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## RESEARCH

# Teenage Pregnancy, Contagion and Affect in European Girlhood Cinema by Women

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In this essay I explore a cluster of recent female-authored European art films from different national contexts that draw on pregnant embodiment as a hyperbole of contagion reclaimed as a female mode of expression and resistance in the face of limited opportunities and the strictures of femininity. *17 filles* (Muriel and Delphine Coulin 2011, France), *Little Black Spiders* (Patrice Toye 2012, Belgium) and *The Falling* (Carol Morley 2014, UK) convey girls' transformative emotive and bodily experiences in their own terms and allow for intense intersubjective encounters through an arthouse aesthetic based on heightened attention to music, the female voice, pictorial use of landscape and physicality. While these narratives of contagion work towards containment of the political potential of female collectivity through a punitive ending and/or mother-daughter scenarios, it is primarily in the affective force of the films' aesthetics that new ways of relating between female characters, and between characters and the female viewer are re-imagined across time and space

**Keywords:** contagion narratives; European cinema; girlhood; affect; pregnancy; female authors

A number of film and television scholars have drawn attention to the recent fascination with unintended teenage pregnancy in American popular culture, critiquing these quintessential postfeminist narratives for depoliticising women's reproduction through discourses of individual choice and personal/moral responsibility, thus proposing 'new iterations of post-feminism that ultimately restore conservative ideas that valorise pregnancy and motherhood as women's imperatives.' (Hoerl and Kelly 2010: 360). According to Pamela Thoma (2009), Heather Latimer (2009) and Kristen Hoerl and Casey Ryan Kelly (2010) the decision to continue an unplanned

pregnancy in romantic comedies and dramedies such as *Juno* (Jason Reitman 2007) and *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow 2007) is reframed as a transformative experience for the young female heroine in an effort to bring 'excessive' female sexuality back within the confines of prescriptive gender norms. Jennifer A. Fallas (2013) observes that television narratives such as *16 and Pregnant* (MTV 2009-) and *Teen Mom* (MTV 2009-) are often promoted as educational efforts and work to reinscribe social and cultural assumptions regarding sexuality, gender roles and class identities through narrative strategies such as the 'othering' of pregnant teenagers and positioning girls as a success or failure, based on their ability to embrace normative middle-class femininity.

In this essay I would like to explore a cluster of female-authored European art films from different national contexts that challenge the postfeminist ideal of femininity that forecloses solidarity among women by drawing on pregnant embodiment as a hyperbole of contagion reclaimed as a liminal model of connection between girls in the face of limited opportunities.

Inspired by historical events, *17 filles/17 Girls* (Muriel and Delphine Coulin 2011), *Little Black Spiders* (Patrice Toye 2012) and *The Falling* (Carol Morley 2014) convey girls' transformative emotive and bodily experiences in their own terms and allow for affective encounters between the characters, and between characters and viewer through an art-house aesthetic that stands out in terms of heightened attention to music, the female voice, pictorial use of landscape, symbolic use of insects/nature and bodies in movement.

If the contemporary realist drama *17 filles* presents teenage pregnancy as a provocative strategy adopted by desponded schoolgirls to take control of their body and future (pitting them against the older rational generation that advocates birth control/age-appropriate pregnancy), *The Falling* and *Little Black Spiders* hark back to the late 1960s and 1970s when contraception and abortion were out of reach for teenagers thus inviting present-day female viewers to recognise 'their bond of suffering with the past' (Erhart 2018: 36) while also tapping into the energy of a period of significant social change and growing feminist awareness to offer a critique of young women's evacuation from patriarchal narratives. However, both films

avoid direct historical references in their evocation of a distant past and repressive space (girls confined in single-sex institutions and constrained by narrow gendered expectations) that functions primarily to heighten feelings of loss and alienation.

All three films mobilise the state of pregnancy and/or the pregnant body as representing the ultimate breach in the unity of the embodied self to explore active and creative forms of collective agency through motifs of contagion, expansion and multiplicity. The positive reclamation of the trope of contagion so often derided as a pathological site of cultural exchange between women in writing on girlhood and popular culture will be explored in the context of feminist thinking about pregnancy and female embodiment and I turn to (film) theoretical approaches premised on proximity, contact and immersion to argue for an 'aesthetics as placenta' that exceeds narrative containment in dissolving the boundary between character bodies, film and viewer thus offering an engaging utopian notion of a female future based in the collective and the embodied.

