

SCENES OF HURT AND RAPTURE: CÉLINE SCIAMMA'S *GIRLHOOD*

Emma Wilson

The October 6, 2015 issue of *Vanity Fair* ran a cover-story interview with Barbadian singer-songwriter Rihanna. Its interviewer, Lisa Robinson, reported her words:

I ask Rihanna if she thinks she's always going to be a poster child for victims of domestic abuse. "Well, I just never understood that," she says, "like how the victim gets punished over and over. It's in the past, and I don't want to say 'Get over it,' because it's a very serious thing that is still relevant; it's still real. A lot of women, a lot of young girls, are still going through it. A lot of young boys too. It's not a subject to sweep under the rug, so I can't just dismiss it like it wasn't anything, or I don't take it seriously. But, for me, and anyone who's been a victim of domestic abuse, nobody wants to even remember it. Nobody even wants to admit it."¹

This is no random reference. Rihanna's 2012 hit "Diamonds" from her album *Unapologetic* is featured in Céline Sciamma's dazzling film *Bande de filles* (*Girlhood*, 2014), which was made and distributed in the period between the song release and this interview.² *Girlhood*, Sciamma's third feature film after *Naissance des pieuvres* (*Water Lilies*, 2007) and *Tomboy* (2011), is a phenomenal addition to representations of female adolescence.³ It is a rare work in its focus on black female girlhood in contemporary France.⁴ As screenwriter and director, Sciamma confirmed the force of her singular vision of young female identity and agency.

Through its politics and style, *Girlhood* immediately began making other once-marginalized kinds of films more visible.⁵ A point of reference in critical discussions has been Mathieu Kassovitz's *banlieue* film *La haine* (*Hate*, 1995), which *Girlhood* follows nearly twenty years later. In an important piece in *Sight and Sound*, Ginette Vincendeau offers a broader context of multiple films that have represented "non-white segments of the French population" during the years that separate *Hate* and *Girlhood*.⁶



Left to right: Fily (Mariétou Touré), Lady (Assa Sylla), Marieme (Karidja Touré), and Adiatou (Lindsay Karamoh) in *Girlhood*.

She argues that there has been an incremental increase in French cinema's engagement with social and political issues, and she rightly foregrounds the urgency of narratives of multicultural France in light of the resurgence of the far-right Front National.⁷

Appraising Sciamma's film Vincendeau writes that "Sciamma adopts an intensely aestheticizing gaze. *Girlhood* is by her own admission an 'impressionistic' tale of youth and her interest is in the choreography of the girls' bodies, the energy of their performances (dancing, fighting), the light on their skin."⁸ Such aestheticizing moves, and avid attention to the bodies and skin of adolescent and small girls, are salient features of all Sciamma's work to date. This focus on the body as lived, sensed, felt, is a fundamental part of the writer-director's feminist politics.

It is also a revelatory part of her work as a screenwriter. Sciamma studied screenwriting rather than filmmaking at La Fémis (the major French film school). In addition to screenplays for her own films, she has advised on scripts for the French TV series *Les Revenants* (*The Returned*, Canal Plus, 2012–) and has scripted several films for other filmmakers. Following her success with *Tomboy*, she was commissioned to

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Marie (Pauline Acquart) and Floriane (Adèle Haenel) in *Water Lilies*.

adapt a novel by Gilles Paris for the stop-motion animation *Ma vie de Courgette* (*My Life as a Courgette*, 2016) by Claude Barras and also commissioned to work with French auteur André Téchiné on an original screenplay for *Quand on a 17 ans* (*Being 17*, 2016).⁹ Sciamma has said that Téchiné came to her for two reasons: the importance of adolescence as a theme in her work and his admiration for the clarity of the narrative line in *Tomboy*.¹⁰ In the same interview, Sciamma characterizes her screenplays as refusing psychology in favor of action and embodiment; her scripts, and the films she imagines and envisages, can thereby come closer to the body, to its intimacy, simply, with few words. She links this limpidity, this move to action, with adolescence itself.

Girlhood is considered a departure for Sciamma, after two films examining indelibly white female culture, for its representation of a multicultural *banlieue* community and for her work with black actors. Interviewed in the left-wing newspaper *Libération*, Sciamma spoke of how intersectionality, the relation between different struggles against oppression, underlies the film.¹¹ Championing her choices as radical and emphasizing the space of representation they have opened, *Libération* also offered interviews with *Girlhood*'s actors and charted the reception of the film in *banlieue* communities around Paris.

In an interview in *Les Inrockuptibles*, Sciamma recalled that, in her first two films, she had started with an intimate subject and developed it into a wider fiction; with *Girlhood*, she said, she started from otherness and tried to focus in on intimacy in its most moving, complex forms.¹² Reflecting on all her work to date, linking *Girlhood* to the earlier films, Didier Péron and Elisabeth Franck-Dumas wrote in *Libération* that Sciamma makes real the body and emotions of individuals in all their singularity.¹³

It is this mode of making real—this feeling alive—that interests me and that I explore here.¹⁴ I follow Sciamma's hint that intimacy is her real subject in *Girlhood*. The particular issue in relation to intimacy Sciamma pursues, from *Water Lilies* on, is that of hurt. She is a filmmaker who in her bodily, affective filmmaking has paid attention to hurt, to abrasion, and to vulnerability; she makes them all part of the robust, adrenaline-pumped feminist politics that pervade her films and their characters.

In a text written before Sciamma had yet made a feature film, Judith Butler contends: "The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all

these as well.”¹⁵ These are the issues *Girlhood* reflects on, allowing a space for thought and feeling about flesh and skin exposed to the gaze, and also to touch, and violence. As for Butler, so for Sciamma: this recognition is part of a feminist politics that attends to pathos and hurt, maintaining crucially that all lives are grievable. Attention to singular bodies, their sensory loveliness, their strength, and their susceptibility to damage, to the full gamut of bodily feelings, risks, and violations, is a means of claiming visibility and value. It is a way of doing politics through sensuous cinema, through a relay of feelings. The hurt Sciamma shows, and the vulnerabilities she exposes, sharpen responses, deepening feelings.

