

Laurence Anyways (2012)

Marius Henderson and Nele Sawallisch

dir. Xavier Dolan; prod. Xavier Dolan, Gus Van Sant; screenplay Xavier Dolan; photography Yves Bélanger; music Noia. 35mm, color, 168 mins. Lyla Films, MK2, distrib. Alliance VivaFilm.

There seems to be at least one obvious connection between Xavier Dolan and the protagonist of his third feature film, Laurence Alia (played by Melvil Poupaud): Both struggle with and defy the power of the gaze and the expectations of others, while both also attempt to navigate the crafting of their public persona and unabashedly follow their passions—»anyways.« Dolan, as a prominent figure and noted contemporary filmmaker, has drawn both awe and skepticism in the »love-hate relationship« (qtd. in Massimi 31) with his home of Québec, with critics at home and abroad, and with domestic and international press. Following the surprise breakthrough with his first film, *J'ai tué ma mère* (2009), incredulity at his young age first dominated the discussion of his work, but this has since given way to increasing critical »respect« (Knegt) and scholarly attention which have turned to focus on his signature style in filmmaking. Indeed, the »Dolandrama« (Pidduck 52) has cemented his standing as a »popular auteur« (Rees-Roberts 209) amongst a new generation of filmmakers.

Laurence Anyways is representative of the particular melodramatic »Dolanian sensibility« (Lafontaine 4) that underlies his films. The plot reconstructs a decade in the life of Laurence, following her coming out as transgender in 1989 and the consequences that her transition has for her own life, her lover Fred (played by Suzanne Clément), her family, and her environment. With this setup, the film incorporates several of Dolan's »narrative obsessions« (Knegt 31), most importantly the depiction of (intimate) relationships between mothers and children, as between Laurence and Julianne (played by Nathalie Baye); relationships between lovers, as between Laurence and Fred; and the experience of tragic or unrequited love, again as between Laurence and Fred. In general, however, the film is not so much plot-driven—it does not present a straight, linear, chronological, or »chrononormative« (Freeman 3) narrative—but rather contains achronologi-



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cal breaks, flashbacks, and flashforwards as well as sequences in slow motion. Many scenes also draw significantly on aesthetics of music videos and are therefore reminiscent of distinct atmospherically connected tracks on an audio-visual album or could also be conceived as affectively saturated tableaux (vivants) on a cinematic mood board (bearing in mind the director's work in costume design and music videos) rather than simply as diegetic stations on a plotline. *Laurence* thus exemplifies Dolan's holistic, sensual approach to his craft by highlighting the »affective impact« (Rees-Roberts 217) of music and visual aesthetics, both of which are central to his storytelling.

This has sometimes been called »expressive maximalism« (Marshall 101), bordering on »camp hyperbole« (Rees-Roberts 212), but these narrative and stylistic elements are vital to understanding *Laurence* within the context of melodrama. Here Melodrama is not necessarily understood as a distinct genre but rather as a mode or »expressive code« (Pidduck 53) that is employed in *Laurence* as well as queerly transformed and undermined. In this code, musical and visual aesthetics (lighting, costumes) are used diegetically (Kotte 326–28) to reflect, for instance, characters' emotional development, states, and relationships—a strategy which, in turn, may affect the audience who becomes emotionally invested in the story.

A few key examples illustrate how *Laurence Anyways*' »emotional charge« (Lafontaine) and overall relation to the melodramatic mode—ranging from affirmation to subversion—play out. *Laurence* resonates with the historical and etymological meaning of melodrama (music + drama) as music, both diegetic and non-diegetic, is used as a means of affective intensification in relation to specific events and the *mise-en-scène*. For instance, in a scene in which Fred is confronted by Laurence and admits to an affair, a butterfly is seen flying out of Laurence's mouth. All the while, a Beethoven symphony plays in the background, mirroring Laurence's emotional turmoil as she ends up soaking wet at her parents' house. The encounter climaxes in a moment of connection and solidarity between Laurence and her mother, Julianne, who destroys the father's TV and shares a smile with her daughter.

