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Céline Sciamma's screenwriting: 'building an architecture of multiple desires'

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ABSTRACT



The article focuses on how Céline Sciamma uses screenwriting to underpin her rigorous and uncompromising approach to independent filmmaking. She blends writing and *mise en scène* in the development stages to repeatedly subvert familiar generic conventions and calls into question what she calls the art of conflict through her distinctive gaze on relationships, femininity, sisterhood, coming of age and gender fluidity. Taking as starting point Sciamma's own analysis of her method of film development in preproduction, the article explores the centrality of screenwriting to her subjective and political approach to artistic creation. The second part of the article explores to what extent her screenwriting for other directors – especially her collaborations with Claude Barras, André Téchiné and Jacques Audiard – has reinforced her method or revealed new facets of her artistic and screenwriting signature.

KEYWORDS

Screenwriting; Céline Sciamma; desire; script; dialogue; collaboration

Over the last 15 years, Céline Sciamma has developed her own distinctive voice and cinematic style as an independent French director who writes her own scripts and collaborates as a writer with other directors. Her five feature films to date have led to her association with representations of youth with a focus on femininity, and the exploration of gender identities. Perhaps above all, she is a filmmaker associated with the expression of desire. In this she is far from unique; it is a cliché to refer to cinema as the industry of desire. And yet, as Sciamma points out, this idea is based in the image, and only very rarely, if ever, linked to screenwriting. What we address here is the way in which she frames writing as an essential process of negotiation between desire (as inspiration or motivation) and necessity (as imposed by filmmaking possibilities and constraints).

This article concentrates first on Sciamma's approach to development and screenwriting for her own films. It then considers her recent writing collaborations with others – some first-time feature directors (Claude Barras) and some established filmmakers (André Téchiné, Jacques Audiard). In this way, we aim to gain an insight into her writing method and the ways in which her 'desire for ideas', as she defines her writing inspiration, is combined with essential structural elements to form 'an architecture of multiple desires' (Sciamma 2019). Through an exploration of her conception of cinema – her approach to storytelling, structure, characters and genre – we will unpick the slippery concept of desire

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in order to consider its various forms (inspiration, creative vision, motivation, feminist activism) that drive her political narratives, expressed through her pared-down style. We will also explore to what extent her collaborations with other filmmakers have reinforced her method or revealed new facets of her artistic and screenwriting signature. We argue that in Sciamma's cinema, screenwriting, often regarded as a transitional and even ephemeral part of filmmaking (Pasolini 2005, 187), is in fact foundational. It is through writing that she translates her motivations into narratives and images that not only question the patriarchal economy of desire rooted in power hierarchies but offer an alternative grounded in reciprocity and equality.

Sciamma's cinema: contextualising her production model

Sciamma is the sole writer of the screenplays for the five films that she has directed to date. All these films share the same independent producer, Bénédicte Couvreur, who is also her first script reader. They fall within the small budget category in terms of financing: €2–3 million for *Naissance des pieuvres/Waterlilies* (hereafter *Naissance*) (2007), *Bande de filles/Girlhood* (hereafter *Bande*) (2014) and *Petite maman* (2021), with only *Tomboy* (2011; €900,000) and *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu/Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (hereafter *Portrait*) (2018; €4.86 million) falling outside this range. All the films have been distributed internationally via arthouse networks, winning awards at major festivals and benefitting from growing critical attention. This independent economic framework informs Sciamma's preproduction development, particularly her screenwriting practice. For her, creativity goes hand in hand with a limited budget; financial constraints are integral to her dynamic mode of artistic creation.

Sciamma's autonomous approach to filmmaking perpetuates an independent cinema tradition entrenched in France since the New Wave. She is a leading example of a type of screenwriting auteur which emerged in the 1990s: filmmakers who initially trained as screenwriters or film editors before directing their own films (others include Audiard and Noémie Lvovsky). Their trajectories reposition the auteur-centred practice of filmmaking in France, illuminating the role of screenwriting strategies in the production of original narratives and aesthetics.

