

Xavier Dolan: Exercices de style

By Christopher Heron for [*The Seventh Art*](#)

"They're the type of ladies who say, 'It's particular.' It's so irritating. When people say 'particular,' they lack the intelligence to understand 'difference.' Or to appreciate it. Or have the guts to admit they hate it. My mother often says that I'm 'particular.'" - *J'ai tué ma mère*

When Quebecois director Xavier Dolan's first feature, *I Killed My Mother*, premiered at Cannes in 2009, the critical reception mostly surrounded his age at the time of production: nineteen. Once that obligatory disclosure was made, reviews often drifted toward the formal qualities of the film, described variably as "freewheeling" [Rachel Saltz], featuring "abrupt" and "sporadic flourishes" [Rick Groen], and ultimately "stylistically mercurial" [Genevieve Yue]. By the time of *Heartbeats*, his second and equally formally minded feature, the conversation had shifted from a young director's raw decisions to a question of influence. These aesthetic comparisons became a seemingly necessary component, always including the same names, and rivaling discussion of story, characters and performance. With the release of *Mommy*, his fifth feature film and fourth to premiere at Cannes, where it won the Jury Prize alongside Jean-Luc Godard, the readings of Dolan's style from critical notices tend to be as hysterical as they perceive the film. This perhaps stems from the narrative projected upon him with the release of each film continually shifting, rather than a look at all of his films with a focus on the films' forms. With that perspective, it's not sporadic flourishes or mercurial shifting of technique that one witnesses, but rather a sustained, evolving use of techniques that we might call the style of Xavier Dolan.

Throughout each of Dolan's films, complex and sometimes erratic characters **bristle against** the world around them, including the people nearest and dearest to them. In *I Killed My Mother*, Hubert has a volatile relationship with his mother, thrown into sharp relief by his boyfriend's liberal mother and his nurturing French teacher; in *Heartbeats*, Francis and Marie compete for the affection of Nico, to the detriment of their own relationship; in *Laurence Anyways*, Laurence discovers his identity as a woman, complicating his career as a teacher and his relationships with his parents and long-term partner, Fred; in *Tom at the Farm*, the death of Tom's boyfriend Guillaume brings him into a destructive co-dependent relationship with Guillaume's brother; while the psychological condition of Stevie in *Mommy* takes it toll on the possibility of health relationships with his mother and the world as a whole.

They are characters that find themselves not just in moments of crisis, but generally undergoing a period of transition, often spurned by these crises. Though Dolan's formal devices in these films clearly draw attention to themselves, they are uniformly in service of establishing a portrait of these characters: their perspective, desires and anxieties. Indeed, in three of the films, we find characters in the films pontificating on their lives as part of the narrative structure of the films. And just as these different characters share certain elements of their personalities across the films, so too does the mode of representation, where repeated techniques over five features attest to a Dolan style.

If Dolan's style is so connected to the representation of his characters, an important starting point for this investigation is the question of how they are shot. The audience is often presented with images of the backs of these characters' heads, attesting to a difficulty

of access to them as people – they are characters that even at their most open, remain apart from a complete understanding by the audience. Yet this camera set-up also positions the audience in a similar perspective to the character – seeing some of what they see and following along behind their harried movements.

Similarly, there is a visual motif of these characters looking downward when they are shot from the front, sometimes with the camera domineering over them at a high angle. If these films are portraits, these are the moments where the viewer is denied the access expected in that type of representation – particularly the eyes of the subject. Emblematic of the weight of the situation pressing down on them, the viewer's position in these moments is not alongside the character, but apart from or upon them – here the audience is more belonging to society at large. In each of these devices, it's clear that despite how close the films come to their characters, there remains a divide to some degree that precisely mirrors the position of society.

However, in other circumstances the audience is given an extremely privileged position in the mind of these characters, balancing the representation. In each film, there are memories, fears and fantasies that manifest visually to offer a better understanding of the worldview of these “particular” individuals.

The heightened perspective of a character and the audience's observation coalesce most notoriously in Dolan's use of slow motion. Initially a point of comparison to other filmmakers, Dolan has laid claim to this device across his five films. It is used in moments of revelry, revelation, and performance. Often paired with music, there is the feeling that these moments represent the characters own self-representation – not just embodying

their emotional state, but also how they would direct the moment themselves or at least demonstrative of how they are aware they are being watched. In each of these films, the main characters are either artists or at least careful curators of personal style. We again get the sense of how Dolan's style is at once emblematic of his characters and yet also exists at a mediated distance.

This distance becomes literal by the point of *Laurence Anyways*, which introduces the motif of long shots of hallways. Doorways and hallways have always had a significant place in Dolan's films, embodying characters movements to and from domestic spaces as the camera tracks in or out. Characters are framed, like paintings, in their domestic spaces, though this is often in conjunction with the crises they face. Meanwhile, the audience is both ushered into these spaces by the moving camera, as well as repelled from it. By *Laurence*, the transitory nature of these framings pertain to the protagonist's discovery of her gender, while accompanying feelings of isolation – including those felt by her partner Fred – are underscored by the distance between the camera and the characters.

The framing of shots and the blocking of characters within them is paramount to the investigation of Dolan's style and this is perhaps no clearer than in his use of symmetrical framing. When a frame is composed with complete symmetry, it illustrates all of the points discussed: portraits of characters and their relationships to one another, and the awareness of mediation between the character and the audience. Each of Dolan's films centres around key and sometimes overwhelming relationships and as such, so too does the formal representation. Oscillating between antagonistic and interdependent, these relationships are visually mapped out through symmetrical groupings within shots or shot-

reverse-shot systems. They develop an aesthetic harmony that can then be juxtaposed with gaps in the frame when this balance is upset within the story, resulting in an off-kilter atmosphere in the image when that same lack is felt by the characters.

Beginning with *Laurence*, this symmetry becomes even more entwined with the concept of the portrait, where the 4:3 framing allows for shots of one and two individuals to fill the frame – or rather, the frame is form fitting to the characters. Similarly, *Tom at the Farm* introduces the devices of the characters literally influencing the frame, when the already widescreen thriller becomes even more widescreen when the anxiety experienced by the protagonist reaches its peaks. Both formats illustrate the connection between formal symmetry, the frame itself, and the characters and their relationships – a connection that has remained central to these films even as Dolan develops new ways to express this interest visually in *Mommy*'s unique 1:1 aspect ratio – reflecting the latest in portraiture: Instagram aspect ratio and the rise of the selfie.

This relationship between film style and the characters it conforms to describes each of the formal motifs observed here, which are present consistently throughout Dolan's filmography, rather than seemingly random elements injected into each film. Instead, even new developments of past techniques or the introduction of new ones contribute to this overall literal balance between form and content – or rather, form and characters – that can be labelled Dolan's style.