Sciamma as writer and director is peculiarly attentive to sensory detail, to what things feel like. This attention can be felt through her collaborative work with director of photography Crystel Fournier, who has worked on all Sciamma’s films to date in a creative collaboration proving just as electric as that between Claire Denis and Agnès Godard. Together, Fournier and Sciamma create controlled visual environments, bathed in cool colors, blue, turquoise, green, and a nauseous yellow.¹⁶ There is here a commitment to a filmic synaesthesia, a sort of sensory overload that surpasses aestheticism to carry intense feeling, to channel rapture, sensation, hurt.¹⁷

In the synchronized swimming sequences of her first feature, *Water Lilies*, Sciamma develops a gritty, abrasive aesthetic to attend to the visual detail of glitter makeup, sequined swimsuits, sprung nose-clips, gelatine-slicked hair.¹⁸ Sensual and athletic bodies are seen being exercised, depilated, coated, lacquered. In this showy film Marie (Pauline Acquart) is in love with Floriane (Adèle Haenel). It hurts. Throughout the film Marie is roughed up, as Floriane maintains a shadow-play of affection whereby she mimes desire for Marie, only to pull away, rendering her girl lover defenseless. This powerplay is felt harshly across a series of kiss sequences between the two. After spewing at a party, and spitting out chewed gum, Floriane brings her open mouth up close for Marie to check her breath. Further on Floriane kisses a windowpane, leaving a lipstick imprint that Marie’s lonely mouth later presses against. Marie puts her lips, abject, to an eaten apple she has retrieved from Floriane’s garbage. After their full-mouthed kiss near the close of the film, Marie emerges visibly winded, with Floriane’s lipstick like bruising round her mouth. Haenel’s performance is intoxicating, giving a new glamour to her erotic body, the sensation it creates, felt in the rhythm of her dancing, the gold of her hair.

In the hyper-sexualized environment of the swim team, Floriane is phobic and conflicted about her virginity. She has

an unmerited erotic reputation. In response she invites Marie to break her hymen so she can retain her reputation when she sleeps with a boy.¹⁹ Floriane lies down in her suburban bedroom and under the covers Marie enters her with her fingers. Floriane registers pain, Haenel’s response conveying a sense of the entry, the tear, as physical hurt. The effect for Marie is brutal. Her sensory landmark—experiencing the vastness of the act of entering another girl for the first time, of feeling her inside, the erotic awe, the intact emotion—vanishes in the aftermath of Floriane’s lack of involvement and in the immediate arrival of her boyfriend.

If this relay, where Marie enters Floriane and is instantly expendable and asked to exit, breaks their relationship, viewing it is like a kick in the stomach. The scene recalls earlier instants where Marie has been made complicit with Floriane’s dating. Floriane toys with her, drawing Marie on a cord. She has a keen sense of Marie’s helpless love, of her susceptibility to the liquid spectacle in the pool. The film’s aesthetic strategy is so acute that it charts minutely the intermittence of Floriane’s attention. There are moments when the film itself seems lost in Marie’s love and seems to be equally enchanted with Floriane’s erotic possibility. These times of disavowal make the outcomes, the break between them, all the more seismic. Sciamma’s aim is not to demonize Floriane. There are times when she too is vulnerable and lovable. Instead, Sciamma shows that for Marie, here, love feels like this. Love is hostile.²⁰

Tomboy is equally uncompromising. In a narrative that can read as a trans childhood story, or as a prequel to the same-sex love in *Water Lilies*, Sciamma focuses on tomboy Laure (Zoé Héran) in her first summer in a new suburban neighborhood.²¹ Laure is hailed as a boy by her new girlfriend and love object Lisa (Jeanne Disson). French as a gender-inflected language requires an immediate assumption about gender in any address to the other. Lisa reads Laure as a boy, addresses him thus, and goes uncorrected for the main body of the film. This assumption is arguably necessary to ensure that the attraction straight Lisa feels for Laure is heteronormative. Lisa’s “grammatical” error meets some desire in Laure and the act of interpolation allows, or requires, Laure to speak and act with Lisa henceforth as a boy, who is self-named Mickäel.

The liberatory effect of this coming-out narrative is circumscribed by Mickäel’s painful maintenance of a dual identity: his boy self in public and his girl persona in his home environment. Mickäel can only exist, with deliberate effort, in the wild spaces and games surrounding the housing blocks he, Lisa, and the other children inhabit. The film is shot through with the madness that ensues from his dual



Laure (Zoé Héran) in *Tomboy*.

maintenance. The encounter with Lisa offers a previously unimagined self-realization (in a trans identity, in boyhood, or in lesbian desire) at the same time as it creates an unsustainable scenario of denial. This denial fails after Mickäel has beaten up another boy and in the ensuing trouble is inadvertently outed. Phobic rejection of his identity is then enacted in his mother's harsh reaction as she slaps him, makes him dress in a frock, and outs him as a girl to Lisa. The film offers a different response by Mickäel's father (played by Mathieu Demy), who in contrast is sympathetic to his child and responds gently to his feelings. Mickäel's tiny sister Jeanne (Malonn Lévana) is more passionate still in defending her brother and making him part of her fantasy world. Both father and sister are keenly aware of the pain Mickäel experiences.

Indeed, in *Water Lilies* and *Tomboy*, the attention to queer and trans child identities is realized most fully in their painful charting of emotional hurt. This is the context for *Girlhood*, the Sciamma film which goes furthest in thinking about violence and love (albeit not in an explicitly queer or trans context).²² Its opening scene shows an American football game at the Stade Léo Lagrange, for which Sciamma has filmed women from Les Molosses, Asnières-sur-Seine, one of the premier "American football" teams in France. This prelude is like a fever-dream. Light Asylum's "Dark Allies" plays over the opening credits, Shannon Funchess's

low voice singing: "heartbeats through the dark that spread like a poison / And the tears ran hot like black tar of emotion." The first image is blurred as helmeted girls run onto the field.²³ The shot is thick with the sheen of helmet carapaces, face-mask bars, the rigor of shoulder pads under fabric. The equipment toughens the bodies, accentuating attention to coating and surface. The beat of the music and the pace of the running girls (resilient, protected) are effortlessly matched. The players seem weightless and elated in artificial stadium lighting. Slow motion shots make the scene unearthly. Girls tackle each other, run, and fall with no damage.

