

IN THE END, MY JOB IS TO BE IN MY ROOM

Interview with Céline Sciamma

*On the occasion of the Dutch release of her new film *Petite Maman*, Céline Sciamma gave an interview to the Alliance Française in Amsterdam. In the library of the Ambassador Hotel near the Herengracht in Amsterdam, the French director told us about the conflict as a storyline, about "showing off" cinema or even about the experience of filming in the studio.*

***Petite Maman* describes a very complicit relationship between a girl and her alter ego, who turns out to be her mother at the same age. And you, what were your fears, your desires, your "black panther" ?**

I think that this portrait of childhood shows it. It is a film that is quite intimate whether it be through its characters or its spaces. As per the story, we are in a kind of magical realism, even sentimental science fiction, which obviously is not my story. I didn't get the chance to meet my mother as a child in the woods [laughs].

But the film is shot in my hometown, the town where I grew up, in the woods where I used to make shacks. The film was shot in a studio and I built and designed this house with my collaborators as a kind of reconstitution of the rooms of my two grandmothers making a kind of fusion, like this.

And this little girl, yes, she probably is a little bit like me, even if I really tried to create a film that was timeless. That is to say that a child of 2021 can completely consider that it is his story and that a child of the 80s and 90s will enjoy it. It is clearly my generation so the film is in the atmosphere of that time. But I really wanted to pay tribute to 50 years of children's fashion style, 50 years of French living rooms. And I hope that these closets, their contents, that all these atmospheres and even the sounds, belong to a common culture of childhood in which everyone can find themselves.

In your films, the sets and costumes are as meticulously chosen as the dialogues and the camera angle. The work you had done on their design was so blurred that we could identify several eras, but not one specifically.

That's exactly it. As we build everything, we get to choose the slightest light switch. I really had this

desire that this switch could exist in the 60s and that we could also find it and acquire it today.

So these are constraints that are those of a time travel, in a time travel film that does not take place in a single era. So it's quite counterintuitive but I think that's what makes the film unique.



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There is no conflict in *Petite Maman*. The relationships are - with the exception of the underlying tension between the parents - all soothed. In comparison with *Tomboy* where the parent-child relationships are very vertical - here in this film, the relations are almost switched over on an equal footing. How did this horizontal, non-confrontational approach to relations come to you?

Indeed, it's a path from film to film where I try to find a way to create tension, suspense that is not only based on conflict or negotiation between the characters. Especially when you write for children, and a film that is also intended for children and adults both to see it equally and be able to share the same cinema experience, really without different reading level, in a great equality, in a great horizontality.



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Actually, the film even makes the journey from verticality to horizontality, this is perhaps its first magic. Clearly, I made this choice to be inspiring, to inspire other types of relationships, since cinema has a great responsibility in the way it inspires our lives, because very often it makes us live things in advance. So there you have it, we're going to see people fall in love before falling in love, we're going to see people and characters love each other, build themselves, confront their desires first on a screen before we can act ourselves. So it's very important, when we talk about new representations, in reality we are talking about new inspirations, new dynamics and even more with children or in collaboration with child actors, I absolutely do not want to put them in situations of violence. I've done it, in my past and it's not pleasant


at all. There are things we wouldn't do anymore. And in *Tomboy* there is even physical violence. I didn't enjoy shooting that much, and now I also try to listen to myself, to shoot scenes that I want to shoot, in which one feels good.

In fact, cinema is very much about... there is like a challenge to create violence, to create collision, it's even a bit like that we can establish our credibility as a director, enter a history of cinema as a place of amaze, a place of action, of outbidding action and I try to develop another axis that is based on opportunities.

On the opportunities to share time, to share feelings, and it is certain that when we spare ourselves the conflict, there is the possibility of a very big surprise. Because if the characters agree, then the adventure takes on another level. And that's it, I had at heart in this film – also because it's a film about the family, about family, intergenerational relationships – to really open up new affective mythologies, because we are all still analyzing our family structures or our emotional relationships through the prisms of very old mythologies, which are stories that are thousands of years old. We will take Oedipus as the most cliché, the most effective example. And it's based on conflicting family relationships. That is to say, we are

learning to understand each other, to forgive ourselves and to heal ourselves through affective rivalry by saying family always is affective rivalry. And that's a mythology, and if suddenly we create a mythology where we are more equal because in fact we are all in the process of - rather than transmitting our traumatic childhoods or our happy childhoods - looking at each other, sharing time together, understanding each other precisely in dialogues that are honest, deep, where everyone gives all their intelligence, where there is no bad faith, we are clearly in fiction. But that's what I do, I do fiction.



