

'Des plafonds dans les yeux': representing the New Town in *Naissance des pieuvres* (Céline Sciamma, 2007)

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ABSTRACT

In contrast to Sciamma's *Bande de filles/Girlhood* (2014), little scholarly attention has been accorded to space in *Naissance des pieuvres/Water Lilies* (2007). Featuring quiet neighbourhoods in the Parisian suburb of Cergy, *Naissance's* backdrop is unassuming. However, its association with consumerism, capitalism and the French state is a rich and hitherto underexploited topic for analysis. Considering the town's relative novelty, this article interprets Sciamma's on-screen environment as a partial 'non-place' as defined by Marc Augé. Such a town produces superficial social connections characterised by contractual exchanges. Meanwhile, the detached *pavillons* in *Naissance* retain a proximity to countryside that suggests freedom and banality, but the tension between nature and state generates oppressive effects. This article argues that *Naissance's* backdrop is punctuated by an underlying sense of entrapment. Space is a vector for exploring human relationships, extending themes of feminism and sexuality that permeate Sciamma's wider oeuvre.

KEYWORDS

Céline Sciamma; queer; space; New Town; power; feminism

When asked to justify her decision to direct *Bande de filles/Girlhood* (2014, hereafter *Bande*), a film set in the Parisian *banlieue*, Céline Sciamma references her upbringing in Cergy-Pontoise: 'I have a strong sense of having lived on the outskirts – even if I am a middle-class white girl' (Sciamma cited in Romney 2015). One of several New Towns [*villes nouvelles*] intended to 'redistribute populations and economic activity' around Paris (Welch 2018, 119), Cergy-Pontoise began construction in 1967, welcoming its first residents five years later (Goursolas 1980, 408). It is this swiftly erected town that became the setting for Sciamma's first feature film, *Naissance des pieuvres/Water Lilies* (2007, hereafter *Naissance*). Already, Cergy had most notably been the backdrop for Éric Rohmer's *L'Ami de mon amie/My Girlfriend's Boyfriend* (1987, hereafter *L'Ami*) and *Enfance d'une ville* ('Infancy of a Town', 1975), a documentary codirected with Jean-Paul Pigeat. While in recent decades *banlieue* cinema has been associated with poverty, inequality and marginalisation, initially 'the *banlieue* was represented as a site of [...] Sunday relaxation'. In *L'Ami*, Rohmer suggests that [...] modern citizens are content dwelling in the periphery' (Handyside 2009, 202, 206). *Naissance* appears to return to this; characters hardly experience the prejudice and brutality showcased in *Bande*. It falls into the category of what Ginette Vincendeau calls 'quiet *banlieue*' cinema: female-identified, 'characterised by

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a lack of crime and violence' and featuring a proximity to both Paris and nature (2018, 91, 93).

Nevertheless, Sciamma's setting is not without challenges. For one interviewee in *Enfance d'une ville*, 'Cergy's most pressing concern is that it is a place without a past; [...] what constitutes urban and civic life above all is time accumulated as history' (Welch 2021, 183). This evaluation proves prescient about *Naissance's* portrayal of Cergy some 30 years later. Here, as we shall see, characters endeavour in vain to form new, fulfilling relationships. The modernity of settings like malls, garages and public transport feel detached from the Cergy of *L'Ami*, wherein characters bond and converse at cafés and restaurants. *Naissance's* New Town experience is disjointed, lonely and seemingly uncondusive to fostering deep-rooted communities.

This analysis takes as its starting point Marc Augé's writings to define Sciamma's on-screen environment as a partial 'non-place': that is, echoing the interviewee's concerns, a place that 'cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity' (Augé 1995, 77–78). Its quasi-'non-place' status and its infrastructure affect the film's characters and relationships. Reflecting the sense of isolation conveyed in Sciamma's statement above, the protagonist, Marie (Pauline Acquart), contemplates the probability that most people die with 'des plafonds dans les yeux' – 'ceilings' imprinted 'in their eyes'.¹ The present essay will argue that, despite its mundane image, the setting in *Naissance* engenders its own 'plafonds', through analysing the consumerist and spatial influences within it.

