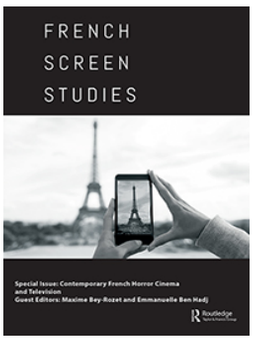

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The queer circulation of objects in the films of Céline Sciamma

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ABSTRACT

The ground-breaking director Céline Sciamma observes that her films are often obsessed with the circulation of objects. This article analyses the forms this circulation takes across Sciamma's first four films (*Naissance des pieuvres, Tomboy, Bande de filles* and *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*), as well as the significance of the objects themselves. Building on insights offered by scholars who have examined Sciamma's work as an example of a cinema of feminist embodiment and materiality, this article charts new territory by examining the queer ethics of Sciamma's cinema not through analysis of bodies and embodiment but through the objects that enable, facilitate and nurture the 'being-in-the-world' of those bodies and embodiments. From apple cores to green dresses, chewing gum to necklaces, this article will centre on forms of circulation, transmission and exchange of objects, not as detached, inanimate, post-human things in the world but as objects whose presence and whose circulation between characters serve to bring together marginalised bodies in solidaristic relationships fostered through queer economies of exchange.

KEYWORDS

Céline Sciamma; intimacy; objects; queer; solidarity

French director Céline Sciamma has noted she often has the sense that her films centre on the circulation and transmission of objects:

> [*Naissance des pieuvres*] est un film qui est obsédé par le rythme et *par la circulation d'objets* et je pense que finalement [. . .] quand je serai morte [. . .] on pourra dire 'la meuf est cinéaste queer' ou je sais pas quoi. Moi, je pense plutôt que *je suis une cinéaste qui fait des films où il y a des objets qui circulent entre les gens* en réalité. Je pense que c'est le point commun dans tout [. . .]. Et finalement, *c'est des motifs comme ça qu'on travaille et qui sont des points d'appui des films et qui sont hyper essentiels*. (Sciamma 2018; my italics)[1]

Instances of the circulation of objects abound across Sciamma's films: objects that circulate as commodities in a conventional sense but also numerous examples of what I will term queer economies of exchange which ultimately enable Sciamma's characters to determine the value that can be attached to the things of their lives. Her fascination with the circulation of objects is doubtless at its most obvious in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu/ Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), the most critically acclaimed and financially successful of Sciamma's films to date. The very premise of the film, after all, rests on the commissioning of a portrait of Héloïse (Adèle Haenel) to be undertaken by Marianne (Noémie Merlant),

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a portrait that will, on its completion, be sent to Milan for the approval of Héloïse's future husband: 'si le portrait lui plaît, nous partirons là-bas',[2] as Héloïse's mother (Valeria Golino) rather succinctly puts it. The mobility of Héloïse and her mother is both contingent upon and constrained by the circulation of the portrait and its favourable reception. The film's flashback narrative is bracketed by the portrait as object, from the arrival of the blank canvas on the Breton island where Héloïse and her mother live, to its departure, nailed back into a wooden crate, in its completed state.

I will return to *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* later, but it is my contention that the circulation of objects is foundational to the narratives Sciamma explores and, what is more, that it is foundational to the *queering* of those narratives across her entire *oeuvre*: 'Queer becomes a matter of how *things* appear, how they gather, how they perform, to create the edges of spaces and worlds' (Ahmed 2006, 167; my italics). Sciamma's protagonists are not generally depicted as being involved in a circulation of objects that obeys the logic of a traditional economy. There are some important exceptions as I demonstrate below, but, overall, the objects that are exchanged, passed on, transmitted between characters, acquire an 'exchange-value', insofar as they do, that is determined by those who choose to transmit them, rather than through an established system of equivalences. I will also examine examples where objects circulate as gifts, as unprompted offerings, but what is particularly striking throughout the four films at the heart of this article is that those who determine the value of these objects, at any given moment, are often those who would be traditionally excluded from positions of power within established economic systems: teenage girls, trans children and their friends, young black women, daughters of eighteenth-century aristocratic families promised in marriage to unknown suitors. . .

There are of course, as I have already mentioned, exceptions: drug deals in *Bande de filles/Girlhood* (2014), the well-established eighteenth-century practice of portrait as promissory note, the purchase of a McDonald's Happy Meal in *Naissance des pieuvres/Water Lilies* (2007). However, even in those exceptions where transactions initially seem to fit within an established economic framework, there are examples of determined, conscious agents subverting the norms of the specific exchanges concerned: Vic (Karidja Touré) changing into her own clothes as soon as she has exchanged drugs for money in *Bande de filles* and refusing drug dealer Abou's orders; Héloïse refusing to sit for the portrait, Marianne destroying the first portrait she produces, then Héloïse and Marianne together, consciously collaborating on a second portrait; Anne (Louise Blachère) in *Naissance des pieuvres* being told that she is too old to be allowed to buy a Happy Meal but insisting that she should be allowed to and that she wants the free gift that comes with it.

My approach here does not follow that of scholars such as Claire Mouflard (2016) who have analysed forms of circulation in Sciamma's work but with a specific focus on how female bodies circulate and how 'imposed economic, physical and educational boundaries' (2016, 115) limit her characters' mobility, constructing the *banlieue* in *Bande de filles* as 'a male-dominated and male-controlled space in which all circulation of bodies and goods exists and is only permissible because of the symbolic masculine power structure that is in place' (117). Neither does it follow the work of Elizabeth Ezra in *The Cinema of Things*, where analysis of the 'things, objects and stuff' with which humans engage offers a means 'to gain an understanding of the ways in which humans are prosthetically engaged with life *beyond the human* in the global age' (2018, 1; my italics). Rather, my

examination of Sciamma's films builds on the work of scholars who have foregrounded her cinematic engagement with an ethics of feminist embodiment and materiality (see, for instance, Bradbury-Rance 2019; Handyside 2019; Lindner 2018; Wilson 2017), her focus on the body as 'lived, sensed, felt' (Wilson 2017, 10).

