

EUROFILE

Céline Sciamma, the director with a cult to rival Tarantino's
Photo: Claire Mathon

THIS IS THE WORLD'S MOST IMPORTANT FILM-MAKER

When it comes to becoming an icon to a new generation of moviegoers, Céline Sciamma has been there, done that.. and inspired the t-shirt. By

JASON SOLOMONS



Sweeping statement though it may be, I don't think there's a more important film-maker in the world right now than Céline Sciamma.

The French director is at the vanguard of female film-makers who have gradually tilted one of

▶ Turn to page 30

EUROFILE FILM

▶ From page 29

the oldest and most pernicious narratives of the movie mainstream.

The past few years, and boosted by the repercussions of the #MeToo movement, a reframing of gender bias has undoubtedly led to 2021's (hopefully) glass-ceiling-shattering moments, with women winning both best film at the Oscars (Chloé Zhao for *Nomadland*) and the Palme d'Or at Cannes (Julia Ducornau for *Titane*).

And in September, another French female film-maker, Audrey Diwan, won the Golden Lion at Venice with abortion drama *Happening*.

I reckon Sciamma was a couple of years too early to win such awards with her own films such as *Girlhood* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, particularly for the latter, which was nominated at major ceremonies in 2019 and early 2020. "It was the same old story," she says now.

"The women get nominated, but the men win. If I didn't call this out for what it was, pure gender bias, things would never change."

Her championing of female-driven movies and, in her own work, delivering films about gender, sexuality, female friendship and love, have made her a feminist icon to a new generation of filmgoers and film critics, of all genders, both in France and around the world.

Her name is emblazoned on the Girls on Tops t-shirts series, alongside her own heroes such as Agnès Varda and Jodie Foster, and fans wear these with pride.

When her latest film, *Petite Maman*, was screened at the London Film Festival in October, Céline was greeted on stage like a rock star.

I can't recall seeing anything quite like it for a film director, not even Tarantino.

Louisa Maycock is founder and company director of Girls On Tops and, when I contact her for comment, she is busy folding a consignment of Sciamma t-shirts. Orders have exploded in recent weeks to herald the director's brief Q&A tour to accompany *Petite Maman* in some London cinemas.

"Her fans wear them like a badge of honour," Maycock says. "They send us pictures of themselves, going in to see Céline's films or standing by the poster in one of our tees. We're sold out again."

What is it that inspires such devotion, I wonder.

"She's a deeply caring film-maker, careful about the stories she tells and how they will feel for the people she's telling them to," believes Maycock. "I think how women look, desire and create is intuitive to her, and her films leave room for us all to find our own experience in them."

Sciamma-mania began with *Water Lilies* in 2007, a classic coming-of-age debut about a teenage girl falling for



Joséphine and Gabrielle Sanz in *Petite Maman*

Photo: Lilies Films



Assa Sylla, Lindsay Karamoh, Karidja Touré and Mariétou Touré in *Girlhood*
Photo: Strand Releasing

a member of a local synchronised swimming team.

Selected for Cannes, it earned the director nominations for best newcomer at the César awards. Her rise as a European voice of note continued with 2011's *Tomboy* at the Berlin Film Festival, about 10-year-Laure who changes her name to Mikhael to impress a new friend.



When images of the black stars of her 2014 film *Girlhood* (*Bande de Filles*) were featured all over Paris, on billboards and at bus stops, it was heralded as a game-changing moment for non-white female representation in the beauty-obsessed French capital. It also became a sizeable international hit, the signature scene of her characters dancing to Rihanna's *Diamonds* becoming one of the most-talked-about clips of the year.

But her major breakthrough came with the sublime *Portrait of Lady on Fire* which premiered at Cannes in 2019. The story of a passionate love affair between a bohemian artist (Noémie Merlant) and her aristocratic female subject (Sciamma regular and ex-partner Adèle Haenel) in 18th-century Brittany was tipped by many to be the film to finally see the festival's top prize go to a woman for the first time since Jane Campion won (tied, by the way) for *The Piano* in 1993.

In the end, Sciamma walked off with best screenplay, beginning a procession of award ceremonies where she would often lose out to the all-conquering *Parasite* around the world. Until it came to France's own awards, the 2020 Césars.

When Sciamma lost out in the best director category to Roman Polanski, her patience snapped and she accompanied Haenel in very publicly walking out of the ceremony.

She doesn't want to talk about that protest or about Polanski any more –

indeed, I'm warned before the interview not to go there.

But aren't all her films some kind of protest anyway? "I don't make my films for the sake of reparations," she tells me. "It's not about getting revenge or payback or anything like that. It's really not on purpose but these stories and ideas are what come out very naturally for me.

"It's just that there's a lot of material in this area, things that have never been covered.

"Female topics have been despised and ignored for so long, so, in cinema, we've been missing insight and images, we've been missing charisma, so many things.

"And now the bigger audience wants these images and they're ready for them and we aren't going to disappear or disappoint them. This time, we will not be erased."

If in print she comes across as strident, I can assure you Sciamma is warm and capable of laughing at herself, however serious the intention of her message. She says her take on "feminism" should not even be called that.

"It's my humanity," she states. "I can't express myself in any other way and it's pretty clear to me that the impulse to make what I make is linked to what's not been there, a response to missing images, but I don't plan it. It just comes."

