1

Introduction: portraits

Sciamma

The filming of Céline Sciamma’s fourth film *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu [Portrait of a Lady on Fire]* (2019) began with portraits of the director herself. Her cinematographer, Claire Mathon, took analogue photos on the set, starting with images of Sciamma. Mathon describes this as ‘a way of questioning differently the relation in creativity between the one who looks and the one who is looked at’ (Mathon 2019: n.p.).¹ The artist acted as model at the project’s inception.² This volume is a study of Sciamma after the success of her fourth film, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, which tells the story of a female artist falling in love with the young woman she paints. This manifesto film, a beautiful film about art, and about feminism, offers an optic through which to look back on Sciamma’s career to date.

Céline Sciamma is the most visible and important feminist, and lesbian, director in international filmmaking at this moment.³ She stood next to veteran director Agnès Varda on the steps of the Palais at the Cannes Film Festival in 2018, campaigning for gender parity in the film industry. Sciamma’s fourth feature, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, competed for the Palme d’Or at Cannes in 2019, and intervened directly in debates about the female gaze, sexuality, and specifically how to look at, and make a portrait of, young women. This feminist intervention has been extended beyond the film through her support for her
Céline Sciamma, former partner, actress Adèle Haenel, whose speaking up about sexual abuse has been critical in 2019 and 2020 in France’s ongoing reckoning with patriarchal violence and abuse in the film industry, and in society at large.

Sciamma is a director who has made children and adolescents, their vulnerable position in the family, and their autonomy and sensuality, central to her filmmaking. In her approach to female, non-binary, and queer identities she has focused in particular on the need for agency of children and adolescents, binding this imperative into her aesthetic choices and modes of filmmaking. She has been particularly attentive to issues of power and domination, showing how heteronormative families, and larger society, extend control and require submission and consent. She is extremely sensitive to the emotions, to ambivalence and conflicted affect, allowing intensity of feeling to be conveyed even in the sparsest narratives. This recognition of complex investments, of confusion, hurt, and tenderness, combined with a clear political agenda, makes her work feel excoriating, energising, and true.

Céline Sciamma was born in 1978, and spent her childhood in Cergy-Pontoise, a ‘new’ town in the Paris suburbs, filmed by Eric Rohmer in *L’Ami de mon amie* [My Girlfriends Boyfriend] (1987). After studying literature at Paris-Nanterre (one of the French universities centrally involved in May 68) she entered the prestigious film school La Fémis and studied from 2001 to 2005, majoring in screenwriting. The script for her first film, *Naissance des pieuvres* [Water Lilies] (2007) was her graduation project. She wrote it with no intention of going on to direct the script. The film was shot in Cergy-Pontoise in 2006 and went on to be selected for the section Un Certain Regard in Cannes in 2007. It also won the Louis Delluc award for a first film. Her second film, *Tomboy* (2011), premiered at the Berlin Film Festival in the Panorama section and won the Teddy award (for films with queer topics). Her third film, *Bande de filles* [Girlhood] (2014), screened in the Quinzaine des Réalisateurs section at Cannes. Her fourth, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, competed in the Official Selection at Cannes, winning the Best Screenplay Award, and the Queer Palm.
In addition to her *auteure* films, Sciamma has continued to write for other directors, collaborating with André Téchiné on the script for *Quand on a 17 ans* [*Being 17*] (2016), and adapting a novel by Gilles Paris for the stop-motion animated film *Ma Vie de Courgette* [*My Life as a Courgette*] (Claude Barras, 2016). Both of these projects show her interest in childhood and adolescence in the context of broken families, looking at bereavement and adoption, and at fragile links and attachments formed outside family structures. She has recently worked on a script with Jacques Audiard for the film *Les Olympiades* (2021) based on New Yorker cartoonist Adrian Tomine’s collection of graphic short stories *Killing and Dying*. She also worked for a year and a half on the TV series *Les Revenants* [*The Returned*] (2012), and several times in interview she expresses the wish to work as director in serial TV. Indeed, this is anticipated in *Girlhood*, which is structured in five ‘episodes’ with interleaving cuts to darkness.

A marked aspect of Sciamma’s films has been their politically charged relation to the moment they are made in, and also to the futures they anticipate. They also have a life of their own, sometimes shifting in meaning in the context in which they are received. Her second film *Tomboy* is about a child (played by Zoé Héran) who, on moving to a new housing estate, is (mis)recognised as a boy by another child, Lisa (Jeanne Disson). Following *Water Lilies*, a girl’s lesbian coming-of-age drama, it was initially possible, led in part by director interviews, to read *Tomboy* as a drama of childhood queerness, of a girl whose nascent same-sex desire compels her to identify as a boy. In the decade since the film was released, increasing trans visibility and activism has made it clear that more is at stake. The act of recognition allows the child to assume for the wilderness time of the summer holidays the boy self he is, while continuing to play the roles of girl, daughter, and sister in his family. Even if it was not intended as such, *Tomboy* is precious as an index of the sensory reality of a trans boy, and this, it appears, is one of the stories it tells.