However, while such works have focused in valuable and interesting ways on the bodies Sciamma depicts, this article is centred on the *objects* that bring those bodies together, serving as bridges between characters, sometimes as the play things of their corporeal materiality and, above all, as the things that facilitate their very 'being-in-the world' (Lindner 2018, 196). The objects at the core of my analysis here are physical, tangible, things that can be and are held or handed over by characters. Taking such objects as its starting point, this article will explore the different forms of circulation we are witness to in Sciamma's films, analysing the solidaristic relationships and queer economies of exchange that emerge via close analysis of the significance of those objects and the patterns of circulation that emerge across her four films to date:[3] *Naissance des pieuvres, Tomboy* (2011), *Bande de filles* and *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*.

Circulation from body to body

While most of the objects within Sciamma's films are passed from character to character, literally handed over, there are also a series of instances where the form that the circulation takes reminds us that Sciamma's characters are *embodied* figures who 'take shape through tending toward objects that are reachable, that are available within the bodily horizon' (Ahmed 2006, 2).

In *Naissance des pieuvres*, which focuses on early teenage desire and friendship against a backdrop of competitive synchronised swimming, Marie (Pauline Acquart) falls for Floriane (Adèle Haenel), a key member of the local synchronised swimming team. Their relationship develops slowly, clumsily, at times painfully, with the emotional intensity of teenage friendship and attraction relentlessly explored, 'the incessant (emotional) movements of [. . .] adolescent girls' (Belot 2012, 171). Marie's first invitation to Floriane's house brings with it an offering of clothing that I examine in detail below, but, on leaving Floriane's house, Marie impulsively runs back and steals the binbag that Floriane has just put out. In the relative privacy of her bedroom, Marie tips out the contents of the bag: an empty Coke can, crumpled papers, cotton wool with traces of lipstick and, crucially, an apple core. She sniffs and touches the surfaces of the objects she has taken and spends most time with the browning apple core, turning it in her hands, and closing her eyes as she bites into it. The expression on Marie's face skates a line between intense sensory pleasure and disgust, blurring the boundary between the two.

A similar entwining of the thrill of pleasure and the exaltation of disgust comes in *Tomboy* when Laure/Mikaël (Zoé Héran) joins Lisa (Jeanne Disson) and the other children, sitting in a circle at the end of a concrete landing in their apartment block. The children chat, laugh, tease each other and begin a game of 'Action ou vérité' (Truth or dare), the focus of which is firmly centred on bodily fluids and other excretions, with the children asking each other if they have ever eaten their own bogies or drunk their own urine. The questions shift to relationships between them, and when it is Lisa's turn to choose, she opts for 'une action' which the other children determine should be her giving the piece of gum she is chewing to Laure/Mikaël. The latter is then 'encouraged' to chew it to an aural

backdrop of the children chanting in unison: 'Mâche ! Mâche ! Mâche !'[4] Laure/Mikaël obliges, and, as with Marie crunching into Floriane's apple core, we see a fleeting combination of glee and disgust at the sensations evoked, Laure/Mikaël's jaw chewing slowly and a series of grimaces (see Figure 1). The object status of these consumable substances is further underscored by the fact that they are not used with their 'original' purpose, i.e. as a source of nourishment. Rather, the apple core and the chewing gum continue to hold significance even as they become waste.

In both instances, the circulation of these objects forms part of an early exploration of desire with all the complexity of emotion one might anticipate a child or young teenager to experience when their object of desire becomes tangible, albeit in mediated form. Where adult characters are involved, as is the case in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, a similar instance of the bodily transmission of something edible arises but the reach of the transmission is more extensive, more explicitly sensual and sexual. Here, Marianne leaves Héloïse asleep in bed and pours herself a glass of water in the kitchen. She returns to the bedroom and gently wakens Héloïse, whose eyes appear jet black as an after-effect of the hallucinatory grey ointment she bought at the *fête* and smeared under her arm. Marianne speaks softly to her: 'Il faut que vous buviez'[5] and then takes a mouthful of water herself, pressing her mouth to Héloïse's and allowing the water to trickle from her mouth into Héloïse's. We are no longer in the territory of 'the impossible physicality of [. . .] desire unfold[ing] through sight, touch, taste and smell' (Bradbury-Rance 2019, 78), but rather the intimate transmission of water from Marianne's mouth to Héloïse's underscores the desire, intimacy and trust between them.

