Rules of the game: sports and the gendered body in Celine Sciamma's youth films

Article (Published Version)


This version is available from Sussex Research Online: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/109872/

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:
Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.
The rules of the game: sports and the gendered body in Céline Sciamma’s youth films

Frances Smith

To cite this article: Frances Smith (2023): The rules of the game: sports and the gendered body in Céline Sciamma’s youth films, French Screen Studies, DOI: 10.1080/26438941.2022.2151152

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/26438941.2022.2151152

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 06 Jan 2023.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 63

View related articles

View Crossmark data
The rules of the game: sports and the gendered body in Céline Sciamma’s youth films

Frances Smith
School of Media, Arts and Humanities, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

ABSTRACT
Written and directed by Céline Sciamma, Naissance des Pieuvres/Water Lilies (2007), Tomboy (2011), Bande de Filles/Girlhood (2014) and Petite maman (2021) comprise Sciamma’s contribution to youth cinema, depicting children and adolescents coming of age in contemporary France. Sciamma’s work has been much discussed in relation to the body, queer youth, desire and gender fluidity. Less remarked on, though, is the number of sports and games featured in her work. Naissance is centred around a synchronised swimming team, while in Tomboy, newcomer Laure/Mickael (Zoé Hérän) finds that football offers an ideal means through which to integrate into a new neighbourhood. For its part, Bande begins with an incongruous all-female game of American football, while the film later features ritualised fights and a brief game of mini golf. Considering these competitive encounters in Sciamma’s youth films, this article argues that they serve as a significant means through which to chart their treatment of gendered norms. Taking up Judith Butler’s work on gender, the author suggests that Sciamma’s films allow for the expansion of gendered morphologies. Sports can in this framework be seen to encapsulate and transcend the constrictions on the body that these characters encounter.

‘There are rules!’¹ The question of how binding these rules ought to be provides a rare moment of conflict between the girls in Céline Sciamma’s 2014 film, Bande de Filles/Girlhood (hereafter Bande) during a game of mini golf. Adiatou (Lindsay Karamoh) surprises her friends by taking the game seriously, hushing the others so she can concentrate and, when she completes a tricky hole in two shots, she celebrates ecstatically around a miniaturised Eiffel Tower.² The dispute ensues when Fily (Mariétou Touré) observes that it might be possible to complete the hole by going around, rather than through, a tunnel. Lady (Assa Sylla) arbitrates, in possession of the all-important pencil and scorepad, and tentatively agrees with Adiatou: ‘if there’s a tunnel then…’.³ When Fily acquiesces, puts the ball through the tunnel and still scores a hole-in-one, the girls erupt into uproarious celebrations. Adiatou, in contrast, starts to break into tears, to affectionate mockery from the other girls. The scene demonstrates the complexity of the group’s relationship to the rules of the game: Fily’s questioning of, and attempt to deviate from, the rules of the game are thwarted here. Nevertheless, the scene shows that such conventions might also be

CONTACT Frances Smith<br>Frances.smith@sussex.ac.uk School of Media, Arts and Humanities, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.
undermined by lightly ridiculing those who, like Adiatou, hold them in such high esteem. Thus, I suggest that this brief scene draws attention to the role of sports and games, and their codified and unwritten rules, throughout the film and elsewhere in Sciamma’s oeuvre.

Sports and games are not only characterised by particular systems of rules, but also instantiate particular gendered norms. Mini golf, for instance, occupies a distinctive position between sport and play. As the name suggests, it is a diminutive of golf – a sport which remains associated with older, upper-middle class, and predominantly white, men. In contrast, while mini golf takes up some elements of its parent sport – principally the number of holes and the scoring mechanism – the use of colourful obstacles, as well as short putting distances, emphasises the focus on light-hearted fun, and suggests its suitability for young children. Adiatou’s investment in the game provokes laughter from the other girls, not only because of her incongruity in being a Black teenager playing staid, starchy golf, but also because her seriousness contravenes the supposed fun, light-heartedness of mini golf. Throughout this piece, I examine a number of sports and games played in Sciamma’s youth films. Focusing primarily on the construction of the gendered body in sports, I follow Adiatou’s lead in considering the systems of rules these sports bring into play. I note the cultural positioning of these sports and games, who is permitted to play them and how they are played. In turn, I examine the ways in which constraint and resistance are enacted within and around those disciplines.