New Towns, non-places

Etymologically, the term New Town suggests a melange of a 'place' and a 'non-place', as defined by Marc Augé. If words 'that did not exist thirty years ago' are 'associated with non-places', and can be contrasted with 'the realities [...] of residence or dwelling' (Augé 1995, 107) then the phrase juxtaposes the two. In *Naissance*, this duality appears via the co-presence of places of residence, which are relational, historical and concerned with identity, with several public spaces lacking these characteristics. Scenes of characters strolling through the neighbourhood feature the detached houses, or *pavillons*, of the Parisian suburbs. As Vincendeau observes, such buildings evoke the 'under-represented *classes moyennes* who [...] constitute large swathes of film and television audiences' – in other words, the familiar French household (2018, 94). Shots inside the girls' homes confirm their status. When Marie is in her bedroom choosing her outfit for a party at the local swimming club, the camera pans to reveal drawings taped to her door. Later, while sorting through waste stolen from her love interest, Floriane (Adèle Haenel), a photograph of Marie and her best friend, Anne (Louise Blachère), is pinned to her shelf in the foreground. Such details infuse this location with life and identity. Evidence of a history experienced in the home predating the narrative, these images indicate a historical relation to the house and thus qualify it as a 'place' in the Augéan sense.

At the same time, New Towns have been criticised for failing to offer "'places for living", equivalent to those produced by an older, slower history: where individual itineraries can intersect and [...] solitudes [are] momentarily forgotten' (Augé 1995, 66–67). Reflecting this assessment, 'meeting' places in *Naissance* are not intended for meeting at all, but rather are transitional spaces. They may not strictly be Augéan non-places like airport

lounges in which individuals ‘interact only with texts, whose proponents are [...] “moral entities” or institutions’, but they still have the defining characteristics of lacking history and identity, surrendered to ‘the temporary and ephemeral’ (96, 98). Hence, Marie spends time with Floriane on coaches and trains, while other settings, ‘leisure parks, large retail outlets’, are specifically identified by Augé as non-places (79).

Of course, the way space is used can contradict the architect’s intentions and shopping centres are nowadays ‘a place of socialisation for the youth [...] where certain identities are defined’ (Thomas 2018, 244).² Indeed, Augé explains that the non-place ‘never exists in pure form; places reconstitute themselves in it; relations are restored and resumed in it’ (1995, 78). Inhabiting an adult-constructed environment, children especially tend to restore relations in unconventional places – fields, street corners – claiming space in a landscape whose design they cannot influence (Elsley 2004, 157–158). They conduct ‘a sort of everyday tinkering’ to subvert the rules of society, to ‘deflect them, [...] to establish their own decor and trace their own personal itineraries’ (Augé 1995, 38). Sciamma’s *Tomboy* (2011) documents this well. Green areas outside apartments and concrete porches are hangout spots, but while these consistently host sustained, inclusive group interactions, similar milieux are often experienced in *Naissance* through shallow, fleeting relations – or as non-places, from Marie’s point of view.

For example, Floriane meets her love interest, François (Warren Jacquin), in a garage while Marie waits miserably alone and Marie is isolated from other girls while swimming in the municipal pool. Within Sciamma’s world, then, spaces experienced as places and non-places coexist. The ambiguity of Cergy’s place or non-place status is further heightened by the elasticity of the distinction between them. Boundaries separating the home and the exterior are porous, as illustrated by breaches in enclosures and windows. Marie’s bedroom is accessible via a broken fence panel in her back garden, through which Anne and Floriane enter on separate occasions. It is flimsy, never secured, always leaving the garden vulnerable to the outside. Towards the end of the film, Anne traverses this barrier, accessing Marie’s bedroom through her floor-to-ceiling windows as she lies on the bed. Not only is this fence a rift, but Marie Puységur writes that windows, too, symbolise an ‘openness’ translating to ‘a lack of barriers that separate or protect’ (2020, 122). Although she is referring to *Bande* and Andrea Arnold’s *Fish Tank* (2009), this glass between Marie’s bedroom and garden does indeed leave her personal sphere exposed. As the material divides the spaces on a haptic level, its transparency visually dissolves any distinction between inside and outside. The lines separating the bedroom from the garden, and the garden from the town, are illustrative of the permeability between place and non-place.

