

## **The Sensation of the Look: The Gazes in *Laurence Anyways***

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In this article, I examine the gazes in *Laurence Anyways* (Xavier Dolan, 2012), their effects on the viewer, and their potential to create viewer empathy through affect. These gazes are seen – and felt – throughout the film. For example, the first few minutes of the film contains a scene composed of ten Point-of-View (POV) gazes that include hostile glares, wary stares, curious gapes, embarrassed glances and shocked looks, each lasting between four and seven seconds (figures 1-10). These gazes are forms of extra-diegetic direct address that break the film’s “fourth wall” and establish direct eye contact between the figures onscreen and the viewer. These gazes not only record the gazers’ emotions such as curiosity, disgust, judgment, embarrassment, ridicule, envy, desire, lust, anger and hate, but also create one of the most affective moments of the film.

The gaze has been analyzed as “a direct and irreducible phenomenal element of our experience” (Heron, 1970, p. 249), and “that particular ability of the eye to explore, know, and consume” (Ahmed, 2013, p. 73). It can be “passional, emotional, intellectual and charismatic” (Heron, 1970, p. 258), “transparent and inoffensive, connoting knowledge and enlightenment”, and also “dark and malicious, associated with power and subjugation” (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010, p. 84). Although much can be written about the gaze, this submission will focus on the phenomenology of the film’s POV gazes, and the experience that they offer the viewer. After all, art is an experience; as the artist Mark Rothko once stated – “A painting is not a picture of an experience; it is an experience” (Seiberling, 1959, p. 83). To rephrase his declaration, a filmic gaze is not a recording of an experience; it is an

experience, and this experience is affective. As Gilles Deleuze defined it, “affect is the entity, that is Power or Quality. It is something expressed: the affect does not exist independently of something which expresses it, although it is completely distinct from it” (Deleuze, 1986, p. 97). For Deleuze, cinema offered a way of thinking, not because of how it reflected meaning, but how it produced it through affect. As he wrote in *Cinema 1*, “Philosophy has to do with creating concepts, while art has to do with creating new experiences” (ibid., p. 7). Thus, art would not *be* art without its affective quality; as Claire Colebrook argues, “Art may well have meanings or messages but what makes it *art* is not its content but its *affect*, the sensible force or style through which it produces content” (Colebrook, 2002, pp. 24-25). As she explains, “Cinema, like art or literature, is philosophical not because it conveys ideas or messages or offers us some theory of the world. Cinema produces new possibilities for the human eye and perception; it creates new affects” (ibid., p. 53).

I start by analyzing the affect of the gazes that begin the film, and how they produce sensations of shame and fear. These gazes are direct and visceral looks of hate, confusion, repulsion, and embarrassment, and offer a sequence of varied “encounters” to which viewers can react, before we have been given a character onto which we can “deflect” them. I argue that this opening sequence of gazes bypasses the representational, narrative and even the sympathetic power of the medium to create “raw”, apparently unmediated sensations. Thus, through the POV shot and direct address, the viewer is the object of the gazes it receives, and experiences their hate and rejection before actually being presented with the film’s narrative object of the gaze – the film’s protagonist, a transgender woman named Laurence. Then, I examine how the viewer, after being affected, interprets and misinterprets the emotions behind the gazes, and then cognitively attaches the gazes’ importance to the narrative. During this stage, the gazes are interpreted by the viewer as being evidence of power and

scopophilic desire. As the narrative unfolds, however, the viewer begins to understand more about the gaze and the figure of Laurence, and we begin to reinterpret the gazes that we have received and that have affected us. Although this knowledge “buffers” the continuing affect of the gazes we receive later because we know that they are not being projected at us but rather at the character of Laurence and thus have a more “cognitive” relationship with the gazes, these initial effects still echo. I analyze how the gazes not only create viewer empathy for Laurence, but also create a shared experience between Laurence and the viewer that enhances this empathic connection. Finally, I conclude by considering the symbolic importance of the gaze, and examine how the gaze is desired by Laurence in the film’s conclusion as a demand for the gaze as a symbol of acknowledgement.