"I'll wait for you, forever / And ever, and ever / And ever." The song becomes an anthem as a girl runs with the ball. The scene closes as the girls mass, giving high fives, in shots that mingle protagonists with real members of the *équipe* Molosses. The details of the scene are exact, right down to the appearance of a real team. Yet the scene works above all as a pressure vessel for the film, a sensory immersion in feelings yet to come. Like the subsequent "Diamonds" scene, it is heightened, psychedelic, a part of the dream life of its subjects. It is also a first variation on issues of protection and damage.

These polarities of protection and damage, in fact, are pursued as the film enters the home of one of the players, Marieme (Karidja Touré). Marieme comes back after the



Bébé (Simina Soumaré) and Mini (Chance N'Guessan) in *Girlhood*.

football game to find her sisters Bébé (Simina Soumaré) and Mini (Chance N'Guessan) eating. Their mother has left for her cleaning job. The sisters are looking after Mini. Mini chooses a Babybel cheese for her dessert and they let her unwrap it herself, watching with affection as she cutely takes pleasure in putting it whole in her mouth. Bébé puts the red wax on Mini's nose, making her look like a Disney mouse. Marieme washes up as Mini sits on the draining board brushing her teeth. Her profile is highlighted in the neon light. She is small and cuddly in her white pajama top and bare feet.

Sciamma surpasses any director I know in showing sisters' love for each other. It's in *Tomboy* too. This is the closest feeling in her films, the most instinctive. It's always there, present, between all the girls. Marieme and Bébé are in their shared bedroom after Mini has gone to bed. Marieme notices that Bébé's breasts have grown and she insists on seeing. Marieme tries to look, Bébé resists, and the film holds their helpless laughter. This ecstatic involvement is broken as they hear their brother Djibril (Cyril Mendy) and both go still. His name has come up earlier in the film. They count beats till he slams the door. They have an intimate sense of his timing. Seamlessly their conversation moves to his threat. Marieme wants to know if Djibril has seen Bébé's body. She warns her to hide it. Then taking Bébé off-guard, breaking the mood of fear, Marieme again tries to get in under her T-shirt.



Marieme (Touré) and Bébé (Soumaré) look out for each other in *Girlhood*.

In another scene, Marieme plays Xbox football in Djibril's room while he is out, and the film shows his violence to her when he returns. When Marieme doesn't want to move from the game he hits her hard across the back of the head. She wordlessly gets up to leave. He silently takes her place at the controls. Sciamma de-dramatizes the scene, implying this is a repeated scene in Marieme's lived reality. Back in her bedroom she stares at the ceiling numbly, music from Para One guiding her feelings. She and Bébé hold hands, their arms stretched out between their beds.²⁴ Bébé's fingers are pressed into Marieme's palm, with firmness and tenderness.

These early scenes establish both that Marieme and Bébé are looking after their sister and that they live under the control of their brother. This situation demands from Marieme resilience and a peculiar watchfulness over her emotions,



Marieme (Touré) interviewed by her teacher in *Girlhood*.

requiring that she be hard and vulnerable all at once. This complexity is conveyed extraordinarily in Touré's performance. Her array of emotions is intimated here through her tenderness to Mini, her ease with Bébé, her physical resistance to Djibril. The film takes stock of her conflicted family situation but saves its outrage for the school system that fails Marieme. Sciamma cuts cleanly, deliberately, from the family home to the public classroom.²⁵

One key scene totally devoid of cuts observes Marieme as she is interviewed by a teacher. Her face occupies the frame for the whole take, its changes telegraphing her range of emotions. The sequence opens with Marieme saying: "Not vocational training." The term she uses is CAP (*certificat d'aptitude professionnelle*) and references the two-year vocational training course at a *lycée professionnel* that is taken in place of the academic *baccalauréat* in France's rigidly bifurcated system of education for the haves and have-nots.²⁶ As the teacher argues, Marieme resists, suggesting different outcomes. She seems thoroughly hard-edged, until suddenly, like a child, she pleads to go into the academic stream. Against her teacher's refusal, she insists: "It's not my fault." The teacher ignores her and Marieme can be seen swallowing hard. The teacher asks: "Is there something I should know?" Marieme makes no reply. She is speechless when the subject is her family.

Marieme's situation of family violence and institutional neglect, a more entrenched and damaging system of hurt and painful love than any in the earlier films, affects all her choices. The first choice she makes is to join a girl gang. The system of the gang requires repetition of the violence and

protection with which Marieme is familiar from her home environment. The girl gang tactics involve the bullying and harassment of other women. In showing this dynamic, Sciamma maintains a complex position. The setup of the film, its visual style and energy reveal a fascination with the girl gang. The film feels half in love with the girls it shows. This position is sustained in its revelation of what female bonding has to offer Marieme as she claims agency and seeks belonging. Yet the film is also mindful of violence and critical in particular of violence against women. In these terms the gang is seen with a mix of adoration and painful skepticism.

The scene of most intense intoxication (for Marieme as well as the audience) is the gang-girl dance to Rihanna's "Diamonds." The girls are in a rented hotel room, a safe space of comfort and luxury where, like children playing an imaginary game, they take bubble baths, eat pizza, and dress up in stolen frocks. Marieme fails to answer calls from her brother and instead follows an injunction from gang-leader Lady (Assa Sylla) to switch off her mobile phone. Lady here is an alternative to the teacher and brother in the preceding scenes. She tells Marieme that she must do what she wants, gives her a gold necklace, and renames her "Vic as in Victory."²⁷ Vic dresses up in an electric blue dress, looking at herself with awe despite the heaviness of the security tag on the fabric. The girls smoke dope and share a bubble pipe, getting high. The scene as it develops is stretched out, made unreal, in line with their elated, languid, drugged perceptions.

