

Céline Sciamma's Water Lilies: Adolescent Sexual Discovery and the Expression of Sexual Desire

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Abstract: Céline Sciamma's 2007 youth film *Water Lilies* presents the sexual desires and discoveries of three girls in the midst of their gender identity in a very feminine form of expression. The film does not specify the specific sexual orientation of the characters, but rather shows the confusion of adolescence and the pain of teenage throbbing in the process of exploration. The article analyzes how the three girls cope with and express their adolescent sexuality in three ways: firstly, the flexible use of the water element, which represents femininity, and the use of the central axis of the camera to construct highly stylized scenes; secondly, it explores the significance of the girls' body language in the expression of desire, criticizing the habit of thinking about women as objects of male desire, and showing the expression of desire for the same sex and men from the female perspective; finally, the film uses camera language (such as the use of filters, voyeuristic shots, etc.) to visualize the sense of touch in female desire, and shows the delicate emotional changes in the film through the analysis of continuous shots.

Keywords: adolescent, sexual desire, scenes, body, tactile vision

1. Introduction

This paper will discuss how Céline Sciamma's film *Water Lilies* presents female desire, which follows three girls with different personalities and different feelings as they navigate from adolescence to adulthood in the Parisian suburbs of Cergy-Pontoise, and their gender identity and sexual desires and pain. The essay will analyze the unfolding of female desire in terms of the film's highly stylized scenes, the use of the body, and tactile visuals.

2. Body

The transition from childhood to adulthood that Patricia Meyer Spacks defines as "the time of life when the individual has developed full sexual capacity but has not yet assumed a full adult role in society" [1]-is often at the heart of coming-of-age films. Céline Sciamma's use of adolescent sexual discovery and the expression of sexual desire as the basic core of the film is a challenge to previous adolescent films, since sexual initiation is rarely treated in youth

films as an intrinsically essential theme and that the dramatization of the vicissitudes of romantic adolescent relationships is more common, especially in films with female protagonists [2].

In terms of narrative, the film follows the narrative conventions of teen films while constantly challenging its clichés of gender identity. This is evident in the film's portrayal of its characters, with Sciamma saying, "I wanted my actors to fit the American Pie template physically. The beautiful girl must be beautiful and blonde, while the fat one is quite unruly and awkward." Floriane fits all the characteristics of a bad girl in American cinema but is a virgin who struggles to maintain her "slut" image to gain the envy of others. "virgin" image; Marie, a young girl in cotton underwear, is the most thoughtful of the three, but physically stunted, she wants to challenge the attraction brought by straight girls; Anne is a grotesque figure who is very eager to get from the opposite sex self-identity, all three girls grapple with their desires and implied gender and social expectations, and do not follow the trajectory of developmental change usually seen in coming-of-age films. Moreover, the author avoids the influence and dominance of adult images in French teenage cinema and proceeds entirely from adolescent self-discovery.

The original title of the film is "The Birth of the Octopus", which can be interpreted here as a comparison of the octopus to the desire of female adolescence is multiple is voracious, the expression is diverse, and the presence of the animal is common in narrative titles written by women, such as Little Black Spiders, Fish Tank or She Monkeys, all of them related to the theme of queerfeminine adolescence; used in a rhetorical way, they refer to the dimension of the revolutionary potential of feminine desire in patriarchal culture [3]. I will develop my analysis of the expression of female desire in the film in the following areas.

2.1. Highly Stylized Scenes

Water, as a metaphor for femininity, is used several times in the film to show its female sexual desires. One of the most characteristic uses is the swimming pool scene, where the film's pool is depicted as an oozing place where desire begins to wet and entwine. The sequence in Figure 1 shows Maire being invited by Floriane to watch them train underwater, and in the surreal atmosphere, the girls' legs spread out like aquatic monsters. Like an octopus opening its tentacles, Marie swims toward them. Time seems to freeze. At this moment, the sexual desire generated by the perfect body and the protective desire aroused by seeing the struggle behind the glamour of the girl you love burst out simultaneously.



Figure 1: Marie's underwater view of the swim team's training.

Another water-related scene is the shower, which appears three times in the film: Maire showering alone after watching Floriane train; Maire spying on Floriane showering with Francois, and Maire and Floriane showering together. Maire is restraining his sexual desire from watching his favorite person's body up close; Maire spies on his beloved girl showering with someone else and is very angry and sad because of his desire to replace Francois due to jealousy In the shower scene between

Maire and Floriane, Floriane happily gives up a spot for Marie because Marie wants to get close to her body and desperately wants to get her sexual desire.



Figure 2: Marie's solo bathing scene (the first appearance of the bathing scene).



Figure 3: Marie's spying on the two men bathing scene (the second appearance of the bathing scene).



Figure 4: Marie and Floriane bathing scene together (the third appearance of the bathing scene).