If these spheres intermingle, characteristics of the non-place inevitably seep into the place. Augé argues that ‘non-places create solitary contractuality’ (1995, 94), producing a world ‘thus surrendered to solitary individuality’ (78). Contractual relations between characters and spaces exist from the beginning of *Naissance*, from the receptionist who demands a medical certificate and a cheque from Marie if she is to begin synchronised swimming, to the payment required before Marie attends Floriane’s team competition. Most clearly, ‘contractuality’ is highlighted by Anne, who asks defiantly if ‘you need to show your ID card to get a cheaper cheeseburger’ when denied a Happy Meal at McDonald’s (by a character played by Sciamma herself – also a reminder of the real-world arrangement between director and actor).³

Given the fluidity of the boundaries between place and non-place, it follows that predetermined arrangements sometimes define the characters' private interactions. Further, since Parisian New Towns – being characterised by large-scale facilities and regional commercial centres (Goursolas 1980, 414) – are intertwined with capitalism and modern consumption, these arrangements involve the exchange of more than money. Eva Illouz notes that '*consumer capitalism has increasingly transformed emotions into commodities*' (2018, 10; emphasis in original). Indeed, an advertisement in the background during the McDonald's scene reading 'pleasure at a low price' encapsulates the essence of Marie and Floriane's 'contract'.⁴ While Cristina Johnston argues that in *Naissance* 'friendships and intimacy unfold *through* transactions' (2021, 6; emphasis in original), I suggest that exchanges more often *replace* friendship and intimacy; affection is not produced but is rather the currency that purchases outcomes external to the relationship. Favours are bought with emotion. It may be more appropriate to speak of Marie and Floriane's relationship, as Clara Bradbury-Rance aptly does, as a 'transaction' (2019, 90).

Beginning with a deal that brings Marie into the world of synchronised swimming, the conditions are set: if Floriane invites her, Marie will complete a favour in return. Anne and Marie's friendship has endured at least since primary school and is preserved by the photograph on Marie's shelf, evidence of its history; this novel relationship is its opposite. The scene unfolds outside of the club's foyer in which, seven minutes earlier, Marie is rejected by the receptionist. The Brutalist white walls establish a connection with the rigid décor inside, and a broken window in the background is an open seam merging the two spaces. With the area of 'solitary contractuality' thus fused with the outside, Marie, although attempting to connect with Floriane, replaces her initial negotiation with another. Subsequently, displays of affection by Floriane towards Marie are performed when she requires a service; she strokes Marie's hair to earn her company on a night out and she gives Marie her winning medal – significantly, while asking, 'are you happy?' – to use Marie to see François on another occasion.⁵ The idea of becoming the permanent object of Floriane's affection, and the emotion this engenders, are sold to Marie in a series of transactions. The conditions of the quasi-non-place thus foster relationships that confuse the boundary between contract and connection.

The spatial element is most explicitly demonstrated in a trade of addresses. In the changing rooms after Floriane has introduced Marie into the swimming club, Floriane writes her address on Marie's hand. Bradbury-Rance identifies the moment as one of intimacy and eroticism 'because of the framing of skin on skin' and 'the absence in the frame of any social indicators of separation' (2019, 90). It is one of several awakening moments at the pool, such that others have pinpointed it as a reservoir for exploring queer desire: Marie first spots Floriane here and gazes at the female form while swimming underwater (Chevalier 2019, 68; Wilson 2014, 205). It is the original location for the exploration of identity; 'the spectacle of first love' emerges 'from the pool forwards' although it 'is one of intermittence, of hurt and radiance' (Wilson 2021, 30). Love, here as elsewhere, never becomes permanent or reciprocal. If the home is representative of 'place', the disclosure of its location is an invitation into the private sphere, the arena of relations, identity and history; it is an offer of connection. But while the shot is visually devoid of separating factors, Marie and Floriane have already established that this is part of a predetermined agreement, undermining the tenderness of the gesture. Admittedly, the favour requested by Floriane could be one of companionship, particularly given that

the previous scene shows Floriane bullied by her teammates for her alleged promiscuity. However, when it is revealed that Floriane is using Marie to meet François, confusion between place and non-place peaks. Marie, sullen, paces the dimly lit garage, alone in the frame after her hopes of rapport are dashed. The address, Floriane's 'place', is used in a transaction that truly produces 'solitary contractuality' for Marie, whose side of the deal is marred by the disappointment of rejection.

