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THE CONTROVERSY AROUND TOMBOY: THE AVERSION TO GENDER THEORY IN FRENCH EDUCATION AND CULTURE

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Abstract: By analyzing the controversy around Céline Sciamma's *Tomboy* (2011) and the concept of gender theory, this paper discusses a demonstration of various levels of aversion to gender theory in current French political discourses as represented in the media in relation to same-sex marriage, the family and state education. The social institution of the family—whose functions encompass marriage and the rearing of children—is often considered a foundational unit of the state and civil society. After the family, the institution of education continues lessons of belonging, history, culture and nationality. In France, Sciamma's *Tomboy* repeatedly appeared in public debates related to gender theory, primary education and the family. In early 2014, parents received mobile text messages to participate in a collective action to keep their children out of school to protest curriculum which would allegedly teach gender theory and include *Tomboy* as part of the Ecole et Cinéma educational program. Former Minister of Education Vincent Peillon responded to this campaign by stating that the national school system is in no way teaching "gender theory". This film is approached as a polemical and subversive work in which gender is

represented and perceived as a construct and performative identity, challenging traditional institutions of gender logics and the institution of the family, and as a learning tool to discuss gender differences and questions of equality in school. Both *Tomboy* and gender theory are represented in manners that do not engage with either topics directly but instead push forward specific agendas of various political groups such as protection of family and programs of equality. This sense of aversion towards gender theory and works like *Tomboy* are a reaction to anxieties towards changing French national identity. *Tomboy* finds itself within these tensions in current French national identity through its representation of children, gender and sexuality. By considering the film itself and its reception in recent journalistic media discourse, I approach how *Tomboy* provides a reflection and response to such tensions and its significance as a tool for related debates.

Keywords: France, gender theory, *Tomboy*, culture, education, marriage, family, children, sexuality, national identity

I. INTRODUCTION

According to its website, in 2013, the French organization La Manif Pour Tous¹ planned in a back-to-school campaign called Vigî-Gender² that intended to stop the spread of “gender theory” in public school curriculum as they believed it to be potentially harmful to the construction of children’s identities as either masculine or feminine, as future men and women. To combat such a potential danger, they intended to launch such a “gender watch” campaign in all departments of France to keep “gender” outside of school. These watchdog committees were to surveil educational settings—especially nurseries and primary schools—to protect children and their supposed natural, inalienable right to become either men or women (and nothing else). La Manif Pour Tous asked that all those who suspected gender theory in schools to report such incidences to the organization in order to address them. They called upon the French people to stand up and protect the institution of marriage, genealogy, procreation and parenting as it is known and has been. They argued that the Mariage Pour Tous bill in favor of same-sex marriage would destroy the foundations of marriage as defined in civil code—making the roles of husband, father, wife, mother defunct.

In this paper, I consider some of the controversies that came about in France regarding “gender theory” as reported and represented in various international media outlets and the rising polemics around this term particularly in relation to Céline Sciamma’s *Tomboy* (2011). Gender theory has found itself not just a contested and controversial term and concept, as it is generally when confronted in academia, but one

being used to provoke political positions and actions in France. Figures on either side of the debate have demonstrated a sense of what I will be calling “aversion” towards gender theory. Aversion occurs when something arouses feelings of strong dislike. I argue this dislike stems not only from a misunderstanding, ignorance or avoidance of what gender theory signifies or proposes but from the idea that gender theory somehow threatens current systems rather than providing new interpretations or possibilities of these systems. Much of this is illustrated in the discussions around *Tomboy*, especially in regards to how this film may affect children and the nuclear family that is being argued as the foundation of French nation, identity and culture.

II. FAMILY AND NATION

The family has often been considered in studies of the nation as the household stage in which the nation is imagined and reproduced. In Western societies, it is often proposed as the foundational unit of civil society, state and nationhood (Collins 1998; McClintock 1993). The family is where individuals encounter their initial sense of belonging, identity, history and beliefs. It is a place of education prior to the institution of schooling. Before the child enters into civil institutions, the home and the domestic are supposed to be the places where the individual initially engages with the political regime in which they are situated, producing “gendered individuals whose activities, beliefs, and identities as women and men are part and parcel of the ways in which the nation is reproduced and its links to the state are re-envisioned” (Fouron and Schiller 2001: 542). The family is an important

figuration that provides and polices an individual's role and place in society and culture.

