



## “A Boy’s Best Friend is His Mother”: Québec’s Matriarchy and Queer Nationalism in the Cinema of Xavier Dolan

By Fulvia Massimi

Je veux devoir tout mon bonheur  
À la tendresse maternelle.

~ Alfred de Musset, *À ma mère*

According to Québécois director Robert Lepage, “We [Québécois people] are not a patriarchal society, but a matriarchal society. The culture survives because of the mothers, the women” (Dundjerovic 2003, 149-150). Such a provocative claim seems to forget, however, 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— and fails to acknowledge the existence of a wide-ranging feminist literature on nationhood as a heterosexist, masculine domain, wherein women are considered central to the national project only in the light of their reproductive role. In her study of feminism and nationalism in contemporary Québec, Diane Lamoureux argues that the existence of Québec’s matriarchy should not be so easily inferred, as the mother—although considered “the origin of the world”—lacks actual power, and the world does not belong to her except on a mere biological level (Lamoureux 2001, 100). Accordingly, Chantal Nadeau further points out that “the Québec space, despite the fear of matriarchy, is still secured as the land of that male heterosexual triumphant shepherd, St. Jean Baptiste” (1999, 197), since the discourse on Québec’s national identity rests on the generalized assumption of nationhood and manhood as interchangeable terms.

Several feminist scholars working at the intersection of gender studies and international relations have attested that the privileged relationship between nationhood and manhood—implied by the male-oriented writings of canonical theorists of nationalism such as Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson—still resonates within the hierarchical structures of the gender world order, even in the age of the alleged crisis of Western masculinity (Sharp 1997; Peterson 1999; Nagel 2010). Joane Nagel observes that “State power, nationalism, citizenship (...) are all

best understood as masculinist projects, involving masculine institutions, masculine processes and masculine activities” (2010, 243). In such a context of persistent masculinism how can Québec be identified as the repository of feminist and queer potential in the formation of an aspiring nation? Stemming from a brief contextualization of Québec’s revolutionary period as a site of heterocentric, nationalist drives, and from a likewise brief overview of feminist and queer perspectives on nationalism, this paper aims to relocate Québec into an alternative framework of nationhood, one that might find in femininity and queer subjectivities the necessary forces for the construction of a pluralist and more inclusive idea of nation.

For lack of a more nuanced term, ‘matriarchy’ will be used to identify the critical stance towards masculinity within Québec’s nationalist project, and to endorse a feminist approach to nationalism that could challenge the mere metaphorization of women and queer others, as well as the secured position of men in the national picture. The controversial configuration of Québec as a matriarchal society will be further employed to understand the reinforcement of motherhood and the revision of patriarchal hegemony in the cinema of Québécois director Xavier Dolan (b. 1989), which will be taken into consideration as a symptomatic example of the counter-normative, female-empowered body of Québec’s post-revolutionary and post-referendary society. The erasure of patriarchy and heteronormativity from Dolan’s narratives, further counterbalanced by the relevance attributed to female and queer characters, will be interrogated in the attempt to challenge the structures of Québec’s post-revolutionary nationalism. Femininity and queer subjectivities will be rearranged into the national design no longer as threats but as necessary forces of nation-building.

The paper will be divided into four sections. First, it will briefly consider the work of Canadian historian Jeffery Vacante on the relationship between the crisis of manhood and the failure of the revolutionary project in Québec, so as to expose the weak status of patriarchy and contrived masculinity in Québec’s present history. Second, it will sketch out a feminist approach to nationalism that could be productively applied to the analysis of Québec’s post-revolutionary national identity. Third, it will take into account the resignification of queer sexualities and queer

identities in Québec's cultural structures, so as to overcome the "fear of federasty" (that is the fear of homosexuality as a sexual but also national-cultural matter) theorized by Robert Schwartzwald in his homonymous article. Finally, it will merge the three levels of inquiry previously discussed within the analysis of Dolan's feature films in order to pinpoint the relevance of female-oriented relationships and queer subjectivities, thereby reinforcing a different discourse around national identity and gendered nationhood in Québec.

In regard to the final section, two caveats are in order. One, the extensive focus on the thematic aspects rather than on the formal features of Dolan's cinema does not intend to flatten the audacity and stylistic exuberance of the director's work. Rather, it is dictated by matters of internal cohesiveness and coherence to the central argument of the paper. Two, the decision to read Dolan's *oeuvre* through the lens of Québec's gendered nationalism has no ambition to settle the identitary paradigm of nationhood as the only viable interpretative option, nor to dismiss the variegated range of readings and possibilities that the analyzed films entail for both the present and future of Québec cinema. It is rather the author's belief that an encompassing analysis of Dolan's revitalizing engagement with the specificity of his own cultural and (sub)national belonging<sup>1</sup> will shed new lights on the ongoing conversation around nationhood and gender as still a crucial debate for the study of both Québec and Canadian cinemas.

