wunder block
Psychoanaliza i Filozofia
2024 [4]

wunderblock
2024, nr 4, s. 110–123
ISSN 2720-4391

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37240/wb.2024.4.8

At the Back of My Head

Cruelty, Submission, and Desire in Xavier Dolan's *Tom at the Farm*

Adam Lipszyc

Abstrakt Artykuł koncentruje się na twórczości Xaviera Dolana, zwłaszcza na filmie *Tom at the Farm* z 2013 roku. Autor rekonstruuje złożoną konstelację interpersonalną rozpiętą między głównymi bohaterami filmu, skupiając się na skomplikowanej grze między okrucieństwem, uległością i pożądaniem, a także żałobą i identyfikacją. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono specyficznemu ujęciu tyłu głowy, które Dolan wykorzystuje w celu zasugerowania ukrytych wymiarów osobowości swoich bohaterów. Jako że konfiguracja interpersonalna zaprojektowana w filmie ma – przynajmniej z pozoru – charakter sadomasochistyczny, aby ją rozjaśnić, autor odwołuje się więc do prac Sigmunda Freuda, Gillesa Deleuze'a i Juliet Mitchell.

Słowa kluczowe Xavier Dolan, Gilles Deleuze, sadomasochizm, okrucieństwo

Abstract The paper focuses on the work of Xavier Dolan in general and on his 2013 film *Tom at the Farm* in particular. The author reconstructs the complex interpersonal constellation between the main characters of the film, focusing on the intricate interplay between cruelty, submission, and desire, as well as mourning and identification. Special attention is paid to the peculiar back-of-the-head shot which Dolan uses extensively in order to reveal-in-concealment hidden dimensions of his characters' personalities. The interpersonal configuration designed in the film being apparently of a sadomasochist nature, the author refers to Sigmund Freud, Gilles Deleuze, and Juliet Mitchell in order to elucidate the structure.

Keywords Xavier Dolan, Gilles Deleuze, sadomasochism, cruelty

Adam Lipszyc is the head of the Center for Psychoanalytic Thought in the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Science. He teaches in the Graduate School for Social Research and at Franz-Kafka-Universität Muri. He has published seven books in Polish and a number of papers in Polish and English. In his work, he focuses on the philosophical implications of psychoanalysis, the philosophy of literature, as well as on 20th-century Jewish thought. His most recent publications include a philosophical analysis of Freudian thought (*Freud: Logic of Experience*, 2019, in Polish), a collection of essays on world literature and psychoanalysis (*The Paper Nose of Literature*, 2024, in Polish), as well as a co-edited volume of essays on psychoanalysis and space (*Space in*

The trajectory of Xavier Dolan's career forms a short curve. It starts from a very high level, quickly reaches a breathtaking climax, then falls to reasonable but not remarkable heights. And so, the great debut *I Killed My Mother* (2009) was followed by the lighter, though charming *Heartbeats* (2010); then, year after year, Dolan offered three masterpieces in a row, each more subtle and outstanding than the previous one: *Laurence Anyways* (2012), *Tom at the Farm* (2013), and *Mommy* (2014); and then three weak or just weaker movies: *It's Only the End of the World* (2016), *The Death and Life of John F. Donovan* (2018), and *Matthias and Maxime* (2019). Whatever the actual reasons for the shape of the curve, anybody who saw *Mommy* and was struck by its heartbreaking intensity would have no trouble understanding that this path was difficult to follow any further, and that so soon after reaching this incredible peak Dolan began to repeat himself, more and less convincingly. His last movie to date, *Matthias and Maxime*, may be very moving, but it signals a withdrawal into well-known territory.

Dolan's films explore a land of all-too-strong attachments and passions marked by various impossibilities and paradoxes – relationships between parents, children, and lovers of various identities and orientations – thus repeatedly probing into the territory studied by psychoanalysis for over a century. Moreover, not unlike in the psychoanalytic perspective, the passions that fill Dolan's films to the brim are, more often than not, accompanied by violence: not only verbal – Dolan rarely does without shouting – but also of a physical nature. The latter explodes time and again, the main protagonists both exerting and falling prey to it. They beat and are beaten by their families and their loved ones – as well as by complete strangers. This study of violence, as with Dolan's cinema in general, reaches its climax in *Mommy*, its destructive potential being inextricably intertwined with the main character's seductive drive to live more and more intensively.

