'Shine Bright Like A Diamond': music, performance and digitextuality in Céline Sciamma's *Bande de filles* (2014)

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Abstract

This article examines the use of music in Céline Sciamma's *Bande de filles* (*Girlhood*, 2014), a film depicting the experiences of a black girl and her friends growing up in the Parisian *banelieue*. In addition to music written for the soundtrack, the film features diegetic performances by its characters of globally popular songs, the dance routine Internet hit 'Wop' by J. Dash, and 'Diamonds' as performed by Rihanna. These performances not only occupy key narrative roles but also situate the film in relation to a widely familiar and/or accessible pop cultural landscape, that encompasses an online visual imaginary or 'digitextuality', constructed through YouTube, Vevo and Vine videos circulating, sharing and responding to the songs and their video performances. This article examines the significance of weaving such sounds and images into the film's fictional world, aiming to understand the implications of this for questions of gender, sexuality and race raised by the film. Taken together with the film's wider aesthetic and musical choices, its digitextuality serves both to implicate the spectator and to frustrate a fixed view or reading of the characters. The result is a queer film that exposes the rigid lines of straight, white culture whilst also working to disorient them.

Keywords

film music, French cinema, girlhood, race, gender, Céline Sciamma

A young woman's face is framed in close-up, bathed in blue light (fig. 1). The soft, dark skin of her bare shoulders gently reflects the light, which also catches her glossy lips and simple jewellery. Her black hair is elegantly swept across her forehead, falling in waves to one side of her face. Her eyes are cast down, her head tilted forwards, as though deep in reflection. On the soundtrack, synthesised chords open Rihanna's version of the song 'Diamonds' and the young woman on screen lip-synchs its lyrics, 'shine bright like a diamond'. She raises her head, lifting her eyes to gaze straight into the camera, at us, as she repeats the line. As the full backing track kicks in, she smiles and continues performing the song, her body moving to the rhythm as the camera tracks back, revealing her strapless black dress and a name in gold on her necklace: Lady. With its blue-filtered lighting, glamorous head shot, apparent awareness of and interaction with the camera and lip-synched performance of a pop song, these moments of Céline Sciamma's *Bande de filles/Girlhood* (2014) recall a music video. As her friends join in, the scene also signifies narratively. In this profoundly moving scene, the girls enjoy a moment of exultant togetherness, ritualising their friendship and revelling in their youthful beauty, as well as the glamour and luxury of their hotel room. It is a hedonistic escape from their everyday lives and an affirmation of their friendship. This joyous positivity, however, is traversed by an indeterminate and problematic set of meanings deriving from the scene's implication in popular culture. From the girls' styling to the lyrics of the song, a focus on image and shining surface pervades, invoking a consumerist, celebrity culture that has, at best, fraught relations to gender and race. INSERT FIGURE 1
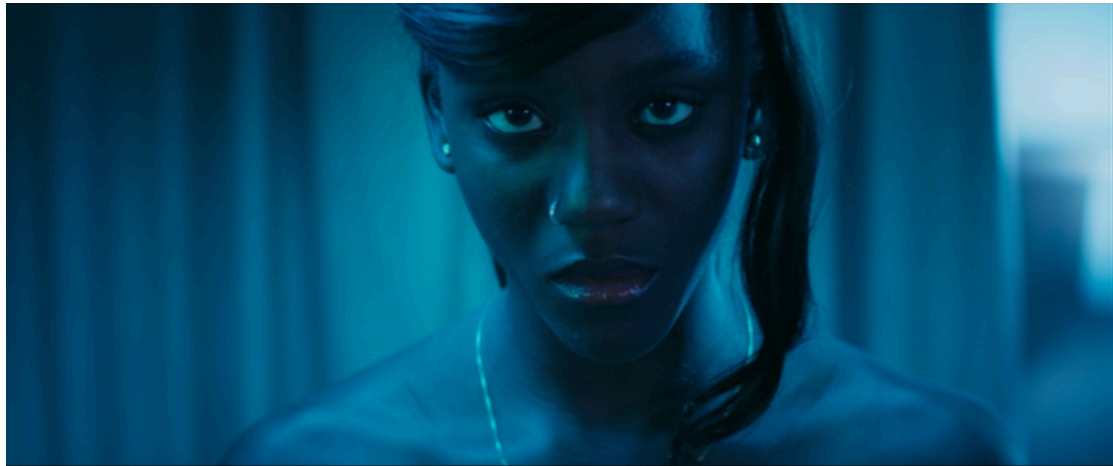
Fig.1 Lady performs Rihanna's 'Diamonds' (*Bande de filles*, Studiocanal)

This article looks closely at the music and musical performances used by Sciamma in her cinematic presentation of young, black girls in the *banlieue* of Paris. In each of Sciamma's three feature films, music has played a crucial role in shaping the characters' emotional terrain. *Bande de Filles*, however, departs from both *Naissance des pieuvres* (2007) and *Tomboy* (2011) by incorporating globally successful pop songs, as well as performances that evoke these songs' music videos. These performances in the film are powerfully felt moments that work with the extra-diegetic score to convey the embodied, transformative experiences and interactions of the characters. However, they also create an audiovisual experience that extends into the musical and digital world of the spectator. Performances of the songs 'Wop' by J. Dash and 'Diamonds', as sung by Rihanna, connect the film to a widely accessible pop cultural landscape. This encompasses not only the songs' audio tracks but also an online visual imaginary constructed through YouTube, Vevo and Vine videos circulating and responding to the songs and their video performances.

