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Staging the generic self: Céline Sciamma's autofictional praxis

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ABSTRACT

Céline Sciamma's uniquely positioned work and public identity present a number of apparent contradictions – especially when considered in the context of French female authorship. After briefly analysing these, this article elaborates its central thesis: that the aporias surrounding Sciamma's authorship, as manifested primarily in her films and secondarily in parafilmic publications and discourses, may be partially resolved by considering relevant artefacts through the prism of autofiction. Sciamma's latest film *Petite maman* can be seen as the fullest expression yet of a self-narrating tendency that close analysis reveals informs her earlier films as well. Finally, the article argues that such a perspective chimes with considering Sciamma's work as formally queer and thus politically significant in ways that exceed questions of identity politics without merely bowing to Republican universalism.

KEYWORDS

Petite maman; autofiction; film authorship; French women's filmmaking; feminist queer theory; Céline Sciamma

Since the release of her fourth feature film, *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu/Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) (hereafter *Portraits*), Céline Sciamma has joined the ranks of the most famous female filmmakers ever, certainly among those working outside Hollywood. She shares this honour with a small handful of arthouse directors such as Sally Potter, Jane Campion, Chantal Akerman, Lucrecia Martel and her compatriots Agnès Varda and Claire Denis. However, Sciamma's exposure may even surpass her predecessors' in terms of crossover mainstream visibility, as reflected by the parody of her aforementioned film by the globally mass-popular US comedy show *Saturday Night Live's* 'Lesbian Period Drama' trailer sketch.¹ As film and cultural theorists from Thomas Schatz (1981) to Judith Butler (1999, 176) have intimated, narratives must be highly recognisable in order to work as spoof.

This reference to a transnational remediation of Sciamma's work reflects the fact that her visibility is in part attributable to the accelerated globalisation of media culture in recent decades, alongside her willingness to work with popular genre templates. Yet this approach accompanies well-documented art cinema credentials, from training at the prestigious La Fémis film school to multiple award nominations and wins. While such engagement with genre is hardly unique in auteur cinema, Sciamma's wholesale openness to resolutely mainstream forms comprises an unusual and distinguishing feature of her œuvre (Smith 2020, 9–10) – one among many. This article proceeds from the premise that Sciamma's work and public identity present a number of such apparent contradictions, especially when

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considered in the context of French female authorship.² After briefly analysing these, it elaborates its central thesis: that the aporias surrounding Sciamma's authorship, as manifested primarily in her films but also through parafilmic publications and discourses, may be partially resolved by considering relevant artefacts through the prism of autofiction. Accordingly, the analysis pays attention to Sciamma's autorepresentation via paratextual platforms as a newly expanding channel for autofictional self-expression, in conjunction with analysing the films. Such an approach departs from, while drawing on, key earlier analyses of Sciamma's films more exclusively focused on questions of phenomenological address and/or identity politics.³ It shares more common ground with studies of her filmmaking in terms of both genre (Chevalier 2019; Smith 2020) – which coincides with (cross-generic) authorship in comprising a hermeneutic based on accrued meanings, including across varied types of extra-filmic discourses – and especially queer aesthetics (McNeill 2018; Bradbury-Rance 2019, 78–97). These optics are, however, complemented by an amplified focus on self-narration. Indeed, the article finally argues that an autofictional perspective on Sciamma and her films chimes with reading these as formally queer and thus ideologically significant in ways that exceed the politics of representation without merely bowing to Republican universalism.

Continuity and difference – the liminal pioneer

Sciamma's exceptional visibility is perhaps most striking when considered in conjunction with her status as an out lesbian director. This is certainly true for the French context, where both *Portrait* and her first film, *Naissance des pieuvres/Water Lilies* (hereafter *Naissance*) (2007), by centralising female homoeroticism, represent a step change from the slow growth in depicting lesbians sympathetically but in secondary roles on the part of female filmmakers in France in the late 1990s (Tarr with Rollet 2001, 91). Furthermore, Sciamma's work issues a direct challenge to the paradigm adopted by pre-millennial films by women that 'rarely question heterosexuality as a desirable goal' (51). Thus, as Karine Chevalier has also noted, Sciamma plays knowingly with conventions associated with such narratives, in particular denaturalising their co-imbrication with classic coming-of-age films. For instance, in *Naissance*, Floriane (Adèle Haenel) flirts with the overdetermined fate of being introduced to sexual experience by an older man, only to laugh in the 'pervert' pretender's face and end up having her hymen unceremoniously broken at her request by a female friend, protagonist Marie (Pauline Acquart). That Marie nurtures a sexual obsession with Floriane makes this queering of the heteronormative rites-of-passage trajectory all the more blatant (Chevalier 2019, 69–70).⁴