As these three examples indicate, edible and drinkable substances form a key category among the types of objects that circulate in Sciamma's films, simultaneously highlighting her focus on the everyday while, on many occasions, also pointing towards the ways in which those everyday lives are composed of encounters and acts of sharing. Sciamma's work often centres on the everyday lives and experiences of figures who are marginalised, whether through gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity or social class. Her inclusion of such a range of scenes where characters share food and drink, voluntarily or otherwise,

Figure 1. Mikaël eating Lisa's chewing gum in *Tomboy* (Pyramide Distribution).

prompts us to understand those characters as being embedded within a network of interacting individuals, a social community that is often fraught and complex but within which there is, nevertheless, the opportunity to prove oneself to be 'solidaire' ('solidaristic', to use Héloïse's term from *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*). For example, in *Bande de filles*, Marieme/Vic playfully takes a piece of pasta from her younger sister's plate, prompting a brief, light-hearted discussion between the three sisters about the ingredients that went into the dish (salmon and pepper). In the same scene, the youngest sister Mini (Chance N'Guessan) asks for Babybel as her dessert and Bébé (Simina Soumare) takes the distinctive red casing from the cheese, placing it on her sister's nose in jest. While this particular scene emphasises the joy and playfulness of a shared meal, later in the same film an unprompted offering of a tray of food in a fast-food restaurant marks the beginning of Vic's relationship with Abou (Djibril Gueye), via whom she finds herself selling drugs. Immediately before this encounter, Vic had been beaten by her elder brother for having slept with Ismaël (Idrissa Diabaté) and she sits alone in the fast-food joint, drinking a can of beer. A member of staff appears beside her table with a plate of food on a tray and tells her it is an offering from a young man at another table. The young man in question turns out to be Abou and, in their next encounter, he offers Vic the opportunity to come and work for him.

Similar exchanges of and around food occur, for example, in *Tomboy*, where we watch Laure/Mikaël playing football with the other children with Lisa watching on from the sidelines. She is holding a mineral water bottle filled with green liquid (*menthe à l'eau*, we assume) that she offers to Laure/Mikaël as they catch their breath between bursts of footballing action. The offering is accepted, and the exchange and sharing of the drink forms another step in the development of a relationship between the two children, entwining friendship, attraction and trust. In a similar vein, it is the transmission of food and drink between Marianne and the servant Sophie (Luàna Bajrami) in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* very early in the film that offers the first glimpse of what will build into a genuine relationship of intimacy, trust and care between the two women (and later to include Héloïse): 'Elles prennent soin les unes des autres, s'apprivoisent, triangle d'affections' (Piette 2019).[6]

On the night of her arrival at the *château*, Marianne makes her way to the kitchen and helps herself to a lump of cheese, a loaf of bread and a knife from a cupboard. She sits alone at the long, wooden table, tearing off a chunk of bread and slicing into the cheese. Sophie arrives.

Marianne: Pardon, je me suis permis. J'avais faim. Vous auriez un verre de vin ?

Sophie takes a bottle of wine and pours a glass for Marianne.

Marianne: Vous m'autorisez à être curieuse ?[7]

What follows are questions from Marianne about what happened to Héloïse's sister whose place Héloïse has taken, having been removed from a convent and returned to the family home to be married off to a Milanese suitor. There is an obvious wariness between Marianne and Sophie, manifest in a complex exchange of glances, but there is also an intimacy and a candour – both in the questions and, to an extent, in the responses – that signal the beginnings of the solidaristic relationships that develop throughout the film.

And they begin around a simple transmission of the simplest of foodstuffs: wine, cheese, bread.[8] Not only, as Clara Bradbury-Rance has noted, do 'friendships unfold as transaction' (2019, 78), but friendships and intimacy unfold *through* transactions, through exchanges of objects that are queer in the sense that they 'privilege[e] generosity, social bonds and intimacies' (Simpson 2009, 4).

In *Naissance des pieuvres*, it is a verbal exchange centred on the circulation of chewing gum that forms the basis of the first conversation between Marie and Floriane. The pair find themselves at the same party, and Marie follows Floriane into a bathroom where we hear the latter throwing up in a toilet. She emerges and faux-nonchalantly makes her way to the bathroom sink where she rinses her face and contemplates her reflection in the mirror under Marie's insistent gaze. An aggressive 'quoi ?' follows, to which Marie responds with a compliment about the synchronised swimming team's routine that she says she found 'beau':

> Floriane: Ah ouais ? Beau comment ?
>
> Marie: [Silence]
>
> Floriane: T'as un chewing-gum ?
>
> Marie hands over a piece of gum. Floriane chews it, spits it into the sink and calls Marie closer to her ('Viens là'), then brings her face close to Marie's, breathing onto her mouth and nose.
>
> Floriane: Est-ce que je pue de la gueule ?
>
> Marie shakes her head.
>
> Floriane: Sûre ?[9]

As in numerous other scenes over the course of the film, I argue that we are simultaneously witness here to the surface bravado of Floriane (with particular emphasis placed on its externality through the use of the mirror), as she 'appears to relish and embrace the social power [the role of object of desire] gives her' (Jonet 2017, 1131) and to her vulnerability, her insecurity and, as she evolves, her need for Marie's approbation. While Marie is momentarily silenced by Floriane's apparently imperturbable confidence, it is, in fact, Floriane who makes the first demand of Marie, in the shape of the request for a piece of chewing gum and then via the follow-up enquiry as to whether the mint smell of the gum has masked the odour of her own vomit.[10]

As noted in the introduction, it is also in *Naissance des pieuvres* that we have the Happy Meal scene, involving Marie, her friend Anne and a McDonald's cashier played by Sciamma herself. Filmed using a conventional shot-reverse shot sequence, the two girls approach the counter in the McDonald's and Anne asks Sciamma's gum-chewing cashier for a Happy Meal:

> Cashier: Vous avez quel âge ?
>
> Anne: 15 ans et demi.
>
> Cashier: Vous êtes trop vieille.
>
> Anne: Faut montrer sa carte d'identité pour avoir un cheeseburger moins cher ?[11]

Marie intervenes to try and calm her friend down, to convince her to just drop it, but Anne insists: 'Je *veux* le jouet.'[12] The insistence pays off and the scene cuts to Marie and Anne sitting at a table in the restaurant, with Anne gazing through the lens of a little plastic kaleidoscope. I argue that we are dealing here not only with an example of a teenage girl's determination for objects to circulate, but, in fact, that we are witness to her refusal and, indeed, her queering, of the exchange-values placed on objects within a traditional, established economy of exchange.

