

Component 2 – Global Non-English Language Film *Girlhood*

## Representation

**Rationale for study:** *Girlhood* is not a typical French film. French films are often synonymous with elegant, white *artistes* concerned with philosophy and existential crises. This beautiful coming-of-age story is a powerful and entertaining film about a group of four black girls who discover what friendship means and the protection it provides. The film celebrates their strength and the beauty of female friendship in adolescence against the backdrop of a housing project on the outskirts of Paris. The protagonist, Marieme, is the main carer of her younger sister and her grades are falling. Her mother works so many jobs, she is never around – something many spectators will understand. We witness Marieme attempting to find her way through the complexities of life as a 16-year-old, whilst always attempting to enjoy it, and we see the changes that always come at this most precious of moments – the transition from childhood to girlhood.

**STARTING POINTS - Useful sequences and timings:**

Opening scene: 00:01:00 – 00:07:02

The fight: 00:58:00 – 01:02:06

**CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS:  
Key elements of film form (micro features):**

## Cinematography

- A core theme of the film is how Marieme must struggle against the world, but finds friendship in her group of friends. The cinematography reflects this as many shots feature Marieme and friends in a medium close-up, bringing them physically closer. Shots of Marieme ‘alone’ tend to be wide, allowing the audience to appreciate how ‘empty’ her world is without her friends.
- A careful mix of shallow and deep focus is employed when she’s by herself. The shallow focus is used when she is thinking, emotional or reacting, making it clear that the world isn’t important to her at that point.

- Scenes where we worry about the world, or where we are interested in how the world (or others) will soon interact with Marieme tend to employ a deep focus with even lighting. Many external scenes featuring bright ambient lighting, which would traditionally signify comfort, create a ‘realistic’ visual style that helps to make the film ‘feel’ authentic.

### *Mise-en-scène*



- The blocking of scenes is varied.
- In many scenes, the friends are in close proximity and stand literally side by side, even as they walk. In other scenes, other characters are placed in positions to signal how Marieme is being watched or blocked off.
- In scenes with dancing, or a sense of freedom and enjoyment (or fighting), the positioning is freer and more unrestricted, and the framing highlights the spontaneity of the characters.

### Costume

- Marieme’s Nike Air Jordan’s are culturally significant as they are an iconic line of shoes. Sometimes referred to as “Js”, they are an important aspect of black culture, trainer collectors, basketball fans and mainstream street style. We see a low angle, almost close up, of her taking her trainers off and the shot lingers. This allows the audience to see her shoes are Jordan 5s in the ‘grape’ colourway, a shoe that hasn’t been available for a while, indicating that Marieme has looked after these, and that they are important to her.



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### Locations

- They are real and authentic.
- While they are specific to this story, they are also broad enough for the audience to recognise the kinds of places in which the film takes place.
- Often, scenes are ‘blocked off’ or controlled by men – this reinforces the idea that these suburban areas are not easy for women to escape from and are uncomfortable for women.

### Editing

- The film employs continuity editing.
- In scenes of significant action, some match-on action keeps the scene moving and flowing in a natural manner. Most often, the camera set-up is from one point and one camera.
- Cuts to tighter shots, or away to a wider shot, are used to focus our attention.
- Rapid cutting is avoided so that scenes play out over a period of time that is generally ‘slow’, allowing the audience to consider the significance of what is happening.

### Sound

- The use of sound in the opening of *Girlhood* sets the tone and the template for the rest of the film. The film opens to the song *Dark Allies* by Light Asylum.
- The thumping, driving, retro-style song grabs our attention immediately. It drowns out all other sounds as there are no sound effects, no dialogue and it intensifies the sport. The audience imagine the sounds that are being generated of people playing sport, and then something remarkable happens as both sides celebrate and come together.
- These young, predominately black women celebrating and chanting can be heard over the soundtrack. And then, there is silence and the

diegetic sounds of talking, excited, energetic voices give way to quieter tones as others, mostly men, come into the frame.

- The film uses sound to show the joy, the excitement, and the life of young, black women in France.
- It occasionally uses contemporary music, both diegetic and non-diegetic, to underline this. The joy, however, is dulled and the sound becomes much quieter when others who pose a threat or seek to undermine the girls’ vitality come into the film.

### CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS:

#### Contexts

#### Political

- Director Sciamma was repeatedly asked about filming a group of young, black women and as an older white woman, she said it was the lack of representation that drew her to create the film.
- Whilst *La Haine* provided an energetically stylish version of life in Parisian suburbs 20 years ago, there has been a lack of female representation in mainstream French and *banlieue* cinema.
- *Banlieue* films are associated with the lives of people who live in the suburbs of large cities such as Paris and reflect the multi-ethnic makeup of France. However, by featuring an all-black lead cast, Sciamma rejects any form of politically correct approach and creating a ‘false’ diversity in the film.

All four female leads are French born to immigrants and used their experiences to inform their performances. In some respects, Sciamma is just as interested in the spaces of the suburbs and the *banlieues*, and how the architecture of these places informs behaviour.



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- The *cités* are conceived and constructed as self-contained districts, but as a result, they become restrictive islands, full of barriers and dead ends. These reflect the lives of the people who live in them, but also make it clear that these places aren't designed for women – note how uncomfortable and quiet the scene directly after the first scene *feels* as the girls walk home under the gaze of men.
- The *emancipation story* – that of a young girl who wants to avoid the destiny that is set for her – is commonplace in French literature. *Girlhood* can be compared to these stories, but as a contemporary film, it features a more modern representation of this character: a romantic, strong, independent and vibrant black woman.