But do Dolan's films concern cruelty? And what is cruelty and how is it different from violence? Cruelty is a sexualized kind of violence in which the libidinal moment is dependent on the temporal one, the moment of postponement and retardation, and so it is violence which takes time to reflect (without thinking) upon, and enjoy, its own power. In sum, cruelty derives its pleasures from violence slowed to the point of reflexive self-enjoyment. If this is so, then Dolan explores cruelty in only one of his films, *Tom at the Farm*, where he offers an intricate analysis of the phenomenon. And it is also in this movie that he follows to the extreme his interest in something that seems to be rather detached from the issue of cruelty and violence, i.e. his fascination with the human face and the back of the human head. Yet, the disconnection between these two issues

Psychoanalysis, Psychoanalysis in Space, 2024, in English). He has edited and co-translated into Polish two volumes of essays, one by Gershom Scholem and one by Walter Benjamin. He is a member of the Board of the International Walter Benjamin Society.

adamlipszyc@gmail. com
ORCID: 0000-0002-6425-7812

is only apparent, and it is also the case that the full meaning of Dolan's exploration of cruelty in the film – and of violence in general in his other films, for that matter – is hard to grasp if we do not understand the other fascination. Thus, I suggest that we first look at faces and the backs of heads in Dolan's other films before we focus on *Tom at the Farm*.

Ingmar Bergman reportedly claimed that he made *Persona* in order to remind us that the human face is the proper subject of cinema in general. Dolan knows this too. In *It's Only the End of the World*, the rather predictable screenplay is balanced by the masterful camerawork, with intense and insistent close-ups of human faces dominating the screen for much of the time. It is as if by getting so close to their faces, Dolan forced the celebrities he packs the cast with to remember that they are also actors and that they know how to do their job after all.

However, this may be the only instance when Dolan makes such extensive use of a close-up of an undistorted human face. Otherwise, when focusing on faces, he shows them with various forms of masking, displacement, fragmentation, and distortion. Thus, the face of the main protagonist's sister in *It's Only the End of the World* is covered with heavier make-up than she is used to: the girl is desperately trying to impress the brother she has not seen for so long. In *I Killed My Mother*, the three main characters are sometimes shown in a displaced shot, their faces shifted aside from the center of the frame, with the people they are talking to not present onscreen; they are decentered and unsure, dependent on others, but the others are not immediately there to offer them existential stability. In *Laurence Anyways*, when the partner of the eponymous character tells them about her love affair, the couple is filmed in a very peculiar way, with the back of one character's head obscuring half of the other's face, thus revealing in this partial concealment the impossible, mutually stifling, and yet unbreakable nature of the bond between them. And finally, there are the distortions – some natural, some caused, indeed, by open violence. Maxime's face in *Matthias and Maxime* is marked by a red blemish he is ashamed of and which he fantasizes was gone in a wishful hallucination. We also see blood pouring over his face when he gets beaten by his mother. Laurence's face gets temporarily distorted as a result of a fight they provoke in a bar. The main protagonist's cheek in *It's Only the End of the World* displays a tiny scar, probably the result of a beating he received from his violent brother. Finally, in *Mommy*, the main protagonist burns much of the face of another pupil at school, an act we do not see, but which ultimately leads to the movie's terrifying conclusion.

However, Dolan's interest in human faces – fragmented and distorted – is matched by his interest in the backs of people's heads, which he shows with

utmost intensity in most of his movies. Sometimes one is shown from a side angle, so that we can see a cheek and part of the face from behind; sometimes, though, the back is filmed centrally, with none of the face visible. The uses of this characteristic shot are numerous in Dolan's cinema, and so it adopts various meanings and functions. Most commonly, the image of the back of a character's head is used to suggest something about them that cannot be seen on their face – something they do not want to present to the world, something they themselves are possibly unaware of or only beginning to suspect: a passion, an inclination, a wish, a thought, a fit of aggression. The back of a head reveals it in concealment; it suggests there is more than a face can tell; it points to a fold of identity that cannot be contained in an undistorted face. Thus, the images of the backs of heads seem to dialectically complement the images of distorted faces that show, on the one hand, the insufficiency of the identity we present to the world, but also, on the other hand, our radical fragility and exposure to violence. The way Dolan shows the back of a character's head suggests both to what extent the face we see is a mask, and to what extent this mask is, after all, made of our most vulnerable skin. In short, it shows that both Deleuze and Levinas are right in their opposing analyses of the human face. Our face is, dialectically, both the moment of the false, imaginary territorialization of our becoming and the moment of radical singularity and vulnerability.[1]