For Sciamma, directing was the result of a natural progression. After literary studies, she joined the Fémis film school in Paris, following the screenwriting pathway. In 2005, she graduated with a screenplay that was identified by the jury as original enough to become a first feature and which she was encouraged to direct herself, thanks to a 'signature' in the writing (Sciamma 2007). This reference to an authorial signature discernible in the writing of what would be released two years later as *Naissance* is telling of the attention and personal investment Sciamma puts into the writing stage of her films. For her, this is a carefully thought-out process, which she reflects on in numerous interviews and lectures, such as the one she gave in 2019 for BAFTA. Here, she presents strategies for effective storytelling that are both engaged and engaging, placing writing firmly at the centre of cinematic creation. Writing, she says, 'is about having a desire for ideas, therefore it is always about trying to build an architecture of multiple desires' (Sciamma 2019). It is an introspective stage, often long and characterised by reflection, revision and rewriting. It offers 'the opportunity to work on your desires, rather than acting immediately upon them', and is about locating with rigour and clarity what the

director wants (Sciamma 2019). This clarity will prove essential later in the production process; when faced with the necessity to compromise (the ‘rising tide’ as she puts it, referring to her experience of filming a key scene in *Portrait* on a beach with the waves lapping at the camera), you need to know what you want.

Sciamma sets out three steps in the construction of this architecture. The first is identifying and locating ‘global’ desires: the ideas driving the film project. These desires can be political, aesthetic or production related (Sciamma 2019). For *Portrait*, she identifies several desires that provided the schema of the film, asserting her agency as screenwriting director in control of her motivations and able to articulate her creative drive (and artistic originality) in reflective and militant terms:

I wanted to write the present of a love story [...] but I also wanted to tell about the memory of a love story [...] crafting the storytelling [to] allow both dynamics; [...] to show an artist at work and an artist–model collaboration that would depart from the fetishized muse tradition; a period piece but tight budgeted because I didn’t want it to be dusty and meticulous and mundane; [...] a contemporary form even though it’s set in the past. (Sciamma 2019)

The second step is to work at the local or scene level. Each scene that Sciamma creates contains ‘a unit of desire’ (motivation) driving the writing process. She talks of having two concurrent lists: one of desired scenes (images or sounds), and one of functional scenes needed for the story (Table 1).

The key function of the second stage of writing is to ensure that no scene remains on the ‘needed’ list that is not also on the desired list. Sciamma only begins the third step, the elaboration of the continuity, when the two files have merged into one. However, with her fourth film, she took a more radical, experimental approach at this stage, jettisoning scenes that had remained purely functional (which in previous films may not have made the final cut but would have been written just in case they were needed for continuity). Instead, she was obliged to take risks, linking scenes by ‘editing within the script’, foregrounding new narratives and transforming power dynamics between characters (Sciamma 2019). This shows that the scope of screenwriting is much broader than merely producing a continuity script and dialogue. From the first draft of the screenplay to the edited version of the film, the creative writing coherence is filled with motivations and decisions which are distinct from the usual attributions of directors. Though she is often considered an auteur-director, Sciamma’s practice reclaims this creative distinction between screenwriting and *mise en scène*. She is a screenwriter who directs and thus broadens the range of creative actions coming into play for independent and feminist filmmaking.

Desires, then, provide intellectual and emotional stimuli for creation, as well as recurring narrative motifs. But they need to be reconciled with cultural knowledge and

Table 1. Sciamma’s concurrent lists.

<i>Desired scenes for Portrait</i>	<i>Functional scenes for Portrait</i>
Adèle Haenel running fast towards the edge of a cliff; setting fire to the character; an abortion being painted; a group of women singing an unknown tune in the night; a sentence: ‘Don’t regret, remember’; and for the last scene of the film, a long take on a character listening to Vivaldi’s ‘Summer’ in a concert hall. (Sciamma 2019)	The scene where [...] the painter is commissioned by the mother; [...] the painter arrives at the castle; [...] the painter sees the sitter for the first time; [...] the painter starts to paint; [...] the sitter discovers her portrait; [...] maid gets an abortion [...] (Sciamma 2019)

methodological principles: ‘Screenwriters know how to write and sometimes this might be our biggest problem, because this knowledge comes from a culture of storytelling. I think writing is all about questioning that, that’s why you need a method’ (Sciamma 2019). Sciamma’s development method rests on identifying appropriate writing ‘tools’ and questioning her application of inherited cultural screenwriting principles, such as narrative arcs, plot conflict, character construction and adaptation techniques (Sciamma and Ciment 2015; Sciamma 2019).