Their hotel-room dance sequence is bathed in lush blue light. Sciamma's director of photography Crystel Fournier

has commented on the racial dynamics of the lighting: “[W]e managed to do things we never could have done with white skins. The colour palette we used between blue and green can produce a gloomy effect and never enhances the actors. But our actresses, since their skin is warm, can handle these types of colours. We could push colours to a point impossible with white skins.”²⁸

This palette is most intense in the “Diamonds” sequence where vivid blueness coats the whole frame. The resultant images remind me of Carrie Mae Weems’s *Blue Black Boy* and *Moody Blue Girl*, toned and color-stained silver prints that show African American children in shades of blue.²⁹ Carol Mavor, writing on emotion in photography in her study *Black and Blue*, has charted the effect: “I feel the punch of ‘Blue Black Boy.’”³⁰ Weems’s work explores African American skin tones and the language used to describe them. She has spoken about the absurdity of names and distinctions but also about the beauty of color, of skin colors.³¹ *Girlhood*’s images are on the side of beauty, the ethereal. They are silvered, “the blue of vivid dreams and cigarette smoke.”³² This is the film at its most aestheticized. The girls’ dancing moves have the same weightlessness as the opening Molasses shots. The girls are in love with each other. They are beautiful like diamonds in the sky. The camera is sometimes mobile, moving with them as they dance, moving with the rhythm of the song with a levity, a nimbleness, a sense of sharing, a beat, an ease that are bewitching.³³

The film cuts to Vic in awe, smiling, moving almost imperceptibly to the music. The camera comes in closer and closer to her face as she watches and listens, her skin shining with reflected blue light, her eyes full of pleasure and grief. Then she too dances in the blue circle of light, stepping into this field of bodily sensation, of beauty, of pleasure. The film offers authenticity to the dreams of its protagonists, showing without critique, with adoration, the stretch of their ambitions, their wishes, their imaginary lives.³⁴ This is a film unafraid of launching a sequence that fully realizes the energy, glamour, and sheen of the bodies being viewed.

This scene is a fantasy that sustains the film and characters even in their most traumatic moments of the real. Yet it is in the traumatic moments that the film comes indeed to be critically mindful about violence as well as sensitive to the enmeshing, sometimes, of hurt and love. After the “Diamonds” sequence Marieme returns home where she is summoned by her brother. Djibril is lying horizontal on the sofa bed and tells her to sit down beside him. He whispers and puts his arm around Marieme. She is silent. She is neither resistant nor compliant but rather appears to be numb and melancholy. Then scarily he begins to tighten his arm,

his muscles pressing her throat, controlling her in an embrace turned stranglehold. He locks her neck back and then releases her. Mini can be heard coming in the room, unaware of what is happening. Djibril relaxes and Mini—presexual and therefore still safe—leaps on him for a cuddle.

Sciamma suggests in the film’s DVD commentary that here Marieme remembers her own childhood closeness to Djibril.³⁵ The image of Mini, then, is full of nostalgia. The scene also seems to hold sadness for Mini’s future. The film bears witness to Marieme’s physical abuse by Djibril with a deep sense of all the different ways this hurts her emotionally as well.

The film shifts tone and location. Back with the gang, Lady fights a girl and loses. She is stripped to her sports bra in the dust. Marieme picks her up but Lady brushes her off. The camera stays a long time on the back of Marieme’s head as she watches Lady leave. Ismaël (Idrissa Diabaté), Marieme’s soon-to-be boyfriend, holds out his hand to her. After he has resisted her because of his friendship with her brother, now in the emotion and pathos of the aftermath of the fight he follows her swiftly into a stairwell. She runs her hand down his face and they kiss, protected by darkness as the timed lighting goes out. The film moves on here, shifting between different forms of bodily urgency, fear, and longing.

These emotions spur an awakening in Marieme. She abruptly forces her way out of a cleaning job by violently locking the arm of the woman supervisor, then is glimpsed alone, looking out at Paris lights and skyscrapers by night. She is Balzac’s Rastignac surveying the city, contemplating his destiny.³⁶ The next shots—composed of mobile phone footage of Lady’s fight—seem to function as Marieme’s subjective images even though these are shots circulating within the community, showing Lady’s torso bared in slow motion against loud music. Her damaged body is still beautiful. She curls up in the dust. The film cuts to darkness.³⁷

The realization of Lady’s shaming—her hair is cut off—absorbs Marieme. She changes. She sets up a fight herself with the same girl. Marieme is hit a couple of times by the girl and then hits back violently, holding her arm to the girl’s neck, locking her from behind. The maneuver allows her to pull off the girl’s denim shirt, baring her torso and a scarlet lace bra. Marieme punches her again and kicks her in the stomach before taking out her knife and with macho efficiency cutting the bra straps, cutting it off the girl prone, and waving it as a trophy. She is still waving it in triumph as she runs in the rain with Adiatou (Lindsay Karamoh) and Fily (Mariétou Touré) on the rooftop of the housing block. She is more than Victory here: she is Liberty leading the people, brandishing red fabric.³⁸ She is Marianne, symbol of the



Djibril (Cyril Mendy) and Marieme (Touré) in *Girlhood*.

French Republic. She says she did it for Lady. Lady says she did it for herself. Then Lady hugs her.

In another of the film's abrupt shifts, there is a cut to Marieme returning home and being summoned again by her brother. On this entry, there is a photograph clearly visible of Marieme and Djibril as children on the wall above the washing machine. She goes in to him. His affect is unreadable. "I wasted her," says Marieme. She slowly pulls the red bra from her pocket. They share her victory, throwing the bra between them. He invites her to play Xbox football. He offers her Brazil (as her team). And she replies, asserting her new authority: "France."

