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Queering up the mother with Michel Tremblay and Xavier Dolan

Although five decades separate Michel Tremblay (1942) and Xavier Dolan (1989), their artistic productions – writing and filmmaking – demonstrate striking resemblances in their content, objectives, and critical reception. Since *J'ai tué ma mère* in 2009, many commentators have underscored a mirror effect between the two in relation to their treatment of women and sexuality. The following contribution investigates, more specifically, the notion of motherhood in Tremblay's autobiographical triptych (*Les vues animées* [1990], *Douze coups de théâtre* [1992], *Un ange cornu avec des ailes de tôles* [1994]) and Dolan's love saga (*J'ai tué ma mère* [2009], *Les amours imaginaires* [2010], and *Laurence anyways* [2012]) to shed light on strategies of representation and maternal emancipation. Looking at questions of performance, screams, as well as distance and absence, each author offers new, less restrictive conceptions of motherhood, along with new forms of kinship, and above all, broader comments on the contexts in which their works were produced. Tremblay represents the primal scene of disrupted Quebecois motherhood and a lens through which to analyze Dolan's more recent films; films that denounce the burden of contemporary anxieties and persisting forms of oppression.

Presque cinq décennies séparent Michel Tremblay (1942) et Xavier Dolan (1989) et pourtant leurs productions artistiques – écriture et cinéma – font preuve de ressemblances marquantes dans le contenu, le propos et la réception critique. Depuis *J'ai tué ma mère* en 2009, nombre de commentateurs soulignent un effet de miroir dans leur traitement des femmes et de la sexualité. Cette contribution s'intéresse principalement à la question de la maternité dans le triptyque autobiographique de Tremblay (*Les vues animées* [1990], *Douze coups de théâtre* [1992], *Un ange cornu avec des ailes de tôles* [1994]) et la saga amoureuse de Dolan (*J'ai tué ma mère* [2009], *Les amours imaginaires* [2010], *Laurence anyways* [2012]), afin de mettre en lumière les stratégies de représentations et d'émancipation des mères. En se penchant sur les problématiques de la performance, des cris et de l'absence et de la distance, chaque auteur propose des conceptions de la maternité moins restrictives, de nouvelles

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formes de parenté et surtout, un commentaire plus large sur le contexte spécifique de production. Tremblay offre une scène primaire de disruption de la mère québécoise, servant ainsi de prisme d'analyse pour l'œuvre plus récente de Dolan; une œuvre qui dénonce des angoisses contemporaines et des modes d'oppression persistants.

Respectively born in 1942 and 1989, Michel Tremblay and Xavier Dolan represent two generations of Quebecois writers and filmmakers who have received much critical attention for their treatment of women and sexuality. In fact, since the release of Dolan's first feature film, *J'ai tué ma mère* (2009), critics such as Chantale Gingras have even argued that "on trouve dans la plume de Dolan un peu de l'encre dont s'est servi Michel Tremblay" (101). Anne Dorval, Dolan's lead actress in several of his productions, "n'hésite d'ailleurs pas à comparer le réalisateur au dramaturge Michel Tremblay qui avait révolutionné en son temps le théâtre en écrivant ses pièces pour les femmes, celles qui ont accompagné sa vie" (Houdassine). The special connection between these two individuals inspires the following analysis as it enables a focus on similar societal issues across several decades, specifically, motherhood, difference, and deviance. And, although five decades stand between them, they share a critical awareness of the discriminations of their times, which they seek to denounce in their productions. Whether Tremblay undertakes the "tragi-comic deconstruction of a central social myth of female fulfillment in devotion to the family" (Killick in *Les Belles-soeurs* xix) in his fiction and plays, or Dolan makes "des films sur des gens différents […] les laissés-pour-compte […] cela [lui] permet de les accompagner dans leur combat" (Madame Figaro), both act as witnesses whose testimonies attempt to make people's struggles and reality visible, while simultaneously calling for more acceptance of difference. Another key point of resemblance lies in their use of *joual* – Montreal's working-class dialect – to further anchor their productions in a specifically Quebecois context, thus contributing to the realism of their work. In a 2014 interview with Radio Canada, Tremblay noted about Dolan's commitment to including *joual* in his films, "Nous ne sommes pas des professeurs de français, nous sommes des témoins de notre époque, nous utilisons ce que nous entendons pour dire des choses […] je suis une éponge et je rends ce que j'ai entendu."[1] As such, the many resemblances between Tremblay and Dolan are more than mere coincidence. Growing up in two different eras, they nevertheless raise similar concerns, all of which are inherent to Quebec's modern history.

Dealing with questions of (queer) nationalism, Fulvia Massimi writes,

> 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. (19)

In a similar fashion, this article intends to make sense of the contemporary models of motherhood in Dolan's cinema – more precisely in his self-coined love saga, the tripartite examination of love *J'ai tué ma mère* (2009), *Les amours imaginaires* (2010), and *Laurence anyways* (2012) – while looking back to Tremblay's original dedication to women's voices. For the purpose of this project, I have elected to focus on Tremblay's own triptych, comprised of *Les vues animées* (1990), *Douze coups de théâtre* (1992), and *Un ange cornu avec des ailes de tôles* (1994), which represents his venture into autobiography and, as scholars like Nathalie Marcoux or Monique Boucher-Marchand argue, recounts the story of the birth of an author. Similarly to Dolan's trilogy, they also tell a story of love – love for his parents, his culture, his province. In the pages that follow, my emphasis on Dolan functions with an understanding that it is Tremblay who provides the primal scene of disrupted Quebecois motherhood and thus a lens through which one can identify strategies of representation and emancipation.