Time has also already brought changing perspectives on Sciamma’s third film, *Girlhood*, a film about a girl Marieme...
(Karidja Touré) in the Parisian banlieue leaving school, after being denied access to the academic stream of education and joining a gang. The film is made with a cast that is majority Black and was initially received as a new feminist vision of the banlieue twenty years on from La Haine (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995). There were ambivalences about the film already on its release. The important moves in the decolonise movement and in particular the visibility of Black Lives Matter in Europe as well as the US in the years immediately subsequent to the making of the film have made it increasingly hard to appreciate a film made by a white director, and predominantly white crew, about Black lives in France. Political activism and a shifting climate have revealed oversights in the film. However beautiful the film is visually and accomplished as a narrative, and however committed it is to visibility of young women of colour – both the characters and the actresses – on screen, it needs now to be viewed with awareness of the criticisms it has generated from Black scholars.

A different shift, and movement in time, is witnessed in the even shorter afterlife of Sciamma’s most recent film, Portrait of a Lady on Fire. In its selection to compete in Cannes, and alliances visually with the work of Jane Campion, whose film The Piano (1993) is the only film to date by a woman to win the Palme d’Or, Portrait of a Lady on Fire offered visibility to women directors in the film industry. Sciamma is a founding signatory of the movement 50/50 by 2020, an equality initiative launched in 2018 to work towards gender parity in the French film industry. Her film gained more relevance to contemporary feminism through its lead actress Adèle Haenel’s decision in 2019 to speak out about the abuse and harassment she received as a child by director Christophe Ruggia. Her courage in facing this, and Sciamma’s support for her, allowed issues about patriarchy, the film industry, and tolerance for abuse to be made visible. This was a critical moment in French response to #metoo and in shifting opinions. Portrait of a Lady on Fire, with what Alice Blackhurst describes as ‘a sexual dynamic not dependent on predation, domination, or imbalances of power’ (2019: n.p.), was powerfully available
as a counter example. It was rightly adored by a young, female, feminist audience.¹⁰

Sciamma’s films metamorphose. I look at them as living things existing in time, rousing sometimes contrary, complex feelings. Metamorphosis is also one of their subjects, as they show young protagonists awakening and changing. Thomas Sotinel, reviewing *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, writes of her films, ‘the flourishing of their characters resembles a metamorphosis’ (2019: 25).¹¹ For Jonathan Romney, writing about a different film, and reading metamorphosis as perpetual, ‘[t]he young heroines of *Girlhood* are perplexing shape-shifters’ (2015: n.p.). Metamorphosis relates to adolescence, but its treatment by Sciamma belies a commitment to unfixing, of identity, and even of meaning, where she commits to what is mercurial and transient.¹² She herself comments on the strange experience of change as she was filming *Water Lilies*: ‘it was a very emotional thing filming Pauline Acquart [who plays Marie]: her body was changing over the time of the shoot’ (Garbarz and Martinez 2014: 27).¹³ Her filming meets her changing subjects.

As if to link contemporary coming-of-age stories to a far longer history of transitions, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* refers explicitly to the classical text, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, with its multiple stories of changes of body, gender, form, and matter. The tale that is referenced directly in the film is that of Orpheus and Eurydice, where the poet and lover Orpheus attempts to retrieve his dead beloved from the Underworld. But other tales in Ovid illuminate Sciamma’s themes, the tale of sea nymphs and the birth of coral, and the story of Tiresias who was transformed into a woman and was able to compare male and female pleasure. Bodies as impressionable, and ever changing, are her subject. She has said, indeed, that she would be interested in making a fantasy film in order to work on the strangeness of bodies growing and mutating (Garbarz and Martinez 2014: 27). She draws from Ovid an interest in matter and substance, and specifically their mutability. Recalling Ovid in thinking about Sciamma reveals the ways in which her work, although strikingly original, is always in dialogue with a
wider range of literary and artistic reference. Although its subject matter, up until *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, is very contemporary, her themes are also immemorial.

In thinking about Sciamma and the contemporary moment, I am inspired by recent French writing on feminism, in order to understand the immediate political and theoretical context of her filmmaking in France. Beyond this, and taking a longer view, I turn to the history of art, to feminist engagements with the visual, and to films, photographs, paintings, and sculptures by women artists who share concerns with Sciamma. In an industry such as cinema, so entrenched in patriarchal relations, painting and photography, and also myth and literature, offer new inspiration. Sciamma’s work is vitally cinematic, and reflective about cinema as art form, and about French cinema in particular, but like a portrait painter, or a novelist, she also attends passionately to her subjects, to their apprehensions, their attachments, and their being in the world.

**Domination**

In 2018 Manon Garcia published *On ne naît pas soumise, on le devient* [*One is not born submissive, one becomes it*] (2018) written in response to the #metoo movement in the US and France, and offering a new acclamation of the importance of the work of Simone de Beauvoir for contemporary feminism. I see it as a strong point of reference for thinking about Sciamma’s films. This comes in particular in its focus on identity as embodied and its attention to the importance of childhood and changes in puberty as they inter-relate with the social construction of binary identity, and the difference of being a girl. Young women’s need for self-possession, and the threat to this from the objectification of their bodies under patriarchy, comes strongly to light in Garcia’s work, following Beauvoir. The question of the self-possession and agency of children and young women is an enduring concern in Sciamma’s films, from her coming-of-age projects to her reflections on looking, power, and equality in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. 
Psychoanalyst Geneviève Morel begins an article on *Tomboy:*
‘To parody a famous statement by Simone de Beauvoir: how does one become a girl in the 21st century?’ (2012: 65). García adapts Beauvoir’s adage that one is not born a woman but becomes one, to think particularly about women’s submission to men, and women’s subjugation within a larger patriarchal system. For Garcia, it is important to think in more detail about what women submit to, and what that experience of submission is, both psychically and in embodied terms. She argues that ‘as women, they undergo a form of domination which is in part social but which is manifested above all in interpersonal relations’ (2018: 108). Women’s experience of submission is structural, prescribed by the structure of society which is still far from egalitarian (2018: 109). And it is also one-to-one, interpersonal relations repeating the larger structure of domination learnt and prescribed in society at large. Garcia sees the inter-relation between interpersonal instances of subjugation, such as sexual harassment, violence against women, and femicide – all the focus of #metoo and contemporary feminism in France – and a wider social structure. The intersection of difference in relation to class, race, and other markers of difference is critical here, but for Garcia all women live this structural submission in patriarchy. What is critical in Garcia and Beauvoir for Sciamma is their emphasis on girlhood.

