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Narcissism and the Cinema of Xavier Dolan

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Declaration

I hereby declare that I have prepared my Master's Thesis on the following topic:

Narcissism and the Cinema of Xavier Dolan

independently under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

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Abstract

A narcissist, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is one who is “extremely self-centered with an exaggerated sense of self-importance”. Nowadays, narcissism is often studied in regards to contemporary culture, social media, celebrities, and the younger generation. The culmination of these topics can be found in French-Canadian filmmaker and acclaimed "wunderkind" Xavier Dolan. In the thirteen years since his directorial debut at the young age of nineteen, Dolan has gone on to direct eight feature films, four of which he has also starred in. Drawing on deeply personal and at times autobiographical themes, it may be difficult to separate Dolan's characters from Dolan the filmmaker. This may be why, oftentimes, particularly in critiques of films Dolan directs and acts in, he's criticized of being a “narcissist”.

This thesis aims to provide an overview of narcissism and to classify the narcissistic character traits to look for in a study of Xavier Dolan's filmography, split into films he has only directed and films he has directed and acted in. We will then analyze the alleged elements of narcissism in the underlying theme, the visual style, and the characteristics of the main characters in order to determine whether these films can rightfully be considered narcissistic or not. Lastly, the critical acclaim and success that Dolan has been faced with begs the question of whether narcissism is in opposition to universality or whether there is a factor of relatability associated with his films, regardless of, or maybe because of, the claims of narcissism.

Resumé

Podle definice slovníku Merriam-Webster je narcista „člověk extrémně sebestředný s přehnaným pocitem vlastní důležitosti“. V dnešní době je narcismus často studován v souvislosti se současnou kulturou, sociálními médii, celebritami a mladou generací. Kulminaci těchto témat můžeme pozorovat v osobě francouzsko-kanadského režiséra a uznávaném „záračném dítěti“ Xavieru Dolanovi. Za třináct let od svého režijního debutu, při němž mu bylo devatenáct let, stihl Dolan natočit osm celovečerních filmů, ve čtyřech z nich si také zahrál. Filmy čerpají z hluboce osobních a někdy až autobiografických témat a může být obtížné oddělit Dolanovy postavy od Dolana filmaře. Možná proto je, zejména v kritikách filmů, které režíroval a v kterých také hrál, často kritizován, že je „narcis“.

Cílem této práce je poskytnout přehled o narcismu a klasifikovat narcistické povahové rysy, které je při studiu filmografie Xaviera Dolana třeba hledat. Snímky rozdělujeme na ty, které pouze režíroval, a dále ty, které režíroval a ve kterých hrál. Poté budeme analyzovat údajné prvky narcismu v základním tématu, vizuálním stylu a charakteristikách hlavních postav, abychom určili, zda lze tyto filmy právem považovat za narcistické, či nikoli. Nakonec se na základě uznání od kritiků a úspěchu, s nímž se Dolan setkal, nabízí otázka, zda je narcismus v opozici k univerzálnosti, nebo zda je s jeho filmy spojen faktor porozumění, a to bez ohledu na tvrzení o narcismu, nebo možná právě kvůli němu.

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1. Introduction

*Avert your gaze and you will lose your love,
for this that holds your eyes is nothing save
the image of yourself reflected back to you.*

(Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, III. 626-628)

In mythology, Narcissus was a beautiful man who was wanted by all but would not reciprocate anyone's feelings. As a result and as revenge for the hearts he had broken, namely that of the mountain nymph Echo, he was cursed to fall in love with his own unattainable reflection. Unable to cope, Narcissus soon succumbed to death; thus creating the legend of the vain man so in love with himself that he was unable to live. Over the years, Narcissus' predicament has moved past the world of mythology and given rise to a wide range of discussions within the fields of psychology, philosophy, and art, amongst others.

In his 1914 essay titled *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, Sigmund Freud drew upon the clinical descriptions of German psychologist, Paul Näcke, who was the first to use the phrase "narcissism" in 1899, to describe "the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated" (Freud 1914, 73). At the time, narcissism was considered a perversion sexual in nature pertaining to the mental condition in which one can only achieve sexual gratification through one's own image. Freud also used the phrase to describe a situation in which "the satisfaction of the instincts is partially or totally withdrawn from the influence of other people" (Freud, 1921, 69) further signifying that a narcissist derives pleasure solely from himself.

Through subsequent theories by Sigmund Freud and other psychologists, narcissism as a psychological personality disorder was born. Since then, narcissism

has somewhat outgrown the concept of pleasure and satisfaction and is used to refer to someone who “measures himself as important” or believes he “should be important in the human environment” (Pederson 22). Nowadays, narcissism refers to a more widespread mental state that includes a gradient of traits including vanity, authority, and superiority.

In recent years, especially following the rise of reality TV and the ease of broadcasting yourself to the masses via social media in the digital age, there has been an increase in discussions surrounding the idea that the population at large, and especially the younger generation, is growing more narcissistic. Some claim narcissism is an epidemic of the modern age (Twenge & Campbell) and the main psychological disorder we are faced with. It is not unfounded to think that in a world where you can become famous simply for being who you are and where you are constantly faced with images of yourself reflected to you as if to Narcissus by the river, we are now faced with an increase in self-centeredness.

The concept of a famed celebrity - someone who is well-known and gets a lot of attention - and who constitutes a celebrity has gone through many changes throughout history. At some point, celebrities were mainly the royalty and nobility; unattainable images of richness and luxury secluded in a manor out of reach. With the invention of cinema, followed by television, we were introduced to a new type of celebrity: those on the screen. Nevertheless, while the projected image of the stars made them appear closer than previous forms of celebrity and decreased the distance between them and their fans, there was still a limit in place to the exposure and the screen time at their disposal which maintained and amplified the sense of mystery surrounding the celebrity's persona.

Nowadays, the distance between fans and celebrities has decreased even further thanks to exposure possibilities being at an all-time high as a result of the

rising online presence mentioned above. This new generation of celebrities is no longer confined to movies or TV but instead receives a constant outpouring of praise and criticism from their fanbase, feeding their sense of self-importance on a daily basis. The mystique of the old celebrity is now gone, “replaced by new celebrities whose primary career motivation has less to do with their craft than with a desperate need to hang on to the spotlight by any means necessary” (Pinsky & Young 41). The mere fact that they *are* celebrities is often their main attraction. Through the use of reality TV manufactured from a person’s “real life”, celebrities are enabled to do as they wish as this provides the media with “maximum profits: more magazines sold, higher ad rates on TV, more exposure on the Internet” (Pinsky & Young 41).

While this has affected celebrity levels of narcissism with research suggesting that celebrities are significantly more narcissistic than the general population (Young & Pinsky 469), it has, in turn, also led to something called *The Mirror Effect* in which this favorable broadcasting of narcissism is affecting new generations and instilling them with an appreciation for narcissism. The culture of the new celebrity promotes narcissism and benefits from it.

Chapter two of this thesis will expand upon the history of narcissism, its changes through time, and the various methods of diagnosing and understanding it. We will also further delve into the topic of cultural narcissism and the studies done on whether celebrities nowadays have more narcissistic tendencies, and if so, *why?*

Chapter three will explore the presence of narcissism within art and the links associated between the creative artist and the narcissist. One of the main concepts in the topic of narcissism is self-expression and the connection with self. Therefore, we will focus on the self-portrait and the various psychological reasonings behind these methods of expressing oneself. Afterward, we will narrow our field down to the world of cinema and provide a brief overview of the history of narcissism within the

film world. In chapter three, we will also provide brief examples of narcissistic characters depicted in movies in order to have an idea of how cinema deals with narcissism. Behind the camera, we will also discuss the ties between filmmaking and narcissism, primarily among those creating cinematic self-portraits; in other words: the actor-directors. As evident by the title, the main focus is on one particular new generation actor-director who manages to embody all the concepts described above: Xavier Dolan.

As of 2022, 33-year-old French-Canadian actor-director Xavier Dolan has had a career unlike any other. Since showing up at Cannes with his first feature film *I Killed My Mother* (2009), which he wrote, directed, and starred in at the young age of 18, Dolan has made seven other features, each with varying degrees of critical acclaim and success. In his 13 years as a director, a variety of phrases have been used by the media to describe him, the more favorable of which include “Wunderkind”, “boy wonder”, and “young prodigy”. However, even early on, “hints of back-handedness and condescension” were seen in the compliments he received, dubbing him “notre surdoué” (our overachiever), “Sun King”, “darling child”, “notre génie du 7e art” (our genius of the seventh art), and “our little national genius”. From there, it wasn’t long until he was called a “spoiled child” (LaFontaine 1) or “narcissistic” which Dolan believes is people’s “favorite word” for him (Bradshaw). Dolan has occasionally responded to these critics, going as far as to reply to a particularly negative review of his film *Tom at the Farm* (2013) with a tweet that said, “@THRmovies you can kiss my narcissistic ass.” (@XDolan 2013).

This thesis will aim to analyze Dolan’s filmography with an outlook on this alleged narcissism in order to understand the different aspects, both thematic and visual, that have come together to brand him as “egomaniacal” and “narcissistic”. For this thesis, Dolan’s filmography has been split into two categories: films he has only

directed, and films he has both directed and acted in. We will begin with the latter, analyzing the characters, motifs, and underlying narcissistic elements that come together in each of these films, starting from his first feature *I Killed My Mother*, all the way to his latest release *Matthias and Maxime* (2019). Other films studied in this chapter will include *Heartbeats* (2010) and the aforementioned *Tom at the Farm*.

Later, in order to form a comparison between how he treats himself as a main character and how he treats characters he doesn't portray, we will also briefly take a look at his depictions, and mainly introductions, of characters within films he has only directed. These will begin with *Laurence Anyways* (2012) and go through *Mommy* (2014) and *It's Only the End of the World* (2016) to finish at his only English language film, *The Death and Life of John F. Donovan* (2018). In these films, the stylistic way in which the characters are depicted visually, as well as the underlying narcissistic elements within the story motifs and the characters will be discussed.

Before delving into Dolan's filmography, however, it is important to understand narcissism in order to provide a framework by which the films, the characters, and Dolan's approach can be analyzed. In the next two chapters, we will aim to provide a backbone to understanding narcissism and the criteria by which a character/person can be dubbed a narcissist, later utilizing this to analyze the relationship between narcissism and cinema within the scope of Xavier Dolan's filmography.

2. Narcissism, a Definition

There are countless books and articles written on understanding narcissism. While it is outside the scope of this thesis to give a complete account of the entire history of narcissism, it is important to provide an overview in order to understand narcissism in a psychological and historical context and to provide a framework for subsequent analyses. It is also worth noting that though there is no denying that works of art can often depict the inner thoughts and psychologies of the creators and can be studied as insights into their psyche, the aim of this thesis is not to provide Xavier Dolan, the person, with a concrete diagnosis as that is something only Dolan himself is privy too and is, as such, beyond the scope of possibilities here.

The aim here is to understand *why* his films are dubbed narcissistic and whether and how the elements that lead to this alleged narcissism have also affected his universality and popularity. Lastly, it is also important to have a grasp of narcissism within cinema (or, in the broader sense: art) in order to understand that, while this thesis has chosen to focus on Xavier Dolan and his films as a case study, narcissism and its potential appeal may be a concept applicable to other films and filmmakers as well. In order to do so, we must first examine the definition of a narcissist: what is “a narcissist” and how has this definition evolved over the years?

2.1. *The History of Narcissism*

As mentioned previously, narcissism is derived from the myth of Narcissus, the God who fell in love with his own image and wasted away as a result of this self-love. A narcissist, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is one who is “extremely self-centered with an exaggerated sense of self-importance”. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica:

Narcissism is characterized by an inflated self-image and addiction to fantasy, by an unusual coolness and composure shaken only when the narcissistic confidence is threatened, and by the tendency to take others for granted or to exploit them. (Rhodewalt)

As apparent in the definitions above, the main concept associated with narcissism appears to concern the self and how one perceives themselves. The history of narcissism can essentially be separated into a disagreement between two theorists regarding the development and treatment of the disorder: Otto Kernberg and Heinz Kohut. Kernberg viewed narcissism as “fundamentally pathological”. He believed narcissism occurs when, during early development, children are faced with coldness and a lack of empathy from their parents. This disrupts normal maturation, elicits rage as a response to neglect, and results in the child having to rely on themselves, thus giving birth to narcissism (Ettensohn 22). Pathologically, narcissism begins “as a defense against feelings of helpless dependency in early life” manifesting itself as grandiose illusions of self-sufficiency (Lasch 231). On the other hand, Kohut’s idea was based on the idea that children need to look to their caregivers as examples to lay the foundation of healthy self-esteem and so when children are denied the attention needed to accomplish this, they remain stuck in their “immature ways of getting self-esteem needs met”. Essentially, Kernberg saw narcissism as a case of “development taking a wrong turn” whereas Kohut viewed it as “a case of development getting stuck on the path to maturity” (Ettensohn 22, 23).

In both theories, as well as Freud’s earlier definition, what is apparent is that narcissism occurs when one is very young and deprived of certain developmental necessities. As with many other psychological disorders, the root of the cause seems to lay in childhood. Freud even goes so far as to say that parental affection is “a

revival and reproduction” of the parents’ own long-abandoned narcissism leading to them “ascribing every perfection to the child” (Freud 1914, 91) which, in turn, seems to kindle the flames of narcissism within the child. Alternatively, psychologist Stephen Johnson claims that having been denied either affection or maturity, the child also denies his or her own self in hopes of appealing to the mother’s “idealized expectations and ministering to her narcissistic needs”. Through this “idealized false self”, the child then attempts to regain what was lost: “the love, respect, echoing, and mirroring which were required for him to discover, accept, and love his true self” (Johnson 44).

The main thread here is not necessarily overt self-involvement but rather a sense of disconnect with the self. As specialist Drew Pinsky puts it in his book on *The Mirror Effect* (which we will discuss later in this chapter), the main point of “the Narcissus myth is not that he fell in love with himself, but that he failed to recognize himself in his own reflection”. A true narcissist suffers from a lack of self-awareness leading to an inability to empathize with others and a need to replace this emptiness with a sense of importance obtained in the eyes of the other (Pinsky & Young 88).

There are multiple different ways in which narcissism can manifest itself in people. Not all narcissists are arrogant and outwardly self-confident as the common image of the disorder depicts. It is essentially possible to separate the types of narcissists into two: the grandiose who “blame others for failure to achieve their potential” and the vulnerable who blame themselves (Ettensohn 125). The main difference can be that grandiose narcissists “secretly feel inadequate, while vulnerable narcissists feel inadequate because they are secretly grandiose” (Ettensohn 35). Due to the wide gradient of personality types covered by these two splits, examples of narcissistic behavior range from “a sense that life is unfair” and “bitterness” to “boasting”, “bullying”, and “fantasies of being famous”.