**Sports in the films of Céline Sciamma**

A screenwriter and director of international renown, Sciamma has become, in the words of Emma Wilson, the ‘most visible, most important feminist and lesbian director in international filmmaking’ (2021, 1). With the exception of her 2019 period drama, *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu/Portrait of a lady on fire* (hereafter *Portrait*), her films centre on childhood and adolescence, often on the expression (if not necessarily the actualisation) of queer desires. *Naissance des Pieuvres/Water Lilies* (hereafter *Naissance*) (2007) selectively draws on elements of the American teen movie, as skinny, childlike Marie (Pauline Acquart) develops an obsessive desire for beautiful blonde Floriane (Adèle Haenel), who strategically nurtures Marie’s desires for her. Sciamma’s second feature, *Tomboy* (2011), takes as its focus a much younger child, Laure ( Zoé Héran), who, on moving to a new neighbourhood, seizes the opportunity to assume a new identity as a boy named Mickâël. Four years later, *Bande* returns Sciamma to female adolescence, portraying Marieme (Karidja Touré) first joining, and later turning away from, a group of girls. Her latest film, *Petite maman* (2021), offers a time-travel fable in which Nelly (Joséphine Sanz) meets her own mother as a child. These films, combined with her screenwriting efforts for other directors, including stop-motion animation *Ma vie de Courgette/My Life as a Courgette* (Claude Barras, 2016) and (live action) *Quand on a 17 ans/Being Seventeen* (André Techiné, 2016), demonstrate Sciamma’s significant and ongoing involvement in films depicting children and adolescents.

While Sciamma’s sustained depiction of youth has been widely noted, the numerous instances of sports and games in these films have been far less discussed. *Naissance* is centred around a synchronised swimming team, while in *Tomboy*, Laure/Mickâël’s integration into the group of neighbourhood children is enabled largely through football. In
addition to the mini golf game discussed at the beginning of this piece, Bande also opens with a striking sequence depicting girls playing American football and later stages a number of other violent, competitive encounters, as discussed later in this piece. Beyond these well-known features, Sciamma has also released a short film, La Coupe Bernard Tapine (‘The Bernard Tapine Cup’) (2018), which portrays a girls’ football game with the energy and kineticism that has been central to her fiction oeuvre. Sciamma, then, is clearly alive to the ways in which young people may be depicted through sport and games. Nonetheless, there has hitherto been little interest in this aspect of her work. Perhaps the closest acknowledgement of the role of sports emerges in Clara Bradbury-Rance’s astute reading of Naissance (2019), which positions the film alongside queer, Swedish sports drama, Apflickorna/She Monkeys (Lisa Aschan, 2011). Yet even she argues that Naissance merely ‘gestures toward the sport film’, while its true focus is on the relationship between Marie and Floriane (Bradbury-Rance 2019, 81), a sentiment likewise echoed in Wilson’s critical overview of the director’s work (2021). However, I suggest that synchronised swimming is more important to Naissance and that sport in general is more significant to understanding Sciamma’s youth cinema than these authors allow. I argue that sport in Sciamma’s films provides a means of tracing the norms and constraints faced by her films’ protagonists. In Sciamma’s films, these rules of the game may also be analogous to, and intersect with, those governing gender and sexuality.

Further to sports, which are governed by a codified set of rules, Sciamma’s films also portray a number of seemingly less-structured forms of competitive encounter. I stress that these forms of engagement only seem to be less structured, since although these modes do not possess the same kinds of pre-existing regulations as sports, they nevertheless conform to norms that participants appear intuitively to understand. In Tomboy, for instance, Lisa (Jeanne Disson) introduces Laure/Mickäel to her friendship group with games of tag, and truth or dare, which require no explanation for the newcomer. In Bande, too, the informal dance competition at La Défense and ritualised fights with other groups of girls demonstrate significant forms of informal competitive encounter among teenage girls, which likewise bear the hallmarks of uncodified, well-understood norms.

A third form of non-competitive engagement, perhaps best conceived as play, also occurs in Sciamma’s films. Fantasy is especially important to these behaviours and is most often found in films featuring younger children, such as in Tomboy when Laure/Mickäel allows Lisa to make over their face, and when their younger sister, Jeanne (Malonn Lévana), uses the shower head to pretend that she is being interviewed as a famous star. Petite maman shows Nelly and Marion (Gabrielle Sanz) playing various games in their woodland hut, while their making crepes together descends into messy play. These forms of engagement do not possess the same levels of rule-bound ritual as the sports or games discussed previously. Instead, they are testament to the personal connections between various characters and, because of their lack of replicability, are beyond the scope of this piece.