Let us take a look at three simple examples. In *I Killed My Mother*, when the main character, angry at his mother, dreams of smashing a pile of plates, we see the back of his head: his anger cannot be expressed, and so it reveals itself in concealment. More subtly, in *Laurence Anyways*, we see the back of the eponymous character's head as he watches his female students and plays with paperclips; as he crosses his fingers behind his head, we see that he is wearing the clips as if they were his (long) nails: it is the first time we understand that he is considering transition into a woman. *Laurence Anyways* not only uses this shot extensively and in numerous ways, but also addresses it explicitly: when Laurence says "I love the back of your neck" to his beloved, "it is as if you were saying 'fuck you' to the world." Finally, in *It's Only the End of The World*, in contrast to the intense close-ups of the main characters' faces, Dolan also shows the backs of some of the heads – in particular of the main protagonist, who is unable to reveal his secret to his family (i.e. that he has come to tell them he is dying), and of his sister-in-law, who, though new to the family – or precisely because of that – has guessed at it. However, some of the most interesting shots of the backs of people's heads – and another scary image of a distorted face – can be found in *Tom at the Farm*, Dolan's superb, frightening study of cruelty, submission, and desire.

[1] See G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi, Minneapolis 1987, pp. 167–191; E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis, The Hague 1979, pp. 187–219.

Based on a play by Michel Marc Bouchard, *Tom at the Farm* tells the story of a young advertising copywriter from Montreal who goes to a village in Quebec for the funeral of his boyfriend, Guillaume, dead at the age of 25. Tom is played by Dolan himself, his head unusually covered with a mop of bleached blond hair that perfectly matches the color of the October cornfield that surrounds the house of Guillaume's family and will play a rather sinister role in the film. In the very beginning, even before we watch Tom's car driving through the fields (a shifted back-of-head shot introduces Tom himself, revealing only a glimpse of his face from behind), we witness him writing a eulogy for Guillaume (addressed as "you"), in which Tom states that part of him has died, that he is unable to cry, and that the only thing he can do is to replace the loved one. This initial statement sets the tone for much of what will happen. Indeed, Tom's inability to mourn – the reasons for which still need to be explored – results in his substitutive semi-identification with Guillaume as he becomes trapped at his lover's family farm.

Much of the anxiety contained in the potential consequences of this identification replacing the mourning process is revealed-in-concealment by the back-of-head shots of Tom roaming through the farm, which, at first, he finds utterly empty. The somber, horror-movie-like music and the images of empty buildings, the yards, the barn, the enigmatic faces of the cows – all of this prepares the audience for the entrapment to come (there is no telephone connection in the area and so links with big city life are severed), but none of it would matter were it not for Tom's unsettled mourning, which exposes him to danger. It is also the semi-identification with the dead lover which may account for the fact that, when sitting on the bench by the door, Tom finds the key to the house. Thus, he can enter the not-really-his house, and after some wandering around it sit at the kitchen table, where he falls asleep.

It is also with a back-of-head shot that Guillaume's mother, Agathe, is introduced. We see her standing on the doorstep of her kitchen, watching the sleeping Tom; it will take some time before we see her face properly. As with Tom himself previously, the result of this back-of-head introduction is that even though later we do of course see the characters' faces, they have already been introduced with the surplus of secret urges and identifications that are not contained by their face-masks. In the case of Agathe, the number of thoughts and wishes revealed-in-concealment by the initial back-of-head shot is quite extensive. When looking at the young man sleeping at her table, she is not only fantasizing about an impossible visit from her dead son, but also considering whether the guest could replace him and could be her son's lover. It is hard to say how

deeply Agathe hides from herself the latter possibility, for – as Tom learns from his first conversation with her, which ensues as soon as he wakes up – officially at least, Agathe has not acknowledged the fact that Guillaume was gay, and so Tom learns he cannot really appear as his partner. Instead, Agathe expresses her anger at the fact her son's supposed girlfriend has not arrived. It is also then that Tom, to his surprise, learns that Guillaume had a brother, Francis, who takes care of the farm.

