

# Xavier Dolan's *Mommy*: The story of a troubled youth

Laurent Lafrance  
22 August 2015

*Written and directed by Xavier Dolan*

*Mommy* is the fifth feature film by Quebecois director Xavier Dolan, only 25 years of age. With this latest work, the young filmmaker, who has been hailed in Quebec and abroad as a “prodigy” and a “genius of the 7th art” [cinema], has won numerous awards in 2014 and 2015. He shared the 2014 Cannes Festival Jury Prize with veteran filmmaker Jean Luc Godard, who co-received the award for his film *Goodbye to Language*.

*Mommy* begins by reporting that in a fictional Canada, a newly elected government has passed a controversial law stipulating that a parent in a situation of financial distress or danger may entrust a youth with severe behavioral problems to a public hospital.

In the following scene, we see Diane “Di” Després (Anne Dorval), a single mother in her forties, coming to pick up her son Steve (Antoine-Olivier Pilon) at a re-education center from which he has been expelled for irresponsible and dangerous behavior. Steve, an impulsive 15-year-old inclined to outbursts of rage, has been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and also with what has been called Attachment Disorder. Confronted with a counselor who is rather pessimistic about Steve’s ability to achieve a normally functioning life, Diane confidently asserts that the “skeptics will be proven wrong.”

Sometime later, after one of Steve’s angry tantrums degenerates into a violent conflict with his mother, the two accidentally meet Kyla (Suzanne Clément), the neighbor across the street. For reasons that remain unclear, Kyla, a schoolteacher, is on prolonged leave from work and suffers from a severe stammer. She feels an immediate and profound attachment to both Steve and Diane, and the three develop a relationship in which each finds a sort of tenuous equilibrium. Steve continues to make life difficult for his mother, but the

trio experience moments of happiness together.

Crisis strikes when Diane learns that the parents of a youth from the center are suing her for \$250,000 because of serious injuries inflicted on their son as a result of Steve’s behavior. Desperately seeking support and a financial solution to this, Diane initiates an amorous relationship with a better-off neighbor who has had his eye on her for some time. Steve, however, ruins this relationship, to the great distress of Di. Their relationship worsens and Steve tries without success to end things once and for all. Having lost control of the situation, Diane, with Kyla’s help, makes the decision to forcibly commit Steve to a psychiatric institute for minors. Unable to accept his condition, Steve tries again to commit suicide.

Unlike the vast majority of current commercially released films, *Mommy* tries to present ordinary people and the serious difficulties they can confront. To a certain extent, it is this aspect of the film that has won it considerable popular success. At the same time, the filmmaker’s tendency to pursue “provocation” hides an incapacity to understand a more complex social reality.

A growing number of children and adolescents with Attention Deficit Disorder, Attachment Disorder and other behavioral problems are found in schools and society in general. Illiteracy, violence, poverty and suicide are not only significantly present in 2015 throughout the industrialized world; they are on the rise. This scourge can only grow under conditions of extreme social inequality, as the policies of the ruling elite throw increasing numbers of working people into misery and destitution.

Troubled children are often taken into care by underfunded state institutions. The “fictional” law referred to at the beginning of *Mommy* gives one hope that some attention will be paid to the role played by

governments in creating the conditions facing Steve and his mother. Unfortunately, however, the film makes no reference to the reality of underfunding, much less to the massive budget cuts in government aid to impoverished youth and families.

Though Dolan has stated that he has made a film about the working class, *Mommy* casts little light on the broader social conditions. The interpersonal difficulties of Steve and Diane—their “impossible love”—dominate every aspect of the film, including their permanent state of economic insecurity and poverty.

Steve and Di are among the most vulnerable elements of the working class. They are portrayed with a considerable degree of empathy and humanity. Nevertheless, Dolan is unable to avoid certain stereotypes. One gets the impression that, for the director, the working population is generally crude, “kitschy” and backward.

To the extent that Dolan seeks to show the source of the suffering of the mother-son duo, he has only scratched the surface, not going beyond appearances and clichés.

In an interview, the director has said that Steve’s behavior is the result of his Ambivalent Attachment Disorder. But this simplistic term explains little or nothing. Too often, a so-called dysfunctional family or parents are simply scapegoated and held responsible for the problems of their children. The cause of the suffering of the adolescent cannot, however, be reduced to a clinical or psychiatric diagnosis or presented in purely individual terms. There are much greater historical and social questions at play.

The background and history of the characters remain unclear throughout *Mommy*. One never understands where they come from or how they became the way they are (Kayla being the most obvious example). Despite the actors’ talent, the characters remain somewhat abstract. One senses that they are not really made of flesh and blood. Their choices and actions are often incomprehensible and sometimes even absurd.

In addition, one senses that Dolan, whether consciously or not, sees reality through the prism of identity politics. In his films, oppression is not tied to the question of class, but to that of diverse identities—gender, sexual orientation, etc. Workers are presented not as a social force, but as one marginalized group among many others.

“I have a fascination with the individuals who define themselves through their vision of the world ... the marginalized people versus those who claim to be the norm,” explained Dolan in an interview. This amorphous conception implies that social organization in itself is oppressive, and not that oppression is the essential being of a profit system based on the exploitation of the majority by a tiny minority.

The young director cannot be held entirely responsible for his incapacity to investigate social reality more deeply. In part, the problem is the result of a political climate and stagnant culture dominated by the intellectual pettiness and egocentrism of the comfortable middle class. This is inseparably bound up with the fact that the working class, suppressed by the unions and the official “left,” has been unable, as yet, to make its independent voice heard.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that hopelessness is a recurring theme in Dolan’s work. This finds its most striking expression at the end of *Mommy*, when it appears that the “skeptics” have not been “proven wrong” after all. Though Diane states that “I did what I did because [at least], that way, there’s some hope,” Steve seems incapable of changing, imprisoned in his conditions of existence, and pushed to find a fatal and violent solution to his individual problems.

Despite these major weaknesses, Dolan is a serious and thoughtful artist. Though he has seemed all-too-comfortable with his youthful stardom and the social life that goes with that, one still hopes that in the future the director will turn his gaze toward the great issues of our time.



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