forebodingly close to the protagonist, causing a claustrophobic feeling of not being able to see more than the character – i.e. something threatening may be lurking just outside of the frame. This is reminiscent of what Davide Caputo in his analysis of Roman Polanski's work calls a "tether": the camera can be described as anchored to a leading character, closely following him/her around throughout the entire film, but still having some little room to maneuver. Caputo explains that he uses the term to "[...] account for the slight advantage the camera's (our) view sometimes has over the object to which it is bound".[38] With this technique we stay remarkably close to a character without actually sharing his/her optical point of view. The character's consciousness is what drives the narrative and as viewers we are not able to free ourselves from this fixed perspective. Dolan adopts this style in *Tom at the Farm*, where we are always in the presence of the titular character. Tom's consciousness and perception dominate every scene, causing a sensation of being "tethered" to him and not having the possibility to move around freely within the filmic space.

Bonitzer, who has written extensively about the ambiguous and potentially disquieting nature of on- and off-screen space, remarks: "The cinematic image is haunted by what is not in it."[39] He rightly points out that what we see in a frame is in part dictated by what is not in it. Bonitzer writes: "Contrary to popular opinion, the filmic image is not the imprint and final depository of a unique reality. Characterized by an absence, the filmic image *works* (the *story* makes it work), ingrained with what is not there" [all italics in original, here and in all other quotations].[40] This way, the unseen is a presence in its own right, adding a tension and uncertainty to the images. Bonitzer identifies two aspects of how the out-of-frame affects the cinematic field of vision, pointing to "[...] a double register of lack: (1) 'diachronically', *what is between-two-shots*, (2) 'synchronically', what is *out-of-frame*".[41] Both of these hidden areas, or "blind spots", are traditionally glossed over by narrative techniques which try to convince the viewer that the cinematic space is continuous and real. Classical filmmaking has as its goal to create the illusion of a unified space, a reality which is simply registered by the camera. This means that when the camera tracks, pans or reframes within a space, we are supposed to get the impression of a natural continuation of that location. And when the film takes us from one place to another – for instance from inside a building out onto a street –

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38 Davide Caputo, *Polanski and Perception: The Psychology of Seeing and the Cinema of Roman Polanski* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 203.
39 Pascal Bonitzer, "Off-screen Space", trans. Lindley Hanlon, in *Cahiers du Cinéma Vol 3, 1969-1972: The Politics of Representation*, ed. Nick Browne (London: Routledge, 1990), 293.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.

the aim is to make us believe that these two spaces are actually related to each other just as it is presented on the screen. Bonitzer points out that tension can arise if the suture of the film is suddenly visible to us. Contrary to the convention of invisible editing and the illusion of a continuous geography, Dolan often leaves the gaps visible. This is the case especially in *I Killed My Mother*, where there are hardly any "transitional" shots between scenes. This means that a character is in one space in one scene and then in another in the next scene – lacking are the shots showing us the character's movement between the spaces or how they relate to each other.

Deleuze, too, in his discussion of off-screen space touches upon the disturbing quality that the unseen can acquire. Deleuze proposes his own dual definition of the out-of-field, but aims at a more obscure element which is characteristically described in poetic prose:

> In one case, the out-of-field designates that which exists elsewhere, to one side or around; in the other case, the out-of-field testifies to a more disturbing presence, one which cannot even be said to exist, but rather to 'insist' or 'subsist', a more radical Elsewhere, outside homogeneous space and time. Undoubtedly these two aspects of the out-of-field intermingle constantly.[42]

However we choose to define this uncomfortable unseen presence in the cinematic image, it is certainly there, and filmmakers frequently use it to create suspense. This is a suspense not primarily based on narrative progression, but rather on the viewer's (sometimes unconscious) fear of what awaits "around the corner". Some films are constructed almost entirely around this unknown, invisible threat, effectively exploiting our tendency to expect the worst. We are made to believe that at any moment, if the protagonist (and the camera) just turned around, we could be confronted with an image of horror.

Although not a horror film but rather a psychological thriller, *Tom at the Farm* plays with these expectations harbored by the spectator. Dolan and Turpin create an atmosphere of unidentified menace that permeates the entire mise-en-scène and somehow seems more far-reaching than the actual threat of Francis. Dolan uses classical thriller tropes and deliberate camerawork to depict homophobia and hate crimes in a manner which elevates them to an all-encompassing dark force. In effect, the very landscape of the rural surroundings in *Tom at the Farm* seems imbued with sinister intentions and promises of physical and psychological abuse. As Massimi states: "What seems at first to be a narrative about the cultural clash between the modernity of the city and the backwardness of the rural environment quickly turns into a tale of psychological horror, where brutality and repression are employed as metaphors of a never outspoken but constantly present

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42 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013 [1986]), 21.

homophobia."[43]

3.4 Frames within frames

The symmetry of Dolan's framing and image composition is present even when there are no characters in a shot. While in *I Killed My Mother* and *Heartbeats* there are hardly any shots devoid of people, *Laurence Anyways* introduces the motif of empty domestic spaces. These interiors are carefully arranged in a symmetrical fashion, with doorways and hallways acting as frames within the frame. There is definitely something Ozu-like about these domestic spaces. Laurence's and Fred's apartment is presented almost as a character in itself; the long, very dark hallway leading to the couple's bedroom is shown multiple times, always from a distance, making it look unnaturally long and slightly threatening. Laurence's parents' home is similarly gloomily presented, with long shots of Laurence's mother moving through their (likewise dark) hallway to answer the alarming telephone calls from her son-soon-to-be-daughter. The foreboding atmosphere permeating these domestic spaces seems to match both the traumatic experiences of the protagonists and the transition that they are going through. By alternately tracking through or statically framing these hallways, Dolan evokes the sense of painful but unavoidable change; Laurence's gender dysphoria as an unstoppable force that has to be released. Heron remarks: "Doorways and hallways have always had a significant place in Dolan's films, embodying characters' movements to and from domestic spaces as the camera tracks in or out."[44] However, in *Laurence Anyways* these liminal spaces are more symbolically charged, having a direct relation to the film's theme of (gender) transition.

The practice of letting dark portions of the image act as frames within the frame is common in Dolan's films since *Laurence Anyways*. However, not all of these instances have the same symbolism or narrative function. For example, Dolan ends a restaurant dinner between Fred and Laurence with an extreme long shot from outside of the building. We see them as miniatures framed by a window, while the rest of the screen is filled with darkness. At this moment they are happy together, and the greatly emphasized distance between us and them signals their intimate relationship, which we are not invited to share. Yet, at the same time, the immense darkness awaiting them outside of their tiny restaurant window reminds us of the trials that their love is going through. It seems to point to the indifferent ignorance of a society where non-normative individuals have no place. There is a similar scene in *Mommy*, where Diane and Kyla have had an evening of friendly conversation and shared laughs. They are sitting next to a kitchen window as Dolan cuts

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43 Massimi, 25.
44 Heron, 4.

from the interior to the exterior of the house. Diane and Kyla are still laughing but suddenly we see them from a distance, framed by the window, which in turn is framed by the darkness of the night. In this instance, too, there is the double symbolism of a private moment that we are excluded from *and* the external threat to this friendship – a foreshadowing of the film's tragic ending.

Dolan furthermore uses the visual motif of an encasing darkness in a scene depicting Laurence's birthday celebration. As Laurence, Fred and their friends are gathered around a table with a birthday cake, the seemingly festive atmosphere is contradicted by multiple visual and sonic elements. Accompanied by melancholic instrumental music, the camera pulls further and further back from the group of people, pausing at a distance where we are led to observe their lively interaction with a questioning gaze. The effect is that we regard the birthday party not as a joyous occasion, but as yet another social situation where Laurence has to perform the role of being a man. Dolan cuts to a medium close-up of Laurence blowing out the candles on the cake and smiling sadly. In this scene, the switches between long shots of the whole room and close-ups of Laurence cause an interesting oscillation between objectively and subjectively tinged images. While at a distance, we look at the whole event with skeptical eyes, perhaps feeling sorry for Laurence but still observing her from an external point of view. On the other hand, the close shots of Laurence with the birthday cake in front of her (symbolizing all the years spent in denial) invite us into the protagonist's subjective realm, even without direct point-of-view shots.

Dolan's symmetrical constructions of frames within frames are striking stylistic features also when the motif of darkness is not present. As stated above, windows and doorways are prominently featured in the filmmaker's mise-en-scène, resulting in shots that consist of rectangular openings and a depth-of-field which allows for action on different levels simultaneously. Writing about Dolan's style in *Tom at the Farm*, Marshall notes how "[...] in a striking shot he films a conversation between Agathe and Tom where she is framed in the kitchen window as he sits on the rocking bench outside. We have seen how these ambivalent images in Dolan paradoxically combine connotations of separateness and connectedness."[45] This scene with Tom and the mother of his deceased boyfriend visually illustrates the divide that separates them. Through Tom's position on the porch, while Agathe is inside the house, Dolan underlines their opposing world-views and the barrier between them. At the same time, the window through which they communicate acts as a symbol of a potential understanding which has yet to emerge. What is subtly expressed here, is the difference between Tom's muted grief over his dead boyfriend (which he is forced to keep hidden) and Agathe's entitled sorrow over losing a son, which renders her even less sensitive to Tom's perspective. They share a loss but are unable console each other.

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45 Marshall, 207.

Marshall identifies the work with framing as one of Dolan's central stylistics, and observes how "[...] the emboîtement [encasement] of frames within frames hints at relays of interconnectedness with what is out-of-field [...]".[46] He quotes a passage from Deleuze, where the latter states: "The out-of-field refers to what is neither seen nor understood, but is nevertheless perfectly present."[47] This brings us back to the question of off-screen space and the unidentified presence lurking there. In Deleuze's theories the out-of-field also designates the cinematic "divisibility of content", where one set is always part of another set, which in turn is part of another, "on to infinity".[48] He explains: "[...] when a set is framed, therefore seen, there is always a larger set, or another set with which the first forms a larger one, and which can in turn be seen, on condition that it gives rise to a new out-of-field, etc".[49] Dolan's work with frames within frames seems to greatly correspond to what Deleuze and Marshall are circling. Via his mise-en-scène and camerawork, Dolan uses the intrinsic possibility of dividing the cinematic image into sub-frames which visualize psychological aspects of the characters and emphasize the films' themes. Experiences of isolation, fear and lack of communication are made manifest through the motif of thresholds, hallways and in other ways geometrical, divided spaces. This visual extension of the characters' predicaments is an important clue as to the nature of Dolan's subjective portrayals of non-normative individuals; something that is not spelled out, yet perfectly present in the images if we only look closely at them.

3.5 Deframing

In his essays on off-screen space and framing, Bonitzer has put forward the highly interesting concept of "deframing". Bonitzer's starting point is Erwin Panofsky's questioning of the "realistic" renaissance perspective in painting and its convention of adhering to the spectator's gaze. Bonitzer, relating Panofsky's comparison of two paintings depicting St Jerome, writes:

> By way of an example Panofsky opposes Antonello da Messina's *St Jerome* – painted in deep
> perspective and situating the point of view at the painting's centre, a continuation which holds the
> spectator 'outside' the scene – to Dürer, whose short perspective and oblique view produce an effect
> of intimacy and give the impression of 'a representation determined not by the objective laws of
> architecture but by the subjective point of view of a spectator happening on the scene'. In a way,
> then, the reduction of distance and the obliqueness of point of view 'snatch' the spectator into the

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46 Ibid., 195.
47 Deleuze, 19.
48 Ibid., 20.
49 Ibid.

painting's interior.[50]

This is clearly applicable also to cinema where oblique angles, unconventional points-of-view and off-center positioning of the action have the potential of creating higher levels of subjectivity. The images become less neutral when they no longer propose to be objective representations, but instead exhibit an intention that seems to originate from someone's subjective gaze. As Bonitzer notes: "There is a potential for *upsetting* the point of view or the situations which belong specifically to cinema."[51] This is very much the case in Dolan's work, where the camera angles are frequently unusually high or low, the characters are often situated in unorthodox spatial relations to each other, and the actions sometimes occur outside of the frame. For instance, Baillargeon observes regarding *Heartbeats*: "Many off-center wide-angle shots with a blurry background enigmatically show Marie or Francis gazing off-screen; lost in the emptiness of space, the characters' reactions are left to the viewer to decode."[52]

As another example of how unusual perspectives in art can upset the image composition and increase the level of subjectivity experienced by the spectator, Bonitzer analyzes Diego Velázquez's famous painting *Las Meninas* (1656), which "[...] portrays a scene whose principal participants are situated beyond the painting, in the very space of the spectator. Their image is murkily evoked in the deep background in the mirror placed at the painting's perspectival vanishing point (an image, needless to say, of Philip IV of Spain and his wife) […]".[53] Bonitzer's discussion follows Foucault's well-known analysis of *Las Meninas*, in which he details how the self-portrayed painter looks at the missing subjects of the painting. Foucault writes: "He is staring at a point to which, even though it is invisible, we, the spectators, can easily assign an object, since it is we, ourselves, who are that point [...]".[54] This technique of positioning the spectator in the place of the protagonist is exactly what Dolan employs in some of his work, most prominently in *Laurence Anyways*. As will be detailed in the coming chapters of this thesis, there are multiple instances where the viewer shares the optical perspective of the protagonist, which of course increases the subjective nature of the images – but simultaneously deprives us of the image of Laurence, in whose skin we are located at that moment. This is the case especially in the opening sequence of *Laurence Anyways*, where anonymous onlookers stare into the camera, at us, drawing the spectator's attention to the peculiar lack of an identifiable subject within the frame. Bonitzer concludes on the missing subjects of *Las*

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50 Bonitzer, "Deframings", trans. Chris Darke, in *Cahiers du Cinéma Vol 4, 1973-1978: History, Ideology, Cultural Struggle*, ed. David Wilson (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 197.
51 Ibid., 201.
52 Baillargeon, 176.
53 Bonitzer, "Deframings", 198.
54 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994 [1966]), 4.