Francis, the third key character of the drama, is introduced to the audience in the most peculiar way. Continuing the motif of identification with the dead lover, Agathe recognizes the smell of Guillaume's cologne on Tom, then suggests that the guest should sleep in her dead son's bed. It is there, in the dark, that Tom is assaulted by a barely visible man who presses him hard to the bed and forbids him to reveal to Agathe the true nature of his relationship with Guillaume. Tom is supposed to say a few nice words at the church the next day and then disappear, just like "him," i.e. Guillaume. The violent night-time scene – which has the taste of a fight between brothers, a rape, or a bleak version of the Jacob–Angel encounter – finds its continuation the next morning, when Agathe is preparing breakfast and Tom is sitting at the table. Francis appears behind Tom, terrorizing him with his menacing presence, but we still do not see his face. First, the camera shows his torso only, then we receive an intense back-of-head shot – but that's not all. In the next shot, we see the corpse of a cow being dragged by a tractor driven by Francis, but his face is seen only very briefly, in profile, from afar. And then we see Tom taking a shower: someone opens the curtain without warning and we see a terrible, distorted non-face which then switches into Francis's actual face, which only now do we see properly for the first time. Francis orders Tom: "No cologne, cologne is for a wedding, but not for a funeral." Thus, the rough, redneck Esau of the story – as opposed to the slick, big city Jacobs of Tom and Guillaume – is introduced with skillful techniques that suggest the surplus of his violence and unfulfilled sexual desire.

It should also be noted that it is only for simplicity's sake that I have been calling Tom's dead lover by his name. In fact, we do not learn the name until the three main characters introduced by the carefully arranged back-of-head shots – Tom, Agathe, and Francis – arrive at the church and listen to the typical funeral sermon, during which the priest mistakenly calls the deceased "Guy." Francis corrects him: "Guillaume!" And even though, as we learn from the priest, Guillaume was an adept draftsman and designer – a man of images – there are only three moments during the film when we glimpse his face. The first of these comes during the funeral ceremony, when – after Tom finds himself unable to

give the eulogy – the congregation is listening to the pop song Tom suggested as Guillaume's favorite. While the song is playing, we see retrospective glimpses of Tom and Guillaume singing it in a karaoke club, with Guillaume's face, however, shown only very briefly in the shifted from-behind mode.

The rest of the scene is not lacking in back-of-head shots. The first of them – the one showing Tom's head – suggests his fear as Francis and other men violently stop a young man from entering the church, most probably a local lover of Guillaume. Next, during a short wake in a room by the church, we see Francis sitting apart, shown, again, from behind, with a shift. And then the central back-of-head shot shows Tom urinating in the bathroom. It is here that he is accosted once more by Francis. Guillaume's brother slaps him in the face several times and accuses him of making Agathe unhappy by not delivering the eulogy. He orders him to come back with them and tell Agathe stories about Sarah, Guillaume's supposed lover. Tom will only be allowed to leave when he has redeemed what he has ruined.

It is at this point that cruelty proper – and not just violence – enters the stage and remains until the film's very end. More precisely, it arrives as Tom gives up his attempt to escape. As he went to the church in his own car, he could still drive away; the fact that he left his luggage at the farm does not prevent this. And yet, he ultimately stops in the field, turns around, and comes back. We see him re-entering the house in slow motion, as if he were returning to a prison. And then, of course, we see him in a back-of-head shot, sitting at the table. This time the back of his head suggests all the reasons for his fateful return. The ostensible motive could be his feeling of guilt for not being able to speak at the funeral and his pity for Agathe – but this is surely not all. What is also there, to name just a few non-exclusive possibilities, is his inability to mourn, which is compensated for by his identification with Guillaume, his dark desire for Francis, as well as his wish to find a home, even if being at home would require acting in the perverse and cruel theater of the Longchamp family.

The spectacle begins right away, at the kitchen table, with Tom, prompted by Francis, telling Agathe about Sarah. Agathe is confused and still angry at the girl for not showing up, but Tom's words do excite her. Tom uses the occasion to quote his original eulogy (the one heard at the beginning of the film), ascribing his own words to Sarah. The eulogy is highly intense and so Francis, who is aware that the words are Tom's own, becomes uneasy and tries to stop the guest, but to no avail. Thus, the scene is composed of a series of cruel moves. First, Francis forces Tom to lie to Agathe. Then, Tom exposes Francis and Agathe to his desire for Guillaume, which they both find highly seductive. The final

move is Agathe's: she acknowledges that Tom now belongs to them, and thus completes his entrapment. She orders Francis to give Tom some of Guillaume's clothes (he will need them to play the role!) and show him how to milk the cows. He may be staying for a while.