One of the ways in which established codes can be challenged is by reinventing the ‘art of conflict’ in her stories through a distinctive gaze on relationships, femininity, sisterhood, coming of age and gender fluidity.¹ With *Portrait* in particular, Sciamma explicitly rejects the conflict-driven narrative that screenwriters are trained to regard as the natural dynamic for a story, in favour of a narrative structure based on equality. It is surely no coincidence that *Portrait* is one of the films Iris Brey draws on in her definition of the female gaze as ‘another way to desire, no longer based on asymmetrical power relations but on equality and sharing’ (2020, 18).² What is interesting from our perspective is the imbrication of the dynamics of the gaze and those of the narrative in a queer economy of desire developed at the writing stage: Sciamma (2019) herself describes this narrative economy in *Portrait*, where conflict is eliminated thanks to having two female protagonists, who are intellectual equals and creative partners, and by a refusal to foreground social hierarchy (see Figure 1). Sciamma makes a political choice not to repeat stories rooted in oppressive relations of power and desire, but rather to foreground untold stories; of the woman artist, of the subject of the portrait who participates in its creation, of sisterhood and desire between women.

This emphasis on equality and agency and a desire to move away from conflict as the central driver of the narrative is not new with *Portrait*, however. In *Tomboy*, for example, we can see how it informs the film’s production as well as its content. The film embraces a child’s perspective, with its disjointed narrative redolent of the rhythms of childhood, its camera placed at children’s height (see Figure 2) and its rapid pace of production (shot in only three weeks) drawing on the children’s ‘crazy energy’ (Sciamma 2011; Wilson 2021, 44). And here again, the film’s energy comes not so much from conflict or suspense (when and how will Laure/Mickäel’s secret be discovered?) as from the intimacy and intensity of the children’s desires (Chevalier 2019, 70; Wilson 2021).



Figure 1. *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*: dynamics of equality.



Figure 2. *Tomboy*: filming at children's height.

Similarly, *Petite maman*, another film centred on young children, embraces the child's perspective in such a way that the audience can 'live the situation' (Guillot 2021). No rational explanation or obvious period markers are offered for the 'time travel' dimension and if, along with the child protagonists, we are initially perplexed by this, the narrative soon draws us away from seeking mechanistic explanations to focus instead on the relationships between Nelly, Marion (her mother) and her grandmother.

Petite maman is also typical of the way in which Sciamma's screenplays intentionally blur temporal and spatial markers to inscribe places in a fictional world outside historical and geographic realism. This atemporality is also reflected in each film's use of dialogue, which tends to play down social markers. In *Naissance*, for example, her focus was not to recreate contemporary slang and expressions, but rather to emulate the rhythms, cadences and silences of adolescent communication, and highlight the connection between talking and doing: 'Every time someone speaks, it implies an action' (Sciamma 2007).³

In all Sciamma's films, communication goes well beyond the verbal; playing, drawing, dancing, team sports are all ways in which characters express themselves and relate to each other. Silences are important too, especially in scenes where characters are alone, either in public or private, going somewhere, returning home, looking in the mirror, looking at their phone. These scenes are crucial in Sciamma's approach to her characters, given the absence of conscious work on characterisation from her writing method; she does not elaborate detailed backgrounds for her protagonists, neither does she endow them with any psychology. Although images, movements and connections between characters may feature in the global desires for a certain film, she states quite firmly that she does not know what happens to her characters when they leave the frame at the end of her films because they do not exist beyond the time and space of the fiction (Sciamma and Bidegain 2019). And yet, her protagonists, filmed in action, are central to building stories 'of emancipation, exploring identities and examining femininity', in the present of narration, without recourse to conventions of character design (Sciamma in Grassin 2014). Like her film projects, characters are 'desire driven', whether it be the discovery of sexual desire, as with Marie and Anne in *Naissance* or Marianne and Héloïse in *Portrait*, the desire to belong for Marieme in *Bande*, or the desire to be themselves, as for Laure/Mickäel in *Tomboy*. Her characters are also frequently driven by a desire to say no:

to normative sexuality, to gender conformity, to social expectations. Sciamma (Grassin 2014) has associated her fictional characters with ‘superheroes’ because of their ability to change appearance with a new outfit, indicative of a refusal to conform that often goes hand in hand with trying out (putting on) different identities. For example, when Marieme joins the girl gang, she puts on a uniform (jeans, leather jacket, straightened hair) to mark her new identity, one she will later jettison in favour of a masculine ‘armour’ (baggy hoodie and chinos). Likewise, Laure/Mick el rehearses the poses and gestures of the other boys before adopting them during football games.

Like her characters, Sciamma experiments with each new film, challenging established formal properties of screenplays, and surprising the audience with unconventional narrative and ideological points of view. Her films offer viewers a glimpse of a different way of experiencing the world, one that is often rooted in a physical relationship, to space or to another character. Her refusal of psychology ‘in favour of action and embodiment’, as Wilson (2021, 45) points out, enables a focus on desiring bodies and corporeal expression: ‘her scripts, and the films she imagines and envisages, can thereby come closer to the body, to its intimacy, with few words’. Central to this is the child-centred aspect of her screenplays, in which adults are kept off-screen: they barely feature in *Naissance* and *Bande*, and in *Tomboy* and *Petite maman* they are seen only from the children’s perspective, to which the camera remains wedded.

Chevalier (2019) argues that Sciamma’s repositioning of the representation of youth is both reassuring in its familiarity and progressive in the way it drives the audience to ‘question the generic norms of gender identity, social clich e and film genre’. Her cinephilia draws on popular genres as well as auteur films; references range from popular American teen movies, thrillers and musicals to graphic novels and fairy tales. *Petite maman*, with its forest setting and time-travel narrative, references codes of the *fantastique* and science fiction, while also calling to mind other films on childhood and mother–daughter relationships, notably *Demain et tous les autres jours/Tomorrow and thereafter* (No mie Lvovsky, 2018). Since *Naissance*, Sciamma has subverted generic conventions, questioning gender stereotypes and cinematic perspective, foregrounding a female gaze in her exploration of the apprenticeship of gender, and what she calls ‘the difficult job of being a girl’ (Sciamma 2008; Franco 2018). *Naissance*, for example, borrows the iconography of 1980s American teenpics to show how Marie learns to navigate her desire for Floriane. *Tomboy* draws on Hitchcockian suspense and the thriller convention of ‘going undercover’ (Chevalier 2019, 66, 70), as Laure, whose mother teaches her how to be a girl, adopts the gestures of the boys to present as Mick el to her new friends. Similarly, Marieme learns how to dress, move and dance from her ‘bande de filles’. Sciamma’s writing also addresses how this ‘job of being a girl’ is linked to the spaces her characters inhabit. For her, this is a political, feminist issue bound up with surveillance and control, social visibility, sorority and empowerment, expressed through a ‘female gaze’ (Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams 1984; De Lauretis 1987; Mayne 1990; Stacey 1994; Brey 2020). For example, her films are all female-driven stories which refuse to objectify women in fiction and perpetuate inherited dominant patriarchal attitudes. Instead, her female characters embody their subject status and express their subjectivity, reclaiming their desires.

Offering the opportunity to reflect, invent and defend, screenwriting becomes a political creative activity underpinning the ambition to make an ‘inclusive cinema, cinema that resembles [Sciamma], both militant and emotional’ (Gianorio 2020), starting

with her method for writing screenplays as an engaged feminist artist. In *Portrait*, this commitment is implemented in part by excluding certain narrative elements from her screenplay. The story is not driven by how the characters face society and its rules; it is about how they face each other. Sciamma has intentionally left out 'the obstacles, the enemies, the traps, men' (Sciamma 2019). This political agenda also impacts on the dynamic with the viewers, drawn into an active, collaborative relationship with the film. This is especially true of *Petite maman*, which Sciamma refers to as a 'dream of collaboration between the viewer and the story'. This collaboration rests on an 'intimate framework' that Sciamma has created to enable viewer engagement with both the story and the film (Boutet 2021). Scepticism here is also a way of justifying and marketing her independence as filmmaker and a different type of engagement when not directing.