I use Anna Everett's (2003) term 'digitextuality' to refer to this digital intertextuality that erupts from and into the linear, diegetic flow of the film, generating ambivalent,

competing meanings and emotions. Everett has shown how, 'earlier practices of bricolage, collage, and other modernist and postmodernist hybrid representational strategies and literary gestures of intertextual referentiality have been expanded for the new demands […] of the digital age' (2003, 7). Digitextuality therefore accounts for the expanded, unpredictable workings of intertextuality at a time when technological and cultural changes encourage us to, 'seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content' (Jenkins 2008, 2). Digitextuality is an important aspect of *Bande de filles* because it bursts the boundaries of the film's fictional world and makes its sounds and images resonate in a virtual, shared and contemporary cultural space. To an extent, this is akin to the use of real locations, which connect the characters' world with that of the audience: we could step where they step. However, whereas shooting scenes in a *cité* in Seine-Saint-Denis, La Défense or the Forum des Halles generates a local specificity (albeit one that might recall similar urban environments), the digitextual resonance of the film opens out into the global space of social, digital media, a space inhabited by both the fictional characters and the viewers of the film. The music and videos existing outside the film bring a virtual resonance that reflects the way audiovisual culture circulates and traverses us all, as we navigate our lives' virtual and physical spaces. By destabilising diegetic space, the film's disorienting qualities resist containment within the film's fictional world. In this way the film makes an intervention not only into a local and national imaginary but, at the same time, into a global, digital consumer culture.

Bande de filles is a disorienting film. Wilson (2017: 18) argues that the film's ending, 'works to disorient the viewer, […] leaves [the protagonist's] future unknown, radically unscripted.' On the one hand, it presents black girls growing up in a place

full of constraints and straight lines, both topographical and social. Underprivileged, female and black, the protagonist Merieme and her friends face restricted choices: pathways they are supposed to take through their *cité*, with its grid-like walkways and housing blocks; routes they are expected to follow through education and work (not the privileged space of the *lycée* but a vocational qualification leading to a low-paid job). On the other hand, the narrative and aesthetic choices of the film tend to disrupt predetermined orientations. Through moments of contact and intimacy, often given texture by the musical score or enacted in dance and music, the film endows the girls of its title with an ambivalent luminosity that defies fixed readings. In thinking about the film's ambivalence, the way it unsettles our appraisal of the directions these girls are taking might take, I am reminded of Ahmed's writing on queer disorientations, where queerness is that which is 'oblique' or 'off line' as well as 'nonnormative' in its sexuality (2006, 161). Ahmed's writing is particularly apt for a film that presents and destabilizes racial as well as gendered identities. Ahmed connects the 'orientations' of gender and sexuality with those of colour. She shows, through the concept of 'reproduction', that whiteness reproduces itself through heteronormativity, whose structures of family likeness encourage, 'whiteness as a bad habit' (129). This reproduction orients along normative lines, which is why '[m]oments of disorientation are vital' (157). Queerness is a form of disorientation that disrupts ideological habits, making strange the rigid conformity of white, heterosexual hegemony.

In what follows, I explore how the film's disorienting queerness, in which music plays an important role, intersects with its digitextual resonances. I examine the different ways in which music acts as an interface between characters and audience, before focusing particularly on the moments of intersection with music and Internet

videos. These moments evoke the shifting pleasures of a shining, aspirational music culture, which the film's aesthetic transformations simultaneously exploit and resist.

Each of Sciamma's three feature films explores formative experiences through a close, sensuous attention to the nuances of everyday sensations and interactions. In her films, music acts as an intimate interface. It helps to convey moments of contact between the characters, evoking a private space of becoming that the audience can never fully know. Although the electronic music of producer-composer-DJ Para One features on all three scores, each film uses music differently to negotiate the relations between characters and audience, between the diegesis and our world beyond the film. *Naissance des pieuvres* depicts three teenage girls involved in the world of synchronised swimming. As Handyside has shown, Para One's electronic score 'accompanies moments in the film where the thresholds between soft and hard, liquid and solid, private and public, collapse' (2015, 129). The music is extra-diegetic, unheard by the characters, and yet it works to express the fluid, inner world of the girls' emotions and sensations. In *Tomboy* music is used more sparingly. A song, 'I Always Love You' by Para One, erupts on the soundtrack when the protagonist, a young girl, Laure, at that point passing as a boy named Mikaël, experiences a moment of joyous connection to his friend Lise through dance. With its layers of upbeat arpeggios, hand claps and 'doop bop' vocal chant, the song forms a striking contrast to the hitherto naturalistic soundtrack, which has oscillated between the quiet, still space of the housing block and the fun but sometimes stressfully socialised chatter of the local children. The music marks this moment of shared dancing as particularly full of promise: it is the one moment in the film when Laure/Mikaël can simultaneously love Lise and avoid conforming to any particular gender norms, enjoying corporeal

expressivity and intimacy without the pressures that accompany being a boy or a girl.