> Objects, as well as spaces, are made for some bodies more than others. Objects are made to size as well as made to order: while they come in a range of sizes, the sizes also presume certain kinds of bodies as having 'sizes' that will 'match.' In this way, bodies and their objects tend toward each other, they are orientated toward each other, and are shaped by this orientation. When orientation 'works', we are occupied. The failure of something to work is a matter of a *failed orientation*: a tool is used by a body for which it was not intended, or a body uses a tool that does not extend its capacity for action. (Ahmed 2006, 51)

The cashier's argument for refusing to sell the Happy Meal is that it is a product aimed specifically at younger children. Her withholding of the Happy Meal (and Anne's object of desire in the shape of the toy) foregrounds the possibility of a 'failed orientation'. As a teenager, the customer she has in front of her is no longer eligible to purchase its component elements as a unit, in the form of the Happy Meal, but is instead expected to invest more money in the purchase of each individual element. However, by challenging the refusal, Anne not only questions the economic logic of the transaction – why should her age preclude her access to a particular commodity? – but she also reclaims the orientation. The irony is all the more intense because what she actually desires is not the comestible objects that compose the Happy Meal but the free gift that accompanies it.

Gift-giving

The Happy Meal sequence in *Naissance des pieuvres* and, in particular, the role the free gift plays, can be read as underlining the ironies and absurdities of a consumerist model of exchange and consumption. I further argue that Sciamma's films abound with examples of genuine gift-giving that prompt us to consider the significance both of objects that come to act as gifts and of the act of giving itself, the ways in which 'the profound ambiguity of the gift (in terms of motivation, its effect on the relationship between the participants and its value in every sense) has a disruptive effect' (Simpson 2009, 5). As I analyse below, there are numerous examples of unprompted offerings and it is important to note that while, in other instances I discuss later, objects are 'offered' in exchange for services rendered, in this section, the gift-giving often signifies openness, trust and solidarity, with the vulnerability and pleasure of the giver as significant as those of the receiver.

Within this framework, I consider, for example, Floriane's unprompted offering of a medal won at a synchronised swimming meet to Marie. A bartering of favours between the two sees Marie reluctantly facilitating Floriane's meetings with François (Warren Jaquin), her boyfriend who is a member of the water polo team. Floriane agrees to get Marie access to the pool to watch the synchronised swimming training sessions, in

exchange for Marie calling on Floriane, ostensibly so the latter is assumed to be with a female friend, while the former, in fact, hangs around in an underground carpark waiting for Floriane to return from meetings with François. The relationship between Floriane and Marie evolves with each of these encounters, and Floriane agrees to enable Marie to travel with the synchronised swimming team, on the team bus, to a competition where, as it turns out, they are among the medal-winners. On the return journey, Floriane and Marie are sitting together and, as the rest of the team erupt into boisterous singing, Floriane takes the medal she has won from her own neck and hangs it around Marie's. Their separation from the rest of the team is underscored by the aural division between the background singing and loud joking and the quiet intimacy of their pairing. However, their togetherness is also emphasised through this act of gift-giving. Floriane recognises Marie's emotional investment by offering her an object that we might expect to be of value in the context of competitive sport but by imbuing it with a value that relates much more closely to the relationship the two are forging. Rather than seeing this gift-giving as further committing Marie to an 'obligation to reciprocate' by covering for Floriane (Simpson 2009, 3), I argue that Sciamma demonstrates here that 'the complex and often ambiguous motivations for giving and receiving are also vital to the social, emotional and erotic bonds that gifts can create' (3).

Looking across the films that are loosely considered as forming Sciamma's coming-of-age trilogy (*Naissance des pieuvres, Tomboy* and *Bande de filles*), it is worth noting that there is an unusual correlation between acts of gift-giving involving different forms of neck adornments. Floriane's offering of the medal to Marie foreshadows a far more complex to-ing and fro-ing of objects later in the same film, this time involving Anne, Floriane, Marie and François. Anne and Marie visit a shopping mall together and Anne shoplifts a necklace, hiding it in her own mouth in order to leave the shop undetected. As she and Marie travel down an escalator, Anne tilts her head back and pulls the chain out of her mouth, showing it to a rather surprised Marie and announcing: 'T'as vu ? C'est comme dans *Peau d'Âne*.'[13] Their attentions are soon distracted, though, as Marie notes Anne's unusual gait (she is wearing jeans that are too small and cannot walk comfortably in them) and then in the Happy Meal sequence. We rejoin them in the swimming pool building, where Anne writes her number on a sheet of paper and folds it around the necklace. She strides into the male changing room where, without a word, she hands over the paper bundle to a half-naked François, who is promptly teased by his team-mates.