For her own films, Sciamma writes alone, only sending her script draft to her producer, Bénédicte Couvreur, then to one or two select readers during the financing stage (Sciamma and Bidegain 2019). And yet, she is aware of a collaborative dimension of screenwriting which plays a key part in relation to the expression of desire. She works closely with her editor Julien Lacheray, establishing clear connections between writing and editing. This last stage of writing enables her to account for the fact that screenwriters are trained to anticipate the process of editing, often over-writing to facilitate transitions ('bridges') between scenes. Consequently, the editing stage of Sciamma's film is an integral part of screenwriting, enacted as sometimes radical choices to cut or even not to write certain scenes. The relationship is not only one of anticipation, though; editing acts retrospectively on the screenplay, revealing latent meanings and desires, allowing 'the subconscious' to emerge. She explains that in *Portrait*, this was 'the issue of equality between the two heroines, [their] relationship without domination', while in *Petite maman*, Lacheray alerted her to the recurring motif of Marion's insomnia that she then linked to a personal childhood experience. Sciamma's practice of writing for cinema, then, is deeply reflective, alive to the political and personal resonances of the desires that drive her creativity. The pared-back aesthetic of her films is rooted in the rigour and clarity with which she builds the architecture of desires: a framework established in the screenplay and then revealed in full through a collaborative editing process. Collaboration takes on a different sense, however, when Sciamma writes with and for other directors.

Writing for others

In addition to her own films, Sciamma also writes for – and co-writes with – other directors, sometimes as a credited co-writer or, occasionally, in a more discreet partnership. She formally collaborated with first-time director Cyprien Vial for *Bébé tigre/Young Tiger* (2014), intervening after a first screenplay draft had been produced, to help Vial 'polish the structure and some of the dialogue' (Vial 2014). She is also credited on Bettina Oberli's first French film, *Le Vent tourne/With the Wind* (2018). In this case, Sciamma was introduced to this director by producers to 'add a contemporary touch' to the script and was also involved in the editing stage (Oberli and Papaux 2018). More informally, Sciamma acted as an uncredited reader, for example for Lvovsky on *Camille redouble/Camille Rewinds* (2012), and regularly for her friend Rebecca Zlotowski, for whom she was also present during the editing of Zlotowski's films (Chèze 2016). She is also active in helping and advising new filmmakers, sometimes deliberately refusing a formal credit,

and of course, like all writers, she has collaborated on screenplays that have not been shot, such as Aude-Léa Rapin's first feature in 2016 (Sciamma and Rapin 2016; Sciamma and Bidegain 2019). Sciamma is not just a script doctor or occasional collaborator; she sees her co-author role as one of sharing experience and personal collaboration. This includes accompanying directors throughout preproduction because she considers that, as a director herself, she writes pragmatically and is able to anticipate filming conditions (cost, extras, sets) but also the desires of the director who will shoot the script she has elaborated.

Sciamma's first substantial adaptation was *Ma vie de Courgette/My Life as a Courgette* (Barras and Macnab 2016, hereafter *Courgette*), an international animation film that received an Oscar nomination and won *Césars* for Best Animation and Best Adaptation in 2017. In 2012, she was approached by the producers to work on first-time director Barras's draft adaptation of Gilles Paris's novel. Sciamma declared a strong connection between her own work and this draft screenplay focused on youth 'at the margin' (Matheou 2017). Barras wanted to tell the story from a child's perspective, as Sciamma had done with *Tomboy*. Sciamma also recognised further points in common: a desire to consider children as fully fledged, intelligent characters and to 'address children as spectators' (Gilson 2016a). She has credited her experiences on *Courgette* with transforming her screenwriting practice by revealing the potential for 'melancholic, tough [...] emotionally engaged' films to appeal to children (Romney 2021, 57).