### **An Introduction to Xavier Dolan and *Laurence Anyways***

To briefly introduce the director and describe his past accomplishments, Xavier Dolan (b. 1989) was a popular child actor famous for his work in commercials, and has so far worked as an actor, screenwriter, director, costume designer, music designer, producer, and editor. Additionally, he has also worked as a model for Louis Vuitton, a voice actor for dubbing Hollywood films (Bradshaw, 2017, p. 18), shares a talent agent with Brad Pitt (Lansky, 2015, n.p.), and has directed Adele’s music video for “Hello” (2015). A Canadian, his films are in French, and he describes himself as a Quebecois filmmaker, declaring: “my movies are soaked with the Quebecois attitude and culture and language and vocabulary and history...” (George Stroumboulopoulos Tonight, 2012). He is famous for his films *J’ai Tué Ma Mère / I Killed My Mother* (2009), *Les Amours Imaginaires / Heartbeats* (2010), *Tom à la Ferme / Tom at the Farm* (2013), and *Mommy* (2014). In fact, he wrote the script for *I Killed My Mother* when he was only 16 years old and directed and starred in the film when he was 20, which he funded through his personal savings from work as an actor and through government

art funding (Lansky, 2015, n.p.). He has been referred to as a “filmmaking wunderkind” and “a precocious practitioner of auteurist art cinema” who has received numerous film awards, among them the Prix Regards Jeunes (Cannes Film Festival, 2009 and 2010), FIPRESCI Prize (Venice Film Festival, 2013), and the Jury Prize (Cannes Film Festival, 2014) (*The Canadian Encyclopaedia*, 2015).

*Laurence Anyways* focuses on the relationship between Laurence Alia (played by Melvil Poupaud) and Frédérique “Fred” Belair (Suzanne Clément), and how it changes when Laurence, who is transgender, decides to assert her identity as a woman and begins her transition from male to female. The film begins in the late 1980s and ends in the 1990s, and roughly covers a decade of their lives. Dolan has described the film as not about a transgender person, per se, but rather as a love story where one of the protagonists happens to be transgender, declaring “it’s really a movie... about difference and the way we deal with difference and different people...” (Formo, 2013). The film was selected for “Un Certain Regard” at Cannes (2012, Suzanne Clément winning the “Prix d’interprétation féminine”) (Festival de Cannes, 2015), and was awarded the Queer Palm (Cannes Film Festival, 2012), the Best Canadian Feature Film (Toronto International Film Festival, 2012), and the Art Cinema Award (Hamburg Film Festival, 2012) (*The Canadian Encyclopaedia*, 2015). Although he is a gay filmmaker, he reacted negatively to receiving Cannes’ Queer Palm, declaring: “A queer palm says this movie is different, this movie is destined to be watched by communities... I’m proud of who I am... but I think its backwards thinking” (George Stroumboulopoulos Tonight, 2012). He has denounced the existence of such an awards, stating: “What progress is there in attributing ghettoizing and ostracizing awards, which scream that films made by gays are gay films? It fragments people into small, hermetic communities. I didn’t accept the Queer Palm. They still want to give it to me. Never! In my

films there can be homosexuality, but it might also not be a topic” (P. Verduzier, 2014; cited in and translation by J. D’Aoust, 2017, p. 3).

### **No. 1 – Opening Sequence**

*Laurence Anyways* begins with a black screen. There is the sound of two voices – one male, one female – and they are arguing. She asks him who he is searching for, and he replies “I’m looking for a person who understands my language and speaks it. A person who, without being a pariah, will question not only the rights and the value of the marginalized, but also those of the people who claim to be normal”.<sup>1</sup> The voice ends, and the title of the film flashes on the screen. Slow paced, throbbing electronic music begins (“If I Had a Heart” by Fever Ray). It cuts to a long take of an empty room with a billowing curtain, then to an unmade bed, an empty kitchen, and a door closing. We see a woman dressed in a blazer, skirt and high heels walk away from us and leave through the patio doors. It then sharply cuts to a close-up of a teenage boy with an alert albeit hostile stare (figure 1). The camera pans past him, his eyes following it for seven seconds, as if staring the viewer down. Then, it cuts to the shocked gazes of three women sitting outside and drinking coffee (figure 2). This is followed by separate close-ups of additional hostile stares, from teenage boys (figures 3, 4), and bemused looks by men (figures 5, 6). The film cuts to a woman walking towards the viewer, but her figure is obscured by a cloud of steam rising from a manhole cover. It cuts again to a POV of a woman’s startled look (figure 7), and then again to another woman with an alarmed expression playing with a baby (figure 8). It cuts again, and this time we see the back of the woman as she shops at a corner store, the man behind the corner refusing to look

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<sup>1</sup> “Écoutez, je recherche une personne qui comprenne ma langue, et qui la parle même, une personne qui, sans être un paria, ne s’interroge pas simplement sur les droits et l’utilité des marginaux, mais sur les droits et l’utilité de ceux qui se targuent d’être normaux”.

at her, seemingly embarrassed (figure 9). The segment concludes with a POV of another hostile stare emitted from a man looking down from a balcony (figure 10).