Following Beauvoir, Garcia identifies the importance of childhood and adolescence in the apprehension of submission. Puberty marks the moment when the young girl comes to see her body as an object that is looked at by others, suddenly understanding that her body is sexualised by the male gaze (2018: 184). For Garcia, ‘her body has become something that no longer belongs to her, which is no longer her body, but a woman’s body, namely an object of desire for the male gaze’ (2018: 185). It is the understanding of this moment and its meaning that is critical to contemporary French feminism, and to its undoing the subjugation that this sense of being looked at, desired, implies. Garcia speaks about puberty as a time of transition, that also
involves a reckoning with the objectification of the body (2018: 184). There is something alienating in this time of metamorphosis being also one of dispossession. Garcia lays moving emphasis on the child’s ‘gêne’, the French term signalling ‘trouble’, ‘embarrassment’, and also ‘distress’ (2018: 140). The girl’s body no longer seems to belong to her. It exists for men instead, in their gaze (2018: 187), and she is divided from her own body and feelings.

The focus on childhood and adolescence in Sciamma’s first three films can be seen in a political light in this context. Sciamma is interested in showing and making visible the ways in which children and adolescents are subjugated by the laws of patriarchy and binary gender. She is also concerned with finding different, less alienating ways of looking and being in her films. Beauvoir, and Garcia following her, have drawn attention to the young girl’s body as central to this first realisation of objectification and alienation. Sciamma shows the ‘gêne’, the distress, of young girls, and takes it seriously. The attention to sensory detail, embodied realities, also in this sense has a political edge. She identifies alienation. Rather than looking away from the body, she imagines different ways of taking pleasure in it. Her work is sensually rich, as well as politically cogent. In her coming-of-age dramas, in her attention to child and adolescent bodies, she imagines different outcomes that do not prescribe submission. If they do show subjugation at certain moments – to the law of binary gender in *Tomboy*, for example – they make visible the pain of that submission. In her fourth film, she envisages the possibility of thinking about looking, and erotic apprehension of the body, outside structures of domination. This work she pursues with her former partner, whose own life experiences lend urgency and authenticity to the issues at hand.

The alienation of the young girl described by Garcia has disturbing resonances with the extreme experiences of Adèle Haenel in her encounter with Christophe Ruggia. In interviews Haenel draws attention to her feelings of guilt and powerlessness, and to the particular violence of keeping silent, of feeling gagged and unable to speak. She makes clear that this silencing was not
chosen but undergone, and she sees her choice to speak out as an act of solidarity with other victims of abuse. Garcia’s work on submission and subjugation allows the continuities between becoming a woman, and being looked at and objectified under patriarchy, and being subjected to abuse and violence, to come to light. Sciamma’s work does not draw directly from Haenel’s experience, but exists as an artistic reflection on, and vision of, survival beyond the girlhood narratives that Haenel and others are making public.

Sciamma’s work also moves beyond Garcia to consider non-binary identities, that of a trans boy, as well as those of girls and young women. For Sciamma’s critique of patriarchy, and her embrace of non-binary identities, the work of Paul B. Preciado is revelatory and in line with Garcia. In *Je suis un monstre qui vous parle* [I am a monster who is talking to you] (2020b), Preciado also thinks about patriarchy and subjugation, arguing that a feminist and queer rereading of the Oedipus complex according to Freud is urgently needed. Showing the ways in which psychoanalysis has failed to listen to, and account for, queer desires and non-binary being in the world, he specifically critiques the reading of incestuous desire in Freud, which is, for Preciado, a patriarchal crime:

I can say, very quickly, that by placing the blame on Oedipus and in putting the weight of analysis on his supposed ‘incestuous desire’, Freud and psychoanalysis have contributed to the stability of male domination, making the victim responsible for rape and making the social rituals of normalisation of gender, sexual violence and abuse of children and women which are the basis of patriarcho-colonial culture into psychic laws. (Preciado 2020b: 83–4)

In the contemporary moment, where abuse is being called out, psychoanalysts can no longer talk about the Oedipus complex or the Name of the Father. Preciado, like Garcia, sees a line between male domination in patriarchy, binary gender, and sexual
predation. He envisages childhood as the time of subjugation under these laws, writing of his own transition:

It’s more than six years since I abandoned the juridical and political status of woman. A time that seems short when considered from the deafening comfort of normative identity, but infinitely long when everything that has been learnt in childhood has to be unlearnt. (Preciado 2020b: 20)²⁵

Preciado identifies psychoanalysis with the social system which is produced by, and produces, male domination. He looks for a freeing of children and adolescents from predation and abuse, and also from the structures which facilitate male domination and binary gender.