2.1.1. *Traits of Narcissism*

There are degrees to narcissism. It is not a disorder one either has or does not but rather “a particular constellation of personality traits”, of which there are seven prominent features to look for: “authority, entitlement, exhibitionism, exploitativeness, self-sufficiency, superiority, and vanity” (Pinsky & Young 89). There are many articles and books written on narcissism and how to identify and cope with it. Freud claimed the narcissist to be essentially incurable; psychologists believe this to be due to the nature of the disorder being based on “self-defense and deception of others” and so when faced with, for example, a therapist trying to help, the narcissist is prone to resist treatment or, in other cases, see no need for treatment (Carey).

Perhaps the most well-known method of diagnosing narcissism (in a non-clinical way) is using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) as developed by Raskin and Hall (1979). Initially a series of 220 questions, the NPI has since been reduced to 40 questions (Raskin & Terry) and then 16 questions (Ames et al.). The NPI-40, the most common of the tests, consists of 40 pairs of statements within which the person must choose which they most identify with. Some examples of these questions include the following pairings:

Pairing 4 :

- A. When people compliment me I sometimes get embarrassed.
- B. I know that I am good because everybody keeps telling me so.

Pairing 5:

- A. The thought of ruling the world frightens the hell out of me.
- B. If I ruled the world it would be a better place. (Raskin & Terry)

In an extensive study done in 2003 on over 2,500 US adults using the NPI-40, a group of psychologists found that the norm for the US adult was measured as 15.3 on the scale (out of 40). That is to say that scoring higher than 15.3 places one in the above-average narcissism category. Later, in a study done using the NPI-40 by Young and Pinsky in 2009, the norm for the US celebrity was measured as being 17.84 (more on that later) (Young & Pinsky 125). There are varying degrees of narcissism that exist within almost all of us. It is possible to have a bit of “healthy” narcissism which is mostly attributed to ambition and assertiveness. On the other hand, “unhealthy” narcissism denotes “grandiosity and insensitivity”. It seems that “narcissism is good in moderation, but bad in excess” as a certain amount is needed for all to function whereas a high amount may lead to problems (Paris 71).

It is important to note that the NPI-40 does not qualify as a diagnosis for Narcissism Personality Disorder but is rather used in normal cases of narcissism. The following checklist, provided by the American Psychiatric Association’s DSM-5, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*, provides the framework within which Narcissism Personality Disorder can be inferred. In order for a diagnosis to be made, a person must meet at least five of the following nine characteristics:

1. A grandiose sense of self-importance
2. A preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love
3. A belief that he or she is special and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people or institutions
4. A need for excessive admiration

5. A sense of entitlement
6. Interpersonally exploitive behavior
7. A lack of empathy
8. Envy of other people or a belief that others are envious of him or her
9. A demonstration of arrogant and haughty behaviors or attitudes

These characteristics can manifest in slightly different ways in each individual. For example, grandiosity can lead to exaggerating accomplishments or expecting special treatment. The belief in one's specialness may lead to treating others as inferior or believing in having special talents while the need for excessive admiration may show up as fishing for compliments or getting angry when unrecognized and a sense of entitlement can lead to expecting others to make unreasonable sacrifices (Ettensohn). Going forward, these characteristics will be kept in mind when analyzing the lead characters in Xavier Dolan's films.

2.2. Contemporary Cultural Narcissism

Nowadays, narcissism is no longer only a clinically recognized disorder but has become a "modern epidemic" brought upon by the movement which claimed "self-esteem was the key to success in life" (Remes 2016). In contemporary times, as mentioned above, we have arrived at a more "cultural" definition of narcissism which views it as less of a sexual psychopathic disorder and more as a form of aggravated self-indulgence, surpassing its psychological definition to simply encompass behaviors of self-flattery, perfectionism, and arrogance. According to Professor Jessica Benjamin, Narcissus has now "replaced Oedipus as the myth of our time" (Benjamin as quoted in Tyler 223).

In 1979, history professor Christopher Lasch introduced the term “cultural narcissism”. He believed that “modern society encourages individuals to focus on self and to loosen ties to community”, as well as the fact that contemporary culture prioritizes “fame, celebrity, and riches” over “duty, honor, and service” (Paris 76). Though Lasch was the first to use the term, cultural narcissism as a concept related to the “balance between the needs of individuals and the expectations of society” has always existed and all through time, “ambitious people have indulged in self-display and sought fame” (Paris 78).

According to Lasch, at the root of this prevalence of narcissism within modern society lay three main elements. The first of these is the “dense interpersonal environment of modern bureaucracy” wherein work becomes abstract from performance and this sense of detachment elicits a narcissistic response from those hoping to excel above these conditions and to succeed above the masses.

Another element, he claims, is “the mechanical reproduction of culture”. He believes that we now live in the “society of the spectacle”, which he describes as “a swirl of images and echoes that arrest experience and play it back in slow motion”. Lasch goes on to say that cameras serve not only to document life but to “alter its quality”, likening it to “an enormous echo chamber, a hall of mirrors”. The fact that modern life consists of so many images and reproductions through photography and other such devices has changed our behavior in a way that we often respond to people “as if their actions—and our own—were being recorded and simultaneously transmitted to an unseen audience or stored up for close scrutiny at some later time” (Lasch 47). This sense of constant surveillance and the effects of performing for photography are later further discussed through the writings of Susan Sontag.

Lastly, Lasch attributes this cultural shift towards narcissism to “the emergence of a therapeutic ideology that upholds a normative schedule of psychosocial

development and thus gives further encouragement to anxious self-scrutiny". The mere presence of a norm to aspire to, and the fact that deviation from the norm is considered unacceptable has created "the notion that health depends on eternal watchfulness and the early detection of symptoms, as verified by medical technology" (Lasch 48). This increase of attention afforded to the self is among what Lasch believes has led to an increase in narcissism.

As a result of the elements above and other smaller features that shape modern culture and encourage a sense of individualism over the community, narcissism now seems to realistically be the "best way of coping with the tensions and anxieties of modern life, and the prevailing social conditions" (Lasch 50).

In more recent history, in a 2013 cover story for *Time* magazine, Joel Stein dubbed millennials the "Me, Me, Me Generation". According to Pew Research Center, a "millennial" is anyone born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock 2019). The *Time* magazine cover story claims that studies show the "incidence of narcissistic personality disorder is nearly three times as high for people in their 20s as for the generation that's now 65 or older" (Stein). The same studies suggest that millennials are fame-obsessed, stating that, according to a survey conducted in 2007 "three times as many middle school girls want to grow up to be a personal assistant to a famous person as want to be a Senator" and that "four times as many would pick the assistant job over CEO of a major corporation". The article deduces that the young now merely want proximity to celebrity and the culture of fame rather than achieving success in another definition of the word. Stein relates this to reality television, stating that because millennials grew up watching these shows which he dubs "documentaries about narcissists", they have now been trained for that lifestyle. To a larger extent, narcissism isn't only limited to fame but even encompasses morality as a study done by the National Study of Youth and Religion "found the guiding morality

of 60% of millennials in any situation is that they'll just be able to feel what's right" (Stein) as opposed to older generations' reliance on leaders or religious guidelines to shape their morality.

It is important to keep in mind that a lot of these studies have to do with youth in the United States; however, while different countries have different categorizations for their generations (not all cultures have "baby boomers", for example), it is believed that due to "globalization, social media, the exporting of Western culture and the speed of change", it is possible to categorize millennials worldwide together as they are closer to one another as to "older generations within their nations" (Stein).

Following the *Time* magazine article, there has been a large number of articles written demonizing millennials as lazy, entitled, and narcissistic. Films such as *Mean Girls* (2004) and *The Bling Ring* (2013), focus on this aspect of millennial culture, showing the characters as shallow stereotypes offering a "veneration of celebrity culture, online addiction, spiritual hollowness" (Clark).

Despite these findings, however, it is believed "that the reported increases in narcissism, although statistically significant, have been modest in actual magnitude" (Grubbs et al. 33). Even earlier, in the '70s when Lasch noted the initial rise in narcissism, he made sure to admit that this reported increase does not necessarily mean that, overall, narcissistic disorders are more prevalent, but rather that those dealing with these disorders may now "simply come more quickly to psychiatric attention" (Lasch 43).

What is different about the modern age is that nowadays, the common individual "lacking the advantage of birth" can rapidly rise to fame and, as a result, be flooded by admiration and a heightened sense of self-importance. This availability of narcissism and the fact that it is possible in everyone and "may even gain a degree of social approval" is what makes our current situation unique (Paris 78). Another factor

is in how supposed narcissists view and treat themselves as, increasingly, it seems that narcissists view individual narcissism (as opposed to social narcissism) to be a “desirable trait” and express a wish to become *more* narcissistic (Grubbs et al. 33).

2.3. *The Narcissistic Celebrity*

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word “celebrity” as meaning both “the state of being famous or celebrated” and also “a person who is famous”. Journalist Michael Hirschorn described celebrity as “a state of pure fabulousness, in which one’s aura is projected across the land, inspiring envy, fantasy, endless curiosity”.

Within the world of art and fame, it is believed that the constant presence of the spotlight can lead to self-grandiosity. In his book on narcissism, Lasch draws upon Susan Sontag’s *On Photography* to comment on the fact that, in the modern period, reality is mostly equated with what the camera shows us and so, as a result of the increase of the recorded image, our sense of reality has been undermined. Lasch claims it is the photograph that provides us “with the proof of our existence”, helping us construct our personal history (48). Sontag compares the reason behind previous photographs and the more recent use of the medium by saying that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, bourgeois families posed for portraits as an attempt to “confirm an ideal of the sitter” thereby proclaiming their social standing and documenting their embellished appearance; whereas today a photograph is often used to simply verify an existence as a document recording one’s development through life (129).

Of course, the sole purpose of the photo camera and other forms of technology is not to cater to the narcissism of the modern age “by allowing people to document their experiences in words, pictures, and videos solely for the purpose of

broadcasting them to (often anonymous) others” but the fact that you can create an image of yourself and put it out into the ether for “universal consumption can make the poster feel suddenly important, gratified, glamorous, even powerful”. Leading social media to act “as incubators for those who harbor narcissistic traits” (Pinsky & Young 73-74).

The question that now comes to mind is whether celebrities become narcissistic after achieving fame or whether their narcissism is one of the reasons *why* they achieve fame. Freud initially admitted that “another person’s narcissism has a great attraction for those who have renounced part of their own narcissism and are in search of object-love” (Freud 1914, 89) claiming that within the non-narcissist lies an attraction and fascination with the narcissist. The rapid growth of celebrity culture within the modern age has led to increased levels of interest and curiosity about the life of the celebrity and, as a result of the sheer amount of images available about the celebrity, there has also been an increase in images of the scandalous and at times “out-of-control” celebrity. This type of sensational behavior has led to the coining of the term “Acquired Situational Narcissism” (ASN) by Robert Millman which is often provided as an explanation for these actions. ASN states that people, even those who “were humble prior to becoming wealthy or famous may develop narcissistic traits if they live in an environment that promotes them” (Paris 73).

To a celebrity, “narcissism is a rational response to a world that functions as a mirror, amplifying one’s positive self-image, the sense that one is in the absolute center”. The difference between the celebrity-type of narcissism and the other is that narcissism, in the classic sense, develops in childhood, often between the ages of three and five, whereas ASN arrives later (Grigoriadis).

Writing on *Celebrity and Its Discontent* in New York Magazine, Vanessa Grigoriadis notes that studies have shown that “pop stars use personal pronouns in

their songwriting three times more once they become famous”. Other studies claim “that the more famous one gets, the more one checks oneself in the mirror”. However, despite extensive research, I was not able to locate the studies themselves in order to obtain the quantifiable data that supports these claims.

In a study conducted by Young and Pinsky, in which 200 celebrities - composed of comedians, reality TV stars, musicians, and actors - were asked to complete the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), the results showed celebrities to be significantly more narcissistic than the general population (Young & Pinsky 469). The NPI, as mentioned previously, is a research tool used to measure narcissism as a personality trait. This research was conducted anonymously and the identity of those 200 celebrities was kept secret. In this categorization, reality TV stars ranked highest on the narcissism scale, followed by comedians, actors, and then musicians. The study also found that female celebrities showed a significantly higher average than male celebrities, especially within the scales of “exhibitionism, superiority and vanity”. Though this may be a result of “a self-selection bias in which the industry attracts and retains women who place a very strong emphasis on their physical appearance” (Young & Pinsky 469).

The research showed no correlation between narcissism and an individual’s years of experience in the field, suggesting that those who work in the industry have had prior narcissistic tendencies. This is also in line with recent research regarding the idea that narcissists are drawn to such environments in which they believe that “high performance will bring self-glorification” (Wallace & Baumeister,). However, another way to view it is that they “acquire narcissistic tendencies very early on in their careers and that those tendencies tend to stabilize fairly quickly” (Young & Pinsky 470). Overall, it is believed that those who wish to be stars have a higher

tendency of narcissism but don't develop the actual disorder “until they begin to achieve success” (Sherrill).

2.3.1. *The Mirror Effect*

As one of the defining traits of narcissists is their belief that they belong to a group of special people and that they are destined for greater things, it is often common for narcissists to divide people into two groups: “the rich, great, and famous” versus “the common herd”. Psychiatric Otto Kernberg believed that narcissists are afraid of not being one of the greats “and of belonging instead to the ‘mediocre,’ by which they mean worthless and despicable rather than ‘average’ ” (Kernberg 234).

Narcissists often identify with others simply through seeing them as an extension of themselves, thus “obliterating the other’s identity”. As they are normally lacking in empathy stemming from the disconnect between them and their parents, they are, as a result, “incapable of hero worship or of the suspension of disbelief that makes it possible to enter imaginatively into the lives of others while acknowledging their independent existence”. As mentioned previously, in older manifestations of celebrity, the audience and the stars were kept at a distance, allowing for the celebrities to be seen as others and worshipped as heroes; however, in a narcissistic society, it is the celebrity itself and the spectacle that comes with it that is worshipped rather than the concept of fame (Lasch 86). William Hurt, the actor, is quoted as having condemned what he claims to be a “pathological sickness” of our celebrity culture in which the cycle between fans and celebrities is seen as “narcissists on screen being consumed by narcissists off screen” (Pinsky & Young 110). Furthermore, in his essay on *The Temptations of Web 2.0*, Andrew Keen provides “personalization” as another word for narcissism. Stating that current technology “personalizes culture so that it reflects ourselves rather than the world around us”,

thus constantly feeding our own thoughts back to us and further enhancing our fascination with ourselves (54).