In shaping scenes, the author often uses the central axis to divide the scene in two. In Figure 6, Marie and Floriane go out together at I'Axe Majeure, a spot in the suburbs of Paris, where a long, open line separates the architectural space. Even though the two girls confide in each other, they are always separated by a crack in the ground, which shows that no matter how close they are, they cannot meet each other because of their different desires. Maire's desire is toward Floriane, while Floriane is deliberately maintaining the desire of her persona. Such a scene also appears in the scene where Floriane is looking for an older man to help her out in a bar. Marie is standing alone in the red light, while Floriane is trying to show her body to the man behind her, their desires are burning at the moment, but just as the screen is divided, their desires are not destined to intersect.



Figure 5: The bar is divided into two scenes separating the characters' emotions.



Figure 6: Marie and Floriane take a walk in I'Axe Majeure.

2.2. The Meaning of the Body

Wilson has said that "Focus on the body as lived, sensed, felt, is a fundamental part of the writer-directors feminist politics." [4]. In this film, the characters' feelings and desires are expressed first and foremost through their bodies and actions, rather than through dialogue, and the process of sex is all dramatized so that the desire expressed through physical activities is primarily subtle and personal. Their bodies have different meanings for the three girls in the film, their bodies are loved differently and developed differently, but they are all carriers of their desires; they show their bodies or use them to their advantage to satisfy their desires, or they express their desires through their actions, these desires are not only sexual desires but also desires to realize their ideal selves.

The first and most meaningful use of the body in the film is synchronized swimming, a sport exclusive to women, which, unlike rugby in girlhood or soccer in tomboy, embodies the dichotomy of society's discipline and desire for young women's bodies. Whether Floriane uses Marie's love for her to defend her public image or she loves Marie is a matter of debate. At the end of the film, the camera lingers on a close-up shot of Floriane dancing alone, with no one at the party paying attention to her every move. The director uses the dramatic treatment of time freeze frames to show her desire, at that moment, In that summer, she longs for her outer strength never to be pierced, for all the opposite sex to fantasize about her, for the social rights that come with being an unruly "slut" never to disappear... The scene where Floriane leaves a hickey on Maire's glass door is also Floriane's physical expression of desire, a kiss that is thus the monstrous version of Floriane's sensual kiss [5].



Figure 7: Floriane dancing on the dance floor by herself.



Figure 8: Floriane leaves a lip mark on Marie's glass window.

Maire's body development was much lower than her peers, Anne would ridicule her for her flat chest, and she would work out alone at home to make her arms thicker. Still, these ineffective exercises did not stop her body from bringing her low self-esteem, and she longed to be strong. When Floriane invited her to watch the swimming training, she did not dare to undress in front of the crowd. She, therefore, did not accept any physical advances of the opposite sex, so she was attracted to Floriane when she was faced with this girl who had a beautiful body and exuded sexiness between her hands and feet. Maire is not good at expressing her love or feelings in words but usually does some physical acts to express the pain of her crush and her same-sex desire for Floriane. The sequence in Figure 9 takes place after Marie stays at Floriane's house for one night. Marie leaves and then sneaks back to find a bag of trash that Floriane just threw away in the garbage, unrolls the paper with her handwriting on it, and gently bites down the apple core she ate along with her teeth marks, which is an expression of Marie's strong desire to kiss Floriane, reminiscent of the peach in *Call Me by Your Name*. After Floriane decides to have real sex with Francois, Marie goes back to her room and rummages through the junk to throw them around angrily and bites her arm hard to hold back her breakdown and heartache; her desire for Floriane is usually something she digests on her own without changing Floriane because of her own desire. Another sequence that expresses through oral movements Another series in which Marie's desire is expressed through oral movements in Figure 10, where she is kissing the hickey Floriane left on her glass window to show that she is distraught at having rejected Floriane, but that she desires not simply to get her first time to make her hurt but to be able to have her.



Figure 9: Marie looks through Floriane's trash and bites down on the apple she ate.



Figure 10: Marie bites her arm to relieve her inner pain and desire.

Anne's position in the film is grotesque, with her overdeveloped, obese body and simple mind, her desire to have a heterosexual relationship, and her belief that it is fantastic to live in a country where you can get married at the age of 14. At the beginning of the film, Anne is seen naked by Francois. He bursts into the locker room and tells Anne that she is afraid, that she is scared of the necessary psychological process of adolescence towards adulthood. In the sequence in Figure 11, Anne undresses again in the locker room and opens her hands in the form of a cross, devoutly longing for Francois to come again and offer her body to him.



Figure 11: Anne's naked body with her arms spread in a cruciform manner.

In these sequences, Sciamma gives more meaning to the female body; as Lindner says, “female bodies are not ‘on display,’ or staged to-be-looked-at; they function as intensely corporeal, tactile and muscular articulations of the phenomenological ways of being- and becoming familiar with and orientated in the world that takes shape in and through the films” [6]. At the same time, Sciamma not only questions female adolescents as objects of male desire but also depicts women’s desires and fantasies about the same sex and men from a female perspective.