Let us reflect upon the nature of the bizarre family circle thus formed, and the elements of cruelty, submission, and desire which permeate it. From this point on, as we shall see, Tom repeatedly attempts to escape from the farm, but at the same time, step by step, he becomes more deeply involved in the libidinal circle of his new family. Within this circle, the growing sexual attraction between Tom and Francis is interwoven with outbursts of Francis's violence against Tom and – most importantly – Francis's cruel play between attraction and threat, marked by shifts between harassment and kindness, suspension and explosion. This drama is played out in the presence of Agathe, which is one of the conditions of its possibility. It is unclear to what extent Agathe is aware of what is going on, to what extent she treats Tom as a substitute for Guillaume, as Guillaume's lover, or as Francis's slave and lover; it is also clear that this unclarity is the very element of the drama. However, the cruel relationship between Francis and Tom is mediated not only by the presence of Agathe and the all-too-present absence of Guillaume, but also by constant reference to the living-yet-absent Sarah, the heteronormative prize that the family supposedly won. Thus, a terrifying polygon is formed, with the triangle spread between Tom, Francis, and Agathe coordinated by the apices of Guillaume and Sarah.

When trying to find a name for what is transpiring between Tom and Francis, we might naturally come up with "sadomasochism." And this may be fine, but it means little until we have a theory of what it stands for. In his essay *Coldness and Cruelty*, Gilles Deleuze insightfully discusses the structure.[2] First and foremost, rightly or wrongly, he breaks up the sadomasochistic unity, claiming that sadism and masochism cannot be seen as each other's complementary inversions but are of completely different natures, as masochism rests upon the contract between two parties and sadism does not. Deleuze offers a useful summary of what could be called an Oedipalizing account of masochism. According to this scheme, the masochist begins by wanting to take the place of the father; then, scared of castration, he takes the place of the mother and wants to become the father's sexual object; then, with the renewed fear of castration, he substitutes "being loved" with "being beaten," and so exposes himself to paternal violence, strangely coded as the violence of the beating woman. In opposition to this model, Deleuze offers his own scheme, according to which the father has been disavowed in the universe of the masochist, whereas any lack in the mother has

[2] See G. Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty*, in: L. v. Sacher-Masoch, *Masochism*, trans. J. McNeil, New York 1991, pp. 9–138.

been fetishistically negated. It is the mother rather than the father who is beating the masochist, whoever the woman is actually doing the beating. Moreover, it is the father who is being beaten in the masochist: the masochistic contract is to prevent the father from returning. Thus, for the masochist, the mother becomes sole locus of the law, which, however, is humorously subverted by the masochist with his very submission. This submission – and that's the *blague*! – results not in the barring of pleasure, but rather its outburst.

When we think of these two models in the context of the structure so carefully designed by Dolan for his film, we find both of them inadequate. True, Deleuze does brilliantly suggest that masochism is not only relational, but also based on suspense, retardation, and waiting. We find all the elements in Tom's new family, with Tom's "masochism" conditioning Francis's "sadism" and turning his simple violence into the terrible spectacle of cruelty. True, just like in all of Dolan's families, from *I Killed My Mother* to *Matthias and Maxime*, there is no father figure at the Longchamp farm, and the whole realm is presided over by the overemotional, overpowering mother. But squeezing Dolan's film into either of the two schemes – not to mention more abstract ones that would see in masochism an eroticized form of the death drive (Freud) or an inverted form of a sadistic drive for dominating the external world (Chasseguet-Smirgel)[3] – would mean reducing the complex polygon comprised of Tom–Francis–Agathe–Guillaume–Sarah to nothing more than a dyad. It would also mean chasing away the numerous moments of ambiguity that are clearly crucial for this spectacle of cruelty to persist.