In the next scene, Marie sits shivering in the female changing room. Floriane joins her, having just seen François, and declares: 'Regarde ce qu'il m'a offert.'[14] In her hand is the necklace Anne stole and that François has now passed on, as a gift of his own, to Floriane. The latter asks Marie to place it around her neck, removing her crucifix to make way for it while distractedly saying: 'De toute façon, j'y crois pas. T'y crois, toi ?'[15] She (Floriane) gives the crucifix to Marie, neither asking if she wants it, nor waiting for a response to the question. The role the stolen necklace plays does not end there. Rather, it continues to serve as a conduit for teenage duplicity and clumsy sexuality when François, wrongly having assumed Floriane would sleep with him, turns up at Anne's door. Without batting an eyelid, he prefaces his enquiry as to whether she is alone at home, with a cursory 'Merci pour le collier.'[16] There is a certain circularity in the transmission of the central object here: Anne steals the necklace, it passes through her hands (and mouth), then François's, then Floriane's, and finally makes its *verbal* way back to Anne. At that point, she believes that

François turning up at her door is a direct consequence of her gift to him. When it becomes apparent the following day that this was not, in fact, the case, Anne rather unexpectedly turns the tables on him. She allows him to think that she is about to sleep with him again in a storage cupboard at the swimming pool, but then spits in his mouth not only to express her disgust but almost as though she sought to transmit it to him physically. In a queer gesture of defiance, Anne can be read here as divesting herself of shame and disgust that should not be hers through an act of physical transmission.

The gifting of a necklace also signals a key turning point in the narrative of *Bande de filles*. Much has been written – in both academic and popular responses to the film – about the 'Diamonds' sequence when Marieme, Lady (Assa Sylla), Fily (Marietou Toure) and Adiatou (Lindsay Karamoh) lip sync to Rihanna's hit song of the same name (see, for instance, McNeill 2018; Pember 2020). However, before that sequence, the quartet are shown making their way to a hotel room together, carrying pizza boxes and Coke bottles, then sharing food and drink on the bed, laughing and joking. A series of objects circulate here: a remote control that serves as a pretend microphone, bottles of Coke being mixed with bottles of alcohol, a shisha pipe and so on. Lady then takes a bath and Marieme goes to join her in the bathroom, upset by her brother having tried to phone her to monitor her whereabouts. Lady signals towards her jacket and says: 'Il y a un truc pour toi là-dedans.'[17] Marieme looks surprised but fishes in the pocket and finds a gold necklace with the name 'Vic' as its pendant, 'Vic comme victoire',[18] as Lady puts it (see Figure 2). The necklace stands as a reminder that:

> Objects also have their own horizons: worlds from which they emerge, and which surround them. The horizon is about how objects surface, how they emerge, which shapes their surface and the direction they face, or what direction we face, when we face them. So if we follow such objects, we enter different worlds. (Ahmed 2006, 147)

From that point on, Marieme *becomes* Vic, a name she does not choose for herself but that she seems to accept as having been bestowed upon her in a sign of acceptance within the group.

Figure 2. Marieme/Vic in *Bande de filles* (Pyramide Distribution).

In *Tomboy*, the examples are less heavy in consequence than those in *Naissance des pieuvres* and *Bande de filles*, but I would argue that an early verbal exchange between Laure/Mikaël, Jeanne and their mother, starting on the latter's bed and ending in Laure/Mikaël's bedroom, is particularly significant. The children jump up to join their mother, and Laure/Mikaël, noticing a pasta necklace around the mother's neck, begins to fiddle with it, asking – slightly mockingly – where it came from. It was, of course, a gift from Jeanne. Shortly after, Laure/Mikaël's mother comes to find them in their bedroom where they are unpacking comic books to settle into their room. The mother presents Laure/Mikaël with a key to the flat on a pink string to hang around Laure/Mikaël's neck. The gesture clearly marks the mother's trust in her child and, in particular, is a visible and tangible sign thereof. Laure/Mikaël looks happily proud to have been entrusted with this symbol of comparative freedom, but, when the mother leaves, they swap the pink string for a white shoelace and replace the key around their neck where we see it hanging the next day when Laure/Mikaël goes to play football with the other children.

I could, of course, expand these instances of gift-giving well beyond the rather peculiar frequency of examples involving necklaces of different sorts, and, as I have demonstrated with the discussion of the stolen necklace in *Naissance des pieuvres*, not all of Sciamma's acts of gift-giving are uncomplicatedly positive. After all, in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, it is explicitly a gift that puts an end to the possibility of any further direct and private exchange between Héloïse and Marianne. Héloïse's mother returns to the island and inspects the completed portrait, under the watchful gaze of Héloïse and Marianne. She approves of the completed work and hands over a sealed envelope to Marianne: 'Pour vous.' She turns to leave the room and asks Héloïse to accompany her. Héloïse tries to postpone her own departure by saying she will join her shortly, but her mother insists, stating: 'Non, maintenant. J'ai un cadeau pour vous.'[19] That 'gift', it transpires, is a white wedding dress that is identical to the one Marianne has twice 'seen' an imaginary Héloïse wearing.

'J'ai un cadeau pour vous', then, are the last words uttered in that scene and there is no further possibility for Marianne and Héloïse to be alone together, with the exception, that is, of their final interaction when Marianne leaves but is called back by Héloïse, at the top of the staircase, asking her to 'Retourne-toi',[20] a reference to Héloïse's interpretation of the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice from earlier in the film. Ultimately, though, what emerges through the coming together of so many different examples across the four films is a vision of a cinema of generosity, reciprocity and exchange: 'Le plaisir et le désir au sein du film, mais aussi dans la salle de cinéma, ne reposent plus sur une idée d'ascension, de domination, mais de partage' (Brey 2020, 37).[21]

The wedding dress itself is a curious example of an object that circulates in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*. Many of the other examples discussed here create, through their very circulation and transmission, bonds between characters' emotions and their experiences, 'shap[ing] what bodies do in the present, or how they are moved by the objects they approach' (Ahmed 2006, 2). The wedding dress, however, is the only object that we see existing in an imaginary realm before it appears in the lived reality of the characters. On two separate occasions, as Marianne makes her way back to her quarters within the *château*, she stops in her tracks. On each occasion, she tilts her head slightly as though sensing a presence and, both times, when she turns around, she 'sees' Héloïse, wearing a long, white dress, almost floating in the corridor, with the otherworldly glow we might associated with the figures in Bill Viola's *Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water)*, somewhere

Figure 3. Héloïse as apparition in the wedding dress in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (Pyramide Distribution).

between white and blue on the chromatic scale (see Figure 3). As well as recognising the figure of Héloïse to be an apparition, we also know that the dress cannot exist, as Sophie informed Marianne shortly after her arrival that Héloïse only has one dress (the green dress I discuss in more detail below) and still wears her convent clothes.