### ***Maîtres chez nous: a false myth***

Questions around autonomy and sovereignty have been part and parcel of Québec's history since the original foundation of New France in the seventeenth century, and even more significantly so with the Conquest of 1760 and the foundation of the Province of Québec after the concession of French territories to Great Britain with the Treaty of Paris (1763). The attempt of the British colonizers to suppress and assimilate the Francophone culture during their colonial administration had the effect

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry White's concept of national *belonging* over national *identity* is borrowed here to stress the adaptability of Dolan's films to a more flexible paradigm of National Cinema. His films do not necessarily pertain to a national project in political and territorial terms; but they do nonetheless participate in the construction and innovation of the cultural imaginary of a given "nation"—especially when the nation in question is not a recognized nation-state but a sub-national, minoritarian entity (White, 2004).

of exacerbating feelings of resentment, and fueling desires of independence and nation-building. The emergence of nationalist impulses in the strict sense of the term emerged, however, for the first time during the Quiet Revolution: 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.

Departing from the chronological development of the Quiet and Sexual Revolutions as parallel trajectories (the former as a local phenomenon; the latter as a more geographically diffuse impulse towards gender revision in Western culture), Canadian historian Jeffery Vacante wrote extensively on the connection between Québec's political history and its history of sexuality (Vacante 2005, 2006). He specifically located in the Quiet Revolution the point of origin for the configuration of Québec's nationhood as a heteronormative, androcentric project -- in opposition to the attempts of the Sexual Revolution to revise fixed (mis)conceptions of gender dynamics. The promotion of male heterosexual power as a way to overcome the myth of Québec's "homosexual" nation—since historically emasculated by the Church and subjugated by the Anglophone colonizer<sup>2</sup>—is at the core of Vacante's interrogation of the relationship between masculinity and nationalism in revolutionary Québec. Referring back to the pre-secularized conditions of Catholic Québec in the 1920s and the 1930s, Vacante identifies in the Quiet Revolution "an important stage in Québec's evolving heterosexual identity [...] that fulfilled many men's long-held desire to overthrow the devirilizing influence of their mothers, wives, and the Catholic Church" (2005, 36). The heterocentrism of both the political revolution and sexual involution<sup>3</sup> of the 1960s is thus construed as a hurdle to the production of a more

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<sup>2</sup> As Vacante acknowledges, the call for secularization of the Quiet Revolution was supported by a strong reassertion of heterosexual masculinity based on two main arguments. On one side, the reevaluation and rejection of the Church's educational system as an environment accused to instill feminine values in the boys and therefore preventing the production of "strong and virile leaders" for an independent nation. On the other, the homophobic dismantlement of colonial discourses based on the homosexualized, feminized metaphor of Québec as the passive partner of the Anglophone colonizer. Independence, then, became for the leaders and theorists of the Quiet revolution an instrument to allow both men and nation in Québec to emerge from a state of weakness and dependence (Vacante, 2005, 36-37).

<sup>3</sup> 'Involution' stands here in contrast to the notion of 'revolution' so as to underline the reactionary nature of the gender politics promoted within the agenda of the Quiet Revolution: a masculine project rather than a quest for sexual and gender equality.

challenging national history, one that does not perceive female and queer subjectivities as threats to a solid albeit heterogeneous idea of national identity.

As Vacante further attests, the reassertion of heterosexual and hegemonic power over “the figurative state of homosexual weakness and dependence” in nationalist Québec can be hardly considered accomplished by the revolutionary design. Interrogating the alleged combination of nationalism and liberalism within the Revolution, Vacante brings men’s studies into the equation, and exposes the reluctance of Québécois historians to engage with the crisis of male subjectivity, for they considered it a major threat to the construction of Québec’s national narrative as a positive force of modernization (2006, 107). If the trajectories of modern nationalism and modern masculinity are assumed to be parallel (Nagel 2010), the subsidence of male subjectivity as a central paradigm in Western post-war history puts into question not only the secure structure of already established nations, but the fragile condition of subnational communities awaiting recognition as well. It is therefore understandable that Québec nationalism, which flourished under the leadership of the Liberal party, became heavily associated in the 1960s with a general idea of liberalism, but not necessarily with “liberal values such as pluralism and tolerance,” especially in regard to sexual and gender identities (Vacante 2006, 111).

Vacante’s call for the inclusion of men’s studies in Québec’s historical writings hence derives from the need to rethink the heterocentric project of the Quiet Revolution in the traumatic context of the post-referendary defeats of the 1980s and the 1990s, in order to revise the alleged responsibilities of women and queer subjectivities in the political failure of the masculine nation, and to underline the crucial role played by both in leading the modernization of Québec:

There is a heightened sense of anxiety among French-speaking Québécois because the province is also coming to terms with the end of the Quiet Revolution. Since the 1960s, Québec society has been consumed with a project of modernization as well as state-building, as a growing segment of the population came to link manhood to the attainment of greater political independence. (2012, 23)

Vacante reads against the grains of Québec’s nationalist mythology, and by exposing the failure of the sovereigntist project in the 1960s (as well as in the three

following decades) he demystifies the validity of the heterocentric paradigm epitomized by Jean Lesage's slogan "Maîtres chez nous" ("Masters in our own house"), where the "masters" are conceived as male and heterosexual. His approach is, however, partially limited: by privileging the stance of men's studies scholars on the issue of masculine nationalism, it overlooks the contributions of scholars addressing the question of gendered nationalism from a feminist standpoint. As crucial interventions to redefine the ground of inquiry of Québec's national design, such perspectives will be taken into consideration in the following section, which will attempt to find a more productive approach to Québec's post-revolutionary setting in both gendered and political terms.