One such moment, which we have not touched upon yet, is Agathe's curious generational status. During their first meeting, Tom notices that Agathe has the same eyes as Guillaume. Much later, he makes the same observation about Francis. Surely, there is nothing peculiar about similarity between the eyes of a mother and her sons. However, if we link this dual observation to the fact that her surviving son rarely calls her anything other than "Agathe," one begins to wonder about the role she plays in the drama. In particular, we can think of her more in terms of a sister than a mother. And this is not the only reason why, if we were to look for a psychoanalytic model that would fit the film, one might think of Juliet Mitchell's interest in sibling relations, her idea of the law of the mother, and her insights into the interplay of violence and incestuous sexuality between siblings.[4] Briefly, according to Mitchell, the law of the mother proclaims "You are not the only one" and "Do not beat my child" and "Do not have sex with each other" and "For the time being I am the one who gives birth to children here," and exists to regulate relations on the horizontal axis between the siblings and

[3] See S. Freud, *The Economic Problem of Masochism*, in: J. Strachey et al. (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* vol. XIX, London, pp. 159–170; J. Chasseguet-Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion*, London 1985, pp. 1–12.

[4] See J. Mitchell, *Siblings: Sex and Violence*, Cambridge 2003.

prepare the children for their interaction with peers in the external world. The law can be subverted in many ways by various forms of violent-and-incestuous relations. For Mitchell, the very encounter with a sibling is of traumatic nature as it questions our ontological stability and feeling of uniqueness. The law of the mother stabilizes the traumatized subjects without letting them revert to the pre-traumatic state of being; it stabilizes us in our feeling of being only relative and relational. Aggression against a sibling is an obvious way to turn away from the trauma without accepting the law of the mother. The incestuous relationship with the sibling is a less obvious but also logical one: the sexual union of the siblings wards off the loss of the position of being unconditional and unique. However, the relationship is usually asymmetrical, with one sibling literally sucking the existence out of the other, and the other feeling "empty of itself."

Mitchell's model throws light on the constellation designed by Dolan for his film, which, however, exceeds the model in its complexity. Here, within the element of a supposedly well-established law of the mother, a curious closed bubble develops, within which the supposed mother also ambiguously occupies the position of a sister who preserves and upholds an increasingly cruel, unfulfilled incestuous relationship between the two brothers, with the cruelty fueled by the unfulfillment, and with one brother constantly draining the other. Moreover, the two absent actors of the spectacle are necessary for its perpetuation. On the one hand, the vital-but-absent Sarah plays the role of a hetero-alibi and the imaginary point of orgasmic fulfillment which must be cruelly ever-postponed at the farm. On the other hand, the dead-but-present Guillaume turns Tom into Guillaume's revenant, a specter that will stay at the farm as long as Guillaume is not mourned for – a work that nobody undertakes. The ever-deepening whirlpool of cruelty, the ebbs and flows of sexualized violence steeped in the element of the uncurable ambiguity of identities and affects, forms a frighteningly effective apparatus of claustrophobic, stifling entrapment and radical isolation from the external world. Rather than suggesting a sexual position, the number we see on the Longchamp house – 69 – points to the cruel intertwinement of the brothers in the play of domination and submission – and to the infinite nature of the daemonic whirlpool. And so Tom cannot return to Montreal and he stays at the farm.

Let us return to the story and point to its most important moments. After they milk the cows together for the first time (Francis is impressed by Tom's achievement; Tom is impressed by Francis being impressed – and moved by the event), Francis shows Tom a picture he carries in his wallet: it shows Guillaume and Sarah in profile, kissing (this is the second time we glimpse Guillaume's

face). “You carry it like a trophy,” notes Tom. “I don’t know what game you’re playing, but I’m out,” he adds. “I’ll tell Agathe the truth and go back to the city.” What follows is one of the film’s visual highpoints: we see Tom escaping through the cornfield, his hair mixing with the surroundings. Francis catches him, beats him up, and spits into his mouth. “Once in a game, you’ll keep on playing,” he says. The violent encounter, clearly marked by sexual tension, ends with a cut to the corner of Tom’s mouth and a few cuts on his wrist caused by the sharp corn leaves (Francis says: “It’s October, the corn is sharp like a razor”).