### **Unwanted Pregnancy and the Power of Contagion**

Rooted in a European tradition of girlhood stories that revolve around adolescent female sexuality as a 'narrative motor of risk' (Mayer 2016: 4) *Little Black Spiders* (LBS), *The Falling* and *17 filles* turn to the rebellious schoolgirl as a seductive figure of transgression who challenges the regulatory nature of social institutions (church, school, family) in the face of alienation and restriction/confinement. In these female dramas, accidental pregnancy functions as a catalyst for resistance and transformation through an appropriation of dominant ideas about unruly female sexuality and dangerous excess/otherness.

What *17 filles*, *LBS* and *The Falling* have in common is a positive exploitation of teenage pregnancy as a contagious condition that empowers girls to come together as a collective body to defy the regulatory force of institutional structures on their lives. This perspective challenges the negative popular discourse of contagion that constructs 'impressionable' young women as a danger to each other and to themselves (Burke 2006). As Catherine Driscoll points out, one of the defining features of public discourses on feminine adolescence is the representation of girls

and their lives as closely framed by institutions and peer groups, linked to a feminine psychology associated with suggestibility and a failure to constitute individuality (2002: 157–158). Throughout the 20th century, anxieties about youthful femininity entwined with the threat of mass culture is embedded in writing on girlhood (Hall 1904, Freud 1921, Kracauer 1995) producing a derogatory image of the mindless horde, associated with a feminised and feminising form of power that erases boundaries between self and other, individual and collective thus challenging the norm of the rational, independent individual at the centre of middle-class white masculinity.

Contemporary feminist discourses on female adolescence challenge the patriarchal politics of these discursive practices by drawing attention to the oppositional and ethical potential of girl group identifications in providing a sense of security and connection for young women (Gilligan 1982, Hey 1997) as well as an opportunity for pleasurable self-expression and an outlet for sexual repression as noted in Ehrenreich et al's study of the Beatlemania phenomenon in the 1960s UK and US: 'to abandon control – to scream, faint, dash about in mobs – was, in form if not in conscious intent, to protest the sexual repressiveness, the rigid double standard of female teen culture.' (1992: 85).

In thinking differently about individuality, feminist critics have also turned their attention to the pregnant body as the most transgressive signifier of the open 'overflowing' character of female subjectivity. As pointed out by Christine Battersby (1998) and Marion Iris Young (2005) who challenge the unitary (stable, fixed and disembodied) Enlightenment concept of subjectivity, pregnant embodiment and birthing – regarded as an intrinsic value rather than a process of producing a baby – offers alternative ways of re-imagining female subjectivity 'as a way of being-in-the-world with uniquely interesting characteristics'(Young 2005: 10) that allows for a radical reconsideration of ideas of in/dependence and Otherness. JaneMaree Maher (2001) challenges the normative idea of the autonomous subject in the context of the physico-metaphorical function of the placenta, an organ that defies boundaries and bodily integrity. Furthermore, Maher extends the potentially contagious capacity of the placenta beyond the boundaries of the pregnant body 'through an

understanding of each body (outside the frames of mother and child) as produced in and through a placental framework of connection and fluid exchange.' (2001: 202).

While the female-authored narratives of contagion immerse the viewer from the very first images in a subjective narration via cinematography and soundscape motivated by the girl-protagonists' emotional perspective (allowing the viewer to look and feel with the characters), the films also retain a political commitment in drawing attention to the stigmatisation of girlhood sexuality and conflicting pressures on young women's bodies. Inspired by historical events, *Little Black Spiders* transports us to a hospital attic in 1978 Belgium where a group of teenage girls are forced to live out their unwanted pregnancies to avoid bringing shame on their Catholic family. The girls' abrupt loss of agency upon entering the hiding place is signaled by their imposed name change, uniform dress code, restricted mobility and ignorance about signing away their baby for adoption. Their shared exile and shameful 'unspeakable condition' allows these young women to bond through games and plays that evoke mythical odysseys of awakening.

In the Coulin sisters' *17 filles* (inspired by the mediated story of an alleged pregnancy pact in Gloucester, Massachusetts in 2008) a group of disaffected schoolgirls who feel trapped in a seaside town in France, seek escape from their restricted lives by transforming an accidental pregnancy into a collective utopian project outside of male desire, parental control and public shaming.

Informed by Carol Morley's extensive research into historic cases of mass psychogenic illness (Morley 2015) *The Falling* associates unplanned pregnancy with trauma in the repressive environment of a prestigious girls' school in Oxfordshire in 1969. The narrative is triggered by the sudden death of Abigail whose first heterosexual experience results in unwanted pregnancy. Abbie's mysterious sickness, linked to the early stages of pregnancy, causes an outbreak of collective fainting episodes that symptomatically occur when the school enforces ideal femininity onto its pupils.