Her macho force, her sudden closeness to her brother, and her physical desire lead her to leave the apartment at night and to seek out Ismaël who lies sleeping. She touches his skin and the slippery contact is audible. She turns him and then more consciously begins to choreograph his body. This scene feels consensual as Ismaël complies.³⁹ Marieme's strength, and resemblance to her brother, are further demonstrated, tested, in a scene at La Défense where she catches sight of Bébé in a gang harassing a girl and tells her to go home. She hits her across the side of the head and Bébé says: "You're just like him." Marieme tries to caress Bébé, touching her face. Bébé is hurt. But in a wordless and guileless scene that is the most moving in the entire film, she reaches out to Marieme, holding her hand, stroking it in her palm. It's painful to her to liken Marieme to Djibril. She feels

Marieme hurting. The film cuts to their bedroom where Bébé lies with her head on Marieme's lap.

This moment of tenderness precedes the most violent scene in the film. Djibril has found out that Marieme has slept with Ismaël. He hits her viciously and knocks her down. Poised above her on the sofa he puts his hands to her neck. He accuses her of hurting their family, hurting her mother. He tries to press her into submission, to make her vulnerable, guilty. His shaming her severs any relation between them. Marieme's life at home is now unlivable. The scene is rapid, Sciamma cutting quickly to Marieme outside alone in the dark. The scene doesn't spare the viewer, but it doesn't linger either. If hurt and abrasion are Sciamma's subject, she avoids any display of victimization. She protects her actresses as well as her characters.

Marieme takes herself forward from here; the last episode of the film shows the compromises she makes to survive. She begins to work for Abou, a drug dealer who has picked her up in a café in Bobigny after noticing abrasions on her face. She sells by dressing up as a diva to pass in Parisian gatherings; on the streets, she dresses as a boy, muting her gender. Ties to both her family and the girl gang have been cut off. She still sees Ismaël who lies waiting in her bedroom, his tenderness a counterweight to Djibril's violence. But as he undresses her, he is shocked to find that she has bound her breasts.

The image superficially recalls shots of Hilary Swank as Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Peirce, 1999) in



Marieme (Touré) and Bébé (Soumaré) grow apart in *Girlhood*.



Marieme's (Touré) necklace bears her nickname "Vic," in *Girlhood*.

that it references trans identity, though this suggestion is not explored.⁴⁰ In her DVD commentary, Sciamma speaks about the binding's resembling a bandage. Brandon's binding represents a defiant act of fashioning his body and self-realization. It also gathers meanings of pathos and rarefied feeling, as Brandon's body is damaged by hate crimes and gradually laid bare. This suggests a further connection to *Boys Don't Cry*: Brandon and Marieme are victims of abuse, his through transphobia, hers through misogyny.

If Marieme, like Brandon, is a victim, she is also, critically for the film's politics, a survivor. She queers her gender protectively, echoing the protective armor of the football sequence at the start of the film. She wears an item of her brother's clothing now and this seems to allow her better to defend herself against him. She is still transacting some relation to masculinity. The binding scene has not been her break with Ismaël, for she returns to him after she escapes Abou's control. And they still love each other. He dreams that she'll move in with him and have a child. He says he'll marry her tomorrow. They kiss. Then she says, "I can't." She cannot submit to her brother, nor to Abou, nor, now, even to Ismaël. She goes on alone.

The end of *Girlhood* works to disorient the viewer. Marieme presses the entry code for her family's flat and hears Bébé's voice. She hesitates and stays silent. Bébé buzzes the door open, but after long moments Marieme lets it close. The pull of the door away from her hand is a physical jolt. The pain of her separation from her sisters, from her girlhood, is registered in the maneuver. Love is still bound up with hurt and vulnerability even as Marieme finds the strength to let the door close. She walks in the shadow and sunshine of the morning light, looking out over the *banlieue* landscape in a final reprise of Rastignac. She weeps. The shots feel heavy with bodily energy. It is now that she definitively leaves her family. As she slips out of the frame, the film shows blurred, tearful images of trees and towerblocks. But then Sciamma refuses that melodramatic moment. Marieme steps back in, dry-eyed, in focus, taking a breath, closing her

eyes, about to run, or dive, into her future.⁴¹ She is suspended on the aching sounds of the Para One music. It is the start of a new day. Sciamma leaves Marieme's future unknown, radically unscripted. She lets the film dream. She leaves it in rapture.

This is a sort of "happy ending" that Sciamma tested earlier, in a less open-ended and more specific form, in the short film *Pauline* (2010) that she made between *Tomboy* and *Girlhood*. In it, Pauline (Anaïs Demoustier) speaks about her childhood in a French village.⁴² The camera follows the clean line of her body as she lies on her bed, and she fingers her neck as she speaks, in a single long take, about falling in love with a girl, then being humiliated by local men. Alienated from her parents to the point that she had to leave home, she says she didn't even hate them for not defending her: "I hated myself for being like that." Almost to the end, it feels as if the film is enacting a monologue and that Pauline is alone. But in the last minute, it is suddenly apparent that she is speaking to her now-girlfriend, played by Adèle Haenel (Sciamma's own partner).

As writer and director, Sciamma has proved fearless. This strength emerges in her sensitivity about sexuality. This is behind her moves to make a film about young black women in the *banlieue*. The justness of her work depends on her pitch-perfect judgment as a writer, on her close attention to marginal experiences, and her political commitment to offering a new vision, a new picture of possible lives. *Girlhood* shows a girl dreaming a different destiny. It is an ongoing riposte to the teacher who shut her out of education. Despite its insistent echoes, its sense of all that Marieme has experienced that draws her back, the film lets her keep on moving into a future. This is the film's politics about violence against women and children. "Nobody even wants to admit it," says Rihanna about domestic violence. "It's still real." Rihanna speaks as a black woman and speaks about and to "anyone who's been a victim of domestic abuse." Sciamma in making *Girlhood* attends to the singularity of Marieme's experience, so that her film reflects the economic and social specificity of

her family context in a still far from egalitarian postcolonial France. Yet Sciamma also hints at continuities with other female experiences of hurt and violence in very different suburban contexts.