Meninas: ”[...] what renders them so present, so necessary to the scene, is that the looks of all the characters in the painting are directed towards them [...]”.[55]

The above discussed perspectival techniques are, however, not exactly – or not only – what Bonitzer wants to include in the term ”deframing”. Deleuze writes: ”Bonitzer has constructed the interesting concept of 'deframing' [*décadrage*] in order to designate these abnormal points of view which are not the same as an oblique angle or a paradoxical angle, and refer to another dimension of the image.”[56] Bonitzer explains the concept by describing a painting depicting a woman looking at something off-frame, which causes her to scream in horror. He notes how the mysterious origin of the woman's fear is destined to remain unidentified in a painting or a photograph, since there is no ”next image” which can provide a clarification. Cinema, on the other hand, due to its reliance on movement is expected to offer an explanation in the subsequent shots. When this for some reason fails to happen, the viewer is unsatisfied, left with a feeling of unresolved tension and unease. This is one form that deframing can take, according to Bonitzer. There are filmmakers who work intentionally with these gaps within or between images; Bonitzer lists Michelangelo Antonioni, Robert Bresson and Jean-Marie Straub among others. He writes: ”Through their deployment of unusual and frustrating framings [...] [t]hey introduce to cinema something like a non-narrative suspense. Their scenography of lacunae is not destined to resolve itself into a 'total image' [...]”.[57] The idea of a non-narrative suspense is certainly applicable to some aspects of Dolan's work. It is closely related to the previously discussed unseen, menacing presence in *Tom at the Farm*, where a large part of the characters' motivations are unknown to us and many shots end abruptly without having provided us with sufficient information or significant narrative progression.

In his essay on deframing, Bonitzer also brings up ”mutilated” images and exemplifies this style with Bresson's practice of turning a filmic space or a character's face into fragments. This can be achieved through unconventional shots that only show a portion of the whole scene, or extreme close-ups. Deleuze calls these kinds of shots ”cutting close-ups” and notes: ”Sometimes the frame cuts a face horizontally, vertically or aslant, obliquely.”[58] András Bálint Kovács makes a similar observation on Bresson's style, noting that ”[...] the scene that was supposed to be visualized became visually mutilated”.[59] He explains: ”In many cases Bresson used medium close-ups whose composition was unclear at the start of the shot. Objects or human bodies are cut off in an unusually nonfunctional manner. In certain cases it is clearly impossible to discern what is shown in the

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55 Bonitzer, ”Deframings”, 198.
56 Deleuze, 19.
57 Bonitzer, ”Deframings”, 200.
58 Deleuze, 120.
59 András Bálint Kovács, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 142.

picture."[60] Dolan "mutilates" some of his images like this. *I Killed My Mother*, in particular, has multiple instances of cutting close-ups which only show a portion of a face or an object. Hubert's video diary as well as some shots of Chantale eating are of this nature. Baillargeon identifies this tendency also in *Heartbeats*. She points out how Dolan in this film frequently employs "[...] an unsettling hand-held camera framing a body part – a tightening of the lips, a twisting of the hands, the exhaling of a cigarette […]".[61] These close-ups of hands, facial features and seemingly random objects are one of the ways in which Dolan underlines his characters' mental states.

There is one stylistic feature of *I Killed My Mother* where Bonitzer's term deframing seems particularly relevant. We are repeatedly presented with two characters sitting side by side at a table, instead of opposite each other, which would arguably be the conventional way of staging a conversation cinematically. After an establishing shot showing both of them in the frame, there is an abrupt cut to a medium close-up of one of the characters, who is *not* centred but instead positioned at one side of the image. The other half of the frame is left "empty", revealing a large portion of wallpaper or the room behind the character. What makes these shots all the more perplexing is that the character who sits, for example, to the left in the establishing shot is positioned to the right in the solo shot – i.e. the frame cuts off the image to the right just at the place where the other character is located. In his description of deframing, Deleuze highlights the focus on "[...] empty spaces like those of Ozu, which frame a dead zone, or in disconnected spaces as in Bresson, whose parts are not connected and are beyond all narrative or more generally pragmatic justification [...]."[62] This resembles Dolan's strange framing in *I Killed My Mother*, where large portions of the images are left "unused" for no apparent reason. Yet, as illogical and unexplained as these deframed shots may appear, Dolan's decision to promptly show each character alone, spatially separated from the other, can be seen as symbolic of their lack of communication. This is at its most prominent in the scenes between Hubert and his mother Chantale, who have severe difficulties understanding each other.

Bonitzer remarks on the style of films where deframing occurs: "There is here a tension that persists from shot to shot and which the 'story' does not eliminate: a transnarrative tension arising from the angles, framings, choices of objects and temporal durations which highlight the insistence of a look [...]".[63] There is definitely the sense of a subjective perception, of someone's "look", which controls the images in Dolan's films. This is a key area of investigation for this thesis – one that I will try to describe and identify throughout the following chapters.

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60 Ibid.
61 Baillargeon, 176.
62 Deleuze, 19.
63 Bonitzer, "Deframings", 200.

4. Interior images

While the techniques and stylistics detailed in the previous chapter are somewhat difficult to label and group, Dolan sometimes employs more easily pinpointed cinematic expressions of character psychology. This chapter examines Dolan's infrequent inclusion of mental or interior images (I use the terms interchangeably). In my definition, an interior image is an image that takes place only inside a character's mind and is not part of the actual events of the narrative. Following these criteria, there is evidently a major difference between a scene within the filmic reality where a character's mind *affects* its stylistics – indicating to us that what we see is not neutral or objective but subjective – and a scene that does not occur in the reality inhabited by the character but only in his/her head. This second category is of course easier to earmark and to attribute to a specific character's psyche with certainty. Still, there are many kinds of interior images and they perform varying functions in films, something that will be examined more closely in the following sections.

4.1 Associative mental images

Sometimes Dolan's narratives pause momentarily to include a mental image which shows us a character's opinion of a situation or a person. I have chosen to call such instances "associative mental images". These brief disruptions of the narrative progression are completely internal but function as "comments" on a current event. As such, they differ from, say, a dream sequence or a longer imagined scenario or fantasy.

An instance where Dolan includes associative mental images occurs in *Laurence Anyways* after Laurence has been beaten by a man who was "provoked" by her appearance. Traumatized by the violent assault, Laurence is walking down a street with blood on her face and tears in her eyes. Here Dolan inserts still images of grotesque faces from paintings by Hieronymus Bosch – an association that we must conclude takes place inside Laurence's head. Presumably, she conjures up these ugly and deviant individuals in her mind because she imagines that this is what people see when they look at her. Bosch's depictions of misfits and unwanted figures are thus associated with today's "misfits", as the normative society views them.

A similar type of associative mental images can be found in *Heartbeats*. While at a party at Nicolas' apartment, Marie and Francis watch their love interest dance with his mother (who wears an eye-catching blue wig, denoting non-normativity). Suddenly, the ordinary room transforms into a dance floor drenched in blue strobe light as the mother and son move in slow-motion to The Knife's *Pass This On*. The dramatic visuals and the emphasized sensuality of the dance suggest that Francis'

and Marie's jealous mental states affect the scene's aesthetics. Here, Dolan inserts images of Michelangelo's statue of David and Jean Cocteau's homoerotic drawings (both resembling Nicolas' features and curly hair). These brief, intercut shots provide illustrations of Francis' and Marie's opinion of Nicolas: that he is the ideal of beauty.

Because of these inserted associative images, which are apparently in the minds of the two protagonists, the entire scene is imbued with a greater level of subjectivity. Baillargeon states that "[...] the tension between what is real and what is imaginary is omnipresent; the characters' romantic feelings create a fantasy that drives the story forward".[64] This is in part true, but I want to clarify that there is no actual confusion surrounding what is real and what is fantasy in *Heartbeats*. The images that take place inside the protagonists' minds are clearly signalled as imaginary, while the rest of the events are apparently happening in the filmic reality. It should be addressed that in this particular scene the interior images originate from *two* characters, which is somewhat strange and brings into question in what way these consciousnesses share a subjective vision. But Dolan clarifies this confusion by connecting the respective sets of inserted images to one character each. After a prolonged shot of Marie staring wide-eyed at the dancing Nicolas, the fragmented images of the statue of David are intercut. Likewise, Cocteau's drawings are introduced by a shot of Francis looking at Nicolas.

Dolan uses associative mental images in another fashion in *I Killed My Mother*, where Hubert recurringly imagines his mother Chantale in various dramatic settings. These instances are related to the narrative situations and clearly dependent upon the highly emotional mental states of the protagonist. Vaughan observes: "Because Dolan portrays much of the film's mother-son conflict by way of disturbingly antagonistic dialogue, the non-diegetic fantasy images and sequences often interrupt the chaotic arguments and shed light on the inner workings of Hubert's mind."[65] A striking example of this occurs directly after Chantale disappoints Hubert by retracting her promise of letting the teenager move into his own apartment – something that would have solved their domestic problems, in his view. After their heated argument, Dolan cuts to a high-angle shot of Chantale's face as she lies dead in a coffin. The image comes as something of a shock although we quickly gather that it is highly improbable that Chantale is actually dead.

A similar associative mental image is inserted at another emotionally charged point in the narrative. Hubert is furious with Chantale after he finds a letter from the boarding school that confirms his continued enrollment the coming year. Since he is home alone at this moment, he starts throwing his mother's things on the floor, although mostly pillows and objects than are not easily

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64 Baillargeon, 175.
65 Vaughan, 171.

broken. This is shown at an accelerated film speed. Lifting a ceramic bowl over his head, ready to hurl it to the floor, he stops and the speed decreases as he ponders his intended action. Here, an image of Chantale as a blood-crying nun is inserted, as if Hubert realizes that she would use his demolition of their home against him in some kind of enacted martyrdom. Vaughan addresses the artificial nature of this interior image: "Though disturbing, the image is highly stylized. Nothing about it appears real; her bloody tears are clearly painted on, she holds fake red roses, and faint white strings and clouds made of cotton surround her, transforming her into a sort of theater puppet."[66]

There is a humorous quality to these overly dramatic imaginary images of Chantale, which is highlighted by their unnatural aesthetics. Since the style of *I Killed My Mother* seems more or less dictated by Hubert's consciousness and opinions, the fact that he makes these darkly comical associations indicates that he has a sense of humor about his situation, after all. A less subtle display of this humor can be seen in the associative mental image that Hubert conjures up when his mother announces that she and her sister are going to a tanning salon. The shot inserted at this point is of the two women standing in a live "tableau", facing the camera; they are wearing outrageous, outdated swimming suits and have fruits and flower decorations on their heads. At each of their sides stands a young man in skimpy animal print swimwear, holding a pineapple. This is clearly Hubert internally mocking his mother's love of kitsch, but the image does not suggest hostility in its comical over-the-top composition.

As a final example of Dolan's use of associative mental images, there is one particularly noteworthy shot in *Heartbeats*. Following the termination of Marie's and Francis' friendship with Nicolas because of their rivalry for him, there is a brief scene of Francis buying marshmallows at a shop. Due to an earlier episode where Nicolas jokingly yet erotically taught Francis how to eat marshmallows, we understand that he buys this candy because he misses Nicolas. Here Dolan inserts a striking medium close-up of Nicolas standing shirtless against a monochromatic blue background, looking downward with the hint of a smile on his face, while marshmallows are raining down over him. This is a highly artificial, completely imaginary image that functions as an emblem of Nicolas' inaccessibility; his knowing smile suggests that he is aware of his effect on people and that he enjoys toying with their emotions. But, of course, since this image exists only inside Francis' head, this is just *his* view of Nicolas. In other words, the image does not tell us anything about Nicolas' motivations or whether he is actually being manipulative.

