

INTERNAL EXILE. WRITING EXCESS IN MOMMY*

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A TURBULENT, YOUNG AUTHORIAL VOICE

“Loving people doesn’t save them,” says the school headmistress to Diane “Die” Després (Anne Dorval), the mother of Steve (Antoine-Olivier Pilon), who has just been expelled for starting a fire. Die answers: “Skeptics...will be proven wrong”. This launches the theme that runs through *Mommy* (Xavier Dolan, 2014). From this point onwards, Die has to take charge of Steve’s education without any institutional or family help: there is no father – he died three years before. Die finds help from her neighbour Kyla (Suzanne Clément), who gives the boy private tuition so she can go to work. But Steve is unpredictable and ungovernable and he tests the limits of love and upbringing.

Xavier Dolan had already imagined *Mommy* in his first feature film, the Cannes award-winner *I killed my mother* (*J’ai tué ma mère*, 2009). He not only directed and acted in that film, he wrote it at the age of just 16. He himself says that if *I killed*

In which corner of the adverse body must I read my truth?

Barthes, 2005: 42

my mother was to meant to punish her, *Mommy* was filmed to avenge her¹. Company tells us that the essential aim of classic cinema is to “inscribe a view in time through experience of it” (2014: 81) but this view “tries to forget that time also inflicts its wounds on the subjects who bear its passing and the fatigue it brings” (2014: 82). Between *I killed my mother* and *Mommy* we can read writings in the voice of a young author who does not try to hide the wounds of time. Quite the contrary: the two films released when Dolan was 20 and 25 are the mark of someone trying to test – and if something is tested it is because it has not been understood – the anger and excess of that very specific and turbulent time: adolescence.

In the middle there are three films – *Heartbeats* (*Les amours imaginaires*, 2010), *Laurence Anyways* (2012) and *Tom at the farm* (*Tom à la ferme*, 2013) – about the pain of love, with characters who cannot contain secrets because they want to say everything, exhausting all words of love and

language itself. Dolan shows a curious relationship with selfhood – deep down, are all directors not always making the same film? – in which he seeks out the new among the repetitive ups and downs of relationships. In his work, the end of love feels like the end of the world. And precisely in his latest film, entitled *It's only the end of the world* (*Juste la fin de du monde*, 2016), something new emerges: the leading character learns about distance and, above all, wins a kind of silence. He learns to keep quiet, to cut back pleasure in words. And is every work not, deep down, a cutting back (sculpture) of the pleasure invading the body of the artist?

AN OVERFLOWING MELODRAMA

As a native of Quebec, in the French-speaking part of Canada, Dolan maintains a certain distance from the hegemonic view. He considers his geography is important for recognition of his voice as author. His characters are at home, though, or they are passing through (like Kyla) or they feel like foreigners in their mother tongue because they know they are speaking a borrowed language (this is Die's situation²). At the same time, they also feel that "the Americans are always close by"³. Dolan looks to the hegemonic cinema of Hollywood and the "disconnected" paintings of Edward Hopper – but also continues to admire the other side of the ocean, where his language is rooted and where modern cinema was born, expanding the ways in which things could be said.

Mommy is the voice of a child calling to its mother with unlimited demands. Perhaps for this reason, it uses uncontained melodrama, seriously challenging Hollywood's restrained version of the genre. After this first hypothesis, our aim here is to study the way in which *Mommy* writes the "excess of melodramatic writing" (Marzal, 1998: 319). We use textual analysis as a method allowing us to uncover cinematic resources – in other words to listen to what the way in which the cinematic

meanings are articulated tells us about the outlines of the story they tell. But we will not forget details of the script (construction of characters and structure) and concepts from psychoanalysis, crucial for considering the grief, violence and love in the film.

In the twenties, amid Griffith's narrative coherence, that "trace of *significant excess*, [...] which only succeeds in striking us dumb" was already appearing (Marzal, 1998: 234). However, such excess faded away in the romantic melodramas of Franz Borzage and John M. Stahl in the thirties and the tearful schmaltz achieved in many forties melodramas. It was the German (a foreigner!) Douglas Sirk, who arrived in Hollywood in the fifties and brought back the visual beauty of the father of narrative cinema, reconfiguring family melodrama and calling into question the happy ending of the classical model. Using *mise-en-scène*, Sirk said "what could not be said, contradicting or placing an alternative emphasis to what was going on in the narrative" (Palencia, 2016: 162). His technicolour melodrama taught the genre – or subgenre or style⁴ – not to round things off and to use irony by sharpening its forms and punching holes in the outdated system of codification for the purposes of realism. Sirk's mannerisms allowed spectators to be carried away by the sentimental, now not driven by corny spectacle but by the sophistication of serious emotions⁵.