The characters appear to hear the music, yet it is not diegetically sourced. We might therefore describe the music here as 'trans-diegetic', in other words creating, 'liminal space – music that is both of and not of the filmic world' (Hunter 2012, 6). The use of music here goes further than the music in *Naissance des pieuvres* in blurring the boundary between the space of the audience with that of the characters. Hunter argues that trans-diegetic sound, 'becomes a way of challenging spatial and temporal specificity and of bridging the gap between film and audience (6). Already in *Naissance des pieuvres*, as Handyside suggests, the extra-diegetic music 'works to give form and expression to girls' emotions, but through a depersonalized register' (2015, 121). In *Tomboy*, however, the trans-diegetic music goes further in momentarily destabilising the film's naturalism, drawing attention to a moment that is both believable and beyond the confines of a normative 'realism' imposed by the social world of either characters or viewers. Hunter suggests that with trans-diegetic music, 'we are at once ensconced in the film's world and also keenly aware of its filmic nature' (9). Accordingly, this eruption of music that seems to come from outside the film, yet be part of the two young characters' world, comes to express the ways in which childhood experience hovers on the boundary between the infinite imaginative possibilities associated with fiction and the more rigid parameters of social structures.

Bande de filles presents a more complex use of music as intimate interface than in either of Siamma's two previous films, since it uses extra-diegetic and trans-diegetic music, as well as performances where music is heard by both characters and audience. In scenes where the music is scored by Para One (with one trans-diegetic exception

discussed below), it functions similarly to the extra-diegetic music in *Naissance des pieuvres*, giving texture to the characters' emotions and sensations without crossing the boundary into the girls' diegetic experience. The film is divided into five episodes by four cuts to black leader. The minimalist electronic score for *Bande de filles* creates a throbbing, cumulative energy at these four key moments of transition in the film, as well as at other points of heightened tension. Para One explains in interview that the score was designed to develop a theme for each 'chapter' of the narrative (the subsequently released soundtrack gives titles to each theme). The music was intended to evolve with the character and begin to 'raconter quelque chose' (Laubier 2014). The score thus traces Merieme's transformations: becoming a member of a girl gang with a new name, 'Vic' ('Néon'); refusing to follow in her mother's footsteps as a hotel cleaner ('Néon reprise'); beginning a sexual relationship with a boy she likes ('Girlhood'); leaving her neighbourhood to work for a drug dealer ('Le Départ').

Although focused on Merieme's subjective experience, the musical themes shape narrative space and its emotional textures rather than signalling the presence of a particular character. When it emerges during the elliptical sections of black leader that mark the key transitions, the music seems to offer an alternative to images and dialogues that might explain and bridge the gaps between scenes, creating an indeterminate affective experience that moves while resisting legibility. Para One's score thus harnesses the potential of extra-diegetic music to be both narratively significant ('raconter') and yet indeterminate ('quelque chose'), allowing the girls and their lives to affect us while retaining the 'opacity' that Handyside identifies in *Naissance des pieuvres*.

Queer disorientations: music and girlhood in *Bande de filles*

The use of the 'Girlhood' theme exemplifies the way the extra-diegetic score works to evoke girlhood as a state or process that defies fixed orientations. At this point in the narrative, Merieme, now known as Vic, has established her position in her *cité* and in her gang by fighting and humiliating another girl from a neighbouring area. Having received approval both from her gang's leader, Lady, and from her controlling older brother, she decides to make a nocturnal visit to her brother's friend Ismaël, who she has been seeing in secret. Waking him up, Vic tells him to remove his clothes and turn away from her and caresses his naked body. A cut to black screens out the act of lovemaking and moves us through time to another scene. Here, the camera frames a blurry expanse of La Défense, beginning a slow lateral tracking shot following a line of girls in close-up. Vic appears first in the frame, her gaze briefly, almost defiantly, holding ours, followed by the rest of the gang and many others, each girl in physical contact and/or conversation with those on either side of her. The 'Girlhood' theme fades in just after the cut to black, swells over the black screen which lasts a full 16 seconds, then continues through several different shots of the throng of girls in the La Défense sequence. Structurally, it resembles the 'Néon' theme that has articulated the previous two transitions: both feature pulsing, repeated semi-quavers and drawn-out, minimalist chord progressions. Yet here the musical phrase begins to articulate an upwards movement, as though the ambivalence of 'Néon' were resolving into a more positive mode. Echoing Vic's affirmation of her agency both in the fight and afterwards with Ismaël, the music seems to take us into a new phase of girlhood, in which Vic has found space for the expression of her desires, both as a lover and as part of a social body. Vic's look to the camera too, proclaims her position as subject rather than solely object of our observation. Yet the music and images are ambiguous.

The chord progressions ultimately have no clear destination, remaining obscure. A fuller texture of sound and a new melody of falling notes – neither melancholic nor hopeful – begins with the lateral tracking shot of the girls, whose diegetic chatting and laughing is inaudible to us. This shot opens out from Vic's individual world, situating her in a collective sphere of subjectivity. It asks us to admire the girls' youthful vibrancy, beauty and connectedness whilst defying our desire to know them or guess their trajectory. The lengthy section of black screen between Vic's initiation of sex and the group scene reminds us of all that we are not seeing and cannot know. Girlhood here is presented as unresolved and unresolvable potential, rather than actualized or fixed.

