

Girlhood & Contemporary French Cinema Studies

Symposium organized by Sue Harris (Queen Mary University of London)
and Ginette Vincendeau (King's College London)

Final report for BAFTSS Event Grant Scheme



This one-day symposium on Céline Sciamma's 2014 *Girlhood* (*Bande de filles* in French), held at King's College London on the 8th of February 2020, provided a unique opportunity to tackle the movie from a range of film studies perspectives through two panels, followed by a discussion of the pedagogical context in which the film has been and continues to be taught. The amount of scholarship surrounding the movie is quite

remarkable and the speakers drew on these sources and their own practices of film analysis to bring new perspectives into light; from analyses surrounding the reception of the film and its political context in the first panel, to connections with other genres (for example the American teen movie) and the soundtrack and its cultural codes in the second panel. The presentations highlighted issues and questions about Sciamma's authorship, and the final roundtable was an opportunity to hear from the audience, among which certain members voiced concerns about the idea that it could be implied that Sciamma should not, as a white woman, have made the film (which features an all-black cast), while others expressed the wish to hear and talk more about the French post-colonial context and issues of racism in a broader sense.

The first speaker, Régis Dubois, is the author of four books on the place of black actors and directors (notably Spike Lee) both in the United States and France. He used quotes from the 2018 *Noire n'est pas mon métier* (which could translate as "Black woman' is not my profession"), a collection edited by Aïssa Maïga which gathers a number of testimonials by black actresses about the racism they have faced in the French film industry. He commented on these perspectives alongside quotes from the French press' reactions to *Girlhood* as it came out, in order to draw a picture of the industry's problematic relation to diversity. Will Higbee, who is currently working on Moroccan cinema and has also written about Mathieu Kassovitz and *Beur* cinema, then highlighted the intersectional issues raised by the film through Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's concept of identity politics. He used the film's scene between Marieme (the main character) and an advisor at school discussing her future as a jumping off point to question Sciamma's framing of the film as simply a universal coming of age story, when, as the guidance counsellor seems to ignore, Marieme's experience as a black woman in French post-colonial society is a distinct one. Professor Higbee was the first to tackle the "Diamonds scene", the most famous scene of the film (its popularity means it can be found on YouTube in its entirety) in which Marieme and her friends dance and sing to Rihanna's song *Diamonds*. The scene was subsequently examined from a different perspective in several other papers throughout the day. Higbee's take was that the scene remained highly ambivalent, because while it depicts a joyous moment and the actresses' own voices are heard over the music, an unusual occurrence for this type of musical interlude, it also is the film's most striking example of fascination with and eroticization of black bodies.

Emma Wilson, who is currently working on a monograph about Sciamma and has written about three female directors and photographers in her 2019 *The Reclining Nude: Agnès Varda, Catherine Breillat, and Nan Goldin*, offered her analysis of the scenes of rapture in *Girlhood* in the context of colour-blindness. She compared Sciamma's position to that of the artists whose work

were exhibited in the Musée d'Orsay's 2019 "[Le modèle noir de Géricault à Matisse](#)" (or "the black model from Géricault to Matisse") and analysed Sciamma's directorial choices in terms of colour, framing and nudity (or lack thereof) and the specificity of her gaze at women in terms of her identity as a queer director.

The discussion following this first panel brought forth questions about the casting of the film (the actresses cast were not professionally trained) and its implications both in sociological and filmic terms. Comparisons with other films (*La Haine* by Mathieu Kassovitz, *Entre les murs/The Class* by Laurent Cantet, *La Vie d'Adèle/Blue is the Warmest Colour* by Abdellatif Kechiche) were made during the debate by both the audience and the speakers to highlight different standards of reception depending on the director's origin and gender.