It is also in this terrible scene, when Francis chokes Tom while lying on him, that Dolan tries a curious trick: representing the stifling entrapment, the frame is, millimeter by millimeter, reduced in height and so becomes increasingly oppressive. A complementary, yet inverted trick is used in *Mommy* when the whole movie is shown in a radically narrowed (square) frame which widens only twice: first, to show the fleeting happiness of the new quasi-family; second, to show the wishful fantasy of the mother concerning her son’s bright future, a future which does not arrive. However, it should also be noted that narrowed frames appear at the end of Dolan’s first movie, *I Killed My Mother*: here, we see a private family film of mother and son running through a meadow, presumably shot by the still present father. In *Tom at the Farm*, the narrowed images of a family idyll in the grass turn into flattened images of a cruel spectacle in the October cornfield. Let us also note in passing that a similar play of reversals between Dolan’s films throws a sinister light on the wishful fantasies sketched in *Matthias and Maxime*: the childhood fantasy of the two main protagonists running a farm together finds its bleak reverse in the oh-so-real farm run by Tom and Francis under the motherly-sisterly eye of Agathe.

It is with this eye that she watches them sleeping in the same room, just like her two little sons – a fact she announces to them at breakfast the morning after the terrible scene in the cornfield. It is also during this breakfast that Tom moves a few steps forward in “quoting” Sarah’s supposed reports about her sexual life with Guillaume, an awkward and seductive moment which – with the help of a dirty joke from Francis – ends with Agathe’s laughter. “I haven’t seen her laughing for years,” says Francis to Tom in the barn, “you do her good.” And: “I could make a woman happy.” And: “I know you feel attracted to me.” And, finally: “Don’t go away.” This sequence of highly ambiguous tenderness, surely pregnant with threat, is crowned by Francis and Tom helping with calving. The calf seems to be the curious child of this curious couple, yet is also identified with Tom himself: “we’ll call it Bitchy Ass,” says Francis, “because you have one.” In one of the movie’s boldest scenes, Francis and Tom dance

a tango in the barn, just like – as we learn – the two actual brothers did in their younger days.

However, as the relationship develops in the cruel element of ambiguity, this orgasmic moment of dance is logically followed by Agathe's entrance, another beating (Francis blames Tom for Agathe overhearing him confess that sometimes he wants her dead so that he could sell the farm and leave), another failed attempt to escape (this time Tom finds out that Francis has removed the wheels from his car), and another heavily sexualized scene of violence when Francis chokes Tom and Tom tries to kiss him. "You've used the cologne," says Tom, sarcastically. "Cologne is for weddings, isn't it?"

This terrible crescendo of sexualized violence, with the sexual tension never finding its climax but always resolving into more violence, is suddenly broken when Tom, to his despair, finds the calf's corpse. It is after this terrible discovery that he calls Sarah to come to the farm. And it is the appearance of the actual, present, down-to-earth Sarah that breaks the circle of cruelty. From now on, things happen quickly. Sarah arrives; Francis makes boorish advances to her; Sarah notices Tom's bruises and urges him to return with her to Montreal. Tom claims that the Longchamps are "like family to him" and that Francis needs him, and in order to prove the "fertility" of the project he brags about the pretty calf they have together (he forgets to mention that it is now dead), and then – at the apex of his serfdom – he identifies with his aggressor and says to Sarah with wickedness and cruelty: "We'll run you through the cornfield. It's October. The corn is sharp like a razor."[5]

And yet, Tom does manage to liberate himself from this vicious circle. The presence of the actual rather than imaginary Sarah destroys the terrible balance of the cruel family isolated from the outside world. It is not only that Tom learns from Sarah that Guillaume was, to put it euphemistically, unfaithful to him, and that, among many others, he had sex with the girl; moreover, with the actual Sarah at hand, Francis wants to prove himself a hetero-man: he forces Tom out of his car, which the three have sat in while waiting for Sarah's bus back to Montreal.

It is while Francis and Sarah most probably have sex in the car – an act we do not see – that Tom receives his final lesson at a bar he ends up in. It should be pointed out that Dolan's real father, the singer and actor Manuel Tadros, makes cameo appearances in two other films by his son (*I Killed My Mother* and *Laurence Anyways*) – in both cases acting as the guy who is to rent a flat to the main protagonist, opening for him the possibility of a new space and new life. In *Tom at the Farm* he plays an even more important role, though along the same lines.

[5] For the earliest analysis of identification with the aggressor see S. Ferenczi, *First Contributions to Psycho-Analysis*, trans. E. Jones, London–New York 2002, pp. 240–252.