### Social and historical

- *Girlhood* is a socially conscious drama about the difficult choices facing a tough, intelligent, but fundamentally good young person in a world that views her with suspicion, or at least indifference. In the same way that other classic *realist* texts exploring the role of the *hidden* classes do, note how the *country* in the form of the state barely features.
- The absence of a supportive education system, a protective police system or any form of governmental help increases the sense that these girls are alone and vulnerable, unless they form their own groups and bonds.

### Cultural

- Black teenage girls are rarely depicted on screen. There are possible arguments that setting the story in a high-crime neighbourhood reinforces negative stereotypes. However, for protagonist Marieme, the film is romantic and about strength.
- Overall, it is a story of *people* and how they laugh, fight, sing, dance and *live*, just as almost everyone does.
- The first scene reinforces how the film will not conform to lazy stereotypes or expectations. It features a game of American football, a sport not typically associated with France and all the players are women; they are mostly black and playing the game with confidence and experience.

### Institutional

- Lead actor Karidja Touré had no background in acting and was spotted by a casting director at an amusement park. She used some experiences from her own life to help inform her performance as Marieme/Vic, but these were mostly the universal aspects of her character: the moments of friends having fun, singing and dancing.
- In comparison to *Girlhood*, Sciamma's two previous full-length films, *Water Lilies* and *Tomboy*, feature marginalised and oft-hidden characters. Sciamma herself has even suggested that the three films could be an informal trilogy with *Girlhood* being the most contemporary film of the three.
- Casting was a long four-month process. Initially, the production crew consulted with acting agencies but in the end, most of the casting was done on the streets to find girls who had a strong individuality, but also worked well within a group. Another key requirement was that the girls must be smart and quick-witted as they needed to be able to improvise during filming. Finding Marieme, aka Vic, was arguably the most difficult, as she had to be truly multifaceted and develop and change some aspects of the role as the film develops.

### ADDITIONAL STUDY AREA – Representation – Starting points

Consider these questions in relation to the representation of people and places in the film:

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- Is the presentation of the girls the same throughout? Does how we feel about the characters remain the same throughout the film?
- How does *mise-en-scène* and cinematography influence how we feel about the girls, rather than what they literally say or do?
- Focus specifically on Marieme's journey in the film. When and how do we react to her? What drives our reaction? Is it her or the things that happen to her?

*Girlhood* is an example of *banlieue cinema*. The portrayal of the *banlieues* in the wider media is often very harsh, demonising the working class and those who are deemed to be ethnic minorities. How does *Girlhood* represent these areas?

- The French title of the film is less 'loaded' than the English translation, with the word hood carrying negative stereotypes. Why might the French title, *Band of Girls*, be more *neutral* given the way that young, black people are sometimes discussed in French society?

The opening scene: 'DIAMOND' 00:31:30 – 00:35:14

Here, the representation is positive: the girls are shown as engaging, loving and welcoming. We feel as though we want to be with them in enjoying this moment.

#### Cinematography

- The colour palette is a heavily tinted blue. Consider the complexity and range of the blue. Some of the blues are cool, icy white, some are more vibrant and more intense, almost teal and the parts of the scene in shadow are a dark, night-time blue. By exploring the range and complexity of the tint on this scene, we can discuss how the range of colour shows the characters on screen are not all the same, as each character has a distinct personality.
- Blue is symbolic: the blue establishes the time of the scene, reinforces the idea of the 'diamonds' in the song and the references to the ocean in the lyrics. The colour is a more pleasant extension of the grey concrete that surrounds the girls and where they live, and could signify that in the company of each other, they are more at home and at ease.

#### KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS:

- Initially, the scene begins almost breaking the fourth wall. This jarring moment takes the audience by surprise and commands attention. Then, as a smile breaks out, the camera goes backwards to a two-shot to show that the girls are literally and figuratively together, and emphasises how close they are
- Each character has their own close ups and watch as they interact with each other.
- Framing in this scene is enjoyably messy – characters dance, sing, move, interact and have fun. The lack of cohesive and neatly framed shots underly their emotions, reactions and personalities.

#### Mise-en-scène

- The colour tint in the scene also helps to unite the characters who in the previous scene were all shown in significantly different clothing: this lighting allows their costumes to look similar and therefore collectively look more united.
- One of the reasons why this scene is so engaging is the performance of the characters – facial expressions depict overwhelming happiness, the body language is confident and open, and it depicts these girls being themselves.

#### Editing

- The scene begins with a slow pace. This allows the audience to consider the character's facial expression to help appreciate how she's feeling, but also to adjust from the previous scene which looked and felt very different.
- There is a significant and jarring difference between this scene and the previous scene.
- The scene features few cuts indicating how the filmmaker doesn't want us to look away and wants us to feel included.

#### Sound

- Featuring the song *Diamonds* by Rihanna is a classic example of a diegetic soundtrack. This is an example of how an audience's awareness of a song, its context and connotations help to emphasise the themes in a film, a scene and the characters.
- The transition from miming to live singing later in the scene helps to underline how the girls metaphorically find their own voice. Their own personalities outshine the voice on the song and instead of 'pretending' to be someone else, they become confident enough to be themselves.