### **Women that matter: a feminist perspective on nationalism**

The discourse around Québec's national design can produce more relevant and pluralist models for understanding nationalism not only by increasing the presence of men's studies in the analysis of its history, but also by turning to feminist approaches on the same matter. As Joanne R. Sharp points out, "the silence of gendered identities of nationalism is due in part to the taken-for-granted nature of national identity in the contemporary world system" (1996, 107); a feminist approach to nationalism is therefore necessary to disrupt the overarching system of heterosexism, blatant gender binaries, and supposedly dominant patriarchy. The revival of nationalist claims in Eastern Europe is used by Sharp as a specific case study to interrogate the agency of feminist demands within the national design, but her conclusion might easily apply to revolutionary Québec as well, especially when she states that "during the nationalist revolt the 'women's question' disappeared as a political issue (...) and it would return to the public sphere of politics once independence has been attained" (1996, 103).

Although neglected by the nationalist design of the Revolution, the 'women's question' addressed by Sharp represented a touchstone for feminism in Québec, and for its later rediscovery in the post-revolutionary era. As Paula Gilbert Lewis notices, the years of the Quiet Revolution did not only elicit the awakening of national consciousness on a broad and generalized scale, but impacted specifically on the rise of feminist awareness of Québec's women and women writers in particular. In between the 1970s and the 1980s the work of authors such as Louky Bersianik,

France Théoret, Madeleine Gagnon, Nicole Brassard and others offered indeed a foundational ground to the emergence of a solid corpus of feminist literature in Québec, exposing strong links between feminism and nationalism, and signaling the equally important need to acknowledge the gendered and national oppression of women as Québécoises *and* female subjects (Gilbert Lewis 1985, 4-5).

In her study of experimental writing in Québec, Karen Gould stresses even further the ground-breaking role played by the abovementioned authors engaging with social, political, and gendered questions of national identity in subversive literary forms. As the pioneers of feminist consciousness and feminine writing in Québec, Bersianick, Gagnon, Théoret, and Brossard opened a breach in an otherwise male-dominated scenario, “challen[ging] the making of an in-different text and, in so doing, work[ing] to unsilence and recover a multitude of female voices, each with its own rhythm, tone, and story to tell” (1990, 2-3).

To rethink the asset of nationalism from a feminist point of view thus means to relocate female subjectivity at the core of the national discourse, not as an abstract entity but as a voice and a body that matters. Women can no longer be scripted in the fabric of nationhood as mere metaphors, never equal to the nation but only representatives of its more vulnerable, penetrable, conquerable aspects. On the contrary, their active involvement in the processes of nation-building must be acknowledged and heavily rooted in reality (Peterson 1996, 99): the urgency to rearrange female bodies and subjects as actual players within the nationalist agenda hence becomes a trope in the feminist approach to nationalism.

In a further contribution, Spike Peterson equates nationalism and heterosexism to draw attention to the role played by the latter in producing a foundational binary that de-naturalizes both the female and the queer other as markers of difference within the nation. Five “interactive ways” to resituate women and men in the national framework are employed to prove how “in reality, women are not only symbols and their activities extend well beyond the private sphere” (1999, 50).<sup>4</sup> Once again, the

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<sup>4</sup> Peterson’s “five gender differentiated dimensions of state-centric nationalism” are designed to expose the intrinsic heterocentrism of nationalist drives, focusing on five different aspects of female subordination and/or cultural-sexual exploitation: a) Women as

active participation of female subjects in the construction of the nation is stressed over the reduction of their role to the level of the metaphorical. As Teresa De Lauretis previously claimed in regard to feminist film theory, “radical change requires a delineation and a better understanding of the differences of women from Woman, and that is to say well, *the differences among women*. For there are, after all, different histories of women” (De Lauretis 1985, 164).

Although geared towards the formulation of a broader theoretical framework, feminist approaches to nationalism can provide a set of methodological guidelines for the analysis of the more specific and localized case of Québec. Elspeth Probyn, for instance, puts such guidelines into practice through an accurate account of the subversive *mise-en-scène* of female sexuality in popular television dramas in 1990s Québec (Probyn 1999). As Sharp before her, Probyn too questions the absence of gender specificity in male-oriented theories of nationalism (particularly Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, 1983), and aims to reject the equivalence of nationhood and masculinity in favor of the theorization of Québec as a potentially female nation. Such theorization must however transcend the danger of sexual and gendered metaphors traditionally used to address the ordinary in Québec, and focus instead on the concrete agency of women and on the material evidence of their role as nation-builders.