Bande de filles is the first of Sciamma's films not to attend explicitly to queer and trans identities, yet in its presentation of girlhood it subtly challenges normative concepts of gender and sexuality. The narrative's 'straight line' recounts Merieme/Vic's coming of age as a straight, sexual subject. Her relationship with Ismaël, moreover, is circumscribed by its position within the grid of the *cité*, where female desire is only tolerable within the confines of marriage. Yet Vic rejects Ismaël's proposal of marriage: 'je ne veux pas de cette vie de fille bien'.[1] Increasingly, Vic discovers the performativity of identity, both in its constraints and its liberations. Whether wearing the necklace of her new name, banding her breasts and downplaying her feminity to escape male attention, or wearing a blonde wig and red dress to sell drugs at a bourgeois party: in each case Vic responds to pressures from others and seeks her own ways of being, within and around them.

The film queers predetermined orientations by foregrounding moments of contact between girls that offer oblique pleasures and possibilities. Merieme's tender

relationship with her two sisters, the solidarity and freedom she finds with Lady, Adiatou and Fily in their girl gang, and even her later friendship with Monica, a neighbour and prostitute working for the drug dealer Abou: all offer alternative intimacies. In its indeterminacy, the score reinforces the ambiguities of these interactions. Near the end of the film, a trans-diegetic use of Para One's song 'Slow Down' fills the soundtrack as Vic slow-dances with Monica. As Vic's life speeds up in intensity, their dance creates an extended pause in which a wordless intimacy is expressed between the two girls. As they gaze tenderly at one another, we grasp a sense of connection, temporarily blocking out the man's world that is Abou's party. The emotions radiating between them remain opaque, unreadable: this could be desire, love, solidarity, or a mixture of those and more. Letting the ambiguous sensations of the music (and obscure lyrics of the song) drive the scene, rather than dialogue, allows it to resonate with possibilities, disrupting fixed narrative meaning.

The film's pre-title opening scene sets up the film's queer disorientation. It launches us into an out-of-focus shot of American footballers pounding in slow motion towards the camera, as the strident notes and fast beat of Light Asylum's queer club hit 'Dark Allies' create a driving rhythm on the soundtrack. The kinetic energy of this sequence is reinforced by the use of slow motion, mimicking the replay used in televised sports matches. Even once the image comes into focus, the movement of the game is robustly unpredictable, edited to highlight intense moments rather than to follow play. And just as we are initially unsure of the gender of these helmet-wearing, shoulder-padded figures, so singer-drummer Sharon Funchess's powerful vocals resist determination. As a black, lesbian musician, Funchess's presence on the soundtrack enables an alternative, identity position to resonate within the film from the start. The scene's vigorous, audiovisual motion and intertextual allusions are anything but

straight.

Bande de filles presents a departure in Sciamma's use of music by including songs that, like 'Dark Allies', exist outside the film, bringing with them layers of meaning and affect. Although differently presented, 'Dark Allies', 'Wop' and 'Diamonds' are part of the audience's world. They therefore constitute audiovisual, intertextual references that signify in other contexts, which may resonate in our viewing of the film, just as the film in turn creates may echo in those other contexts. I have argued elsewhere that songs, like other incorporated cultural objects, function in cinema as objects of collective memory, at the intersection of personal experience and a collective sphere. The song, 'can be seen as a recuperated object that brings the virtuality of its past into a new signifying context' (McNeill 2010, 78). Whereas my previous analysis addressed objects that bring a haunted, problematic past into contact with the spectator's present, the use of pop songs in *Bande de filles* is distinguished by their contemporaneity with the film. In this instance, the spectator's memory may be triggered, bridging not so much past and present, but the filmic world and the spectator's. The cinematic triggering of spectatorial memory is a potential actualisation of the virtual past, in other words dependent, 'on the chance of either knowledge and recognition or research' (2010: 61). With the Internet, however, boundaries between knowledge, recognition and research are increasingly blurred, less confined to individual memory. Google, YouTube and Wikipedia, alongside Apps such as Shazam and Spotify or Amazon Video's X-Ray service, allow unfamiliar music to become familiar in real time as a film is viewed. The shared cultural space, created by the inclusion of familiar cultural objects in a film, is extended into an audiovisual digital realm.

However the use of songs that are also popular on a global scale complicates the presentation of subjectivity in the film by implicating it in a digital, consumer culture that offers both liberation and constraint. The use of 'Wop' and 'Diamonds' differs from that of The Light Asylum track, not only in the wider reach of these more mainstream songs, but also in that the characters are explicitly engaged in performances of them. The entanglement of the characters' lives in a network of pop culture is thus made explicit in the diegesis. 'Wop' appears twice in *Bande de filles*. The first time is in the *métro*, when Lady plays the song from her phone and gets Merieme (who is not yet 'Vic', having only just encountered the gang) to join her in an impromptu dance, following cues in the song. The second scene, a recapitulation of this initial bonding between Lady and Merieme, takes place at La Défense, shortly after the 'Girlhood' sequence analysed above. In front of a large audience of girls, the two reprise their dance, but this time Merieme/Vic knows the movements and they dance as equals. Although there is no visible source this time, 'Wop' is plausibly integrated into the diegesis, easily believable as part of these girls' musical knowledge. 'Wop' was an international YouTube hit in 2013. It went viral, and its associated dance routine(s) resulted in thousands of fan videos and millions of views on YouTube. It also led to the creation of huge numbers of humorous, user-uploaded videos on Vine, a platform for sharing 6-second videos known as 'Vines'. It is therefore as credible a feature of urban space as the physical places where it is heard in the film. 'Diamonds' is equally plausible as a song the girls would know. By the end of 2013 Rihanna was the most viewed artist on YouTube and 'Diamonds' was top of the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart. (Marshall 2015, 41). As suggested in the opening of this article, the performance of 'Diamonds' in the film destabilises diegetic space by borrowing from a music video aesthetic in which, 'performers address the camera

directly, often lip-synching into its lens' (Railton and Watson 2011, 58). Both songs

resonate, through performance, editing, and mise-en-scène within the fictional world

and beyond it. The 'Wop' sequences participate in a fan culture that highlights the

inextricability of urban, cinematic and online space, while the performance of

'Diamonds' blurs the narrative boundaries of the film by appearing to be expressly

constructed for the camera.