The subject of violence against women is finding its way into French female-directed filmmaking, though with dominant attention to date to the experiences of white women and children. Themes of violence and sexuality have been witnessed variously in Marguerite Duras's screenplay for *Hiroshima mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959) and her later novels, or with different emphasis in Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi's *Baise-moi* (2000), or indeed in Catherine Breillat's extended exploration of the female body and psyche from the 1970s forward. More recent films have tended to move with more pathos, more pessimism, and more regret.⁴³ Catherine Breillat's most recent film, *Abus de faiblesse* (*Abuse of Weakness*, 2013), offers an excoriating study of extortion and emotional dependency. Mia Hansen-Løve's films about girls and women, though more low-key in their treatment of violence, look in detail at the emotional hurt that surrounds separation. Actress-turned-filmmaker Maïwenn has more overtly opened a range of questions about partner violence and sexual abuse of children. Her *Pardonnez-moi* (2006) offers an autofictional account of a family. *Polisse* (2011) explores the work of the *Brigade de protection de mineurs* (the French child protection squad) with Maïwenn herself playing a female detective.⁴⁴ Her most recent film, *Mon roi* (*My King*, 2015), starred Emmanuelle Bercot (who shared best actress prize at Cannes that year) as a woman experiencing an increasingly hostile love relationship. Abuse of daughters within the family has long been a subject in French autofiction, particularly in the extraordinary work of Christine Angot.⁴⁵ It was also the subject of a moving first film *Je m'appelle Hmmm. . .* (*My Name is Hmmm. . .*, 2013) by Agnès Troublé, the fashion designer of Agnès B. fame.

Sciamma adds uniquely to these feminist engagements with violence against women and children through her non-sensationalist, highly sensitive, finely textured films. She creates protagonists who experience a wide range of conflicting feelings about situations where they are hurt. Sciamma's films understand blurred edges between pain and desire. They are nonjudgmental, sex-positive, love-positive. They are clearly, too, about hurt and about violence, in white families and in black families. They take this subject seriously in order to claim serious possibilities for overcoming violence, shaking off the past, crossing its barriers, leaving painful emotions behind. This, then, is the films' take on hurt and vulnerability. It is one of the reasons for their vivid attention

to the body, the skin, the entire sensorium of the young women and girls onscreen.⁴⁶

I am curious about the direction Sciamma's work will take next. Her first three films have been classified as coming-of-age movies. I claim them too as feminist engagements with violence against women and children. Issues of suffering and hurt continue in her screenplays for *Being 17* (André Téchiné, 2016) and *My Life as a Courgette*, though gender changes their subject to male adolescents and a nine-year-old boy respectively. If this focus on boys and young men can be seen as a recognition that boys can be victims of hurt, as signaled in Rihanna's interview, it is also a response to the demands of the particular writing projects. Sciamma speaks movingly in one interview about her vision of her work with André Téchiné, and of the work of a screenwriter in general, which requires being responsive to the filmmaker (*accueillir le cinéaste*) in order to create the best tool to allow their particular filming style to be enhanced.⁴⁷

Sciamma's script allows Téchiné to create his strongest film about adolescence since *Les roseaux sauvages* (*Wild Reeds*, 1994). If *Being 17* again pursues the theme of sexual expression between two adolescents at school, it is significantly different in the way this is handled. Sciamma describes *Being 17* as "post-gay," in terms of what becomes possible between these characters.⁴⁸ Their relations exist ambivalently between hurt and desire. Sciamma adds to the mix the elements of bullying, fighting, erotic longing, and realized sex acts, as the film shows that these coexist, with one touch, one contact leading to another, this time with no clear demarcation. Further complexity comes through the role of the mother (Sandrine Kiberlain), who feels desire for her son's friend and who brings him to live for a time in their family home; as a character, she is allowed her own autonomy, her own ambiguity. The screenplay pursues Sciamma's interest in reimagining the family, as with Téchiné she is able to expand beyond the child-centered focus of her three feature films to open up intergenerational relations with due subtlety. The clarity of the narrative line of the film and its leisurely pace reveal even more closely the relentless and fleeting, often ambivalent, moves and choices made by its characters.

This uncompromising and politically imaginative view of the family flourishes in her screenplay for *My Life as a Courgette*. Like the source novel, Sciamma's screenplay focuses on children who have for various drastic reasons been removed from their families and brought to live in a *maison d'accueil* (a children's home). Courgette has inadvertently caused the death of his mother. Alice has been abused by her father who is now in prison. Camille has seen her father shoot her

mother, and then commit suicide. Small figurines, marionettes with large moveable eyes and multiple adhesive expressions, incarnate these children. Sciamma has said that it was Claude Barras's tenderness toward his characters that appealed to her.⁴⁹

If *Being 17* is post-gay, *My Life as a Courgette* is post-nuclear family. Courgette and Camille are adopted by Raymond, the policeman who first looks after Courgette after his mother has died. A different possibility of intergenerational love and care is imagined. Speaking at the premiere of the film in Paris (October 16, 2016), Sciamma hoped that the film would encourage everyone to welcome (*accueillir*) and adopt each other. If hurt and violence have been in different ways her subjects through all these projects, her work since completion of her own trilogy is evolving to envisage new political and affective outcomes.

Notes

1. Lisa Robinson, "Rihanna in Cuba: The Cover Story," *Vanity Fair*, October 6, 2015, www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2015/10/rihanna-cover-cuba-annie-leibovitz
2. The importance of "Diamonds" to *Girlhood* was drawn out by Gemma Edney in "'Shine Bright Like a Diamond': Rihanna and the Transnational Experience of Girlhood in *Bande de Filles* (Sciamma, 2014)," paper delivered at the "Childhood and Nation in World Cinema: Borders and Encounters in World Cinema," Leverhulme network conference, held in Cambridge, UK, November 2–3, 2015.
3. Released by Studiocanal, it was screened at the Director's Fortnight in the 2014 Cannes Film Festival, in the Contemporary World Cinema section at the 2014 Toronto International Film Festival, and received four nominations for the French César awards. It racked up ticket sales of 306,713 in France. (The figures for Sciamma's first two films were 78,477 and 281,330 respectively.) In the United States, it was released by Strand.
4. Sophie Mayer writes: "*Girlhood* is very much a film about the 'hood, an unusual representation of contemporary urban space and its post-colonial subjects as female. The *filles* are banded together by their shared location in the *banlieues* of Paris, with all that that means /socially and economically." *Political Animals: The New Feminist Cinema* (London and New York: IB Tauris, 2016), 137–38.
5. The winner of the *Caméra d'or* (prize for the best first feature film presented in any of the Cannes selections) in 2016 was Houda Benyamina's *Divines*, repeatedly compared to *Girlhood* in the press that emerged from Cannes. It was released in France on August 31, 2016. Benyamina's film is more impulsive and less structured than *Girlhood*. Like Sciamma's film it has extraordinary performances from young female actors (Oulaya Amamra and Déborah Lukémuema).
6. Ginette Vincendeau, "Minority Report," *Sight and Sound*, June 2015, 25–31. She makes reference to two films from