At the same time, thanks to a breadth of subject matter, Sciamma's work overall nonetheless adheres to Republican tradition in sitting ill with the tag of *lesbian cinema* as such – a notion in any case described by Lucille Cairns as 'patently absurd' (Cairns 2006, 2) in its reductive approach to cultural artefacts. Further, Sciamma's statements, such as her well-publicised defence of filmmaker Abdellatif Kechiche's right to make a lesbian love story as a straight man (Regnier 2014), also distance her from an essentialist sensibility. We are thus confronted with a body of work in which a recurrent concern with gender fluidity is routinely, and logically, discussed through reference to its director's lesbian identity, while at the same time we are warned against adhering too slavishly to such a perspective. Such an apparent paradox is perhaps most familiar in France through

the more pronounced example of many female filmmakers' historical refusal to acknowledge the importance of gender – let alone feminism – to their work, even when this flagrantly contradicts such a posture. As Ginette Vincendeau's contribution to this special issue demonstrates, Sciamma's statements display traces of this legacy, despite her not only having been prominent in feminist activism off-screen but also making films whose overt focus on gender identities has ultimately rendered the importance of such categories to her directorial work almost impossible to deny, including in the public arena (with *Tomboy* [2011] being used to teach children about trans identities). When it comes to both gender and sexuality, Sciamma can here be seen as in part a product of changing cultural mores. The label *feminist* was devalued under post-feminism from the 1980s to at least the late 2000s globally, but in the last 10–15 years declarative feminism – like gay Pride – has gained much greater currency globally, even in France. The longstanding French tendencies in French (film) culture both to celebrate artistry in isolation from – 'above' – social identity, and to trivialise women specifically as objects, die hard, but the emergence after #MeToo of the feminist Collectif 50/50, fighting for gender parity in screen industries, indexes a shift in attitude. As its website explains, this organisation was in fact a new iteration of a similar one co-founded by Sciamma five years earlier, and she is an exceptionally important figure in the new generation of filmmakers whose work and other activities reflect these changes.

As regards her films' thematic and aesthetic qualities, Sciamma's interest in topics including childhood and adolescence (*Naissance*, *Tomboy*, *Bande de filles/Girlhood* [Sciamma, 2014, hereafter *Bande*]), *Ma vie de courgette/My Life as a Courgette* [Claude Barras, 2016, co-scripted by Sciamma], *Quand on a 17 ans/Being 17* [André Téchiné, 2016, co-scripted by Sciamma] and art (*Portrait*), as well as her use of strategies to dethrone both the male gaze (on which more later) and pornographic economies for representing female sexuality more generally (examined in *Portrait* by Susan Potter in this volume), all have a solid lineage in French women's filmmaking of the 1980s and 1990s (Tarr with Rollet 2001, 25–27, 141–146, 54). What is novel is the extent to which Sciamma and her films articulate an expanded notion of (female) authorship by embracing self-narration through autofiction. Autofictional practices have been extensively identified with women's writing in France since the late twentieth century (Jordan 2012; Richard 2015; Baillargeon 2019); interestingly, Sciamma has cited an autobiographical account by a key figure in the trend, Annie Ernaux, as the direct inspiration for an abortion scene in *Portrait* (Syme 2020), as well as further aligning herself with Ernaux – for instance in a joint interview – through post-#MeToo activism and because they both hail from the same town (see Grassin and Groussard 2021), while Emma Wilson's article in this volume notes both women have also explored their characters' mothers' childhood. In cinema, the first-person documentaries of the 1990s made by women loosely associated with the *jeune cinéma français* auteur movement such as Dominique Cabrera, Sophie Calle, Lætitia Masson and others seem to have paved the way for a more recent mini-wave of autofictional films by female director-actors including Noémie Lvovsky, Valeria Bruni Tedeschi, Maïwenn and Julie Delpy.⁵ I refer here to films featuring fictionalised characters whose experiences are based fairly closely on the filmmakers' own, on which basis it is apparent that directors do not need to physically appear in their films in order for these to take the kind of broadly autofictional approach ascribable to strands of Sciamma's work – although the director did appear in a cameo role as a fast-food vendor in *Naissance*,

which also hews closely to autobiographical concerns. The personal resonances of Sciamma's first film reside most obviously in its theme – a young woman, Marie, coming to terms with same-sex desire – but also its setting, Sciamma's (and Ernaux's) hometown of Cergy-Pontoise, north-west of Paris. Retrospective autobiographical significance is also readily attributable to the casting of Adèle Haenel, who would later become the director's partner and – with *Portrait* – definitive 'muse', as the object of Marie's desire, Floriane, just as it adds a highly personal dimension to *Portrait* itself.

It would be misleading to suggest that the multiple correspondences between life and art of the sort I am describing are new in auteur cinema; one only has to think of François Truffaut's well-known body of films starring his 'alter ego' Antoine Doinel to see that, if anything, the opposite is true. In fact, Tim Palmer's (2011, 15–56) analysis of coming-of-age films by auteur directors, placing them as the inheritors of Truffaut, suggests that autobiographical elements are particularly common in these (Smith 2020, 16), such that many might be usefully described under this banner. In many ways, the example of Truffaut epitomises broadly 'autobiographical' variants of the more general phenomenon whereby the discursive auteur filmmaker takes on part of the burden of the work usually done by genre, in allowing audiences to make sense of art films (Bordwell 1979). It is striking, however, that all Palmer's examples are films by women (including *Naissance*) – even if there are not only empirical but also theoretical reasons for associating female filmmakers with coming-of-age stories, as much as personal ones. Notably, girlhood in many ways emblematises women's (like queer) identity as a whole in being permanently in a state of becoming, or attempting to live up to some elusive ideal of 'womanhood'. There is a certain irony to the fact that 'the discursive auteur [has always been] constructed by intertextuality' (Cobb 2015, 12), or reliant on a relational identity that undermines the exceptionality of individual artworks or their makers. From this perspective, female authorship is well suited to negotiating the self across the many texts of an authorial oeuvre. It is also in this sense that I posit the self constructed across films by one author as inherently generic: it is legible only when necessarily reduced to a simplified, incomplete and relational articulation through constellations of component elements (themes, iconography, etc.). More pertinently for the purposes of the present discussion, autofiction provides a particularly apt vehicle for exploring such fluid forms of identity, by dispersing the self specifically into various characters.⁶