*Figure 1*



*Figure 2*



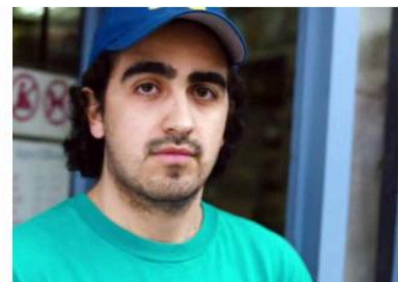
*Figure 3*



*Figure 4*



*Figure 5*



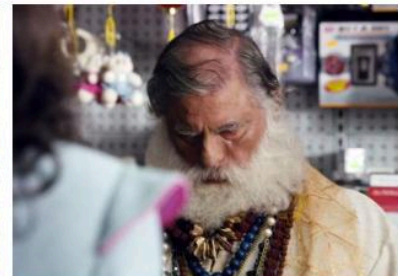
*Figure 6*



*Figure 7*



*Figure 8*



*Figure 9*



*Figure 10*



*Figure 11*



*Figure 12*

There are three types of gazes in this sequence – gazes that look at someone or something just beyond the screen; gazes that are averted; and gazes that break the fourth wall and look directly at the viewer, and each affect the viewer differently. Gazes that look at something beyond the screen (figures 2 and 8) cause us to wonder what they are looking at so intently and pique our interest, while the averted gaze (figure 9) communicates this person’s obvious embarrassment and his refusal to look, and causes us to wonder why. But the direct gazes in this sequence (figures 1, 3-7, and 10) appear to look at the viewer, and are the most affective gazes in this sequence. In these direct gazes, the gazes are not only “seen” by the viewer, they are “felt” by the viewer; we feel their hostility, embarrassment, and judgment acutely, and the gazes affect us immediately. Humans have been described as “face reading, socially inquisitive animals” who react to viewing others’ faces, “reading” them for information (Kozloff, 2007, p. 7). This is a biological response; humans have evolved to be alert to the gaze, and it is part of our survival instinct; after all, research into social and cognitive behaviour has long analyzed gaze sensitivity in primates, and all hominids “have a biological predisposition toward attending to and processing information around the eyes” (Lee, Guajardo, Short and King, 2010, p. 68).

These are not friendly gazes; rather, they are threatening, startled, or embarrassed, and instead provoke an instant “fight or flight” response in the recipient of the gaze. For instance, I feel “stared down” by the angry stare and respond to it by cringing or looking away, while others could gaze back warily or feel goaded to fight. We are, after all, the aforementioned “face-reading animals”, and have evolved to protect ourselves when we sense that we are in danger. When we examine these hostile glares, they have affects; our heartbeats rise, our bodies tense, our mouths go dry, and our glands release adrenalin to prepare to attack or

prepare to flee. Similarly, the looks of disgust can provoke us to look away, and perhaps hide in shame. Our faces redden; our bodies perspire; we prepare to run.

These gazes, of course, are mediated via a screen. Although the viewers are obviously not in close physical proximity to the characters, these mediatized gazes still affect us. It has been theorized that “approximately 75 per cent of all gaze activity will be focused on faces when they’re on screen... because they’re the sensory centre of our lives, and a way to read another person’s mood and intent” (Hill, 2010, p. 69). Similarly, John Ellis (2009) argues that moving image and sound produce both a feeling of “thereness” – “a felt affect” of the here and now – stating:

The effect of the real strikes even the most cynical viewer immediately. Recorded or relayed images and sounds have an immediacy and a presence that cannot simply be denied... We see and we hear. These sensations feel similar to our seeing and hearing in everyday situations, even though at the same time we are perfectly aware that we are watching... (p. 68)

Although we know that we are watching a film, we are still affected by this sequence of gazes, in that they have Ellis’s quality of “thereness” because they put us “on the spot” and affect us via their formal qualities. Thus, although they are mediated by the screen, their affect is still felt. Furthermore, as Steven Shaviro states, “cinema produces real effects *in* the viewer... We respond viscerally to visual forms, before having the leisure to read or interpret them as symbols” (Shaviro, 1993, pp. 50, 25). Even though we know that we are not “in” the film, the direct gazes include us in the film’s diegesis; furthermore, we are “embodied” by the gazes due to their affect, and thus make us “part” of the sequence.

Furthermore, the gaze is not only confined to sight, but can be a multi-sensory haptic experience with effects akin to touch. John Heron (1970) points out that simultaneous



reciprocal interaction occurs in two instances: when people touch each other and when they make eye contact (p. 243). As he explains:

In mutual touching as in mutual gazing, each person both gives and receives in the same act, and receives moreover what the other person is giving. This can never be the case with the act of speaking or listening, for speaking is exclusively an act of giving and listening is exclusively an act of receiving (p. 243).