Dolan, like Todd Haynes, is Sirk's heir. But, as "melodrama [...] is a shapeshifting 'mudskipper fish' leaping from one spectacular manifestation of a population culture to another and being continually modernised" (Williams in Zurián and Vázquez, 2005: 308), Dolan uninhibitedly uses resonances from the indie, pop and techno sound world of the nineties and the new century. This is radio formula music that spectators would perhaps prefer to forget when they are in the cinema but which here is used to tell us what the characters are not saying. Where Haynes, with

the melodramas *Far from Heaven* (2002), *Mildred Pierce* (HBO, 2011) and *Carol* (2015), continues the restraint and distills a nostalgia for Sirkian melodrama that prevents him escaping the period, Dolan brings freshness and irreverence to melodrama from the most immediate future present: for a film coming out in 2014 he places his diegetic present in 2015. On the surface, *Mommy* is an effusive work paying profound attention to tragic events. Its melodramatic view is a study of limits taken to the extreme. Its discourse runs from the most intimate (trembling words and bodies) to the framework for the subjective (family, social and institutional factors). The originality of his treatment of excess lies in the fact that it even affects the game of enunciation with the format of the film. Ultimately, although *Mommy* can be taken as a banal, postmodern pop video, the enunciation takes on the seriousness of an argument that does not hold back from the study of emotions because it is devoted to listening – humanising the unbearable.

IT'S ABOUT FEMININE AGREEMENT

Mommy belongs to the current of maternal melodramas, from the iconic *film noir Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945) to the contemporary *Julietta* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2016), in which mothers do not manage to prevent evil or pain in their daughters. While the topography of a melodrama is the home as the family “nest”, the mother is the all-enveloping character. She is the support, who must ensure than no-one goes hungry. For this reason, even in films that stress the figure of the patriarch, such as *How Green Was My Valley!* (John Ford, 1941), the mother appears feeding the whole village. Love is shown via the stomach. In the Hollywood melodrama, as Núria Bou’s study (2006) has shown, the mother is the guardian of the home; “the silent, life-giving, spiritual face of the benefactor” (97). Ultimately, her function is sacrifice. As we will see, even at the most hope-

ful moment of Dolan’s film, when the leading characters cook together, showing how they look after one another, the ultimate responsibility for ensuring they are fed falls on the matriarch. Because, as we will later analyse in more detail, this sequence closes with a shot of her as a court letter arrives demanding a large sum of money.

Diane Després is named to be a heroine – her initials coincide with the comic superhero tradition⁶ – but her name also attracts death. She is known as “Die”, and her surname Després sounds, in French, like “de prés” (up close). As we have already said, Canada’s language mix provides material for jokes and these offer a degree of truth for the story: the two leading characters laugh about the Die double meaning after she confesses to Kyla her loneliness after being widowed. In this conversation, the most intimate between them, Die talks about her desire. She appears as a mother who is not all about sacrifice. She is a vivacious woman who enjoys dressing in lace and still treasures the last drops of a Dior perfume she was given. In the prologue – out of time in the diegesis that prefigures the story – she takes an apple (symbol of original sin) while she draws breath in the absence of her son, seen metonymically in the form of his tasteless underpants flapping on the line.

Nor is Kyla a sacrificial mother. She is a secondary-school teacher on a career break who has been outside the world since the death of



Die

her son. In her house she is always preoccupied, not listening to the demands of her husband and daughter. At one point, when they are doing their homework, they say about an exercise: “it’s all about feminine agreement”. This detail from the script can be read as a nod to melodrama and to the film itself, which takes it to extremes. Because “if there is something that cannot be measured, it is precisely female enjoyment” (Bassols, 2017: 73), “for the female, if there are boundaries they always boundaries without limits” (19). Questions about femininity are a stylistic theme for Dolan. His work involves a beautiful otherness, the unknown self, both for men and for women.

WORDS BITTEN BACK

I rub my language up against the other
Barthes, 2005: 82

Everything begins with what cannot be said. This is one of the foundations of melodrama. When Dolan collected the Cannes Jury prize from Jane Campion, he told the auditorium that the first film he saw was *The Piano* (1993) and that it encouraged him to write film scripts. If the New Zealand director’s film highlights anything, it is the capacity to use music as a vehicle for what her mute leading character does not say. By playing the piano, Ada is allowed to say what her body has decided to silence.

In *Mommy*, the three characters are affected from the beginning by obstacles to language. Die speaks while chewing gum with a very unusual sing-song intonation and she has problems with translation, which is one of her jobs. Kyla’s stumbling tongue is a cry of grief for her dead son. The character appears stammering, almost unable to articulate a word, and only when she tries to save Steve does she save herself, managing to speak and laugh. Steve is foul-mouthed. For him, the discourse of the film uses music to say what he is unable to articulate for himself.

When he comes out of school and arrives at his new home, the first thing he does is recover his father’s jacket, looking for photographs of him – here the dead look out at us from photos – and dusting down his CD player. With music he tries to symbolise the deafening sound of the grieving process – in fact he then plays a musical compilation made by his father. This logic is concealed behind the shouting, insults and mockery he hurls at others so he does not have to listen to his own grief.