Indeed, the obvious difference between Truffaut and Sciamma, reflected by my use of the (nonetheless imperfect) term *autobiography* and not *autofiction* in the first case, is Truffaut's repeat use of one character, speaking to Platonic notions of the coherent self underpinning traditional ideas of authorship as opposed to contemporary post-modern ones. As Johnnie Gratton's definition of autofiction in his *Encyclopaedia of Life Writing* recognises, the mode stresses the 'act-value' rather than the 'truth-value' of narrative (in Jordan 2012, 76). Thinking of autofiction as centralising the inchoateness of personhood and (so) the incompleteness or exploratory nature of (self-)representation, points to further important precursors of Sciamma from the previous generation of French women auteur filmmakers: Catherine Breillat and Varda (see McGuire 2005). Thus, Breillat's *Sex is Comedy* (2002) constructs a 'making of' mockumentary about a film that looks almost identical to the director's earlier fictional feature *À ma sœur! / Fat Girl* (2001) (itself significantly based on her relationship with her own sister) and notably about the director Jeanne's (Anne Parillaud) difficulty finding authenticity

when filming sex scenes. Many of Varda's films explore concerns linked directly to her own experiences, whether through fiction or documentaries spotlighting close acquaintances (including her husband) among other topics, but it is in *Les Plages d'Agnès/The Beaches of Agnès* (2008) that she most directly and consistently addresses the fragmentation of the self through a 'complex, performative reinvention of her entire life' (Jordan 2012, 83), without obscuring her presence as subject as well as filmmaker under any fictional guise. Likewise, willingness to foreground the personal distinguishes Sciamma's work from the traditional view of authorship as creative genius, which paradoxically downplays 'mere' personal exploration (including in Nouvelle Vague filmmakers' critical praxis) – though in her case this is realised for the most part *alongside* the text. Hence, just as important to the expanded definition of the contemporary autofictional author is what Mercédès Baillargeon describes as a conscription of multi-media channels into the construction of their star persona, allowing them to 'move their staging of the self into the public sphere' (Baillargeon 2019, 9–10).⁷ Sciamma's celebrity status has been significantly established by her willingness to appear across media – facilitated by the ever-increasing global massification of communication channels in the digital age – and a key element to this construction of the branded self revolves around the director's tendency to foreground personal connections in her films paratextually. Breillat is perhaps the closest comparison here, in that she does not appear in her relevant work herself, such that links to her life have often been filled out in interviews. However, Sciamma's films approach her own experience more obliquely, while by contrast the tendency for her paratextual discourse (and public image) to underline often precisely how multiple personal connections inform her work is considerably more extensive. For example, it is thanks to many references made in media appearances and interviews following *Naissance* that it is well known that Sciamma set this film in her hometown. Likewise, in interview she revealed that the awakening of Marie's queer desire through observing Floriane engaged in synchronised swimming reproduced her own lived experience: 'synchronized swimming [. . .] symbolized *something I wanted to be* or somebody that I wanted to love' (Newman 2008, my emphasis). In this way, the filmmaker clearly invites us to see her filming of synchronised swimming as comprising a kind of exploration of an (idealised) self.

The remainder of this article will demonstrate in more detail the claim that using paratextual platforms in this way to elaborate frameworks within which to understand her work is a strategy widely deployed by Sciamma. This is true to the extent it becomes logical to consider her work and statements as comprising a praxis, in other words an approach to cinema that theorises the films alongside their production; consequently, we are cued to consult both forms of authorial articulation to construct Sciamma's autofictional narrative. Of those following *Naissance*, it is Sciamma's latest, *Petite maman* – also her second set in Cergy-Pontoise – that most blatantly returns to personal territory. I will therefore adopt a non-chronological approach (whose aptness for a study of Sciamma's anti-teleological cinema will become apparent) and begin by examining this film. Then I will consider more briefly how even apparently more self-evidently generic films such as the *banlieue* film *Bande* and the period melodrama *Portrait* might nonetheless be usefully thought of through the paradigm of autofiction.

Autofictional retrospectives

Petite maman offers the magical realist tale of eight-year-old Nelly's (Joséphine Sanz) encounter with her mother, Marion, as a child of her own age (played by twin sister Gabrielle Sanz). This interlude occurs during a trip to pack up Marion's childhood home owing to the death of her own mother, when Nelly spends her days in the surrounding autumnal forest building a treehouse with her new friend. If this suggests a moment of liminality outside time, just as Ellie Smith's article in this volume argues of *Naissance*, *Petite maman* also constructs Cergy-Pontoise as a somewhat anonymous canvas for psycho-social explorations.⁸ Indeed, while all Sciamma's films concentrate on fairly narrowly defined spaces and characters, *Petite maman's* locations and cast – like its gently muted palette – are strikingly restricted in a fashion often seen in literary autofiction and reflective of the primacy of the author's subjectivity to the world created.⁹ Thus, locations encompass only a nursing home in the opening sequence, where Nelly visits her grandmother for the last time, a car and her grandmother's house and wooded surroundings including a second house, Marion's, that is a mirror image of the first. The film's use of naturalistic lighting echoes the look of *Portrait*, shot by the same cinematographer, Claire Mathon, while the outdoor forest backdrop is also redolent of *Tomboy*.¹⁰ To add to the promotion of self-exploration, Sciamma not only acknowledges using the woods where she herself played as a child for filming, but also explains the improbable architecture of the house – which seems to be a bungalow but features a long corridor – as a function of her bending of reality to her subjective memories: she amalgamated her two different grandmothers' homes, one an apartment and the other a house (Sciamma 2021). Moreover, in the same interview, Sciamma claims the mood of the film, typified by a certain ease partly ascribable to fluid camerawork, despite the melancholy subject matter, mirrors her own enjoyment of and confidence during filming.