Like Preciado, Sciamma sees the subjugation of women and children in a broader frame that includes gender non-conforming people. She sees puberty and adolescence as critical to understanding and contesting patriarchy, and bound up in this is a rejection of the body as an object sexualised by others. Sciamma advocates child and adolescent agency, autonomy, and self-possession. She looks towards choice, consent, and freedom. She offers ways of thinking about, and looking at, the body that move away from the categories and power relations of binary gender.

Sciamma thinks beyond the phallus and castration, valuing different body morphologies, and opening polymorphous pleasures. This is how she too, like Preciado, is moving towards a new history of sexuality. She creates moments in film that speak of lesbian and non-binary experience.²⁶ She lets these moments take on the aura of romance, a cinematic enchantment, a string of lights around the heart. She points to the way their existence in film, in France and globally, is politically important. If she is a director who has focused in on distress, embarrassment, and hurt, she is also interested in new moments of joy and pleasure.

As I look at her films, I am interested in the ways in which she mobilises moving image art as a means to achieve these goals. Showing children, girls, and young women, as mobile, and transforming, is key to this. Sciamma’s filmmaking seeks to
rethink the visual, beauty, and pleasure. This is how she looks for a means of refusing objectification and so ending a regime of domination.27

Inclinations

Sciamma’s critique of patriarchy and subjugation requires new ways of using the moving image medium and reflection on how bodies are shown on screen. Feminist philosophy and the history of art help identify the means she uses. For example, in her 2016 volume *Inclinations*, Adriana Cavarero offers an argument for thinking a relational ontology marked by a feminist critique of (patriarchal ideas of) uprightness and rectitude. She replaces rectitude with inclining, remarking that ‘to incline is to bend, to lean down, to lower’ (2016: 3). ‘Inclination bends and dispossesses the I’ (2016: 7), she says. She envisages ‘a kind of subjectivity already caught up in folds, dependencies, exposures, dramas, knots, and bonds’ (2016: 130).28 Cavarero’s turn to think these issues through painting, pose, and gesture allows thought about the interest of her work, between philosophy and history of art, for feminist film, and specifically for the work of Sciamma.

The kind of subjectivity involved in inclining is, for Cavarero, the maternal. Developing a *postural ethics* she highlights ‘maternal inclination – understood as a posture that is relational, originary, and asymmetrical, capable of evoking a common vulnerability’ (2016: 127).29 Her sense that a pose carries some vision of relation and intersubjectivity is compelling, and holds potential for thinking about how, and in what positions, the body is shown on screen. But Cavarero in *Inclinations* remains within the normative family structure in thinking the mother’s inclination to the child. (Her work in *Relating Narratives* (2000) opens to different structures in thinking female friendship.)

Sciamma too looks for a different relational ontology rooted in a different way of positioning and imaging faces and bodies, and she moves outside the mother and child relation. One alternative
part of Sciamma’s feminism, and its visual, pictorial realisation, is found in the postures through which she illustrates dramas, knots and bonds between children, women, and non-binary people, who are siblings, friends, and lovers. This is part of her thinking of the body beyond domination. She privileges agency and autonomy, but also, like Cavarero, shows how subjects exist exposed and in inter-relation, never fully knowing or understanding themselves or the others they love.

Cavarero looks to Renaissance art to find a different model for thinking ethical and feminist relationality. In looking to illuminate Sciamma’s film frames and the feelings they hold, I make comparisons with modern and contemporary works, paintings from the eighteenth century forwards, sculptures, and photographs, by women artists. This is to recognise the involvement of Sciamma’s work aesthetically with feminist work in other mediums, so illuminating her visual and spatial choices. This is not to trace influences but to find connections between different imagining and framing of bodies in feminist art. It is also a strategy to make visible some other artists who have in different ways kinship with Sciamma and shared ethos. In this aim to look at her works alongside those of other artists I am inspired by the work of two feminist art historians, Griselda Pollock and Carol Mavor.

In conjuring the idea of a ‘virtual feminist museum’, in her book project of 2007, Pollock imagines new ways of curating art and new encounters with artworks by women. She draws attention to possibilities for a feminist remapping of the museum space and newly politicised understandings of the exposure of the body in art. The virtual feminist museum, drawing on and rethinking the work of Aby Warburg in his Mnemosyne project, becomes a space for expression of new relations and for forms of activism.

More recently, looking at works by Sonia Khurana and Sutapa Biswas, Pollock writes: ‘One key focus of the Virtual Feminist Museum concerns the ethics and body politics of one specific “pathos formula”: lying down’ (2018: n.p.). Like Cavarero looking at inclination, Pollock is interested in a pose and gesture,
for her, reclining or lying prone. She thinks about the politically charged adoption of lying down in contemporary works. Khurana’s performance *Lying-down-on-the-ground* (2006–12), in Pollock’s reading, draws out intense emotions:

Lying down ‘speaks’ the weight of the trauma of psychological dereliction in the pathos of that act of giving way, desiring the support of bare earth or hard ground, or giving into a wish to escape into unconsciousness or sleep that might also feel like death. (Pollock 2018: n.p.)

For Pollock, the story and pose of Sleeping Beauty ‘represents the imposed passivity of women in patriarchal culture’ (2018: n.p.). She finds in the work of the artists she examines a different energy and aim. She writes: ‘Sometimes we place our bodies nakedly and vulnerably in the world of history or in the landscapes of memory’ (2018: n.p.). Pollock draws attention to possible reactivating and transforming of meanings, in repeating and shifting poses and gestures, moves and shapes.