Following the study on narcissism amongst celebrities, Drew Pinsky, in a book titled *The Mirror Effect: How Celebrity Narcissism Is Seducing America* sought to explain the relationship between the rise in narcissism and the prevalence of the narcissistic celebrity. Pinsky claimed that reality TV had “democratized fame” and, as such, normalized narcissism in the public’s eye as well as fueling narcissism among the everyday people (Pinsky & Young 70). Pinsky describes the steps in what he deems *The Mirror Effect* as follows:

- 1) The viewer consumes a consistent diet of images of celebrities behaving in attention-getting, narcissistic ways, images that make the behavior appear both entertaining and attractive.
- (2) The viewer develops a preoccupation with these images, to the point that the behavior begins to seem normal, even desirable.
- (3) Consciously or unconsciously, the viewer begins to adopt the behavior, with detrimental or even dangerous consequences. Though it’s not a necessary step, the cycle is completed if
- (4) the viewer then takes advantage of open-access media to indulge his own narcissistic urges, reflecting the behavior back to the public at large. (Pinsky & Young 137)

The constant everyday drama shown on reality TV appeals to the young generation who “relate to the conflicts being played out” and reinforces their sense of importance (Pinsky & Young 68). If problems similar to theirs are valuable and interesting enough to be broadcast to the mass population, what does that have to say about their own lives and their own importance?

3. Narcissism in Art

God is really an artist, like me...I am God, I am God, I am God.

(Pablo Picasso, quoted in Zhou 1)

In art, narcissism “generates the need to encounter and incarnate the ideal” (Giesbrecht & Levin 10). As discussed by Giesbrecht and Levin in their study of *Art in the Offertorium*, the idea is not that art is narcissistic but that it doesn’t suppress narcissism as much as other fields of work do as art invites one to think about it, “as opposed to simply disavowing it—or rationalizing it” (ix). Art, it seems, turns towards narcissism and, in a way, embraces narcissistic tendencies and shines a light on them rather than shying away from them. Not only does the artist have to deal with their own narcissism, but they also take into account and cater to “the narcissism of the art lover”. This is described as narcissism in a sense that it “kills what it doesn’t like and declares that this work is meaningless, pretentious, “could have been painted by my three year-old daughter.”” Artists have to appeal to the art viewer’s need to feel special and to fulfill their desire for “a special experience” by conveying the sense that the viewer is “the most excellent audience” (Giesbrecht & Levin 222).

Despite its increasing appeal in society, as mentioned in the previous chapter, narcissism is still mainly viewed as a mental disorder with prejudiced connotations. As a result, it is often difficult to quantify the amount of self-claimed narcissists in any given field as most are quick to react defensively to the topic. Within the art field, however, multiple indirect studies have been done to analyze the connections and correlations between narcissism and creativity, or narcissism and the artist in general.

One of the theories regarding the ties between creative people and narcissism is that, due to the nature of their work, creatives often spend a lot of time alone, “are often absorbed in their work to the point of obsession, and refuse to conform to social conventions”, and so, as a result, others view them as being narcissistic. On the

other hand, there is also research that shows that narcissism may be a cause for creativity since narcissists, looking to “stand out” and be the center of attention, are often motivated to come up with unique ideas (Goncalo et al. 3). In an experiment to find the relationship between narcissism and performance, Wallace and Baumeister found that narcissists often performed well in cases where there was an opportunity for self-enhancement and the possibility of garnering attention from it. They also found that in group performances where individual contributions counted, narcissists performed higher than in groups where everything was judged collectively and there was less opportunity for recognition (821).

The relation between the appeal of art and narcissism has been studied indirectly by analyzing the price of artworks sold at auctions in relation to the artists’ narcissism using the size of their signature as a proxy. In this study, it was found that “artists’ narcissism positively and significantly impacts the auction prices” of their work within the art world. The study also found that there is a positive association between the market performance of art and the artists’ narcissism and that the narcissistic artist is “offered a greater number of solo exhibitions and more group exhibits” as well as being “included in more museum and gallery holdings” and being “ranked higher by art scholars” (Zhou 1-2).

In order to control the results of the study above due to a concern that the size of the signature merely signifies overconfidence, the researchers used two other proxies for narcissism and repeated their analysis. One such alternative proxy was based on the frequency of the artist’s usage of first-person singular pronouns, and the other was through comparing “the percentage of self-portraits among all of an artist’s artworks” (Zhou 16-17). Both of these analyses yielded results similar to the original and led to the conclusion that there is a positive relationship between an artist’s narcissism and their productivity (Zhou 19).

3.1. *The Self-Portrait*

The word “self-portrait” is seemingly self-explanatory: it is a portrait of the artist done by the artist. Although the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans were the pioneers of portraiture, the self-portrait as we know it, the act of an artist sitting in front of a canvas and painting themselves, has a slightly shorter history. The first official self-portrait has been traced back to 1484 when a 13-year-old Albrecht Dürer composed a silverpoint sketch of himself using a mirror, and “set the foundation for a quite persistent cultural phenomenon: the phenomenon of self-depiction or, as we would call it today, the selfie” (Carbon 9). Ultimately, it was during the Renaissance and with the rise of individualism that the self-portrait as we know it and as a movement from the 14th to the 17th century came to be. Raphael inserted himself into his fresco of *The School of Athens*, standing next to Ptolemy and staring directly at the viewer. Michelangelo is said to have included a self-portrait of himself in the form of a skin being held up by a saint in the Sistine Chapel. Velasquez boldly placed himself amongst Spanish royalty in *Las Meninas*. Some artists even chose to depict themselves as gods or goddesses, as heroes. Over the course of art history and now, more than ever, “Self-portraiture has become the defining visual genre of our confessional age” (Hall 7).

Starting with the invention of the photograph, self-portraits began to take on a more realistic shape, offering the artist the chance to quickly snap a photo rather than sit for hours. Nowadays, with the help of front-facing cameras, the self-portrait has evolved into the “selfie”: “immediately distributed and inscribed into a network, [...] an instant visual communication of where we are, what we’re doing, who we think we are, and who we think is watching” (Saltz). In a *Vulture* article providing a history of the selfie, Jerry Saltz claims that Selfies have their own “structural autonomy” and that, having changed how we interact with others and view ourselves, have now

become “a new visual genre—a type of self-portraiture formally distinct from all others in history” (Saltz).

3.1.1. *The Psychology of the Self-Portrait*

Self-portraits are, fundamentally, a means to express oneself. Being able to “turn the camera” on yourself is to be able to capture your essence as you, the artist, see it. In his paper on the principles of self-expression, Claus-Christian Carbon outlines the many reasons behind the existence of self-portraits claiming that the act of depicting yourself is based on the belief “that the depicted person is different, unique, special in a sense of a personality trait” (Carbon 14). Sometimes, these depictions are instantaneous, showing the current mood or emotional state (e.g., the selfie), while other times, they focus on more extraordinary instances and characteristic traits (e.g., the painted self-portrait). One of the reasons for self-portraits in any form to exist is to place yourself within a surrounding, culture, and environment, hence the prominence of travel photography. Another is to “aim to document a certain status quo [...] often realized by referring to certain achievements in a very explicit way, by use of paraphernalia or symbols,” such as those used in weddings, graduations, and other important life milestones (Carbon 14).

A self-portrait is also a way to imagine yourself in scenarios other than what you are used to and to study who you are. It is not necessarily aimed at documenting or preserving your image as it is, but rather a way to access parts of yourself otherwise unseen and to share that with others in the hope of creating a connection. It is believed that portraits (and by extension, self-portraits) provide an insight into the sitter’s soul and thus “overcome the alienation and anonymity experienced by so many in modern urbanized societies,” (Hall 7) which may be why self-portraits have often been used by marginalized groups as a way to find a place for themselves

within the world and to provide their own “forms of defiance and skepticism” (Hall 240) through their self-portraits.

Though perhaps, much like the underlying core of all art, the most prevalent reason behind the existence of the self-portrait is the attempt to achieve immortality and the “wish to freeze, to maintain or to document a fluctuating but significant slice of life” (Carbon 10). In his study of *Portraits of the Artist*, Pascal Bonafoux maps out the history and the psychology behind self-portraits, mentioning that the painter in depicting himself aims to be “shown, by his pictured gaze, to be individual and timeless” (15) and that “To paint oneself is, in the first place and even beyond any credo, the wish to deny death” (140). This need to preserve yourself could be seen as “an inspiring symbol of artistic freedom or a symptom of what has been dubbed ‘the culture of narcissism’” (Hall). Bonafoux believes that each self-portrait is “nothing other than the recurrent portrait of Narcissus, a monotonous repetition” (8). As previously mentioned, Narcissus fell in love with his reflection, and as such, a parallel has been drawn to the iPhone, “a modern iPool with the echo of one’s reflection always present in the screen alongside whatever one is looking at” (Watts 66).

When discussing the Culture of Narcissism, Christopher Lasch draws attention to the “popularity of the confessional mode” as he believes it is an example of the prevalence of the new American narcissism. A confessional may include anything that attempts, “through self-disclosure, to achieve a critical distance from the self and to gain insight into” all that has gone into the creation of selfhood. This requires one to be able to look at oneself from a detached stance and to objectify one’s own experiences. However, “the increasing interpenetration of fiction, journalism, and autobiography” seems to indicate that writers often have difficulty achieving “the detachment indispensable to art” as, rather than fictionalizing their own lives or reframing them within a different context, they are now “presenting it undigested” and

asking the audience to interpret it themselves. Hence, why a large number of current memoirs are simply a recounting of memories and disclosing of events that have occurred in order to pique the interest of the reader. Instead of trying to find a common ground in the understanding of shared experience or empathy, the celebrity memoir or the current confessional appeals to one's "salacious curiosity about the private lives of famous people" (Lasch 16-17). This is important in trying to understand the popularity of Xavier Dolan's semi-autobiographical features and the confessional style of filmmaking he and many other millennial directors take up.

3.2. *Narcissism and Cinema*

Psychiatry has been a staple of films and their stories ever since the beginning. It seems psychiatry and films often "share the same subject matter" as they both focus on human behavior and the motivations behind it. This is why both psychiatrists study movies and movies, in turn, depict and draw from psychiatry (Gabbard & Gabbard XV).

When depicting narcissism in movies, the stories tend to show this trait as a personality flaw that must be fixed and an obstacle that must be overcome. The often self-centered character fails "to see the detrimental effects that his or her actions have on others", simply consuming all that everyone else has to offer and "robbing others of opportunities and even recognition for their assistance". The narcissistic character is shown as being too self-involved to care for others and to see beyond their own greed and pride and normally it is only through "an intervention of heroic, divine, or supernatural proportions" that the character learns a lesson and gains selflessness (Robinson 240). In such films, narcissism is often simply the synonym of selfishness and the trait is - unlike in most real-life cases - fundamentally curable.

The majority of films featuring narcissistic characters tend to opt for those on the extreme end of the sociopathic spectrum, engaging in homicidal activities and physical acts of violence, mainly showcasing the more psychopathic elements of severe Narcissism Personality Disorder. These are the traits of narcissism that are best transferred to the visual medium (Milstead 2018). Among these films, perhaps one of the most prominent would be *American Psycho* (2000), in which the main character, a serial killer, displays many of the tell-tale signs of a person with Narcissism Personality Disorder. Similarly, films such as *Gone Girl* (2014) and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999) also depict narcissists as extremely cold, calculating, and smart characters, controlling and deceiving others. Speaking about literature, Freud had previously claimed that our interest in criminals, for example, stems from “the narcissistic consistency with which they manage to keep away from their ego anything that would diminish it” (Freud 1914, 89). However, it is not only murder and violence that narcissism in mainstream cinema is linked to, it is also excess and luxury as depicted in inspired-by-real-life movies such as *Catch Me If You Can* (2003) and *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2014) or the popularity of superhero Tony Stark in *Iron Man* (2008). In these films, the narcissist is shown to be extremely successful and, again, able to manipulate and deceive others, albeit through less bloody means.

On the less extreme side are films with “self-absorbed, unpleasant and yet curiously watchable characters” (Lyttelton 2014). Some of these types of characters include depictions of artists, filmmakers, or real-life successes, as seen in *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2005) and *The Social Network* (2010). These characters are less focused on the luxurious and over-dramatic aspect of narcissism, they are slightly more successful versions of real people and are, as such, more self-obsessed than the general public. Slightly below them is the narcissistic parasite which includes average, egocentric, and often self-victimizing people. The most

prominent example of this would be found in the work of Woody Allen, such as *Annie Hall* (1977). While Xavier Dolan's characters aren't on any list (that I have found), as we will come to see later, they do tend to fall under the latter categories (except for Francis in *Tom at the Farm* who belongs to the more severe group).

Regarding actors, as discussed in the previous chapter, the average actor is considered to be more narcissistic than the average US adult. Amongst the celebrities analyzed in Pinsky & Young's study, actors ranked 3rd in terms of narcissistic tendencies, below reality TV stars and comedians but above musicians. There is a stereotype associated with the narcissistic actor who "may not even be consciously aware that he's behaving in certain ways in order to evoke a steady stream of encouraging feedback, but their needs are usually obvious to those around them" (Pinsky & Young 101).

There is a lot to be said about the importance of self-confidence when presenting a project or "pitching" to producers and the ability to depict yourself and your project as one that is special enough to be made, not just one of the other common ideas floating around. In 2003, in a qualitative study of Hollywood "pitches", Elsbach and Kramer (2003) found that studio executives judged the creativity of the project based on their view of the "pitcher" and how much that person matched the image of a creative person by being "charismatic" and "witty." As one studio executive explained, an "enthusiastic and passionate" pitcher "can make a regular story sound spectacular" (Elsbach & Kramer 290).

A glance at film history shows that many directors were deemed arrogant, demanding, and occasionally narcissistic. This is especially true of auteur directors, as they are seen as the sole creator of their films and constantly drawing on their own lives for their stories. "Truffaut is alleged to have said that one repeatedly makes

the same film, which is always about oneself" (Gabbard & Gabbard 248). What, then, can be said of the auteur who also positions himself in front of the camera?

3.2.1. *Self-Portraits in Cinema - Actor/Directors*

Being an actor-director has a history as long as that of the cinema itself with pioneers such as Charlie Chaplin and George Méliès acting in their own films in what may be construed as a form of a moving self-portrait. Since then, a multitude of directors have, either through a cameo or the portrayal of a significant character, stepped in front of the camera, taking on the role of actors as well as directors. Alfred Hitchcock is perhaps the director most associated with cameos having had 37 silent ones. These cameos were a staple of his films and a "symbol of authorship", signifying that he "revelled in being Hollywood's most recognisable director and couldn't resist guesting in trailers for his films or introducing his television series" (Parkinson). A more recent frequent cameo director is M. Night Shyamalan who occasionally gives himself a small speaking role within the films as well; Shyamalan is quoted as saying "It's important for me to be a part of the film in some way rather than to be an outsider from the independent world of film-making. I would love to play the lead role, but it's physically impossible" (Parkinson).

Outside of the cameo, "Whenever an actor directs his own performance (and it is almost invariably a "he"), there is the risk that a film will morph into a vanity project" (Gilbey). There are two main divisions in this field: The first group are directors who give themselves the role of important literary or historical characters; an example of this would be Orson Welles, portraying the titular roles in *Macbeth* (1948) and *Citizen Kane* (1941). The second group is those who choose to write their own stories and act in what is, most of the time, essentially an extension of themselves. In the 1997 film *Deconstructing Harry*, Woody Allen plays a successful novelist who has ruined

his personal life. Allen responded to comments about the character's similarity to himself by saying he's sure the audience will think he is the character, "But they think that of everything I do. I don't care. That is one of the curses or the blessings of what I do. That is why they come or why they stay away" (quoted by Hirschberg). Allen is banking on his own self-obsession and inviting the audience to join him (Gabbard & Gabbard 248-249). Whether through giving yourself iconic roles or always playing yourself, there are arguments to be made for both sides being somewhat narcissistic.