All three films draw on the feminist reclamation of hysteria described by Elaine Showalter as a 'specifically feminine protolanguage' (1993: 286) 'that serves as a simultaneous index of forms of gender oppression and a space to stage resistance to it' in the words of Claire Devereux (2014: 29). Under pressure to perform femininity

in restricted ways, the hysteric's body bears witness to emotional forces and repressed feelings in the form of behaviour or symptoms (Segal 2009). Central to the contagion narratives is a yearning for connection as a reaction to alienation, repression and loss or to put it in Susan Dominus words:

Mass psychogenic illness, whatever its mysterious mechanism, seems deeply connected to empathy and to a longing for what social psychologists call affiliation: belonging. (...) the workings of the illness are in some ways as mysterious as the hidden codes of adolescence itself. (2017)

Mothering as a political/ethical practice, in the sense of girls who are not linked by biology caring and looking out for each other imbues all these narratives. In *17 filles* the charismatic ringleader of a group of schoolgirls, Camille, occupies the position of role model and surrogate mother vis-à-vis her classmates in the face of indifference and hostility from parents and teachers. When Camille falls pregnant as a result of a condom accident and decides to keep the baby, she can only rely on the support of her friends who embrace the prospect of unconditional mother-child love and an alternative form of mothering outside of the nuclear family. During one of their many chats, the core group of popular girls develops a utopian vision of an all-female community where mothering is a shared activity and duties are divided evenly so that each member can still retain her personal freedom. Camille also takes up the role of confidante and mother figure in her close friendship with Clémentine, the youngest looking girl who is closely supervised by her controlling parents. On several occasions, Camille comes to the rescue, helping her friend to break out, offering the girl emotional support and a bed for the night. When Clémentine runs away from home, all the girls pull together and fix up an abandoned trailer near the sea with quilts and pillows. This vision of an exclusively female, maternal utopia in *17 filles* is further supported by the absence of father figures in the film.

The *Falling* and *LBS* also place emphasis on romantic friendships between women that cross into sexual attraction, conveyed in a circuit of intense female gazes and gestures that speak of desire and identification. The emotional core of *The Falling* is the intense friendship between luminous Abigail and dark-haired Lydia, a

bond they celebrate by carving their initials in a sacred oak tree. *Little Black Spiders* dwells extensively on the romantic and increasingly erotic bond between ingénue Katharina and streetwise Roxanne, the central couple at the heart of the female community. When Katharina gives up on her romantic fantasies as she discovers that the father of her child – a school teacher and married man – openly admits to being ashamed of having her in his life, the two girls vow to stand by each other and raise their kids together, sealed by a kiss on the lips and the exchange of mother milk. In privileging meaningful relationships between young women, these female ensemble films, a type of fiction described by Victoria Ball as ‘largely written and/or produced by women, which diegetically focuses on particular communities of female characters and which is predominantly aimed at female audiences’ (2007: II) effectively undermine the ideology of heterosexual love and romance.

Yet, even though these ensemble films challenge heteronormativity and patriarchal motherhood in their celebration of collective female rebellion and solidarity as a utopian space, they ultimately cannot envisage a programme for change in the position of young women as a group. Significantly, all three narratives are marked by containment of female friendship/romance through the death or disappearance of the seductive agent of contagion (who is also one half of the female couple) thus foreclosing queer possibilities. If *17 filles* allows its teenage characters reproductive choices outside normative femininity and creates affective bonds between girls who are not linked by biology, this alternative scenario is undermined by the film’s punitive ending that puts the girls back under parental control, dismissing their social project as misguided escapism. When Camille, the group’s ringleader, mysteriously disappears having lost her baby after a car accident, a voice-over informs us that the teenage mothers ‘naturally’ gave up on their dream. In *LBS* and *The Falling*, the anarchic power of the female collective is supplanted by maternal love in a melodramatic climax. Expelled from school, Lydia is saved from drowning by her mother whereas *LBS* works towards an affirmation of maternal desire and self-sacrifice in the closing sequence that shows streetwise Roxy embracing motherhood through the adoption of Katharina’s baby-girl when her best friend tragically dies during their escape from hospital. *LBS* also grants orphan girl Katharina (who is



desperate to have a family of her own) a privileged narrative and moral position as tragic heroine whose emotional journey we are invited to share.