Both 'Wop' and 'Diamonds' are songs that are not only heard by the characters but

also performed by them. These performances emphasise the relation between the

characters' individual gestures on screen and a global network of images, sounds and

gestures beyond the film. I will explore these aspects through close analysis of the

sequences involving J. Dash's 'Wop' and Rihanna's 'Diamonds'. In each case I will

first analyse the performance and presentation of the song within the diegesis of the

film, before extending the reading to incorporate the music videos and online

practices that are referenced by the inclusion of these scenes of performance, finally

returning these implications to *Bande de filles*. This process of analysis – moving

through, out and back to the film – reflects the way the scenes work as openings in a

fictional world.

'Wop': the black, female body in digital consumer culture

In both its appearances, 'Wop' features as a performance in which Lady and Merieme

dance together in public. The first time, which takes place in the *métro* after

Merieme's first outing in Paris with the girls, the dancing is spontaneously instigated

by Lady who plays the track from her phone. As the train moves, Lady begins to

dance and bids Merieme to join her, issuing instructions that translate directives in the

song such as 'play dead', and 'strike a pose'. Throughout the dance, the camera

frames the girls in close up, focusing either on Lady, Merieme, or Adiatou and Fily (the other two in the 'bande') who stand behind, offering encouragement and commentary. This framing has the effect of obscuring the girls' bodies, focussing instead on their facial expressions: Lady's confident pleasure, Merieme's shier enjoyment as she mimics the actions. Although this framing makes a two-shot impossible, the interactions between the girls are in fact emphasised, as at several points a cut is rejected in favour of a pan, connecting the space between the girls. This tight framing and camera movement also capture the cramped space of the busy train carriage. Along with the sound of the train's movement, this emphasises the ordinariness of the space, highlighting the contrasting vitality of the dance. Along with Merieme, we are discovering the girls' collective ability to transform mundane, urban moments into a celebration. Furthermore, by staying very close to the girls, we are drawn into their circle. We lose the distance we might otherwise have on occasions when music or collective festivity erupts into the normally atomised and taciturn space of public transport.

In this scene of *rapprochement*, then, the spectator, along with Merieme, glimpses the seductive potential of the group. The possibility of making noise or making a fuss is shown to be a significant part of the group's appeal for Merieme. In the steps and walkways connecting the housing blocks of the *cité*, girls stay quiet. In the opening scene, a group of girls' cacophony of chatter suddenly switches off as they enter the *cité*, where shadowy male figures loiter, calling out a name, generating discomfort and silence. Even the boy that Merieme likes shuts down conversation, inaccessibly friends with her older brother. When Merieme first meets Lady, Adiatou and Fily she is seething after being told that her grades are insufficient to continue her academic education. Her pleas have gone unheeded; protest seems futile in the face of

institutional disavowal. So while Merieme initially tags along with the girls to become more visible to Ismaël, their trip to central Paris opens up broader potential. The *métro* dancing follows other public interactions in which the girls assert their power to be heard. They loudly call out the racism of the white shop assistant who suspiciously follows Merieme, then confront another, hostile, group of black girls on the opposite platform in the *métro*. In each case the girls band together, taking pleasure in a noisy display of protest and dominance. They laugh together afterwards, acknowledging the event as performance. Life becomes a game they can play and win, in public space.

The lyrics and dance moves of 'Wop' reflect this performativity of confidence, enacted through group gestures. Like many hip hop songs, 'Wop' is self-reflexive and performative, describing and simultaneously bringing into being the 'wop' of the title. The injunction to 'wop' – a routine of fluid steps, hip and arm movements – foregrounds collective, shared movement. However 'Wop' also links dance to the acquisition of wealth: the lyrics begin, 'I made a little bit of money / I paid my bills / I paid this cover / I can't stand still'. The official video stages J. Dash and his collaborators as rich superstars, with a mise-en-scène designed to signal wealth, from J. Dash's diamond-encrusted necklace to the shots of their status symbol transport..

The song and its official video therefore place emphasis on the 'bling' associated with music industry success, whilst foregrounding dance as a both a collective, celebratory response to wealth and a way of achieving it. The conspicuous consumption in the video, however, is controlled and driven by men. Women in the video showcase the 'wop' in bikinis as sexualised objects of the camera's gaze. The lyrics too conform to the stereotype of rap's objectification of women. One of the moves in the dance routine is to, 'check that lady, like, "Dang! She fine"', ensuring

that both men and women dancers position the female form as object of the gaze. The presentation of race in the video is also problematic. The framing tends to segregate the dancers racially, perpetuating, as music videos frequently do, 'the binarism which serves to codify representations of black and white as internally cohesive categories' (2011, 96). In the video, black women are shown as proficient and sexualised dancers, while the line "Dang! She fine", coincides with a shot of the Barbie-like torso of a white woman. On the one hand, then, 'Wop' presents the dance as an inclusive, celebratory performance, open to all. On the other hand, its fantasy of male financial success depends on harmful gendered and racial stereotypes.