Nowadays, the majority of actor-director examples are established actors who step behind the camera. In cases such as these, because we are used to the actor's image on the screen, the preconception is that these actors *are* narcissistic by virtue of their career and so there is less of an outcry of narcissism and vanity when one directs. One would suppose the actor would take the main role and as we are used to the countless close-ups awarded to them in other films, it doesn't seem out of place when they are constantly on screen in their own films as well.

In order to find comparisons for this thesis, research was done in trying to find someone similar to Xavier Dolan, i.e. a previously unknown actor-director who had achieved critical acclaim at a young age. Of the more obvious options, Woody Allen's first film as an actor-director, *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* (1966) was released when Allen was 30-years-old and had already had many years of experience as a stand-up comedian and playwright. Prior to his debut, Allen had even written a feature film script that had been produced. The other comparator would be Orson Welles who made *Citizen Kane* as a 25-year-old. Before *Citizen Kane*, however, Welles had already gained significant experience as a stage and radio actor, even writing and producing radio plays. Another potentially comparable actor-director would be New Zealand filmmaker Taika Waititi who was 28-years old when his short film *Two Cars, One Night* (2003) was nominated for an Academy Award and 32-years-old when his

first film *Eagle vs Shark* (2007) was made. Though Waititi does often act in his own films, he didn't have a main role in either the short or his first feature debut. Perhaps, the closest comparable, especially in terms of age and immediate success, would have to be Spike Lee who made his feature debut at the age of 21 with *She's Gotta Have It* (1986); however, despite also acting in that and some other subsequent films, Lee has never portrayed the lead role in any of his productions.

There are very few instances in which an unknown director began acting simultaneously, fewer still are instances in which this director mainly self-funding his first film was a teenager, and there is only one known case in which this teenage director achieved immediate success.

4. Xavier Dolan, an Overview

Born in Quebec, Canada on March 20th, 1989, Xavier Dolan's first connection with cinema was as a child actor in a miniseries at the age of four. It was with these earnings as a child actor, and subsequent work done as a voice actor dubbing English films in French, that he was able to partially self-fund his first feature film later on. In 2009, this semi-autobiographical self-funded debut, *I Killed My Mother*, was able to premiere at the Cannes Film Festival and gain him three awards, as well as a standing ovation after the screening. This film introduced Dolan not just as an actor-director, but also as someone confident, unapologetic, and fully aware of who he is and what his style is, able to capture "the raw intensity of what it means to be young, passionate and, often, gay" (Rose 2019). As of April 2022, the 33-year-old actor-director has amassed a mostly successful filmography consisting of eight feature films, the majority of which have been well received by spectators and critics alike and have been screened at some of the most prestigious festivals worldwide. Dolan has had a career unlike any of his generational peers.

While not large, there is already a sea of literature dedicated to Dolan's body of work. There are a couple of untranslated books in French and one collection of essays in English that focuses solely on his films published as part of *ReFocus: The International Directors Series*. The essays in this collection, as well as the majority of other articles written on Dolan, are mainly studies in the field of queer cinema or Quebec cinema. Outside of these two topics, the collection also has three essays analyzing Dolan as a "Millennial Auteur", specifically focusing on Dolan's Excessive Dialogues (LaFontaine), his Pop Fashion and Surface Style (Rees-Roberts), and the concept of happiness in his film *Mommy* (Baillargeon). None of the studies done on him, however, discuss his presumed narcissism or its relation to his success.

4.1. *Dolan, the Persona*

As a lot of criticism about his films is aimed at himself and how he is viewed (details later), it is important to understand the persona that Dolan has crafted as a celebrity. An active user of social media, Xavier Dolan is a different type of director as compared to others in his career. Dolan's Instagram bio reads "Actor, director, Slytherin" (a reference to the *Harry Potter* series) and the page itself is an interesting combination of the director's various photoshoots, occasionally unflattering selfies, and various pop culture references including film and TV recommendations and seemingly random reposted shots and callbacks of his favorite stars and celebrities.

His movies are also filled with literary and cinematic references that appeal to his fellow millennials and others from his generation who see themselves reflected in his choice of music (from Céline Dion's *On Ne Change Pas* in *Mommy* to Britney Spears' *Work B**ch* in *Matthias and Maxime*) and his modes of self-expression and methods of conveying his emotions and concerns. He is, as French critic Gérard Grugeau claims "a brilliant nerd, falsely superficial, breathing the exaggerated narcissism of a society turned in on itself" and "a versatile artist ... who loves to see himself in the limelight" (as translated in Pidduck 53). Other critics view Dolan as a "hipster filmmaker" and criticize what they claim is his preference for "formal exploration over content, social commentary, and narrative development" resulting in a film style and aesthetic that they view as superficial (Baillargeon 180). In an article for *The Guardian*, Tom Seymour brands Dolan as "a millennial Woody Allen" pouring "his vanity, his insecurity and his bravado into his films" (Seymour).

In an essay published as part of the *ReFocus* collection mentioned, Julianne Pidduck coins the term "Dolandrama" to refer to the type of melodrama often present in Dolan's films. Pidduck draws on the work of Claire Moran regarding "self-fashioning" to discuss the persona of the modern artist. "Self-fashioning"

involves the practices of “self-fictionalizing” and “self-posturing”; the former is used to refer to “a portrait or performance of the artist that is embedded in the works” and the latter denotes the fact that the way an artist depicts themselves allows them a “specific way of occupying a position” within the world of art. Pidduck provides Dolan’s first film as an example of “self-fictionalizing” in which he re-creates himself in the form of a character within his film and suggests Dolan’s persona as a “young filmmaker who consistently seeks media visibility [...] through interviews, photo shoots, and social media” to be an example of him “self-posturing” (Pidduck 54).

As we will discuss later, it is no secret that Dolan prefers acting and indeed began directing as a way of giving himself the roles he desires; however, his interest in being in front of the camera isn’t limited to acting. Dolan is an “ambassador” for the luxury brand, Louis Vuitton, making him probably one of the only high profile filmmakers “to cultivate close ties to the fashion industry”, the other being fellow director Sofia Coppola (Rees-Roberts 215). Besides acting and directing, Dolan is also deeply involved in different aspects of each of his films. His name often appears credited as being part of the wardrobe and costume department, as well as art design and editing. He’s also the one who subtitles, and occasionally dubs, his own film into English (LaFontaine 4).

4.2. *Dolan’s Filmography*

We will delve deeper into all of Dolan’s films in the next two chapters but, for the time being, this section will present a general summary of the films and their themes. As apparent when looking through the prevalent literature on Dolan, some of the most important elements of Dolan’s stories include the Quebec setting which is featured in the majority of his films, queer characters - Dolan has been openly gay

since his debut - and the mother/son conflict often at the root of his stories. All three of these traits were center-stage right from the beginning in *I Killed My Mother*.

In an Instagram post made in 2019, marking the tenth anniversary of *I Killed My Mother*, Dolan reminisced on his feelings during the time of filming as being “filled with resentment, self-loathing, insecurity, ill-placed ambitions... Longing to be understood and approved”. He then went on to say that since then many seemingly superficial things, such as the way he looks and presents himself to the world, have changed as a result of “the one single thing that doesn’t change with time, but with will, and support ; self-love”. He acknowledges that self-love and confidence are often confused with arrogance and pretentiousness which are “unforgivable qualities to insecure, loveless others”. In an interview with Jessica Chastain, when speaking of the connections between himself and his characters, Dolan said that all of his characters are “personal” as there is a lot of him “in their anger, their loneliness and their rage against society, against people who ostracize people who are different”. He mentions that even the characters that differ drastically from him are speaking in his words when they speak (Chastain).

Immediately after *I Killed My Mother*, even during the film’s presentation at Cannes, Dolan was already discussing his next big project, *Laurence Anyways*, with potential partners. Compared to *I Killed My Mother*, *Laurence* required much more time and budget to be made. Rather than wait for everything to be ready, while working on *Laurence*, Dolan chose to use the exposure offered to him by his first film’s success to make a transitional feature in 2011: *Les Amours imaginaires*, or as it is known in English, *Heartbeats*.

For this second film, Dolan again cast himself as one of three lead characters who find themselves caught up in a love triangle. A story of friendship ruined by romantic rivalry, the film allowed Dolan to explore a looser, less dramatic narrative

while also providing him with a large number of close-ups, an outlet for his outpour of musings on love, and an Adonis as a love interest.

In 2012, Dolan took a step back from acting and directed his first relatively big-budget film *Laurence Anyways* (2012) focused on a transgender character and the changes his relationship goes through as he transitions. It was around that time that *Cahiers du Cinéma* claimed that during his short career, Dolan “had come to occupy a free space in international cinema: that of extreme youth” (as mentioned in Rees-Roberts 215).

Dolan didn't stay away from acting for too long and in 2013, he received his first strong outcry of “narcissist” when he took on the titular role in his first adaptation, *Tom at the Farm*. Dolan did not act in his next three films. As we will see below, this may have been a direct result of the criticism he had faced for this at that point.

His next film, *Mommy* (2014), is undoubtedly the most liked and well-received film in his repertoire thus far. Earning one of the longest-ever standing ovations when it premiered as part of the main competition at Cannes (the first of Dolan's films to do so), *Mommy* is, arguably, the perfect embodiment of Dolan's thoughts and his artistic innovations. Dolan's cinema is often associated with “intimacy” both thematically and visually in that he's mainly concerned with “human relations and close family relationships”, and places a significant portion of his films within family homes (LaFontaine 4). It is here in *Mommy* that, thanks to the 1:1 square ratio of the film as well as the overall emotional style of the story, we find ourselves deeply rooted within the world of the characters and their relationships.

The film won the Cesar award and was Canada's submission to the Oscars, though it was not selected by the Academy. At this point, Dolan was only 25 and he had already done more and received more accolades than any of his just-starting-out peers. While he didn't have a film ready in time for the next Cannes, 2015 saw Dolan

attending as part of the festival's jury. He was the youngest member the jury had ever had at the time. A day after the festival ended, he began shooting his sixth film, *It's Only the End of the World* (2015), another adaptation. *It's Only the End of the World* has been described by Dolan as being a "transitory" film signifying the end of a chapter for him as he hopes to move on to genre films and less self-reliant projects that are "still personal, but less private" (as quoted by LaFontaine 19).

However, where before, Dolan had sometimes been met with mixed reactions, this time, the criticism was mainly unanimous in its negativity, a fact that would go on to have a great personal impact on Dolan.

Following a break from directing, Dolan returned in 2018 with *The Death and Life of John F. Donovan*, his first English-language film and the biggest budget he has worked with so far. The focus of the movie is on John F. Donovan, a celebrity destroyed by the attention given to him. Donovan's story is told through the eyes of a now-grown child actor who used to write letters to him. *Donovan* premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival instead of Cannes, both in the hopes of appealing to a broader audience, and also because, as Dolan claimed in an Instagram post, he wanted to avoid the "culture of trolling, bullying and unwarranted hatred" that had wounded him in the past. Regardless, *Donovan* did not receive positive reviews and failed to find a US distributor despite its star-studded cast.

In 2019, with his latest film, Dolan returned once again to his actor-director roots by premiering at Cannes with *Matthias and Maxime* which tells the simple story of a queer friendship. This film appears to be a culmination of all the personal motifs that initially helped him earn his current success, and yet, it too seemed to coast by almost unnoticed by fans and critics alike.

4.3. *Dolan and Criticism*

In an interview with *The New York Times*, Dolan once mentioned that he believes people dislike him and his “big mouth” and that they see him as “a narcissistic brat”; a matter that does not seem to faze Dolan as he claims he has always spoken his mind and been true to himself. In the same interview, however, he does mention that he is now “scared to disappoint people and to be criticized or mocked” which he says is a new feeling for him (Bilefsky). In another interview, he is quoted as saying that while he no longer feels insecure, he does “doubt everything” including his ideas, choices, and behaviors. The one thing he claims he doesn’t doubt is his “ability to achieve things” if he doesn’t “succumb to the fear of displeasing people - or the obsession with pleasing them” (Seymour).

Although he claims to be unaffected by criticism, he has mentioned that he has “benched” himself from acting in roles that he finds interesting in his films. In an interview with *The Guardian*, he was quoted as saying he wishes he had parts as generous as that of Anne Duval (his frequent mother character), or the main character in *Mommy*, or Antoine in *It’s Only the End of the World* but that he feels he cannot give such roles to himself as he would be called “narcissistic” (Bradshaw). It is interesting to note that *It’s Only the End of the World* was where Dolan also received some of his harshest criticism which dubbed that, as a director, he had regressed into “feeling like the most misunderstood genius who never asked to be born” (Kiang). The blow was felt and Dolan would “later claim the experience had had an effect similar to the trauma of a car accident” (Lafontaine 12)

Despite all of this, however, Dolan has not shied away from commenting on or, at times, basking in the “impish and arrogant” image that has been painted of him. In an Instagram post of a cover of *Style* magazine featuring his image he refers to his “arcane insanity and paranoid, half-assumed, dwarfed narcissism” in the caption.

Following the success of *Mommy*, when he was compared to Orson Welles who had made *Citizen Kane* at 25, Dolan replied by jokingly stating that Welles was “lazy” and a “late bloomer” (Mesley). Speaking of Jean-Luc Godard and the comparisons drawn between his film *Heartbeats* and Godard’s *Contempt* (1963), he mentioned that he has never seen it and “now that I’ve heard Godard has said [negative] things about *Mommy*, I will never see it” (McGovern). While he claims to appreciate negative feedback in that it gives him room to grow, he has also been quick to fire back at what he believes to be unfair criticism.

Perhaps the most infamous of these instances has been a particularly scathing review of *Tom at the Farm* in *The Hollywood Reporter* that called the film an “egomaniacal exercise” and stated that Dolan has “an extraordinary eye” that “spends considerable time trained on the French-Canadian writer-director himself”. The review then went on to claim that “CUT TO EXTREME CLOSEUP OF ME appears to be the predominant script note” resulting in the film becoming about “auteurial self-adulation”. The film is claimed to be difficult to take seriously as “scene after scene explores the director’s face with such swooning intoxication. Shots of Tom are held and held and then held some more”. And at last, the suggestion is made to Dolan that he spend less time “fetishizing his own image and more on building credible character dynamics and psychological complexity” (Rooney).