I argue however that the recuperative narrative pull in these female-authored films is surpassed by the affective intensities that circulate between character bodies and filmic aesthetics. It is through aesthetic choices and heightened cinematic expression that these ensemble dramas transmit affective connection and attachment between female bodies as the boundary between viewer and film dissolves.

### **Unruly Bodies: Excess and Otherness**

Mimetic communication characterised by Gibbs as 'corporeally based forms of imitation, both voluntary and involuntary' (2010: 186) is at the core of the affective transfer between the girls, a process that culminates in moments of collective emotional communion marked by synchronisation of voices and bodies in movement – singing, making music, playing, reciting poetry, swooning and dancing – in exhilarating scenes that punctuate the narrative. Transmission of affect in the sense of individuals becoming alike as well as in taking up complementary positions of the loved and the lover in the female couple (Brennan 2004) is triggered by physical proximity between the girl characters, often involving bodily contact or a caressive gesture; the touch of a face, a kiss or blending of two faces into one through superimposition of images in 'the film's body' (Sobchack 1992).

*The Falling* and *Little Black Spiders* rely on rhythmic motion and disorderly dance as a rebellious mode of expression tailored for the girls own pleasure (rather than satisfying the visual expectations of the audience) and as a medium for the flow of affect between bodies that dissolves individuality into a pulsating mass. The close link between dance and hysteria that became increasingly pathologised across scientific disciplines at the turn of the 19th century (Kolb 2009, Gotman 2017) is appropriated in both films as a disruptive force and excessive vitality 'of a disorderly social body that jerks uncontrollably and in doing so unpredictably affects those around it.' (Gotman xiv).

In *The Falling* the collective fits symptomatically occur when the school enforces domestic femininity onto its pupils, unleashing an orgy of unruly bodies swooning

and collapsing on top of each other in tableaux with erotic and mystical overtones (**Figure 1**). Significantly, social contagion also affects the young art teacher, Miss Charron, who is increasingly prone to twitching and fainting when she is coerced into resigning for being pregnant out of wedlock and deciding to keep the baby.

In *LBS*, it is ingénue Katharina, the most creative girl, who introduces rock music, poetry and empowering mythical stories to distract her peers from the stress and boredom of their impending births, thus challenging the passivity/domestic activities deemed appropriate for expectant mothers. The girls' collective rebellion erupts in a hypnotic dance performance that enacts a confrontation between frenzied goddesses and a captive Minotaur to loud and rhythmic music. Attempts by the nuns to keep the girls in their place are met with defiance as 'the little black spiders' increasingly venture out at night to roam the forest where they create their own code of behaviour and movement in a trance-like dance ritual. (**Figure 2**).

The centrepieces of collective delirium and self-transcendence in *LBS* and *The Falling* can be read as affection-images 'that connect the figure(s) on the screen to the viewer, not necessarily mediating emotional reactions or leading to action but conflating and collapsing subject with object' in the words of Mieke Bal (2009). The



**Figure 1:** Collective hysteria as disruptive and creative force in *The Falling* (BBC Films).



**Figure 2:** Girls escaping confinement and dancing in the woods in *Little Black Spiders* (Versus production).

gestural and postural articulations of female bodies released from normative social and cultural codifications, underscored by hypnotic music and amplified by the girls' breathing, whispering and sighing, invite affective kinaesthetic engagement with 'the dance's body' that according to Dee Reynolds (2012) is not identified with a fixed subject position of either performer or spectator but 'invested in the shared materiality and affective flow of choreographed movement' among dancers and between dancer(s) and spectator (2012: 123). Furthermore, kinaesthetic 'contagion' (Reason and Reynolds, 2010) is intensified by visual/optical effects (such as fractured inserts/subliminal images shared by the girls and the film text itself) and camera work that simulates the intensity of the characters' movements, positioning the spectator in the middle of the event, at the heart of the emotion. As Adriano D'Aloia points out: 'camera movements do not simply produce a motor activation, but rather are capable of generating or implicitly suggesting a relation between the movement perceived on the screen and the movement that is internally experienced by the spectator.' (2012: 104).