While there are striking resemblances that provide the basis to this analysis, Dolan certainly pushes the boundaries of transgression even further than his literary forefather. To quote one of Dolan's characters, "Our generation can take this" (*Laurence anyways*). It is indeed arguably easier to make such transgressions given the contemporary proliferation and liberalization of new sexual identities, models of womanhood/manhood, and relationships. And yet, the issues that emerge out of both corpuses, seen together, call for much attention. Although Lamoureux in 2011 may argue that "the Quebec feminist movement […] has […] succeeded in motivating Québec's political elites to declare, in a rare show of unanimity, that equality between women and men is now an integral part of 'Québec's values'" (308), conservative politics still fail to see women as equals, or even as independent individuals.

We do well to remember the Quebecois context where, on the one hand, "maternal instinct was invoked so frequently that the qualities associated with it seemed to be innate as well" (Lévesque 24).[2] And where,

even as recently as 2015, as most Western countries were undergoing economic crises of austerity, Quebec's prime minister, Philippe Couillard (Parti Libéral du Québec), suggested new budget cuts targeting daycare centers. In response,

> Le Conseil du statut de la femme (CSF) reproche au gouvernement Couillard de ne pas avoir pris la peine d'évaluer l'impact sur les femmes […] Or, une hausse de tarif pourra inciter certaines mères à renoncer à leur emploi, pour demeurer au foyer. (Richer)

In a context where political and economic measures hinder women's social progress – "[l]es femmes du Québec subissent davantage que les hommes les dommages collatéraux de la plus récente crise économique" (Rettino-Parazelli) – Dolan's work, just as that of Tremblay did several decades ago, proves strikingly relevant. While the Quebecois context has moved toward more acceptance of professional women or LGBT rights, "social anxieties" à la Gail Rubin (1984) continue to target these same marginal groups.[3] The purpose of this analysis thus lies in shedding light on the ways the maternal characters suffer from social oppression, and in turn, how Dolan and Tremblay employ what I call "strategies of unmothering" to let mothers be women too. I propose to look at notions of performance, screams, and absence and distance, to make sense of the ways both authors make room for less restrictive conceptions of motherhood, which result in the acceptance of new and marginal forms of kinship.

Tremblay and the diva

Michel Tremblay's triptych provides insights into the life of one of Quebec's most revered and prolific authors. At the heart of this trilogy lies the desire to share narratives about his origins, as well as the variety of factors that have influenced his fictional works. In that sense, and as Laurence Joffrin puts it, "[l]e récit autobiographique est bien le prolongement d'un processus qui vise à constituer une image de soi à travers l'écriture" (212). Written in the 1990s when the author was in his 50s, this autobiographical enterprise might seem precocious, presumptuous even. Yet, I would argue that such an early venture results from an attempt to remain, for once, in control of "one's own body" (*Undoing Gender* 20). He who addresses problematics of deviance shows how the other's gaze can enslave and discipline. The triptych thus allows the narrator to regain a certain degree of agency, to

tell his side of the story. Whether it be about cinema, plays and operas, or books, the three cultural media, which structure the three *récits*, "ne lui servent que de prétextes pour parler de lui-même" (Marcoux 92). Further, these art forms allow him to speak about, or rather give a voice to, his family and working-class milieu at large. As much as the first-person narrative might present itself as solely focused on Tremblay, he is but one protagonist among others.

In an interview with Caroline Montpetit for *Le Devoir* (2007), Tremblay declares, "Je déteste la famille mais j'adore chacun de ses membres" (Montpetit). Although such a statement may seem paradoxical, it is in fact the notion of family as an institutional force which the writer despises. That "[l]a structure familiale a […] permis à Tremblay d'ébaucher et d'écrire des drames terribles" (Royer) shows the impossibility of not dealing with the topic as well as the impossibility of not dealing with it in a subversive manner so that its most oppressive and problematic aspects shine through. Throughout the triptych Tremblay's fondness for his parents gradually emerges while simultaneously pointing out the controlling and limiting elements which form the bulk of his grievance against this social unit. Tremblay's aforementioned statement on family also reveals an antithetical relationship between the social (family) and the individual (member). In a way, by rejecting the social, Tremblay gives more agency to each individual, and lets them have a distinct story and a unique voice. As will be shown later, each member of his family has had a significant influence on him and his writing, an influence which he acknowledges in the triptych. This section examines specifically the ways in which Tremblay's depiction of the mother moves her beyond the constraining boundaries of her milieu. In addition, the strategies to which he resorts play an active role in unmothering her, that is, in giving her the opportunity to reveal the woman behind the socially constructed and imposed image of motherhood.

In *Un ange cornu avec des ailes de tôles*, the narrator recalls his mother saying about Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'occasion*: "Y me semblait que tu comprendrais tout c'qu'y'a là-dedans […] Que tu comprendrais plus que les autres c'qu'y'a là-dedans […] Tu comprends, c'est rare que quelqu'un parle comme ça de nous autres, les femmes" (*Un ange* 164). If the three *récits* recount the birth of an author who owes his literary leanings to women, because "c'est la lectrice inconditionnelle qu'était sa grand-mère paternelle qui lui a fait découvrir et apprécier l'univers de la littérature" (Marcoux 95), these texts underscore, above all, the birth of *un auteur engagé*. He who

can understand women better than most other men thus has a duty to make women the matrices of his work, because "c'est rare que quelqu'un [en] parle." Such a confession on the part of the mother also testifies to her awareness of her condition. Interestingly, she does so through the medium of literature and specifically the work of Roy whose realism calls attention to the harsh reality of Quebec's working-class population. By displacing the critique rather than expressing her own views, she also unveils internalized processes of censorship. In her historical study of women in Quebec (1919–1939), Andrée Lévesque reminds us, "Every piece of legislation, every regulation, is accompanied by the apparatus of surveillance and repression. Violations must be detected, for without the threat of punishment, there is a risk that the rules will lose their force" (24). By resorting to fictional works, Tremblay's mother (Rhéauna) thus transfers the possibility of real punishment back onto the writing. In her introduction to Tremblay's *Les Belles-soeurs* (1968), Rachel Killick reminds us,