The ubiquity of sexualized images of women in prime-time television shows such as *Les Filles de Caleb* (1990-1991), *Shehaweh* (1992), and *Blanche* (1993), are taken by Probyn to reverse the metaphor of Québec as a “bleeding wound” in regard to “her brute of a husband, Canada,” and to encourage a reconsideration of the concrete role of women as founders of the nation. In a context like the Québécois one, doomed by “the absence of men” on the screen and outside of it, a revision of the female role in configuring the nation thus proves not only necessary, but also inevitable:

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Heterosexual/Biological Reproducers of Group Members, b) Women as Social Reproducers of Group Members and Cultural Forms, c) Women as Signifiers of (Heterosexist) Group Identities and Differences, d) Women as Agents and Heterosexism as Ideology in Political Identity Struggles, e) Women as Societal Members of Heterosexist Groups (Peterson 1999, 44-54).

In other words, if the movement of metaphorizing the nation in terms of woman would generally serve to displace actual historical women, the historical and social force of women in Québec society redirects this movement and reveals the very materiality of women in forging the nation. (1999, 52)

By questioning the validity of gendered metaphors in giving an account of Québec's nationalism, Probyn challenges not only the otherwise marginal role of female subjectivity in the national paradigm, but also the marginalization of homosexuality as a trope of political weakness. Stemming from Schwartzwald's thorough analysis of the homophobic stance of Québec's revolutionary nationalism, the following section of this paper intends to highlight the relevance of queer subjectivities collaborating with feminist approaches as to formulate an alternative model of nationhood in post-revolutionary Québec.

### **True feminine, real homosexuality: the revival of the national other**

The "fear of federasty" addressed by Robert Schwartzwald in the title of his seminal essay (1991) is a phenomenon that both Probyn and Vacante take into further account to explain the threatening nature not only of the female but also of the queer other for the nationalist project of the Quiet Revolution. The marginality and passivity of the homosexual subject were blamed—along with the devirilizing influence of the Catholic Church—for the inability of Québec to decide in favor of independence (Probyn 1999; Vacante 2005).

Schwartzwald's study of the crisis of male subjectivity in Québec cinema intervenes in the longtime debate on the unstable status of masculinity within the representation of Canadian gender identity as a whole, which relies on from Robert Fothergill's influential but controversial essay "Coward, Bully, or Clown" (1973) to fill the gaps of a partial and asymmetrical account of the issue.<sup>5</sup> While English-Canadian "younger brother syndrome" in respect to the cultural interference of the United States was largely addressed by Fothergill as the cause of male inadequacy in Canadian

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<sup>5</sup> Along with Schwartzwald, scholars such as Christine Ramsay (1993), Lee Parpart (1997, 1999) and Thomas Waugh (2006) have extensively addressed Fothergill's limited equation of Canadian cinema and impaired colonized masculinity. Although confirming the link between colonialism and marginal masculinities as a foundational trope of Canadian cinematic imaginary, the abovementioned contributions point in fact towards the outdated and over-generalizing tone of Fothergill's statement and argue for a more efficient reconfiguration of Canadian masculinities in post-colonial and queer terms.

national cinema, Québec's masculinity was easily dismissed as "a mode of positive self-realization of a distinct and significant kind" (Fothergill 1973, 241). The self-awareness of political culture that informs Québec cinema was, however, clearly outlined by Fothergill, who marked the difference between English-Canadian "individual" and Québec "ideological" approaches to the representation of masculinity, thus identifying a central motif in Québec's post-revolutionary culture. What Fothergill failed to fully acknowledge was nonetheless the crucial importance of the question of masculinity in Québec's political discourse, and therefore in its cinema: an importance that required then and still requires now a necessary investment, demanded by the political and cultural influence of the question on Québec cinema more than on its Anglophone counterpart.

The widespread crisis of male subjectivity in the contemporary world hence regains significance when considered in the context of Québec sub-state nationalism, as a source of frustration but at the same time of possibility for alternative modes of conceiving the nation. Schwartzwald focuses on Québec's climate of sexual anxiety within the Quiet Revolution as a consequence of decolonization and modernization, and locates in the supposed idea of "phallo-national maturity" the center of resilient homophobia in post-referendary Québec. Pointed at as *fédéraste*—a corruption of the French term "pédéraste" with anti-sovereignist implications—the national enemy is thus qualified in sexual terms, even if only on a metaphorical level. The reduction of the other to the realm of the metaphorical in Québec's revolutionary culture, then, does not limit to women, but extends to queer subjectivities as well. As Schwartzwald argues: "homosexuality has served as an accepted metaphor for national oppression and continues to do so" (1991, 180). By taking Denys Arcand's successful *Le déclin de l'empire américain* (1986) and Hubert Aquin's literary oeuvre as case studies, Schwartzwald claims that homosexuality in Québec's culture is still represented as "a deviation, a 'detour' in the truest sense," and a result of the emasculating influence of Catholic "false fatherhood," which leaves its traces on both the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period (1991, 184-186).