Whether writing for her own films or collaborating with other directors, Sciamma's practice places the focus on the emotional and sensory experience of the viewer; the target audience is always in her mind. When writing *Courgette*, her goal was to craft a story that would engage children, so her focus was on the audience, rather than the characters, or puppets (Sciamma and Jenkins 2017). She further developed this idea of film viewing as an embodied experience in relation to *Petite maman*, describing how she envisaged the audience's rapport with the film: 'it should feel like cinema, one should draw pleasure from living the ideas, not necessarily see them but live them, sense them, be moved, be at the heart of an idea, take part, be happy to follow it up' (in Guillot 2021).

This desire to write for an audience also explains Sciamma's rejection of common storytelling motifs of the children's animation film genre, including an episodic or multi-layered narrative construction. *Courgette's* screenplay places the story firmly at the level of children (see Figure 3); there are no Pixar-style *clins d'œil* [winks] aimed at adults. The first scene of the film illustrates how Sciamma employed a visual method (*Courgette* playing with empty beer cans) to directly communicate the protagonist's personality, age and experience of home ('he's a kid, he's inventive, and his mother's an alcoholic'). It took her two days to come up with this image, which is not in the book, but which proved to be the key that unlocked the rest of the story (Sciamma and Jenkins 2017).

Just as she drew on experience built on with *Courgette* to develop *Petite maman*, some of the dialogue of *Courgette* was written using the experience she had acquired with *Tomboy*. In particular, she learned to have confidence in her understanding of children's intelligence – as characters and viewers – and to position herself in their 'logic' (Sciamma in Gilson 2016a). As with *Naissance*, this is not about emulating patterns of speech or expressions, but about writing from a child's point of view. What we see here, then, is that Sciamma's writing for other directors is not a separate activity from her own films' development. Rather, it is infused by her prior experience and it inspires her for her



Figure 3. *Ma vie de Courgette*.

next films. She is just working to another's timetable (Sciamma and Bidegain 2019). The collaborative work that she does for others is a form of experience sharing which generates mutual cross-fertilisation, even if so far, Sciamma has never invited other writers to collaborate on her films and does not make use of writing collectives.

For *Courgette*, Barras provided a first screenplay draft that Sciamma then reworked on her own. On the other hand, her collaboration with Téchiné – a director with over 50 years' experience – on *Quand on a 17 ans/Being 17* (2016) illustrates a change of practice. This screenplay was developed by Sciamma and Téchiné together, working in constant dialogue. This collaborative role went beyond helping to write a screenplay, requiring Sciamma to accept the responsibility of entering Téchiné's cinematic universe, to create 'his ideal screenwriting tool' that would serve 'the ambition of his project, which I shared with him' (Sciamma in Gilson 2016b). What mattered was not to bring her own concerns to the project, but to put herself at the service of the director and the *mise en scène*. Together they explored shared themes and motifs to depict 'a world where assuming one's feelings is an everyday battle' (Carrière 2016),⁴ and to rework them to 'make them universal and atemporal' (Sciamma in Gilson 2016b). Téchiné, embarking on an original story about two teenage boys, was drawn to Sciamma's gaze on adolescence, and to the essentially moving quality of her films that 'preserves the enchantment of cinema': 'a breath of fresh air and a kind of appeal for emancipation' (Baronnet 2016).⁵

In addition, Sciamma brought a rigour and clarity to the script – a 'unity' not generally associated with Téchiné's work. In practice, the collaboration involved Sciamma first proposing a 'skeleton' that Téchiné could 'nourish and bring to life' (Sciamma in Gilson 2016b).⁶ Rather than a rich script from which the director would pick and choose what he wanted, Sciamma brought a 'precise and dry' draft that they elaborated together, further reworking it after a period of research (Gilson 2016b). Sciamma emphasises the attention to rhythm, in relation to the scenes and to the minimalist, direct dialogue written by her, far from Téchiné's usual garrulous tendency (Carrière 2016). Rhythm was also a key element of the writing and filming process. In order to capture the two seasons of the story, there were two distinct phases of shooting, offering the rare opportunity of a rewrite in between. Sciamma had not been present for the shoot and did not watch

the rushes; her writing was informed by Téchiné's vision and his experience of the actors (Gilson 2016b).