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66 Ibid, 172.

4.2 Affective mental images

In *Laurence Anyways* Dolan introduces a type of mental image previously unused by him. It is perhaps best explained by means of an example. Fred, having been apart from Laurence for years and now living with her husband and small child, receives a copy of her former partner's new book of poetry. When she realizes that Laurence's poems are about their relationship, the emotional impact overwhelms her. As the she sits in her living room reading, the camera zooms in on her while the sound of water can be heard on the soundtrack; suddenly a mass of water pours over her, soaking the entire living room. Since it is clear that this does not (and cannot) happen in the reality of the film, we have to accept that the scene is a visualization of Fred's feelings. For lack of a better term I label these instances "affective mental images", because of their emotional influence upon an actual narrative event. In contrast to the associative mental images, these affective images do not occur in an inserted, purely interior shot, which disrupts another scene. Instead, the mental state of a character affects a "real" event in an obviously impossible manner. This impossible quality is what sets these images apart from other scenes where a character's state of mind affects the aesthetics of a situation. Whereas a color filter, slow-motion, music or a certain style of camerawork may indicate a subjective perspective in a scene, these affective mental images contain elements which clearly do not occur in the narrative and therefore has to take place inside a character's mind.

To complicate an already complex classification of images, Fred and Laurence *share* some of these affective mental images throughout *Laurence Anyways*. In fact, one of the film's key scenes is of this kind. After having read Laurence's poems, Fred agrees to them going on a vacation together, to examine if they could try again as a couple. Their trip goes to a (fictional) place called the Black Island (Île-au-Noir), which is depicted as a remote and peaceful refuge of sorts. Marshall connects this location to the Foucauldian concept of "heterotopia":

> Rather than an actually existing 'place', Dolan here sets up a space which is not utopian (Fred is mortified by its faux bohemian nature and returns to her husband and son) but which constitutes a narrative pause where Laurence's quest for recognition and for a non-differentiation in difference, in other words a difference of transgender which makes no difference in the world, is momentarily satisfied [...] In the highly influential 1967 essay, 'Des espaces autres', Foucault wrote of those spaces which do not quite fit into the contemporary regime of classifying and establishing relations between sites.[67]

The first scene from Fred's and Laurence's visit to the Black Island is a sequence of shots of the two

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67 Marshall, 202.

of them walking happily through a small town, while colorful items of clothing are raining down on them. Like in the scene where water pours over Fred, there is of course no doubt about the unreal nature of this "fashion rain"; it is a visual manifestation of their shared mental state. Urrea and Gil-Arboleda interpret the scene similarly to Marshall. They note how the Black Island "[...] represents a break from the norm and the freedom of being in a place away from daily life, and this sensation is reinforced by the sequence in which clothing falls from the sky as they walk".[68] Urrea and Gil-Arboleda interestingly see the island as a "place without a society", which matches the film's overall theme of society's marginalization of non-normative individuals and their need to find their own space, someplace they can be themselves.

The term "heterotopia" indeed seems appropriate here, since the Black Island represents an alternative space, where non-hegemonic conditions prevail. It is a place where Laurence and Fred can experience being visible as a couple without fearing society's reactions – yet staying there is not a realistic solution to their problems. The Black Island exists in the reality of the film, but at the same time it represents a mental state, an interior space where the protagonists can seek refuge temporarily, while they reconsider their options. As Foucault says of heterotopias: "Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality."[69] Laurence and Fred have to travel to the island by water, further signalling its separateness from the "real" world of their everyday lives, as well as strengthening the relation to Foucault's concept. He notes how the boat is "the heterotopia par excellence", since it is "[...] a floating piece of space, a place without a place [...]".[70]

Sark, paying close attention to costume and colors in her reading of *Laurence Anyways*, highlights the clothes falling from the sky as symbolic and crucial for the film. In her reading, the scene signifies the protagonists' "[...] temporary liberation from the social, familial, and personal restraints they live under, and their unrestrained joy at being able to express their true selves [...]".[71] Sark additionally notes: "Their walk is shown in slow motion—Dolan is slowing down time here to allow the viewer and his protagonists to take in the full pleasure of this moment [...]".[72] The falling clothes logically refer to gender performativity. Since clothing is the primary outward expression of gender in our society, they represent both liberation and repression for Laurence. All her life, she has dressed in men's attire which has restricted her possibilities of showing her true identity. Now

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68 Àngela Urrea and Mariana Gil-Arboleda, "*Laurence Anyway*s: The Transgression, Narrative and *Mise-en-Scène* of Transition," Synoptique 4, no. 2 (Winter 2016): 138, accessed: August 17th, 2016.

69 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias and Utopias," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984): 3-4. [Online source: http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf]

70 Ibid., 9.

71 Sark, 132.

72 Ibid.

that Laurence is living as a woman, she is finally "allowed" (although the permission comes only from herself, since society still regards her as deviant) to use colorful and expressive clothes. The very colorful sartorial items falling from the sky underscore this liberating aspect.

Another symbolic and unexplained occurrence which clearly only happens in the protagonists' minds, is when a butterfly comes out of Laurence's mouth at the moment of their break-up. They sit in a café as Fred tells Laurence that she wants them to separate. When it is apparent that they have nothing more to add on the matter, Laurence looks at Fred for an extended moment, opens her mouth and a butterfly emerges – after which Laurence winks mysteriously at Fred and asks the waiter for the check. Like the falling clothes sequence, this utterly surreal shot disrupts the otherwise mostly realistic mode of the film, and disorients the viewer with its sheer strangeness. One possible interpretation of the shot is that by breaking up with Laurence, Fred is actually setting her partner free from societal demands. Laurence can now continue her transition from man to woman without the expectations of normativity that a relationship is likely to bring. Like a butterfly emerging from its pupal state as a colorful winged creature, Laurence is now free to pursue her true gender identity.

4.3 Facelessness

In *Tom at the Farm* there is just one mental image: a shot which provides a shock effect in accordance with the thriller genre of the film. The first morning at the farm, the day of his boyfriend's funeral, Tom stands in the shower. We are presented with a medium close-up of him as he covers his eyes with his hands for a moment. Suddenly the shower curtain is pulled back and there is a quick shot of a faceless face, seen from Tom's optical point-of-view. The horrific image is literally a face without any features; no eyes or mouth. The next second, the curtain *is* actually pulled back, and we get a close-up of Francis as he instructs Tom not to wear perfume at the funeral. Before he leaves, Francis looks down (off-frame) at what we can assume is Tom's penis, a demonstrative act that highlights Tom's vulnerability and humiliation. It also indicates the possibility of Francis' repressed attraction to men.

The faceless figure in the shower is clearly a mental image, seen only by Tom. The withholding of characters' faces is a recurring motif in *Tom at the Farm*, which is established by not letting us see Tom properly in the film's introduction, and then by only filming Agathe from behind or obscured by objects in her first scenes. Francis, too, is introduced to us as a faceless body. Our first encounter with him takes place when he comes home late on the night of Tom's arrival and attacks the guest in the dark bedroom. As he puts his hand over Tom's mouth and warns him not to

tell Agathe about her son's homosexuality, Francis' face is obscured by the darkness. The next morning, at breakfast, Francis enters the kitchen and stands shirtless behind Tom. The deframed shot cuts off Francis' head, presenting him as pure, physical masculinity – an obvious contrast and potential threat to the marginalized, gay character of Tom. We eventually get to study the characters' faces in close-ups throughout the film, but the postponed first images of them cause a tension that persists even after they are made visible. Bonitzer's theories of the non-narrative suspense and unresolved tension caused by deframing come to mind. The face of Guillaume, Tom's deceased boyfriend, is the one that is withheld the longest. There is a brief flashback of the two of them singing karaoke, but the shot does not reveal Guillaume's facial features even though it is apparent that he is present in the memory. When Guillaume's face is finally shown, it is in a quick shot of a blurry photograph – an unsatisfactory, anti-climactic visualization of a character so central to the narrative. In fact, in line with Bonitzer's writings on the power of the unseen, Guillaume seems *more* present when he is not visible but only talked about by the other characters.

The film's visual motif of facelessness can be interpreted as the invisibility of the marginalized; Tom and Guillaume are gay but cannot express this aspect of their identities in the menacing rural milieu. The facelessness also relates to the theme of interchangeability between characters in *Tom at the Farm.* Tom begins to see Francis as a substitute for Guillaume, while Tom in turn is a substitute for the girlfriend/wife that Francis says he wants but seems unable to acquire. Additionally, Agathe is reminded of her son by Tom's presence, and urges him to stay with them for a while – indicating that he could perhaps take Guillaume's place.

4.4 An imaginary flash-forward

The sole interior sequence in *Mommy* is of a kind never used before by Dolan and fairly unusual in cinema in general: an imaginary flash-forward. At the picnic held for Steve before Diane submits him to state hospital care she imagines his future if he were to live a normal, free life. Since the viewer does not know at this juncture that Diane has decided to have Steve hospitalized, the long, highly emotionally charged flash-forward depicting Steve's coming of age and life as a grown man comes as a complete surprise. While Steve and Kyla fools around on the beach where the picnic takes place, the camera zooms in on Diane's face, after which Dolan initiates the fantasy sequence. Accompanied by intense, string-based instrumental music, we see Steve graduating, introducing a girlfriend, having a child, marrying etc. All of these events are depicted in brief, fragmentary scenes without dialogue, as the camera lens goes in and out of focus repeatedly. The tone is bittersweet; a memory of the future, so to speak, in which Diane remembers the highlights of her son's distinctly

normal life. The sequence is almost five minutes long and halfway through there is a change of actor in the role of Steve to establish that he is fully grown. Watching this summary of the coming years in the protagonists' lives, there is no way of knowing for certain that this is imaginary and only taking place in Diane's mind – it could well be that Dolan is moving the narrative forward in time to spend the rest of the film depicting a later point in their lives. But as we are presented with idyllic scenes from Steve's wedding, the images get increasingly blurry and the camera movements mimic the dizziness felt by Diane as she envisions this alternative future. Suddenly we are in a car with Diane behind the wheel, Kyla in the backseat and Steve still fifteen years old.

The imaginary flash-forward in *Mommy* is an important component in the understanding of Diane's subjective perspective. She is depriving her son of his freedom by placing him in a psychiatric facility, yet she wants more than anything to see him happy and having a normal life. The emphasis on the normalcy of Steve's grown life in Diane's fantasy is especially interesting. Her inner visions of him becoming a father and marrying a sweet, normal girl could in the hands of another filmmaker arguably be attributed to storytelling conventions and a wish to please the audience by providing (hetero)normative images that are easy to identify with for most viewers. But as Dolan spends not only *Mommy* but all of his films depicting non-normative individuals, it seems that the strikingly conventional content of the flash-forward is intentional and must be attributed to Diane herself. Being a single mother and a widow, not earning enough money, and having a child with great difficulties adapting to society's norms, she fantasizes about *normalcy*.

However, the fantasy does not include a future male partner for Diane – instead it is Kyla who is present at all the occasions shown in the flash-forward. A reasonable interpretation of this slightly odd lack of male figures (Kyla's husband is not seen in the sequence either) is that Diane secretly hopes to live her life with Kyla. There is no explicit sexual tension or romantic love between the two women, but at several points in the film it is possible to detect a deeper meaning to their words, their eye contact and the fact that they seem perfectly happy to raise Steve together. If this is the case, the flash-forward takes on a significantly less normative quality and Diane's wish for Steve to be "normal" can be further explained by her knowledge of her own non-(hetero)normativity.

As I have tried to show in this chapter, the various kinds of mental images in Dolan's films have the important function to mediate the characters' opinions, hopes, dreams and disappointments. While taking place "outside of" the narrative, they nevertheless play key parts in our insight into the characters' minds.