2014, *Samba* (Oliver Nakache and Eric Toledano) and *Serial (Bad) Weddings* (*Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au bon Dieu?*, Philippe de Chauveron), considers films with actors of North African origin, looks at the legacy of *cinéma beur* through directors Merzak Allouache, Rachid Bouchareb, and auteur director Abdellatif Kechiche, and references attention to France's multi-ethnic population in films such as Claire Denis's *35 Rhums* (*35 Shots of Rum*, 2008) and Jacques Audiard's *Un Prophète* (*A Prophet*, 2009).

7. Régis Dubois offers a different, and damning, appraisal of *Girlhood* in his volume *Les Noirs dans le cinéma français: De Joséphine Baker à Omar Sy* (La Madeleine: Editions LettMotif, 2016), 117–22. His account of the exoticizing language used by the French press to describe the actresses and to convey their sensuality is both revelatory and important (for example, in his charting of the use of animal vocabulary such as "feline" and "she-wolf," which he argues constructs black femininity as physical, wild, and violent).
8. Vincendeau, "Minority Report," 27.
9. This was Téchiné's first film with an original screenplay since *Les Témoins* (*The Witnesses*, 2007). Sciamma has talked about how important Téchiné was to her cinephile formation when she first saw his major films in her teens. See Nicolas Gibson, "Interview: Céline Sciamma," March 2, 2016 (<http://www.ungrandmoment.be/celine-sciamma-entrevue-2/>)
10. LMC (Le Mauvais Coton), "*Quand on a 17 ans: Rencontre avec Céline Sciamma*," March 30, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuGquppIsMo
11. See http://next.liberation.fr/cinema/2014/10/17/bande-de-filles-une-jeunesse-francaise_1124323
12. Jean-Marc Lalanne, "Bande originale" [rencontre avec Céline Sciamma], *Les Inrockuptibles*, October 22, 2014, 42–48, on 44.
13. Didier Péron and Elisabeth Franck-Dumas, "*Bande de filles: Une jeunesse française*," October 17, 2014, next.liberation.fr/cinema/2014/10/17/bande-de-filles-une-jeunesse-francaise_1124323. This article was part of the extensive dossier devoted to *Girlhood* in *Libération*.
14. I feel there is future work to be done about the longer-term impact of *Girlhood* and in particular about the reception of and responses to the film by black female viewers in France and also internationally.
15. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 26.
16. Production designer Thomas Grézaud worked with Sciamma and Fournier on both *Tomboy* and *Girlhood*, contributing to the controlled environments created materially in the sets and spaces of the films.
17. I would align her work with Jane Campion's films in this regard.
18. This interest in the gritty, the crystalline, is another unlikely connection to Rihanna: at the start of the "Diamonds" music video, Rihanna pushes her hands through piles of diamonds thick as gravel. The rocks run between her fingers. In 2014, at the Council of Fashion Designers of America awards ceremony, Rihanna wore a dress encrusted with 230,000 Swarovski crystals.