There is a presence to these gazes that is felt by the viewer who makes eye contact with the figures on screen. In this sequence of gazes, the angry gaze may seek to make the object of the gaze react, either by provoking us to fight or by realizing our inferiority and looking away; the shocked, curious and alarmed gazes communicate the feeling that we are strange, unwelcomed, and do not belong; and the embarrassed gazes provoke a feeling of shame. In regards to the direct gazes in figures 1, 3, 4 and 10, their hate-filled looks have specific effects; as Heron (1970) writes, “Hate is one of the most disturbing and potent reminders of the direct qualitative impact of the gaze” (p. 259). These gazes produce what Todd McGowan (2007) would describe as a “traumatic encounter” between the viewer and the screen (p. 18), in that they are angry at us and condemn us. We see and feel the heat of this type of gaze; it is tangible, and our bodies become alerted to this danger in that, through this gaze, we are potentially under threat. Thus, the gaze can be both a verb and a noun, an assault and a weapon.

The film’s close-ups of the characters’ faces show their emotions towards the person that they are looking at. To examine the formal qualities of these gazes more closely, Noël Carroll (1996) analyzes the combination of a point/glance shot (a close-up of the character looking at something beyond the screen) with the point/object shot (a close-up of the object of the look), and how they influence the viewer’s interpretation of the characters’ emotions (p. 132). As he states, “emotions are characteristically marked by intentionality... they are directed, or, to

speak more technically, they have objects. One is not simply angry; one is angry at someone or something” (p. 131). After establishing the object of the character’s emotion, he argues “the point/glance shot *sets the range* of the point/object shot while the point/object shot *focuses* or *specifies* the particular emotion represented”, and thus “the point/object shot functions as a *focuser*, specifying the relevant affect as a particular emotion within the range set forth by the point/glance shot” (pp. 132, 133). The point/glance shot and the point/object shot therefore determine the emotion and bring it into focus. This formal construct is also similar to the shot/countershot (also called the shot reverse shot), in which one character is shown looking at the second character, and then the second character is shown looking back. Marc Vernet (1989) argues that this is understood by the viewer as two characters who are looking directly at one another, and thus “establishes its own abolition for the spectator” because the viewer knows that even though the characters are looking at them, the viewer is not actually in the diegesis (p. 57). Thus, both of these concepts analyze how the character’s gaze stays within the diegesis. For instance, in the case of figures 2 and 8, we understand that the characters are looking at something or someone outside of the film’s frame that we cannot see. But there is no external object for the direct gazes and there is no abolition of the spectator – rather, we the audience are the object of the look, and *we* are positioned to receive the affects of the gaze without knowing who these strangers are, as they are neither described nor seen again later in the film.

After these affects, we might begin to consciously recognize them as looks with certain emotions – hate, confusion, embarrassment – and we wonder why we are being looked at in this fashion, and what we should do. Thus, we cognitively attempt to interpret what we just experienced and discern the reasons for these gazes. For example, the looks of shock, curiosity and bewilderment (figures 2, 5, 6) make us realize that there is something or

someone out of the ordinary that is causing them behave in such a way, as does the embarrassed gaze of the shop clerk which signifies his discomfort. After the sixth gaze, the camera's cut to a walking female figure causes us to realize that perhaps she is the object of these hostile gazes, and we begin to associate the gazes with her. In this instance, she is walking towards the camera, but her face is obscured by the steam, and her identity remains unknown. The gazes that follow are associated with this figure, as is the shop clerk's refusal to look at her since her shoulder is included in the frame (see figure 9). We never see her face, however, or her reactions to the gazes – it is either covered by her long brown hair or she is only filmed from the back, and when she does turn her face, we only see the tip of her nose. We still have not been introduced to this woman. We do not know who she is or why these people hate her, fear her, or are embarrassed by her. Is she notorious? Disfigured? Frightening? How does she return these gazes? Is she angry? Embarrassed? Triumphant? Ashamed? But these questions are not immediately answered. Instead, the film cuts to a man sitting on a kitchen counter. He takes out clothes from the drier, and dumps them on a sleeping woman who laughs in surprise. This scene introduces us to Laurence and Fred, and takes a different trajectory than how the film began. We learn that he is a lecturer who teaches French literature, and that she works for the film and television industry, and the first part of the film proceeds to record their passionate relationship. But the condemning gazes that began the film and the figure of the mystery woman still continue to linger.