5. Music video aesthetics

This chapter deals with what I haven chosen to call Dolan's "music video aesthetics". The sequences referred to with this expression, are the ones where non-diegetic music plays over a montage of shots that together stylistically resemble a music video. This type of sequence is a very recurrent feature in Dolan's films, with the exception of *Tom at the Farm*. Usually combined with a pop song, a sequence of this kind shows one or several characters without dialogue. There is usually some narrative progression within these "music videos", but their main function is to provide stylized visualizations of subjective experiences – heightened moments in a character's life. What sets these sequences apart from Dolan's other uses of music or subjectively charged scenes, is that they seem to borrow their aesthetics, editing techniques and modes of address from contemporary music videos. It is as if the film pauses and the character(s) act(s) in a music video directed by themselves. Some of these sequences are accompanied by classical music, which naturally makes them less like music videos for pop songs, but they may still showcase the same kind of editing and aesthetics. In most of these sequences Dolan uses slow-motion, which further differentiates them from the rest of the film and intensifies the sense of increased character subjectivity. As Heron notes: "The heightened perspective of a character and the audience's observation coalesce most notoriously in Dolan's use of slow motion. Initially a point of comparison to other filmmakers, Dolan has laid claim to this device across his five films. It is used in moments of revelry, revelation, and performance."[73]

5.1 Queer and non-normative self-representation

Dalida's Italian version of "Bang Bang" from 1967 becomes something of a theme song in *Heartbeats*. It is played in more or less its entirety at two points in the film, both times in combination with shots of Marie and Francis preparing before a meeting with Nicolas. The first sequence occurs early on in the narrative when the protagonists are invited to meet Nicolas at a café. As the Dalida track plays, we see Marie applying make-up and Francis putting on perfume in slow-motion. They are in their respective apartments, positioned in front of mirrors, seemingly trying to perfect a look that they hope will appeal to Nicolas. The music and the slow-motion continues as they walk separately to the café. Here Dolan gives us a montage of tracking shots from the side and behind, as well as medium close-ups of them from the front. These shots highlight their clothes and hair styles, fragmenting their bodies into parts – not unlike a catwalk at a fashion show.

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73 Heron, 3.

Francis' trendy, contemporary hairdo, red jeans and striped t-shirt are juxtaposed with Marie's cerise dress of 1950s style. They both give a strong impression of performance and self-representation, as if the characters are aware of being looked at, both by people in the street and by the spectators of the film. Heron, too, has noticed the performative nature of Dolan's slow-motion sequences: "[…] paired with music, there is the feeling that these moments represent the characters' own self-representation – not just embodying their emotional state, but also how they would direct the moment themselves or at least demonstrative of how they are aware they are being watched".[74]

The procedure is repeated at a later point in *Heartbeats*, when Marie and Francis get ready for a party at Nicolas' place. "Bang Bang" plays on the soundtrack as they purchase expensive gifts for Nicolas (an old-fashioned hat and a tangerine cashmere sweater, which they believe will go well together with his golden locks). Baillargeon observes how "[...] Marie and Francis both buy Nico new clothes for his birthday; they literally mold him into becoming their ideal object of desire".[75] Then, again, the theatrical walk towards the party in slow-motion, with the camera and editing dividing the protagonists' items of clothing into fragments. These "music video" sequences are emblematic of *Heartbeats* as a whole; a film so full of slow-motion, dramatic music and colorful aesthetics that it is easy to dismiss it as all surface and no depth. However, it should be noted that these performative moments of self-representation are important aspects of queer resistance to the norm. Displaying a personal style is a statement for these characters, much like Laurence's outings in women's clothing play a major part in her liberation.

The scene which most strikingly displays non-normative self-expression in *Laurence Anyways* is Laurence's first public appearance in female attire. One day at school, she enters the classroom in a dress, make-up and earring (but no wig) and stands before her students awaiting the expected reaction of shock. This is shown in a static long shot from the back of the classroom, positioning the viewer among the students. After an extended silence (almost one full minute), a girl asks a question about today's reading, indicating that everything can proceed as usual. At this point the camera tracks forward through the classroom, until it reaches Laurence and frames her in a medium close-up as she smiles in apparent relief. At the moment when the camera changes from its static position to movement, the track "Moisture (Club Mix)" by Headman starts playing on the soundtrack. This initiates the music video sequence, where Laurence walks confidently through the school corridors, dressed as a woman for everyone to see. Dolan's rhythmic editing – which matches the track's distinctive beat – alternates between tracking shots of Laurence from the shoulders up, close-ups of her yellow high-heeled shoes and shots of her green narrow skirt from

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74 Ibid., 3-4.
75 Baillargeon, 179.

the waist down. All through this sequence, shots of people in the corridors looking into the camera are intercut – i.e. we share Laurence's optical point-of-view and her experience of being looked at.

Urrea and Gil-Arbodela compare this scene to the introductory sequence of Laurence's walk in the streets: "Laurence crosses the school's halls and a subjective camera captures the fixed looks of the students and teachers. Once again, these looks follow Laurence, although in this instance they are middle ground, over-the-shoulder shots. Both scenes stage the look to the different and illegible from the standpoint of normative gender codes."[76] What Urrea and Gil-Arbodela fail to mention here is that while the opening sequence of the film underlines the discomfort and alienation experienced by a marginalized individual forced to endure the normative gaze, Laurence's movement through the school corridors is triumphant and rebellious. This is not the walk of a repressed person but an active demonstration of resistance and self-expression. Significantly, when a colleague asks Laurence if this is a revolt, she replies "No, it's a revolution!".

Fred, too, gets her own music video display of non-normative self-representation in *Laurence Anyways*. This occurs at the point where she realizes that her relationship with Laurence is not working out. Instead of falling into a depression (something that has happened to her before), she dresses up and heads to a grandiose VIP party, called the CineBal. As she enters the almost impossibly glamorous hall where the party is held, she literally *floats* above the floor. To the sound of Visage's 1980s synthpop hit "Fade to Grey", Dolan offers an extremely aestheticized music video of Fred's dramatic entrance and mingling at the CineBal. As she floats through the room and spins in the air, she is filmed from a low angle, making her appear "larger than life" and in complete control of the situation. She strikes poses as if on a stage. There are point-of-view shots of party-goers looking at her in awe; the extras all have masquerade-like costumes and dramatic make-up. The sequence illustrates how Fred turns defeat into victory, and instead of outwardly expressing her depressed mental state, she projects a triumphant persona. It could well be argued that she performs the role of "woman" in this scene as much as Laurence does throughout the film. In fact, there is very little separating Fred's artificial staging of her femininity here from the act of a drag queen. Dolan uses these sequences in the film (both Fred's and Laurence's public demonstrations of colorful femininity) to underline how gender is a performance. Urrea and Gil-Arbodela, tracing Judith Butler's theories, assert that gender is "[...] not a fact but a repetition of acts instituted by the stylization of the body and enforced through certain modes of punishments and rewards".[77] *Laurence Anyways* certainly functions as an exemplary illustration of this.

Marshall observes how the style of *Laurence Anyways*, and in particular of these music

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76 Urrea and Gil-Arbodela, 136.
77 Ibid., 135.

video sequences, matches the film's theme of queer and nonconformist gender identities. He highlights "[...] the eschewal of depth models in favour of a proliferation of surfaces that can be said even to generate a queer style, as in the bravura party scene and 1980s pop video aesthetic to Visage's 'Fade to Grey'".[78] The fact that Fred levitates in the air makes this scene akin to the "affective mental images" discussed in the previous chapter. Just like the water pouring over Fred, her floating above the floor is of course not actually happening, but a metaphor for how she experiences the situation. In both cases a character's mind affects the cinematic representation of an actual narrative event, rather than being a fantasy or a realistic scene.

5.2 Moments of heightened experiences

Some of the "music videos" in Dolan's films seem included primarily as visual expressions of a character's experience of a certain, emotionally charged situation. This is the case, for example, in *Heartbeats*, when Marie and Francis at the end of a trip to the country with Nicolas, end up wrestling each other in the forest. The almost surreal scene takes place when Marie decides to leave the boys and head back to the city; she is jealous of their intimacy and feels excluded. The speed turns to slow-motion as the creeping electronic beats of Fever Ray's "Keep the Streets Empty for Me" start playing on the soundtrack. We see Marie struggling with her suitcase and impractical high-heeled shoes in the autumn leaves, while Francis follows in an attempt to stop her from leaving. There is much focus on her very distinctive red shoes dragging through the muddy terrain. Francis catches up with her and they fall to the ground, indulging in a childish fight where their rivalry is finally exposed to themselves and to Nicolas, who stands watching them half-amused, half-bored.

The extended scene is extremely stylized, alternating between slow-motion and normal speed, presenting the fight as fragments of yellow leaves and blurry images of the former friends wrestling one another. Analyzing this sequence, Baillargeon highlights "[t]he precision of the actors' movements, the mannerism behind Marie's high heels and Francis' skeleton gloves, the color red, reminiscent of anger but also of passion, in sharp contrast with the stillness of the forest in which the drama occurs, the sweeping of the camera over the slow-moving bodies […]".[79] She concludes that "[...] all of these elements add to the artificiality of the scene's supposed spontaneity".[80] The sequence displays the qualities of the kind of heightened perception that can sometimes be experienced in a crucial situation: time seems to stop and the here and now become more intensely

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78 Marshall, 194.
79 Baillargeon, 181.
80 Ibid.

felt. Dolan uses "music videos" at multiple points in his work to express just this kind of heightened moment; through extensive stylization he evokes the sense of being a spectator of your own actions.

Early in *Laurence Anyways*, before the rupture brought about by the protagonist's gender transition, there is a nightclub scene which exhibits the aesthetics of Dolan's "music videos". In a montage sequence accompanied by The Cure's "The Funeral Party", Fred and Laurence dance happily in a milieu of dark blue lighting and green and pink laser beams. As they move around on the dancefloor, they look directly into the camera, making the viewer part of the moment. Dolan switches between slow-motion and normal speed in this sequence. It is apparent from their choreography that the two protagonists dance to another kind of music than the slow, non-diegetic track by The Cure. Dolan creates contrast by combining visuals that signal joy and audio that expresses sadness. It lies close at hand to interpret this scene (with its conflicting audiovisual moods) as the last days of happiness for the central couple – a reading which is substantiated by the symbolic usage of "The Funeral Party". Fred and Laurence are, unknowingly, celebrating the death of their relationship.

In comparison to Dolan's first three films, *Mommy* is relatively sparse on dramatic music video sequences, but the ones that are included display a strong relation to the emotional states of the protagonists. Shortly after Steve's return home from the juvenile center, we see him take a ride on his longboard in the suburban neighborhood. The sequence is accompanied by "Colorblind" by Counting Crows, and the melancholic atmosphere of the song is contrasted by Steve's apparent happiness of being free. During the duration of the track, a montage of Steve's excursion is shown: the ride on the longboard, him playing violently with an empty shopping cart on a parking lot and pausing to talk to some youths who give him a cigarette. Part of the footage is in slow-motion, but overall it is less stylized than Dolan's music videos in previous films. The function of this interlude is to provide a breathing pause for Steve (and for the viewer) in an otherwise overheated subjective vision of the world. The sequence is a mood piece in which the bittersweet music simultaneously highlights Steve's inner conflicts and a rare experience of joy.

5.3 Moments of intimacy

Dolan's films feature very few sex scenes. This is probably because his narratives are not interested in the characters' sexuality per se, but rather in examining their identities. Interestingly, when Dolan does include a sex scene he usually constructs it like a music video and injects it with other meanings than the purely sexual. The one time that Hubert and his boyfriend Antonin have sex in *I Killed My Mother*, it is presented as an act of queer defiance. The teenage boys are helping

Antonin's mother with a paint job in an empty office building. As Vive La Fête's aggressive track "Noir désir" starts playing on the soundtrack, Hubert and Antonin engages in a furious case of "dripping" - i.e. throwing paint on the walls in a chaotic fashion. The scene starts by close-ups of them dipping their brushes in jars of paint, followed by shots of the boys throwing the paint off-screen, intercut with images of the paint hitting the wall in thick layers. The tension builds both visually and musically, and suddenly Hubert drops to the floor on his back and is joined by Antonin. The artistically expressive activity apparently leads them to have sex on the floor, amidst the spilled paint. As so often, Dolan manipulates time in this scene, here by *increasing* the speed, with some frames being slowed down in between others. Notably, the scene is simultaneously non-graphic (there is no explicit nudity) and unapologetically defiant in its celebration of gay love and lust. After all the previous trials of Hubert and the decidedly chaste depiction of his relationship with Antonin, this "music video" functions as a cathartic outburst.

The sex scenes in *Heartbeats* are of a very different kind, but like the one in *I Killed My Mother*, they are paired with music in a distinctive manner. Marie and Francis have two sex scenes each in *Heartbeats*, which are distributed at even intervals throughout the film, but have no direct connection to the narrative events. The men that Marie and Francis have sexual relations with are seen only in these four scenes, suggesting that they are one night stands. In each of the scenes, there is an extreme color filter; the first is red, the following are green, yellow and blue. There is nothing natural about these colors – we can safely assume that they do not originate from colored lamps in the characters' respective apartments. All four scenes have the same aesthetics and theatrical staging: Marie or Francis sit undressed in a bed beside a man, with whom they have had or will have sex. They talk about topics that are only indirectly related to the plot of the film, such as smoking, sexual fantasies, their ideal partner etc. After these brief, awkward conversations, they begin kissing and caressing. At this point, a cello suite by Bach starts playing non-diegetically on the soundtrack and Dolan offers a montage of the characters' body parts in slow-motion.