Sciamma has been much less forthcoming about her latest collaboration, with Audiard on *Les Olympiades/Paris, 13th District* (2021). Audiard met Sciamma through Zlotowski, and he invited her to work on the early stage of development of a new project based on the adaptation of three tales from the graphic short story collection *Killing and Dying* (2015), by the American artist Adrian Tomine. The aim was to transfer the stories and characters to Paris and explore the *discours amoureux* [lovers' discourse] of hyper-connected young people. They produced a first draft together. Audiard was interested in Sciamma's way of understanding young people and her idiosyncratic characterisation. However, her actual contribution to the screenplay remains unclear. Sciamma worked on the adaptation of the third story, about the relationship between Nora and camgirl Amber Sweet, but her version, in which the two characters do not cross paths – Sciamma describes it as 'more like a ghost story' – was not kept (Letertre 2021a). When Audiard picked up the project after making *Les Frères Sisters/The Sisters Brothers* (2018), Sciamma was not available, and Léa Mysius, who has written screenplays with Téchiné and Arnaud Desplechin, came into the project for three months, contributing to some rewriting and most of the dialogue (Letertre 2021a; Mysius 2021). Sciamma's name has nevertheless been prominent in the film's promotion, linked by reviewers to her previous writing and filming of young women's stories focused on desire and to her feminist activism. This was perhaps a politically astute move for a film so focused on the sex lives of three young women and one young man.⁷ The fact that Sciamma's profile as a screenwriting auteur is much higher than that of Mysius, who has directed one well-received film to date, *Ava* (2017), is also telling of screenwriters' struggles for visibility (Scénaristes de cinéma associés 2019; Leahy and Vanderschelden 2021). Even when they are fully credited and involved in the film's promotion, as Mysius is, an auteurist bias is present in the press. No wonder Sciamma sometimes prefers anonymous collaborations, especially when working with first-time directors (Sciamma and Bidegain 2019).

* * *

This article has drawn attention – as she herself consistently does – to the centrality of screenwriting to Sciamma's filmmaking practice, establishing a space for herself in the industry and making it an integral part of her brand. Placing the emphasis on writing as a key stage of production sheds light on her artistic approach and the politics underlying her films. Sciamma's international reputation as a major filmmaker is readily associated with a distinctive style of *mise en scène*, but it is also firmly attached to her ability to write powerful coming-of-age stories which eschew orthodox depictions of children and subvert generic and narrative conventions. Her cinephile culture inspires her screenplays, but she is also determined to find new modes of film language to express her vision of the world and to enable the realisation of the desires that drive and infuse both her own films and those she has written with other filmmakers.

Sciamma's rigorous approach to scene construction and storytelling is underpinned by precise writing mechanisms. Yet she also consistently questions her screenwriting training, playing with generic codes, probing gender politics and generating narrative energies rooted in action and rhythms shaped by intimacy, collaboration and a desire for

equality, rather than conflict. Her screenwriting practice participates in a redefinition of film authorship, one which contributes actively to the visibility of screenwriters and highlights the importance of the script, not just as a tool for financing, but as a carefully honed artistic and political practice at the heart of the film.

Notes

1. For a detailed study of these themes, see Chevalier (2019); Smith (2020); Wilson (2021).
2. 'une autre manière de désirer, qui ne se base plus sur une asymétrie dans les rapports de pouvoir, mais sur l'égalité et le partage'.
3. 'À chaque fois qu'un personnage dit quelque chose, ça engage une action'.
4. 'un monde où assumer ses sentiments est devenu un combat ordinaire'.
5. 'le cinéma gardait son caractère enchanté': 'une espèce d'appel d'air et d'appel vers l'émancipation'.
6. 'Je lui ai proposé quelque chose qui était de l'ordre du squelette et qu'il pouvait ensuite nourrir d'une chose qu'il fait extrêmement bien : s'emparer de la vie. Il a nourri ce squelette de ses repérages et des métiers qu'il voulait filmer'.
7. See Letertre (2021b) on the autonomy Audiard, 68 at the time of shooting and not renowned for filming sex scenes, gave his actors, leaving them to develop and rehearse the intimate scenes without him.
8. Given the subject of this article, we are including the names of credited writers in the filmography.

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