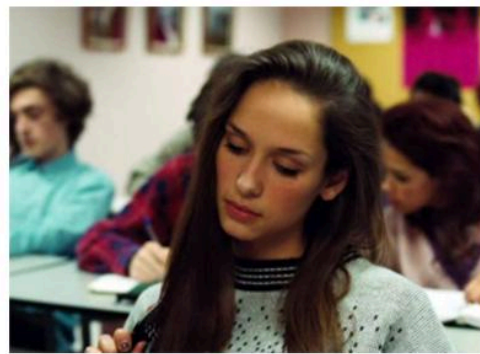
### **Nos. 2 and 3 – Hair and Rain**

The gaze returns later in the film, but in another form, when Laurence is invigilating an exam. A medium close-up POV shot of Laurence records him staring intently at a young woman working on her test (figure 13). It cuts to her brushing her hair (figure 14), and then cuts again to a reverse shot of Laurence staring. It cuts again to another woman playing with

a lock of hair (figure 15), and then cuts back to his intense gaze. In these instances, we interpret Laurence’s gaze as a male heterosexual voyeuristic gaze that is taking erotic pleasure from staring at these young women, and we associate his gaze with his lust. In this segment, his intense look brings to mind Laura Mulvey’s famed dichotomy between an “active/male” and a “passive/female” erotic gaze in film, in which the male has the agency of looking, while the female is positioned as the object of the look and has the quality of “to-be-looked-at-ness” (p. 203).



*Figure 13*



*Figure 14*



*Figure 15*



*Figure 16*

Laurence’s pleasure in looking is disrupted, however, because when he stares at the third woman, she looks back (figure 16). In this, she too breaks the fourth wall and returns the viewer’s gaze. Judith Butler argues that the returned female gaze “reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position” (Butler, 2006, p. xxx). Unlike the

others who are looked at, she looks back, unflinching, contesting his gaze. In this moment, her returned gaze causes Laurence to look away, seemingly embarrassed that he was caught in this voyeuristic act. Similarly, it also implicates the viewer, and we too are also ashamed at being caught looking. The scene then cuts to close-up of the back of Laurence's head and his shoulders, and he looks down, breathing heavily. He anxiously touches his close-cropped head, a reaction that also reveals that he has incongruously decorated his fingertips with paperclips.



*Figure 17*

This scopophilic and voyeuristic gaze returns in the next scene, when a rainstorm forces him to take shelter in a store where others are also waiting for the rain to clear. Laurence turns around, and the camera records his close-up POVs of the assembled crowd, lit red by the light. A child stares back, an elderly woman smiles politely, a man stares into space, an older woman sighs, and a young woman turns her head to meet Laurence's gaze. The first four are glances which last a couple of seconds and orient us to the assembled group, but unlike the brief eye contact he makes with the other people sheltering from the storm, the young woman's smoldering gaze lasts for 13 seconds. During this long take, she slowly smiles seductively (figure 17), seemingly inviting Laurence to do the same, and the red light make

the experience even more erotically charged. But it then cuts to him breaking her gaze and looking away, the abrupt cut duplicating his rejection of her invitation.

These two direct gazes of female agency have very different effects. The first meets our gaze equally; it stares at us evenly and neutrally, as if waiting for us to respond. This gaze makes us aware of ourselves by catching us unexpectedly, and has no clear motive – it just looks back, waiting. Thus, it shocks us, and we wonder how we should respond – with wariness? Curiosity? Surprise? The motive behind the second gaze, however, is clear – it is a sexualized “come hither” look, and invites us to respond similarly.

In these two sequences, we interpret Laurence’s gaze as lustful towards the young women he sees, and believe that the film will begin to focus on his urge to have an affair, as evidenced by his “wandering eye”. But this prediction drastically change twenty minutes into the film when Laurence admits to Fred that he has gender dysphoria, “the experience of discomfort a person has with his or her physical body and the desire to express the gender attributes associated with the other sex” (Juett, 2010, p. 73), and wants to become a woman. With this revelation, we reconsider the previous scenes and re-interpret his gazes, and it becomes apparent that Laurence’s gaze does not signify lust for these young women; rather, it is envy.

We collect gazes and their effects during these three sequences. They affect us, and then try to interpret the meaning of their effects and their importance to the film’s developing narrative. To emphasize this further, these gaze sequences have affected the viewer in contradicting ways. First, we were the direct object of the hostile or fearful gazes and experienced their affect, and then, as the scene unfolded, began to associate the gazes that follow with the mysterious female figure and construed the emotions behind them. Next, we

witnessed and experienced Laurence's scopophilia, interpreting it as erotic before suddenly realizing that it was not a lust for these women, per se, but a longing to become one of them. Thus, these gazes have effected a range of affective, emotional, and cognitive responses – from the initial “flight or fight” response, to the emotion evoked in their interpretation/misinterpretation, to a growing awareness of the gazes' effects on the narrative.

#### **No. 4 – The Hall**

In the fourth instance, Laurence comes to class dressed in female clothing. During this sequence, the film records her walking down a hallway and a series of POV gazes record the students' reactions to her appearance, which range from embarrassment to humor to disdain towards her (figures 19, 20). This scene is 44 seconds long and is composed of 18 close-ups lasting 2-3 seconds each, and its quick tempo is matched by its electronic dance music soundtrack (“Moisture” (Headman Club Mix)). The first gaze is from two punk students who stare as the camera goes past; next, it cuts to a close-up of Laurence's buttocks as she walks; then, we see two students smoking and looking on in bemusement, and during this take, a male student who is waiting for the elevator glances at the camera, looks away, and then smirks condescendingly; it cuts again to a close-up of Laurence's shoulder and the back of her head, and is followed by ten different stares from the students, which are shocked, embarrassed, patronizing, judgmental, nervous and flirtatious looks.