Concurrently, as feelings are given an exchange value, so too do objects acquire emotional significance. As another consequence of late capitalism, Mike Featherstone describes how the "'natural" use-value of goods' has been 'obliterated', meaning that 'consumption must not be understood as the consumption of use-values, [...] but primarily as the consumption of signs' (1987, 57). Although Featherstone refers to signs as markers of social status here, in *Naissance* the 'use-value' of objects is also overridden, and they are assigned alternative personal and symbolic meaning. After Anne steals a necklace from a jewellery vendor by concealing it in her mouth, she and Marie wander through the shopping centre. Anne extracts the necklace, remarking that 'it's like in *Donkey Skin*'.⁶ This reference to the classic folk tale conjures the image of its magical donkey who excretes gold coins (while perhaps also being a queer cinephilic nod to the 1970 Jacques Demy film). As Anne Duggan suggests, this process in Demy's film 'mixes the scatological with signs of wealth, lower functions with higher ones' (2013, 54). In other words, the conventional value system is disordered. It is a fitting metaphor for the role of items in *Naissance*.

In the partial non-place where exchanges replace connection, objects become a treasured alternative to genuine relations. For Marie, the 'waste' that she encounters is an apple, discovered within a refuse sack plucked from Floriane's dustbin after their impromptu sleepover. No longer assessed by its quality as a nutritious food, this apple becomes a symbol for Floriane herself. Bradbury-Rance argues that stealing Floriane's waste reflects Marie's desperation 'to do anything for attention and proximity' (2019, 78). However, in the previous scene, a high-angle shot shows the two characters lying on Floriane's bed; Floriane attempts to hold Marie's hand, but Marie rejects her twice by retracting it. This scene demonstrates a reluctance rather than a willingness to achieve proximity at any cost, at least in person. Floriane's primary target of attention is François. The apple, then, stands as a replacement for an unattainable Floriane that Marie can engage with unreservedly, more permanently, in the private space of her bedroom.

Johnston also identifies that objects are 'not used with their "original" purpose', stating that they 'continue to hold significance even as they become waste' (2021, 4). In this instance, though, meaning is not passively constant; Marie actively ascribes significance to the apple core. According to Mary Douglas, litter has a 'half-identity' and recovering it 'revives [its] identity' (2003, 161). Following this theory, what was Floriane's apple-turned-waste becomes, in its revived form, Floriane's apple recovered by Marie. By bringing this object into its symbolic second existence, Marie claims power over it. Considering the biblical connotations of the apple, not as forbidden but as a source of absorbable wisdom, Marie consumes her own knowledge of Floriane when she brings it to her lips; the biological matter left by Floriane replaces the kiss she cannot receive. Marie absorbs a part of Floriane completely, while in their interactions she barely obtains her superficially. Furthermore, if the apple is representative of Floriane, Marie's digestion of it is a unifying act. This perspective becomes particularly resonant given that Anne, in

a deleted scene, describes how she 'ate' her twin in her mother's womb. Anne elaborates, responding to Marie's horror: 'it's a good thing. This way, I'm never really alone.'⁷ In light of this, the apple-eating sequence signifies a dissolution of the boundaries between Marie and Floriane, an absorption of the other into the self. It is an attempt to counteract the loneliness caused by their inconsistent relationship. The use-value of the object is overturned, becoming an antidote to the superficial exchanges experienced within the New Town.

Internalising the banlieue

Returning to the preceding scene, there is arguably another force inhibiting Marie from accepting Floriane's advances. Seemingly, Sciamma creates a utopian world without external pressures: without danger, racial conflict or parental influence. In *Bande*, the absence of nature reflects fewer freedoms. Characters are often forced to gather in concrete areas that are male dominated, threatening or alienating. By comparison, the environment in *Naissance* undeniably enables more mobility and exploration of identity without danger. The infrastructure within *Naissance* and its closeness to nature is an often freeing hallmark of 'quiet *banlieue*' cinema. This is seen in several of Sciamma's films: *Tomboy*, most markedly – while *Petite maman* (2021) is shot in the same neighbourhood as *Naissance* (Monks Kaufman 2021).

More so than the rest of Sciamma's corpus, however, *Naissance* places countryside and concrete in constant tension. It is a reminder of the relationship between its inhabitants and the powers that ordered its creation: the French state. The natural and the unnatural, the free and the controlled, conflict in a way that somewhat disrupts the harmony otherwise fostered by green space. Edward Welch suggests that in the implementation of the New Town housing policy, the 'reorganization of [...] living places emerges as a tangible manifestation of the state's power over human life' (2018, 108). Indeed, Cergy already has filmic links to this, with *Enfance d'une ville* choosing the theme of expropriation as its starting point (Welch 2021, 181). Furthermore, as Didier Desponds and Elizabeth Auclair document, there was an emphasis on taking 'into account their nature resources in the urban plan' (2017, 873). Therefore, the so-called 'natural' areas in the middle-class *banlieue* are in fact as deliberately organised as its infrastructure.