Judith Butler’s conceptualisation of gender performativity and her lesser-known discussion of gender as a citational practice, elucidate some of the gendered dynamics at issue in sports and other modes of competitive encounter. In Gender Trouble, Butler reverses the hitherto common understanding of gender behaviour as a manifestation of some inner essence and instead argues that ‘acts, gestures and desires produce the effect of an internal organising substance on the surface of the body’ ([1990] 1999, 192).
words, she argues that gender is constituted by the very elements that seem to be its effects. Performativity not only exposes the contingency of normative gender, but also provides a model for gender formation, while also serving as a means of subverting these gender norms. As I go on to suggest, the sports and competitive encounters in Sciamma’s youth films not only provide a fruitful arena for the articulation of gender norms, but also demonstrate ways in which they might be undermined.

Butler’s later work moves more expressly into the realm of rules and norms and further, into considering the role of sports in the construction of gender. In Bodies That Matter ([1993] 2011), Butler stresses that performativity consists of a citation of a series of norms that ‘precede, constrain and exceed’ the subject. Similarly, participants in sport typically understand the various rules of the discipline in which they participate, from required kit, the scoring system, to what might constitute a foul, among many other stipulations. Such rules are not decided by participants but are instead drawn up by a distant governing body, whose decisions then filter down to the young, amateur players seen in Sciamma’s films. Taking up Butler, we can conceptualise this relationship between the players and the rules of the game as one of citation. Butler offers the example of a judge, whose authority appears to derive from the legal conventions to which they refer. Conversely, Butler suggests that it is in the very act of citation that the convention is created and reified ([1993] 2011, 70–71). As a result, if the convention is recreated anew on each single citation, then it is vulnerable to modification; each citation is an opportunity for the ‘reconstitution and resignification of the law’ (71). Consequently, the existence or otherwise of clear norms does not necessarily indicate blind compliance with those conventions, but in fact opens the door to their subversion.

Though discussed in the abstract, Butler’s ideas around gender, norms and citation have clear applicability to thinking about sports. Brian Massumi’s phenomenologically inflected chapter ‘Politics of Belonging and the Logic of Relation’, which uses sport as a way of thinking through group interactions, echoes Butler in his contention that the ‘codification of the rules follows the emergence of an unformalized proto sport’ ([2001] 2021, 77). That is, while the existence of a written framework of rules presents itself as the sport’s point of origin, this is a post-hoc construction, imposed after the potentially long existence of a semi-formalised game. Massumi thus observes a complex dynamic: a framework of rules allows for the replicability of the sport across geographies and time periods. However, those rules also appear to constrain possibilities for variation and deviance from these rules, lest the game no longer count as the sport of which it appears to be an example. In turn, such systems of codified rules mark a sharp distinction from the unwritten conventions of games like tag and truth-or-dare, which, as Linda A. Hughes points out in her study of childhood games and folklore, rely not only on a basic framework of rules, to be reimagined according to the demands of the group, but also on a generalised knowledge of fairness, cheating and being a good sport (1995, 94–95). It is for this reason that in Tomboy, despite Lisa’s evident reluctance, she agrees to swap chewing gum with Laure/Mickäel, since not to do so would violate the promise to complete the ‘dare’ in the game of truth-or-dare. Both Butler’s and Massumi’s work on norms and sports are aligned in their contention that while a sport may set the terms for an engagement, each individual game or competitive encounter interprets those rules anew.
Butler herself has turned to the realm of sport to identify how gender norms might be expanded in such a way as to undermine existing feminine and masculine morphologies. Female athleticism continues, Butler argues, to inspire discomfort for spectators, since the norms of athleticism contravene those of femininity. As a result, visible instances of female athleticism, which cite the norms of femininity and athleticism at the same time, do much to expand the norms of femininity in ways that accommodate elements such as strength and masculinity (Butler 1998, 405). It is no surprise to discover that her work has been widely taken up by sport sociologists, as Kristi Tredway’s (2018) survey of the field indicates. However, I am here specifically interested in considering how Butler’s observations about female morphologies may apply in Sciamma’s films. While synchronised swimming offers a particularly constrictive model of spectacular femininity for its participants, American football and football both have rather vexed relationships with female participation and accordingly with the gendered morphologies advocated by the sports. It will therefore be important to consider the extent to which girls playing various different sports and games in Sciamma’s films endorses or undermines existing norms of femininity.