This observation simultaneously stakes out a certain distance between *Petite maman* and Sciamma's first film, focused on the agony of unrequited love and failure to fit into a heteronormative space evoked by hard lines and rigid disciplinary practices.¹¹ It is tempting to ascribe this change of sensibility to maturity and the relative reconciliation with the 'non-normative', or messy and boundless, self this tends to bring. *Naissance* and *Petite maman* offer increasingly distant takes on the coming-of-age formula, with ageing entirely reversed by the second film, whose action is moreover initiated by the ultimate culmination of all life narratives: a death. At the same time, the circularity that also pertains to Sciamma's oeuvre in 2022 as sketched out here finds numerous echoing figures within *Petite maman's* diegesis. Notably, the refusal of temporal teleologies (past leading to present then future) is immediately tied to a refusal of spatial ones during the opening sequence taking place in a care home. Here, a smooth sequence shot shows Nelly spending time doing a word puzzle with her grandmother, taking her leave, then going into several residents' rooms along a corridor to wish them goodbye, until she reaches the last one to find her mother inside it, gazing out of the window. However, it quickly transpires that, despite its different location along the corridor, this is the first room we saw and Nelly's grandmother has now died. In a similar fashion, the woods in which Nelly and Marion together build a den lead at both ends to the same destination, their respective homes, in an inversion of Red Riding Hood's inability to stay straight on the path to her grandmother's house. A fairy-tale genre-world ambience is nevertheless

maintained, not least thanks to Marion's red velveteen jacket. The impression of an enclosed arena is also partly a function of filming with minimal establishing shots, an approach necessarily extended to the interior sequences, filmed on a set. Thus, repeated shots follow Nelly as she proceeds down and back up the house's central passageway, looking for a cupboard built flush into the wall where a cache of alluring knick-knacks belonging to her grandmother are to be found in old biscuit tins (Figures 1–3). These sequences offer a filmic alternative to certain features of recent French life writing identified by Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier: 'concentric narrative that drills down repeatedly into the same material' and 'immediacy' (Jordan 2012, 80). Yet an almost static camera offsetting Nelly's movement in them is here attuned to a particularly leisurely exploration of circuits: forms that at least since Descartes have figuratively evoked the human mind, in this case Sciamma's own.

A further detail ascribable to the drive for (inter)personal exploration and consonant with theorisations of the (female-authored) autofictional approach that recurs in *Petite maman* is the figure with their back turned to camera.¹² As well as (often) Nelly walking along (Figure 1), and her adult mother looking out of a window in the opening sequence described above (Figure 4), we also see Nelly's sleeping father in such a posture (Figure 5) and the child Marion, during a game of role-play (Figure 6). Such unusual views exemplify perfectly a tendency identified by Baillargeon through analysis of the writings of Christine Angot, attributing to autofiction a desire to play with the autobiographical convention of *dévoilement* or 'unveiling [characters' 'true' nature]' (Baillargeon 2019, 19). Here, instead, the inscrutability of ontological essences is expressed by the iconography of veiling (also an approach literalised for shooting the lovers in *Portrait* [Figure 7]), reflecting autofiction's status as a post-structuralist-influenced successor to more traditional accounts of the self. Not only that, but the choice to show figures with their faces hidden from the viewer has been theorised as symptomatic of an ethical conception of self–other relations in cinema, wherein directors respect alterity rather than seeking to subordinate others to their interpretative gaze (Cooper 2007). Richard (2015, 33) invokes an identical Levinasian theoretical apparatus to claim that the narrative subject posited by autofiction is an inherently ethical one in the philosopher's sense of 'existing for the other' [*être pour autrui*]. Such an approach bears out Sciamma's apparent view of the directorial role, one which – perhaps paradoxically – proves well tailored to the autofictional project. In the first place, Sciamma consistently promotes a collaborative approach to filmmaking both explicitly and implicitly, in that she also works as a screenwriter for other auteurs such as André Téchiné. Further, across hundreds of interviews, Sciamma has repeatedly stressed the centrality of audience address in her conception of cinema as art; discussing *Petite maman*, she has claimed that her memories and emotions – despite shaping the film – are unimportant except in their potential usefulness as a route to prompt us to engage our own varied and particular ones, whatever they may be (our 'hidden' subjectivities) (Sciamma 2021). Here Sciamma illustrates Baillargeon's point that female authors of contemporary autofiction use multimedia channels to 'implicate the public directly as both reader and spectator' (Baillargeon 2019, 10).¹³ These various practical and critical statements are knitted together by their emphasis on the use of fictional structures to facilitate 'real' intersubjective communication, contact and proximity – to 'use [...] the simulacrum to reveal the truth' (Chevalier 2019, 77) – outside of relations of domination. In terms of cinematic precedent, it is apt to recall that Julia Dobson in her work on video



Figures 1, 2 and 3. The set of the house in *Petite maman* figures the chambers of Sciamma's own memories and psyche.