In Sciamma's cinematic world, man-made formations dominate green space. In one of the scenes that introduce *Naissance's* town to the audience, Marie and Anne ride a bike towards home. A close-up tracking shot follows them, panning between the faces of the girls, while in the unfocused background, nature flies by. The foliage that fills the frame is broken up by the flicker of passing tree trunks. From this image, the viewer is led to believe that the characters are travelling through an untouched forest. However, cutting to a long shot reveals that they are following a concrete path spanning the horizontal length of the frame. Considering that this path has been constructed by the state, its existence is a material reminder of the government's capacity to overpower nature and, given the function of a pathway, its ability to encourage the movement of people in a predetermined direction, just as it is leading Marie and Anne. Evidence of state power in this case is, quite literally, concrete.

A second path sequence further reinforces this authority. When Marie visits Floriane's house for the first time to settle her debt, Floriane leads Marie through a muddy trail that



Figure 1. Floriane and Marie passing through a trail in *Naissance* (Slingshot Studios).

is flanked by short metal rods (see [Figure 1](#)). In the ‘subsequent’ scene, the characters continue to walk, except here they are framed by the grey pillars of a garage (see [Figure 2](#)). The aesthetic parallel between the structures in these two shots, heightened by their immediate temporal proximity, invites a comparison between them; the garage and the ‘natural’ trail have been curated to steer users through space. Not only is nature permeated by artificial constructions, but it is itself shaped and manipulated into organised uniformity. It is, as Welch declares, evocative of what Michel Foucault defines ‘as “bio-politics”’ (in Welch 2018, 108).

The writings of Foucault can be used in this instance to illuminate the characters’ relation to this disciplined environment. Foucault describes the effect of space on prisoners in the panopticon: it induces ‘in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.’ (1995, 201). For this to be effective, power should be visible [. . .]: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes [. . .] the central tower from which he is spied upon.’ (201). In Marie’s case, if power manifests



Figure 2. Aesthetic parallel: Floriane and Marie walking through a garage in the following scene (Slingshot Studios).

itself in the presence of infrastructure and controlled nature, her experience fits this condition; in the New Town, power is perpetually perceptible. Thus, her sentiments of restriction and containment are articulated in spatial terms: 'When you die, the last thing you see remains imprinted in your eye, a bit like a photo. Can you imagine the number of people who have ceilings in their eyes?'⁸ This question, posed to Floriane while they lie on Floriane's bed, expresses her expectation of being interminably limited by her surroundings. Suggesting that this limit is imprinted in the eye recalls Foucault; it is internalised, incorporated into their body and consciousness, shaping Marie's outlook and behaviour. The fact that Sciamma's on-screen environment is so utopic, with no parental agents to enforce correct behaviour, only highlights its automatic functioning.

With this in mind, it is unsurprising that Marie's corporeality carries a sense of submission and passivity. Throughout *Naissance*, Acquart's performance is defined by an awkward rigidity as she stands against walls, constrains her limbs and, at some points, refuses to speak, as though she is internally monitoring her existence in the world. More specifically, when she raises the 'plafonds' ('ceilings') question, her reluctance can be linked to her burgeoning queer attraction. It is relevant to note that at the time of release, 2007, the French government actively enforced anti-LGBT laws – as exemplified by the controversial annulment of a same-gender marriage performed by Noël Mamère, a French mayor and politician, in a series of rulings between 2004 and 2007 (Perreau 2016, 3). The 'plafonds' conversation is followed by the sequence in which Marie withdraws her hand from Floriane's attempts to hold it. This arrangement of events implies that the obstruction felt by Marie is directly entwined with her inhibitions surrounding her queer desire for Floriane. Indeed, Marie's passivity is most conspicuous in their scenes together. No scenes are more illustrative of this than those in which they almost kiss: first, when Floriane asks Marie to check her breath; and second, on the dancefloor of the nightclub that the two visit, seeking a sexual partner for Floriane. Floriane is always the initiator, ordering Marie to approach and lifting Marie's face upwards. In close-up shots, their lips are practically touching, although on both occasions, Marie is static, avoiding Floriane's gaze. Her eyelids are closed, acting as the 'plafonds' that shield her from her natural desires. She does not answer Floriane's dare to seal the kiss until the film's end. If one is to read the New Town as Marie's panopticon, signifying the state's power, it can be inferred that the resulting self-regulation also encompasses the repression of lesbian attraction. The government's refusal to legitimise same-gender relationships is equally a display of its ability to police human desires. Nature can be controlled; natural desire can be controlled.