**Watching synchronised swimming**

*Naissance* makes clear the connections between the norms and conventions of synchronised swimming and those of hegemonic femininity, in particular the appearance of effortlessness. In an interview at the BFI London Film Festival in 2019, Sciamma dwells on the athleticism of synchronised swimming, noting in particular that only women compete in the sport at a professional or Olympic level. There is a peculiar paradox to this, Sciamma observes, since synchronised swimming is ‘so athletic, but you have to hide the fact it’s so athletic’ (Sciamma 2019). During the shoot, she recalls that the actors were only able to film the swimming scenes for a few minutes at a time because the sport was so demanding. Yet synchronised swimming requires that participants do not overtly display the strength and endurance that the sport demands, since these qualities threaten to disrupt the spectacle. What is at issue here is not so much the required athletic endeavour – that much could be said of a number of sports – but its elision. Synchronised swimming requires competitors not only to perform a vigorously athletic routine in time with music and in synchronicity with the other members of the troupe, but also to smile at the spectators as they do so. Even when the girls emerge from the water to hear their scores in the opening scene of *Naissance*, only the expansion and contraction of their chests betray their fatigue as they grin and wave to the crowd.

Sports scholars Amanda Roth and Susan A. Basow demonstrate the ways in which the norms of female dominated-sports intersect with those of hegemonic femininity. In common with gymnastics and figure skating, a performance of femininity is integral to the discipline of synchronised swimming. Indeed, it is part of the criteria on which participants are judged (2004, 252). For Judith Franco, synchronised swimming in *Naissance* serves as a metaphor for the complex mechanisms of discipline and constraint governing femininity under patriarchal cultures (2018, 25). Certainly, the requirement for effortlessness in sport dovetails neatly with the demands of the postfeminist sensibility identified by Rosalind Gill in the year of *Naissance*’s release, according to which girls and women must ‘regulate every aspect of their conduct, and present their actions as freely
chosen’ (2007, 164). Roth and Basow, for their part, term this intertwining of normative femininity into women’s athletic endeavour the ‘feminine apologetic’, indicating, following Butler, that these elements prioritising grace, effortless and ornamentation mitigate an otherwise troubling display of athleticism, strength and endurance.

Katharina Lindner goes further, arguing not only that female-dominated sports constitute a spectacle, but that such a spectacle is intended to be sexualised (2013, 244). It is surely telling that, despite many of these sports having opened up to men and boys, these elements of display are not required of male competitors. In gymnastics, for instance, men do not perform their routines to music, and their attire, while certainly flamboyant by the standards of men’s sportswear, lacks the pizzazz of the bright colours, patterns and glitter that work to establish the female gymnast as primarily an agent of spectacular display. In Naissance, an intended male audience is what one of the coaches (Christel Baras, moonlighting from her role as casting director) has in mind when she inspects a team of synchronised swimmers in one of Sciamma’s signature tracking shots. Lined up against the wall, the camera tracks alongside the girls, emphasising their conformity, uniformity and beauty. Finding one of the girls’ depilatory efforts wanting, the coach scorns the girl’s excuse that she lacked time, asking, ‘Is that what you’re going to say to your husband? That you didn’t have time?’ Success in synchronised swimming is thus expressly connected with the participants’ status as objects of an assumed heteronormative, male gaze (Figure 1).

However, I suggest that Naissance undercuts the sport’s disciplinary mechanisms by means of Marie’s queer gaze on the swimmers. That she usurps a heteronormative perspective is apparent when, so taken is Marie with Floriane and her team, that she remains standing in the bleachers, obscuring the view of a couple behind her. Through Marie’s perspective, Sciamma’s camera observes the monstrousness that is integral to the erotic spectacle of synchronised swimming. Although Water Lilies, the title under which the film was released in Anglophone territories, is considerably more anodyne, the original, Naissance des Pieuvres, draws attention to the monstrous potential of girlhood. The norms of synchronised swimming, as discussed, require that such monstrousness be

![Figure 1. Synchronised swimmers line up for inspection.](image-url)
undergird. Indeed, the Belot what continuously word octopuses which routine. Floriane figures 2012, also the negative, like this black juice’ (Sciamma 2019). This dynamic interrelation between desire and the abject occurs throughout Marie’s desire for Floriane, such as when she takes a bite of an apple taken from Floriane’s discarded refuse. Sciamma thus constructs the erotics of adolescent desire as intermingled with the monstrous. In fact, as I show, in Naissance the erotic cannot exist without the monstrous.