Despite the non-homophobic nature of Québec's contemporary society in terms of its progressive legislation, the Quiet Revolution is blamed for its attempt to first create

and then erase the “federast” enemy from the nationalist scenario, by using the trope of sexual difference as a weapon:

In Québec, this homophobic sexual anxiety accompanies a new nationalist project that wishes to effect a radical break with the conservative “agrarian” and clerically animated nationalism of the past [...] In this anxiety, those found to be traitors or sell-outs to the cause of national revolution are gendered as passive/seductive men. (1991, 179)

The same argument is recuperated by Schwartzwald in his later article “‘Symbolic’ Homosexuality and ‘False Feminine’: Problematics of Identity in Québec” (1993), where Jacques Lavigne’s philosophical apparatus (Lavigne 1971) and Gilles Thérien’s account of the representation of otherness in Québec cinema (Thérien 1987) are employed to unpack the conflict between national authenticity and discursive production of difference in Québec (Schwartzwald, 1993, 266). By referring to Thérien’s analysis of the presence of queerness as an identity problem in Québec national cinema, Schwartzwald questions the way in which Lavigne’s notions of “symbolic homosexuality” and “false feminine” are applied to Québec’s modern nationalism, when the attempt to construct the national body on the shape of the heteronormative, patriarchal family is disturbed by the interference of other forms of sexual and gendered subjectivity.

With the term “symbolic homosexuality” Lavigne defines an eroticized and affective relationship with a similar other (namely mother-daughter, father-son), that stands in the way of the achievement of *real* heterosexuality. The “false feminine” represents instead a pact between mother and son, an alliance against the father that allows the formation of “alien subjectivities” through the transfer of power on the child, and thus creates false forms of femininity and fatherhood as well. As Pascale Devette points out in her Master’s thesis on Lavigne: “les termes utilisés par Lavigne renvoient à des images symboliques pour décrire des états psychiques” (Devette 2012, 64),<sup>6</sup> that is both principles signify for the Québécois philosopher a shift from positive and healthy structures of *real* subjectivity. Symbolic homosexuality and false feminine thus diminish the agency of *real* fathers and *real* heterosexuals, and fuel the homophobic panic of the Quiet Revolution subsequently portrayed in Québec post-revolutionary cinema (Thérien 1987).

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<sup>6</sup> “The terms used by Lavigne point towards symbolic images apt to describe physical states.” (Author’s translation)

As symbolic conceptions of subjectivity, Lavigne's terms reduce the female and queer others to metaphors and prove inadequate to properly address the role of non-normative, non-masculine subjects in constructing and representing the nation. Through the rejection of Lavigne's theory and the re-evaluation of *true* feminine and *real* homosexuality as productive agents of identity and nation building in post-revolutionary Québec, Schwartzwald proceeds instead to dismantle the inscription of homosexual and female subjectivities as reasons for national failure within the Quiet Revolution. While suggesting the co-option of difference within the discourse of subnational identity, the author acknowledges however the persistence of issues even in his own approach:

How far can we push the sexualization of the debate while remaining in tune with the insight of modernity about the fundamental failure of identity? How far can we affirm the positivity of female difference while resisting the reduction of subjectivity to consciousness, of self to willful nationality? I am not talking about mechanically substituting "nation" for "sex", "Québécois" for "female", but rather about underscoring how identity preoccupations always have a *strategic* basis. (1993, 289)

In light of both feminist and queer approaches to the issue of national identity in post-referendary Québec, the cinema of Xavier Dolan might constitute a productive tool to venture an answer to Schwartzwald's questions, and to consider the role played by sexual and gendered subjectivities in Québec's post-revolutionary moment. In the final section of this paper, Dolan's feature films will be therefore analyzed as symptomatic grounds of inquiry for the reconsideration of femininity and queerness in the national design of Québec.

### **The act of killing: Xavier Dolan's matricidal/matriarchal cinema**

Born in the decade of the first post-referendary defeat (1980) and raised in the aftermath of the second (1995), Québécois director Xavier Dolan could not have experienced the nationalist climate of the Quiet Revolution firsthand. Nevertheless, his cinema reflects the desire to revise Québec's history by engaging with crucial discourses of identity politics and national models of subjectivity in the present times, with an eye always turned to the past. As a recurrent stylistic feature in Dolan's films, the anachronism of the *mise-en-scène* through costumes and décors (the kitsch extravaganza of the 1980s-1990s in *J'ai tué ma mère*, the vintage rebound of the

1950s-1960s in *Les amours imaginaires*) might be blatantly read as a fashionable sign of citational auteurism, or rather, and more productively, as a coherent strategy of queer historiography.<sup>7</sup> In order to recompose the pieces of a past he could not have personally witnessed, Dolan looks back (in anger) to Québec's post-referendary consequences, exploring their effects on his contemporaneity, and revisiting the failure of Québec's modern nationalism through a persistent challenge to its familial models and dominant subjectivities.

Dolan's first feature film, *J'ai tué ma mère* (2009), successfully premiered at Cannes' Quinzaine des Réalisateurs in 2009. From its very title, the film seems to endorse the anti-oedipal scheme embraced by the nationalists of the Quiet Revolution: the refusal of the maternal, castrating figure—conceived as an act of murder—to clear the path for masculine agency in Québec. However, Dolan's matricidal intentions are rather symptomatic of the instability of the male protagonist, the teenager Hubert (Xavier Dolan), caught in between the struggle with his own sexuality and the suffocating presence of an exuberant, hysterical single mother (Anne Dorval), constantly blamed for her son's miseries. The relationship between Hubert and Chantal, built on non-reciprocity and estrangement to each other, seems to epitomize at first the unhealthy status of Québec when left in the hands of non-masculine, non-normative subjectivities. The erasure of the paternal figure from Hubert's life, and the reduction of fatherhood to an insignificant presence, is addressed in one scene by the father himself (the repository of Québec's "revolutionary" values) as the cause of Hubert's lack of discipline, and therefore as the sign of Chantal's inability to construct a functional masculine subject.