Initially, then, the dress exists only in Marianne's imagination. However, after Héloïse's mother returns to the island, in the scene described above, it becomes a tangible reality, worn by Héloïse as her mother makes some adjustments to how it hangs. The difference between the physical stance embodied by Héloïse as apparition and that which she adopts in this scene is striking. In the former, she is pictured straight to camera, her gaze firm and bold; in the latter, she is half-turned, subject to her mother's desires and initially separated from Marianne both by the physical presence of the mother between the two women and by social conventions. Both the physical presence and the social conventions are circumvented in the few seconds that follow, as Marianne embraces Héloïse's mother, to the latter's obvious surprise, and then holds Héloïse, breathing her skin in a final embrace, the white dress becoming the last physical texture of Héloïse that Marianne feels, a circulation that begins in her imagination and ends in her lived reality.

The circulation of items of clothing recurs across Sciamma's films, with the wedding dress being but one example. Indeed, while the wedding dress circulates between Marianne's imagined Héloïse and the real Héloïse, in the sense that it is worn by both versions, the dress itself remains comparatively static, very much in line with the restrained physicality of many of the film's scenes. The vibrant green dress that Héloïse sits in, on the other hand, is a character in its own right as Sciamma notes in an online interview, describing it as 'une star du scénario' (2020),[22] rich not only in terms of the density of its colour and the sheen of the material but also in terms of what we can understand as its active participation in the narrative.

In our first glimpse of it, the green dress is a rather dull affair, worn by Héloïse as faceless subject of the incomplete portrait she refused to sit for before Marianne was commissioned. The tones of the painting are muted, dull, soulless, in sharp contrast with the next shot, which sees the visual and aural landscape of the film filled to overflowing

with the physical presence of the green dress. Its folds capture the light that comes through the windows, its cloth crackles and rustles, and, most importantly, it *moves*. It sweeps across the screen, seemingly moving of its own accord, and it is only as the camera pans out that we discover it is, in fact, being carried by Sophie, who holds it out for Marianne to inspect and then lays it on a bed. In those few seconds, it has already shifted from flat representation to layered, textured presence, drawing the light of the room towards it, and contrasting vibrantly against the white of the sheets on which it is placed.

As the film progresses, all three of the central characters are seen wearing the dress: Marianne, then Sophie, and finally Héloïse. We first watch Marianne sitting in the dress, arranging its folds as she wants to depict them in the portrait, looking in a mirror not at herself, as such, but at the dress and its presence. The arranging of material is interrupted by Héloïse knocking at the door, prompting Marianne to hide behind a makeshift curtain where she hastily steps out of the dress, reappearing in the room in her own clothes. The scene that follows, coincidentally, begins with yet another instance of the exchange and transmission of objects as Héloïse asks Marianne whether she has any tobacco, which, in turn, leads Marianne to light the pipe we saw her smoking on her arrival at the *château* and to pass this to Héloïse. Transmission and exchange continue as the scene evolves but transmission and exchange of ideas and emotions, as the pair's brief conversation about music leads Marianne to play on a harpsichord a few bars from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* (Summer), a piece of music that returns at the very end of the film when Marianne sees Héloïse at a concert years later and a performance of the third movement of Vivaldi's Summer accompanies an extended close-up of Héloïse's face, alternately startled, moved, tearful and exultant.

To return to the green dress, though, after Marianne, it is then Sophie who wears it, posing for Marianne as the latter begins preparatory work on her portrait of Héloïse. It is hard to overstate the significance of Sophie's role here in underlining a flattening of conventional hierarchies in the film. As I have already discussed, there is an almost immediate relationship of trust between Marianne and Sophie, forged around the taking and offering of food and drink. This trust and intimacy extend to encompass all three central figures, and, in this scene, I argue that we witness another step towards the horizontal solidarity that emerges across the trio. We do not hear the conversation between Marianne and Sophie that leads to the latter acting as sitter. However, we do know that Sophie is aware that Marianne has been brought to the *château* to paint Héloïse's portrait well before Héloïse herself finds this out. And in this comparatively early scene, where Sophie sits in Héloïse's dress, servant wearing the clothes of her mistress, I argue that codes and conventions are already being rewritten, 'bodies inhabit[ing] space by how they reach for objects, just as objects in turn extend what we can reach' (Ahmed 2006, 110). This queer rewriting will resurface at numerous points in the film, interestingly from my perspective here, often centred on acts involving the circulation of objects: a playfully joyous card game, for example, or the communal preparation of meals. Sophie sitting for Marianne in Héloïse's dress represents an early instance of what will build into a complex relationship of trust between the three women.

After Marianne and Sophie, we finally see Héloïse wearing the dress. Marianne has completed her first attempt at a portrait and asks Héloïse's mother to allow *her* to tell Héloïse that she is a painter and to show her the portrait first. The scene where that

happens revolves around a confrontational verbal exchange between the two women, with a complex series of shot-reverse shots involving Marianne, Héloïse and, crucially, Marianne's first portrait of the latter in the green dress:

Marianne: Vous ne dites rien ?