Although these gazes are associated with Laurence, as evidenced by the frequent reverse shots of her, they also put the viewer on display through the use of the direct address. We feel the embarrassment, ridicule, and surprise. These reactions change as the gaze experiences change – these individual gaze clips are shorter than the opening sequence's gazes (2-3 seconds over 44 seconds, compared to 5-7 seconds over 1 minute 55 seconds), but their quick

tempo and variation provide an increased number of affective looks over a much shorter period.

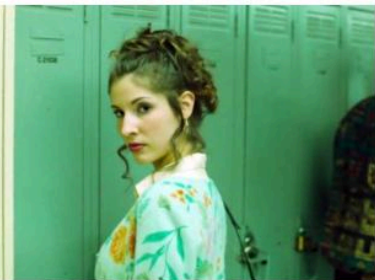
Even though we associate the first two gazes with the figure of Laurence as she walks down the hall, the ten stares that follow evoke the film's opening sequence's direct affect because they omit the object of the look (Laurence) from the scene and instead position the viewer as their object. Thus, we are left to directly experience the gazes and feel their affects. If the sequence was composed of close-up of hateful stares each juxtaposed with a close-up shot of Laurence's reaction shot, the stare and Laurence's reaction would be associated almost entirely with her – or, to express it semantically, “they hate her”. By omitting Laurence's reaction shot, however, it becomes “they hate” and the object is us. Similar to the gazes in the opening sequence these gazes affect the experiences of being looked at and found comical, strange or revolting. We are thus positioned as Laurence and receive the burden of the gazes and their effects.



*Figure 18*



*Figure 19*



*Figure 20*

In the scene's fifteenth close-up, the camera focuses on the back of Laurence's head and shoulders, then cuts to another close-up of stares, before finally cutting to a shot of Laurence's reaction (figure 18), and we realize that she is smiling (somewhat hesitantly) and acknowledging people as she passes. However, her reaction of smiling feels incongruous with



what the viewer expects, since it is a bizarre reaction for such a hostile reception. I, for one, did not accept these stares happily; rather, they made me cringe and desire to leave the environment as soon as possible due to the “traumatic encounter” they created.

To return to the hostile stares, Franz Fanon examines the power of “the white man’s eyes”, stating: “The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man”; rather, the white gaze provides “frames of reference within which he has had to place himself” (Fanon, 1996, p. 83). The gazes Laurence receives in the hall instantly provide this frame of reference. But Laurence is transgressing not because of her ethnicity but another kind of outward appearance – her gender “deviation”. To examine this further, Fanon describes the white gaze as “burdening” him, making him intensely aware “of my *self* as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world” (p. 83), and describes this authoritarian gaze as positioning the whiteman as “not only The Other but also the master, whether real or imaginary” (footnote 24, p. 106). First, these gazes make us aware of ourselves because they return our looks and affect us. Second, as we associate the gazes with Laurence, they also make us aware of her transgender status, a member of a group who commonly lack civil rights, suffer social and workplace biases, and are frequently the recipient of hate crimes. Thus, the gazes from the public are the master – the gazes of those who are not “deviant”, but see Laurence as a curious, frightening, or comical transgressor who must be avoided, shamed, or ridiculed.

In her analysis of Simone de Beauvoir’s statement “one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman,” Judith Butler argues that gender is performed via a “*stylized repetition of acts*,” which are “the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler, 1988, p. 519). She

explains that this requires “*social temporality*,” writing “If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repletion of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts...” (ibid., p. 520) In this scene, Laurence is “performing” her female gender identity through the social temporality of the school hallway in Montreal, in the 1990s. Although she is wearing traditionally feminine clothing, makeup, and shoes, in this instance she does not wear a wig; rather, she sports the buzz cut that she wore when she dressed as a man (figure 18). Thus, she is not trying to “pass” as a woman, per se but rather expresses her identity – a corporeal act, as are the gazes that she receives during her gender “performance”. In this decision, Laurence refuses to conform to socially dominant notions on expressions of gender (described with such terms as “gender non-conforming”, “genderqueer”, and “genderfuck”)<sup>2</sup> by subverting established prevailing social gender cues. In this scene, she has become a transgressive figure who does not conform to expectations in regards to such elements as sexuality, gender, or even occupation. She is also “migrating” between genders – neither one nor the other, but performing elements of each.<sup>3</sup> But transgression and migration are also acts of agency for Laurence; although she is being humiliated and threatened by these looks, she asserts herself by looking back and, in doing so, genderfucks the viewers onscreen and off-screen.