In foregrounding the loss and suffering of their heroines *LBS* and *The Falling* also rely on the 'text of muteness' (Brooks, 1976) that replaces speech and dialogue by music, gesture and an expressive mise-en-scène of desire to resituate the body as a site of affective communication. Set in a repressive past, these films draw on the melodramatic mode to highlight bodily manifestation of repression and trauma related to unwanted pregnancy (rape, miscarriage, death) but also in function of a climactic narrative turning-point that highlights maternal sentiment and works towards the restoration of the mother-daughter bond in intensely emotional and striking resurrection scenes. Sue Thornham (2019) argues that *The Falling* reverses the ending of the maternal melodrama as the mother is saved by her daughter (discovering her voice to speak about her rape experience and escaping the domestic sphere) and she, in return, brings Lydia back to life under the magical oak tree. A similar melodramatic mother-daughter dynamic of loss and reunion is played out in *LBS*. After her death/resurrection, Katharina lives on in her baby daughter as the object of Roxy's maternal affection in a reversal of the previous mother-daughter positions in the female couple.

In order to foreground the subversive power of social contagion, *17 filles* and *LBS* rely heavily on the visual spectacle of the expanding and multiplying pregnant body as a figure of excess and transformation. Excess is connoted by the sheer magnitude of pregnant bodies in the image and through the alignment of girls with insects. While insects function as a metaphor of alienation and insignificance (abandoned and rejected girls, cast away or seeking refuge in liminal spaces), there is also a defiant quality to the association of adolescent female bodies with the invisible underground activity of collective minded insects in proposing a challenge to narratives of individualism and the masculine ideal of the autonomous self. According to Rosi Braidotti, qualities that make insects an inspiring model for a symbiotic relationship that defies binary oppositions while also constituting a paradigm for polymorphous antiphalllic sexuality is 'the fast rate of metamorphosis, the talents for parasitism, the power of mimetism or blending with their territory and environment, and the speed of movement.' (2011: 102–103). The kinship between girls and insects is established

in the very first image of *17 filles* as we hear a female voice-over expressing a sense of wonder and awe for the mysterious presence and inexplicable behaviour of ladybirds invading the beach of Lorient, briefly offering respite from the monotony of the girls' dead-end existence ('for once, a truly wonderful thing happened here'). The ever-expanding pregnant girl gang and the ladybirds are narratively and visually aligned as a mysterious phenomenon that defies the laws of nature. In a key scene of communal bonding, we see the girls playing with the ladybirds after braving the cold sea waves one last time at the end of summer. Conveyed in intensely tactile soft-focus close-ups that puncture the realist narrative, this pivotal bathing scene is echoed nostalgically in the film's closing sequence, conjuring a mythical bond between young women and nature that transcends time and space (**Figure 3**).

### **Girl Talk, Music and Affect**

Looking into the ways in which international cinema articulates girls and girlhood, Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones point out that sound and music in particular are often foregrounded to express experiences of girlhood that seem to escape conscious articulation and 'to enhance the emotional and affective intensity of audience engagement with the girls' subjectivity' (2016: 124). As Michel Chion (1999)



**Figure 3:** Haptic and tactile imagery in *17 filles*: communion between girls and ladybirds on the beach (Diaphana Distribution).

and Vivian Sobchack (2005) have argued, sound possesses tactile and haptic qualities that envelop the spectator 'as a bodily being enmeshed acoustically, spatially and affectively in the filmic texture.' (Elsaesser and Hagener 2015: 48).

All three female ensemble films poignantly contrast the authoritarian/disciplinarian speaking voice and the antagonistic silence of adults with the emotional expressivity of girls that erupts in the ambient noise of chatter, laughter, poetry and intimate conversations about dreams and desires. The privileging of the vocal/semiotic aspect of embodied and feminised speech as opposed to the semantic (the meaning of words associated with the rational masculine sphere) foregrounds relationality and the infectious quality of girl talk. As Adriana Cavarero's puts it: 'The voice vibrates in the air, striking the ear of the other, even when it does not mean to do so...The ear is an open canal; it can be surprised from anywhere at any given moment. It is always cocked to a sonorous universe that it does not control.' (2005: 178).

Heather-Warren Crow, drawing on Paolo Virno's definition of idle talk (2004), points out that girl's chatter is primarily performative and agential: 'it is not about what is said but what is brought into being – the pure and simple ability to say "I speak"' (2013: 118). The sonorous plurality of girl's chatter as well as the power of singular and defiant young female voices is mobilised in all three films to critique and subvert the violent, alienating language and mute indifference of teachers, doctors and parents that aims to silence and discipline the young women. In *The Falling* and *LBS*, the girls' poetic 'outbursts' that stand out in terms of rhythm, intonation and gesture work to destabilise and displace oppressive language. In *LBS* the girls hidden away in the attic who are denied control over their bodies through lies and silence appropriate Greek mythology and poetry to reinvent themselves as empowering goddesses in vocal performances that burst with sensuality and energy. When questioned insistently by a doctor about her family history and 'hysterical' symptoms, Lydia in *The Falling* is overcome by emotion and stutters 'I feel—I feel—it—I—I f—I feel...' echoing Wordsworth's line 'The fulness of your bliss, I feel—I feel it all' in the *Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*

(1807), a poem that reverberates throughout the film to signify the unbreakable bond between the female couple.