In her different feminist art historical practice, Mavor gathers images with startling emotive, sensory, and formal connections, in a Proustian way letting links be apprehended by intuition, by sudden shock, by involuntary memory. Mavor juxtaposes words and images in her projects, telling stories and letting a dissolving sweep of images mesmerise the viewer. For Mavor, artworks, the field of the visual, hold sometimes unspeakable, intense, and bruising feelings, grief, an erotic charge, regression, joy. She is attentive to colour, texture, surface, the transparent, the glassy, the diaphanous. Her range of images, visual and verbal, by women artists, runs from Julia Margaret Cameron’s sensual images, dreamy, ‘otherworldly’, of children, to Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Carrie Mae Weems’s *Blue Black Boy* (1997), and Colette conjuring a memory of a field of blue wildflowers she saw as a girl. Mavor’s work, like Sciamma’s, is attentive to the sensorium of children, and connects this, through art, to adult consciousness.

As a filmmaker Sciamma has recourse to movement and changing angles of vision in her artworks. As a feminist, post
Beauvoir, she is sensitive to the body as part of our situation and being in the world. She is interested in the selfhood exposed, and hidden, in bodily pose and gesture, as well as facial expression. Looking at her films with Pollock lets her films be read as new iterations or reactivations of poses in art. And her portraits are also about feeling, about relaying emotions, if of the body then also of the psyche. Sciamma creates sensory worlds in her films, that are not only formally controlled but expressive, beyond language, particularly of the rarefied feelings of childhood and adolescence. Their affective charge is illuminated by Mavor.

Sciamma draws attention to the vulnerability and plasticity of young bodies. Her intelligent focus on her protagonists, and sparse, finely judged writing, lead her to conceive human, complex, sensitively drawn, and very real characters. Her portraits in film attend to the moves and needs of their subjects, without claiming to catch an essence, a true self. The films look at embodied existence, sensory life, gestures, emotions, silence, and stillness. Sciamma offers multiple, serial images. Her subjects are never fixed.

**Portrait of a Young Girl in Brussels**

Painting and photography are important in this study, but Sciamma's portraits of young girls can also be compared with works by a host of film directors, for example Jane Campion's *A Girl’s Own Story* (1986), Catherine Breillat’s *Une Vraie Jeune Fille [A Real Young Girl]* (1976), Julia Ducournau’s *Grave [Raw]* (2016), Rebecca Zlotowski’s *Une Fille facile [An Easy Girl]* (2019), or the various girl-led dramas of Mia Hansen-Løve or Alice Rohrwacher. Sciamma herself speaks of her encounter with ‘le jeune cinéma français’ in the 1990s and the influence of Noémie Lvovsky’s film about four girls, *La Vie ne me fait pas peur [Life Doesn’t Scare Me]* (1999). Over and above these connections, the one film which offers the closest anticipation of Sciamma’s work, and pre-empt its poignancy and truth about childhood
and adolescence, is Chantal Akerman’s *Portrait d’une jeune fille de la fin des années 60 à Bruxelles* [*Portrait of a Young Girl in the Late 60s in Brussels*] (1994), an hour-long film made for ARTE. The very title of Akerman’s film is echoed, perhaps unintentionally, in Sciamma’s recent title *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*.

At the centre of Akerman’s film is a party sequence. Michelle (Circe Lethem), in a striped shirt stands out from the other girls. Her mood is melancholy. A song, ‘La Bamba’, plays at the party. Danielle (Joelle Marlier), in a peppermint green dress, invites Michelle into the centre of the ring. For beautiful moments, Michelle and Danielle face each other dancing together. The music and ring of faces creates a blurred, vibrant ground for this unreal happening. Danielle has chosen Michelle. She takes her by the hand. Michelle glows with happiness. She is entranced by Danielle, by her prettiness. This is a *coup de foudre*, an interpolation. Danielle invites Michelle. She catches her in desire. Then Danielle goes back into the circle. She is glimpsed from behind, her dark hair hanging down. She finds her place, with a boy beside her. Michelle is alone.

The song continues, its sounds heightened. Michelle does not exit. She is as if arrested. She is alone, moving but unable to move on. She watches the dancers circle, and then chooses Danielle again. There is a hiatus in Michelle’s sense of self. She is suddenly exposed, lost. The film is painful in capturing her faltering. Danielle joins her. The repetition, the return to the ring, undoes the ritual. Akerman’s choice to have them do this again is devastating, about madness and impossibility. Michelle looks at Danielle, and Danielle’s shadow falls across her.

The music shifts to ‘It’s a Man’s World’. A boy cuts in and takes Danielle in his arms. Michelle is again on her own. Her face is close to the camera and the camera stays with her as she stays numb. She watches and there is no cut-away. Her lack of join with the world is felt. She stands, in readiness. There is pathos in the camera’s attention to her, her face impassive as she waits. And then she turns and leaves. She goes into the dark garden outside, passing a boy who wears her same striped shirt. She paces alone.
on the green lawn. The moment of love is lost. But it was present
in the dance, with manic joy.