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<sup>2</sup> Gender non-conforming: “A person who don’t (sic.) conform to society’s expectations of gender expression based on the gender binary, expectations of masculinity and femininity, or how they should identify their gender”; genderqueer: “A person whose gender identity is neither man nor woman, is between or beyond genders, or is some combination of genders”; genderfuck: “The idea of playing with ‘gender cues’ to purposely confuse ‘standard’ or stereotypical gender expressions, usually through clothing” (*Gender Equity Resource Center*, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> It is also interesting to note that the character of Laurence Alia is a French immigrant to Canada, and thus a migrant between nations.



*Figure 21*



*Figure 22*

Ultimately, however, Laurence *is* later punished for her transgression and is fired from her teaching position due to pressure from a parents' group, and their fear of her "illness of transsexuality". To add further insult, right after she is fired, she goes to a bar where a man harasses her due to her appearance, and they begin to fight. As Butler reminds us, "gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences... those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (p. 522). And Laurence *is*: this event is followed by a slow motion close-up of Laurence stumbling down the street, her face bleeding.

Not only does this scene mark a turning point for Laurence, it is also representative of violence towards LGBT+ people in Canada in the 1990s. In his analysis of "queer-bashing incidents" recorded in Canada since 1990 (published 2005), Douglas Janoff reports that of a total of 424 victims, 379 were men and 9 were transgender women; furthermore, of the 107 "queer-bashing homicides", a staggering 98 were men (92%) and 5 were transgender women (5%) (p. 11). He also writes that in 1992 alone, a queer activist in Montréal's Gay Village reported an average of two assaults per week (p. 209). Sadly, this has not changed over the years. In fact, Dolan has been a victim of queer-bashing (Yue, 2002), and, according to Statistics Canada's report on police-reported hate crime in 2010 (released 2015), LGBT+

people in Canada are subjected to the most violent attacks of all hate crimes (including those based on ethnicity and religion); for instance, 16% of all hate crimes were because of sexual orientation, and 65% of these were violent, in contrast to 34% of hate crimes by ethnicity and 17% by religion (Egale Canada, 2015). In 2013 the numbers were similar; 16% of all hate crimes were motivated by sexual orientation and, of those, 66% were violent – the largest percentage of any other minority group (Mastracci, 2015). Furthermore, the exact number of instances are unknown, as it is estimated that only 34% of hate crimes are reported (ibid.).

In this scene, Laurence wears a stunned expression, and frequent cuts alternate between close-ups of her shell-shocked gaze and close-ups of the back of her head (figures 21 and 22). In the hallway, we received the gazes directed at Laurence and were therefore positioned as Laurence and identified with her. But now, we gaze at her and her battered face. These slow motion close-ups of the film's wounded and bloodied protagonist connects to Carl Plantinga's (1999) assertion that "Viewing the human face can move beyond communication to *elicit* an emotional response in the viewer" (p. 242). Specifically, he describes the close-up of a favoured film character's face as a "scene of empathy", and argues that such scenes "communicate emotion" and "elicit, clarify, and strengthen affective responses – especially empathetic response" in the viewer via "affective mimicry, facial feedback, and emotional contagion" (p. 240). Previously, we have witnessed her transition and have received various looks of hate, condemnation and ridicule. Now we are left to witness the effects of the hate that she has experienced, and thus this segment produces such a scene of empathy for Laurence.

John Ellis posits that empathy "seeks to designate the ability to experience the emotions of others as one's own, if feeling as an other does... it seems to be used in ways that a "proper

distance” is maintained, that feeling *as* an other does is not to imply some merging *with* the other. The self is maintained even as the other is experienced” (2009, p. 72). He argues that it “requires that the witness acknowledge the status of the other as a person”, an effect that “the audiovisual has contributed, through its ability to present the distant as a simulation of presence, to a wider acceptance of the personhood of remote and different others”, and has thus “enabled, and perhaps even required, a recognition of common personhood...” (p. 73). In this scene, our sense of empathy for Laurence is crystalized. We know that we are not her and we may not share her life experiences, yet we are still aligned with her.