These sequences are not exactly music videos, but like the examples above they are cases where a distinctive piece of music (undisturbed by dialogue) becomes the focal point of a scene, and where Dolan's editing turns the characters into fragmented images in a strongly stylized fashion. These bed scenes – because they are not really about sex – provide intimate insights into Marie's and Francis' respective love lives. In these moments they reveal their insecurities and disappointments; it is painfully clear in each of these sexual encounters that they compare the man beside them in the bed with Nicolas – unfavorably, it might be added. The color filters can logically be interpreted as a signal from the filmmaker that these scenes are subjective in nature, somehow apart from the overall narrative, although still within the diegesis. Marie's and Francis' subjective

experiences *color* these moments of intimacy.

5.4 The normative gaze

The opening sequence of *Laurence Anyways* is essential in establishing the film's theme of the normative gaze directed at the marginalized. The elaborately stylized, unsettling sequence violently puts the viewer in the position of the titular character, forcing us to share her subjective vision. As Urrea and Gil-Arbodela notes: "One might say that the first sequence of the movie, supported by non-diegetic music, stages society's view of Laurence."[81] The sequence, which is accompanied by Fever Ray's eerie track "If I Had a Heart", begins with a series of shots of empty domestic spaces, followed by a female figure walking away from the camera and out of an apartment. We are then, suddenly and shockingly, subjected to the gaze of unknown people in the street, staring into the camera unemphatically. This, we start to realize, is the protagonist being stared at, which means that we are in the same position as her. After a series of suspicious faces looking directly at us, making us literally feel their disapproval, we finally step outside of the protagonist's body and instead take up a position just behind her back. Being a montage of stylized shots in slow-motion accompanied by a contemporary pop song, this opening heavily resembles a music video in its execution. In fact, the sequence could be lifted out of the film in its current state and released as a promotional video for the Fever Ray track without seeming out of place. This introductory episode introduces the spectator to the trauma of the look. Urrea and Gil-Arbodela assert: "We can affirm that the film positions the viewer to experience the suspicious look directed at the different, because these scenes are talking directly to us. And what is beyond this, is the institutionalization of the normal and the criminalization of the other."[82]

To begin a film in such a manner alienates the viewer at the same time as it brings us directly into a very subjective territory, where we are disoriented and at the mercy of the images. As I observed in section **3.5**, this opening sequence shares some of the techniques used in Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, where the spectator is forced into the position of the painting's protagonists, who are being portrayed but are not visible (other than in a distant mirror at the far back of the image). The onlookers' gazes at Laurence are similar to those of the self-portrayed painter and the other individuals gathered in *Las Meninas* to watch the missing subjects – us. And this is an uncomfortable position. As Foucault observes: "As soon as they place the spectator in the field of their gaze, the painter's eyes seize hold of him, force him to enter the picture, assign him a place at once privileged and inescapable [...]".[83] Leach notes how the opening sequence of *Laurence*

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81 Urrea and Gil-Arbodela, 136.
82 Ibid.
83 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 5.

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Anyways "[...] first frustrates the look of the spectator by withholding the image and then reminds us of the act of looking, while now withholding the object of these looks (even while representing the subjective point of view of that object)".[84] That Laurence's face is never shown in this "music video" serves as a metaphor for one of the film's major themes, namely that the marginalized are "invisible" to the normative society – until they claim their place and attention, which is exactly what Laurence is doing in this introduction. Leach writes: "As the narrative develops, this sequence foreshadows the scandal caused by Laurence's rejection of 'normal' gender codes and emphasizes how the sense of self is mediated through the look of others [...]".[85]

As stated in the discussion on deframing, the lack of a follow-up image which clarifies the confusion frustrates the spectator and induces a non-narrative tension. This is definitely the case in *Laurence Anyways*, where the tension caused by the introductory sequence persists throughout the entire film, never allowing the viewer to relax. And, as Bonitzer remarks in his discussion of *Las Meninas*, the substitution of positions between the portrayed subject and the spectator causes confusion while at the same time rendering the depiction all the more powerful. Bonitzer notes how this bold technique "[...] forces the spectator to believe that the scene extends beyond the boundaries of the frame, holding him in this space as well as pushing him beyond it, which multiplies the power of the representation to evoke in it the unrepresented, if not the unrepresentable [...]".[86] Perhaps needless to add, the matter of the unrepresented and the unrepresentable is at the heart of the film's theme of gender transition and its lack of visibility in our society. The very limited cinematic representation of transgender individuals more or less dictates the need of an unusual narrative technique in order to catch the viewer off-guard and thereby short-circuit potential prejudice. By placing the viewer in the "clothes" of the transsexual protagonist, the film leaves us no other choice than to try to see the world from her point of view.

The visual motif of the normative gaze is featured so frequently in *Laurence Anyways* that it seems impossible (or at least impractical) to discuss every instance of it. There is, however, one scene which deserves closer attention. I will include it here – although it is not a music video sequence – because of its close connection to the film's opening. *Laurence Anyways* starts with the sound clip of an interview between a female journalist and Laurence, played over the black screen of the opening titles. The reporter (repeatedly switching between French and English) asks Laurence to state her full name and then poses the question: "What are you looking for, Laurence?" Laurence responds: "A person who speaks my language and who, without being a pariah, will question not only the rights and the value of the marginalized, but also the rights and value of those

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84 Leach, 99.
85 Ibid.
86 Bonitzer, "Deframings", 198.

who claim to be normal". This line manages to capture much of what Dolan is doing in his work: questioning normativity. Sound clips from this interview are subsequently inserted at different points in the film, giving Laurence the role of narrator of her own story, while also forcing her to explain herself to the inquisitive and often rude reporter. Towards the end of the film we finally get to see the interview situation as well as hearing it. Laurence and the journalist are sitting in a café opposite each other, but the other woman refuses to look Laurence in the eyes; her gaze is always pointed at some area below or beside the protagonist's face. This is truly disturbing to watch and functions as a reminder of the constant battle individuals like Laurence have to fight to be taken seriously. By denying Laurence eye contact, the interviewer denies her existence. Urrea and Gil-Arbodela observe: "The journalist, an elegant and refined woman, has an attitude towards Laurence that is akin to what a western [sic] conventional and conservative spectator feels towards such a discord with the non-normativity Laurence embodies."[87] This is probably true in many cases, and this late scene in the film functions as a final comment directed at those viewers.

After being demonstratively ignored for a while, Laurence urges the woman to look her in the eyes, which she eventually does. Dolan stages this final "look" in a rather complex manner. Following an establishing long shot of the two of them as silhouettes in front of a window, we only get shots of either the journalist from Laurence's point-of-view (refusing to look at Laurence/us) or partially obscured shots of Laurence from over the other woman's shoulder. This way, a clear image of Laurence is withheld from the viewer – reminding us of the film's opening sequence. When the reporter in the end agrees to look at Laurence, Dolan opts for a close-up of the woman's face and her strikingly clear blue eyes, which seem to have a veil lifted from them as she finally acknowledges and sees Laurence as an individual, and not as a freak. Since we at this moment share Laurence's point-of-view, we get to experience the intensity of the woman's look and the importance of being acknowledged.

The inclusion of the journalist seems to function as a surrogate for a skeptic viewer, since it is only at the end of the narrative that the journalist is able to look at Laurence in a respectful way – mirroring the journey to a (potentially) deeper understanding undertaken by the spectator of the film. Urrea's and Gil-Arbodela's conclusion may be somewhat preachy but nevertheless rings true: "The film seems to say at this point: these three hours of film should not been [sic] in vain, you should now understand that the difference exists, acknowledge it, and that gender norms are as ridiculous as the idea of an exclusively binary world."[88]

The normative gaze is visualized also in *Mommy*, in an episode which displays some aspects

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87 Urrea and Gil-Arbodela, 138-139.
88 Ibid.

of Dolan's music video aesthetics, but additionally uses music in other ways to highlight the disapproving looks that the normative society casts upon the non-normative. In this scene, Steve reluctantly accompanies Diane and a male neighbor to a karaoke bar, where he decides to perform a song, Andrea Bocelli's "Vivo per lei". As Steve walks through the nightclub towards the karaoke stage, Dolan emphasizes the movement and the space with the aid of slow-motion and instrumental techno music. Steve looks at heterosexual couples kissing publicly; the men are touching their female company in sexist, possessive ways which seem to disgust Steve. This sequence is interesting because it forces the spectator of the film to look at heteronormative behavior through the eyes of someone "outside" of normativity, even though Steve is not identified as gay in the film. In this instance it seems like it really is Dolan's own non-normative perspective that colors the images of the straight couples' public demonstration of their sexuality – yet the shots are clearly from Steve's point-of-view. I will return to this kind of phenomenon in the chapter on the "free indirect subjective".

When Steve starts singing the Bocelli track, the heteronormative couples' hostility towards him increases. The track is a sentimental ballad and Steve reveals his vulnerability by performing it on a stage, in front of young men projecting their "tough" and "manly" images. They start shouting insults at Steve, all the while disrespectfully groping their female dates, who look uneasy. As D'Aoust writes about the scene: "Steve is heckled and scorned this time by the boisterous members of his heteronormative surroundings. The young bucks at the nearby pool tables are not only intent on dominating their females companions, but also any male who does not conform to their standards of behavior."[89] Like many similar moments in *Laurence Anyways*, the karaoke scene is Dolan's way of exposing normative society's belittling attitude towards non-normative individuals. The viewer is compelled to feel the humiliation and provocation experienced by Steve, which in extension means acknowledging the structural problem of heteronormative males dictating how others are allowed or not allowed to act or look.

5.5 Alternative family constellations

All five films analyzed in this thesis deal with non-normative family units in one way or another. Interestingly, the figure of the father is repeatedly excluded in Dolan's work, which points to a conscious decision to supply viewers with alternatives to patriarchal family structures. This is at the heart of Massimi's essay on Dolan. She states: "The need to find alternative parents [...] or to create surrogate familial models [...] are therefore tropes in Dolan's cinema, along with the suppression of

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89 D'Aoust, 12.

the paternal figure and the reinforcement of queer forms of sexuality over the marginalization of heterosexual male characters."[90]

Mommy is a film devoted primarily to the examination of such an alternative family unit. Neither Steve nor Diane are conventional individuals and their life together seems to lack traditional structures. When they befriend Kyla, it is as if the last piece of the puzzle falls in place. Because, while Kyla is not good at being a mother to her own daughter (due to her grief over her other deceased child), her presence in Steve's and Diane's chaotic household creates the peace and joy that was previously missing. This is exactly what the extended music video sequence in *Mommy* illustrates through its audiovisual montage. Accompanied by the Oasis track "Wonderwall", the sequence shows a summarizing series of shots depicting a brief time in the three protagonists' daily lives. The style of the sequence is in many ways uncharacteristically conventional for Dolan; it is of the kind often used in mainstream romantic comedies, where a catchy pop song is played while we see a collage of events. In romcoms, this type of "summary sequence" is usually inserted to show characters trying on different dresses before a wedding or redecorating their homes. In other words, the "Wonderwall" episode is dissimilar to Dolan's other "music videos", where stylized imagery and slow-motion are utilized to create a heightened subjectivity. In comparison, the shots of Kyla home-schooling Steve while Diane starts working as a cleaner of rich people's houses are notably less artistic or subjective in nature.

However, halfway through the sequence Dolan introduces the first instance where the 1:1 aspect ratio expands into widescreen – something that immediately moves the conventional montage into experimental territory. Furthermore, the manner in which the screen format is widened is strikingly unorthodox. Addressing the camera directly, Steve positions his hands at the edges of the frame and "manually" expands the square image horizontally, as if forcibly broadening the screen. For the remainder of this "music video", the format is widescreen, which corresponds to the protagonists' experience of happiness. As Steve rides his longboard, Diane and Kyla follow him on bicycles; they laugh when he skates in the middle of the motorway and shouts "Liberté!" euphorically. This period of hope and happiness is, however, brief. Shortly after the end of the "Wonderwall" sequence, Diane receives information of a legal case against Steve – at which point the screen starts slowly narrowing back into the 1:1 square.

Despite not being a music video sequence per se, Dolan uses music to depict the non-normative family unit of the three protagonists also in another of *Mommy*'s key scenes. Following Kyla's first dinner at Diane's house, the two women stand talking and drinking in the kitchen when Steve comes into the room and puts on a track by Céline Dion on the stereo. He has applied eye-

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90 Massimi, 22.

liner and as he lip-syncs to the song he performs a decidedly queer, suggestive choreography. Here, the camera adopts Kyla's point-of-view – i.e. when Steve sings to her, he is directly addressing the camera. This results in us sharing Kyla's sensation of being "seduced" by Steve. It is important to note that Diane is not surprised or annoyed by her son's very androgynous appearance and mannerisms; she seems to appreciate his gender-bending performance. After the initial surprise, Kyla is encouraged to sing and dance along to the Dion track. At the end of the scene, all three of them dance together in the kitchen as the camera (which was previously moving among them) pulls back in a dolly shot. The distance created at this point between the viewer and the characters is of the kind detailed in section **3.4**. It is the type of shot which simultaneously underlines the intimate on-screen relationship and the fragile nature of this union. We understand that we, as spectators, are not allowed complete access into this private sphere (only a peek) and we also sense the threat of the outside world awaiting the protagonists.