> Though they [women] had finally gained the vote in Quebec in 1940, their civil rights […] continued to be severely curtailed […] A wife could not inherit or go to law in her own name, had no control of family finances […] could make no official decision over the upbringing of the children. (*Les Belles-soeurs* xvii)

Notwithstanding the powerful hold of clerical and Duplessis-governmental authorities under which the Tremblays evolve, "[n]o one would claim that the[ir] normative discourse is a faithful indication of how people behaved" (Lévesque 12). And, clearly, in the span of three novels, the Tremblays manage to stray from the acceptable order. Reminiscing about his weekly trips to the Household Finance, young Tremblay adds, "j'étais son complice obligé […] l'orgueil de cette femme qui avait toujours été pauvre et qui, au moment où son mari et ses fils commençaient à pouvoir la gâter, préférait s'adresser à une compagnie de finance plutôt que de leur en demander" (*Un ange* 118). Out of pride, she refuses to ask her family for help. What stands out in this moment is her determination to remain independent. After all, it is better to rely on the Household Finance than on the household men. Using her young son as intermediary, she manages to maintain "control of family finances" (Killick in *Les Belles-soeurs* xvii). Once more, maternal agency is displaced or mediated to avoid the stigma, and young Tremblay as her trustee and complicit must act carefully: "Alors comment passer inaperçu?" (*Une ange* 119). As far as education is concerned, her overprotective attitude with her children also comes as a blatant contradiction

to official discourses.[4] Where her role could normatively lead her to be effaced, she quickly becomes the main protagonist of the stories, so much that she resembles one of her son's cinematographic idols or divas. Her overall dramatic and over-the-top performances retain the reader's gaze on what could have been an unseen, unnoticed character. For instance, the narrator recalls "la scène de la syncope" (*Douze coups* 65), when his mother faked a medical condition and successfully guaranteed him a spot in school. Likewise, she would resort to similar acts to guilt her son into staying at home with her. In both cases, it is the woman who manages to subvert male decisions and male order. Again, it is because she relies on a so-called expected female behavior/malady (i.e., hysteria) that she can obtain what she wants without standing out from the accepted social order. The reader, however, becomes a witness to her paradoxical social condition, along with her subverting potential.

One of the goals of depicting the mother as quasi-hysterical first pertains to her visibility. By being overly present and constantly over-the-top, she is inescapable. In line with such concerns, Tremblay works to individualize the mother. More specifically, it is about insuring that – in Irigarayan terms – she is not killed once more: "Une autre chose à laquelle nous avons à veiller, c'est surtout de ne pas retuer cette mère […] Il s'agit de lui redonner la vie […] Lui donner droit aux paroles, et pourquoi pas parfois aux cris, à la colère" (Irigaray 28). Tremblay utilizes the literary space to let the mother scream and shout beyond the home, beyond her middle-class milieu. For instance, the narrator notes that "elle exagérait, bien sûr, mais c'était là une de ses grandes qualités" (*Douze coups* 14); and remembers how she would always complain:

> "C't'enfant-là va finir par me rendre folle!" […] Mon enfant est peut-être mort assassiné dans le fond du théâtre La Scala en regardant Maria Goretti se faire couper en morceaux, pis vous pensez à manger! […] Personne ne l'écoutait plus […] (*Les vues* 70–73)

Her hyperbolic tendencies – or "qualités" (*Douze coups* 14) – first denote how greatly she cares and worries for her son. At the same time, her performance is so dramatically tragic that it draws attention to her condition. It is because of her status as *mère québécoise* that she is so invested in her child's life. By acting in such a manner, she then becomes aurally inescapable to the reader. Performing almost beyond credibility thus ensures that she is seen as a good mother, while underlining the performance itself. Mrs. Tremblay, "la reine du plateau" (*Douze coups* 48), the diva, becomes iconic and her

performances are worthy of what might be called a drag show. According to Judith Butler,

> The critical promise of drag does not have to do with the proliferation of genders, as if a sheer increase in numbers would do the job, but rather with the exposure of the failure of heterosexual regimes ever fully to legislate or contain their own ideals [and yet] heterosexual imperatives, are not […] necessarily subverted in the process. (*Bodies That Matter* 181–182)

I would argue that Mrs. Tremblay's performance holds the similar "promise of drag" by shedding light on "the failure of heterosexual regimes." She evidently manages to circumvent Quebec's conservatism, while her mother-diva persona saves her again from punishment. As over-the-top as she is, she is not "necessarily subvert[ing]" the order, because she is still performing a normative image of standard motherhood. Tremblay's work, however, does subvert to the extent that his mother becomes an image of resistance and rebellion, albeit at times implicit and invisible to governing authorities.[5]