The multitude of 'wop' Vines responding to the song and its video were highly diverse in their imitations and variatons on the 'wop' dance moves. There is, however, a recurrent theme of bodily agility.[2] Cued by the dance routine, the Vines foreground physical prowess: the ability to pull off successful twerking, or to integrate wop moves seamlessly, and often absurdly, into everyday life. In the Vines, stereotypical meanings chanelled through the lyrics and official video are sometimes reinforced, but also widely diluted, parodied and diversified. As Tryon has argued of the 'fake trailer' genre, the Vine users manifest, 'a desire for building community', while also, 'illustrating his or her skill in manipulating a familiar text' (2009, 151). In *Bande de filles*, both performances of 'Wop' are akin to the Vines, though the later scene also invokes the music video. In the *métro*, the girls manifest a certain self-awareness and ironic distance from the dance that is clearly part of the fun. Afterwards Fily parodically mimics the 'make money' move. Whether she is mocking her friends or the song itself is unclear, just as the Vines ambiguously engage other users' videos as well as the original song. The framing described above, however, distances the scene from the Vines by refusing to showcase control and agility,

instead foregrounding the participatory 'idiocy' of their shared gestures.[3]

The scene at La Défense is more problematic. While the framing here is also constrained, the camera's proximity to the girls affords a lingering, close-up gaze on their hotpants-clad hips and thighs, gliding over their bodies as well as their faces. Understood in relation to the Vine twerking and official 'Wop' video, the visual pleasure of this close gaze upon the girls' supple bodies and energetic movements resonates with latent sexism and racism that commodifies the black, female body by investing it with a fascinating hypersexuality. The positioning of the girls adds to the sense of spectacle: the other girls stand behind them, while the camera and spectator watch them head on, giving the impression that the performance, unlike in the *métro*, is for someone other than the girls themselves. The scene therefore risks participating in what bell hooks describes as, 'the white consumer appetite that makes it possible for blackness to be commodified in unprecedented ways' (2015, 154). Yet understood in its digitextuality this scene also unsettles such objectification.

Firstly, the close framing differs from both the Vines and the official video which predominantly display the whole body in motion. Whilst the fragmentation of the body in close-up echoes a music video aesthetic in which black bodies are a fetishised spectacle for consumption, the scene also denies us a full view of the 'wop'. As in the *métro* scene, much of their movement remains *hors champ*. For the 'drop it to the floor' move, Lady's body is a vertical blur that traverses the frame. A tilt up from Vic's denim hotpants coincides with the 'turn around' move, so that she turns her back to us, filling the frame with her hair. We are made aware of both the camera's selectiveness (and therefore its – the director's, our – fascination) and at the same time its inability to contain the girls' movements, which continually exceed it. It is

significant that the scene in La Défense follows from the sequence scored to the 'Girlhood' theme analysed above. We saw how Vic's agency is emphasised audiovisually in that sequence, whilst remaining opaque and unresolved, opening out into a collective sphere of indeterminate subjectivity. The girls' participation in the 'wop' meme continues this sense of agency as they pleasurably manipulate a familiar text, while also revealing the precariousness of an agency expressed through a body that is continually at risk of appropriation by white consumer culture. This is visually literalised in a wide shot of La Défense. The shot (fig. 2) shows the whole group of girls dwarfed by the backdrop of the glossy towers and white, concrete expanse of the *parvis*, a gigantic advertisement for 4G mobile networking looming above them.

[INSERT FIGURE 2]

Fig. 2 Surrounded by white, digital consumer culture (*Bande de filles*, Studiocanal)

'Diamonds': music video and luminous constellations

If the 'Wop' sequences hint at and resonate with music videos through digitextual connections, the 'Diamonds' sequence emphatically resembles one. The incorporation of a music video-like sequence is arguably a strategy borrowed from what Colling (2015) calls the 'teen girl film', with reference to Hollywood coming-of-age narratives featuring young female protagonists. For Colling, the use of music video

aesthetics in such films is designed to engage the spectator's body pleasurably and to 'feel fun' (138). Drawing on Berlant's (2008) concept of an 'intimate public', Colling argues that such scenes harness, 'the desire to be *somebody* in a world where the default is being nobody' (Berlant, cited in Colling, 139), a desire certainly seen in Lady's gang as they hustle the money needed for a night together in an expensive hotel. An intimate public operates at the intersection between demographically-targeted marketing and private desire and/or dissatisfaction. For Colling (139), '[t]he intimate public of girlhood aims to feel as though it expresses what is ostensibly common among girls and in doing so it sustains the association of specific desires, fantasies, affects, and pleasures with girlhood'. Colling shows how Hollywood teen films invoke the participation of both characters and audience in the intimate public of girlhood, thereby giving the impression of release and empowerment whilst simultaneously reinforcing gender norms. In borrowing the device, Sciamma risks constructing a, 'shift within parameters: a static movement' (139). I want to suggest, however, that the film's aesthetic choices and digitextual resonance work together to expose and disorient, rather than perpetuating, the lines of stasis structuring the girls' lives.