This scene in the kitchen is an important illustration of a non-normative family constellation: two women and a queer-acting teenage boy who enjoy each other's company and make their own rules. Kyla's "catharsis" here is especially moving, since she has up until now shown signs of being uncomfortable in her own body, ashamed of her stuttering, and ultimately unable to express emotions freely. In letting go of her inhibitions during an evening with Steve and Diane, it is as if Kyla has finally found a space (which is both physical and mental) where she can relax and actually enjoy herself. Foucault's concept of "heterotopia" again seems applicable here.

D'Aoust analyzes this scene at length in his essay and sees in it what he terms a "queer vocal identification".[91] I agree with D'Aoust that Steve's substitution of his own voice with Celine Dion's, in combination with his androgynous appearance and choreography, constitute an act of queer performativity. However, I think it is a problematic misreading of the scene to state, as D'Aoust does, that Diane and Kyla are uncomfortable with Steve's behavior. Their encouragement of and participation in his performance are unambiguously signalling acceptance and support.

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91 D'Aoust, 11-12.

6. The limits of access

The scenes discussed so far have illustrated various ways in which Dolan's films offer the viewer access to characters' inner lives and subjective perspectives; we get very close to the filmmaker's protagonists indeed. Yet, as I have mentioned in passing, there are limits to this closeness that sometimes make themselves known. Because these characters are complex and usually in the process of forming or re-forming their identities, they are not easily defined or entirely available to us. I have devoted this very brief chapter to these limits of access since they constitute a crucial aspect of Dolan's filmmaking – yet would seem out of place in the previous chapters' analyses of style elements. Here I will also address a seemingly paradoxical fusion of narrative modes that can be witnessed in Dolan's work: the invitation to come close to the characters and the alienating exclusion of the spectator at certain points.

Vulnerability and inaccessibility is frequently visualized by Dolan through the motif of characters' necks and the back of their heads. They turn away from the viewer just when we think we fully share their vision. This is something that Heron, too, has noticed in Dolan's films: "The audience is often presented with images of the backs of these characters' heads, attesting to a difficulty of access to them as people – they are characters that even at their most open, remain apart from a complete understanding by the audience."[92] The purpose of these shots is apparently not to show us what the characters see, since their heads are blocking our view. Rather, the images of necks and backs of heads are significant in and for themselves. By denying us a look into the characters' eyes, they speak to us of these individuals' solitude and their unwillingness (or inability) to surrender to the norms of society.

While the motif of character's backs and necks frequently expresses introversion or vulnerability, Dolan also uses it for other purposes. Perhaps the most significant shot of the back of a character's head in all of the director's work, is the emblematic image of Laurence which occurs shortly before she takes the final step to start living as a woman. The camera is close to her neck as we see Laurence sitting in front of the class she is teaching; the students are working silently on some kind of assignment and Laurence is watching them. There are shots (from her point of view) of the girls in the class unconsciously toying with their long hair in slow-motion. In response Laurence touches the back of her head with its closely cropped hair, suggesting the lack she is experiencing. The most interesting aspect here is that Laurence has put paperclips at the end of her fingers, which act as surrogates for long nails. The scene subtly illustrates the protagonist's growing impatience with being a "man". Here Dolan uses the neck motif to give the viewer a glimpse of

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92 Heron, 2-3.

Laurence's secret true self as she simulates having long nails in a public place.

Heron notes that "[...] despite how close the films come to their characters, there remains a divide to some degree that precisely mirrors the position of society".[93] From this perspective, the motif of characters' backs also has to be considered as a visualization of such a divide. Since there is a gap in experience between someone on the "inside" and someone on the "outside" of normativity, it seems only logical that the non-normative characters in Dolan's films cannot completely reveal themselves to the normative viewer. Without attempting the complicated and perhaps impossible definition of a "normative viewer", it is sufficient to point out that it has to do with personal experiences. Someone who identifies with Laurence and recognizes him/herself in Laurence's journey from biological man to woman is naturally not a normative viewer. Similarly, a homosexual spectator can be expected to have an easier time identifying with Hubert, Francis or Tom – or at least to have an understanding of the basic difference between being or not being part of heteronormativity. It goes without saying that a heterosexual viewer may have a deep sympathy for or recognize aspects of a gay character's life, but (1) that cannot be taken for granted, and (2) that viewer is still comfortably positioned on the inside of normative society. Likewise, a gay viewer may be sympathetic to the trials of Diane as a single mother of a problematic teenager, yet not necessarily able to fully appreciate her situation. And Kyla's stuttering is probably less easy to identify with for a non-stutterer than for someone with a speech impediment. Not to mention how a person with ADHD will understand Steve's struggles to a higher degree than the rest of us.

Leach observes, regarding *Laurence Anyways*, that it deals with "[...] characters who challenge what they experience as oppressive gender roles prescribed as 'normal,' but whose determined pursuit of their desires is ultimately seen as destructive both for them and the other people in their lives".[94] I do not agree with Leach's evaluation that Laurence's gender transition is destructive, since it apparently is a necessary step for her. However, Leach's comment is a good example of how a normative spectator may view the theme of transsexualism. By contrasting the initially heterosexual (and therefore positively connoted) relationship between Laurence and Fred to the drastic change caused by the protagonist's gender transition (non-normative and therefore negatively perceived), Leach reveals his lack of understanding towards the film's central theme. Marshall, on the other hand, is able to see a positive outcome from Laurence's actions, which I think is a much more accurate interpretation of the narrative trajectory. He highlights how the people close to Laurence "[...] are also swept along in a movement of change which disrupts the fixities by which they have lived and injects them with a renewed belief in the world in contrast with previous

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93 Ibid., 3.
94 Leach, 104.

assumptions about gender binary polarizations and/or domestic stasis".[95] Laurence's mother Julienne goes from being cold towards her son to developing a closer relationship with her now-daughter. Julienne even confesses to Laurence: "I never saw you as my son, but I see you as my daughter", confirming that the protagonist's upheaval of social norms has had a positive effect on at least some aspects of her environment. As Massimi notes: "Laurence's transgendered metamorphosis as a passage from rejected masculinity to fierce womanhood allows nonetheless the eventual achievement of maternal recognition, by promoting a female bond that erases the already irrelevant paternal figure from the picture, and elevates instead the feminine and the queer [...]".[96]

Leach, despite being basically sympathetic in his discussion of Laurence's non-normative gender identity, cannot help remaining in his position as someone on the "inside" of normativity, who has a hard time comprehending why someone would want to risk everything to be able to express their true self. Consequently, Leach finds it "[...] difficult for the spectator to identify in a straightforward way with characters who are in many ways attractive, and the focal point of the narratives, but whose actions are often highly dubious".[97] The conflicting emotions expressed by Leach perfectly illustrate the special nature of Dolan's character portrayals, as they tend to oscillate between being "attractive" and alienating.

My point in all of this is to highlight that the filmic depiction of non-normative characters is a tricky one, since it has to be both familiar and sympathetic enough for a normative audience to want to engage in the narrative, and still "true" enough to be convincing to a viewer who belongs to a marginalized group. Dolan negotiates this difficult territory by alternating between bringing the viewer unusually close to the characters (forcing a degree of identification, since we share their subjective perspective) and distancing the same viewer by making the characters "turn their backs" (both literally and figuratively) on us. We are not allowed to dissociate ourselves from their experiences, but neither are we given the opportunity to truly identify with them. This is the case also for a non-normative viewer to some extent, since characters like Hubert or Tom are introspective and private in their nature, thus making complete identification almost impossible even for a gay viewer. All in all, the stylistics and narrative modes of Dolan's films highlight just this clash between opposing perspectives.

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95 Marshall, 194.
96 Massimi, 23.
97 Leach, 104.

7. The free indirect subjective

Over the course of the previous chapters I have analyzed various stylistic devices used by Dolan to express the subjective perspective and psychology of his characters. Some of these stylistics are indisputably subjective, like interior images and point-of-view shots, while others are less easily explained. For instance, Dolan's "music video" sequences heighten the subjective tone of the film(s) without necessarily taking place inside a character's mind or forcing the viewer to share the protagonist's optical point-of-view. As has repeatedly been indicated throughout this thesis, Dolan's films display a strong sense of character presence even in scenes and shots that are not of the clearly subjective kind. Very few of the filmmaker's images propose to be "neutral" or "objective". In certain scenes a character's subjective experience or perception color the events depicted to an especially high degree, which is then mediated stylistically by Dolan.

What we have is a tangible subjective presence that permeates Dolan's work, and which is neither solely the vision of the protagonist nor just some kind of auteur signature that points back to Dolan as an individual. The character's subjectivity guides the narrative and the aesthetics, while simultaneously being stylized by the director. As Heron observes: "In each of these films, the main characters are either artists or at least careful curators of personal style. We again get the sense of how Dolan's style is at once emblematic of his characters and yet also exists at a mediated distance."[98] However, this symbiotic relationship between protagonist and filmmaker is difficult to explain in established terms of film style and by just detailing such technical aspects as camerawork, editing and sound. Because of this stylistic elusiveness, I consider it fruitful to introduce Pasolini's concept of the "free indirect subjective" to the study of Dolan's films. In the following sections I will explain the term and discuss why it seems applicable to Dolan's work.

7.1 Blurring the line between two subjectivities

As the modernist films of the late 1950s and early 1960s developed novel ways to create subjective representations of characters through stylistic experimentation, Pasolini tried to explain this "new" cinema with linguistic analogies. He proposed that some of these young filmmakers were engaging in a "cinema of poetry". However, his attempt to designate the classical cinema as one of "prose", while the modernist films should be considered "poetry", was built on arguments that were both problematically opinion-based and ultimately too vague. To force linguistics onto cinema is in itself hazardous, as many film theorists have pointed out. For instance, while Christian Metz applied

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98 Heron, 4.

semiotics to cinema, he found many faults in Pasolini's ideas. A thorough account of Metz's and Pasolini's opposing positions on a number of linguistic issues would occupy too much of this thesis' space and has little to do with the aspects of Pasolini's ideas that I want to employ. Contrary to Metz, Deleuze found some of Pasolini's notions to be of great importance. He chose to focus primarily on one concept in Pasolini's poetic manifesto: the "free indirect subjective". This term can be applied to cinema without the need to define whether the film is supposed to be prose or poetry, which makes it more useful than many of Pasolini's other theories. Even Pasolini himself acknowledged that this concept was not dependent upon a linguistic approach to film: "The fundamental characteristic of the 'free indirect subjective' is therefore not of a linguistic nature, but of a stylistic one. It can be defined as an interior monologue without its conceptual and philosophic element, which as such is abstract."[99]

Pasolini borrowed the term from literature theory's "free indirect discourse", of which he says: "It is simply this: the author penetrates entirely into the spirit of his character, of whom he thus adopts not only the psychology but also the language."[100] *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* defines the "free indirect discourse" as follows:

> The presentation of thoughts or speech of fictional characters which seems by various devices to combine the character's sentiments with those of a narrator. In its most primitive form, indirect discourse is signalled by the narrational 'framing' of the thought or utterance, as in 'Archer tried to console himself with the thought that he was not quite such an ass as Lefferts' (the unframed, direct version would be 'Archer thought: "I am not quite such an ass as Lefferts"'). The free indirect style can produce more complex effects, however, in what has been called 'the commitments and abstentions of the authorial voice'. Fruitful ambiguity is created when the author's hand in the passage is not clearly marked out from the voice of the character […].[101]

Referring to this linguistic term, Pasolini states: "In cinema, direct discourse corresponds to the 'subjective' shot."[102] The free indirect discourse (or free indirect subjective, as he names it), on the other hand, manages to channel a character's consciousness without such explicit point-of-view shots. Pasolini felt that some films seem to be highly subjective of their characters and yet do not achieve this effect through classical stylistic means. What they display is a greater level of fusion between the filmmaker's style and the character's identity. These stylistics allow a character's

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99 Pier Paolo Pasolini, "The Cinema of Poetry", in *Movies and Methods vol. 1*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 552.
100 Ibid., 549.
101 J. A. Cuddon, ed., *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 330-331.
102 Pasolini, 550.

personality and world-view to color the entire film, regardless of whether a certain image is seen from his/her eyes or if it is "objective". Deleuze describes this cinematic practice interestingly:

> [...] the camera does not simply give us the vision of the character and his world; it imposes another vision in which the first is transformed and reflected. This subdivision is what Pasolini calls a 'free indirect subjective'. [...] it is a case of going beyond the subjective and the objective towards a pure Form which sets itself up as an autonomous vision of the content. We are no longer faced with subjective *or* objective images; we are caught in a correlation between a perception-image and a camera-consciousness which transforms it [...]. It is a very special kind of cinema which has acquired a taste for 'making the camera felt'.[103]

By "making the camera felt", Deleuze is alluding to the films of Antonioni, Godard and Bertolucci (among others) – directors mentioned in Pasolini's text as examples of this film style. Their jump cuts, experiments with the zoom, switches between different lenses on the same object and framing of "dead spaces" partly constituted the "new" cinema that Pasolini believed was emerging.