Chantal's rejection of the accusations she receives from both her son and her arrogant but powerless husband is displayed by the end of the film, when Dolan

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<sup>7</sup> To understand the chronological discrepancy in Dolan's take on history and gender, it would be worth to refer here to Elizabeth Freeman's writing on gendered cross-identification as a matter of temporal drag. In her article "Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations" (2000) and later on in her book *Time Binds* (2010), Freeman performs a queer reading of history based on principles of anachronism and dissonance, rather than on the exact correspondence of one's gendered identity to the social criteria of his/her contemporary historical moment. Not "how" but "when" queer performativity takes place is therefore a valuable question in regard to Dolan's oeuvre, where national and gendered history are both resumed in retrospect to reflect on the state of queer subjectivities in Québec's present.

eventually reveals his intention to represent motherhood as a site of resistance. Blamed by the principal of Hubert's boarding school for her son's escape—given her status of "mère monoparentale" and the absence of a masculine presence in the domestic space—Chantal reacts with anger, reasserting the importance of her parental role in conditions of indifference and weakness of the paternal figure. The uprising of Chantal's motherhood represents an epiphanic moment for both mother and son. Finally reunited to Chantal and open to rebuild the familial space on the renewed premises of mutual love and reciprocity, Hubert finds in the reconciliation with his mother the cohesion and plenitude necessary to reconstruct himself as a stable subject.

Elaine Pigeon's essay on Michel Tremblay's theatrical work as an act of queering Québec's national identity offers some relevant cues to read Dolan's cinema as strongly intertwined with the discourse of queer nationalism and the position of women and homosexuals in Québec's national design (Pigeon 2001). As she states in regard to Tremblay's *oeuvre*: "conceptions of the modern nation rely on the heterosexual model of the patriarchal family as a means of naturalizing nationalism" (2001, 35). Dolan's cinema aims from its very debut to reverse such paradigm, by expelling patriarchy from the national scenario and proposing instead alternative images of family unit. In *Les Amours Imaginaires* (2010)—where the shared infatuation for the new-guy-in-town Nicolas (Niels Schneider) compromises the friendship between Francis (Xavier Dolan) and Marie (Monia Chokri)—Dolan's concern is geared toward the study of romantic relationships, rather than familial ones. The inclusion of Nicolas' mother (Anne Dorval) as the only hint of parental dynamics within the narrative is however revelatory. "Father knows best", Désirée repeats with sarcasm, providing the portrait of a distant father who pays the bills but is not included in his son's life. Although unnecessary to the plot development, the presence of Désirée's character is significant to highlight Dolan's perception of his generation as a result of unstable role models and wrong management of familial relationships within the post-revolutionary decades; if the male subject is in crisis (and the nation with him), patriarchal family might be the cause of it.

The need to find alternative parents (like the teacher Suzanne Clément in *J'ai tué ma mère*) or to create surrogate familial models (such as the impossible triangle

between the three main characters in *Les Amours Imaginaires*) are therefore tropes in Dolan's cinema, along with the suppression of the paternal figure and the reinforcement of queer forms of sexuality over the marginalization of heterosexual male characters. Since the patriarchal, masculine project of the Quiet Revolution has damaged Québec's identity instead of securing it, Dolan's work engages with different forms of subjectivity in the attempt to find those who better represent the national instances of his contemporaneity. As Pigeon further states:

A new, more inclusive national configuration is now needed; such a model must be expansive and diverse in its conception, allowing for difference rather than assimilation, which only leads back to reinstatement of an exclusive, self-defeating norm. While the appropriation of heterosexual model inflects the queering of nationhood with development failure, in order to arrest this interpretative trend, it is imperative to recognize how homophobic anxiety inevitably undermines the very model it seeks to impose. (2001, 39)

Dolan's third feature, *Laurence Anyways* (2012), perhaps best represents the director's attempt to assess the alternative "national configuration" mentioned by Pigeon. Set in Montreal in the decade between 1989 and the beginning of the new millennium, the film tells the story of Laurence Alia (Melvil Poupaud), a 35-year-old French teacher and aspiring writer who decides to undergo a long-desired sex change but has to deal with the reaction of his family, his colleagues, and his female lover (Suzanne Clément). Dolan recovers the years of his childhood as "the ideal birthing ground for a film about sex" (Knecht 2012), given that the proximity to the new century discloses promises and possibilities for the inclusion of different, non-normative forms of sexuality within the historical trajectory of post-revolutionary Québec. Twelve years after the actual setting of the film, Dolan asks, "the question is, how much have things changed?" (Knecht 2012). By linking the film to Québec's post-referendary climate Dolan extends the interrogative to the current situation of his "nation" as well.