19. In an interview with Sam Ashby, Sciamma says: “I write scenes that I believe haven’t been written before. In *Water Lilies*, one girl is deflowering another girl without love, in a clinical way.” See *Little Joe Magazine*, no. 3 (December 2011), 10.
20. Sophie Mayer offers a positive reading of the end of the film, arguing that Marie “defies the emotionally violent put-downs of her mean girl crush Floriane (Adèle Haenel), captain of the synchronized swimming team, by taking to the water.” *Political Animals*, 126.
21. Darren Waldron reads the film carefully as a film of gender nonconformity rather than as a trans or lesbian film, writing that “the film reveals the conditionality of all gendering by highlighting the performative strategies undertaken by boys to comply with compulsory masculinity.” See Waldron, “Embodying Gender Nonconformity in ‘Girls’: Céline Sciamma’s *Tomboy*,” *L’Esprit Créateur* 53, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 60–73, on 60.
22. Kerensa Cadenas writes: “With *Girlhood*, filmmaker Céline Sciamma has brought to the screen the delicate, joyful, beautiful coming of age story of Marieme (Karidja Touré), a black French teenage girl, who is fed up with her abusive home life. . . . Sciamma’s films effortlessly combine beauty, lyricism and a naturalistic storytelling in her direction and narratives. They ache with the care she takes to her craft and the importance of honestly telling the stories of her characters.” See Cadenas, “An Interview with Céline Sciamma, Director of *Girlhood*,” *Jezebel*, February 3, 2015, <http://themuse.jezebel.com/an-interview-with-celine-sciamma-director-of-girlhood-1683367053>
23. On the DVD commentary, Sciamma acknowledges that there may be hesitation in this opening over whether these are boys or girls, and whether this is France or America.
24. Outstretched hands are also seen in Rihanna’s music video for “Diamonds.”
25. This brief scene in the film merits comparison with other more extended investigations of multiculturalism and the French education system, such as Laurent Cantet’s *Entre les Murs* (*The Class*, 2008), Régis Sauder’s *Nous, princesses de Clèves* (2011), and Julie Bertuccelli’s *La Cour de Babel* (*School of Babel*, 2013). *Tomboy* has been shown in French primary and secondary schools, nicely highlighting the way Sciamma’s own work can influence education in France.
26. *Divines* has a memorable classroom scene where girls are given training to become receptionists. As in *Girlhood*, this is a turning point in the narrative and marks Donia’s exit from the school system.
27. Ginette Vincendeau points out that the name of Vic is “a reference to the Sophie Marceau character in the 1980 classic French teen film *La Boum* (*The Party*, Claude Pinoteau).” She cites Sciamma as saying that the original Vic was the perfect little French *fiancée* of the 1980s and that she was looking for the little French *fiancée* of today. “Minority Report,” 27.
28. Chrystel Fournier, AFC, interviewed at Cannes 2014 by the ARRI Channel, www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqjiNyB3olw
29. These images appear in her series “Colored People” (1989–90) and in a 1997 exhibition, respectively. However, Anupa Mistry, in a brilliant piece, draws a different connection to the film work of Hype Williams and specifically to his use of cobalt lighting in *Belly* (1998). See Anupa Mistry, “*Girlhood*: Finally, A Film about Black Girls Strengthening Each Other,” *Jezebel*, January 17, 2015, <http://themuse.jezebel.com/girlhood-finally-a-film-about-black-girls-strengtheni-1681462966>
30. Carol Mavor, *Black and Blue: The Bruising Passion of Camera Lucida*, La Jetée, Sans soleil, and Hiroshima mon amour (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 42. Mavor is interested here in the emotional effect of photography and writes, vis-à-vis Barthes and Weems: “Punctum at times may be just a little sting; but when it is coupled with some hard-hitting studium (like the fact of blackness, like the racing of photography, like color and women as nourishing), it is affectively bruising. It makes you black and blue” (42).
31. See www.albrightknox.org/collection/collection-highlights/piece:weems-colored-people-series/
32. Joseph Roth, *The White Cities: Reports from France 1925–39*, translated and introduced by Michael Hofman (London: Granta Books, 2004), 159.
33. Marieme and Lady also dance later in the film in a sequence choreographed by Karidja Touré. Their outfits recall those worn by the sisters in Jacques Demy’s *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (1967).
34. In an interview out of Sundance, however, Sciamma specifies further: “I think the youth of today, it’s not about having an ideal or to fulfill a desire,” she says. “I think she’s a contemporary heroine, because she’s narrowing her refusals. It’s not what she says ‘Yes’ to, it’s what she says ‘No’ to. And I think that’s something quite different and profound from today.” See Alison Nastasi, “‘Girlhood’ Director Céline Sciamma on Reclaiming Childhood, Casting Her Girl Gang, and How Her Film Mirrors ‘Boyhood,’” *Flavorwire*, January 30, 2015, <http://flavorwire.com/502100/girlhood-director-celine-sciamma-on-reclaiming-childhood-casting-her-girl-gang-and-how-her-film-mirrors-boyhood>
35. The French DVD film release (Pyramide Distribution 2015) has a director commentary by Sciamma from which these quotations have been taken.
36. The reference is an allusion to the protagonist of Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot*, from a comment by Sciamma on the DVD commentary. In an interview with Jean-Marc Lalanne, she speaks about female coming-of-age narratives, referencing variously Jane Austen and Jane Campion. In his review, A. O. Scott wrote: “‘Girlhood’ can be described (like so many movies these days) as a coming-of-age story, and it honors the genre, and its main character, with exemplary sensitivity and sympathy.” See Scott, “Exploring the Limits in a Man’s World: In *Girlhood* A French Adolescent Comes Out of Her Shell,” *New York Times*, January 29, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/01/30/movies/in-girlhood-a-french-adolescent-comes-out-of-her-shell.html?_r=0
37. The film is arranged in five “episodes” of just over 20 minutes each with protracted moments of darkness spacing them out.

38. The reference is to Delacroix's 1831 painting with the same title.
39. It feels as if the earlier phone images of Lady had sensitized Marieme, as if one series of images of a body leads to another, to a restaging of that woman's body into these bedroom shots of Ismaël naked.
40. B. Ruby Rich connects *Boys Don't Cry* and Sciamma's *Tomboy*: "Zoé Héran's pitch-perfect embodiment of her private/public gender binarism as Laure/Mickaël make the film's politics of gender dysphoria go down so easily, *Boys Don't Cry* minus the tragedy." *New Queer Cinema* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 279.
41. I see the end of the film functioning differently from, for example, the end of Lukas Moodyson's *Lilya 4-ever* (*Lilya 4-ever*, 2002) where Lilya runs away and jumps from a motorway bridge to her death.
42. *Pauline* was commissioned for the collection *5 Films contre l'homophobie / 5x7* (*Five Short Films against Homophobia*, 2010). Produced with French government funds for Canal +, the other films were directed by Xavier Gens and Marius Vale, Sébastien Gabriel, Pascal-Alex Vincent, and Rodolphe Marconi.
43. In different national contexts, and over this same period, Nan Goldin's slideshow project *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1985), Jane Campion's *In the Cut* (2003), and Icíar Bollaín's *Te doy mis ojos* (*Take My Eyes*, 2003), represent different, complex visual engagements with violence against women.
44. Malonn Lévana, who plays Jeanne in *Tomboy*, also has a role in *Polisse*. For an excellent critical discussion of Maïwenn, see Cybelle McFadden, *Gendered Frames, Embodied Cameras: Varda, Akerman, Cabrera, Calle, and Maïwenn* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014).
45. Angot's 2002 novel *Pourquoi le Brésil* has been filmed by Laetitia Masson as *Pourquoi (pas) le Brésil* (*Why (Not) Brazil*, 2004), an experimental autofictional film.
46. Other reasons doubtless include an engagement with girls as desiring subjects and a commitment to opening representations of queer childhoods.
47. Gibson, "Interview: Céline Sciamma."
48. LMC, "Quand on a 17 ans: Rencontre avec Céline Sciamma."
49. Alexandre Caporal, "Interview: Claude Barras et Céline Sciamma pour *Ma vie de Courgette*," July 4, 2016, www.daily-movies.ch/interview-claude-barras-celine-sciamma-vie-de-courgette