Music moves him. When he is lying down while Die is looking for job advertisements, he hits play and goes into the street with his skateboard and his headphones. While he speeds through the empty surrounding fields, isolating himself listening to rap, the spectators hear him listening to an extradiegetic song:

I am colour-blind [...]
 Pull me out from inside
 I am ready
 I am taffy stuck and tongue-tied
 Stutter, shook and uptight
 Pull me out from inside
 I am ready
 I am folded, unfolded, and unfolding.⁷

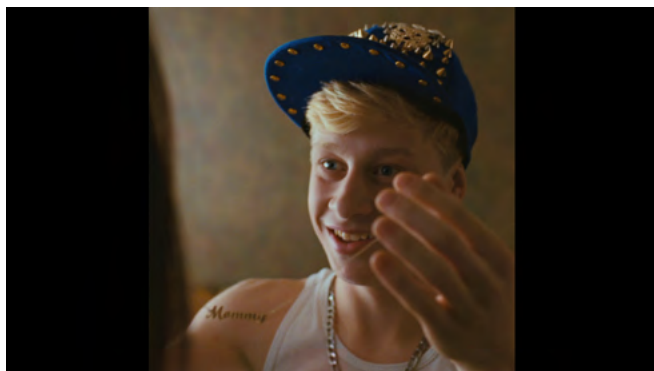
The lyric emphasises the bitten-back words, revealing the character’s internal exile and declaiming what he cannot say at a time of transformation: “folded, unfolded, and unfolding...” refers to an awakening which could probably be rendered: “inhibited, uninhibited, awakening” or even “revealing myself”.

In the same sequence, the first in which he appears to demand freedom, he swaps his skateboard for a shopping trolley, a very specific symbolic object in this melodrama. When he moves with it, it is the container for an absence. It transports the void left by his father, to whom he shouts, looking up at the sky. It is also a representation of hunger, indicating financial difficulties. Above all, though, it is what makes it possible to carry a burden, which is how he sees himself both for his mother and for the institutions. The mother-son

relationship is locked between absence – the death of the father and the lack of any institution that can educate Steve – and excess – if they are always together, she cannot work. So, to alleviate his guilt, Steve fills the trolley.

CHAINS AND LINKS

When he reaches home with the shopping, Steve gives Die a pendant. On it is inscribed the word “Mommy” in capital letters, with the fondness symbolised by the serifs in italics. He says that with the gesture he is keeping a promise: “Told ya I’d take care of ya”. But she is disturbed and distracted: she does not accept it because she assumes it must be stolen. He will not accept the rejection. They begin to argue, more and more ferociously, until Die, unable to curb Steve’s anger, hides in a cupboard. Here, the point of view switches and the spectator is trapped with Die, Steve staying silent while Die’s face is in the dark, striped with a thread of light.



Steve tries to name Die

This pendant comes in to name the film, but before that it names Die as mother. The pendant acts as a gift and “a gift is not an object, it is a symbol that names the subject – and, because it names it, it constitutes it as it is” (González Requena, 2002: 84). With the pendant, he seeks to *chain himself* to her. It is the cry of a son who, by promising to take care of her, is asking her to take care of him. But care involves much more than calming him or giving him medication to calm his anger. What Steve seems to be demanding is, in the words of the song, someone to pull him out from inside: to bring him out of the idiotic pleasure that keeps him outside the world. But this will not be possible without a third element to cut through the *love-hate relationship* between mother and son. When Die comes out of the store cupboard she finds Steve, now calm and being helped by Kyla, whom she is barely able to greet.

The character of Kyla is the third element⁸, taking up a position between mother and son. She brings them out of the imaginary two-way relationship in which neither can save the other because they do not know how to distance themselves from one another. The death of the father has left a painful vacuum but there is no strong father’s name as a reminder of the limits between bodies that always approach one another too closely with violence or eroticism. Kyla plays the role of school, which also happens in *I Killed My Mother*. In that film, the actress plays a schoolteacher who enters the leading character, played by Dolan, for a writing competition called “Authors of tomorrow”. Because ever since his first film, Dolan has been writing of his desire to be recognised as an author. This three-way dynamic is ultimately symbolic, and is crucial for contact with others: “there is no way the family can be the ultimate horizon of the world. Compulsory schooling sets a necessary distance between the subject and his family and offers possible encounters with other worlds. It is enforced exile; the transition from the mother tongue to the language of the alphabet or

other languages, because without translation, as Benjamin would say, there can be no survival” (Recalcati, 2016: 78).

The mother tongue, therefore, has to be given up, above all because, as we have said, Die literally has problems with translating. So, Kyla makes possible the link between the three, demonstrating that the freedom Steve demands throughout the film – as Dolan does throughout all his work – can only be achieved through connections with others⁹, a fundamental lesson given us in *Three Colours: Blue* (Trois couleurs: Bleu, 1993) by Krzysztof Kieslowski. That film, which questions freedom as an enlightened ideal, shows us a character who can only come through grief through connections with others. Without them, one is left alone with one’s own pleasures, remaining in an indefinite internal exile.

As in *Three Colours: Blue*, the internal exile of the characters moves the mise-en-scène. In *Mommy*, light marks the relationship between charac-

ters and spaces. Public places – the transitional areas where Steve would like to disappear – give off cold references: the karaoke club is a frozen blue, the car park a monstrous green, the supermarket and the hospital have white tungsten lighting, making it impossible to hide. The characters mix in closed, monochrome spaces. In Die’s home, which still “smells stale” with the mixed odours of smoke and air freshener, the light is yellowish, suggesting the flavour of repetition and threatening to burn out shadows against the light. The light guarantees the return of the day, regardless of the bodies.