Flashforward a decade or two to Sciamma’s films. There is the
first love of Water Lilies with its parties and dancing. There is the
interpolation of Mickaël in Tomboy where, with Lisa, he can exist,
miraculously, as a boy. Like Akerman, Sciamma is a director who
needs very few words to conjure feeling. Sciamma’s directing of
actors, her understanding of gesture and mood, are enough to
allow the moving images to hold pathos and meaning. Akerman
shows multiple shifting images of Michelle in her striped shirt,
her dark hair tied back, and Sciamma likewise returns to the girls
she films, showing them always different, catching minute shifts
in response, thought, and feeling. Sciamma follows Akerman in
her attention to the intensity, grief, and elation of growing up.
Sciamma moves forwards with these emotions. If for Akerman
this is about existence, opening to the world, Sciamma is more
focused on a clear, and liberatory, political agenda.

Scopophilia

Sciamma is an imaginative portraitist. This is felt in her attention
to the range of feelings, and to the becoming, the destinies, of
her young protagonists. It is achieved in her extraordinary par-
ticipatory and collaborative work with young actors. Children
and young women are dwelt on, photographed in her filmmaking
but, through Sciamma’s creative uses of her medium, never fixed,
always moving and moving on. This approach to portraiture is
witnessed in her creation of still and barely moving, shifting,
serial, frontal images of her protagonists, of the child in Tomboy,
drawn by his sister, of Adèle Haenel as a young woman, Héloïse,
in Portrait of a Lady on Fire.

Where Sciamma may be compared to women photographers
who have explored seriality and changes over time, such as
Rineke Dijkstra, and who have pursued narrative sequences of
images, such as Carrie Mae Weems (as discussed in my chapter
on *Girlhood*), the photographer who has come closest, for me, to illuminating the lives of female and non-binary children and young people, and making portraits of them, in ways revelatory for Sciamma, is Nan Goldin, the New York-, Berlin-, and Paris-based American photographer.


> With children, society starts destroying them quickly, but before they’re four or five they have their own worlds. I have this idea that children come from another planet; they remember that place at first then they forget it. This book shows children as autonomous beings; it’s not about children as invented by adults, not about behaving in ways that were prescribed to them. (Alexander 2014: n.p.)

Speaking in an essay in the same volume, of what he sees as Nan’s unique empathy with children, Costa names them ‘creatures who in their unwillingness to yield are doomed to suffer a gradual, inevitable subjugation’ (Goldin 2014: 376). Like Goldin, Sciamma envisages children as autonomous, as living in their own worlds that, through her careful work with actors, and her lively imagination, she is able to create on screen.

Both Goldin and Sciamma frequently show children without adults present. In their portraits, photographic and filmic, they attend to the real spaces children live in and fashion, and also to their play and imagination. This is about taking children seriously as subjects, adapting their mediums to make portraits of children on their own terms. These children are not seen as miniature adults, or as objects for idealisation and cherishing. From Courgetté, the stop-motion puppet, to Mickäel’s small *femme* sister Jeanne (Malonn Lévana), Sciamma lets her children be real, impressionable subjects. If Goldin opens an alternative paradise where children run free and wild, self-motivated, creative,
Céline Sciamma beautiful, Sciamma in her portraits of children is interested in the ‘inevitable subjugation’ that children undergo, and uses her films to detail this, and also to decry it. An area of sensitivity in Sciamma’s work is its questioning of compulsory heterosexuality and binary gender, each of the films in its own way using portraiture, close-up attention to children and adolescents alone, and in intimate contact, to chart the ways in which physical and affective lives and intensities outreach these laws. This is in parallel with two sections in Eden and After: ‘I’m a little girl, I’m a little boy’ (2014: 110–31) and ‘Girl love’ (2014: 164–87).

In ‘I’m a little girl, I’m a little boy’, the kids flout gender norms. In Io in camouflage, NYC (1994), Io in army gear, face painted khaki and green, looks out at the camera. In other photos, the same child holds out a plastic mermaid, lies reading The Hardy Boys, and climbs on a wolf statue in Central Park. In another photo, Lucien, hair long, is among the arcades in Coney Island. In others, Tara is in a leather jacket on a bike, and Elio is in a feather boa in the back of a car. These kids are gender queer, fluid, changing.

In ‘Girl love’, Goldin closes in on the intimacy of girl friendships. Mia washing Georgia in the tub, London (2007) is followed by several further pictures of these same little girls in the bath. Luna and Emma napping, Helsinki (2010) shows two different little girls in bed, with their own intimacy and connection. Goldin can conjure the force and dignity of these childhood attachments and their sensory worlds. She takes seriously children’s lived, chosen, real, and imagined identities, their individuality and sociality at once. She shows children as not always straight and not always binary, but without fixing and labelling, by just observing and feeling.

Both Goldin and Sciamma explore how visual mediums can offer sensuous, visually gorgeous, but liberating, non-voyeuristic ways of looking at faces and bodies. More directly than Sciamma, Goldin has claimed scopophilia, pleasure in looking, as part of her project as a photographer, this name being given to an ongoing series of works which began in 2010 with a commission to work with Patrice Chéreau in the Louvre Museum. Goldin spent time in the museum photographing and responding to a
vast range of paintings, largely portraits and nudes. She created a slideshow, *Scopophilia*, which played with transitions between her photographs from the museum and her own images of lovers and friends from her retrospective career. Such comparisons, and resemblances, she explored further in a series of grid pictures and portraits where a loved one and a painting are aligned.