The prominent, well-orchestrated use of music is also indicative of a queer politics of melodrama in *Laurence*. This becomes apparent in the prominent inclusion of non-diegetic tracks that were released only after the time covered by the film's narrative (1989–99), such as Moderat's throbbing and synth-heavy electro track »A New Error« (2009), and Fever Ray's likewise pulsing, loop-driven »If I Had a Heart« (2009). These tracks instantiate additional temporal layers, anticipating a queer futurity with glimpses of a shifted horizon of the possible (Muñoz 1), from within the confines of (chrono)normativity. Nonetheless, these tracks allude to the past as well due to their 1980s-style synths. Fever Ray's »If I Had a Heart,« as a song by an artist deeply embedded in queer subcultural contexts, is the track that sets in at the end of the very first scene of the film, in which viewers hear a conversation between Laurence and an interviewer while the screen remains black apart from the appearance of a few opening credits and the film's title. The inclusion of the track enhances the aural undermining of »straight time« (Muñoz 25) and »straight voicedness/sound« due to the track's utilization of pitch-shifting effects, which render the vocals—as well as the previously heard voices of the actors, who were audible but invisible—difficult to classify and fluidly ambiguous in terms of gender.

Traditionally, a key function of melodrama has been to provide a »coping mechanism« in light of personal-political scenarios of crisis, such as crises of identity or sov-

ereignty (Anker 28-30, 225-26; Zarzosa 237-42). *Laurence Anyways* divests from (hetero-) normative melodramatic fantasies of identitarian »truth,« cohesion, and reconstituted sovereignty. This divestment is epitomized in a scene in which Laurence relates her transition to Fred for the first time. Contrary to melodramatic convention, and thus to being set in a contained domestic space and being staged as an intimate act of »confession,« Laurence elliptically hints at her transitional gender identification to Fred in a semi-public, mobile, and likewise transitory space—that is, in a car—while in a car wash. The loads of splashing water that surround Laurence and Fred literally turn this into a space of fluidity. In general, figurations of water, as a liquid element constantly in flux, permeate the entire film (Armbrecht 38). The tropological importance of water's fluid ontological status for the film is already inherent in the film's title and the protagonist's name. Not only is »Laurence« a gender-fluid name in French but is also an allusion to the St. Lawrence River (*Kaniatarowanenneh/Le fleuve Saint-Laurent*) which flows through Québec, where the film is primarily set (Armbrecht 38-39).

Laurence also assumes a different relation to the notion of excess, which has been called a defining characteristic of melodrama by canonized theorists of melodrama, such as Peter Brooks (viii–ix). The film fosters a re-thinking of the assumptive logic of classical melodrama. Excessive display of affect does not lead to a re-enforcement of a binary moral economy or to the showcasing of virtuous suffering. Whereas the film includes incidents of transphobic and anti-queer violence and discrimination, from which Laurence suffers, these incidents are not depicted in a spectacularizing manner. The attention and affective charge are not so much centered on Laurence's suffering as they are on the transgenerational, queer relational networks that Laurence forms with others in response to violence and discrimination.

Rather, in *Laurence*, affective intensities travel between bodies and their surroundings, soften hardened binary oppositions, and generate »soft subversions« (Guattari 306) of normative configurations of embodiment. Therefore, Dolan's take on melodrama in *Laurence* strongly resonates with Jonathan Goldberg's non-identitarian, queer theoretical conceptualization of melodrama: »The aim of melodrama is not to find the possible in the impossible situation, but to surpass the possible, to realize what the possible deems impossible« (160–61). Moreover, Goldberg claims that queer melodrama emerges »when identity withdraws from being identified as such, and the reality of an unthought (im/possible) relationality can take place« (162). And this is also the skewed melodramatic path that *Laurence Anyways* follows, as the film is concerned with neither its characters' ostensible innermost being nor its protagonist's formation of a fixed, post-transitional identity. Instead, it focuses on what mantles and enables the characters' performative, embodied, relational, and affectively intensified becoming—that is, fashion, interior design, music (diegetic and non-diegetic), and (bodies of) water. Laurence's process of transition is neither depicted in a voyeuristic way nor as a teleological progression. The achronological structure of the film underlines this.

Hence, Laurence's transition seems relatable to Jack Halberstam's conceptualization of »trans*« as a term that »holds open the meaning of the term »trans« and refuses to deliver certainty through the act of naming« (3), and in which »the asterisk modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity« (4). In queerly melodramatic ways, *Laurence Anyways* presents a multiplicity of fluid (path) ways that forms of embodied life may take: *any – ways*.

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