ON NE CHANGE PAS

The three-way connection begins at an initial dinner where Die is now wearing the pendant, somehow reflecting the one Kyla is wearing – the symbol of infinity – together with a heart that also connects her with her dead son¹⁰. After dinner, the two women begin to become close. In me-



In the kitchen, intimacies slip out

lodrama, as is particularly clear in Almodóvar's work, the kitchen is the territory where close relationships are forged; where bodies come into contact and rub up against one another, without regard for fragility. Steve bursts on to the scene with a song by Céline Dion. Kyla, who has barely been able to say a word, also begins to sing and the three of them dance. Céline Dion – as Steve says, the Canadian “national treasure” – is the mother tongue that soothes them. The camera pulls out and leaves them alone in a general shot: Kyla has expanded the boundaries of the close family universe and something has also emerged in her. The scene celebrates this three-way link but also exudes something pathetic and sad: a rusty nostalgia that feels like a disguise. Steve has appeared wearing make-up. This is important: “make-up also implies or announces a body that is changing state” (Seguin, 2009: 153); that desires a surface change. Of course, the kitchen is also the place where food is transformed. However, the song lyrics are saying something different:

On ne change pas / No-one changes
 On met juste les costumes d'autres sur soi / We just
 put other people's clothes on top
 On ne change pas / No-one changes
 Une veste ne cache qu'un peu de ce qu'on voit /
 A jacket hides only a little of what can be seen

The lyrics offer a challenge in the story precisely in this sequence, which begins the second part of the dramatic structure. And it is no coincidence – there is a great deal of the redundancy of melodrama here – that the album the song is taken from is called *S'il suffisait d'aimer* (*If Loving Were Enough*, 1998).

THREATS IN A FACE

All discourse involves negotiating distance, and it is the framing that separates the view from the filmed world. After experimenting with different formats¹¹ throughout his work, Dolan's decision¹² to opt for 1:1 is the first argument for maintaining

that the author will not draw back from his characters' pain. The 1:1 format is discreet and does not lend itself to the spectacle of action or the movement of bodies in scenes. 1:1 format films are anti-academist. One of their features is that they emphasise, for spectators used to wider formats, the blackness of a darkened cinema, making the screen stand out against the nothingness. But they are very stable, providing a pure scale: that sense of proportion Dolan's characters fail to find in love. In the photographic tradition, 1:1 lends itself to portraits, and “portraits profile, stand out, highlight and bring out of anonymity” (Azara, 2002: 130). So, 1:1 listens to the characters almost as closely as Steve looks at his mother when she is suffering or when they are arguing. Love and hate want to remove the space between bodies to the point of annihilation. Dolan makes it clear that he wants the audience to look the characters in the eye¹³. That makes *Mommy* a study in close-up and detail – something he already seemed to be looking for in *I Killed My Mother*, which starts with a detailed shot of Dolan's own eye. Through 1:1 and the frontal shot he isolates the face, even in conversations, trying to put the pain they are having to swallow into the image, bringing out threats in their hesitant faces, their airy gestures or their shining eyes. In this format, too, the enunciation tries to capture the internal exile of the characters.

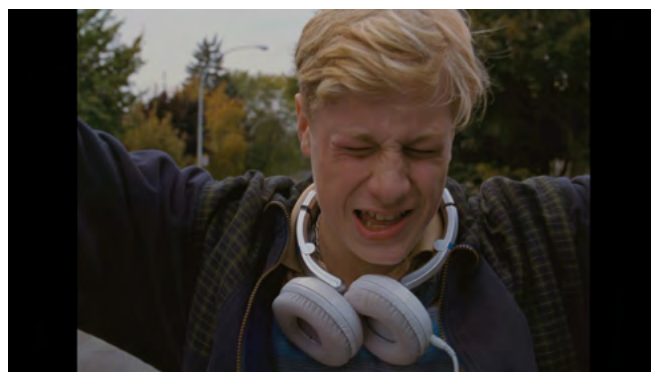
A POSSIBLE DELIGHT FOR MÉLIÈS

After the initial obstacles, Steve gives Kyla a hand-made bracelet, symbolically representing a three-way alliance. He can then enunciate a desire: “I'll apply to an art school in the States. Juilliard”, and time ceases to stand still. The story now allows itself a time ellipsis and even changes of season in a linking sequence with the song *Wonderwall* by Oasis (1995). This song, once again spelling out what cannot be said, indicates the protection offered by connections:

There are many things that I would like to say to you
 But I don't know how
 Because maybe
 You're gonna be the one that saves me

The editing mixes spaces and times: Kyla and Steve study; Die works as a cleaner, envying the gloss and luxury of other people's homes; and the three go out in the street, the women on bikes and Steve on his skateboard, wrapped in his father's jacket. Steve approaches in a reverse shot and literally opens the frame, changing the 1:1 format to 16:9 while closing his eyes, as if this change of format were going to distil a certain internal openness that would prevent anger making him lose control. The fourth wall is not broken to distance spectators – although inevitably it is a mark of enunciation – it is opened so the spectators can regain the distance the enunciation denied them by forcing them to look him the eye. Outside, and in the full light of day, there is clarity; there are different colours and distance between the bodies. The leading characters are moving forward together in the same direction. They laugh and look at the sky – a recurring gesture by characters in Dolan's films which he encourages by leaving plenty of air in the photographic composition. Steve can finally shout: "Freedom!". Perhaps freedom begins by accepting that loving another person means acknowledging that their body is in motion. The frame remains open when the song disappears and the story is taken up again in the new present in the kitchen, where, as we have already mentioned, they are all taking care of one another.