One such alignment (seen in Goldin 2016: 192–3) shows Guérin’s *Portrait of a Young Girl* (1812) as photographed by Goldin the Louvre in 2010, next to her photograph *Siobhan, Berlin* (1993). Guérin’s painting shows the face and torso of a naked girl. Her short hair is tousled. She is grave and intent, her skin like pearl. She has a mix of androgyny and unmarked femininity. This girl is juxtaposed with Siobhan, her torso naked but Calvin Klein underwear visible. Her stature and affect are more confrontational, more reflective. She looks out of the portrait with a loosely made bed behind her. She was Goldin’s lover for five years. In *Nan Goldin, In My Life* (Paul Tschinkel, 1997), Goldin says: ‘it was a big part of our relationship for me to photograph her’. In *Scopophilia*, these images of Siobhan’s nakedness, mementoes of love, tokens of an earlier time, candid, beautiful portraits, find their way back into Goldin’s art.

The contemporary photograph of Siobhan is compared with a Romantic portrait. The two aligned have uncanny resemblances, a similar pose, exposure and reticence, energy and pathos, as each young woman seems strangely alive and also inscrutable. Goldin shows continuities between her own photographs and portraits of young women in the Western tradition in art. She questions the alignment of her pleasure in looking with the scopophilia of Western art. She also queers that tradition, making her portraits of her female lover part of a larger series of stories about the body and looking. Her politics are expansive and inclusive. She embraces historical paintings, showing looking itself as pleasure, as erotic.

Sciamma creates beautiful images in her films, curating sensory environments, worlds of light and colour, as she works closely with cinematographers Crystel Fournier and Claire Mathon. Looking is one of the pleasures of her films, looks in the films, the look of
the director at her subjects, the look of the viewer at the films. This is beyond and despite her feminist recognition of the relation between looking, objectification, and subjugation. This is indeed one of the interesting tensions of her projects. Sciamma’s work explores ways in which looking may no longer impose a gendered binary of activity and passivity. Looking and being looked at are collaborative, shifting, unfixed. As in Goldin’s *Scopophilia*, female beauty, desire in looking, are seen differently, in a fluid, queer domain of pleasure. Sciamma’s work, like Goldin’s, depends on a certain alchemy, closeness and trust, where the artist’s consensual intimacy with her subjects is part of the process of imaging. Sciamma makes art that opens the range of images of children cis and trans, young girls, and women, looking, and looked at, existing in the world. As I write she is working on a new project, *Petite Maman*, which will for sure extend this range, and confirm her unique position still further.

**Notes**

1 ‘une manière de questionner autrement le rapport de création entre celui qui regarde et celui qui est regardé’. Translations from the French are mine unless otherwise stated.

2 Sciamma has a cameo, as a server in McDonald’s, in her first film.

3 In September 2012 *Cahiers du cinéma* devoted an issue to women filmmakers, since no films by women directors were in competition at Cannes that summer. Céline Sciamma’s interview stands out. She argues that women’s cinema is an issue not of aesthetics, but of politics. See Sciamma (2012: 25). In the words of So Mayer: ‘Céline Sciamma is the most exciting thing to happen to French cinema since Catherine Breillat’s *Romance* (1999) definitively blew up *le cinéma du papa*’ (2015: n.p.).

4 This is also the town where writer Annie Ernaux lives. Ernaux too has done much to represent class mobility and the lives of women and girls.

5 See Garbarz and Martinez (2014) for further details about Sciamma’s studies before film school.

6 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 (Gilson 2016). She 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 (LMC 2016). Sciamma speaks movingly in one interview about her vision of her work with Andre 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 (Gilson 2016).

This is an inspiration for the structure of this book, where each of the five chapters has five sections.

Iris Brey offers a comparison between Sciamma’s Portrait of a Lady on Fire and Campion’s film (2020: 61).

In this context she was a co-organiser of the women’s march on the red carpet at Cannes later in 2018.

I witnessed this on first viewing the film in the ‘Cannes à Paris’ festival in May 2019.

Metamorphosis, and the specific emergence of the butterfly from the caterpillar’s cocoon, is used more overtly as metaphor in Leonie Krippendorf’s queer coming-of-age film Kokon [Cocoon] (2020).

‘c’était une grande émotion de filmer Pauline Acquart: son corps évoluait au fil du tournage’.

Garcia’s book also draws on her French doctoral thesis on submission. Coincidentally, she is the daughter of documentary maker Claire Simon. See Boulé and Tidd (2012) for an important reckoning with Beauvoir as theorist for thinking cinema, and Ince (2017) for a film theoretical reading of Beauvoir as phenomenologist and the implications of this for examining subjectivity in films by female directors.

‘Pour parodier un célèbre propos de Simone de Beauvoir: comment devient-on fille au XXIe siècle?’

‘en tant que femmes, elles subissent une forme de domination qui est en partie sociale mais qui se manifeste avant tout dans des rapports interindividuels.’

‘son corps est devenu quelque chose qui ne lui appartient plus, qui est non plus son corps à elle, mais un corps de femme, c’est-à-dire dans le regard des hommes, un objet de désir’.

Véronique Cauhapé writes that Sciamma explores in Portrait of a Lady on Fire ‘what woman have been submitted to by men’s law and how they have managed, sometimes, to get around it’ (‘ce à quoi les femmes ont été soumises par la loi des hommes et comment elles sont parvenues, parfois, à la contourner’) (2019: 18).

For a fuller account, see Dryef (2019: 23).

In Le Consentement [Consent] (2020: 131), an account of experience of abusive relations, Vanessa Springora likewise speaks of a nameless
violence. She draws attention to the adaptations an adolescent will make to a situation which she also sees and knows as abnormal and abusive.