To further illustrate this, let us return to paths. Sara Ahmed discusses sexual orientation in spatial terms, describing heterosexual culture as a 'line', a 'matter of following a direction or of being directed in a certain way' (2006, 554). Pursuing the pre-existing 'line' of heterosexuality shares similarities with following the physical routes laid out by the state. Characters in *Naissance* are no strangers to the heteronormative trajectory. Anne, in a scene walking through the town to a party, laments being 'late' according to society's schedule, having yet to experience her first kiss.⁹ She calls countries in which girls marry as children 'cool', explaining that if she lived in one, '[she] would not be here' [in her late position].¹⁰ The spatial language evokes Ahmed's geography of becoming 'straight'. An imposed path provides Anne with comfort and freedom, discarding the requirement of struggling for male attention, propelling her along the road to achieving straightness. For Marie, however, whose desires are queer desires, following this path involves self-

discipline, even self-punishment. She must internalise the demand to control her nature that threatens to defy norms. The existence and visibility of predetermined routes create 'des plafonds dans les yeux' for those wanting an externally legitimised life. Marie, who never divulges the identity of her love interest to Anne, protects her chances.

A blueprint for rebellion

This is not to suggest that nonconformity is impossible. Sara Ahmed also speaks of 'desire lines': 'marks left on the ground that show [...] where people deviate from the paths they are supposed to follow' (2006, 570). There are instances in *Naissance* where Marie does resist the urge to repress her queerness. If internalised homophobia relies on self-policing, the self can interrupt this process. The New Town's Foucauldian effect discourages, rather than externally precludes, deviation; paradoxically, the visibility of power also provides a blueprint for rebellion. When Marie runs across a grassy plain in between motorway lanes after disrupting Floriane's heterosexual encounter, she diverges from the conventional route, creating her own 'unofficial path'. The mixture between concrete and nature highlights where the girls are expected to go, but also makes visible what has been tamed; they can digress from the path, staying true to their own identities, if they are willing to abandon self-surveillance. This takes place after Floriane, having found an 'old guy' with whom she can 'lose her virginity', is found in a car outside of a nightclub.¹¹ Marie knocks on the window and precludes any sexual act, thereby postponing Floriane's virginity loss. As Karine Chevalier notes, the queerness of this moment is heightened by the subversion of the cinematic convention that posits the adolescent girl as an object of male desire, forcing the audience instead to adopt Marie's queer point of view while overturning the heterosexual trajectory (2019, 69–70). Interrupting this progression on the heterosexual 'line' is then metaphorically reflected in their running across the road verge. Sound effects of vehicles racing past in the background, alongside the bokeh of unfocused headlights, indicate that humanity does not belong here. This 'desire line', caused by a refusal to allow the symbolic loss of Floriane to a male stranger, is a digression from both the heteronormative and architectural track. Through avoiding the 'straight and narrow', Marie invents her own path (Ahmed 2006, 554).

Consequently, *Naissance* is a film about possibility. Lines are discovered that 'are often invisible to others,' Ahmed writes; 'becoming a lesbian can feel like a whole world gets opened up' (2006, 564). Indeed, in developing a queer affinity for Floriane, Marie enters the realm of synchronised swimming, even bypassing the contractual restrictions imposed by the receptionist. Emma Wilson describes how 'Floriane opens Marie's world'; the swimming pool is a symbol of this new world (2014, 213). Underwater, a physically inaccessible space to poolside spectators, is demarcated by a 'static surface [that] conceals unknowable depths' (Puységur 2020, 129). As the exhibition is staged by the synchronised swimming club at the film's beginning, Marie and the performers' parents watch from the side-lines, representing the family and heterosexual society. The depths are concealed to them. Later, when Marie is invited by Floriane to leave this side-line and join her team in the water, she is called to traverse the surface that separates the two realms and enter a space reserved only for the club swimmers in that moment. Thanks to the natural fluidity and malleability of the water, Marie cuts a path plunging

beneath the dividing line, and a point-of-view shot reveals what her actions fuelled by desire have uncovered: the unseen spectacle of the athletes' bodies, indefatigably working to stay afloat. If Wilson also maintains that the pool is a 'reservoir for the flowering of adolescent girls' eroticism' (2014, 205), attraction to Floriane has 'opened Marie's world' to her own sexuality. By tracing an alternative line and eluding the contractuality of the non-place, Marie is able to see what is unreachable from the space of heteronormativity: her own desire.