The film identifies in Laurence a scapegoat for the post-referendary era, as the "wrong" male subject: queer and condemned for his transgressions against the national masculine paradigm as the *ecce homo* of the Christian tradition. Laurence's acceptance of his sexuality and his relationship with the mother Julienne (Nathalie Baye) offer a significant example of how alternative frameworks of subjectivity and

familial dynamics can enrich the modern asset of Québec sub-state nationalism. As in *J'ai tué ma mère*, the relationship between mother and son is initially depicted as a conflict, a refusal of the other, here represented by Julienne's rejection of Laurence's sex change as a way to preserve the domestic façade intact. Julienne's enraged reaction to Laurence's confession aims to traverse the blame society will put on her for the non-normativity of her son. "Should I torture myself and think I'm a bad mother? I don't care! Why should I?" Julienne screams, and her reply, although apparently progressive, differs from Chantal's one in the way it represses sexual difference and endorses the *status quo* of Québec's heteronormative society.

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 as central components of the national identity. "I never saw you as my son, but I see you as my daughter," Julienne tells Laurence, thus establishing a previously absent complicity between the two, and suggesting the potential foundation of a more inclusive, pluralist, modern configuration of national identity addressed by Pigeon's essay.

The interpretation of Dolan's work in relation to culturally-specific and locally-grounded instances of Québec's nationhood needs however to be properly contextualized and unpacked, especially given the number of prominent international coproductions by Québécois filmmakers in recent years. While Bill Marshall famously defined Québec cinema as a national phenomenon (2001), several scholars have more recently moved to reframe Québec within the global (including Marshall himself, see his interview in this volume). The contributions of successful expatriates further collaborates this, including: Jean-Marc Vallée (*Dallas Buyers Club*, 2013; *Wild*, 2014), Denis Villeneuve (*Prisoners*, 2013; *Enemy*, 2013; *Sicario*, 2015), Philippe Falardeau (*The Good Lie*, 2014) and Dolan himself (with the forthcoming French/Canadian and US/Canadian co-productions *Juste la fin du monde* and *The Death and Life of John F. Donovan*). 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 *inter*-national product, rather than a national one. Considering the

dependence to French funding and the recurrent inclusion of his work in the lineups of film festivals all around the world, it is a legitimate concern to ask how Québec's local specificity is affected by the marketing and cultural strategies of film festival networks. As Felicia Chan puts it in regard to international film festivals and national cinemas: "how does the 'national' emerge from a transient event that seeks to market itself as 'international'?" (2011, 258). That is, how can the cultural and commercial drives of films be reconciled in the ambiguous space of festivals, especially when conceived as "both cultural celebrations and marketplace"? (257).

With *Tom à la ferme* (2013), the screen adaptation of Michel Marc Bouchard's homonymous play, Dolan provides an interesting answer to the above-mentioned interrogatives. Instead of conforming his production to a more palatable international taste—as with the case of *Les Amours Imaginaires*—Dolan reinforces the centrality of Québec, and therefore of its national discourse, over its erasure. Dolan's fascination for the original *pièce* is hence understandable, since it provides the ground for a close examination of disturbed familial dynamics as well as the key to accessing Québec's nationalist discourse through a different stylistic approach.

If Michel Tremblay's *oeuvre* from the 1960s and 1970s "participated in shaping Québec's nationalist project, for [he] wrote in response to the momentous transformation that Québec society was undergoing" (Pigeon 2001, 30), Bouchard's more contemporary work offers a significant account of Québec's national scenario by challenging familial roles and gendered subjectivities in a way that resonates the intent of Dolan's cinema as well. Bouchard's interest for conflicts such as family values, sexual, and national identities is indeed addressed by Jean Cléo Godin and Dominique Lafon as the most relevant trope in the theatre of Québécois' playwright, in which, they claim:

La cellule familiale, et particulièrement la figure paternelle qui en constitue le centre névralgique, connaît, dans l'oeuvre, une évolution très significative des mutations comme des attermolements idéologiques de la société québécoise. (1999, 95)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "The family, and especially its neuralgic center, that is the paternal figure, undergoes a crucial evolution in Bouchard's *oeuvre*: a process that regards the transformations as well as the ideological procrastination of Québec's society" (Author's translation).

As the first of Dolan's feature films to premiere in official competition at Venice, *Tom à la ferme* follows the uncanny journey of a young advertising agent (Xavier Dolan) from Montreal to a non-specified town in rural Québec, where he plans to visit his dead lover's mother Agathe (Lisa Roy) and his brother Francis (Pierre-Yves Cardinal), both of whom were previously ignorant of his existence and deny his romantic relationship with deceased son. 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 homophobia. Heavily influenced by the cinema of Alfred Hitchcock and Roman Polanski in its visual and sound values, *Tom à la ferme* represents a stylistic shift in Dolan's work, which was previously characterized by a creative re-appropriation of post-modern devices (video confessionals, intertitles, fake interviews, slow-motion), video-clip and art house cinema aesthetics. However, it remains part of his ongoing discourse on the role of sexual identities and non-normative subjectivities in shaping the nature of Québec's sub-state nationalism.