This passage of freedom is reversed at the end of this sequence. The doorbell rings and Die receives a legal claim for a huge sum as compensation for the damage Steve caused in the fire. The format returns to 1:1 on her shaken face, imposing destiny on the characters, a destiny that seems to have been set in that pendant saying Mommy, which shines ironically over an image with low lighting, coherent with the tone of desolation.



Mommy links *mise-en-scène* and framing

The change of format would have probably delighted George Méliès, because it offers magic to the eyes, opening the doors to a cinematographical journey while the train is still running. The view of the enunciation allows itself to be affected by the interior of the characters, linking *mise-en-scène* and framing. "This formal option is not superfluous because it challenges two forms that have been in perpetual debate in contemporary auteur cinema: physical cinema and frame cinema¹⁴" (Quintana, 2014: 46-47).

In this way, Dolan continues the work always done by melodrama with shots and framing to fix the characters in their world and their loneliness, but recalling that the frame is not just another setting, it is essential for determining contact with the subject and the world. The frame is the cut, a libidinal boundary, where the desire of the person watching slips in and sustains the discourse.

A NEW CAR

Let us go back to the beginning for a moment. The story begins when a car crashes into Die's car¹⁵. She gets out, bleeding, and receives the call from school telling her about Steve's expulsion. With the expectations of a classical spectator, we hope the story will repair the consequences of this chaotic central scene. Die is left without a car and she and Steve are forced to transport their own bodies, walking everywhere and arriving late. All journeys appear impossible¹⁶. At times of freedom, the characters move on skateboards and bikes or in supermarket trolleys. After the most dramatic point, when Steve has taken his own life to the limit (he could not stand Die getting close to the lawyer), the third part of the film begins, and the fact that Die arrives home with a new car seems to be a promising sign.

LIFE WORKS THAT WAY

Faced with Steve's enthusiasm, she lays down a law, in an attempt to hold back the boundless love that persists in their relationship: "The only thing that's gonna happen...is I'll love you more and more. And you'll be the one loving me less and less, but... life works that way." Throughout the film, we have seen that Steve's experiences of freedom achieve nothing because Kyla is not enough to separate the clinging relationship between mother and son:

FRAMING DOES NOT MEAN JUST ANOTHER FRAME, IT IS FUNDAMENTAL

"the pleasure of freedom runs directly towards death in as far as it denies the Law of Castration as the law that oversees the experience of limits and of the impossible" (Recalcati, 2016: 87). "The way life works" mentioned by Die is, then, the law of castration, essential so that words and culture can form a barrier to the violence which, in all creatures, never rests.

After this maternal statement that translates into an initial withdrawal¹⁷ the three begin a journey. As soon as the car leaves the neighbourhood, the frame opens up to 16:9 format on a big general shot of the city. It seems that the characters have managed to go beyond their everyday horizon and have symbolically left the family threshold behind.

Die allows herself to dream, and, fixed to her point of view, the spectators dream with her. The enunciation leads us through a dramatic crescendo to emotional saturation point. The melodrama overflows into romantic epic. While melodrama usually unfolds in a heavy present, in this kind of imagined narrative flashforward, time moves on through continual ellipsis: we see a grown-up Steve – a domesticated, married graduate. Steve as a father who can probably now understand his mother's "life's works that way". With video-style editing, a corny feel and forced defocussing, as if everything were being seen through misty windows, the promise Kyla makes to Steve in the supermarket – "When the time comes we'll apply to Juilliard." – unfolds. One day we'll get a nice letter¹⁸ in a nice envelope, and your mom will be so proud." Although he never heard it, because he was already on the floor, falling apart.

SLOW (E)MOTION EMERGENCY

This sequence appears to be in slow motion, a constant resource throughout the film and one of Dolan's stylistic trait involving a deliberate gestu-

re in the enunciation to try to capture something that is escaping us even as it happens. Slow motion is a language of emotion: “The slowing down of bodies transports the weight of perception that sadness itself – infinitely large or infinitely small – has been broken down into rage or love, semiotised in the same way and with the same material as in traditional melodrama” (Di Martino and Vedove, 2016: 12). The slowing down of the image is a sign of the director’s melodramatic urgency; of his need to write in order to fix emotional density, where chronological time is flooded with the most specific subjective time.