The realist-style narration of *17 filles* is framed by adolescent female voice-overs that convey intimacy through the grain of the voice and authenticity in expressing the specific experiences of girlhood while drawing the viewer into a critical perspective on the adult world. The opening sequence foregrounds the disembodied young female voice over a black screen that offers a retrospective account of what happened last summer, introducing the trope of contagion through the 'miracle' of the transgressive ladybirds migrating from the gardens to the beach of Lorient ('the old folk figured they had seen it all, they were in for a surprise'). The association between ladybirds and girls is established in the following close-ups of anonymous body parts (tummies, elbows, knees...) accompanied by the buzzing noise of girls' voices. In the closing sequence, the female voice-over multiplies into a chorus of girls' voices commenting collectively, as one body, on Camille's disappearance:

'we don't know what happened to her after she lost the baby (...) the wildest rumours circulated, she had become an au pair, she had left for the South of France or maybe even moved to Mexico (...) we have given birth to 15 babies.'

Even though the girls' project of raising their kids together is narratively dismissed as an accident of nature on a par with the suicidal/vanishing ladybirds, the closing images are both visually and aurally imbued with a sense of collectivity and lingering desire for the absent Camille. Significantly, the claustrophobic image of the heroines and their offspring stuck on a merry-go-round is eclipsed by nostalgic, dreamlike images of the girl gang laughing on the beach and playing in the sea, giving way to an aggressive music track by rock singer and guitarist Izia (2009) as a female voice-over reminds us that the creative and transgressive potential of girlhood is here to stay: 'at seventeen, you are bursting with energy and nothing can stop you. There is nothing you can do against a girl who dreams.'

Another acoustic register that is particularly prominent in *LBS* and *The Falling* is non-diegetic music as 'one of the key means through which unexpressed or

inexpressible emotions are conveyed' (Laing 2007: 3). As Handyside explains in her analysis of French girlhood films, non-diegetic music can be interpreted as a 'depersonalized register' that allows the spectator to gain insight into the girls' heightened sensations while preserving their opacity and privacy (2016: 121). *LBS* and *The Falling* are saturated with distinctive music that consists of predominantly non-diegetic musical sketches with a haunting and delicate quality (the tracks are released as an album in its own right by the respective composers, John Parish and Tracey Thorn). Both music scores are dominated by a leitmotif that supports the main protagonists' subjectivity anchored in loss and a homo-erotic desire for connection and belonging. By blurring the boundaries between non-diegetic and diegetic music/sound and through the involvement of girl characters who are amateur composers, musicians or active listeners, *LBS* and *The Falling* foreground music (often linked to creative expression in general such as poetry, dance, drawing) as part of the wider narrative operation of the film, as a feminine voice that escapes containment.

A plaintive musical leitmotif heightens the emotional intensity of Abbie's and Lydia's bond displaced onto nature after Abbie's death. The full moon and disorientating images of the oak tree where the two girls vow to meet every year for the rest of their lives become infused with Abbie's spirit through Tracey Thorn's soothing voice and lyrics that speak of isolation and loss: 'girl, are you there? (...) hearing your ghost everywhere, you're the one that is left behind' (Thorn 2015). In *The Falling* the affective/hypnotic power of music and the female voice are particularly foregrounded in ecstatic mass swooning scenes with mystic overtones and montage sequences that juxtapose the sensuality of the girls through haptic and tactile imagery (extreme close ups of lips and hair, touching of face and body, textured images of leaves and water...) with the stillness of the despondent mature women trapped behind glass and gazing out of the window.

*LBS'* instrumental score composed by John Parish (2013) who contributed to all Patrice Toye's feature length films, is primarily attached to Katharina through a delicate leitmotif, reminiscent of a nursery rhyme, that becomes more complex and elaborate as the young heroine's desire takes flight in her intimate bond with Roxy.