In an interview with George Stroumboulopoulos, Dolan addressed this review, claiming that “It’s called *Tom at the Farm*. I’m Tom. At the farm. So once we’re at the farm, I will be in front of the camera. That’s one thing we know about the movie” (Strombo). He also insisted that had he not been the director, this would not be an issue of discussion, asking whether Woody Allen is “narcissistic for having put himself in front of the camera for all those years, kissing the hottest girls in Hollywood?” (Strombo). In another interview, he later clarified that he believes there

“are as many close-ups of everybody else in the film as there are of me,” and that this review “was a review of my personality, not of my work” claiming he is interested in reviews of his films rather than a diagnosis of himself (McGovern).

Dolan has also, indirectly, addressed his critics in his films as there are instances where dialogue between characters can be seen as a means of communication between Dolan and these reviews. In a scene in *The Death and Life of John F. Donovan*, the character of Rupert, the former child actor (possibly a self-insert of Dolan’s) lashes out at the journalist interviewing him who is refusing to take him seriously, saying:

Do you feel like you and I come from different planets? [...] Why would you be fighting for truth and I for shit? [...] This is a story about intolerance, this is a story about how a business has been so scared to lose a public it claims illiterate and small-minded that it’s basically kept it illiterate and small-minded for decades. This is about us, as a society, [...] you’re putting your life in peril for truth and we’re strutting around in our first world problems (*The Death and Life of John F. Donovan*)

Shortly before the film was released, Dolan shut down his Twitter account, using a final tweet to state a desire to stay away from too many “hateful debates”.

Dolan claims he has spent ten years trying to find himself “through the criticism of others” (Barlow), could it be that for a director who found his voice by digging deep into his personality and being extremely self-aware, the last few years of scrutiny and negative feedback have had a lasting impact on that very self of which he is aware?

5. Dolan, the Actor

What primarily separates Dolan from other prominent actor-directors - besides his age - is the fact that he started both at the same time¹. With Dolan, we are faced with a young director who is, simultaneously, demanding that you accept his role on the paper, behind the camera, *and* in front of the camera. Dolan claims to prefer acting to directing as it allows him to express himself. Directing is his means of making sure he is involved with the type of films he wishes to be involved in. He has also said that going forward, he is planning to focus on acting as he finds it “more rewarding and more liberating” than directing (Barlow). In an interview with IndieWire, conducted before the making of *Matthias and Maxime*, he mentioned having “sacrificed acting for directing”, a thing he can no longer bear to do. He then went on to say that he enjoys watching actors act and “acting through them, and being inspired by them, but it’s not enough” as he has become envious and wishes to perform his ideas himself. He doesn’t see directing as “liberating” and claims that many actors want to direct “because they crave control” and separates himself from them by saying he wishes to “relinquish it” (O’Falt 2016).

In the following sections, we will analyze his films in terms of theme and character traits; studying whether the underlying theme of the film contains elements of narcissism and whether the characters themselves - occasionally seen as self-inserts of the director - exhibit traits of the disorder or not. We will also discuss the visual style, especially within the opening and character introductions, to see whether the style favors Dolan’s close-ups or screen time over those of others, to study how he portrays himself, and to understand these claims of narcissism. To compare Dolan’s depictions of himself with others, we have separated his films into

¹ While it is true that Dolan was a child actor between the ages of 4 and 11, it is important to note that there was a large gap between that and his debut feature and that he was never a celebrity child actor.

two categories: those in which Dolan acts (this chapter) and those in which he doesn't (next chapter). The films will be discussed chronologically in each chapter.

5.1. *I Killed My Mother (2009)*

Dolan himself has said that his first feature film was semi-autobiographical. It tells the story of Hubert (himself) and his mother (Chantale, played by Anne Dorval) and the difficulties they face in getting along. There are elements put into the main character of Hubert (played by Dolan) that confer with what is known about Dolan's personal life, the most obvious of which being the conflict with his mother, his time at a boarding school, and of course, his sexuality. There are also details however that add to the illusion, an example can be seen when Hubert's mother claims he was obsessed with Leonardo DiCaprio in *Titanic* and that he wrote him a fan letter. This is an actual Dolan memory, the letter was later released by Dolan (more on that later when we discuss *The Death and Life of John F. Donovan*).

Stylistically, the film is a combination of visual styles and editing tactics, often cutting away to abstract shots of statues or works of art or, in one instance, for example, even a poster of James Dean. A review called it a collection of "brilliantly achieved cinematic moments and repetitive, massively self-indulgent gestures of acting out" (Brunette).

One of the styles employed here by Dolan is a series of confessional sequences in which Hubert addresses the camera, voicing his beliefs. As previously mentioned, the confessional is a popular tool amongst modern artists and writers when discussing their lives; however, how Dolan utilizes it is different from the more prevalent method of simply recounting. Through the use of cinema as a medium, and the film within a film method, as well as the more abstract content of these videos, he can distance himself from the character and view these confessions from afar, thus increasing the viewer's ability to empathize with the character rather than banking on

interest existing simply due to Dolan himself and his life.



Image 5.1 - Extreme close-up of Dolan's eye

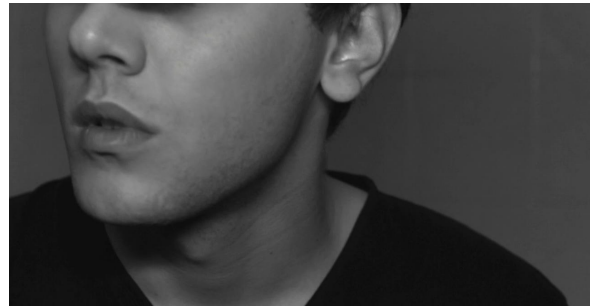


Image 5.2 - Introduction of Dolan's face

As the film begins, Dolan introduces his character bit by bit; beginning with a black and white extreme close-up of his right eye panning to his left eye (image 5.1) and then cutting to a shot of the lower half of his face (image 5.2) which, finally, pans up to reveal his full face. By splitting his image into these extreme close-ups and providing hints of information in each shot, Dolan effectively creates a sense of anticipation for his face. These black and white sequences also serve as a glimpse into the character's thoughts and emotions, especially towards his mother, and are filmed, as we later find out, as he sits in a bathtub and speaks to a video camera. These shots are, for the most part, separate from the actual events of the story and, through virtue of being black and white and breaking the fourth wall, stand outside the narrative until they converge with the diegetic story towards the end. These shots present Hubert in a favorable light, bringing us close to him and separating him from other teen characters in movies simply through how he speaks and voices his thoughts. Slightly later in the film, there is a series of close-ups on a black and white poster of James Dean (image 5.6) closely resembling the black and white sequences in the film and subconsciously tying Dolan to Dean in this visual aspect.

Outside of these black and white scenes, when the story officially begins, we are met with Hubert and his mother at the breakfast table. Hubert is, once again,

introduced via a close-up of his eyes (image 5.3); bringing the viewer in to empathize with him and to see through his eyes as he glances at his mother, the antagonist, who is also introduced through close-ups. In these shots, we see the lower half of her face as she messily eats breakfast (image 5.4) and, instead of connecting with her, we're invited to judge her as Hubert does. Hubert's introduction serves to build up mystery and empathy whereas hers evokes a feeling of disgust and annoyance on behalf of Hubert.



Image 5.3 - Extreme close-up of Dolan's eye



Image 5.4 - Extreme close-up of mother's mouth



Image 5.5 - First two-shot of the film



Image 5.6. James Dean poster in the room

It may also be worth noting that in this introduction, when we do finally see both characters in a wide two shot, Hubert is shirtless, vulnerable, accessible, and favorably lit, and she is still making a mess (image 5.5).

As mentioned, Chantale is introduced in an extremely unfavorable light with an extreme close-up of her mouth showing her messily eating an orange and a cream cheese sandwich. In the next scene which takes place in a car, she is shown applying makeup while driving. Both actions (the eating and the applying of make-up) are seen as somewhat off-putting by Hubert and the viewer alike. We are meant to

understand his frustration and to feel his disconnect in regard to his mother. Once the scene ends, with Hubert getting kicked out of the car by his mother, we are fully on his side and empathizing with his sorrows.

Throughout the film though, the scales aren't always tipped in Hubert's favor as, occasionally, Hubert's immaturity and childishness as well as the cruelty of his tirades, "coupled with Chantale's stoicism and painfully wounded facial expressions, bring us back to her corner". This doesn't stay for long as Chantale's questionable actions then "seesaws viewer sympathy" away from her and back towards Hubert. There is a back and forth between the characters, though ultimately, the focus remains on Hubert and Dolan's attempt at "punishing his mother" (LaFontaine 7) since we view Chantale and her decisions through the lens of Hubert and how it affects him. Older audiences may be put off by his "tantrums" but there is an authenticity in them that one cannot help but empathize with.

While it is true that the film focuses mostly on Hubert, it could also be said that the style of the film itself is made up of close-ups, whether they be of people or objects, abstract shots of butterflies, artwork, etc. However, there's no denying that there are many close-ups of Hubert. Based on my personal calculations, of the movie's 98 minute running time, 18 of those are spent on solo shots of Hubert. In comparison, Chantale has 11 minutes of solo screen time. Of the rest, 25 minutes are two shots that include Dolan. As the numbers indicate, the majority of the film is comprised of two shots featuring Hubert with either his mother, his boyfriend, or his teacher, emphasizing the story through his relationship with others rather than purely focusing on him in close-ups.

Thematically, self-expression and how characters choose to portray themselves is a common theme in all of Dolan's films and this one is no exception. What is especially fascinating about this film is that, at one point, Hubert picks up a

video camera and begins recording himself (image 5.7) as a meta-reference to Dolan picking up the camera and making *I Killed My Mother* about his own life. Another motif in Dolan's films is shots of characters looking at themselves in the mirror in moments of self-realization. Here, this scene occurs in the second half of the film during Hubert's time at boarding school when he is feeling even more misunderstood than before. In this bathroom scene, we see everyone leave him alone with the reflection he doesn't wish to confront as, in a wide shot, the camera tracks back, further distancing him from us (image 5.8). In a later scene, in his mum's bedroom, we see Hubert crying with his image reflected behind him. Two images of Dolan, both equally lonely and neglected. Within narcissism, mirrors are a common motif, starting from Narcissus and his reflection. Lasch describes the impact of mirrors, stating that we all live "surrounded by mirrors" and that we use them to "seek reassurance of our capacity to captivate or impress others" and to destroy all blemishes that we may find (Lasch, 92). Dolan, however, often uses a mirror to show a character's insecurity rather than a fascination with self.



Image 5.7 - Hubert shooting a confessional

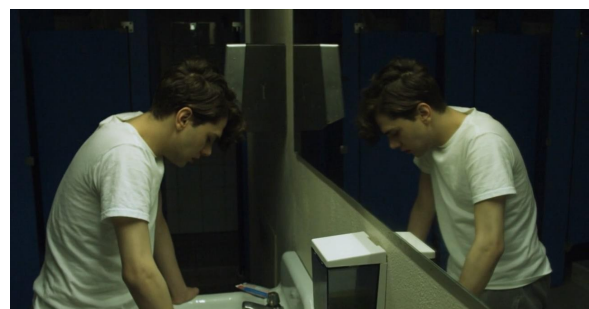


Image 5.8 - Reflections in *I Killed My Mother*

Characteristically, Hubert is a temperamental artist. He is both a skilled painter as confirmed when his boyfriend's mother comments on how impressive his art is and commissions him, and also skilled at writing and poetry, as confirmed by his teacher submitting his work to a competition on his behalf. Both of these skills are things that come naturally to Hubert as we do not see him working on them or

struggling to succeed with them. Since Hubert excels at everything he sets out to do and receives praise for it, it is fair to take this as an example of both his self-importance and, when viewed as an extension of Dolan, as a symbol of his need for admiration.

Other narcissistic traits found in Hubert are that he finds himself different from others his age and refers to his classmates as “morons” as they “can only talk about hockey and sex and [...] get 35 percent on their French dictation”, displaying a sense of arrogance towards others. This is further enhanced when he claims that his mother says he is special and “particular” and immediately brushes it off by adding that “when people say “particular”, they lack the intelligence to understand “difference”. Or to appreciate it. Or to have the guts to admit they hate it”.

The mere fact that he does separate himself from others and views himself as special is of course another trait of narcissism in that he feels he is so unique that he simply cannot empathize with or be understood by others. Hubert also appears to be entitled, expecting special treatment from his mother, sometimes going so far as to exploit her and her feelings toward him to get his demands met. He is then quick to anger when denied what he wants. Lastly, though this is not as strong as the other emotions depicted, he also appears to be envious of his boyfriend for having a more understanding mother. It seems that of the main nine traits of narcissism, varying degrees of all nine (as mentioned in chapter two) can be seen in Hubert. While on paper Hubert appears to have all the tell-tale signs of a narcissist, it is worth noting that he is also a troubled teenager and, at least in part, a lot of these traits also coincide with that aspect of his character.

Overall, this may be among Dolan’s most narcissistic films due to the reasons mentioned above and the simple inherent narcissism of a nineteen-year-old with no prior experience writing, directing, and starring in a movie about his own life. This is

especially the case when we consider that Hubert, who displays many, if not all, of the traits of narcissism, is based on Dolan himself.

5.2. *Heartbeats* (2010)

Whereas the previous film was about the rocky relationship between a mother and a son, with one point of conflict being the son's sexuality, or rather his hiding it, this film is entirely focused on the concept of relationships and sexuality. *Heartbeats* takes a step away from the autobiographical and offers us a love triangle between Dolan's character Francis, his best friend Marie, and the conflict between them as they both vie for the attention of the object of both of their attractions: Nico.

The film has an overall visual style similar to that of *I Killed My Mother* and is, in parts, somewhat reminiscent of music video montages. The story of the love triangle is intercut with discussions of romantic experiences and faux pas offered by non-narrative characters speaking directly to the camera, almost as if in a documentary slightly detached from the story. The film opens with a three-minute documentary-esque sequence in this manner before we delve into the main story.

Stylistically, *Heartbeats* starts in the same vein as *I Killed My Mother* with a close-up of someone speaking; though this time, it is not Dolan that begins the film but rather a series of seemingly unrelated talking heads. Within the narrative, we are first introduced to Nico, the center of the love triangle, who is being observed by the other two leads. The multiple shot opening shows him to be the clear center of attention as though a spotlight is placed upon him (image 5.9).

As we switch to the reverse to see who the observer of these shots is, we see Marie looking at Nico (image 5.10). Slowly, we come to realize someone else is standing behind her completely obstructed, stealing a glance at Nico. Here is when we finally catch a glimpse of Francis peeking out from behind Marie, a figure in the

shadows in the background. The next two shots of him continue to show only the back of his head (image 5.11). Though the introduction focuses on flattering close-ups of Nico, it is Francis that is shrouded in mystery, hidden from us, and thus our main point of interest as we wish to see his face.



Image 5.9 - Nico's introduction



Image 5.10 - Marie's introduction



Image 5.11 - Francis' introduction



Image 5.12 Francis introduction

While the story is presented as a triangle with two main leads and a love interest whom they both try to win over, the introduction paints a different picture as we do not see Dolan's face at all in this first sequence. This could, of course, be symbolic of Marie standing in his way as he attempts to win Nico's affection but it also makes the audience anticipate this reveal; thus, it makes *him* the most interesting character and turns it from an equal-parts love triangle into a single person's journey, placing us, as the audience, on Francis' side.