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Nelly and Marion build memories together. The scene at Cergy Lake, enhanced by the music singing "be a child with you (être un enfant avec toi)" just before they go their separate ways seems to be one of those unforgettable memories we have from our childhood. It reminded me of the scene with Marianne and Héloïse in *Portrait of a Lady on fire* when they share the moments they are going to remember, thus, recreate them and give them new meanings. Are memories no longer a question of chronology in your cinema?

Yes, completely, the film also seeks to create a journey through time, not as an opportunity to visit the past or learn about its future according to the two positions of the characters, but really as an opportunity for a shared time. Then, if we have the opportunity to share time, you see for example here: we have the opportunity to share time! What do we do with it? So it's not so much that we make memories, but it's really the question of what we shared and how what we shared will animate us in the present, not to "pass" in fact, that's it.

There's a little Snoopy comic, I'm a very big fan of Snoopy, Schulz is a very great philosopher! And Snoopy says "why we call it the past, if it doesn't pass". There is really the idea of rather changing even the conception, of giving everyone back his child's body. Because it's cinema so it's a physical experience. And to say to ourselves: but why do we act as if childhood is always the past, as if the child we were was like... dead. While it is the same body, it is even almost denial of our old age. What does it mean? That this adult will then die for the benefit of an old lady? And so there's this idea of rather creating fluidity, continuity, of considering that we are the same person who is getting older.

And there is really the desire to give back to childhood all its strength, and therefore not by celebrating its innocence or its ephemeral character and all that, but on the contrary by giving back everything, everything, all the seriousness, all the individuality, all the power to the individuals that we were and are as children and that we carry on as adults. And we don't just carry our childhood in addition, we carry the childhood of our parents.

So, it's not nostalgia?

No, it is definitely not nostalgia. Although, there is a such a consoling power in memories. Memories are hot, memories radiate, memories burn, it's not a pebble in the pocket at all.

After the resounding success of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, you have chosen to make a film with the airs of a fantastic tale which deals with mourning, love, communication between children and parents. However, between these two very different films, we recognize a taste for the phenomena of appearances and disappearances. It's surprising after your much more naturalistic first cycle of films. Is this attraction to the phantasmagoric recent?

I don't really know whether it is recent. In any case, what is recent is that I allow myself to explore that. I look around ideas that have this part of magic. And I believe more and more that movies actually have power. And I try to mobilize all the tools of cinema, not to consider that there are only a few that are at my disposal. And so it can be fantastic bursts into a film that looks like it's more of a period film, or it can be the argument of the movie itself. *Petite Maman* is a film with a "high concept" as they say, there is a great concept in it that could be redone by



Hollywood as either a comedy or a form of *Back to the Future* for kids. But there is a modesty of the film, which nevertheless has this idea that we can really make a very strong profit of if we want, precisely if we enter into the dynamics of conflict, of spatiotemporal paradox.

But there's really the idea that we can have this fantastic idea, and treat it in a pretty naturalistic way without a time machine. And then there is shooting in the studio: I've never had so much machinery, never had so many lights on the set. All of this just to film a little girl eating a bowl of cereals! In the studios next to ours, epic things were happening.. well, very theatrical things. But there, we're in period film, huge film sets, you see, usually there's cash behind it [laughs]. Here, it is true that it is a film that typically should rather be shot in an apartment, but we choose to mobilize the tools of cinema as well as a primitive cinema. I was really thinking about the pioneers of cinema, Germaine du Lac, Alice Guy, those women who invented fiction and magic realism in studios, and to tell me I have the same tools as them and maybe I can have the same freedom too.

You talked about *Back to the Future*, but there is no car or time machine here in *Petite Maman*. There is a mysterious forest in Tim Burton's

style, but the magic is mostly hidden in the editing. How did you go about achieving it?

Well precisely, considering that the machine was the film and that the magic was in the cut, precisely like this first pioneer cinema. And so it involves an editing film "film de montage", which relies on editing as a substitution effect and magic effect but at the same time it is an editing that is written, that is to say that the cuts are really written in the script. So it's not a "montage film" in the sense that editing will bring re-writing, it's editing as writing in solidarity with the script and staging.

And so finally, it's a film that is very easy to edit if it works. This is my fifth film it's time for it to work, so we can bet on it. It's a film that is not looking for editing, my films are rarely looking for editing, I write quite precisely, that's how I like to work, to make life rather than hope for it in the moment.

So, it was my easiest film to edit, at least the fastest to edit. But yes it is betting, because for the moment we do not have a wrist, we are at the bone of a principle. But there are these magic effects that work right away during filming because there are teletransportation effects including bodies or from one space to another that are only related to the cut. But it's like in

Benitched, it works very well, those tricks have proven themselves.

You are here in Amsterdam for the release of your film *Petite Maman* in the Netherlands. The success of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* has created a community of admirers of your work around the world. Of course, you know the influence that the film had, especially on social networks, but not only. Has your relationship to foreign audiences changed?