The 'Diamonds' sequence shares some of the characteristics Colling identifies in teen girl film's use of music video aesthetics (136), notably the emphasis on dancing and singing, the hotel room location, functioning as a site of both domesticity and consumption, and also a 'makeover' element in the girls' dressing-up. It also encourages what Colling calls, 'kinaesthetic contagion […] a physically uplifting response to the general movement of the performance, dance, or object on display'. However, unlike in Collings's examples, or the super-fast editing of the 'MTV aesthetic' (Dickinson 2001), cinematographer Crystel Fournier creates kinetic energy

and rhythm primarily with framing, camera movement and variable selective focus. The average shot length (ASL) is long compared to most contemporary music videos. Rihanna's 'Diamonds' video, for example, has an ASL of 1.8 seconds, whereas in *Bande de filles* the sequence has an ASL of 14.7 seconds. The synergy between music and image, therefore, arises in the relations between camera and lens movement, the music, and the girls' motions of singing and dancing. As in the 'Wop' sequences, the camera's proximity means the girls' movements constantly extend beyond the frame. A shallow depth of field allows them to emerge into and out of clear focus as they dance. Here too, the 'kinaesthetic contagion' is accompanied and undercut by a refusal to contain or fully display the girls as spectacle within the frame. Yet, this scene is very different to the 'Wop' sequences: it is not a performance in public, but in a specially chosen non-place that allows them to create their own territory, private yet shared. After the opening shot of Lady, described above, the focus is entirely on exchanges between the girls: they dance and sing/lip-synch with each other, holding hands, looking at and gesturing towards each other, responding to each others' swaying motion. This is not the imitative performance of the 'wop', but something generated between the girls, for each other. The scene re-orients the lyrics of the song, whose 'eye to eye' coupling becomes a declaration of love between girls, underscored by Lady's gesture, pointing from her eyes towards Adiatou. The lengthy shots emphasise this, foregrounding the flow of interaction between the girls.

The sequence contains a mise-en-abyme of the kinaesthetic contagion between screen and viewer that ultimately distances us from the girls' intimate world. After several shots of Lady, Adiatou and Fily dancing together, we cut to a reaction shot of Vic (as she's just become), sitting on the bed, watching the others, separated visually from them by the absence of blue light. The camera slowly approaches Vic as she watches

her new friends, rapt like the spectator of a music video. She gets up, leaving the frame, and joins them in their performance, something that we as spectators cannot do. It is as though the music, rhythm and togetherness has moved her to cross a virtual screen into their music video world, 'stepping into this field of bodily sensation, of beauty, of pleasure' (Wilson 2017, 16). More broadly, of course, this signifies her decision to become part of their group and all that it offers her: distilled here in the embodied pleasures of carefree confidence and sisterhood. The film as a whole makes clear that these pleasures operate within constraints that promote divisions between women, such as the feuds and confrontations with black girls from other neighbourhoods, or the scene where Merieme intimidates Farida into handing over money to fund the hotel room. But the 'Diamonds' sequence shows the luminous allure of this shared access to glamour, a moment of privilege torn from a world where none is on offer.

Luminosity is central to the ambivalence of this sequence, particularly when Rihanna's video of the song is considered. Her video opens with diamonds filling the screen, and continues to gleam with their brilliance, with flashes frequently flaring up from behind her as she sings. The lyrics, too, emphasise luminosity: 'shine bright like a diamond', 'we're beautiful like diamonds in the sky', and images of a shooting star, light on sea water, sun rays and moonshine. Rihanna's performance of the song testifies to her ambivalent image as a star, an ambivalence that also pervades *Bande de filles* and this sequence in particular. The Barbadian singer is as famous for being violently beaten by her boyfriend, rapper Chris Brown in 2009, as for her stream of hit singles and party-loving lifestyle. Yet she has consistently refused to be settled into a clear identity position (of role model, victim, survivor etc.). She plays out themes of sexual violence, resistance, and power in provocative, polyvalent ways in

her songs and videos. Marshall argues that, 'Rihanna has consistently resisted socially produced scripts of oppression which expect black women to remain safely in lanes of servitude and invisibility' (2015, 47-8). The multiplicity of contradictory responses to Rihanna suggests that she has been able to construct herself as a mobile screen onto which innumerable and often lucrative projections can be beamed (see Best 2015, 136). In 'Diamonds' this combination of starry attraction and unsettling, evasive illegibility is conveyed between the sung lyrics and the video.