Throughout the texts, the mother proves very critical of the various art forms that appeal to her youngest son. Ironically, she is very similar to the characters he enjoys in his books or plays. One day as the narrator is listening to an opera recording, she complains: "Michel, lâche c't'air-là, on dirait que tu viens de doubler ta dixième année! C'est quand même pas c'te musique plate-là qui te met dans c't'état-là, jamais je croirai! Ça miaule comme des chats un soir de pleine lune!" (*Douze coups* 177). Her final criticism, that "ça miaule," could easily apply to most of her interventions. I would argue that she does not simply act *like* one of her son's divas, rather she *becomes* one of the divas he looks up too. She may well even become an inspiring model in her gay son's eyes. For Harris, "Even today, gay men still allude to the star's usefulness in enabling them to 'cope,' in offering them a tough-as-nails persona that they can assume like a mask during emotionally trying experiences" (13). Mrs. Tremblay certainly demonstrates a strong and decisive persona, which influences the son to seek out what he truly enjoys. At the same time, the representation of the mother-diva temporarily takes the woman to "a sophisticated 'artistic' demi-monde inhabited by Norma Desmonds and Holly Golightlys" (10). She is one of them. It is thus by embracing (or making her embrace) her stereotypical female malady, hysteria, that she retains her agency.[6] In spite of the social limitations imposed on her sex, she refuses to sit still; she fights: "elle en était, hélas, très capable" (*Douze coups* 131).

Dolan's matricide in *J'ai tué ma mère*

The modes of representation which emerge in the works of Tremblay provide tools to analyze Dolan's films. If many Quebecois novels have participated in exposing women's living conditions – as shown by those of Tremblay, but also those of Anne Hébert, Gabrielle Roy, or Nicole Brossard – films have long tended to focus on fathers and sons (Greene; Gilbert Lewis). Indeed, filmmakers have relied on concepts of paternity and masculinity to reflect upon the singular status of the Quebecois province. As Bill Marshall – Quebec and cinema scholar – observes, "[i]t is certainly the case that the father–son relationship is often privileged in Quebec cinema (or conspicuous by its absence, which usually amounts to the same thing)," and often serves to bring forth Quebec's "failure to attain phallo-national maturity" (106). With his debut film *J'ai tué ma mère*, Xavier Dolan changes this lens and zooms in on the mother figure and the mother–son relationship as sketched out on the characters Chantale and Hubert. Film critic Martin Bilodeau remarks and confirms the importance of such a shift: "J'ai beaucoup exercé ma mémoire cette semaine afin de trouver dans le cinéma québecois un personnage de mère aussi fort et présent au centre de l'image que celui interprété par Anne Dorval" (Bilodeau).

If the model of motherhood Chantale represents seems, at first, in direct opposition to Tremblay's mother, her centrality in the film – central in the shots and in the plot – demonstrates similar patterns of imposed conformity. Although she acts more detached and much less caring toward her son, because she seems to prioritize her well-being and material satisfaction, she too cares about regulating discourses and normalcy. Notwithstanding her standoffish behavior, her lack of visible emotions and affection for her son, the film marks her as omnipresent. Opening the film with a close-up on her mouth while she is having breakfast, for example, makes the mother forever visually inescapable to the viewer. The scene is purposely disturbing; she is not eating neatly, she has orange juice and cream cheese smeared around her lips, and sticks her tongue out. The slow-motion effect (coupled with classical music) also accentuates her filmic predominance as we are made to linger on her monstrously present image. *J'ai tué ma mère* is clearly a story about motherhood, a messy motherhood at that. Toward the beginning of the film, one exchange between mother and son comes to demonstrate such messiness. And it is through the mess that the need to conform surfaces and unveils Chantale's fear of not being normal.

Hubert: J't'haïs!
Chantale (*in resignation*): Ben vas-y, haïs, haïs-moi. (*J'ai tué ma mère*)

To say that this argumentative exchange between mother and son embodies the essence of Hubert and Chantale's relationship would certainly be reductive and oblivious to the richness and nuanced facets of *J'ai tué ma mère*. Yet, the routine of hatred – which one encounters throughout the film and which constitutes the heart of this film – underlines how pivotal a topos it is, so much so that it transports this particular mother–son relationship, this Hubert–Chantale incompatible duo, into the realm of the marginal. Or, to use a word dear to Dolan, "c'est *spécial*."

The film thus revolves around this conflicting familial unit, in which constant tensions and negotiations further displace the characters away from one another and postpone a potential reconciliation. Some could argue that the son is the sole culprit in this matter, but the mother's behavior cannot be altogether dismissed insofar as she does not make much effort to pacify the situation either. Consequently, the degree of resentment felt by Hubert toward his mother consistently and invariably increases. It thus comes as no surprise when the son decides to commit a metaphorical matricide at school. Prompted to work on an economics assignment about their parents' careers, Hubert asks, "Madame, est-ce que je peux prendre le métier de ma tante? […] C'est parce que je vois jamais mon père et ma mère […] ma mère est morte?" (*J'ai tué ma mère*). Before finishing his sentence, the young man pauses. Should we sense in this hesitation some guilt? Perhaps, as metaphorical as it may be, Hubert becomes, for a slight second, aware of the social consequences of such an act, of the burden he must now carry. At that very moment, Hubert steps into the world of social transgression; he becomes the one who killed his mother.