22 Preciado describes it as the ‘Discourse of a trans man, with a non-binary body, before the Freudian School in France’ (‘Discours d’un homme trans, d’un corps non-binaire, devant l’Ecole de la cause freudienne en France’). The original talk was given in Paris on 17 November 2019. The published version also addresses the responses from the audience. The book is dedicated to Judith Butler. It follows Preciado’s work in Testo Junkie (2013) and Un Appartement sur Uranus (An Apartment on Uranus) (2019; 2020 in English) where, in broader theoretical discussion, he speaks of his own departures from binary gender. Catherine Malabou, in discussion of Preciado, speaks of ‘the metamorphoses of his body and gender’ (‘les métamorphoses de son corps et de son genre’) (2020: 94).

23 ‘Je peux dire, très rapidement, qu’en portant la faute sur Oedipe et en mettant tout le poids de l’analyse sur son supposé “désir incestueux”, Freud et la psychanalyse ont contribué à la stabilité de la domination masculine, en rendant la victime responsable du viol et en transformant en loi psychique les rituels sociaux de normalisation du genre, de violence sexuelle et d’abus des enfants et des femmes qui fonde la culture patriarco-coloniale’.

24 The full quotation runs: ‘You can no longer go on talking about the Oedipus Complex or the Name of the Father in a society which is recognising for the first time in history its femicidal functioning, where the victims of patriarchal violence are expressing themselves to denounce their fathers, their husbands, their bosses, their boyfriends; where women are denouncing the institutionalised politics of rape, where thousands of bodies are going into the streets to denounce homophobic attacks and the nearly daily murder of trans women, and the institutionalised forms of racism’ (‘Vous ne pouvez plus continuer à parler du complexe d’Oedipe ou du nom du père dans une société qui reconnaît pour la première fois dans l’histoire ses fonctionnements féminicides, où les victimes de la violence patriarcale s’expriment pour dénoncer leurs pères, leurs maris, leurs chefs, leurs petits-amis; où les femmes dénoncent la politique institutionalisée du viol, où des milliers de corps descendent dans la rue pour dénoncer les agressions homophobes et les meurtres presque quotidiens des femmes trans, ainsi que les formes institutionalisées du racisme’ (Preciado 2020b: 119–20). He responds here to the political issues importantly at the centre of activist protest in France from 2019.
25 ‘Cela fait plus de six ans que j’ai abandonné le statut juridique et politique
de femme. Un temps peut-être court quand on le considère installé dans le
confort assourdissant de l’identité normative, mais infiniment long quand
tout ce qui a été appris dans l’enfance doit être désappris.’

26 Few such moments have been filmed by women directors in France. (Catherine Corsini’s La Belle Saison [Summertime] (2015) is an exception
as a complex love story between women.)

27 After Portrait of a Lady on Fire was screened at Cannes, Sciamma was
interviewed by Iris Brey for the series of podcasts ‘She Cannes’ (Sciama
2019). She speaks about equality being the project of her work, about her
awareness of inequalities in the industry, and about her aims to represent
love and sex between women in new ways. She sees this as her twelve-year
project to date, and one where she is changing and challenging herself. She
looks to think beyond submission and power relations, in looking, and in
representations of love and sex, seeking other sensations and pleasures.

28 Cavarero has been important for Judith Butler’s work in Giving an Account
of Oneself (2005). Butler has engaged with Cavarero’s work Relating
Narratives (2000) also about dependencies, exposures, thinking about
how our own opacity and unknowing can be the basis of relationality.

29 A model is found in Leonardo da Vinci’s The Virgin and Child with St Anne
(1503–19) where the Madonna bends down towards the Christ child. For
Cavarero, ‘Leonardo’s painting gives the meaning of maternal inclination a
special ethical density and a neat geometric linearity’ (2016: 99).

30 As Pollock explains, the notion of a ‘pathos formula’ is drawn from Aby
Warburg: ‘For Warburg, images are dynamic modes of the transmission of
affects. Hence they are formulae for intensity, suffering, abjection, ecstasy,
and transformation’ (2018: n.p.).

31 Speaking about the coming-of-age story in Girlhood, Sciamma comments:
‘I thought of Jane Austen, of Jane Campion, of numerous stories where
a young girl wants to live her dreams, tries to free herself and comes up
against her era, her social and family setting’ (‘J’ai pensé à Jane Austen, à
Jane Campion, à de nombreux récits où une jeune fille veut vivre ses désirs,
demander à s’émanciper et se confronte à son époque, son milieu social et sa
famille’) (Lalanne 2014: 44). See also Mayer (2015) for discussion of this
quotation.

32 Sophie Belot’s excellent article on Water Lilies (2012: 170) references
Akerman’s film and takes account of a broader range of female-authored
French films about adolescent girls.

33 The title in French, Portrait de la jeune fille en feu, also carries echoes
of Portrait de la jeune fille en fleur, so recalling Marcel Proust’s novel of
absorption in a band of young girls in love, À l’ombre des jeunes filles en
fleur [In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower]. In its English translation, Sciamma’s title seems to look out to Henry James’s novel of female destiny, The Portrait of a Lady, adapted for the cinema by Jane Campion as a work of feminist costume drama in 1996.

34 She says in interview that there is ‘the political wish to represent girls, to go into their private worlds, to go into things that are fantasmatic and clinically real all at once’ (‘la volonté politique de représenter des filles, d’aller dans leurs coulisses, d’aller à la fois dans des choses fantasmatiques et absolument cliniques’) (Garbarz and Martinez 2014: 26).