NOSTALGIA FOR WHAT HAS NOT HAPPENED

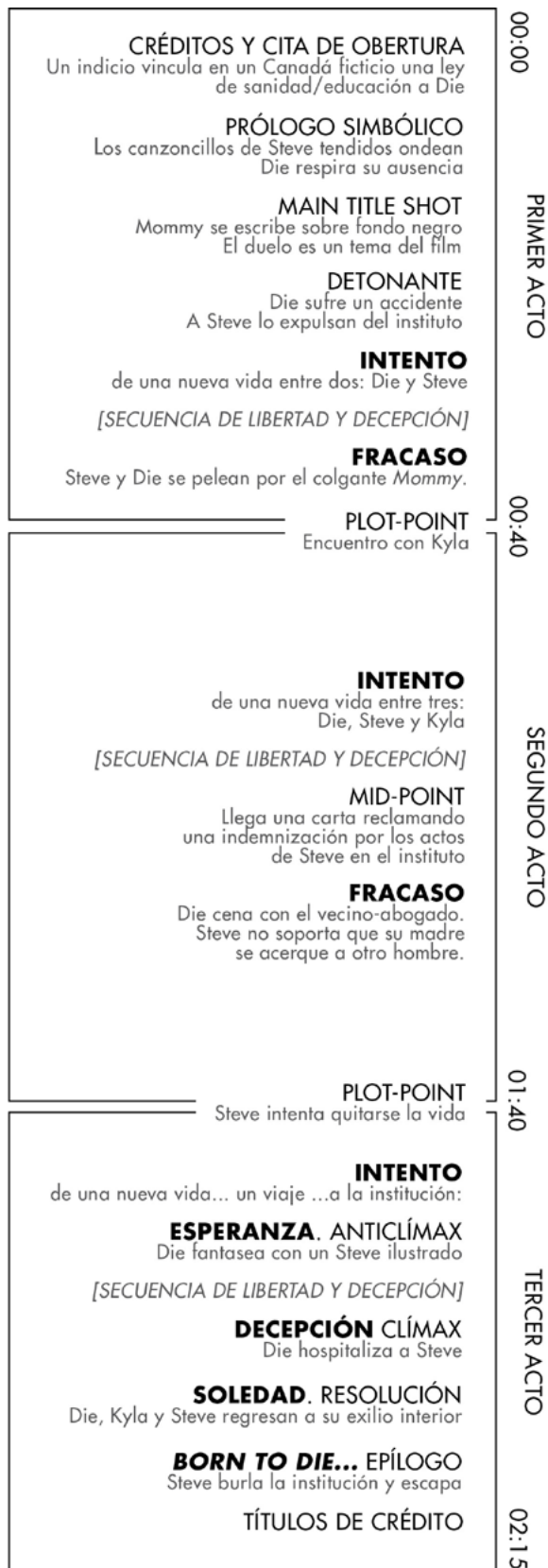
However, here, slow motion translates what cannot be worked on by memory. Catharsis is halted and faces disintegrate, swallowed up by the light. The 1:1 format is imposed once again. What spectators, precisely because they believe in the promises of the story, might have understood as a climactic flashforward, is reversed and revealed as anti-climax. Those bursts of nuclei or essential moments are revealed as illusory, and the story returns to its catalytic rawness. It seems that time is not passing. The happy ending was Die’s imagination. For a moment, cinema has gone beyond the photographic “*this has been*” (Barthes, 1990: 136) and allowed itself to show what *will not happen* in the story. The same happens in *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997)¹⁹, when the leading characters are brought together after death under the clock, and in *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, 2016), when the meganarrator shows the happy ending the lovers missed out on by following their desires. There is nothing more powerful than a film writing the pages stolen from life. With the perplexity of someone who has not been able to fool herself – “the only legitimate kind of blindness is the kind possessed by love” (Cavell, 2003) – Die comes back to reality as she drives. And with the ignorance of

a tragic subject, Steve tells her of the change in the lights, the obligation to go on. Die goes in the only direction she believes leads to salvation: the destination of the journey they have begun is the children’s hospital, where the staff capture Steve as if he were a wild beast. The scene is shot with a shoulder-mounted camera and narrated without time ellipsis, so the spectators follow its seriousness without relief, experiencing the anguish of Die’s failure and regret before the violence of the institution.

This provides the reason for the link the film makes before the prologue between Diane “Die” Després and a law in a fictitious Canada, allowing the parents of a child with behavioural problems and in a situation of danger to entrust their children to a public hospital without legal process. *Mommy* shows the limits of upbringing. Freud²⁰ said this is an impossible task, because there is no law that can eradicate the impulse of death. Dolan’s film takes account of this impossibility with its own uncontained nature: no family or institutional framework can contain Steve’s distress. Pleasure is particularly destructive when there is no law of the word, a condition for all laws²¹.

AN IMBALANCE OF FAILURES

Xavier Dolan goes beyond the sentimental and the label ADDH (Attention Deficit Disorder with Hyperactivity) to take on this pain in Steve that covers the ferocity of his impulses. The enunciation listens to the unbearable from the point of view of the excess of melodramatic writing, and listening means humanising, not judging. That is why the enunciation changes and triangulates points of view, avoiding the Manicheism of melodrama and showing that suffering runs in all directions while love is a misunderstanding. The fury in Die’s gesture of farewell in the story, mute with anger, seems to confirm the words of the school principal: love does not cure everything.