Hubert's killing plays a crucial role in unsettling the mother. It acts as a trigger that somehow pushes her to display her emotions more explicitly, as though she needed to defend her title. Having found out about her "death," she rushes to school. She is determined to show everyone at school – a place of institutionalized normativity – that she still exists. Through this episode of intense fury ("J'ai-tu l'air morte?"), she attempts to reestablish her maternal role; an attempt she also makes whenever she and Hubert share a meal. At dinner, Chantale's attempts to make conversation are met with cold and abrasive retorts. She asks Hubert, "Penses-tu qu'il y a beaucoup d'enfants qui parlent comme ça à leur mère?" Here, the marginality of their rapport is reinforced while simultaneously bringing forth a sense of absurdity. It proves absurd, because of the scarcity of reasons and justifications that place

the viewer in front of an impossibility to produce meaning. Hubert's answer to his mother proves just as opaque: "Penses-tu qu'il y a beaucoup de mères qui élèvent leurs enfants comme tu m'as élevé?" The composition of the shots separates them further. Even as they are sitting next to each other, the shots show them nevertheless alone, in their own space.

Discussing performance, Butler argues, "I think that when the unreal lays claim to reality, or enters into its domain, something other than simple assimilation into prevailing norms can and does take place. The norms themselves can become rattled, display their instability, and become open to resignification" (*Undoing Gender* 28). Because of its violence and relative unintelligibility (i.e., the difficulty to understand the original root of their anger), Dolan's film seems to transport the viewer into that realm of "the unreal." Purposely so, it displays and embraces exacerbated marginality, while, at the same time, claiming its belonging to "reality." Indeed, the use of culturally accepted signifiers (a dinner, a family, a conversation, etc.) aggravates the tension between what is known and expected and what is actually shown. Therefore, by being unable to make sense of this partial otherness, the viewer is forced to question and "resignify" his or her own reality. Again, that is not to say that watching Dolan's film is a venture into the nonsensical. On the contrary, it is about witnessing something mundane that we all easily identify as such, and then realize that the analytical paradigms we would usually (and normatively) use to make sense of the film fail to deliver.

Interestingly, however, and contrary to Tremblay's mother whose protective attitude is overwhelming, Dolan's mother portrays, as it were, a post-mother, that is, a mother whose child has grown and reached independence while not being fully adult yet. Critic Chantale Gingras remarks,

> La mère est un savoureux personnage tragi-comique, qui accumule les décorations et les vêtements quétaines avec un enthousiasme et une démesure qui font sourire, mais qui en même temps crie silencieusement la vacuité de son existence, affalée devant la télé ou les jeux de patience, ayant tout donné à son fils et rien gardé pour elle-même. (101)

That she has "tout donné à son fils et rien gardé pour elle-même" makes her step into this post-mother space of "vacuité"; a space where her "existence" has lost all meaning. Yet, she remains concerned by what others might think of her. While Gingras's comment is a valid understanding of her overall demeanor, it must be noted that Hubert's mother is constantly

trapped between that "vacuité" and the need to maintain herself as a normal mother. As a product of 1970s women's liberation movements (Fédération des femmes du Québec, FFQ, or Association féminine d'éducation et d'action sociale, AFÉAS) – which not only fought for abortion rights but also "set their sights on […] ending physical and sexual violence […] daycare and parental leave […] and the recognition of equality of spouses in marriage" (Baillargeon 243) – Chantale exercises her freedom to work, to be divorced, to decorate her house, or buy herself clothes as she sees fit, to take care of her appearance (e.g., the tanning salon). Yet she cares to be considered and perceived as a good mother.[7] When she initiates a dialogue with her son, I would argue that she conforms to a performance of motherhood (i.e., being effortlessly caring, being nourishing, knowing everything about her child, etc.). As such, although seemingly liberated and living in a time different from that of Tremblay's mother, she is nonetheless haunted by past and present normative discourses, according to which "no matter who the woman was, once a mother, she was sanctified by that revered vocation, maternity" (Lévesque 24). Through her performance, there is hope of sanctification, of social praise. Later in the film, upon her return home, she eagerly tells her son about a new jacket she just purchased and fails to acknowledge that her son is angry. Having found out she has signed him up for another year in boarding school – which he despises – Hubert cares little about her clothes. And she cares little about his emotions. In fact, the way she ends their argument makes it difficult to see whether she truly understands his feelings at all: "C'est plate, je t'avais acheté un beau filet mignon […] un beau p'tit gâteau [… *ironically*] on va passer une belle soirée!" (*J'ai tué ma mère*). Rather than divulging her feelings in a specific situation, she displaces them onto material goods, which according to her logic act as proof of her care and consideration.[8] In lieu of a justification to the maternal behavior, Hubert explains, "Elle voulait pas m'avoir. Elle a agi comme si j'étais un fardeau. Elle était pas faite pour être mère. Elle s'est mariée puis elle a eu un enfant parce que c'est ce que tout le monde attendait d'elle. C'est ce que tout le monde attend encore des femmes d'ailleurs. Presque tout le monde" (*J'ai tué ma mère*).

As we have seen, Chantale conforms to a preestablished model of womanhood, whose ultimate goal was to procreate and have children. As Lévesque accurately remarks about Quebec's normative discourses on women, "Might we conclude that without motherhood, woman was nothing?" (27). Chantale's struggles arise from rejecting the possibility of being "nothing," as well as being constantly oppressed by a social yoke

and her inability to truly act as the perfect caretaker. Her extra-familial/maternal interests take over what she should be privileging, making her work twice as hard to present a simulacrum of motherhood. The latter thus depends exclusively on an ostentatious performance to present a normal image to the outside world.