Figures 4 and 5. The camera in Sciamma's films acknowledges the hidden alterity of even the beloved other.

essays by Cabrera cites René Prédal's equally paradoxical acknowledgement that non-indexical DV recording technology, which is also Sciamma's medium of choice, can make it easier to 'get close to other people' (in Dobson 2012, 36).¹⁴

In Richard's view, the yearning for intersubjectivity articulated by autofiction is often reflected by the explicit thematising of a desire for contact with the other, including through erotics (Richard 2015, 24; see also Baillargeon 2019, 7): a suggestion that could sum up Sciamma's project.¹⁵ According to the filmmaker, discussing her first film, '*Water Lilies* goes into the locker rooms of girls not to fantasise, but to see the crude realities', and



Figures 6 and 7. The camera in Sciamma's films acknowledges the hidden alterity of even the beloved other.

the storyline that sees Marie unceremoniously break Floriane's hymen so that the latter can live up to her socially inflicted role of 'slut' literalises the inseparability of the impetus to stage a social identity and the need for brute contact. Sciamma's earlier cited comments about *Naissance* aptly crystallise ideals of both self and other around the physical figure of synchronised swimming. Similarly, discussing *Bande* as a *banlieue* film about Black teenage girls which draws centrally on globally recognisable pop music, Sciamma repeatedly emphasises an empathy for the real girls who inspired it, imagined in terms of

proximate embodied experience (rather than of identity – Sciamma has been criticised for speaking ‘for’ a racial group that is not her own):

Every time I walk past them, there’s a kind of fascination or empathy. And of course, that’s immediately followed by thinking about the fact that they’re invisible. How could I display them as not a theorisation but an incarnation of all their contrasts? That was the aim of my film. (In Marques 2014)¹⁶

Or, ‘I didn’t feel I was making a film about black women but *with* black women’ (Romney in Wilson 2021, 63). In this vein, Frances Smith (2020, 54–59), drawing on Wilson (2017) and moral philosophy, details the way in which *Bande’s* focus on the violence engaged in by gangs of socially alienated girls can be read in terms of an exploration of ethics in which bodily gestures express, alternately, hurt and love: a measure of the vulnerability that comes of the human need to be ‘recognised’ or understood (in non-dominating ways) by others. This speaks to the same dialogical impulse underpinning autofictional self-revelation, the way in which ‘I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another’ (Bakhtin in Cain 2022). As F. Smith further explores in this special issue, sporting and dance sequences in the film (as also in *Naissance*) throw into relief bodies’ sameness beyond social identities. Wilson meanwhile suggests Black female subjectivity in the film is co-authored with Sciamma’s actors; for instance, Karidja Touré as lead character Marieme choreographed dance sequences (Wilson 2021, 64, 71–76). No wonder journalists have also equated Sciamma with her characters in this film despite substantial disparities, with *Le Monde’s* coverage calling her a ‘*fille de bandes*’ (‘group girl’) (Regnier 2014).¹⁷

It is worth clarifying, in view of *banlieue* films’ typical association with social commentary, that formal realism has no place in this desire for emotive experience; instead, we have seen that Sciamma opts for stylised, arthouse-influenced aesthetics that range from intrusive musical numbers to the breaking of the fourth wall, as well as intradiegetic sequence patterning of the kind elaborated in *Petite maman* (not to mention depicting a *banlieue* in *Bande* whose racial makeup is overtly inauthentic [Vincendeau 2018, 92]). However, this does not take anything away from the filmmaker’s desire that audiences feel something that approximates the physical texture and emotion-sphere of others’ lives. On the contrary, I agree with Wilson (2014, 2017, 2021) that an overt engagement with Art is very often paralleled by a use of *mise en scène* that (beyond privileging the diegetic body as such) centralises tactility and materiality. Accordingly, bodies for Sciamma are at once repositories of – and vehicles for cuing – heightened emotions, but they are nonetheless understood as culturally constructed.¹⁸ Thus, *Naissance* is an aching depiction of unrequited youthful desire constructed through open citation of US teenpic conventions for character typology, featuring among other figures, in the director’s words, the ‘very beautiful’ girl and the ‘fat one’ (in Chevalier 2019, 63). Chevalier moreover describes these characters in terms of ‘a body image *that determines their relationship to others* [exaggerated] to the point of caricature’ (63, my emphasis), such that emotion emerges as a function of interpersonal choreographies. Critic Jean-Luc Douin adopts a similarly behaviourist perspective – and one that is apt for Sciamma’s well-publicised habit of choosing and styling her actors’ costumes in dialogue with them to build the character – when he comments

on *Tomboy's mise en scène* of the physical pain of having to wear a dress (Douin 2011). The important point is that generic identity-construction works here like autofiction, and within its mode of expression, by instantiating the most intimate and even material facets of personhood as a product of intersubjectivity, through social apparel in the broadest sense (not just costumes but character types, patterns of behaviour and so on). It is of passing note that considering such fundamentally generic tropes' ability to make individual experiences recognisable to broad publics further allows us to situate Sciamma's work as a whole within a growing trend for women filmmakers to adopt the discursive structures of genre as propitious for autofictional concerns, in France (Leahy and Vanderschelden 2021, 302, 324) and in globalised and globalising Hollywood (Harrod 2021, 247–260). In Sciamma's case, to further underscore the game of 'concentric circles' of self-exploration through social genericity in *Petite maman*, the importance of costume is not only evidenced by the similarities between Nelly and adult Marion's attire, but also by the little girls' role-play through dressing up as long-lost lovers in an imagined family melodrama – also the genre to which the film comes closest. This is particularly striking in view of alter-ego author figures' common presence in autofiction. If Lourdes Monterrubio Ibáñez (2022, 539) sees 'the gesture of handing the camera to another person becom[ing] a ritual recognition of its autofictional nature' in contemporary French cinematic autofiction, diegetically handing over costuming (and scriptwriting) duties to her young characters bears a similar significance in Sciamma's work.¹⁹ Altogether, Sciamma's (2021) elaboration of her directorial praxis of interacting with actors illustrates the drive to use fictional structures for shared understanding and broad communicability, conceived through horizontal relations. The filmmaker thus reports not telling her actors what to feel, instead limiting herself to 'the language of genre' when directing them. Given *Petite maman's* relatively looser relationship with film genres compared to other Sciamma films, it is reasonable to speculate that *genre* here designates the textual term's overlap with (and bearing on) 'real life' behavioural modes, or, to paraphrase Gledhill (2017, x), the genericity of social performance; hence, Sciamma celebrates the experience of working with children whose lack of ego 'allows access to a more genuine building of rhythm'.²⁰