It is Marie’s gaze on the team’s synchronised swimming training that brings out the girls’ monstrousness. When Marie shyly watches the session from the side of the pool, Floriane suggests that she dive beneath the surface of the water to better understand the routine. Only here, Floriane implies, will Marie be able to perceive the labour that the routine requires. When Marie obliges, the film cuts to a long shot from her perspective in which we see a tangle of the group’s legs kicking vigorously underwater, surely the octopuses to which the film’s title refers. Sophie Belot connects Floriane’s name to the word ‘flower’, arguing that, like the swimmers’ legs, a flower’s roots are hidden, yet continuously touch beneath the surface (2012, 181). Further to the florid imagery that Belot conjures, though, Marie’s perspective beneath the surface of the water makes visible the athletic labour that the discipline of synchronised swimming contrives to conceal. Indeed, Naissance shows that it is these monstrous kicking legs that in fact sustain and undergird the performance of spectacular femininity (Figure 2).

This moment and its display of athletic labour is of a piece with the frequent use of what might be termed ‘backstage’ settings throughout Naissance, most notably the swimming pool changing rooms and showers. These settings encourage us to think about the repeated athletic labour that lies behind the spectacular performance with which the film opens. If, according to Butler, gender performativity is meant to be seamless, such that gendered behaviour appears to emanate from within, then Marie’s gaze on the swimmers constitutes a significant disruption to that paradigm. The film draws our attention to the many individual moments that, when viewed together after

Figure 2. The monstrous legs kicking under water undergirds the girls’ spectacular routine.
several repetitions, come together to constitute a winning routine. Marie does not join the team but instead is permitted to follow Floriane into these backstage spaces, and on one occasion to a regional competition. Marie’s close attention to the routine is signalled by the frequent use of close-ups both in moments of preparation and in the competition itself. We see Marie help Floriane apply her gelatinous hair lacquer, which itself erases athletic labour since it is intended to suggest that the swimmers’ hair was already wet. And we see close-ups of Floriane applying glitter make-up to her face, the stark colours of which indicate that it is intended to be viewed at a distance, rather than at such close quarters. Wilson’s perceptive analysis of Naissance argues that the ‘gritty, abrasive’ qualities of glitter on the swimmers’ faces repel the gaze owing to their associations with hardness and the grotesque (2017, 12). Following Wilson, the closeness of Marie’s gaze draws attention to the individual elements of glitter, in a spectacle analogous with the film’s display of marked citations of gender.

At the regional competition itself, Marie’s focus on the routine is demonstrated by the proximal experience of the girls’ bodies, rendered through close-ups. Through the position of the camera, we can see and hear the effort that the sport requires. The fixed rictus grins, which viewed from a distance serve, as Roth and Basow (2004) argue, to elide athletic labour, here in close-up become monstrous. In turn, the girls’ audibly heavy breathing obscures the music to which the routine is supposed to be synchronised. Marie’s gaze fragments the girls’ routine into individual close-ups, which deprives the viewer of the full spectacle of the routine. Just as significant, though, is that such a fragmented perspective, focusing on individual faces and limbs in distinct frames, precisely parallels Butler’s conceptualisation of the ways in which gender performativity draws attention to the labour of gender, and in so doing provides the means by which normative morphologies might be undermined. Marie’s close attention to the girls’ routine, which is thus aligned with a queer perspective, therefore works to undercut disciplinary regimes associated with heteronormative visual economies.