The second panel opened with Fiona Handyside's perspectives on Marieme's lack of choices in *Girlhood* when contrasted with other post-feminist heroines such as the main figures in *Frozen* or *Hunger Games*. Professor Handyside, co-editor of *International Cinema and The Girl: Local Issues, Transnational Contexts*, went on to examine, from a girlhood studies perspective, the motif of the 'power plait' and the evolution of Marieme's hair throughout the film. The following presentation by Frances Smith, whose book *Bande de filles: Girlhood Identities in Contemporary France* just came out in Routledge's Cinema and Youth Culture series, identified the elements both in the film's plot and its mise en scène that connect it to the American teen movie; she identified Sciamma's kinship with the genre, and used these observations to respond to Olivier Davenas' notion that "the high school film does not exist in France" (in *Teen!: cinéma de l'adolescence*). Phil Powrie concluded the panel by drawing on his notion of the "crystal song" (from his 2017 book *Music in Contemporary French Cinema: The Crystal Song*, and in connection with Gilles Deleuze's notion of the crystal-image as turning point in the narrative) to analyse the aforementioned *Diamonds* scene and question what it is meant to symbolize. Powrie referred to the recent work of *Girlhood* scholars Alice Pember and Robin James (on resilience and counter-resilience in the song and the scene), Isabelle McNeill (on digitextuality), and Mame-Fatou Niang (on the film's ultimate emptiness being concealed by its aesthetics), and Rihanna's own mise en scène and performance of the song in order to examine the sonic melancholia at stake in *Girlhood* and compare it to another musical interlude in a famous "banlieue" film, the DJ Cut Killer sequence in *La Haine*.

Questions were subsequently raised in the audience on many aesthetic choices made in the film, from the lighting to the hair styling pointed out by Professor Handyside. The latter point in particular brought forth the notion that the question of ethnic specificity would have required more research and caution than was demonstrated by Sciamma.

The final round table was an opportunity for speakers and the audience alike to continue to raise the many issues that *Girlhood* carries both as a filmic and commercial object. Sue Harris, co-organizer of the symposium, opened the debate by asking what our responsibilities as scholars and instructors are when tackling such a film, and encouraged everyone to partake in this conversation. Dina Benderra, who is currently pursuing a MA in Film Studies at University College London and has a background in social science from Sorbonne Nouvelle, argued against the idea of *Girlhood* as a coming of age story and pointed to the discrepancies between the film's representation of Paris and the reality. Corinne Rocke, who has a background in Global Studies from Temple University (USA), pointed to the gaps in the representation of minorities in education particularly. Martin O'Shaughnessy, who specializes in the politics of French cinema and has written about Laurent Cantet, evoked the film's sense of materiality but stressed that it also ignores the history behind the representation of black bodies. Belén Vidal, who is currently part of the AHRC research network 'Producing the Post-National Popular: The Expanding Imagination of Popular French Films and Television Series', emphasized that visibility does not mean representation, and gave a few ideas of other films that can be used in class to tackle this dichotomy. Ginette Vincendeau, symposium co-organizer, talked about using the film to study the concept of

the banlieue through a feminized vision, but pointed out that most banlieue films, including Sciamma's or the more recent *Les Misérables* by Ladj Ly, struggle to propel a vision of the banlieue beyond certain clichés.

During the final general discussion, two members of the audience warned against a tendency to imply that the film should not have been made altogether; Professor Vincendeau addressed this point by insisting that that was not the implication, but rather that some of the film's problematic issues, as raised during the day, resulted from a friction between Sciamma's individual, aesthetic, project as an *auteur* and the sociological world depicted. Another member of the audience regretted that the issue of race in people's lives in France had not been tackled more. Professors Vincendeau and Harris pointed to the real-life impact of the film in the classroom and the fact that students gravitate towards it for the variety of questions it raises. Dina Benderra evoked the production history and context of the film and of *La Haine's*, notably in terms of institutional responses (the CNC's in particular) to riots and social movements in France.

It was mentioned that a special issue of *French Screen Studies* may be devoted to the film and the editors (Mary Harrod and Ginette Vincendeau) invited submissions to this effect. The conference organizers expressed their gratitude for the large audience of 80 participants the event has drawn (some of whom came from far afield, including Germany, France and the USA) as well as for the speakers' presentations, and the wide range of debates and analyses discussed during this day.

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