While Katharina's acoustic representation has touches of sadness and vulnerability (a sensibility that is amplified in the first part of the film through the girl's voice-over expressing a romantic yearning that transforms into increasingly desperate pleas to the father of her child in letters that remain unanswered), there is also a quiet authority in Katja's musical leitmotif exemplified by the melodically extended, climactic death/ rebirth scene with its strong religious overtones that perpetuates the bond between Roxy and Katharina through 'their' daughter. The newly born baby's cries punctuate the music score in a life-affirming closing sequence as Roxy breastfeeds and adopts Katharina's baby, naming the girl after her mother. Contrasting in tone and style with Katja's leitmotif are loud and aggressive music fragments in a variety of genres (rock, punk, electronic) that erupt or spill over in the diegetic world throughout the film to signal the girls' collective rebellion.

### **Natural Landscapes and the Feminine Sublime**

Female relationality expressed through music, the female voice and sensual contact (touch, kiss, exchange of body fluids such as breast milk, saliva...) is linked to the cinematic landscapes that the girls inhabit. The beach, sea and the woods serve as liminal spaces of escape and transition, often infused with a magical quality, and intense sites of affective investment where communion between girls and their surroundings (trees, water, sand, insects...) is celebrated.

In their critique of institutions (school, family, medical world) as an instrument of social control that negatively affects young women, all three films draw on the contrast between stillness/containment/loneliness and togetherness/bodily expression/solidarity exemplified by *17 filles'* juxtaposition of claustrophobic cityscapes and static shots of lonely teenagers (home alone confined to their bedroom) with dynamic scenes on the beach of Brittany where an ever growing group of pregnant girls form a bonded mass as they make plans for a new future (building a female commune, closing the generation gap, collective parenting), revel in bodily transformation (of the fetus and their own pregnant bodies) and simply enjoy the pleasure of mobility and freedom, striding across the beach and braving the cold sea water.

The girls' habitation of their spatial environments releases an affective force that erupts in striking arresting images marked by aural and visual excess that is associated with art cinema. As Barbara Klinger points out:

'the arresting image is a signature element of the (art house) genre. It occurs when a film stops to contemplate an exquisitely composed, significantly evocative and/or uncanny image. The forward motion of the narrative slows down or temporarily halts, allowing the spectacle to capture fully our attention. The arresting image may have an additionally unusual temporal status, often appearing outside of time in a fantasy or dream like dimension (...) the mystifying qualities of the arresting image are, in turn, deeply related to its affective dimension.' (2006: 24)

Landscape operates as a significant space in *LBS*, *17 filles* and *The Falling*, foregrounded in 'frozen pictorial moments' (Hockenhull 2014: 2) when a more or less static camera allows the shot to resemble a painting, evoking what Martin Lefèbvre refers to as 'temps morts' (2006). In prioritising the pictorial over the narrative, the spectator's attention is guided towards space in such a way as to release it from narrative motivation. As Stella Hockenhull explains:

'the ways in which the landscape is formally structured by the filmmaker and technical staff, whether intentionally or not, elicit an emotional response from the spectator and relate to the notion of affect. This is further enhanced, though not always, by the "prefocusing" of the spectator through the narrative.' (2014: 9)

All three ensemble films are interspersed with timeless landscape imagery (that is not legitimised by a character's point-of-view) as the narrative gives way to a spectacular mode, inviting the viewer to engage with the elements of the landscape in combination with haptic and tactile imagery that transmits the characters' bodily sensations. The natural landscape evokes an all-female adolescent utopian realm

that occludes the outside world in compositions that show girl packs occupying the woods or the beach, appearing at one with the landscape they inhabit.

In *LBS* and *The Falling*, the natural landscapes are imbued with a spiritual or even supernatural quality (enhanced by dreamlike cinematography, elliptical editing and surreal montage sequences) evoking Justine Kurland's painterly photographs (1969-) of adolescent groups of girls who appear as dislocated figures in an enchanted landscape 'indicating a yearning and desire beyond the space they occupy' as Hockenfull puts it (2014: 143). A shared source of inspiration cited by both Carol Morley (2017) and Patrice Toye (VPRO 2016) is Peter Weir's film adaptation of Joan Lindsay's bestselling novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) revolving around a group of schoolgirls from an exclusive boarding school in the Australian countryside who mysteriously disappear in the bush while on a Valentine's Day picnic. If Peter Weir sacrifices his female protagonists to the sinister monumental landscape that towers over the girls during their perilous journey, Patrice Toye and Carol Morley attribute a therapeutic and magical quality to the natural landscapes inhabited by girls (**Figures 4 and 5**).