**From the bleachers onto the pitch**

In contrast to Naissance, in which Marie remains on the periphery of the synchronised swimming team, Tomboy and Bande show instances in which characters move from the side-lines and into the fray of various sports and competitive encounters. In Tomboy, football serves as the principal means through which Laure/Mickäel integrates themself into the neighbourhood, and through which their masculine gender identity is negotiated. The film presents football as a distinctly gendered arena; while Laure/Mickäel is gradually allowed to join in the game, one of the boys remarks to Lisa that, as the only girl present, she ‘should be the cheerleader’. Before they play, though, the film shows Laure/ Mickäel watching the game and the players, carefully. In a similar fashion to sequences in Naissance, shots of Laure/Mickäel gazing at the players are here intercut with long shots of those players. Tellingly, the game itself appears to be of limited interest to Laure/Mickäel. Rather, they are attentive to the boys’ body language and gestures while they are playing the game but do not have possession of the ball. It is in these situations that we see the boys’ seemingly nonchalant, perhaps unconscious, gestures, as they spit on the ground and scratch their backs, readying themselves for further action. Through Laure/Mickäel’s acute attention to these actions, Tomboy seems to suggest that these movements are as
integral as any of the other, official rules to the game. Much as Naissance showed that synchronised swimming mandated a normative construction of femininity, so here the citation of a particular form of masculinity seems to be a pre-requisite for participating in even a children’s amateur game of football.

Tomboy provides perhaps the clearest instance of the potentials of Butler’s conceptualisation of citationality, and with it the potentials of sport, for disrupting gender norms. Following Laure/Mickäel’s close attention to the players’ actions, the character echoes those movements themself, once invited to join the game. These moments are carefully picked out by the camera, ensuring that we see Laure/Mickäel carefully punctuate a pass by spitting on the ground immediately afterwards, and scratching their own back as they watch the action further down the field. This is the radical promise of Butler’s theorisation of performativity, namely that, when cited differently, the individual behaviours that taken together are said to constitute a gender identity might become untethered from their gendered associations. In consequence, someone assigned female at birth can effectively cite the norms of masculinity (Figure 3).

Tomboy nevertheless seems to emphasise the limits of Butlerian phenomenology when shortly afterwards, the boys break from the game to urinate by the side of the pitch. Laure/Mickäel, realising that they cannot replicate this particular behaviour, retreats to the woods to relieve themself. This moment would seem to re-emphasise the immutability of the gendered body, as the sounds of boys’ voices close by suggest Laure/Mickäel’s fear of discovery. The seeming intractability of the gender binary is apparent in other elements of Tomboy: Laure/Mickäel’s mother (Sophie Cattani) is heavily pregnant throughout the film, drawing attention to her biological femininity, while their father (Matthieu Demy) seems to embody hegemonic masculinity and to encourage his child’s masculine identity. However, Sciamma’s film demonstrates that the gendered body, like gendered behaviour, may likewise be manipulated. When Laure/Mickäel prepares to go swimming with the group, they cut up their girl’s swimming costume to fashion some red briefs. Observing the physical absence of a penis underneath their briefs, Laure/Mickäel retrieves some plasticine and moulds it into a small prosthesis to create the impression of

Figure 3. Laure/Mickäel observes the gestures of the football players.
male genitalia. As such, *Tomboy* demonstrates that even this seemingly infallible signifier of masculinity might be manipulated. Indeed, when their mother demands that Laure/Mickäel reveal themself as female to their new friends and wear a dress, it is this clothing, replacing their usual singlet and shorts, that appears to be gender impersonation. In contrast to synchronised swimming in *Naissance*, which served as a vehicle for the enforcement of gender norms, football and swimming in *Tomboy* provide arenas in which gender identities might be reappropriated.

Just as Laure/Mickäel is gradually coaxed onto the football pitch, *Bande* shows a character moving from the periphery into the centre of the action. In the much-discussed sequence in which the girls dance and lip-sync to Rihanna’s ‘Diamonds’, we see Marieme move from simply watching the other girls to a position in the centre of the frame. As I have argued elsewhere, this is a pivotal moment in which Marieme assumes a position of agency in the narrative (Smith 2020, 62). For Isabelle McNeill, this is a moment of seduction, akin to that which Marie experiences watching the synchronised swimmers for the first time (2017, 337). However, in contrast to Marie’s evident *coup de cœur*, Marieme is able to participate immediately in the spectacle before her. A similar dynamic is at play in the various sports and ritualised encounters throughout the film. *Bande* begins with an American football game, played with skill and panache. Marieme is here just one of many players, some of whom are semi-professionals from Les Molosses d’Asnières, one of the premier American football teams in France (Wilson 2021, n191). Whereas the all-female synchronised swimming team in *Naissance* is typical of a sport that is most often practised by girls and women, American football, particularly in its native United States, remains heavily male dominated. Accordingly, the gendered regimes surrounding the sport are highly distinct. As discussed, synchronised swimming valorises the performance of effortless grace and poise, which works to deny the sport’s athleticism. In contrast, the helmets and protective body armour worn by players of American football enhance an assumed male physique and constitute a promise of the rigorous athletic activity – as well as violence – fostered by the game. Perhaps because of the widespread associations with masculinity, a number of critics and scholars have described their surprise when the players remove their helmets and we see for the first time that the players are female (see Dobson 2017; Wilson 2017; Handyside 2019). This sequence, occurring immediately before the film’s title, seems to present itself as a declaration of intent, informing us that the narrative that follows will be one that defies gendered expectations (Figure 4).