Sketch of the (melo)dramatic structure. Self-created

If we perform the exercise of breaking down *Mommy's* dramatic structure in relation to the theory of Syd Field's most paradigmatic script (1994) we can organise the narration into three²² Aristotelian acts, connected by the nodes or plot points in the story – nuclei in Barthesian terminology. In addition, as we explain in more detail in our diagram, *Mommy* uses various script tricks²³ to knit together a highly strategic melodrama: a chaotic starting point; a mid-point shuffling the destiny of the leading characters; a cathartic and hopeful anti-climax; a sad, violent climax; and a poetic prologue that appears to foretell the story... But the revelation for our study lies in the fact that, with its structural development, *Mommy* can be read as a chain of failures in which hopes and promises run up against powerlessness. The continuing progression of the story does not find a way of correcting the initial scene. While in classical cinema love makes it possible to overcome obstacles to arrive at a happy ending, here it is shown not to be enough. Despite their transformation in the film, the three leading characters have once again been silenced, choked by what they cannot say.

There is also impotence in knowledge. While in melodrama the spectator knows more than the characters, here this is questioned. What is distressing about the story at narrative level is that we have no knowledge of impulse. In the characters' pain, action, cause and effect do not work. The story continually runs up against the incalculable nature of pleasure, which eats away at its own structure. Although the story introduces possible figures who could bring him up, Steve is implacable; that is the excess of the story also operating at structural level.

With all this, Dolan's work portrays his ciphers for love and freedom. As in his other films, he shows us the importance of mothers, teachers and letters. This is the importance of symbolism, transmitted while slipping between subjects and generations. For the Canadian director, words

are as heavy as bodies. “Excess is the basis for a neo-Baroque feel that ends up posing an inventive challenge to the post-modern cinema of the para-advertising surround (Quintana, 2014: 47). And he shows that “what is excessive in melodrama is, it seems, its dependence on appearances” (Epps in Zurián and Vázquez: 2005, 271). There is nothing banal about its treatment of appearances: what could be more incisive than the surface, because this is the route giving access to the profound.

BORN TO DIE...

The misery of love does not dissolve away;
you must suffer or get out: resolving it out is impossible
(love is neither dialectic nor reformist)

Barthes, 2005: 60

Mommy shows that, in pleasure, one is painful and solitary; two, without three, is imaginary and hostile, because a symbolic three is always required to achieve a proper distance between the bodies. However, when an institution silences the subjects, all connections dissolve, leaving our leading characters mute, as we have already said. The soundtrack of the epilogue plays over the final shot of a catatonic Die in shadow. In the hospital where Steve is shut away, as the nurses speak in hostile tones of “fucking human nature”, he escapes his straitjacket and runs away. The enunciation cuts on the detailed shot of his moving feet. However, the song *Born to Die* (2012) by Lana del Rey sonically stretches the final shot – “if the image is a choice, sound is a selection. The image is limited;

sound knows no barriers” (Seguin, 2009: 223). So, in the absence of an image and beyond diegesis, the music continues to tell the story as the final credits roll. Emotions – we will say it again – overflow to the end:

Feet don't fail me now
Take me to the finish line
[...]
Sometimes love is not enough
and the road gets tough
[...]
Choose your last words,
This is the last time
'Cause you and I
We were born to die.

Born to die... Born to Die. Steve's destiny has his mother's name – his original name even before his birth, when the subject is already a story of others – and the name of his end.

NOTES

- * This study has been carried out as part of the research project “La crisis de lo real: la representación documental e informativa en el entorno de la crisis financiera global” (P1-1A2014-05), financed by the Universitat Jaume I through the UJI's competitive research project



Steve, *born to Die*

- funding process (evaluated in 2014 by the Catalan University System Quality Agency, AQU), for the period 2014-2017, and directed by Javier Marzal Felici.
- 1 Recovered from: <https://www.edstirner.com/xavier-dolan/>
 - 2 In Die's first conversation with the school principal she asks her whether she speaks French. Die replies: "Just as good as they do in France, yeah".
 - 3 Kyla jokes in a conversation with Die.
 - 4 "Melodrama [...] is a very broad style, not a genre" (Williams, 2005: 308).
 - 5 Sirk's melodrama is corny, but it is corny in a good, sentimental way, not a bad, schmaltzy way, as differentiated by the aesthetic and theory of taste.
 - 6 Like the heroes of the comic tradition – Sue Storm (the Invisible Woman), Peter Parker (Spiderman), Bruce Banner (Hulk), Clark Kent (Superman). Contemporary melodramatic series follow this naming style and call characters Don Draper in *Mad Men* (Matthew Weiner, HBO, 2007-2015) and Walter White in *Breaking Bad* (Vince Gilligan, AMC, 2008-2013).
 - 7 *Colorblind* (2010), performed by Counting Crows.
 - 8 González Requena (2002) analyses how the presence of the number three imbues the legend of the Three Kings. They are third-party figures interposing themselves between the demands of children and their parents.
 - 9 Although our era is full of the "myth of freedom with no ties" (Recalcati, 2016: 87).
 - 10 A memory of her deceased son. Her fury is unleashed only when Steve snatches it, provoking her.
 - 11 The 16:9 standard view for high definition in *I Killed my Mother* and *Heartbeats*; the televisual 4:3 in *Laurence Anyways*; and the more cinematographic 1.85:1 in *Tom at the Farm* and *It's Only the End of the World*.
 - 12 On 4 June 2016, Dolan sent a letter to Netflix, asking them to remove the film from their catalogue because they had standardised the format so the changes could not be seen.
 - 13 Recovered from <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/why-xavier-dolans-mommy-was-756857>.
 - 14 It continues: "Physical cinema would be that considering the body as the essential material, moving the camera to capture contact, while framing cinema consi-