We can, then, trace correspondences between Sciamma's characters, her actors and the filmmaker through their joint embrace of creative enterprise underpinning the desire to exist socially or be understood. Furthermore, the frequency with which trauma and psychic disturbance recur in autofiction (Baillargeon 2019, 7) points to such narratives' typically cathartic function for their authors – and by extension potentially for their addressees, as in the title of Calle's (2007) novel *Prenez soin de vous* ('Take Care of Yourself'). It is apt, then, that when discussing *Petite maman* Sciamma (2021) has noted that 'fiction can give us all new patterns' and describes with pleasure how a friend alleviated distress during an argument with her own parent by imagining building a den with them (cf. Zoppé 2021). *Petite maman* is here dubbed by Sciamma no less than a 'therapeutic device [...] for future memories' on the part of her audience. This statement simultaneously signals the archetypal qualities of narrative as such, acknowledgement of which is implicit in all autofiction's perverse use of the general to explore the particular.

'Post-gay' cinema and queer feminist authorship

Sciamma's reflections about *Bande* allow us to infer that the film was conceived in part as a tool to prompt imaginative experiences of what it is like to live as a Black woman in the French *banlieue*; she has been open about the fact that *Tomboy* was commissioned as part of a push against homophobia by the Ministry of Health, and so evidently intended among other things as a propagandistic film, in other words one that would allow anyone to empathise with the desire to perform another gender; and she has specifically described *Naissance's* making as underpinned by the aim for all viewers to experience gay desire (Oumano 2010, 214).²¹ Chevalier (2019, 77) further builds on statements made by Sciamma in her above-cited interview with Elena Oumano about cinema's capacity to have us 'live experiences you would never otherwise undergo [...] open[ing] your mind and body to other people's feelings', to claim a political approach to filmmaking. While I have already suggested that a film praxis determined by horizontal relationality, and one that makes the personal political, is obviously feminist inflected, in this section I will suggest that Sciamma's praxis also corresponds with various theorisations of queer.

As Sciamma's only film (as director) to date to deal at any length with a consummated gay relationship and one that starred her own one-time partner, *Portrait* merits primary attention in this discussion. This film queers interpersonal erotic relations not merely by featuring lesbians but through its inversion of the typical artist–muse dynamic. Thus, the paradigm of looking (or filmmaking) as possessing, which is associated with the postures of mastery adopted by traditional auteurs and the rhetoric surrounding them, is turned on its head by the film's self-conscious reflection on regimes of representation through the example of portraiture.²² Haenel's Héloïse refuses to pose for painters sent to render her image and who are constructed not merely as bearers of the male gaze but as the literal agents of patriarchy, because her portrait is to be dispatched to the unknown future husband chosen for her by her family. Not only that, she pulls the rug out from under the very notion of artistic representation as stable knowledge or guarantor of proximity when she suggests that one day a drawing of her will supplant her 'real' self in her lover Marianne's eyes. Such a statement points to the way in which Sciamma's films frustrate monolithic interpretations. Moreover, it reveals the dynamic of male domination so often underpinning heterosexual relationships to be not just undesirable but a hubristic patriarchal illusion. Of course, Marianne is a woman, underlining the fact that such dynamics can persist perfectly well in same-sex relationships – as they threaten to at the start of the film, before Marianne strays from the purpose for which she has been employed. It is only in eschewing such regimes of power that relationships become not just gay but queer, and Isabelle Regnier's qualification of the director and actress's liaison as 'post-gay' looks forward to slippage between the real-life Sciamma–Haenel duo and the onscreen artist–'muse' couple seen in *Portrait* (Regnier 2014).

Secondly, as Isabelle McNeill (2018) and others have also noted, Sciamma's work and its exegesis bear a striking similarity to queer feminist affect theory, particularly the writings of Sara Ahmed and her seminal conviction that:

It is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others [...] emotions create the very effect of an inside and an outside. (Ahmed 2014, 10)