Yes, of course, it changes and it has changed a lot of things. But to be honest I did one film right after the other and in the meantime we stayed locked at home, the physical encounter with the public and the post-*Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is done these days. So it's something I'm experiencing, but anyway yes it's true that I experienced an international tour with *Portrait of the lady on fire* which obviously made me meet this audience and then there are social networks, I receive a lot of letters of testimonials, and then I see the initiatives of this community.

What it taught me, and the place where it impacts my writing, is that films have power, films have a cultural impact and a sentimental impact on people. What I get a lot is testimonials from people who have changed their lives, either because they started making movies, or because they fell in love differently, or because they left someone, or because they decided to assume their desires and their desire could be to become a brain surgeon for example.

And so yes, of course it changes, because when I began working on *Petite maman*, I said to myself: we already know that we will have a larger audience, we will be watched so we have more responsibilities, and I wondered about the impact? What impact do we want to have on life, on people's hearts, what do we want to talk about? Because indeed the film, it has created a lot of support but there has also been rejection, in the great backlash that feminists live today, it has obviously also been through some attacks. And suddenly it is about how I make sure that this conception of cinema, the way I make films, can radiate more and more, always stronger. In order to get more and more people into the ride, to make sure that we don't leave anyone on the side of the road. I was very happy to make a film with a boy in it, for example, this father character. I was happy that at one point, since people suffered that there was no man in the previous film, that there we could really continue our journey together. And then the next question is what are we going to console this time,

how we're going to talk about feelings? And then there in addition, looking at the subject of the family, of several generations of women, we know that we are looking at something that is not being watched too much as usual. So this story of a little girl hanging out with her little mom, frankly, when she came to my mind I had the impression and I'm sure she already exists, just she didn't get to us. The stories of mothers and daughters for now are in the eyes of Bergman for example, and it's intense, it's cruel. And so when we know that there are many beating hearts waiting, how are we going to address these beating hearts? How are we going to take care of them? How are we going to animate them?



Since my characters are essentially feminine, the public space anyway is to be conquered.



This brings up the question of the gaze in the cinema and the importance of the discourse that we have. In an interview at the Berlinale you said that “queer readers are great readers”. It reminds me of Alice Coffin and Virginie Despentes. How much being queer, having been a “gay kid” has changed that gaze, sculpted it, without essentializing what you do?

It is obvious that queer childhoods put us in dynamics of reading the world with more investigation than the average, because we do not see ourselves so we go looking for ourselves, and at the same time we have the impression of always inventing something since we are alone. It puts us at the same time in dynamics of imagination and with an appetite that is not satisfied, which makes that we can find ourselves in a position to be creative.

But at the same time, today I realize that all childhoods are queer. All childhoods are queer. The great machine that submits us begins at that moment. Frankly, when I see what we do in the heart of little boys, whether they are queer children or not, gay or

not, there are forms of domestication or on the contrary stirring up forms of relations of domination. Children are the great class of the dominated, whatever their class. So we can expand. Besides, I really wanted to make a film for children also and I see that the children who see the film identify with the characters. The more it goes, the more we realize that the system is relentless on the most rebellious members at the earliest, but that in the end it applies to everyone.

We find your characters often in a duo, on a bed (*Water Lilies*, *Portrait of a Lady on fire*, *Petite Maman*). Why is this constantly found in your camera?

There are always beds, in *Tomboy* there is a long sequence shot where she plays the game of portraits precisely in bed. Always.

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Why is this constantly found in your camera?

Overall because I look at the "the Room of One's Own". I make films that mostly take place in bedrooms but at the same time that have escapes in the public space in the shape of adventures. Since my characters are essentially feminine, the public space anyway is to be conquered.

And there is, in the room, the possibility of intimacy, secrecy and therefore to be oneself. And to have characters who confide. In the end, my job is to be in my room. It is from there that we imagine and model anyway. Furthermore, in cinema there is a real dialectic of the “inside” and the “outside” in the films and then from the inside within the inside. That is to say there is the house in which you live with others, and then there is your room, if you are lucky to have one.

And these bed plans, it's also a way to bring the characters together in the same frame. I'm not too much into shot/reverse shot dynamics, like the one we're experiencing right now. If you were next to me, this scene would have nothing to do with what is now, because you would be there within the frame. So that's really what makes the dialogue and precisely how we bring people together. And often in my movies there are top shots, especially in the *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, meaning shots made from the top. And so there is something even graphically, which puts the characters in an equal exchange. For example, I shot "Girlhood" with cinemascope because all of a sudden it was not two characters, but four in the same frame.

Yes, frankly, most of our adventures are in the room, in real life. Especially recently. We are going outside as much as we can again but still, we lived locked in our rooms and it has changed us.

Interview on septembre 2nd 2021 by H el ene Le Corre
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