The homophobic, hyper-sexualized character of Francis epitomizes the dysfunctional male subject in the film, who is produced, once again, by the unsuccessful design of the Quiet Revolution, as his sexual ambiguity and his submission to his controlling mother disclose the failure of Québec's nationalism to brand itself as a masculine project. Agathe's character, on the other hand, only appears as an Oedipal monster, as her initial desire to keep her dead son's sexuality under cover is replaced in the end by the desperate desire to understand it. Her capacity to resist the matricidal design of Francis, and to diminish his authority in the domestic space—through the alliance with the queer other, Tom, and the eventual acknowledgement of her dead son's "normality"—seems thus to suggest another chance of inclusion and plurality within the national design.

Dolan interestingly chooses to change the original ending of the play, where Tom killed Francis and fantasized about returning to Agathe as her surrogate child. The end of Tom's nightmare and his final escape from the farm is staged instead as a return to consciousness: the alternative family that the character aimed to form is revealed as the product of an unstable mind, and the return to the city is therefore

conceived as the rediscovery of mental stability. The patriarchal family might be the cause of the exclusionary national project in Québec, but to substitute it with alternative models based on violence and terror is not a solution either. *Tom à la ferme* provides in the end a disturbing portrait of Québec's present, explained by Dolan himself as the result of an overall climate of violence blatantly associated with the cultural influence of the United States (signified in the film by Rufus Wainwright's song "Going to a Town" and Francis' star-spangled-banner shirt). It seems in this sense legitimate to ask if the film represents Québec's swan's song for the achievement of national "normality," or if a "new national configuration" can still be accomplished by reframing Québec nationalism in matriarchal and queer terms.

Dolan's latest feature *Mommy* (2014) resumes from the very title the director's concerns with questions of motherhood and patriarchy in post-revolutionary Québec, and intends to engage with the questions raised so far by leaving them partially unanswered. Ideally closing the circle started in 2009 with *J'ai tué ma mère*, *Mommy* sets the stage for yet another configuration of Québec's alternative national paradigm by addressing the struggle of single mother Diane "Die" Després (Anne Dorval) dealing with her violent son Steve (Antoine-Olivier Pilon) in a slightly futuristic, suburban Québec. Winner of the Jury Prize at Cannes (where it was finally presented in competition), and selected to represent Canada in the run for Best Foreign Film at the 2014 Academy Awards, *Mommy* preserves a strong connection with its Québécois setting despite the international scale of its circulation and reception. It offers a portrayal of Québec's working class enriched by the specificity of its spatial coordinates (the film is entirely shot on Longueuil), popular cultural references (the quotation from Michel Noël's *Capitaine Bonhomme*,<sup>9</sup> the musical number on the notes of "national heritage" figure Céline Dion), and regionally-specific language (the presence of the *joual* dialect as a Tremblayan device of socio-cultural accuracy).

As a recurrent feature of his cinema, Dolan's choice of the film format (or rather *formats*) suggests the coincidence of stylistic and semantic values. In *Mommy*, the 1:1 aspect ratio allows spectators to access just a limited portion of the characters'

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<sup>9</sup> "Les sceptiques seront confondus".

lives, forcing them to exist within a square that is such only in geometrical and not socially conventional terms, suggesting the interest in the creation of an alternative *framework* of familial and intimate dynamics. The trope of absent fatherhood and the inability of adult males to provide effective substitutes for the missing father are indeed touched upon once again by Dolan, who imagines the future of Québec as a heavily feminine scenario. The female bonding between Die and her neighbor Kyla (Suzanne Clément)—in the attempt to raise Steve in an alternative familial environment—thus offers another powerful example of Dolan's involvement with the reconfiguration of Québec's imaginary in non-normative and feminine terms rather than in heteronormative and masculine ones. Working on the film format(s) even more than on the film form to convey his message, Dolan uses the imprisonment of the characters within the 1:1 ratio to express his preoccupations for the effective future of Québec's gender and national liberation. In the opening of the format (strategically positioned as to coincide with Steve's hopes and Die's fantasies for a better life) lies the possibility to build a better tomorrow, but in its closing (also strategically positioned right before Steve's actual imprisonment) it is implied that such a possibility still needs to be worked through.

## Conclusion

Taking Dolan's cinema as a symptomatic case study, this paper aimed to suggest that the potential reformulation of Québec's nationalism is no longer in accordance with the masculine, heterocentric project of the Quiet Revolution, but rather functions in more flexible and gender-inclusive terms. Feminist approaches to nationalism and queer revitalizations of Québec's cinematic imaginary have merged into the analysis of Dolan's work as an allegory of national potentialities. 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.

In his acceptance speech for the Jury Prize at Cannes 2014, Dolan addressed New Zealander director Jane Campion as his primary source of inspiration, claiming that *The Piano* (1993) made him "want to write roles for women, beautiful women with soul and will and strength, not victims, not objects." His choice of words could not be more revelatory. In the relatively short span of his career, Dolan has emerged as one

of the most representative voices of Québec from both a local and an international perspective. Moreover, his call for a more profound and concrete engagement with the representation of femininity and queerness, in Québécois cinema and beyond, gives hopes for the revision of Québec's national design in more pluralist and open ways.

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## Filmography

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*Enemy* (Denis Villeneuve, 2013).

*J'ai tué ma mère* (Xavier Dolan, 2009).

*Juste la fin du monde* (Xavier Dolan, 2016, in post-production).

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