My focus here, however, is the ritualised violence that is sanctioned within American football and is ever-present in different forms throughout *Bande*. The extent of the body armour used in American football, in contrast to other contact sports such as rugby, might be said not only to mitigate, but also to permit, the regulated violence that occurs within the norms of the game. In this opening scene, we see the players throw their bodies onto one another, or onto the ground, in a bid to retrieve the ball. Much of the footage of the game is shot in slow motion and, accompanied by ‘Dark Allies’ by Light Asylum, can be seen to draw from the music video aesthetic that likewise proves so important to the ‘Diamonds’ sequence. The slow-motion footage has two principal consequences: firstly, it has the effect of making the sanctioned violence of the game somewhat balletic. Secondly, and in combination with the use of close-up, the footage draws our attention to the individual actions of the players, which, taken together, constitute a game of
American football. In this way, the viewer is distanced from the game itself to focus on the players’ distinct roles. The spectacle of the girls playing such a masculine-coded game exemplifies Butler’s contention that sports have the potential to expand out the possibilities for feminine morphologies (1998). Alice Pember (2020) notes the paucity of attention paid to the soundtrack in discussing the scene’s affective potential. For her, ‘Dark Asylum’ undercuts the visual spectacle of the girls clashing heads, to create a ‘counter-resilient’ affect of melancholy (2020, 302), that is, one that resists the call of resilience for the girls to overcome the violent damage they endure in the game. As a result, then, the inclusion of girls in this sanctioned violence is nothing to celebrate.

Pember echoes Wilson in her contention that the American football sequence seems to be somewhat disconnected in both space and time from the rest of the film (2020, 300). Nonetheless, there is considerable evidence that the sanctioned violence of this sport spills over elsewhere in the film. The girls walking home after the game understand their role to keep their heads down and tolerate the harassment they face from young men in their neighbourhood, just as Marieme can predict to the second her brother Djibril’s (Cyril Mendy) actions, including his violent outbursts. In these instances, violence is understood and presented as the preserve of men. However, the two fights that punctuate Marieme’s affiliation with her bande demonstrate the ways in which ritualised violence functions among groups of young women as well. These fights seem to be scheduled in advance and allow some degree of hierarchy to be established among the distinct groups in the same neighbourhood. They do not have codified rules, but the participants appear to have agreed to certain principles of engagement, such as that the victor is confirmed by their opponent losing her clothing. When Lady is left cowering in her black sports bra, it is clear that her authority is diminished among her own friendship group and the neighbourhood alike.

Thus it is that Marieme takes on the task of recuperating the reputation of her group, setting up the assignation with the girl who had defeated Lady, without the latter’s knowledge. Here Marieme, newly minted as Vic ‘for victory’, lives up to her namesake, and easily beats the girl who had previously defeated Lady. Moreover, in the fight, she succeeds not only in removing the girl’s top, but also in slicing away her red, lacy underwear, which she grasps aloft as her prize. That the revelation and removal of this underwear is the principal signifier of winning the fight indicates not only the clear humiliation and violation of having one’s clothing removed in public, but also the fact
that it reveals anew the participant’s femininity. Shortly after Lady loses her fight, a group of boys refer to her as ‘just a chick’ and refuse to move to let her past.\textsuperscript{11} It is notable, too, that at the fight, Marieme wears her baggiest sweatpants and hooded sweatshirt, which work to obscure her female body (though her hair remains tied into a loose braid). Further, it is only once she has won this fight that she earns some begrudging respect from Djibril – particularly when she shows him the red bra she has pocketed from the experience – and he allows her to play a football video game with him. Though these moments are fleetingly celebratory, it would be inaccurate to suggest that \textit{Bande} endorses Marieme’s masculinised violence. Instead, when Marieme slaps her sister, effectively citing Djibril’s violence in the name of discipline, the film observes the circularity of the violence established here and suggests that this behaviour adds negatively to the girls’ experience. While Butler (1998) argues that sports and athleticism may broaden the scope of feminine morphologies, it is clear in \textit{Bande} that citation of male violence simply adds further violence to the girls’ worlds rather than broadening their possibilities, as Butler intended.

