Fiona Handyside, *Sofia Coppola, A Cinema of Girlhood*

Delphine Letort

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/lisa/10367
ISSN: 1762-6153

Publisher
Presses universitaires de Rennes

Electronic reference

This text was automatically generated on 3 May 2019.

Les contenus de la *Revue LISA / LISA e-journal* sont mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.
Fiona Handyside, **Sofia Coppola, A Cinema of Girlhood**

Delphine Letort

REFERENCES


1 Sofia Coppola’s films have aroused conflicting responses among critics. On the one hand, some celebrate her cinema of slowness as a filmmaking strategy that allows her to capture intimate images of womanhood. Others, on the other hand, dismiss her films’ attachment to the surface and to “bodies living a luxurious life.”

2 Fiona Handyside, film studies lecturer at the University of Exeter, approaches Sofia Coppola’s filmmaking through the theoretic lens of girlhood studies, a field that has emerged and grown in the wake of Catherine Driscoll’s pioneering book *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Theory* (2002). Handyside aptly resorts to a wide range of theories developed in girlhood studies to articulate a new analysis and understanding of Coppola’s political and aesthetic filmmaking, questioning her “quintessentially postfeminist aesthetic” (5) in relation to her privileged background as the daughter of famous Hollywood director Francis Ford Coppola.

3 Rather than giving in to the attractive power of what she identifies as “luminous girlhoods”, construed as signifiers of an auteurist cinema influenced by European art-house aesthetic, the author foregrounds a critical look at the branding effect which compromises Coppola’s artistic identity into entrepreneurship. Early in the book, Handyside poses a key question that illustrates her frank treatment of her subject’s ambiguities: “How much do Coppola’s films offer us a singular female-authored vision of the world, uncompromised by the demands of Conglomerate Hollywood and ‘girly’ films?” (16). She does not eschew the numerous debates triggered by Coppola’s status and
Coppola’s films respond to the demand for visibility for girls which characterizes contemporary media culture. Sarah Projansky contends that “the media incessantly look at and invite us to look at girls. Girls are objects at which we gaze, whether we want to or not. They are everywhere in our mediascapes. As such, media turn girls into spectacles—visual objects on display.” Handyside’s first chapter establishes the centrality of the girl figure in Coppola’s cinema in relation to the interdisciplinary theories that are fundamental in girlhood studies. Referring to Sarah Banet-Weiser, Anita Harris, Mary Celester Kearney, Sarah Projansky, Claudia Mitchell, Diane Negra, among others, she analyses the limits of the postfeminist ethos that underlies Coppola’s exclusive perception and representation of girlhood. Beyond the known feature films made by Coppola, the author examines the construction of the girl figure in her short *Lick the Star* (1998) and her advertising videos for Marc Jacob’s *Daisy* perfume (2016). Through close visual analysis, she highlights the props used by a woman filmmaker whose portrayal of girlhood builds on celebrity culture, fashion and travel – concerns that appear to constrain the vision of the “rich bitch” whom Coppola self-reflexively and ironically alludes to as herself in the credits of *The Bling Ring* (2014).

The second chapter convincingly explores Coppola’s construction of an elaborate image of girlishness that makes uses of objects and designs (cakes, flowers, shoes, silks, etc.) to express the subjective experience of girlhood. Handyside identifies Coppola’s idiosyncratic tropes and mise en scene effects – such as the recurrence of fluid camera movements and close-ups used to turn the girls into spectacle, most notably when they are filmed “in repose (sunbathing, soaking in bathtubs, lying in bed)” (14). She thus goes beyond the clichés that have urged critics to berate Coppola’s films for their dazzling representation of girlhood, suggesting that they convey the paradoxes of female adolescence through an image of girlhood “that is rebellious while remaining girlish” (55). To give an example, she views the characters of *The Bling Ring* as defiant teens who steal rather than buy the glamorous objects expected to provide sparkle and joy in our consumer society.

The third chapter touches upon the concept of home and other locations, chronotopes that signify social standing and represent Coppola’s vision of girlhood themes – the imprisonment of domestic life which creates an atmosphere of stillness and boredom that prevails over plot, an “intimate public” culture that epitomizes the postfeminist pressures of celebrity. The girls’ liminal existence is symbolized by mirrors and glass walls that connote borders to be negotiated between interior and exterior, urban and rural.

The fourth and final chapter examines Coppola’s expressive use of fashion and clothing as a means to assert “agency, identity and authority” (146) – an idea that prompts the scholar to reassess Coppola’s cinematic complicity with postfeminist trends in more creative ways. Handyside contends that the director uses fashion to engage with “emotion, interiority and femininity” (152) – thereby challenging the objectification of girls by giving them access to their subjectivity.

To conclude, *Sofia Coppola, A Cinema of Girlhood* brings new insight into the meaning of girlhood and how contemporary filmmakers may explore the postfeminist ethos. It aptly conveys the relevance of an interdisciplinary approach to film studies in the society of the spectacle, which exploits “a politics of dazzling girlhood” (49) as a means of
surveillance and discipline. *The Beguiled* (2017) strikingly departs from Coppola’s glamorous aesthetic of girlhood and provides but another bone of contention for Coppola’s critics, which Handyside may want to tackle in a future publication.

---

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


**NOTES**


AUTHORS

DELPHINE LETORT

Delphine Letort is Professor of American studies and film studies at Le Mans University.