Pasolini felt the need to justify his theory by proclaiming that for a film to be made in the "free indirect subjective" style, it has to have a gravely neurotic or otherwise mentally ill protagonist with which the director can identify – resulting in a blurring of the boundary between their respective subjective visions. This is one of Pasolini's key arguments, upon which the otherwise rather vague specifics rest. In my view, it is limiting and even inappropriate to stipulate such conditions. Characters are not that easily labelled and should not be categorized as mentally ill just because they are unconventional in some way. Furthermore, a film featuring the stylistics of the "free indirect subjective" may very well portray an individual who is not mentally unwell or even very unusual. Having said that, the "free indirect subjective" does have a great potential for depicting characters who are outside of normativity, who observe the surrounding world in a skeptical or alienated state of mind. This is because the style elements involved offer the filmmaker alternatives to classical storytelling that disrupt the narrative and direct our attention to the filmic construction. By doing so, it makes us aware of conventions and exceptions to these conventions – which in turn mirror the outsider status of the protagonist. Thus, if we consider non-normative, queer or in other ways nonconformist characters – instead of declaring them mentally ill – there is definitely some merit to Pasolini's theories on how certain style elements are well-suited to represent mental states.

Consequently, it seems counterproductive and unnecessary to dismiss Pasolini's interesting idea of a merging of two visions (the filmmaker's and the protagonist's). He describes this practice

103 Deleuze, 82-83.

when detailing the style of *Before the Revolution* (*Prima della rivoluzione*, Bernardo Bertolucci, 1964): "What there has been is a contamination between the vision the neurotic woman has of the world and that of the author, which are inevitably analogous, but difficult to perceive, being closely intermixed, having the same style."[104] It is neither a fully subjective portrayal of a character, completely seen through her eyes *nor* a style exercise carried out by an auteurist director only to express his own personality. David Heinemann, who applies the concept of the "free indirect subjective" in his essay on Bresson and Éric Rohmer, explains how a seemingly ordinary point-of-view shot becomes more complex in this kind of film. He observes: "Although it may appear to convey the character's point of view directly, the traces of the narrator's authorship it contains create an irresolvable tension, a duality of expression, a hybridity of consciousness, a 'mutual contamination' of worldviews."[105] Since Heinemann is only interested in the use of narrational voice-over in the work of Bresson and Rohmer, his text is not of much relevance to a study of Dolan. It is, however, interesting to see how Pasolini's concept can be used in contemporary film analysis.

Although Dolan's films are not that similar to those of the modernists of the 1960s – and my purpose with this thesis is certainly not to speculate on possible sources of inspiration – the concept proposed by Pasolini nevertheless seems pertinent to much of Dolan's work. To call it a "contamination" between the filmmaker's subjectivity and that of the protagonist is a clever way of terming something which is stylistically elusive. Vaughan is apparently circling these very issues when she suggests that the viewer has special access to Dolan both as actor and filmmaker in *I Killed My Mother*. Discussing Hubert's video confessionals, Vaughan observes how "[...] the monologues read like personal video journal entries, or perhaps confessions, allowing the main character to participate in narrating the film's events, and reminding us of the *auteur* designing and directing the film".[106] Without speculating about Dolan's own personality or its possible similarities to Hubert's, it is clear that he allows his protagonist to "contaminate" the overall style of the film, resulting in a narrative and visual form which mirrors Hubert's identity.

Somewhat unexpectedly, Baillargeon mentions Pasolini's concept in her analysis of *Heartbeats*, noting that watching the film is a "peculiar experience" because "[...] the objective eye of the camera and the subjective gaze of the characters merge to create a free indirect discourse".[107] Favoring a psychoanalytical reading of *Heartbeats* with focus on the film's Québécois aspects, Baillargeon does not elaborate on the interesting connections between Pasolini's theories and

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104 Pasolini, 553-554.
105 David Heinemann, "The creative voice: free indirect speech in the cinema of Rohmer and Bresson," *The New Soundtrack* 2, no. 1 (2012): 1 [online version]. http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/sound.2012.0024
106 Vaughan, 165.
107 Baillargeon, 176.

Dolan's style. However, she identifies in *Heartbeats* "[...] a duality of expression that blurs the distinction between the characters' and the filmmaker's voices".[108]

Pasolini never offered any exact stylistic requirements for the "free indirect subjective". He settled for descriptions of some of the techniques and aesthetics of the modernist films which he considered examples of the style. Since many of the theories and concepts that have been applied to Dolan's films over the course of this thesis bear interesting similarities with the properties assigned by Pasolini to the "free indirect subjective", this chapter will return to some of them. In doing so, it will hopefully function as a summarizing discussion of the ideas presented in this thesis.

7.2 Still lifes, deframing and obsessive framing

One of the most apparent ways in which Hubert's mind colors the style of *I Killed My Mother*, are the recurring series of brief "still images" that at several points in the narrative seem to summarize a room or a character. After the film's opening with Hubert's video diary, we are presented with seven quick shots (they are not really still images) of details from a domestic setting: porcelain figures, stuffed butterflies against brightly colored walls etc. At first this makes no sense, but as the film progresses we begin to identify these objects as parts of Hubert's home, which is decorated by his mother, Chantale. These "still lifes", as I prefer to call them, interspersed into the narrative are logically interpreted as Hubert's summaries of a room – and as such they are affected by his opinion of them. As we see only objects of kitsch represented in the still lifes from Chantale's and Hubert's home, we can assume that what we are subjected to is Hubert's disapproval of Chantale's (lack of) taste. This practice of summarizing places (and, in extension, persons) is used at multiple instances in *I Killed My Mother*. For example, before a scene where Hubert is in his boyfriend's bedroom, we are shown close-ups of posters and objects on Antonin's walls, as if to give us an instant idea of what the character is like. Or, rather, an idea of which of Antonin's objects that Hubert wants us to notice.

Vaughan observes how these series of shots are too quick for the viewer to contemplate at any depth; they pass by from occasion to occasion, heightening the subjective tone of the film without seeming to have any particular message. While Vaughan devotes a major part of her chapter on Dolan to analyzing these shots, she cannot seem to make up her mind concerning their significance. On the one hand, she regards them as "arbitrary", evoking "[...] the New Wave or Dada/surrealist cinema, eras during which directors often included fleeting images on screen that carried no immediate relevance other than perhaps reflecting the characters' subconscious

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108 Ibid., 186-187.

thoughts".[109] On the other hand, she feels that the objects "[...] associated with each character help to communicate a deeper knowledge of their motivations and preoccupations to viewers [...]" and that they ultimately "[...] destabilize an otherwise calm progression of thoughts, just as they do a logical progression of images. Together, they force viewers to continually reflect on the technological, psychological, and sociological properties of representation."[110] I agree with Vaughan that these shots of identificatory objects offer some insight into the characters' personal tastes, at the same time as they disturb the narrative flow and draw attention to the cinematic construction. However, I would argue that they are indeed manifestations of Hubert's subjective perspective, channelled through Dolan's style. These are not point-of-view shots seen through Hubert's eyes, but it seems reasonable to assume that the images would not have been included in the film had its style not been aligned with Hubert's view of his surroundings. In other words, these shots are good examples of a merging of Hubert's vision and Dolan's aesthetic choices – two subjective elements that cannot be easily separated but that are nevertheless not entirely the same.

An instance where there can be no dispute as to the subjective nature of the images, is the first proper scene of *I Killed My Mother*, where we are confronted with a close-up of Chantale's mouth messily eating an orange in slow-motion, accompanied by classical music. The shots of Chantale's elaborate chewing and the orange juice running down her chin are intercut with close-ups of Hubert's eyes looking away in disgust over her table manners. This sequence establishes Hubert's annoyance and impatience with his mother. The slow-motion of the scene signals Hubert's "control" over the film's aesthetics: his thoughts seem capable of slowing down the narrative progression in order to underline a moment of irritation.

These "mutilated" images of Chantale's mouth and chin – shots that do not show the character's entire face but instead turn it into grotesque fragments – are closely related to Bonitzer's concept of deframing. As mentioned previously, Deleuze calls such fragmented shots "cutting close-ups" or "cutting frames". In a nod to Bonitzer, he adds: "These cutting frames respond to the notion of 'unframing', proposed by Bonitzer to designate unusual angles which are not completely justified by the requirements of action or perception."[111] Further illustrating the connections between the writings of these two theorists, Bonitzer refers to Deleuze: "Deframing is a perversion, one that adds an ironic touch to the function of cinema […]. In Deleuzian terms it needs to be said that the act of deframing, the displaced angle, the radical off-centredness of a point of view that mutilates the body [...] is ironically sadistic […]".[112] This sadistic and ironic quality of deframed shots is

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109 Vaughan, 169.
110 Ibid., 170.
111 Deleuze, 120.
112 Bonitzer, "Deframings", 200.

particularly evident in the images of Chantale's chewing mouth. Hubert's annoyance is exaggerated and apparently out of proportion, which is demonstrated by the absurd attention given to her table manners. Discussing the "free indirect subjective", Pasolini notes how the characters in this type of film often show an "[...] obsessive attachment to a detail or a gesture (and this is where cinematic technique comes in; even better than literary technique, it can push such situations to the extreme)".[113] The scene described above illustrates how Hubert's state of mind causes the overall film (and Dolan as director) to focus on the "wrong" things, the unimportant details – as if the narrative has trouble progressing because of Hubert's unwillingness to let go of his fixations.

I Killed My Mother also displays usage of another technique mentioned by Pasolini in relation to the "free indirect subjective", something that he terms "obsessive framing". Pasolini describes this practice as "[t]he close follow-up of two viewpoints, scarcely different from each other, upon the same object: that is, the succession of two shots which frame the same portion of reality – first from close, then *a little* farther away; or else first head-on, then *a little* obliquely [...]".[114] He adds that this could also be done with two different lenses or through "abuse of the zoom". Pasolini concludes: "From this arises an insistence which becomes obsessive [...]".[115] Hubert's video diary sequences are exemplary exhibits of this style. The cinematography mimics a digital video camera and the images pass in and out of focus as the lens tries to fixate Hubert's face while he addresses the camera. Some shots frame a portion of the grey background, as if the camera momentarily missed its object. In these interspersed video confessions, Dolan combines deframing and obsessive framing in a manner which confuses the viewer and highlights the subjective quality of the images. Additionally, the footage in the video diary is supposed to have been edited by Hubert and not by Dolan – a fact that further blurs the line between their respective styles. Deleuze notes regarding "obsessive framing" that it "[...] doubles the perception of an independent aesthetic consciousness".[116] I strongly agree with this statement; these types of unconventional camerawork suggest a keenly felt subjectivity which guides every frame.

7.3 Colored by a consciousness

Although the subjective style of *Mommy* is constructed out of three separate consciousnesses (or four, if we count Dolan's own), it can be argued that Steve's restless, volatile psyche is the one that colors the film's aesthetics most prominently. An example of this occurs when Steve comes to live

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113 Pasolini, 554.
114 Ibid., 552.
115 Ibid.
116 Deleuze, 83.

with Diane following his period at the juvenile center. After the previous scenes' intensity and occasionally chaotic soundscapes, the representational mode alters as we see Steve throw himself happily upon a bed in a room drenched in golden sunlight, with curtains fluttering softly in the breeze. This is done in slow-motion. Accompanied by an ambient, soothing soundtrack Steve buries his face in the bedspread and for a rare moment relaxes. In this scene, Dolan manages to produce what D'Aoust calls "sensory renderings"; we can almost physically *feel* the glossy material of the bedspread and the warm sunlight which flickers over Steve's face. D'Aoust writes: "[...] the camera captures the opaque undulation of curtains that shimmer in the afternoon sun. [...] Dolan places images that recall the fluidity of water. Outside of space, we reach back in time and accompany Steve's submergence in an indefinite past."[117]

To emphasize Steve's experience of this peaceful moment, Dolan includes three alternative shots of Steve throwing himself on the bed, filmed from different angles. This reminds me of Metz's analysis of a scene in *Pierrot le fou* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965), where the same narrative event is repeated several times within one sequence, with only slight variations in the execution. Metz calls it a "potential" or "dislocated" sequence, and describes it as "[...] highly expressive of the mad rush, the fever, and the randomness of existence [...]".[118] The repetition of a specific, significant moment (Steve's fall to the bed) underlines the character's state of mind.