Dolan's absent and non-guilty mothers

J'ai tué ma mère laid the grounds for an analysis of motherhood across Dolan's films. Although other foci may shift in *Les amours imaginaires* and *Laurence anyways* to love triangles and transgenderism, it is important not to dismiss the role of mother altogether in these successive films, especially when the same actress, Anne Dorval, is once again cast as a mother in the second feature.[9] Yet, there are striking differences between her two performances which can be explained by the mother's general absence from the plot in the second film. At the cinematographic level, at least, Dolan has managed to somewhat kill the mother, by making her much less central. While the first film is a lesson about the constructive nature of mothering/parenting and the variety of familial units, *Les amours imaginaires* and *Laurence anyways* will further such a representation by relying on the distantiation of mothers, be it physical or emotional. As a result, unmothering happens, and women can demonstrate their own sensibility as individuals whose lives are not defined solely by procreation and raising children. Unmothering also implies the refusal of guilt and shame for one's offsprings' wrongdoings or deviance.

Les amours imaginaires tells the story of two best friends, Francis and Marie, who become infatuated with the same Adonis-like young man, Nicolas. One major issue, at least for the two friends-turned-rivals, lies in their inability to find out his sexual orientation. Nicolas behaves equally affectionately with both, thus blurring the lines of intelligibility; that is, whom does he prefer? Notwithstanding the clear plot focus on this new complicated love story, motherhood still remains to play a part and, I would argue, resumes where *J'ai tué ma mère* ended. *Les amours imaginaires* works to represent independent, detached, and more selfish mothers. If Chantale was a central and inevitable character, Nicolas's mother – whose name is unknown (yet again played by Anne Dorval) – is absent for the most part. In a way, however, Nicolas's mother is very similar to Hubert's, except for the fact that she is much less concerned about the other's gaze. One evening when Francis has thrown a birthday party, the mother's

dismissive attitude toward norms becomes most evident. Francis and Marie represent a judgmental gaze, along with the viewer, as they observe a group of guests dancing; more specifically, Nicolas and a slightly older looking woman. Unbeknownst to everyone is the fact that Nicolas's dance partner is his mother. Coiffed with a bright blue wig and made-up in an eccentric manner, she fails to look motherly:

> Francis: Qui est cette *androïde*?
> Marie: C'est sa mère, elle s'appelle *Désirée* […] Elle m'a dit que j'avais l'air d'une *femme au foyer* des années 50 […] Elle peut ben parler avec son spear du Capitaine Spock […] Moi au moins j'ai pas l'air d'une *pétasse assoiffée* […]
> Francis: Oui, mais ta robe est légèrement *anachronique*.
> Marie: Pardon? C'est vintage, je te ferai remarquer.
> Francis: Je sais. Mais c'est pas parce que c'est vintage que c'est beau. (*Les amours imaginaires*, my emphasis)

The use of "androïde" serves to underline how unusual she is, even abnormal. And yet, her name is "Désirée" which would echo Dolan's intention to draw the light on this preferred and *desired* form of motherhood. The mother's gestures could at first echo robotic movements, but her fluidity and interaction with her son rehumanize her. Keeping in mind that machines are built to accomplish repetitive tasks, the naming of the mother as "androïde" produces two things. On the one hand she is othered by Francis and Marie because she fails to uphold the accepted image of motherhood. One the other, she is a different mother who rejects the "routine," and rejects the idea that she should only be a reproductive machine. Dolan thus reappropriates the negative, sheep-like image of motherhood to liberate her from social norms.[10] Désirée, the traveling showgirl, is not too different from Chantale, who likes tanning and shopping. However, the latter did not escape the consequences of the gaze. In that sense, and even though she failed, Chantale attempted to be that "femme au foyer des années 50," when she would have certainly preferred to be "une androïde" or even "une pétasse." This very dichotomy exposes the binary dimension of our judgments toward women, which annihilates all other options. In that sense, it echoes these haunting words from Fanny Britt's *Les tranchées*: "nous manquons cruellement de tolérance par rapport à l'ambigüité" (12).

Within this film, the limited maternal presence grants her a great sense of freedom. The next day, after the party, the mother stops by Nicolas's apartment to drop off his allowance before returning to work. Wearing a new wig, covered in fur, glitter, and lace, the mother once again stands out:

she clearly works on her appearance to express femininity. As a dancer, the glitter also echoes this artistic world where the image of woman is *travaillée* to appeal to external gazes; through such prosthetic femininity she surpasses motherhood and is woman first.[11] She proceeds to remark about Francis, "Il m'a parlé de toi. En effet, beau bonhomme!" (*Les amours imaginaires*). Once again, she figures a stark contrast with Hubert's mother, who failed to act as a confidante. Although Nicolas is very independent, the distance does not seem to exclude a close relationship; one which allows sharing one's feelings. She explains:

> Tu demanderas à Nico! Il venait dans les loges quand il était petit; il aimait ça à maudit. Son père, il trouvait pas ça ben élevé […] "Ah! c'est vulgaire, c'est vulgaire!" […] Après ça on s'est perdu de vue […] Son père il te l'a repoigné, ça pas été long […] Father knows best! Ah! ah! ah! Father knows best […] ouais! (*Les amours imaginaires*)

Despite her busy career, she made the mother–son relationship work for a while until the father decided to put an end to it. More than a simple question of time differences, the alleged vulgarity of her shows and backstage led the father to "repoigner" the son away from her. Yet, mother and son managed to build different ties, in distance and absence, making for a workable and close relationship.

She soon leaves the screen. In a little over five minutes, Dolan exposes a new and more independent form of motherhood, which could easily have been omitted. In fact, the variety of reviews from Canada, France, and the United States does not touch upon this theme at all. Even though the mother figure appears and disappears quickly, it is necessary to read this move as a direct reflection of motherhood itself. That is to say, Dolan depicts a woman's self-determination and underscores her ability to be either motherly or womanly at her will. In that sense, we might say that she is the product of the women's liberation movements not yet available to, say, Tremblay's mother figure.