Once the opening sequence ends, Francis is the first of the three main characters shown alone and is, as a result, again emphasized in his importance. Here too, when we do finally see him clearly, he is shirtless (image 5.12), just like Dolan's introduction in his first film.

Overall, the character we follow and relate to most is mainly Francis as he is shown in the most favorable light. We feel for his pining and see Marie as his competition, the person trying too hard to usurp his claim to the love interest; she even goes so far as to backtalk him when he is not there. When given the chance, Francis does not do the same; instead, he, for example, makes way for her and Nico to go to the cinema alone together. As the film moves along, we are made to relate to Francis and feel for him and the rejection he eventually faces at the hands of something he has no control over: Nico's sexuality. On the other hand, we are made to pity Marie in regards to her antics and her rejection as a direct result of who she is.



Image 5.13 - group shots favoring Francis



Image 5.14 - James Dean used as Francis' hair inspiration

Stylistically, as this is a film about a group and how its dynamics shift due to the members competing for love, the majority of the shots are group shots showing all three characters squeezed in together. Of these shots, Francis is often always sitting in the middle (image 5.13) or otherwise singled out as the main point of focus. Out of these group shots, the film also employs very stylistic close-ups for each character as an artistic expression of the disconnect between them. Of the three main roles, it is interesting to note that despite feeling like the lead character, Francis actually doesn't have the most solo screen time. Of the film's 98 minute running time, 25 of those are solo shots of Marie and 22 are of Francis. Of the remainder, 9 minutes are given to Nico alone which is interesting when compared to the fact that the non-narrative interview segments take up 15 minutes. Overall, as evident, Nico is

only a main character in regards to his being part of the group and Francis and Marie share the majority of screen time with Marie slightly taking the lead.

Heartbeats is essentially a film about beauty and vanity. Throughout the film, the framing of Nico as “the obscure object of desire” coupled with the similarities in casting brings to mind “the beautiful boy in Visconti’s *Death in Venice* (1971)” (Pidduck 58). While the film is filled with expressions of beauty aimed at Nico, Francis also receives his fair share of compliments, mainly from Nico’s mother (played by Anne Dorval, the mother in *I Killed My Mother*) calling him “a twinkie”, “a cutie”, and “a heartbreaker”. To further amplify the topic of beauty, the characters spend a lot of time shopping for expensive clothes and standing in front of mirrors, with multiple montage sequences showing them trying to look good or even getting makeovers to seduce Nico.

The film also briefly touches upon the concept of celebrities as sex symbols when a character asks Marie if she ever thinks of movie stars during sex; dropping the names of Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, and James Dean. Another point of reference to the visual unattainability of the celebrity comes from Dolan styling himself as James Dean (image 5.14) while Marie styles herself as Audrey Hepburn upon hearing of Nico’s love for the actress. Both Marie and Francis are “out of place in their own time and space” and “exist in a bubble of temporal suspension, dominated by subjective logics of over-fantasized but unrequited romance”. A great example of this is in the scene where the characters are looking at Nico while he dances. Francis’s point of view keeps flashing to Jean Cocteau’s homoerotic drawings and Marie’s flashes to Michelangelo’s David both serving to “project their romance into the realm of the fantasmatic” and further signify their individual ideals of beauty as well as the disconnect between them, Nico, and the world they live in (Massimi 41).

As a result of the focus on one's image and as a recurring motif of Dolan's, reflection shots are a significant part of this film as well. However, there is a difference between these reflection shots. Marie's reflections are often tied to her getting ready, applying makeup, and emphasizing her old-fashioned, classic style of dressing (image 5.15). She's also often shown to favor elegance over comfort (e.g., wearing heels for a walk in the woods). Francis', on the other hand, are often depictions of him emoting (image 5.16) as he opts for a more effortless look, maybe applying cologne. The main feature of Francis' scenes is a tally he keeps next to the mirror which he crosses off with each rejection. The presence of these marks and their proximity to his image shows how he views these scenes as inner reflections and increases our empathy for Francis.



Image 5.15 - Marie's reflection



Image 5.16 - Francis' reflection

At its core, *Heartbeats* is also a film about rejection, this is Dolan stepping away from his image as a heartthrob and main character, talking more about his insecurities. In the beginning, we see marks on the bathroom wall and, in the end, we come to understand that these are marks to keep a tab of every time Francis is rejected. Ultimately, however, it is not Francis that gets rejected, it is his sexuality. "How could you think I was gay?" Nico says upon hearing Francis' confession. The rejection does not lie in anything Francis has control over.

Of the character traits of a narcissist, Francis and Marie are both extremely preoccupied with fantasies of ideal love and, through their viewing of Nico as special and their need to be admired and loved by him, coupled with their envy of the

attention the other receives from him, may exhibit hints of other traits as well. However, overall, the majority of these traits occur in relation to Nico, and are not necessarily observed in any other aspect of their lives; therefore, we cannot accurately determine whether they are narcissistic but rather that they are infatuated. As for Nico, in that first introduction, Marie views Nico as a narcissist and refers to him as “that confident poser”. Since we see him through their affectionate eyes and never get a glimpse into who he is on his own, he appears to be flawless, winning them both over with his “superficial charms” (Rees-Roberts 212). It is only towards the end and in his manner of rejecting both characters that we get a hint of something more sinister coming from him and view traits of self-importance and grandiosity. Of the three characters, it appears that Nico is the one exhibiting the most signs of narcissism. That being said, it is not valid to deduct that the film is a narcissistic one or one in praise of narcissism as he is shown to be, ultimately, the antagonist of the story. It would be possible, however, to offer a reading of the film as a critique of narcissism and the narcissist exploiting others.

5.3. *Tom at the Farm (2013)*

In his first adaptation, Dolan tried his hand at a psychological thriller instead of his usual social drama. Dolan based *Tom at the Farm* on a play with the same name, giving himself the titular role. *Tom at the Farm* tells the story of Tom who, after the death of his boyfriend, goes to attend his funeral not knowing that the boyfriend’s family was unaware of his sexuality. Once there, he is unable to leave and is, in essence, kept captive by the boyfriend’s somewhat sadistic brother.

The story essentially deals with the topic of homophobia and self-loathing. At multiple times during the film, Tom claims that he is “worthless” and deserving of the hardship that befalls him. The ever-present theme of a mother and son conflict is also

available by proxy through the relationship that Tom's deceased boyfriend and his brother seem to have with their mother and, as a result of his stay on the farm, the tense relationship Tom also builds with her. A relationship that appears to be the root of all of their problems.



Image 5.17 - Close-up of a cigarette



Image 5.18 - Tom's face covered by hair



Image 5.19 - Tom from behind



Image 5.20 - Tom through the car window

As in the previous films, the main character here is also introduced through extreme close-ups. We first see Tom via his cigarette in a close-up of his hands (image 5.17) which is then followed by the back of his head as he is driving. It is not much but it is enough for us to notice that Dolan's recognizable hair is now shockingly blonde. Next, we see Tom's side profile where the hair obscures much of his face (image 5.18) followed by an extreme close-up of his eyes behind glasses while he drives. In one instance, we see Tom leaving the car, discarding a wallet (a symbol of his identity and past) all the while managing to keep his face hidden with his back to the camera (image 5.19), depriving us of a proper close-up of him. It isn't until much later, when Tom arrives at his destination that we finally see him in a frontal close-up through the car window (image 5.20). This act of seeing Tom through

something, somehow veiled and inaccessible, with the audience kept at a distance, is a motif that is continued throughout the film. There are multiple shots of Tom's face where he is obscured by something or viewed through something, whether it be a net, his hair, a glass door (image 5.21), or a shower curtain (image 5.22). This type of shot keeps the character at a distance despite our proximity and invites the viewer to imagine and fantasize about his image within this stylized close-up.



Image 5.21 - Tom through the glass



Image 5.22 - Tom behind the shower curtain

It is also worth noting that not only is Tom the only character in the film for the first 11 minutes but that even after the arrival of the second character (the boyfriend's ominous mother) he is still the only person who has close-ups until the thirteenth minute. However, it is also true that the opening shots used contain as many sweeping wide shots of the landscape and the house as they do close-ups of Tom and one can argue that the overall visual style of the film is a combination of wide shots and extreme close-ups. Tom's introduction was done through close-ups to add to his mystery and the mother's was done through wide shots to show her as integral to the surroundings.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, *Tom at the Farm* was greatly criticized for having too many extreme close-ups of the director with the reviewer claiming that "scene after scene explores the director's face" and that "Shots of Tom are held and held and then held some more" (Rooney). Rather than viewing it as narcissistic, the point can be made that close-ups are simply the style of the film. On the other hand,

one may argue that the style of the film was indeed chosen by the director who also chose to give himself the titular role. Dolan also chose to give his main character a solo screen time of 33 minutes within the film's 103 minute running time. In comparison, Francis has 10 minutes of solo screen time. With over 30% of the film taken up by Tom alone, it is understandable where the criticism lies. However, such criticism of this film being narcissistic simply for featuring too many close-ups of Tom may be unjust as the film takes place in a secluded land with minimal characters and these shots are meant to convey Tom's loneliness and fear of stepping into an unknown world. It stands to reason that a psychological thriller will try to bring us close and keep us within the headspace of the character. The proximity to his face coupled with the broad nothingness of the wide shots helps create the sense of claustrophobia the film requires. There are also a great many wide shots signifying the emptiness and vastness of the house and creating an eerie atmosphere as we rarely see the main three characters in a close two-shot or three-shot, instead always view them in an extreme wide shot or one by one. Whatever close-ups there exist are used diligently to showcase their weirdness and each character's isolation.

Tom at the Farm appears to be the only Dolan film to not have *any* scenes of him (or any other character) looking at his reflection. There's only one scene in which a mirror is even present and that is in a threatening confrontation between Tom and the antagonist (the boyfriend's brother) which takes place in a public bathroom. This omission seems almost deliberate for a filmmaker that often utilizes this type of shot and it may be understood to imply the disconnect Tom feels with who he is and how he is viewed. *Tom at the Farm* is a film in which the main character loses touch with himself and his identity and is manipulated and bullied into becoming someone else. After a certain point in the film, he even speaks less, allowing others to speak instead of him as he loses bits and pieces of who he is, first his belongings (wallet, car, etc.)

and then his words. This insincerity regarding who you are is also apparent in the overarching backbone of the story of the now-deceased boyfriend who was never able to come out to his family and had to create a whole fake persona in their eyes.

Characteristically speaking, there are very few elements of narcissism visible in Tom. The main instance would be when, in the one flashback scene of the film, Tom remembers singing with his boyfriend at a karaoke bar, it is himself and his own image that he remembers, and not the boyfriend. On its own, however, this does not signify an obsession with the self in Tom's case, it may be a yearning for the freedom and happiness he felt in that moment or it may even denote an avoidance of remembering the boyfriend. Outside of this instance, Tom does not exhibit any other narcissistic traits and rather seems more burdened with masochism and the belief that he deserves to be mistreated.

If there is a narcissistic character, it would be that of the brother Francis who lacks empathy toward Tom as he inflicts pain and trauma upon him. Francis also shows signs of arrogance and entitlement, considering himself better than Tom and the situation he is in. Considering the lack of warmth depicted in the character of the mother, it is fair to assume that, as a child, Francis had the required neglect needed to develop narcissism. From what is known of the now-deceased boyfriend and the fact that, as it is revealed late in the film, he was lying to and manipulating Tom, we may also be able to determine that he may have had elements of narcissism as well, owing to the same upbringing as Francis. Here again, as in *Heartbeats*, it is the antagonist who shows narcissistic traits and, as a result, makes life difficult for the others around them. Though this depiction of narcissism is considerably more violent and physical than the confidence and shallowness depicted by Nico in *Heartbeats*.

Lastly, this is the first of Dolan's films to offer a less than aesthetically beautiful image of its characters; even the so-called love-interest/antagonist in the film is more

frightening than appealing. There is also something to be said about the drastic visual change Dolan goes through in *Tom at the Farm* and in his next film, *Matthias and Maxime*, each time taking another step away from how he looks in real life and how he initially presented himself despite the film/story not necessarily seeming to require those changes. It appears as though he's trying to distract and divert attention away from his looks and to prove himself as an actor. However, due to the extreme nature of the change, he is drawing more attention to his image and having his alterations become, at times, the sole focus of the discussion surrounding the film.

5.4. *Matthias and Maxime (2019)*

Dolan's most recent film and the last in which he acted and directed before taking a self-proclaimed break, tells the story of two childhood friends, Matthias and Maxime (Dolan) as their relationship is changed by a kiss. The film begins with a dedication to Dolan's friends and seems to be a much more personalized film than even his initial semi-autobiographical debut. In his most recent film, Dolan tries to step away entirely from his looks, making himself considerably different by choosing to give his character a visible birthmark, covering half of his face.

This is a film about friendship and acceptance. Dolan draws a parallel between his character's visual imperfections and his own inner ones saying he also has a "mark that's bleeding, a sort of wound. It's about my insecurities or my fears, which my friends in the past years have made me forget just by their presence" (Barlow). While, visually, the character of Maxime is different from the typical Dolan character, thematically, he is going through the same kind of struggles with his mother and his aim in life as the previous characters discussed. The main difference is that there is no longer a conflict with sexuality within Maxime as it is Matthias, the love interest, who is the one having a crisis in this regard.

Matthias and Maxime has a much simpler visual style as compared to Dolan's previous work and this is best shown through the introduction. The movie begins with the two of the titular characters running on a treadmill at the gym. In the first shot, both are introduced through their feet on the treadmill and then, we see Maxime's face (the ever-mysterious Dolan introduction) blurry in the foreground with an in-focus Matthias in the background (image 5.23). When we go to the reverse of this shot, we see the right side of Maxime's face in focus and shift our attention to the birthmark covering it (image 5.24).

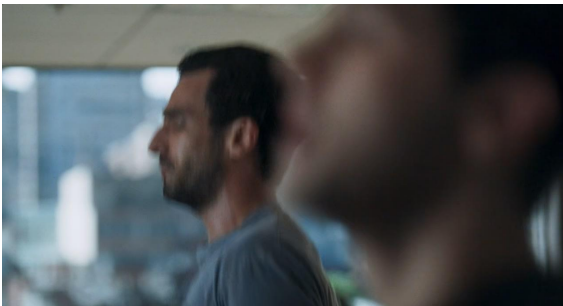


Image 5.23 - Matthias' introduction

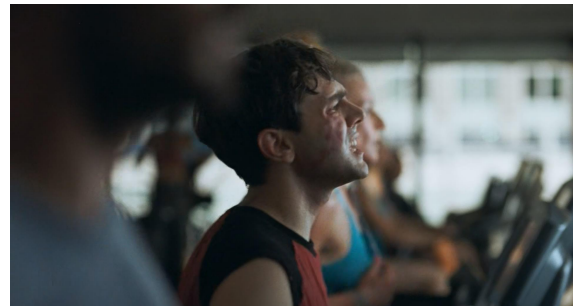


Image 5.24 - Maxime's introduction

In the next sequence, in a shot reminiscent of the opening of *Tom at the Farm* (images 5.17-20), we see Dolan's hand holding a cigarette (image 5.25) and then cut to a wide shot of the same scene in which we observe him through a cafe filled with people and through traffic (image 5.26). As always, we are constantly made to feel like we desperately want to see him, cross these barriers, and be "introduced" to him. The official introduction in this film, as well as the majority of all shots featuring Dolan, focuses on the birthmark and favors his right side (image 5.27), drawing attention to the artist's expression of self, in which he distances himself from the image he is known for. As mentioned, similar to *Tom at the Farm*, *Matthias and Maxime*, changes Dolan's image.