'Diamonds in the sky' are at once cosmic stars and expensive jewels, evoking the 'bling' associated with stardom. The kind of beauty sung here sits undecidably between an elevated, shining agency and material luxury and glamour. Yet there is also something traumatic in the video that clashes with the empowering lyrics ('I choose to be happy'). Rihanna appears sad and vulnerable throughout, and is repeatedly glimpsed fleeing, as though terrified (fig. 3). As the video progresses, images of conflagration and catastrophe accumulate. The hotel room is repeatedly restored from some fracturing disaster, played backwards and in slow motion, the song's diamonds turned to shards of broken glass. Despite the references to a couple in the lyrics, a close-up of separating hands is the only interaction in the video, creating a dissonance between the vibrant connection celebrated in the lyrics and the mournful feeling of loss visualised on screen. [INSERT FIGURE 3]
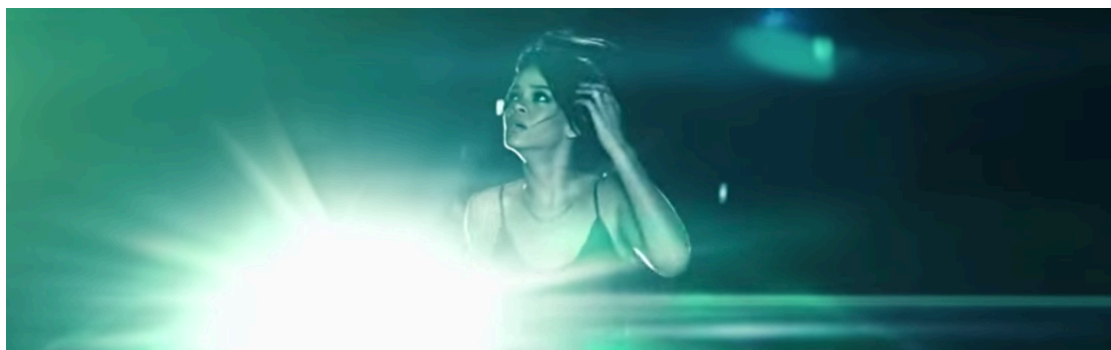

Fig. 3 Luminous vulnerability in Rihanna's 'Diamonds' (Vevo)

That the girls in *Bande de filles* sing along joyfully highlights the polyvalence of the song's audio. The film sequence overtly draws upon the upbeat sounds of 'Diamonds', the girls celebrating their togetherness. Yet in the era of digitextuality, Rihanna and her 'Diamonds' haunt the film, creating a trans-diegetic, connotative constellation that produces an ambivalent, unresolved reading of the sequence. The girls momentarily become 'stars', like Rihanna, wearing their glamorous, if stolen, new clothes and make-up, enjoying a night of luxury, but the traumatic melancholia of the video and Rihanna's fragile persona contribute a sense of unsettling transience. The connection with Rihanna raises questions about the image the girls choose to revel in: 'Diamonds' incarnates the luminosity of a black, female star who resists any coherent personal or political 'message' and has mastered the art of selling her image as spectacle. The girls reject the marginalised existence embodied by Merieme's mother, who works relentlessly and silently as a cleaner in a similar hotel to the one the girls stay in. Yet their exuberant crossover, through music and dance, into music video glamour is only temporary: despite Rihanna's brilliant appeal, it is only given to a very few to manipulate the racist, misogynist structures of consumerism to their material advantage.

Sciamma's use of 'Diamonds' reveals the film's complexity. Berlant describes how intimate publics create a sense of belonging, forming situations where, 'qualities, ways of being, and entire lives that have otherwise been deemed puny or discarded […] can appear as luminous' (2008, 3). Sciamma harnesses and exposes this problematic luminosity, leaving spectators with a feeling of disorientation. At the very moment of liberation from the ordinary constraints of their lives, the girls are shown also to be implicated in a world in which the gloss of image and the appeal of music are relentlessly recuperated by normative, neoliberal ideologies. Yet in transforming

the music video aesthetic into a scene of intimate fluidity that emphasises queer possibilities, the vision of girlhood in the film cannot be captured by the intersecting lines of *cité* and consumerism. In its shining allure, its intimate strangeness and its vibrancy, the scene reminds us of the shared, evanescent and infinite possibilities of music as a formative experience. Our experience of watching Rihanna's video cannot be untouched by it.

While Sciamma includes in her film a troublingly fascinated gaze on her black stars, the use of music, performance and digitextuality works to displace any fixed gaze upon or rigid apprehension of the characters' embodied subjectivities. Through virtual networks of sound and image, the fictional world is brought into audience's world and vice versa, creating a point of intersection that is itself unstable and ambivalent. Ultimately, such strategies make this a queer film: 'oblique', 'off line' and 'nonnormative' (Ahmed 2006, 161). While the 'wop' sequences in *Bande de filles* tend to reinforce the norms inhabited by the film's characters, they do so in a way that simultaneously manifests a resistance to containment within clear lines, whether of the frame, diegesis, or narrative. 'Diamonds' also offers points of resistance that disrupt the lines the characters – and a spectator's gaze – might otherwise follow. Opening out from the film's diegesis, these moments of freedom for the characters expose the frightening extent of the forces that act upon them, but also, in the context of the film's soundtrack and aesthetic choices, present an unknowable subjectivity that just as forcefully asserts its continual reinvention. Ahmed proposes a queer commitment 'not to presume that lives have to follow certain lines in order to count as lives' (2006: 178). In *Bande de filles*, a queer commitment emerges in the exposure of constraining lines, along with the multiple, audiovisual openings out from and

resistances to them. This is expanded by a resonant digitextuality, both normative and disruptive, in which the audience is also implicated.

Notes

1. 'I don't want that life of a "decent girl"'.

2. For a sample of Wop Vines see "Wop J Dash Best Wop Vines by Vines Army" (12th July 2013): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ts8pKN1a6IU

3. In her discussion of 'performances of idiocy' in Internet memes, Goriunova (2012, 231) differentiates idiocy from stupidity, which is innate, whereas idiocy, as manifested in new media, is an intentional performance of creative participation.

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Filmography

Naissance des pieuvres, 2007, Céline Sciamma, France.
Tomboy, 2011, Céline Sciamma, France.
Bande de filles, 2014, Céline Sciamma, France.

Videography

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Diamonds, Rihanna, 2012, Anthony Mandler, United States.

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