Extrapolating from such claims that social structures impinge on identities, the writings of both Ahmed and Lauren Berlant have pointed to the role of genres – here too encompassing psycho-social and not merely fictional narratives – in fostering communities, including queer ones. A significant strand of such work in cinema involves melancholic engagements with past eras, apostrophising a particular shared ‘we’ formed by suffering. *Portrait* thus takes its place in the canon not merely of what the *Saturday Night Live* sketch sends up as lesbian period drama (a handful of texts) but the wider category of queer period melodramas. Popular at least since the 1980s and enjoying a recent boom, from *Maurice* (James Ivory, 1987) to *Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2015) and *Call Me by Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017), these are films that index the historical pain of impossible same-sex (or, potentially, otherwise ‘alternative’) love stories under oppressive cultural systems through aestheticised formulae. While such a phenomenon is not beyond reproach for its overdetermination of gay identities in terms of painful foreclosure in an era when many would hope this script is obsolete, at a formal level it speaks to queer’s rejection of linear temporalities and ‘futurism’.²³ We have seen that such a stance is also much in evidence in Sciamma’s syncopated approach to the rite-of-passage narrative as a ‘stagnant time-space’ (Chevalier 2019, 66). *Petite maman* in particular reimagines its world in the absence of the relentless momentum of positivity and ‘growth’ associated with heteronormative matrices, privileging themes of arrested development and play within a queered space whose logic of relational continuity is scrambled from the emblematic first sequence onward. Queer form in it further extends to an audience address wherein for Wilson in this special issue, ‘Sciamma plays with the viewer, as readings of what is happening fail to settle’: an approach that evokes experientially the way in which non-normative ‘bodies fail to “sink into” spaces’, producing ‘a “queering” of space’ that has the potential for social transformation (Ahmed 2014, 152). While bittersweetness dominates many queer-inflected love stories precisely because of their temporal bracketing outside what queer theorists such as Elizabeth Freeman and Jack Halberstam have seen as normative temporality (Cicoski 2021), this film of the imagination tends moreover to celebrate the sweetness of present-orientation and attendant identity fluidity. The scenes of the children entertaining themselves with role-play endure in the memory, while the film’s penultimate sequence shows Nelly and child Marion enjoying a riotous baking session then sleepover and exhilarating boating outing before parting. Although there is melancholy to transience, reflected in child Marion’s request during this precious final day and night together that Nelly and her mother sing Happy Birthday to her not once but twice, *Petite maman* then closes on Nelly and adult Marion seated side by side in an embrace to the euphoric strains of the song ‘La musique du futur’/‘The music of the future’ written by Sciamma that proclaims, ‘If my heart is in your heart//Your heart//Your heart is in my heart.’²⁴ Consequently, the film stresses the permanence of love outside traditional time-space in a less tragic fashion than do star-crossed romances such as *Portrait*.

Not unlike Sciamma’s films, despite rejecting the narrow labels of *lesbian cinema* or even *lesbian filmmaker*, this article has circled back to the issue of ideology. It is apt to close with an additional layer of circularity, by suggesting Sciamma’s work demands we recalibrate notions of female film authorship and French women’s filmmaking in particular, with its queer formal and cultural associations in mind. While women’s interest in personal stories is truistic globally, this article has argued that Sciamma has pushed the interweaving of her private life and her work further – and certainly with greater cultural

visibility – than most of her predecessors. Universalising aspects of one’s own experience resonates with feminist authorship. It resonates even more loudly, however, with queer discourses that understand identity as radically unfixed and dialogical, typified by the ‘infinite permutations’ [*permutations infinies*] journalist Isabelle Regnier (2014) sees in Sciamma’s vision of childhood in *Tomboy* and played out in the destabilisation of roles around which *Petite maman* revolves. More than any of her other films, her latest both intra-diegetically and paratextually queers the familiar lines along which interpretation is made and creates new spaces for authorial self-expression. This innovation reveals the figure of the auteur, with which we have seen Sciamma cannily engages and whose shoes are among those inhabited by this self-dubbed ‘perverse polymorph’ [*pervers polymorphe*] (Regnier 2014), to be formally, inherently, queer. This is because of the key role played by intersubjectivity in erotic desire (in its broadest sense), relating not merely to gay communities, as Jackie Stacey’s (1994) work on film viewership has amply shown: to cite a second time Sciamma’s description of writing Haenel’s character Floriane in *Naissance*, synchronised swimming partially symbolised not merely a love object but ‘something I wanted to be’ (Newman 2008, my emphasis).

The strategy of addressing materiality as a route to immateriality – enlisting the body in and through films as a means to allow viewers to experience something akin to others’ lives – that is central to Sciamma’s autofictional cinema and its theorisations also offers a unique space for reconciling these positions in French culture. This is because, as Sam Bourcier has noted, ‘the Republican demand for minorities to remain invisible [means that] the anti-identitarian injunction of queer theory holds a different political significance in France’ (in Evans 2020, 6). Responding to a situation that has meant queer identities have a vested interest in achieving visibility without ghettoisation, Elliot Evans’s theorisation of queer permeability in French thought enlists the vocabulary of touch and skins to argue for the kind of ‘symbiosis between material body and language’ I have been elaborating in these pages as a potential way out of the impasse: ‘This book is committed to both the anti-identitarian impulse that inaugurated queer politics and the deep suspicion of universalism permeating French queer works’ (Evans 2020, 12).²⁵ I have already alluded to the problematic non-assertion of feminist (or even feminine) identities in France; for Bourcier, the LGBTQ+ movement has likewise been crippled by a pernicious Republican universalism on multiple fronts. Needless to say, the superficial contradictions of Sciamma’s positioning as both a feminist and a gay auteur referenced at the start of this article are underpinned by this conundrum. But just as the very title of Evans’s book accords canonical (lesbian) feminist writer Monique Wittig a primordial status in the development of queer thought, so the foregoing analysis of Sciamma’s œuvre is intended to spotlight the far-reaching importance of her praxis for both groups. Her films, in inviting identity-fluid engagement through an appeal to embodied yet socially situated subjectivities, offer intersubjectivity without erasing the specificity to which Republicanism can be blind; they mimic the body’s status as culturally generalisable but at other levels particular. In so doing, they emphasise shared humanity, or widely resonant experiences, without denying the symbolic hidden face of the other. Put simply, Sciamma’s work reminds us that walking in another’s shoes through fictional creativity can be interpreted as both a queer and a feminist act.