The new film is a quieter, less spectacular piece than the period frills and frissons of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* but no less affecting. In fact, its fairytale eeriness in a naturalistic setting makes it perhaps even more beguiling, oozing in its perfectly formed 72 minutes a brisk confidence that I found beautifully troubling.

"Ooh, I like the word 'troubling'," says Sciamma. "For me, 'troubling' can be very exciting, it's a very positive thing: to be in trouble, to

EUROFILE FILM

▶ From page 31

make trouble, to trouble the status quo, all of these are positives.”

Petite Maman is about eight-year-old only child Nelly and her mother, Marion, who are clearing up the old family apartment after the death of Marion's mother.

They look through Marion's old school books and Nelly asks if she can keep some of her grandma's things, such as her silver-topped walking stick. There's an atmosphere of absence in this emptying flat, something deadening, yet also something ghostly.

“What were you scared of when you were a child?” Nelly asks her mother, as she sleeps in her mum's old bed. She also asks her to show her a secret place in the woods she must have heard about, “la cabane” she calls it.

But Marion is too overcome with grief to indulge her daughter.

Nelly goes into the woods alone to explore and meets another little girl, strikingly similar to herself and, helping her to drag a big fallen branch, this girl leads Nelly to a house constructed like a wigwam around the trunk of a large tree.



The pair strike up an instant connection. “My name is Marion,” says the new girl. And it begins to strike the viewer that maybe there is something strange going on. “I'm from the path behind you,” she says.

When they go back to Marion's house, it's weirdly similar to Nelly's grandma's place and Marion's mum walks with a cane.

Without any adornments or visual tricks, it's clear that, somehow, in grief and confusion, Nelly has met her mother and, through some kind of brief portal, is eavesdropping on her mother's childhood, while also forming a close bond with her mum – as a child.

The wonder of it all is that it doesn't feel strange or wondrous at all, and the scene of the two girls (played by twins Joséphine and Gabriel Sanz) making crepes together is one of the loveliest things I've seen all year.

“This image just came to me,” says Sciamma. “It was while I was writing ‘Portrait’ and into my head popped the idea of a little girl standing next to a treehouse with another little girl and that this other girl was her mother.”

She says she could not shake this image from her mind all the way through making and touring around the world with the earlier film and always knew it would be the starting point for her next project.

She agrees when I suggested it troubled her.

Sciamma uses the conceit, then, as the jumping-off point for an



Girls On Tops t-shirts bearing Sciamma's name
Photo: Girls On Tops



Adèle Haenel and Noémie Merlant in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*
Photo: © Lilies Films / Hold-Up Films / Arte France Cinéma

exploration of female ties and relationships, fears of mortality and childhood, and feelings about abandonment and leaving home. These are troubled waters and she even shot it in the suburb where she herself grew up, Cergy-Pontoise, about 30km north-west of Paris.

She wasn't close to her own mother, she admits, but clings to the role models of two grandmothers, both of whom lived to an old age. One was 103 when she died.

“The walking stick in the film is actually my own grandmother's,” confesses Sciamma. “I got to know

them as an adult and I did have conversations with them and they gave me such a lot of wisdom and perspective, and also sadness and limitations. So yes it's a very personal film in some regards, but it's also about troubling the idea of genealogy and bringing down notions of hierarchy, to have a daughter and mother looking at each other on the same level.”

Sciamma was a founding member of 5050x2020, a group of French industry professionals campaigning for gender parity by the year 2020 and, as co-organiser, she took to the

famous steps of the Palais des Festivals in 2018 to protest inequality, alongside Cate Blanchett, Agnès Varda, Ava DuVernay and many more women. It has become an iconic photo and moment in the history of Cannes.



I wonder if Sciamma, now 43, feels part of the younger generation still and if there's been a levelling up in the French film establishment due to the political stance she and her colleagues have taken.

“Well, the film is asking: if you were the same age as your mother, would you be friends? But yes, I feel there's a cultural shift in feminism now, so this film is about that levelling up of generations.

“I do know from letters and audience responses that my films have had an impact on people who haven't felt ‘seen’ before and that is amazing and inspiring for me.”

Are there film-makers who in turn inspired her, then, as she wrote *Petite Maman*?

“I became interested in taking things back to the beginning, so I watched a lot of the female film pioneers: Alice Guy-Blaché, Germaine Dulac and Mabel Normand. She invented Chaplin, you know? These women invented magic realism, they found the magic in the cut. Everyone says: ‘Oh, the Lumieres invented cinema’, but those men only invented documentary. These women invented fiction films, so my approach to *Petite Maman* was to work as they did, so I was sort of going back to the childhood of cinema.”

One of the tricks, however, not available to those filmmaking women of the silent era is music, and Sciamma's film boasts another collaboration with the artist Para One, who has scored all her films, including that haunting refrain sung by a female choir in “Portrait”.

This time, a synth-based tune called *La Musique du Futur* accompanies the two children as they paddle around a lake in a dinghy, enjoying a brief, yet total, escape from reality.

“We were at film school together, he's an artist and a friend and he also makes films and we have always had a strong connection around melodies about childhood, so this was the perfect task for him.”

But Para One insisted Céline herself wrote the lyric. So she came up with: “*Des voix d'enfants chanteront de nouveaux rêves, le rêve d'être enfant avec toi...*” (Children's voices will sing of new dreams, the dream of being a child with you...).

“I'm very pleased with that,” Céline says. “It's my first song.”

That might be true, but the filmmaker who's become an arthouse rock star has to go now. It's time to greet some more fans.