- ders composition as the essential element determining the aesthetic and formal games of mise-en-scène".
- 15 Spectators see it from the point of view of Kyla, who is listening to the same song as Die.
 - 16 When they take a taxi, the driver throws them out because of Steve's misbehaviour.
 - 17 "Knowing how to lose your own children is the greatest gift for parents, beginning when they take the responsibility of representing the law of the word. Being parents [...] firstly involves a radical dimension of giving up possession of your own children; it means knowing how to 'send them to the wilderness,'" (Recalcati, 2014: 69).
 - 18 *The Death and Life of John F. Donovan*, Dolan's next film due for release in 2018, confirms the symbolic importance of correspondence as another of his stylistic traits.
 - 19 This also indicates the influence of *Titanic* on Dolan.
 - 20 Also governing and psychoanalysing.
 - 21 "The life of the community is possible thanks to the symbolic mediation imposed by the Law of the Word" (Recalcati, 2014: 70).
 - 22 Compared to the 25%, 50%, 25% pattern of running time for the first, second and third acts respectively, *Mommy* is organised approximately into 30%, 45% and 25%.
 - 23 Who has introduced other script theories, making Field more complete and complex.

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INTERNAL EXILE. WRITING EXCESS IN MOMMY

Abstract

Xavier Dolan was already trying out *Mommy* in his first feature film, the Cannes award-winner *I killed my mother* (*J'ai tué ma mère*, 2009). He not only directed it and acted in it, he wrote it when he was just 16. Between *I killed my mother* and *Mommy* we can read painful writings in the voice of a young author who does not try to hide the wounds of time. Quite the contrary: the two films released when Dolan was 20 and 25 are the mark of someone trying to test – and if something is tested it is because it has not been understood – the anger and excess of that very specific and turbulent time: adolescence. For this reason, Dolan uses uncontained melodrama, seriously challenging Hollywood's restrained version of the genre. In this text, we study how *Mommy* writes the excess of melodramatic writing. In this, we are assisted by textual analysis as our methodology, without forgetting script details and concepts from psychoanalysis. On the surface, *Mommy* is an effusive work paying profound attention to tragic events. Its melodramatic view is a study of limits taken to the extreme. Its discourse runs from the most intimate (trembling words and bodies) to the framework for subjectivity (the family, social and institutional factors). The originality of his treatment of excess lies in the fact that it even affects the game of enunciation with the format of the film. Ultimately, although *Mommy* can seem like a banal, postmodern pop video, the enunciation takes on the seriousness of an argument that does not hold back from the study of emotions because it is devoted to listening – humanising the unbearable.

Key words

Xavier Dolan; *Mommy*; Melodrama; Auteur Cinema; Narrative; Script; Psychoanalysis.

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EL EXILIO INTERIOR. LA ESCRITURA DEL EXCESO EN MOMMY

Resumen

Xavier Dolan ya ensayó *Mommy* en *Yo maté a mi madre* (*J'ai tué ma mère*, 2009), primer largometraje, además premiado en Cannes, que dirige e interpreta y que había escrito a los 16 años. Entre *Yo maté a mi madre* y *Mommy* podemos leer la escritura dolorosa de una voz autoral joven que no trata de disimular las heridas del tiempo sino todo lo contrario: los dos films, estrenados a los 20 y 25 años de Dolan, suponen una escritura de alguien que trata de ensayar la ira y el exceso de una temporalidad turbulenta muy precisa, la de la adolescencia. Por ello, Dolan despliega el melodrama desde el desbordamiento poniendo en crisis la contención *hollywoodiense* del género. En este texto estudiamos cómo *Mommy* escribe el exceso de la escritura melodramática. Para ello nos ayudamos del análisis textual como metodología sin obviar detalles de guion y conceptos del psicoanálisis. *Mommy* es un trabajo efusivo de la superficie que presta profunda atención a lo trágico. Su mirada melodramática es un estudio del límite hasta sus últimas consecuencias: su discurso va desde lo más íntimo (el temblor de la palabra y del cuerpo) hasta lo que lo hace marco a la subjetividad (lo familiar, lo social y lo institucional). La originalidad de su tratamiento del exceso reside en que afecta hasta el juego enunciativo con el formato del film. En definitiva, aunque el semblante de *Mommy* puede tomarse como un banal videoclip posmoderno, la enunciación asume la gravedad de un discurso que no retrocede ante el estudio de los afectos porque se dedica a escuchar, esto es, a humanizar lo insoportable.

Palabras clave

Xavier Dolan; *Mommy*; melodrama; cine de autor; narrativa; guion; psicoanálisis.

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gaciones, interroga la superficialidad de la imagen y la complejidad de la cultura visual desde la teoría de la imagen, la narrativa audiovisual, el psicoanálisis y la estética. Contacto: scatalan@com.uji.es.

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