Plantinga elaborates further on empathy, explaining that its not only one of emotion but is rather “sharing her or his emotional experience, at least in part”, as it “consists of a capacity or disposition to know, to feel, and to respond congruently to what another is feeling, and the process of doing so” (p. 245). As he writes, “Empathy incorporates both cognitive and physiological, voluntary and involuntary processes. It involves both imagining the situation of a character from the outside and, perhaps in a few cases, imagining being a character” (p. 247). But there is not such “imagining” with the eye contact through the direct address; we experience it, and this position makes us experience Laurence’s experience, but as ourselves. For instance, we first receive these experiences before we are introduced to Laurence and have a character onto which to deflect them, and continue to receive them through the film even after Laurence is introduced. By this I mean that these sequences could have instead included the figure of Laurence and captured her in the third person, but it chose instead to use these POV close-ups and direct address. For instance, later in the film, we see Laurence dressed in the same blazer and skirt as the mystery woman who began the film, and we realize that we have been positioned as Laurence during this initial sequence of hostile gazes. This revelation causes us to reflect on the gazes that began the film. When we compare this

first sequence to those experienced in the halls, although they both are affective, the first feels much more “visceral”, since we experience the gazes directly, before we cognitively associate them with the mysterious figure who is later to be revealed as Laurence. If the first sequence would have included the figure of Laurence and knowledge of her context like the hallway scene did, the effect of these gazes would be different and their affect would not have been so intense because, as I have argued, it would have given the viewer another object to deflect the character’s gaze onto. Similarly, if the direct address was not used and instead we were positioned as third person witness, we may have sympathized with Laurence’s situation but would not have necessarily experienced her experiences.

Thus, it does not depend on our alignment with Laurence or sympathizing with her; rather, we receive her gaze experiences and are affected by them. My response is to be alert; I watch warily and prepare to act. Others may become angry, while others may look away in distress. Laurence’s reaction, at least in the hallway, was to smile. These direct address looks, glares, stares and gazes therefore construct an affective shared experience with Laurence that has the potential to intensify our empathy with her. Although we might not necessarily understand her feelings (such as her incongruous reaction to smile in reaction to the condemnatory gazes in the hallway), we experience what Laurence experiences, and thus “share” the same experience, but can react in different ways. In this way, this cinematic “shared encounter” of direct address gazes has the capacity to transcend “understanding” the feelings of others, and instead re-creates the experiences for the viewers, thus communicating not through cognition but through affect. The direct gaze experiences offer us an insight to Laurence’s subjectivity – her phenomenological experience of being in the world – by briefly “sharing” her experiences.

In his analysis of performative documentaries, Bill Nichols (2001) writes that they attempt to move the viewer into “subjective alignment... with its specific perspective on the world”, and “to give representation to a social subjectivity that joins the general to the particular, the individual to the collective, and the political to the personal” (pp. 132-133). As he states, “Subjectivity itself compels belief: instead of an aura of detached truthfulness we have the honest admission of a partial but important, situated but impassioned perspective” (p. 81). Although *Laurence Anyways* is not a performative documentary, the direct address gazes have similar effects, in that they offer a subjective alignment with Laurence and her experience, thus offering her subjectivity through cinematic affect.

## **Conclusion**

During the final part of the film, many years have passed. Laurence has become a successful writer and is being interviewed by a former colleague who refuses to look at Laurence during the interview. Laurence challenges her, telling her that she has not looked into her eyes once, and asks “Are you afraid you’ll be turned to stone?” Her colleague retorts – “Do looks matter to you?” Laurence replies: “I don’t know. Does air matter to your lungs?”<sup>4</sup> This is a demand for the symbolic importance of the gaze, a gaze that acknowledges its object’s presence, and what Paul Coates (2012) would describe as a demand for “political equality” through the return of the gaze and the acknowledgment of the subject (p. 128). Receiving the gaze and looking back is an act of agency, as demonstrated by the young woman during her exam and the hall scene where Laurence genderfucks the viewers. Furthermore, Laurence’s statement emphasizes the power of the gaze, and makes us reflect on the refusal of the look, such as

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<sup>4</sup> “Depuis qu’on a commencé, vous ne m’avez pas regardé une seule fois dans les yeux. Ça vous donne de la contenance, c’est ça ? Vous avez peur de vous changer en statue de pierre? ” ; “Ça vous importe les regards?” ; “Ben, et vous ? Vous avez besoin d’air pour respirer, non?”

found in the gaze with the shop clerk (figure 4). Compared with the hostile stares, this refused gaze at first appeared mild, but it also has the power to strip the objects of their subjectivity by refusing to acknowledge it. Thus, it is this demand *for* the gaze as a marker of acknowledgment that not only concludes the film, but also completes the trajectory of the various gazes in the film and the ways that they have produced meaning through direct, unmediated, multi-sensory affects, to cognitive interpretations of the gazes' meanings, to reevaluating these initial affect, effects, and interpretations as the film progresses. To return to Rothko's quote that began this essay, "A painting is not a picture of an experience; it is an experience". The cinematic gaze is an experience, and via the gazes in the film we are experiencing Laurence's experiences through these affective cinematic forms. These cinematic gazes recreate the narrative's affective moments, and thus have the potential of producing viewer empathy through their experience and their affect.



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