Laurence anyways does not fail to carry the conversation forward, even when the central theme – that of transgenderism – could easily draw attention away from other less-obvious considerations. Dolan's third piece delves into the complex life of Laurence, a biological male, who decides to transition to be a woman. The story focuses mostly on Laurence and his fiancée, Fred, as they go through the process that considerably shakes up their beliefs and habits. The Laurence–Julienne mother–son relationship is grounded in models of motherhood that Dolan established in the previous

films. Julienne, Laurence's mother, marks a certain balance between Chantale's omnipresence and Nicolas' mother's overall absence.

On the day that Laurence announces the news of his transition to his mother, she does not react as Laurence expected, and the following dialogue ensues:

> Laurence: Maman, c'est important ce que j'ai à te dire.
> Julienne: Tu peux monter la télévision quand même?
> Laurence: Pourquoi est-ce que tu réagis comme ça maman?
> Julienne: Tu veux que je réagisse comment, Laurence?
> Laurence: Je sais pas, mais tu ne poses pas de questions, tu n'es pas surprise?
> Julienne: J'ai pas de questions […] tu m'annonces un truc dingue, […] mais des questions, non, je m'en pose pas […] Surprise? Quelle surprise? […] je suis pas surprise, non! Faut pas se laisser surprendre. C'est pas bon. Je suis sûr que c'est très sérieux Laurence, faut pas penser que je te prends pas au sérieux. Mais que tu sois sérieux ou non, tu crois que je vais me martyriser? Je vais me dire que je suis une mauvaise mère? Je m'en fous. Qu'est-ce que tu veux que ça me fasse? Et ton père? (*Laurence anyways*)

The mother's reaction is strikingly unconventional, insofar as she refuses to feel any guilt or to even carry the burden of her son's marginality. Throughout this passage, Dolan deconstructs yet another form of prejudice, according to which women are responsible for society's deviancies. One example of such prejudice lies in *Une fleur de jasmin à l'oreille* (1980), in which Dominique Fernandez recounts the journey of a young homosexual man and remarks: "Pourquoi mettre sur le compte de leur mère tout ce qui advient aux garçons?" (127). In *Laurence anyways*, this underlying problem is quickly thwarted by the mother's rejection of the guilt. Unlike the mother in Fernandez's novel, who "s'était mise à acheter et à lire des ouvrages de pathologie sexuelle et de psychanalyse" (27) to make sense of her son's newly revealed homosexuality, Julienne won't "se martyriser" or "[s]e dire qu['elle est] une mauvaise mère."

The films that followed *J'ai tué ma mère* depict mothers who embrace their difference, who are indifferent to judgment. Beyond the conflicts, which make for most of the story in the first opus, one last scene in the first film is worthy of attention, in the sense that it echoes Julienne's rejection of guilt. As the son has run away from his new boarding school and the principal calls Chantale to inform her about it, he quickly feels the need to lecture her and notes that Hubert could certainly use a masculine figure at home. Chantale – who had yet to show any passion for motherhood – engages in a vehement harangue against his allegations and confirms her caring for

Hubert. Her screaming at the top of her lungs eventually serves to foreclose, to shut down, any attempted critique of unconventional mothering.

> Vas-tu me donner un cours de maternité 101! J'ai grandi avec une mère maniaco-dépressive qui a passé la moitié de sa vie dans une chambre d'hôpital. J'ai marié un lâche qui m'a dumpée sous prétexte qu'il n'était pas à la hauteur de son rôle de père […] Tu viendras pas me dire que mon fils est en fugue parce que je suis une mère monoparentale […]. Vous me poursuivez avec vos questions, avec vos petites insinuations, vous me faites sentir responsable pour votre incompétence […].

While Chantale criticizes the principal for telling her how to be a mother, her first sentence reiterates motherhood as a basic practice, a common and natural knowledge. The "cours de maternité 101" represents the basics of motherhood; what is expected from a mother. Because she fails to fulfill the requirements, she must be corrected. In this instant, Chantale refuses the correction and instead decides to correct the principal, the epitome of institutionalized patriarchy.

To conclude this analysis, I would draw attention to a recent article by *Le Devoir* journalist Isabelle Paré, who explores societal issues in Quebec. In "Journée à thème sexiste au service de garde" she reports on a controversy around what children are being taught, and shows another exemplar of institutionalized sexism in Quebec:

> L'histoire a fait boule de neige quand une mère a publié sur Facebook une photo de la fiche d'inscription à cette journée pédagogique, surnommé "*Journée de filles pour les filles/Journée de gars pour les gars*," rapportée à la maison par son enfant. La fiche invite les parents à payer 7,30$ en sus du tarif quotidien pour que leurs fillettes de 5 à 12 ans puissent apporter à l'école poupées, figurines, trucs de coiffure, de maquillage, alors que l'on conseille plutôt aux garçons de se présenter ce jour-là avec autos téléguidées et jeux vidéo. (Paré)

In this context, from a young age, Quebecois children are faced with gendered perceptions of who they are and should be. Girls, who can bring their "poupées," are maternatilized and taught to look pretty and care about imaginary children, while boys play video games. As such, the "cours de maternité 101" harshly critiqued by Chantale is evidently not too far from reality, just as the struggles of Rhéauna (Tremblay's mother) still echo current problems. If one were to rephrase Beauvoir's famous sentence "On ne naît pas femme: on le devient" (13) in relation to the Québécois context, the result might rather be: "On ne naît pas femme: on naît mère."