Notes

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgaLIP0xmQE>. The sketch explicitly references both *Portrait* and *Ammonite* (Francis Lee, 2020).
2. Ginette Vincendeau's piece in this special issue explores some of these contradictions from the point of view of Sciamma's status as a celebrity.
3. For examples of feminist-phenomenological readings focused on *Bande*, see Pember (2020); Niang (2019, 251) typifies the concern with identity politics.
4. See also Smith (2020, 79), citing Whitney Monaghan and Bradbury-Rance's work on coming-of-age as queer.
5. On Cabrera, Masson and Lvovsky, see Dobson (2012), and on Lvovsky, Bruni Tedeschi and Maiwenn, see Leahy and Vanderschelden (2021, 296–326). That these developments parallel global ones is illustrated by the online symposium *Women's Auto/biographical Cinemas: The Gendered Story*, held on 27–28 November 2021.
6. Autofiction by women displays a similar fascination with coming-of-age, with salient French examples taking in girl-focused stories by, among others, Ernaux or Delphine de Vigan.
7. 'investir la mise en scène de soi dans la sphère publique.'
8. Smith (2020, 20) sees this anonymity as propitious for mapping American genre onto *Naissance's* narrative.
9. *Petite maman* also responded creatively to restrictions in place owing to its being shot during the COVID-19 pandemic.
10. In a discussion at the *Motherhoods on Screen: Global Perspectives* conference, 23–24 September 2022, Maynooth University, it was suggested that autumn leaves in *Petite maman* also recall the fire in *Portrait*, altogether contributing to a 'Sciamma-verse'.
11. See also Ellie Smith's article in this collection.
12. Cinematographer Mathon's co-investment in this detail is evidenced by its presence in at least one other film she has worked on subsequently, *Saint Omer* (Alice Diop, 2022).
13. 'un processus qui implique directement le public en tant que lecteur et en tant que spectateur.'
14. 'elle facilite [aussi les contacts, donc] l'approche de l'autre.' Similar claims have been made about Agnès Varda's 'materialist, feminist, phenomenological, and political' use of digital cinema to interrogate herself and other topics (King 2007, 422).
15. Breillat and (again) Ernaux are exemplary here.
16. 'À chaque fois que je les croise, il y a quelque chose qui est de l'ordre de la fascination, de l'empathie. Et évidemment, ça se double très vite d'une réflexion sur le fait que ce sont des invisibles. Comment va-t-on les déplier dans ce qui n'est pas une théorisation mais une incarnation de tous leurs contrastes ? C'était le projet de mon film.' While I do not deny this approach suppresses specific histories, a situation with which Mame-Fatou Niang and in a different way Alice Pember take issue in Sciamma's work and/or its reception, this strikes me as a deliberately chosen trade-off.
17. Regnier is here ostensibly referencing Sciamma's ability to fit into any social unit or demographic 'like a chameleon' [*comme un caméléon*].
18. The film's constellation of movable intergenerational figures also centralises the body in its game of echoes and correspondences, by having Marion inherit her mother's walking disability, while ultimately making the child lucky enough to be expecting an operation that will intervene to reroute this path before she matures. Cult Sciamma fans who tattooed a detail ('p. 28') from *Portrait* on their hands provide a literal demonstration of how culture can write on the body.
19. Nelly and Marion also build their own woodland 'set' in which to play.
20. Gledhill's phrase is 'the genericity of social gender', which is directly highlighted in the film when two little girls role-play at being star-crossed lovers and parents of an illegitimate baby (a doll).
21. On *Tomboy*, see for example 'Céline Sciamma talks "Tomboy" – Film – Time Out Barcelona' (Anon. 2013).

22. The Nouvelle Vague filmmakers were quintessentially associated with cultivating muses via on- and off-screen erotic relationships with creatively and socially subordinate actress-lovers. The paradoxes of conceptualising authorship via feminism, when the latter has often emphasised ethics and relationality and the former singularity, are well known.
23. For fuller discussion of this queer representational paradox, see Bradbury-Rance (2019).
24. 'Si mon cœur est dans ton cœur // Ton cœur // Ton cœur est dans mon cœur.'
25. My thanks to Oliver Davis for this reference.

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Filmography

À ma sœur!, 2001. Catherine Breillat, France/Italy.
Ammonite, 2020. Francis Lee, UK/Australia/USA.
Bande de filles, 2014. Céline Sciamma, France.
Call Me by Your Name, 2017. Luca Guadagnino, Italy/France/USA/Brazil.
Carol, 2015. Todd Haynes, UK/USA/Australia.
Maurice, 1987. James Ivory, UK.
Ma vie de courgette, 2016. Claude Barras, France/Switzerland.
Naissance des pieuvres, 2007. Céline Sciamma, France.
Les Plages d'Agnès, 2008. Agnès Varda, France.
Petite maman, 2021. Céline Sciamma, France.
Portrait de la jeune fille en feu, 2019. Céline Sciamma, France.
Quand on a 17 ans, 2016. André Téchiné, France.
Sex is Comedy, 2002. Catherine Breillat, France/Portugal.
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