Shots of the swimming pool, however, also expose heteronormative forces. Sciamma has herself suggested that synchronised swimming imitates 'the job of being a girl' (Sciamma cited in Pollard 2020). If this is true, it also embodies the effect of patriarchal culture, that is that, according to Sandra Lee Bartky, 'a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women' (1997, 140). The girls in Floriane's swim team are required to maintain hairless bodies, apply perfectly identical makeup, strike poses with impeccable military timing and smile through the resulting discomfort; each athlete is 'committed to a relentless self-surveillance' (143). At the competition Marie travels to with Floriane, a scene mirrors the performance that is executed at the beginning of the film to Verdi's 'Dies Irae', but with a twist. This time, there is no music nor audience to represent the New Town's normative nuclear families. The spectacle is stripped bare, so that panting counts of four are audible above frantic splashing. The girls are performing for an invisible judge, before they wave to imagined spectators – disciplined, despite the absence of an external observer. In unveiling this impulse to self-regulate femininity, Sciamma exposes the environment from which it originates; the New Town becomes a microcosm in which mainstream society's gender politics are made explicit. Ceilings, evidently, occupy some eyes more prominently than others.

Sciamma's New Town is a place – or rather, a quasi-non-place – of negotiated exchange, state power and internalised oppression. The hybridity of Augéan places and non-places spawns a social climate in which Marie and Floriane's relationship is defined by contractual agreements, both explicit and implicit. The loneliness that ensues, along with the consumerist culture that categorises Parisian New Towns, induces the destruction of the natural use-values of goods, which are taken instead as a substitute for human affection. As a visible materialisation of the French government's influence, infrastructure in the *banlieue* makes permanent the possibility of internalising feelings of immobility; paths, in particular, act as effective metaphors for the pressure to conform to heteronormativity. Nevertheless, it would be a misreading to conclude that the screening of these restrictive powers is a continuation of harmful homophobic or sexist tropes seen elsewhere in cinema. Sciamma instead exposes the origin of these forces and illustrates the possibility of circumventing them, in what Tim Palmer calls 'a formal pledge to subvert conventional models and dismantle cinematic cliché' (2015, 34). In the creation of normative femininity, Bartky writes, '[w]hat is new is the growing power of the image in a society increasingly oriented toward the visual media' (1997, 149). If this is the case, *Naissance* is a valuable contribution to the dismantling of heterosexist norms – which, in consideration of the rest of her corpus, is a legacy that Sciamma has successfully begun to establish.

Notes

1. In English: 'Ceilings in their eyes.'
2. 'un lieu de socialisation de la jeunesse [...] où se définissent certaines identités.'
3. '[Il] faut montrer sa carte d'identité pour avoir un cheeseburger moins cher ?'
4. 'le plaisir à p'tit prix.'
5. 'T'es contente ?'
6. 'C'est comme dans *Peau d'âne*.'
7. 'Non, c'est bien. Comme ça, j'suis jamais vraiment seule.'
8. 'Quand tu meurs, la dernière chose que tu vois reste imprimée dans ton œil, un peu comme une photo. T'imagines le nombre de personnes qui ont des plafonds dans les yeux ?'
9. 'en retard.'
10. '[Elle] en serai[t] pas là.'
11. 'un vieux.'

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Ellie Smith recently graduated from the University of Warwick with an MA in Research in French and Francophone Studies. Her research interest is mainly in lesbian cinema, with her dissertation exploring art in Céline Sciamma's *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* and Abdellatif Kechiche's *La Vie d'Adèle*.

Filmography

L'Ami de mon amie, 1987. Éric Rohmer, France.
Bande de filles, 2014. Céline Sciamma, France.
Enfance d'une ville, 1975. Éric Rohmer, France.
Fish Tank, 2009. Andrea Arnold, Netherlands/United Kingdom.
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