As the barman at the bar Tom finds himself in, he tells him the story of how, years before, the Longchamp brothers danced together there. Then Guillaume danced with a boy who later came up to Francis and wanted to tell him "something" about his brother. Francis assaulted the boy and tore his mouth open, leaving terrible wounds on both of his cheeks. When the barman finishes his story, Tom sees Sarah board her night bus to Montreal.

The barman's story is the final intervention which cuts open the sphere of Tom's new family and enables him to escape. No, I do not think that it should be seen as the intervention of the Name of the Father or the Paternal Law. The barman – the director's father – pushes the main protagonist out of his role in the perverse theater of cruelty which could be played out infinitely at the Longchamp family farm, but does so not by confronting him with a prohibition or stern tribunal. What he does is to cut through the element of ambiguity in which the theater can thrive and – in a face-to-face conversation filmed in a sequence of frontal shots of the pair's faces – confronts Tom with the effect of the utmost and literal cruelty of the ruined human face, rather than the ambiguities of the back of someone's head.

However, the film has one more back-of-head shot. Prompted by the events of the previous night, Tom makes a last attempt to escape. Armed with a shovel – perhaps just a random weapon, but presumably also a tool for the final burial of the unfaithful Guillaume – Tom rushes away from the farm. Finding it impossible to drag his suitcase with him, he keeps only three things from a box of Guillaume's possessions that Agathe had shown to him, Francis, and Sarah the day before: his watch, his confirmation tie (Tom puts it around his own neck as a sign of residual identification), and his childhood photo (this is the third and final time we see Guillaume's face: this time, finally, *en face*). As he is followed into the woods by the enraged Francis, the frame becomes stiflingly flattened one last time, but as Tom manages to steal Francis's car and drive away, it returns to its regular proportions.

Yet, this salvation from the theater of cruelty is marred by a further encounter. At a gas station, when Tom wants to pay for fuel, he sees a young man sweeping the floor. The man is shown in a back-of-head shot. He moves his head a bit to the left and right and we see his cheeks marked by terrible scars. A retrospective image of Francis as seen from behind during Guillaume's wake flashes on the screen. Tom turns around quickly, and over his shoulder we see the blurred face of the young man approaching him. The man goes away; Tom pays a woman for the gas and drives off.

He has escaped from the daemonic circle of cruelty, submission, and desire that kept him at the farm within the bonds of his strange new family, surrounded

by the razor-sharp corn, within this terrible play of identification and resistance to both the work of mourning and to the ordering of things according to the law of the mother – a play in which the wavering between violence and desire was infinite. And yet, Tom was unable to face the ultimate result of his lover-brother's violence, the distortion of a face that could have been done to him or that he himself could have done. Of those not compelled to watch, only the bravest do not turn the back of their head on the ultimate cruelty: the terrifyingly slowed violence which reflexively enjoys its own power – the cruelty which lurks within us all. The cruelty which, ultimately, may be one of our responses to our own helplessness when confronted with our overwhelming sexuality and the self-insufficiency of our bodies in the world. And yet, and yet, it is not always the case that turning your head away means not knowing it is there; it is to be hoped that the knowledge is sometimes enough, even without the shattering vision.

There is one more terrible possibility. Perhaps Tom turns the back of his head to the image of ultimate cruelty precisely because he feels that, were he to face it, he would not be able to resist its terrible attraction and would yield to the seduction, to the temptation of returning to the eternal, destructive whirlpool of the Longchamp family, his strange new "home" composed of perverse siblings. This is the ultimate cruelty Xavier Dolan confronts us with in his brilliant film. I am turning the back of my head on this possibility. But I know it is there.

Bibliography

Chasseguet-Smirgel J., *Creativity and Perversion*, Free Associations Books, London 1985.

Deleuze G., Guattari F., *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1987.

Deleuze G., *Coldness and Cruelty*, in: L. v. Sacher-Masoch, *Masochism*, trans. J. McNeil, Zone Books, New York 1991, pp. 9–138.

Ferenczi S., *First Contributions to Psycho-Analysis*, trans. E. Jones, Karnac, London–New York 2002.

Freud S., *The Economic Problem of Masochism*, in: J. Strachey et al. (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIX, Hogarth Press, London, pp. 159–170.

Levinas E., *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, The Hague 1979.

Mitchell J., *Siblings: Sex and Violence*, Polity, Cambridge 2003.