In *The Falling* the sumptuous landscape dominated by the sacred oak tree into which Lydia and Abbie carve their initials is narratively entwined with the intimate bond between the two girls. Throughout the film, the majestic oak tree with its intricate web of branches turns into an ever more enchanting presence, operating pictorially as a metaphor for the connection between young women and



**Figures 4 and 5:** Revisiting *Picnic at Hanging Rock*: the enchanted landscape of girlhood in *The Falling* (BBC Films) and *Little Black Spiders* (Versus Productions).

their privileged bond that transcends time and space. The opening shot's pastoral imagery of an idyllic autumnal landscape reflected in the lake and augmented by the emotional force of a young female singing voice and Wordsworth's romantic poetry soon gives way to a more sublime sensibility that threatens to engulf the spectator as the tree appears to take on a life of its own through fragmented, disorientating images of branches heightened by dramatic lighting. If the window figures as a trope of containment, barring the older embittered generation of women from direct contact with nature, the viewer is invited to share the girls' spiritual and bodily contact with the natural landscape. It is through a tactile and sensuous aesthetic that *The Falling* conveys Lydia's devastating experience of loss and longing for her best friend. Intimate close shots of the girl's face leaning against the oak tree, the movement of her fingers tracing the carved initials while calling out Abbie's name implicate the viewer in Lydia's rapturous experience.

In *17 filles* it is the beachscape and the sea that functions as a medium of connection between young women. Marking a departure from realism in visual and sound design is the girls' poetic bathing scene (revisited in the closing sequence) that stands out in terms of haptic and tactile imagery. The camera caresses the girls' skin as they move between and around one another, capturing the sense of shared pleasure and solidarity. The swimming, playing and being in water conveyed through movement, gestures and touch evokes a fluidity and freedom of desire while also inviting embodied spectatorship (Marks 2002).

In foregrounding nature as an empowering magical space, occupied and inhabited by girls who connect across time and space, all three films offer the viewer an experience akin to the feminine sublime that embraces excess and tries to find otherness without mastering or domesticating it. As Barbara Claire Freeman explains in her literary critique of the masculinist discourse of the sublime, the very features of the sublime moment such as rapture, merger and identification unsettle the notion of spectatorship in their ability to blur boundaries between subject and object, observer and observed, speaker and listener (1995). Significantly, this loss of control as effect of a sublime aesthetic resonates in the critical reception of *LBS*

and *17 filles* that abounds with references to the elusive 'atmospheric' quality of the films (described as uncanny, haunting, enigmatic, unnerving) whereas the frequent recourse to body metaphors in reviews of *The Falling* such as 'the film gets under your skin' (Steele 2015) and 'terrific film – brings a rush to your head' (Bradshaw 2014) highlights a visceral viewing experience and the destabilising force of the feminine sublime.

### Conclusion

According to Fiona Handyside, female filmmakers' privileging of gender appropriate girlhood narratives in the context of contemporary art cinema can be interpreted through a postfeminist lens as a strategy to carve out a modest daughterly space in a male-dominated and patriarchal auteur cinema/discourse. In her discussion of the complex negotiation of postfeminist art-house authorship in the 'unnamed' trilogies of Mia Hansen-Love and Sofia Coppola, Handyside points out that 'in both their auteur images and their films, (the female directors) remain contained within a daddy-identified girl world...offering the young female protagonists a space of experimentation and desire that remains contained within a patriarchal postfeminist culture.' (Handyside 2015).

If *17 filles*, *Little Black Spiders* and *The Falling* are still infused to a certain (and varying) degree by a postfeminist sensibility in terms of a focus on attractive young white female bodies and a privileged daughterly perspective (at the expense of mature women/mother figures), these European art films offer a more radical version of pregnancy than the individualist and educational scenarios of teenage pregnancy in popular culture in proposing a creative and utopian girlhood space by drawing on the format of the female ensemble drama and through a feminist reclamation of contagion as an empowering collective experience that allows women to relate directly to one another without mediation via the desire of (or for) a male subject.

Even though the political potential of female collectivity is contained through punitive endings and mother-daughter scenarios, I argue that this recuperative pull is surpassed by the affective force of aesthetic and generic elements that have the potential to mimic the role of the placenta, offering spectators an experience that

challenges the boundary between self and other, viewer and film. The flow of affective intensities circulating through multiple channels such as the acoustic register (girl talk, music, the female voice), pictorial landscape, bodies in movement, haptic and tactile imagery, camera work and visual/optical effects not only connects the young heroines with each other in intimate ways and with their natural surroundings but also transports the female viewer to a place of belonging that is particularly attractive for women as Monica Swindle reminds us, because of 'the boundary that is created around female bodies rather than between them...a collectivity that many women lament as lacking in womanhood replaced instead by horizontal hostility and competition' (2011).

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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