2.3. Tactile Vision

In her book *The Skin of the Film*, Laura U Marks formally introduced the concept of “haptic vision” and “haptic cinema.” She defines “haptic cinema” as follows: “The Skin of the Film offers a metaphor to emphasize how film signifies. It also suggests that vision itself can be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one’s eyes: I term this haptic visuality” [7]. It calls for a new way of viewing and a new path of thought to enter the thinking and analysis of the film, trying to enter the central field of film research from the perspective of touch and body perception. It subverts the established model of visual center and opens up the rich possibilities of the film itself again, and also becomes a research object of great interest because of its implicit feminist and cross-cultural vision.

In the film *Water Lilies*, the author’s use of appropriate framing distances allows the camera to wander between scenes and characters, producing several expressive tactile images that “invite the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way; these images “invite the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way and thus facilitate the experience of other sensory impressions as well” [7], and the tactile visuality of such images makes the expression of desire in the film more vivid, even if the viewer is not gay. Even if the viewer is not gay, they can still feel love and passion in the movie.

The scene in Figure 12 is a shot of Marie watching Floriane and Francois in the shower, and at the beginning of the image, Marie appears as a voyeur. The viewer’s eyes involuntarily follow her to look at them in the shower. Then the camera’s focus changes to Marie, who turns around and cries, and the audience’s eyes are pulled back to feel Marie’s sadness and desire. The scene is shown in Figure 13 also highlights the character’s desire through a change in focus, and the author uses Maire’s sight as the camera’s sight throughout the film. Floriane’s line of sight becomes the main line of sight of the camera, and the audience sees the desire for Marie in her eyes and has the feeling that someone likes are suddenly watching her.



Figure 12: Marie spies the change of focus when the two take a shower.



Figure 13: Floriane looks at Marie (the change of the main line of sight of the film).

The use of color filters is pervasive in the film, using green, red and blue, respectively, which coincides with the additive primary colors or light colors; the visual is destroyed under the effect of color filters, the overall resolution of the characters and the environment is reduced, and it is complex for the audience to distinguish everything in the shot, where the color filter that highlights the desire of the characters is the use of red filters, red is often associated with fire, in this scene, the characters can only see When Floriane is close to Maire, Floriane's touching body, Marie's intense facial close-up of breathing heavily and the tactile image rendered by the red filter highlight Marie's desire for Floriane at that time. In addition, the use of the blue filter implies more restraint and the disappearance of desire. In the Figure 14 shown, Maire refuses Floriane's request, not wanting to destroy Floriane's precious virginity for her selfishness. The restraint of her passion shows her love for Floriane. At the end of the film, Floriane dances alone on the dance floor as a dramatic expression of her desire and irony; she is immersed in her passion, the people around her do not pay much attention to her, all she does is live in her imagination, at the same time Maire saw Floriane's use of himself and jumped into the pool next to the party when The audience is under the blue filter think whether she chose to commit suicide, she reappeared in the spotlight, and with Anne open arms in the shape of an octopus lying on the surface of the water looking at the ceiling, she had previously said that most people look at the top when they die, at that moment her adolescence and her desire are dead. When her eyes to the camera at the moment, she told the audience in the third space in that summer about the three. The story of the sexual formation of the girls also ends.

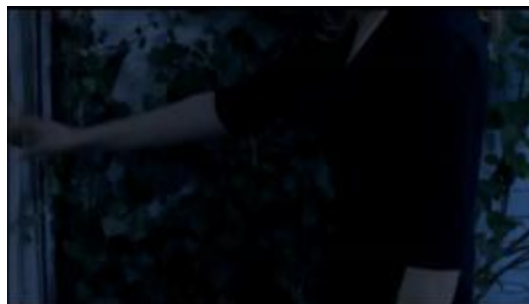


Figure 14: Marie refusing Floriane's request (use of blue filter).



Figure 15: Maire and Anne looking towards the ceiling in the shape of an octopus (use of blue filter).

3. Conclusion

The film overturns the paradigm of previous French writers on adolescent films by erasing adult images and focusing on the sexual desires and gender identity processes of middle-class girls with different identities and personalities during adolescence.

The article summarizes how the film *Water Lilies* presents the desires of the three girls during their adolescent gender identity period and how director Sciamma once commented that “the first taste of forbidden fruit is sweet because it can be completely lawless. The three girls use more physical actions instead of words to express their desires, and the highly stylized scenes and highly experiential tactile images created from the director’s female perspective bring out the complexity of the girls’ desires before they reach sexual maturity, drawing more attention to the sexual growth of adolescent girls.

Reference

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Appendix

Filmography:

- [1] *Call Me by Your Name* (2017)dir. Luca Guadagnino, Italy& France& United States& Brazil.
- [2] *Fish Tank* (2009) dir. Andrea Arnold,Netherlands & United Kingdom.
- [3] *Little Black Spiders* (2012) dir. Patrice Toye, Belgium.
- [4] *She Monkeys/ Apflickorna* (2011) dir. Lisa Aschan, Swedish.
- [5] *Water Lilies/Naissance des pieuvres* (2007) dir. Céline Sciamma, France.