Héloïse: C'est moi ?

Marianne: Oui.

Héloïse: Vous me voyez comme ça ?

Marianne: Il ne s'agit pas que de moi. . . [23]

The verbal sparring ends when Héloïse goes to get her mother, who arrives to find that Marianne has rubbed out the face on the portrait: 'Ce n'était pas assez bien. [. . .] Cela n'aurait pas plu. [. . .] Je vais reprendre.'[24] It is at that point that Héloïse states, not defiantly, but matter-of-factly: 'Je vais poser pour elle',[25] and the first thing we see the next day is Marianne arranging her studio-space for Héloïse and the latter arriving in the green dress. We watch her in the dress during three portrait sittings. As noted above, it is the mobility of the garment that is particularly striking, indicating the development of a collaborative artistic and intellectual relationship between the two women. During the first sitting, it is Marianne who is in a position of control, albeit one that is tempered by her own awareness of convention as, for example, she asks Héloïse for permission to adjust the position of her arm. In the second sitting, *after* Marianne and Héloïse have slept together for the first time, the dress and its role in the portraiture are foregrounded. Marianne has covered the dress in a white sheet in order to focus on other details of the portrait. She asks Héloïse to uncover her chest, which ultimately leads to the sheet being pulled off and the dress being revealed once again in a flash of colour. It also, though, leads to a conversation between the two women about the gaze, as Marianne's list of physical tics Héloïse exhibits when she feels nervous or annoyed is trumped by Héloïse, 'impériale dans sa robe verte' (Brey 2020, 36),[26] instructing her to come and stand beside her: 'Si vous me regardez, je regarde qui, moi ?'[27] In the final sitting, the portrait has been completed and it is Marianne who invites Héloïse to come and stand with her. The two look at the portrait together and acknowledge that it has been completed.

Héloïse: Quand sait-on que c'est fini ?

Marianne: À un moment, on s'arrête.

Final brushstrokes are applied to the canvas.

Marianne: C'est fini.[28]

The green dress features no further as a physical, tactile, mobile presence, but instead it becomes the dress in the completed portrait, an object that has ceased to circulate. As I argued in relation to the necklace in *Naissance des pieuvres*, there is a circularity here in the sense that a dress that first appears in its painted, represented form before being shown as a moving, tangible object returns to its representational form. However, as with the necklace in *Naissance des pieuvres*, the meanings and relationships that have circulated around it have changed dramatically in the course of its circulation: 'The actions

performed on the object (as well as with the object) shape the object. The object in turn affects what we do' (Ahmed 2006, 43). Sciamma's objects do not just symbolise connections and bonds between characters but spur them to action and to change.

Although the green dress in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* plays a more prominent role than do its counterparts in Sciamma's earlier works, it is nevertheless worth noting that, in each of those previous three films, we can also find significant examples where the objects that circulate are also items of clothing. They occupy less screen-time and do not recur in the narrative as does Héloïse's green dress, but they should be noted all the same for the role that they play in the progressive depiction, throughout the 'coming-of-age' trilogy, of childhood-adolescence-early adulthood as a period of exchange, of transmission, of movement through and of things. In *Naissance des pieuvres*, the first time Marie visits Floriane's bedroom the latter looks out an old sequined swimming costume and gives it to Marie, insisting that she try it on, there and then, over her clothes, prompting much giggling; then Marie continues to wear the suit as the pair lie on the bed together, rather incongruously discussing the fact that a ceiling is the last thing many people see before they die. In *Tomboy*, the first game Laure/Mikaël plays with the other children involves individuals from two opposing teams having to race to a point in between the teams, with each trying to retrieve a sweatshirt that is lying on the ground. The victor, in each match-up, is the child who manages to run away with the sweatshirt, holding it aloft – as Laure/Mikaël does – like a hard-won trophy. Later in the same film, when the mother discovers that Laure has been passing as Mikaël and decides to take her child round to the other children's homes to apologise and explain the situation, she (the mother) insists that Laure/Mikaël do so wearing a blue dress that she brings to their bedroom. While the green dress in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* seems to have a life of its own, the blue dress in *Tomboy* seems eerily lifeless, hanging off Laure/Mikaël's frame, apparently utterly detached from them, and it is ultimately discarded by Laure/Mikaël, who leaves it hanging in the branches of a tree in the forest, bringing its circulation to an end. A blue dress also features in *Bande de filles*, stolen – along with other dresses – by the girls on a trip into central Paris, worn with pride and pleasure during the 'Diamonds' sequence, then brought back home by Vic where her younger sister Bébé finds it and holds it up against herself in a mirror in their shared bedroom.

The circulation of these items of clothing does not only nurture relationships of trust, intimacy and care between characters within a single film. Rather, I argue, from *Naissance des pieuvres* to *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, a series of inanimate objects function not as signals heralding the arrival of a post-human condition but rather as indicators of a solidaristic, feminist, queer relationship between marginalised subjects, on the one hand, and between those marginalised subjects and their lived environment, on the other. We are dealing here not only with the coincidental examination of the circulation of objects in individual films, but rather with the transmission, exchange and sharing of objects as 'hyper essentiel' (Sciamma 2018)[29] to the queer lives and subjectivities Sciamma depicts, to her perspective on them and to her interest in what has been left unshown and unexpressed: 'We are missing the art that will not be made – that has never been made – but also we are missing the transmission of our own stories, which is basically isolation [. . .]. Art is also about the transmission of our intimacies and we were not given that' (Sciamma cited in Bendix 2020). Through her unrelenting examination of the transmission of objects as stepping-stones towards intimacy, trust and care, Sciamma also works to restore that 'transmission of [. . .] intimacies' she identifies as having been withheld.