Image 5.25 - holding a cigarette



Image 5.26 - viewed through a cafe



Image 5.27 - close up of Maxime



Image 5.28 - the birthmark visible in all shots

Throughout the film, Maxime's shots are almost always pointed at this side of his face; we rarely ever see him frontally (image 5.28). He *is* the birthmark, a character hiding behind this "irregularity" of his face. Though the birthmark does not play a major role in the story of the film, it does in how Dolan, fresh off the comments regarding his narcissism, chooses to depict himself in his film. It is not just in how he looks, it is his posture, how he stands, how he acts and portrays his character, he is slumped, made to look smaller, even "frumpy" at times. In clear contrast to the young actor who was often shown in a favorable light, he is now stripping his image of all that makes him who he is, choosing to direct our attention to the acting. On the other hand, his love interest, Matthias, is successful and handsome. The gaze of the lens is aimed fully at him as he is constantly observed.

Within this film, in which the inciting incident is brought upon by the filming of a student film (more on that later), frames and the act of viewing characters through frames is a recurring visual motif. We often see characters through screens and windows, made to feel smaller within the larger picture, effectively distancing the

audience and drawing attention to the frame within the frame and the film being watched (image 5.29). Even the intimate scene between the two lead characters is initially viewed through a plastic-covered window (image 5.30). It is interesting to note the difference in style between the detached yet personal visuals here and the overly stylistic ones in *I Killed My Mother*.



Image 5.29 - a frame within the frame



Image 5.30 - intimacy through a frame

As always, mirrors and a person's image, or rather the act of destroying it, play a crucial role in this film as well. This concept of changing or destroying oneself is emphasized in this film's two main mirror scenes. In a climactic scene, after a heated argument with his mother, Maxime stares into the mirror with tears in his eyes and then punches it, effectively shattering his image (image 5.31). It is one of the first times we very clearly see his face in its entirety, in a proper frontal close-up right before he looks away. He punches and breaks himself quickly, unable to face who he is. In another scene, a drunk Maxime, having just been kissed and rejected by Matthias, throws up in a club bathroom and stares at his image, covering the birthmark and, in a split-second fantasy, seeing his image reflected without it (image 5.32), expressing the character's wish to look different, to be someone else and to step away from what he views to be his limitation. And yet, in the end, it is this character, flaws and all, that manages to "score" the handsome main love interest. It is in this film, finally, that Dolan's character gets what and who he wants and maybe, just maybe, lives happily ever after.



Image 5.31 - shattering the reflection



Image 5.32 - changing the reflection

Lastly, the presence of a filmmaking student whom Matthias says “will annoy the fuck out of us with that [film she’s making for school]” is a fascinating choice. Similar to *I Killed My Mother* and the use of the diegetic video camera, a camera is also used here when the filmmaking student asks Matthias and Maxime to play a role (and kiss) in her film. Here, Dolan is no longer portraying the role of the self-insert filmmaker, sitting in a tub recording confessionals as he has instead delegated that character to someone else; specifically to an annoying young character who is shown to be looked down on as someone extremely frustrating who talks with an anglicized accent and overindulges in the use of the word “like” in her speech. She comes across as narcissistic and pretentious. One may interpret this as being Dolan’s view of himself at that age as there are some visual similarities apparent between what we see of the style of the short film the young director makes and the style of *I Killed My Mother*. It is said that her short film is about the question of “who am I?” but then when it is shown it doesn’t appear to be anything but random shots. Regardless, within the film, it is highly praised and has the other characters acting the role of critics by favorably over-analyzing the colors and shots. In regards to the question of narcissistic characters within this film, one must only look at this aspiring filmmaker with her grandiose sense of self-importance and need for admiration. Is this character a self-insert of how Dolan viewed himself at that age or how he feels he is or was viewed by others?

6. Dolan, the Director

In the previous chapter, we focused on Dolan's depiction of himself, the characters he plays, and the characters that act alongside him. To fully understand how to interpret those depictions, we must also see how he treats the leads in films where he doesn't act to offer a basis for comparison. For this thesis, the main focus will be on character introductions as well as the underlying themes used in these films. We will also provide a brief overview in discussing Dolan's reason for not acting in these films, the reviews he has received, and how it all connects to the theme of narcissism.

6.1. *Laurence Anyways* (2012)

Laurence Anyways, Dolan's third feature film (and the first in which he didn't act), tells the story of a transgender character and his romantic relationship with his girlfriend Fred through the years. Dolan has mentioned the reason he didn't act in this film was that "there was simply no role" for him here; however, he has also admitted that he initially wrote the movie with himself in mind for the main actor but then decided to change this to be able to cast Fred's actress (Suzanne Clément, a staple of Dolan's films) as otherwise "the age gap would've been a bit exaggerated, maybe even excessive". Nevertheless, he viewed it as an opportunity to focus on directing and to act alongside his actors behind the camera (Tatarska).

Despite the rumors circulating at the time, the film was not accepted as part of the main competition at Cannes. It was, however, screened in the *Un Certain Regard* section and was awarded the *Queer Palm*; an award Dolan refused to accept, claiming that "the very idea that such ghettoizing awards exist is disgusting" (as quoted by Lafontaine 12). Dolan has been very vocal about his disappointment

regarding *Laurence* not being in the main competition, saying that “because the film is an ambitious work; whether people hate it or love it, it feels like it could be competing in something, even if it’s a piece of shit” (Schmidlin). At the time, though Dolan’s outburst raised a few eyebrows, it was ultimately deemed in line with the young director’s self-aware confidence.

Dolan had spent about four years on this screenplay, claiming his interest in it was due to his “wanting to tell the story of a great love unfolding over a decade in which one partner assumes a different gender identity”. Over the time span of the film, the characters deal with their own prejudices as well as “the look of others which others us” (LaFontaine 11). Dolan’s main theme here is an exploration of “how society looks at people” and so, as a mode of achieving this, he chose to have the characters “look exactly into the objective” to make eye contact with the viewer. He also mentions how the film begins with “a series of looks” as Laurence walks down the street (Tatarska).

In regards to the character introduction, the film begins with shots of an apartment, curtains blowing in the wind, an empty bed, and a door closing. All serve to create an atmosphere. After these few empty shots, we see our main character, Laurence, as a silhouette walking through the apartment (image 6.1). We then step outside, into the world beyond the apartment in what appears to be a fantasy-esque sequence where the first close-up we see is a look into the camera by someone (who we assume is) observing Laurence walking down the street. This look into the camera is repeated by various other figures as well (image 6.2) and, as a result, we build the mystery of the main character in a way not only associated with their image but with their surroundings and the reactions they provoke.



Image 6.1 - Silhouette in the apartment



Image 6.2 - reacting to Laurence



Image 6.3 - moments before cutting away



Image 6.4 - Silhouette in the flashback

Much like Dolan's introductions of himself, the style here is used to build anticipation for the reveal of the main character by creating a mystery. Even more so than any of his own characters, here we see Dolan tease Laurence's reveal as we first see him emerging through a fog, the whole neighborhood staring, and then we follow him from behind, face just out of reach. Finally, as Laurence begins slowly turning towards the camera, Dolan cuts away a split second before the big reveal, keeping us waiting for a glimpse of Laurence (image 6.3). We never see Laurence's face in this opening, instead, we are thrown into the flashback and the story begins with another silhouette of Laurence but this time, as a man (image 6.4).

Often, when introducing himself, Dolan reveals his image bit by bit, but when introducing Laurence, he opts for the effect the character has on others. That is not to say that there's no sense of build up here, quite the contrary. Of all the characters

introduced, Laurence is probably the one with the most heightened sense of anticipation. However, as he achieves this by not showing his face at all (as opposed to showing bits as he does with his own characters) he maintains the sense of mystery but prevents us from connecting with Laurence, making us another one of the spectators within the film, observing him from afar, lacking access to Laurence and his point of view.

Stylistically, the film is quite similar to Dolan's first two films in that it features many music video montages and pop culture references with a constantly intercutting editing style. The film is highly stylized within the art-house tradition and, as a result, some critics have taken to viewing this lack of "realist social dynamics as a form of narcissistic elitism" as it differs drastically from other films focusing on this topic and comes across as a vehicle for the director's style rather than the story. However, it may be more in line with the director's intention to assume that the main difference is purely in his source of inspiration. Dolan has drawn his visual style from the aesthetics of fashion photography (which he claims was a source of inspiration for this film) and the pop culture that is so influential to millennial filmmakers and so, it seems best to view it as him adapting this story to his voice and his generation rather than to attribute it to him completely disregarding the social realist form as a result of his need for "total control or individual narcissism" (Rees-Roberts 219). Perhaps the most potentially narcissistic element here is the inherent self-confidence required to tackle such an epic tale of a love story spanning decades at such a young age.

6.2. *Mommy* (2014)

Made after *Tom at the Farm* and the criticism he faced, then-25-year-old Dolan bounced back from those reviews and returned with *Mommy*, his most commercially and critically successful film. *Mommy* competed as part of the main competition and

won the Jury Prize at Cannes. The award was shared by both Dolan, the festival's youngest filmmaker, and Jean-Luc Godard (for *Goodbye to Language* (2014)), the festival's oldest, in an act that some viewed as a passing of "the torch from the innovator of the older to the new generation" (LaFontaine 17).

With its unconventional 1:1 ratio reminiscent of album covers, and its usage of millennial hits such as *Wonderwall* by Oasis and *Born to Die* by Lana Del Rey, *Mommy* manages to wrap up all that is needed to be quintessentially millennial and captures the essence of the generation of which Dolan is the pioneer filmmaker. Speaking of the aspect ratio, Dolan has brushed off claims that it is "pretentious" saying he found it a "more humble and fitting format" for entering the lives of the characters; he also denied claims of it being inspired by Instagram and said, if anything, it was album covers he had on his mind as those are the images he finds "imprinted in our imaginations over time" (O'Falt 2015).

Subject-wise, there are quite a few similarities between *Mommy* and *I Killed My Mother*. Both films feature a tumultuous mother/son relationship which results in the son being sent off to boarding school. Both have Anne Dorval playing the mother and both also feature a second main female character (played by Suzanne Clément) whose relationship with the leads greatly impacts them; in *I Killed My Mother* this role is given to the teacher who recognizes Hubert's talent and here it is the neighbor who is tutoring Steve. However, where *I Killed My Mother* basked in Hubert's feelings and invited you to relate to his angst as the queer teen misunderstood by his mother, *Mommy* tries to show the mother's side of the story of having to deal with a violent son whom she is unable to get through to. *Mommy* is a more story-focused depiction of this conflict coming from a director who has matured and taken a step away from telling just his own story and is willing to see his life from another's point of view.

That can be seen in the difference between the characters' introductions. In *I Killed My Mother*, Hubert was introduced as someone for us to relate to but here, the main character is introduced as a menace and we are meant to relate more with the mother and to understand her struggles in trying to control his wild side. Where Hubert invites you to see with his eyes and to understand his thoughts, *Mommy* begins with a peaceful environment that is then corrupted when Steve (the main character) enters, making the audience view him through his role in society.

Here, as in *Laurence Anyways*, we were introduced to the characters via clothes (image 6.5) and the setting instead of personal close-ups of their face. And much like his own main characters, here too, the sense of building a mystery persists as we see the mother in various blurry shots (image 6.6) and slowly pan up her jeans.



Image 6.5 - Steve's introduction through clothing



Image 6.6 - Diane's blurry introduction

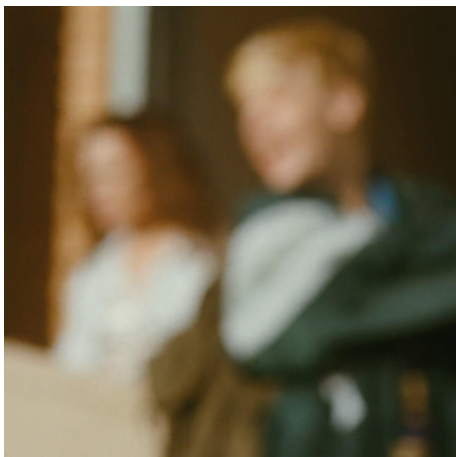


Image 6.7 - Steve's blurry introduction

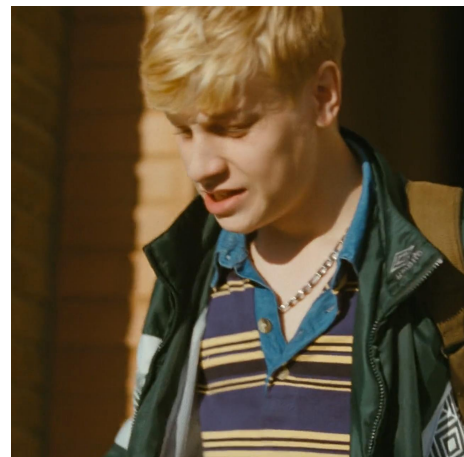


Image 6.8 - Steve's official close-up

In both *Mommy* and *Laurence Anyways*, these opening sequences are much more abstract and feel separate from the narrative structure of the film as compared to the four films Dolan acts in (not considering the documentary-style shots of *Heartbeats*). The introductory shots here seem much more atmospheric (image 28), setting a mood for the film, as compared with the introductions of the other group. It can be seen as more of an introduction to the film and the story, rather than the one character we are meant to empathize with.

A few minutes into *Mommy*, following the mother's introduction, a car crash, and an initial discussion, the main male character, Steve, is finally introduced in a way that creates suspense. We hear his mother and the school principal first speaking of him and the trouble he has caused, then we hear his voice through a radio, cursing. Even later, we hear him still talking, cursing, just off-screen, while we walk with his mother, and finally, as we exit the school, we see him emerge in a blurry shot (image 6.7) that comes into focus as he steps into his first close-up (image 6.8).