***

Overall, I have argued that sports, games and other forms of ritualised encounter provide a potent means through which characters negotiate the conventions of gender and sexuality in Sciamma’s youth cinema. The various systems of rules and conventions on display, I have argued, are vehicles for the instantiation of norms of gender and sexuality. Synchronised swimming is presented as the epitome of normative femininity, while in \textit{Tomboy} football is a privileged forum for the instantiation of masculinity. For its part, \textit{Bande} establishes the complex relationship between femininity and violence found in the film through a female game of American football. In none of these films, though, are the rules of the game, and with them the norms of gender, straightforwardly inhabited. To be clear, I do not suggest that the rules of these various sports have necessarily been subverted in Sciamma’s films. However, I have observed the ways in which Sciamma uses sports and games as a vehicle through which to observe – and to undermine – norms of gender and sexuality. In \textit{Naissance}, Marie’s queer gaze on the swimmers disrupts the harmonious, seemingly effortless spectacle presented by the girls, while the deception that motors \textit{Tomboy} demonstrates that, following Butler, masculine norms may be embodied by individuals of any gender. Lastly, the violence of \textit{Bande} works to question the assumption that expanding feminine morphologies is necessarily a positive development. Rather than ‘opening up the possibilities for liveability’ as Butler’s utopian prose has it (2004, 31), Sciamma’s film demonstrates that replicating the violent norms of toxic masculinity undermines the girls and their fragile solidarity. Just as Fily observed in the game of mini golf with which this piece began, there are rules, but there are also innumerable ways in which they might be broken.

\section*{Notes}

1. ‘Il y a des r\'egles!’
2. Claire Moufliard (2016) is attentive to the spatial politics of this scene, noting how the girls on the mini golf course are able to negotiate these Parisian landmarks in ways that are otherwise off-limits to them, since they remain discursively marked by the \textit{banlieue} (113).
3. ‘S’il y a un tunnel, alors…’
4. There is some debate as to whether Tomboy depicts a transgender child in the process of coming to terms with their identity as a trans boy. However, the affirmation ‘Je m’appelle Laure’ ['My name is Laure'] at the film’s conclusion seems to indicate that the identity of Mickâel is a fleeting one. Throughout, I use they/them pronouns to designate the character’s gender ambiguity.
5. Katharina Lindner expands on the gendered discourses governing participation in sports and representation in sports films, noting that disciplines associated with poise, balance and grace tend to be those associated with femininity, while those requiring strength and speed are associated with masculinity (2014, 489–490).
6. This is true of only one other sport: rhythmic gymnastics.
7. ‘Tu diras ça à ton mari ? Que tu n’as pas de temps ?’
8. ‘t’as qu’à jouer la pom-pom girl !’
9. This is less the case in France, where female American football teams are more widespread.
10. ‘comme victoire.’
11. ‘une espèce de meuf.’

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Frances Smith is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Sussex. She is the author of Rethinking the Hollywood Teen Movie (EUP, 2017) and Bande de Filles: Girlhood Identities in Contemporary France (Routledge, 2020), as well as co-author of the forthcoming Trans Representation in Contemporary, Popular Cinema (Routledge, 2022). She is a series editor of Refocus: The American Directors Series, published by Edinburgh University Press, and the editor of this special issue of French Screen Studies on the films of Céline Sciamma.

ORCID

Frances Smith http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8401-704X

Filmography

Bande de filles, 2014, Céline Sciamma, France.
La Coupe Bernard Tapine, 2018, Céline Sciamma, France.
Ma vie de Courgette, 2016, Claude Barras, France.
Naissance des pieuvres, 2007, Céline Sciamma, 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 Techiné, France.
Tomboy, 2011, Céline Sciamma, France.

References