D'Aoust points out how, directly after this blissful scene, Steve's inner peace is interrupted by Diane's holler from the kitchen. Although D'Aoust gets the order of the events wrong here (Diane's and Steve's shouting over the noise of two blasting radios occurs *before* the scene in the bedroom, which increases the contrast between the cacophony and the following calm), he is right in noting how Dolan in *Mommy* works with sounds in striking ways. D'Aoust highlights "[...] the film's use of competing sounds in order to convey social and psychological friction".[119] Through the use of a variety of distinct sounds – pop songs, dreamy instrumental soundscapes, characters talking at the same time, frequent shouting – Dolan expresses the turbulence experienced internally by Steve, and in extension by Diane and Kyla when they are drawn into the teenager's fits of boundless joy or uncontrollable anger. This ongoing, frustrating mix of competing sounds adds an overwhelming dimension to *Mommy* that forces the viewer out of any possible comfort zone.

Another stylistically interesting instance of a character's subjective vision literally *coloring* the images, occurs in *Laurence Anyways* when the titular character is walking home from work on her thirty-seventh birthday. This takes place shortly before Laurence tells Fred that she is a woman on the inside. The rain is pouring down and the dark city streets are repeatedly lit up by lightning.

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117 D'Aoust, 6.
118 Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 219.
119 D'Aoust, 6.

The sounds of the rain and thunder are exaggerated while faint, non-diegetic classical music plays on the soundtrack. Laurence passes a hair salon with a bright, pink neon sign announcing its name: "Elle & Lui" ("Her & Him"). Through the salon's window a group of elderly women with curlers in their hair stand staring out at the lightning (and at Laurence as she looks in at them). The camera films them from Laurence's point-of-view, which creates an effect similar to the film's opening sequence where we are put in the protagonist's position and subjected to the skeptic gaze of unknown people. The hair salon's name with its normative, binary division between male and female signals Laurence's mental preoccupations and the nature of her secret – as does the next scene where she seeks shelter from the rain in a wine shop. This locale, too, has a very striking neon decoration in its window; the red neon light completely colors the crowd inside trying to avoid getting wet. As Laurence looks around at the group of people in the shop, they all stare back at her (and at us, since the camera again adopts the protagonist's point-of-view). However, one individual's gaze lasts longer: a young person of indeterminable gender (who wears make-up) looks intently into Laurence's/our eyes and smiles mysteriously. The androgynous face and the knowing smile – which indicates a secret link between these two strangers – can be interpreted as a foreshadowing of Laurence's revelation that she is, in fact, a transgender woman. Perhaps this stranger is able to see past Laurence's masculine surface and glimpse her true self. More probably, the connection takes place in Laurence's mind. The sight of this gender-ambiguous individual matches Laurence's mental state and possibly helps her gather the courage to finally tell her friends and family about her decision to live as a woman. In either case, the almost unreal colors of the neon lights, the over-emphasized sound of the rain and the dramatic inclusion of lightning all help to stylistically express a turning point in Laurence's life. The sequence exhibits a sense of heightened perception, of being acutely aware of one's existence.

The visual and sonic expressions of subjectivity in Dolan's work vary from film to film, depending on the personality of the character(s), the narrative mode and the film's overall aesthetics. In *Tom at the Farm* – Dolan's most traditional "genre film" to date – the style is adapted to the story's underlying threat of physical violence and its theme of homophobia. As the titular character remains at the farm for a longer amount of time than he had intended, his mental state is increasingly affected by the constant fear of being abused by Francis – and his involuntary sexual attraction to the same. Sharing Tom's subjective perspective, the viewer experiences the character's dangerous fascination with Francis while, like Tom himself, being frustrated with his inability to leave this rural version of hell. As discussed previously, the camerawork of *Tom at the Farm* is particularly centered on the protagonist, never straying far from his physical presence. I have used Caputo's term "tethering" to describe this claustrophobic and limited field of vision, where the

subjective quality of the cinematography has less to do with direct point-of-view shots than with an uncomfortable closeness to the main character. Notably, Caputo's description of "tethering" has striking similarities to Pasolini's "free indirect subjective": a "[...] cinematographic style of keeping the camera closely linked to a single character's subjective narrative reach, whilst at the same time maintaining its stance as a notional observer, whose own perception is sometimes affected by the psychological state of the character to whom it is 'tethered'".[120] Compare this to Deleuze's take on the "free indirect subjective": "A character acts on the screen, and is assumed to see the world in a certain way. But simultaneously the camera sees him, and sees his world, from another point of view which thinks, reflects and transforms the viewpoint of the character."[121] The key point in these concepts is that the character's own subjective perception is mediated to us through a second subjective vision, resulting in a blurred boundary between the two.

Laurence Anyways is the work by Dolan that most explicitly tackles the opposition between normative society and non-normative, marginalized individuals – and this greatly affects the film's style. As Urrea and Gil-Arbodela note, the film "[...] proposes the representation of a character who transgresses the rules of gender, by building her own identity as a woman. At the same time, it is important to note that Dolan's film also violates aesthetic and stylistic norms of mainstream cinema, proposing an, at times, unconventional treatment of verisimilitude."[122] These violations against the norms of mainstream cinema include the recurring "affective mental images" discussed previously, where the protagonists' emotions cause the imaginary to invade on actual narrative events. The many music video sequences of stylized slow-motion walks through public spaces represent other such deviations from conventional cinematic storytelling. These striking aesthetics increase the sense of being inside someone's consciousness, while simultaneously attracting our attention to the artificiality of the cinematic construction.

A constant and crucial characteristic of Dolan's films is that we are never allowed to distance ourselves and look *at* the protagonists, never given the opportunity to evaluate them from an outside perspective. Instead, we are with them, inside their skin or at least so close to them that it is not possible for the viewer to identify with the normative society of the films. It should be noted that this is the case also in the instances where we are denied access to the characters, and where the filmic construction is exposed. Even then, there is no neutral standpoint for the viewer to occupy – instead, we are momentarily deserted within the protagonist's world, unsure of the alien territory.

Heinemann notes how the free indirect style "[...] positions viewers in a constantly shifting relationship with the narrative, at one moment encouraging an immersion in the illusionistic

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120 Caputo, 224.
121 Deleuze, 82.
122 Urrea and Gil-Arbodela, 139.

unfolding of the plot, the next forcing an awareness of its formal properties [...]".[123] Similarly, Baillargeon highlights how the "free indirect subjective" of *Heartbeats* draws our attention to filmic conventions: "Through this 'meta' dimension of film, the viewer is constantly reminded that what she is faced with is not reality, but a simulacrum making the mechanisms and technology through which the cinematic illusion is created undeniable."[124]

While the "free indirect subjective" cannot be used to label an exact category of films or a fixed set of stylistic features, it can be helpful when analyzing "auteur films" whose aestheticized nature suggests a subjective presence which is hard to pin down and does not belong either entirely to the protagonist or the director, but lands somewhere in between. As Pasolini notes: "[...] the 'free indirect subjective' in cinema is endowed with a very flexible stylistic possibility; [...] it also liberates the expressive possibilities stifled by traditional narrative conventions".[125]

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123 Heinemann, 1-2.
124 Baillargeon, 176.
125 Pasolini, 552.

8. Conclusion

Since the entire thesis has been one long ongoing discussion of Dolan's style and its relation to his non-normative characters, I will keep the conclusion fairly brief and mostly reiterate some of the key arguments and findings. As stated in the introduction, my investigation was guided by three main questions: By what stylistic means are Dolan's protagonists portrayed? How are their subjective perspectives presented cinematically to us? And, to what degree and in what ways do the subjective visions of the characters and the filmmaker coincide in the films' aesthetics?

Through the identification of style elements and close attention to specific scenes in Dolan's films, I have tried to answer these questions. I have studied some of the techniques frequently employed by the filmmaker in his character depictions, such as point-of-view shots, close-ups, slow-motion and color filters. Dolan's symmetrical image compositions, experiments with aspect ratio and motif of frames within frames have been highlighted, as well as his usage of off-screen space. Special attention has been given to Dolan's interior images and his music video sequences, since these narrative devices stand out particularly in his work and exhibit a high degree of character subjectivity. In all of these stylistic elements and storytelling techniques, I have tried to discover their relation to Dolan's queer and non-normative themes. In other words, I have analyzed how these formal aspects help expressing alternative world-views in order for the viewer of the films to connect with the individuals portrayed and to question normativity in various ways. In the course of these investigations writings by several theorists – primarily Deleuze and Bonitzer – have been employed, although not as methods of inquiry but rather as complementary concepts in order to more clearly identify and theorize Dolan's key stylistics.

Additionally, I set out to engage in a dialogue with the few existing academic sources on Dolan. Throughout this thesis I have argued with and against these texts in order to identify the specifics of the filmmaker's work. Although some of these writers have proposed ideas different from my readings of the films, I have found them to be useful in my analyses. Together with them, I feel that a first step towards a serious study of Dolan has been taken.

All of the sources on Dolan that have been discussed in this thesis seem to agree that Dolan has a habit of adopting stylistics that match the protagonists of each of his films. The depiction of non-normative individuals calls for unconventional aesthetics and narrative techniques. As several of the texts have noted, Dolan frequently employs unusual, experimental stylistics, which sometimes result in "violations" of cinematic norms. These exceptions or oppositions to storytelling conventions match the characters' outsider positions in the normative society. I want to underline this as one of the key observations of my research: Dolan lets the protagonist's identity dictate the

film's aesthetics, rather than having the protagonist adapt to the filmmaker's style. And since the characters are unconventional and queer in various ways, so are the films' stylistics. While not belonging exclusively to an "art film" category, Dolan's work often borrows stylistics from experimental cinema. Because of this, Dolan is usually considered as both having commercial appeal and apparent "auteur" qualities.

The many stylistic devices discussed throughout the thesis commingle to visually and sonically make the viewer experience the characters' inner lives. Without solely resorting to the most obvious or classical techniques of constructing subjectivity, Dolan invites us to share the characters' visions to reach a greater understanding of their emotional states. Put together, these formal devices create a subjective mode of narration that is somehow both the director's and the protagonist's voice. Because of this stylistic eclecticism and the elusive subjective presence in the films, I have proposed the application of Pasolini's concept of the "free indirect subjective" to describe Dolan's work. Pasolini's term captures this seemingly unidentifiable subjective quality, without rigidly designating neither the protagonist nor the director as the true origin of this vision. It is, as Pasolini proposes, a "contamination" between two subjective visions, and as such it is elusive by nature. It could of course be argued that applying the term "free indirect subjective" to Dolan's work does not result in a method for analysis. However, I find the open-ended, intentionally vague yet inventive theories of Pasolini, Deleuze, Bonitzer and similar theorists to be especially suitable for Dolan. This is because Dolan's work presupposes a critically thinking spectator who welcomes being provoked, seduced and alienated by the films. Dolan's characters are not there to entertain a passive audience or to affirm normative values, but to cause a reaction and initiate a thought process – which is why they do not offer fixed definitions, clear answers or easy solutions.

Through a queer vision of the world, Dolan's films and characters act as a critique of conventions and norms, enabling identification for non-normative viewers who do not feel that they are properly (if at all) represented in mainstream cinema. At the same time, Dolan's depictions of marginalized individuals have the potential to function for a normative audience as eye-opening encounters with another, less visible part of the population. In contemporary culture, where so little space is afforded those who fall outside of the norm, it is important to focus attention on the few directors that offer such individuals a central position in their films. This makes the study of Dolan relevant not only as an auteurist exercise in film style analysis, but also as a contribution to the academic research on media representations of marginalized groups.

Because of the limited space of a master's thesis, I have not been able to go deeper into a number of interesting areas of Dolan's cinema. Being such persuasive depictions of non-normativity and queerness, Dolan's films constitute promising material for a thorough Butler-esque analysis of

gender performativity. Additionally, it would be interesting to study Dolan from a Foucauldian perspective. Not only does the concept of "heterotopia" seem applicable to several of the films, but Dolan's work also deals frequently with the issue of who is considered normal by society, and the criminalization of "deviant" individuals (Steve's involuntary hospitalization in *Mommy* seems highly suitable for a Foucauldian examination). Likewise, an extensive application of Deleuze's theories on Dolan's films could generate interesting results. I have tried to cover these issues to some extent in my study, but even with the narrowed-down scope of style-in-relation-to-queerness, the text became much lengthier than I initially believed or intended. This has resulted in some ideas and concepts only being mentioned in passing, inexhaustively dealt with or removed entirely.

Nevertheless, the main purpose of examining Dolan's non-normative character depiction and its relation to his style was carried out in the space of this thesis. And being one of the very first extensive English-language academic studies of Dolan, it seems only natural that many different aspects of his work is highlighted and that future research is suggested; this is, after all, what could be called uncharted territory.

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