Mommy is perhaps the only film in which Dolan chooses to have the main point of view be directly opposite to who he is and the types of characters he sees himself in. Though the topic is greatly similar to that of Dolan's semi-autobiographical debut, what's captivating here is the director's ability to take inspiration from his own life but to be able to view it at a distance thus moving on from the confessional style that he had employed early on and embracing story-telling rather than recounting events. By having Steve be a violent exaggerated version of Hubert, Dolan can complete the journey he set out to do as he began telling his stories 5 years earlier. Having achieved the maturity and ability required to see the flaws in his self-insert characters, it seems understandable that the next two films Dolan released, in which he once again focused on the plight of self-pity, seemed to critics as a regression

6.3. *It's Only the End of the World* (2016)

Based on a play, *It's Only the End of the World*, is Dolan's second adaptation and his sixth feature film, continuing his longest break from acting in his own films. Set in France and stepping away from Dolan's Canadian roots, this film tells the story of Louis (played by the late Gaspard Ulliel), a dying man going home to inform his estranged family of his condition.

It's Only the End of the World has certain similarities to *Tom at the Farm*. Both have similar settings (a person visiting family after a long time versus a person meeting a dead spouse's family for the first time), both feature death and homophobia as a prominent part of the story, and both have similar visual styles composed of a mix of extreme close-up and wide shots creating a sense of claustrophobia.

Even the character introductions are similar, where Tom is in a car, Louis is on a plane. We see Louis introduced slowly, with his ear coming into focus, seen through a crack in the darkness in a wide shot (image 6.9). From there we move to the back of his head and, again, see his ear in a close-up (image 6.10). When we do see the character, it is dark, and his face is mainly covered by his cap. His voice-over then begins, providing us with some story information and leading us to his first proper close-up, just as the voice says he is going to announce his death to his family. Though the anticipation is short-lived and quick, as we've seen, this type of gradual character introduction, of the build-up to the reveal of the face, is as much a staple of Dolan's filmmaking as the mother/son conflict at the core of the film.

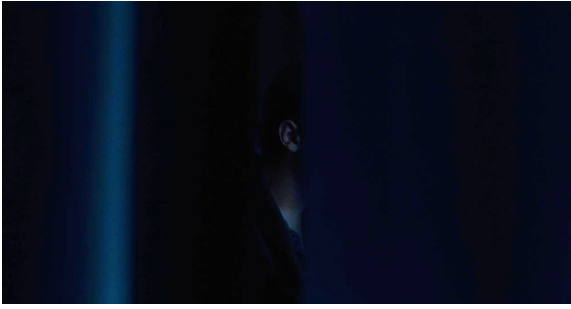


Image 6.9 - Louis' ear in a wide shot



Image 6.10 - Louis from behind

From there, we follow Louis on his car ride from the airport, showing the scenery as it is intercut to the beats of a pop song with shots of food being prepared. This helps, once again, to build up anticipation for the characters through the objects and the atmosphere around them. When Louis arrives at the house in minute 5 of the movie, we are fully aware of the importance of this visit for him (through the voice-over) and members of his family (through their extensive preparations). Character-wise, all of the family members have, more or less, been dubbed to be narcissistic and self-absorbed by viewers and critics of the film. This is mainly due to their demonstrations of arrogance, entitlement, and exploitativeness all around. Some critics claim Louis to be the most narcissistic of all, saying that the trip itself (returning home to tell his estranged family he is dying) is a “big ego trip” as it confirms that despite his estrangement, Louis has remained very important to all of these people (Kiang). Though this may be true, it is also worth noting that none of the characters in the movie are shown in a particularly favorable light.

Due to the physical similarities between Louis and the characters Dolan often portrays, the question remains: why did Dolan choose to not act in this film, and was it a direct result of being dubbed a narcissist? In an interview, he once claimed he would love to give himself such roles but refrains from doing so as he would be called “narcissistic” which he believes is people’s “favorite word” for him (Bradshaw). Despite Dolan’s decision to not act here, the film was still faced with many outcries of

narcissism. One reviewer called the film a “disaster” that is “overcome with pretension” and proves that Dolan has “trouble seeing past his own nose” (Lawson). Another reviewer referred to the story as the “fairly prevalent fantasy among petulant teenagers to avenge themselves on their families, who are *stupid* and *mean* and don’t understand *anything*, by imagining just how sad and sorry everyone would be if it turned out they were dying” and mentioned that despite the film being an adaptation, the “self-pitying” and “martyred self-involvement” aspect of the film simply had to come from Dolan; thus reinforcing “the very negative impressions he may have designed it to address” (Kiang). Dolan angrily addressed this particular review in an interview, stating “This is not journalism. It’s gossip. It’s pretending to be a sophisticated analysis, but really it’s cheap psychology”, going on to say he’s not sure if he wants to go on being a director after this (and other such reviews) ending up in a “spiral of hatred” for a film he claims he thought was his best film (Zeitchik).

The majority of these reviews bring up Dolan’s age and how, what was once excusable as an up-and-coming 20-year-old director is no longer something that they deem appropriate in an experienced 30-year-old. It seems that, for them, the problem lies in the expected maturity that comes with age and experience within the film world; however, it could also be that what we are witnessing here is the backfiring of Dolan’s attempt at distancing himself from himself. The more he delves out of his typical type of story, the more he is accused of telling the same thing.

6.4. *The Death and Life of John F. Donovan (2018)*

Finally, in *The Death and Life of John F. Donovan*, Dolan’s only English-speaking film thus far and the latest in which he hasn’t acted, we’re faced with the story of a celebrity whose life is destroyed by the media and the child actor who befriended him by writing fan letters. The film serves as a self-aware depiction of

fame and the expectations that come along with it. Dolan himself was a child actor keen on writing fan letters to actors he admired and when the film premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival, he presented it by reading a letter he had written at the age of eight to Leonardo DiCaprio. In the letter, he introduces himself as an actor who has played in commercials and tells DiCaprio that he is looking forward to playing in one of his movies should he ever “need a young boy in the cast” (@TIFF_Net 2018). DiCaprio, it seems, never replied.

The two main characters, John F. Donovan, the celebrity, and Rupert, the child actor, depict the two halves of a self-insert character, who Dolan used to be before he achieved fame, and who he is at the moment under media surveillance. John is constantly scrutinized by the public over who he is and unable to cope with the media’s judgment and Rupert grows up to be a celebrity-wannabe who idolized John but never made it himself and is now able to speak his mind about the situation at hand. There is even a scene in which Dolan, speaking through a grown-up Rupert, addresses an interviewer and attacks the journalists who are quick to judge the struggles of the celebrity (as quoted in chapter four).

At the beginning of the film, we are introduced to the character of John F. Donovan through his death and the discovery of his death via his friend. We do not see the famous John in this scene, merely hearing his name being repeated as Dolan, true to form, builds anticipation again for us to finally meet John. His friend knocks on the door, entering, and commenting on the foul smell, before realizing the source of it. In the next scene, we step away from John as we first come to meet the other main character, Rupert the child actor, the character obsessed with John F. Donovan. Rupert is also introduced initially through his surroundings (the cafe he’s in and the coffee that is being made) and his clothes (image 6.11). However, without much build-up, we cut immediately and quickly to a sudden close-up of Rupert

looking at the camera and challenging his mother (image 6.12). This character does not require much mystery and so, instead, we shift our focus back to John in the form of the topic of discussion between Rupert and his mother. They mention a letter that had been sent by John. As they talk, the cafe television in the background announces John's death though, even now, when Rupert gets up to get closer to the TV, we still don't fully see John's image as the photograph shown on the TV is initially covered by the crowd gathered (image 6.13). There is a mass of people obscuring our view and getting in the way of us getting to know John.

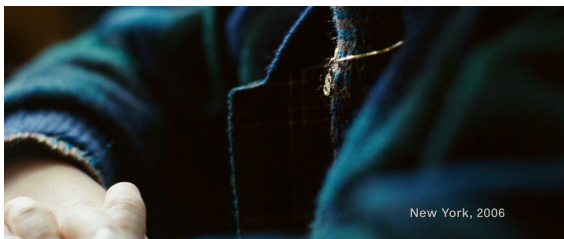


Image 6.11 - Rupert's clothes



Image 6.12 - Rupert's introduction



Image 6.13 - The news on TV



Image 6.14 - John F. Donovan's close-up

As a character, even from the opening scene, Rupert comes across as an arrogant and entitled child challenging his mother and attempting to prove himself to be smarter than her. As the story progresses, he also begins to show signs of fantasies of brilliance and a belief that he is special and that he should associate with others who are special, as primarily evident in his correspondence with John F. Donovan and the way he rejects his peers in pursuit of the celebrity. Furthermore, as an adult, Rupert also displays a need for admiration and a sense of self-importance seen clearly in his defensive and dismissive tone during the interview he has.

As for John, after the news announcement of his death, we flash-forward and meet the interviewer (an antagonistic force who seems comical in her arrogance towards Rupert) who provides us with more hints regarding John's character and serves to amplify the aura surrounding him. She is there to interview Rupert about a book of John's letters, referring to a "scandal". It isn't until after the title sequence (set to Adele's *Rolling in the Deep*) at minute 13 of the film that we finally see John sitting with his head down as people pass by in front of him (image 6.14), cameras flashing, he looks into the camera, confronting the viewer as the song sings "*we could've had it all*" and the title of the film flashes on the screen. We are here to lay witness to the death and life and wasted potential of this character, the narcissistic celebrity who, as the film will go on to show, has been ruined by us viewers.

This film was also panned by critics, many calling it Dolan's worst film and seeing it as an "over-the-top celebration of Dolan himself" (Debruge) and claiming the reason the film was not successful was that viewers want to see themselves on screen, and not Dolan. In a review for *The Guardian*, one reviewer drew on the potentially autobiographical features here and mentioned the importance of balancing one's own story "with honesty and understanding what's of interest outside of a very biased personal sphere", claiming that Dolan has revisited the same tropes that have always worked for him but this time, done so with "little care for what anyone else might find entertaining, engaging or even coherent" (Lee).

It is interesting to note that this film, despite not being marketed as autobiographical (in the same vein that *I Killed My Mother* was) is still being treated as such due to Dolan's approach to the topic. As mentioned in the previous section, an autobiography by a teenager, even a narcissistic one, may be accepted but an autobiography by a celebrity about being a celebrity lacks the relatability factor that is required for a film to find its audience. Of course, as mentioned, fascination with

celebrity persists and so, had the film banked on this appeal within the modern cultural narcissist, it may have succeeded; however, having chosen to focus on the negative aspects of celebrity and shining an unfavorable light on all who contribute and participate in it (i.e., the viewers), the film loses the audience it may have gained through the public's interest in celebrity life.

7. Conclusion

Narcissism and art have always gone hand in hand, with creativity and art in a constant state of give and take. Nowadays especially, it can be said that narcissism is prevailing, a modern epidemic that many experience, relate to, and even aspire to. Despite narcissism's negative connotations, this new generation of acceptance and self-love, brought on by social media, the self-esteem movement, and the global reach and fame of celebrities, is viewing narcissism as a desirable trait worthy of admiration.

There's a sense of inherent narcissism involved whenever one chooses to focus on oneself as the subject of a work of art. Whether it is a painter painting themselves, a photographer taking a selfie, a writer writing an autobiography, or a filmmaker making a movie about their own lives or choosing to portray a role in their own films, artists turning the focus of their attention on a depiction of their self is prone to be met with cries of narcissism. As a young, successful actor-director, certainly one with no comparable peers, Xavier Dolan seems to be the scapegoat of many critiques of narcissism aimed at the millennial generation of filmmakers.

Certainly, when looking at Dolan's filmography, the fact that he often portrays the lead roles and that his initial feature film was the story of his own life seems to show hints of narcissism and grandiosity. There's also the added element that the topics addressed are mostly taken from Dolan's own life and experiences. When looking solely at films Dolan has acted in, it seems safe to assume that the visuals signify narcissism as he is offered the most screen time and there are indeed many close-ups of him. Specifically, he favors his characters' introductions over others in the films and likes to build a sense of anticipation surrounding his roles and, mainly, his face. However, looking at the films Dolan doesn't act in, we notice that this trend

carries. Dolan employs the same visual style and a similar type of introduction there, building a sense of anticipation; though one may argue that in those cases, the anticipation is less related to seeing the actor's face and more about creating the setting the character is to be based in.

As discussed through the study of Dolan's films, there are certain attributes, both stylistically and thematically, that can lead to his films being deemed narcissistic or, at the very least, dealing with narcissistic characters or concerns. Hubert, the semi-autobiographical lead in his first debut, has almost all of the telltale signs of one suffering from Narcissistic Personality Disorder, and the film invites you to connect with him and empathize with his woes while also stylistically showing him in a favorable light within an appealing aesthetic. Both *Heartbeats* and *Tom at the Farm* depict their antagonists as narcissists and show their detrimental effect on the lead; though the latter film does indeed do so by focusing the vast majority of the film's shots on Tom's face, showing a blonde and visually different Dolan. On the other hand, films such as *Laurence Anyways* and *Mommy* are not faced with as many critiques of narcissism as they manage to take a step away from Dolan himself; though the former does have some complaints of "narcissistic elitism" when it comes to its usage of film style. Yet, while neither *It's Only the End of the World* nor *The Death and Life of John F. Donovan* feature Dolan as an actor and, as such, have no Dolan close-ups to be deemed narcissistic, based on the subject matter alone and the topics of self-pity and celebrity, they have and can be seen as being the most narcissistic of his films; even more so than *I Killed My Mother* which can be attributed to teenage angst, and definitely more so than *Matthias and Maxime*, Dolan's most recent attempt at completely disconnecting with his image and stepping away from narcissism.

All things considered, is the criticism of Dolan's films as narcissistic works of art valid? Maybe not. The widespread appeal and early success of Xavier Dolan begs the question of not whether he or his films are narcissistic or not, but whether his type of early narcissism was his selling point. It is through placing the viewer in his own shoes and inviting the audience to see the world as he sees it that Dolan has managed to offer us an authentic view into who he is; thus, increasing his appeal. By banking on narcissism, this cultural phenomenon backed by the rise of self-awareness, Dolan embraced the narcissistic tendencies in his young characters and films and was able to succeed. Every new generation of directors brings with it a certain characteristic. It is unreasonable to expect millennial directors to have the same attitude as their predecessors. Perhaps Dolan, dropping out of college after one week and going straight to creating features, simply started earlier than the rest and, as such, faced the brunt of the criticism before his peers caught up. There is a whole generation of millennial filmmakers coming, each set to be unapologetically narcissistic and as their pioneer, Xavier Dolan drew upon his modes of self-expression and tapped into the essence of narcissism to best depict himself in his own versions of a moving self-portrait.

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The Death and Life of John F. Donovan (2018). Directed by Xavier Dolan., Canada and UK
The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou (2004). Directed by Wes Anderson., USA
The Social Network (2010). Directed by David Fincher., USA
The Talented Mr. Ripley (1999). Directed by Anthony Minghella., USA
The Wolf of Wall Street (2013). Directed by Martin Scorsese., USA
Tom at the Farm (2013). Directed by Xavier Dolan., France and Canada
Two Cars, One Night (2003). Short Film. Directed by Taika Waititi., New Zealand
What's Up, Tiger Lily? (1966). Directed by Woody Allen., United States