The role women play in Quebec has been and remains significant, so much that it represents a haunting figure for contemporary cultural productions. That she is so inescapable for both Tremblay and Dolan is thus no surprise and reflects upon her socially expected overbearance. While the maternal representations reveal internalized and controlling discourses, which make mothers so predominant, Tremblay and Dolan underline strategies that allow them to escape social duties. In a province where "strict social policing prevails" and where "everything is seen and nothing is overlooked" (Killick in *Les Belles-soeurs* xviii), conforming to the norm might, at first, prove the easiest way of life.[12] And yet, motherhood for Tremblay and Dolan is above all grounded in more or less explicit transgressive practices, and in *ambigüité*.

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Notes

1 In the same interview, Tremblay further describes an encounter with Xavier Dolan, during which he advised him not to pay attention to the critics: "J'ai eu une conversation avec Xavier la semaine dernière […] je lui disais: 'réponds pas à ce monde-là, aux gens qui te critiquent […] c'était la même chose y'a 40 ans.'"

2 Lévesque remarks, "Whether they [women] remained single or entered religious orders, they were supposed to practice an ideal, if not a biological motherhood. They were to mother their parents, other women's children, or society itself" (24).

3 In her 1984 essay, "Thinking Sex," Gayle Rubin argues, "Disputes over sexual behavior often become the vehicles for displacing social anxieties, and discharging their attendant emotional intensity" (267). In Quebec, this phenomenon of radicalization was first inscribed in a survival narrative, according to which "French-Canadian mothers were the cornerstone of francophone survival in America" (Baillargeon 236).

4 Another example of her performance: "Il n'y avait pas de place pour moi […] Elle avait porté la main à son coeur, avait tapoté sa vaste poitrine en faisant semblant d'avoir de la difficulté à respirer […] Cinq minutes plus tard, j'étais installé dans la quatrième D […] Ma mère avait probablement déjà retrouvé son sourire et sa joie de vivre" (*Douze coups* 65–66).

5 Harris also argues, "the homosexual's love of Hollywood was not an expression of flamboyant effeminacy but, rather, in a very literal sense, of swaggering machismo […] diva worship provided effeminate men with a paradoxical way of getting in touch with their masculinity, much as football provides a vicarious way for sedentary straight men to get in touch with *their* masculinity. Despite appearances to the contrary, diva worship is in every respect as unfeminine as football. It is a bone-crushing spectator sport in which one watches the triumph of feminine wiles over masculine wills" (13). For the mother, acting like a diva would result in her getting in touch with a different form of femininity.

6 Laplanche and Pontalis's *Language of Psychoanalysis* provides insight into the historical – though clearly problematic and outmoded – category of hysteria, whose symptoms

"may be paroxystic (e.g. emotional crises accompanied by theatricality)" and led the medical institution to claim that "hysteria should be raised to the status of a disease like any other" (195). Neither Laplanche nor I would subscribe to such a view, but the defining traits are certainly re-appropriated by Tremblay as easy-to-recognize signifiers. Applying "folle" to herself, Rhéauna Tremblay falls under the category of the hysteric which is reinvested through the texts as a mode of empowerment. As a woman she belongs to the margin, which could easily invisibilize her. The art of performing keeps her visible.

7 I understand that the use of "good" is arbitrary and may evolve with time, even as we are reminded by Fanny Britt in *Les tranchées. Maternité, ambigüité et féminisme, en fragments* (2013) that "nous manquons cruellement de tolérance par rapport à l'ambigüité. Comme les anxieux chroniques souffrent d'intolérance à l'incertitude, il y a dans la maternité actuelle un rejet de l'ambivalence qui me peine et me révolte. Si l'on n'est pas la sainte mère, on est la mère indigne. Si l'on aime nos enfants d'une fièvre éperdue, on ne peut pas ressentir également, et parfois dans la même seconde, l'urgence de *crisser son comp* au bout du monde. Si l'on considère nos enfants, ou notre famille, comme l'élément central de notre existence, on ne peut pas avoir aussi des velléités professionnelles ou amoureuses prenantes" (12–13).

8 I would argue that both Hubert's mother and Tremblay's belong to the lower (or middle) class of society and display materialistic leanings, through which they try to somewhat efface their class inferiority. It is certainly striking in Tremblay's *Les Belles-soeurs*, in which Germaine is ecstatic to have won one million stamps to completely upgrade her furniture, kitchenware, decorations, etc. All these changes are but cosmetic. The house is still in a working-class neighborhood, her family still earns little money. Chantale attends to her "surface" too. She goes to the tanning salon to perhaps give the impression that she travels. She likes animal-prints in her house and on herself. Overall, she might wear her exoticism but never travels. Such a dissonance applies just as well to her model of motherhood.

9 Although motherhood is the main topic of *Mommy* (2014), this analysis – as indicated in the introduction – is limited to Dolan's self-coined love saga. I address *Mommy* in another publication on "horrible mothers" across Francophone North America.

10 I use sheep in reference to Philip K. Dick's 1968 science fiction novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Quebec being such a Catholic nation also implies that each parish had its followers, also known as sheep.

11 Lévesque writes, "Thanks to mass-produced clothing and the Eaton's catalogue, everyone seemed to be wearing the newest fashions, fashions that were all too frequently deemed immodest by the Pope and the bishops, and then by the various parish organizations that refereed questions of modesty" (56–57).

12 I would draw attention to proliferating media stories about "horrible mothers" who lose custody of their children for having left them in the car (in safe conditions); an example of modern-day surveillance and judgment. See Brooks.

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