Taken as a series of inter-related examples across Sciamma's body of work, encompassing items of clothing, examples of gift-giving and the sharing of food and drink analysed in the opening sections of this article, the circulating objects discussed here construct a complexly queer network of exchange and transmission. Indeed, the very repetition of such circulations 'is not neutral work: *it orients the body in some ways rather than others*' (Ahmed 2006, 57; italics in original). They point towards the director's ongoing examination of the interaction of diverse subjectivities and the embeddedness of these relationships and subjectivities within a real and lived environment, a 'foregrounding of embodiment, corporeality and sensuousness' (Lindner 2018, 195) that can be strengthened by a close examination of the objects through which the characters experience their worlds. Teenage girls, trans children, young women of colour, eighteenth-century daughters promised in marriage live and love and feel their way through Sciamma's landscapes. Our understanding of the significance of their embeddedness in these worlds is strengthened through analysis of the value they are empowered to invest or to refuse in these objects and the active role they play in the queer economies of exchange that emerge as a result.

Notes

[1] '[*Water Lilies*] is a film that is obsessed by rhythm and *by the circulation of objects* and I think that ultimately [. . .] when I'm dead [. . .] people might say "she was a queer filmmaker" or something like that. As for me, I'm more inclined to think that, in reality, *I am a filmmaker who makes films in which there are objects that circulate between people*. I think that's what links everything together [. . .]. And at the end of the day, it's motifs like that that we work on and that become key points in the films and that are hyper essential.' (Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author.) Sciamma's comments came in response to a question from an audience member at a roundtable focusing on the career of Adèle Haenel, organised by the Paris Forum des Images as part of the Forum's thirtieth anniversary celebrations.

[2] 'If the portrait is to his liking, we will go there.'

[3] Sciamma's fifth film as director (*Petite Maman*) premiered at the Berlinale in March 2021, but, at the time of writing, has not yet had a full cinematic release and, as such, does not form part of the analysis here.

[4] 'Chew! Chew! Chew!'

[5] 'You must drink.'

[6] 'They take care of each other, win each other over, in a triangle of affections.'

[7] 'Forgive me. I was hungry. Could I have a glass of wine?'/'Do you permit me to be curious?'

[8] A later scene involving Marianne and Sophie also takes an offering of an object related to food as its focus. Marianne wakens in the night with period pains and it is Sophie, in the *château*'s kitchen, who heats cherry stones over the fire for her, wrapping them in cloth for Marianne to press against her belly. A key shift in the relationship occurs during this scene, signalled by a shift from *vouvoiement* to *tutoiement* as Marianne's thanks ('je *vous* remercie') prompt Sophie to tell her that she normally has a cherry stone bag ready but that she has missed her period for three months. Marianne's questions use the 'tu' form: 'C'est la première fois que ça t'arrive ? [. . .] Tu veux un enfant ?' in a clear mark of trust ('Is it the first time this has happened to you? [. . .] Do you want a child?').

[9] Floriane: 'Oh yeah? "Nice" how?'/'Have you got a stick of gum?'/'Does my breath smell?'/'You sure?'

[10] An interesting counterpoint to this scene, from Sciamma's first film with Haenel, can be found in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, which Sciamma has described as a film inspired by Haenel and by her love and admiration for her (see, for example, Sciamma cited in Tremblay 2020). There, immediately after Marianne and Héloïse's first walk together along the cliffs, Héloïse asks Marianne: 'Vous êtes venue avec un livre ?' ('Did you come with a book?'). She then asks to borrow the book, holding it close to her chest. In both films, the apparently confident exterior of Haenel's characters is shown to be capable of expressing desire, of reaching out for exchange, at a very early stage in the narrative and, in both films, the early stages of the development of key relationships revolve around the sharing of objects.
[11] Cashier: 'How old are you?'/Anne: '15 ½.'/Cashier: 'You're too old.'/Anne: 'Have you got to show ID to get a cheap cheeseburger?'
[12] 'I *want* the toy.'
[13] 'Did you see? It's like in *Peau d'âne*.'
[14] 'Look what he gave me.'
[15] 'In any case, I don't believe in God. Do you?'
[16] 'Thanks for the necklace.'
[17] 'There's something for you in there.'
[18] '"Vic" as in "victory".'
[19] 'For you.' 'No, now. I have a gift for you.'
[20] 'Turn around.'
[21] 'Pleasure and desire at the heart of the film, as well as in the cinema itself, are no longer dependent on an idea of ascension, of domination, but of sharing.'
[22] 'A star of the script.' I would also note, in passing, that objects play an unusual role in the extra-textual fandom around *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, its director and (human) stars with, for example, the Instagram fan account Page_28_club represented visually by an image of the stool on which Héloise poses for Marianne and innumerable YouTube compilations of clips of Adèle Haenel variously drinking from bottles of mineral water, returning umbrellas and playing with microphones.
[23] Marianne: 'You don't have anything to say?'/Héloïse: 'Is it me?'/Marianne: 'Yes.'/Héloïse: 'That's how you see me?'/Marianne: 'It's not just about me.'
[24] 'It wasn't good enough [. . .] It would not have been to his liking [. . .] I am going to start again.'
[25] 'I will sit for her.'
[26] 'Regal in her green dress.'
[27] 'When you are looking at me, who am I looking at?'
[28] Héloïse: 'When does one know it is finished?'/Marianne: 'There comes a point when we stop.'/Héloïse: 'It's finished.'
[29] 'Hyper essential.'

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