Although in recent times this has been changing, the nuclear family formation is still often referred to as the ideal model. It consists of a traditional, conventional figuration of father, mother and children with prescribed roles. The nuclear family has in the Western world seemed the norm but it has only been so within the last century. Nowadays, a rise of "alternative" families is seen in most of these Western societies that include families in which there is only one parent, same-sex parents, non-wedded parents, and children brought into the family through adoption and surrogacy. These non-normative, non-traditional families have at times caused a great stir in public debate (Cutas and Chan 2012). This is due to what could be considered "deviance" from what is considered "normal"—the nuclear, married, heteronormative family structure with children that has been regarded as the contributing and functional micro-unit of the nation (Collins 1998).

Just as the family represents and passes on values, histories, customs, and language, the family also passes on the notion of proper sex and sexuality. The normal, nuclear family is connected directly to sexuality. It relies on the importance of the "conjugal couple": it "is valorized as the ideal (or perhaps even the only legitimate) parental combination for the formation of families... it remains the ideal (or perhaps even the only legitimate) scenario in which sex should take place" (Cutas and Chan 2012: 2). With this in mind, the nuclear family is therefore the heterosexual family.

In contemporary France, the passing of same-sex marriage and potential future legislation in relation to

the legal recognition of such unions is causing great anxieties that have moved bodies out onto the streets, both in favor and in protest.

A. *French Families, French Politics*

According to the English publication *The Guardian*, leader of the Manif Pour Tous Ludovine de la Rochère stated that she was "horrified" by the promotion of the former minister of women's rights Najat Vallaud-Belkacem as the new Minister of Education (Penketh 2014). De la Rochère saw this move by the new French government as a "provocation" and called for all opponents of Vallaud-Belkacem's promotion to join the Manif Pour Tous protest on October 5th 2014. Several months earlier, French rightwing newspaper *Le Figaro* went so far as to call the new education minister the "Khmer Rose"—after the Khmer Rouge, the orchestrators of the Cambodian genocide in the 1970s—and accusing her of importing gender theory from the United States into France (Stainville 2014). This accusation stems from her support of an experimental educational reform launched late last year called l'ABCD de l'Egalité³. This program was introduced into 600 classes in 275 primary schools with the intent to overcome gender stereotyping and instill more self-confidence and less self-censorship to its students. Currently, it has been pulled to be reviewed for implementation in 2016. In French left leaning newspaper *Le Monde* this move was called a surrender from the left to the demands of the right (Storti 2014).

Although in the past two years various debates and actions have been occurring around gender, family and education, February 2014 proved to be a month filled with what I call examples of aversion in the

political public stage in France. It appeared to be ignited by the planning and execution of the *Manif Pour Tous* demonstration early that month. The ever-so-active *Manif Pour Tous* held a large demonstration on February 2nd to oppose the passing of the bill of same-sex marriage and newly proposed measures to update “family law” to offer reproductive assistance to same-sex couples. Not only did rightwing political parties and conservative and fundamental Catholic associations such as *Civitas* participate but also other non-Christian religious groups, rightwing student groups, and traditional and extremist nationalists were marching outside in protest. On this day, the streets of Paris became a large political stage in which the people rallied together not to demand change but to demonstrate their reluctance towards it. People demanded a defense of marriage as it was defined and known before the passing of the bill and to “protect” the institution of the family. There was what seemed to be a solidarity between groups that typically would not gather together but were now rallying behind the opposition to same-sex marriage and changes in family law: not only Christian and Catholic groups, but Islamic groups were also present, particularly the most traditional and fundamentalist variety. Nationalists of various degrees also came out to call for a protection of French identity and culture, to keep out foreign and outside influences. While their slogans, chants and posters communicated their disdain and disapproval of the passing of this bill and future related reforms, they were also consistently warning of the introduction of an ideology into the French educational and cultural spheres: gender theory. Many argue that gender theory would erase sexual distinction, a supposed basis for identity that begins in the family and then extends to the nation.

Gender theory is not something that is typically seen debated outside of academia. It is generally difficult to define, but it is particularly so within French language, in which “genre” and “gender” share the French word *genre*. Outside of interested circles, it is typically an unfamiliar idea, a very new concept. Gender theory can take up various manifestations and conceptualizations depending on discipline, institution and philosophy, but generally it has been based upon the idea that the differences between the genders are not linked to biology but are constructed, produced, and/or performed. When the *l'ABCD de l'Egalité* program was being implemented, its curriculum against gender stereotyping was translated rather brutishly and problematically by those in opposition to it—particularly those of the political right and far-right. Certain groups who opposed this educational reform were publicly announcing that school teachers were teaching boys to be girls and girls to be boys (Bamat 2014). Some went so far as to say that sexuality was being discussed with these primary schoolchildren, including how to masturbate (Cross 2014). There were even actions for parents to keep children out of school for a day as a protest to the newly implemented program and its promotion of gender theory (De Bode 2014). Schools reported enough absences that government officials had to come out and publicly address these false and often ridiculous accusations. For example, former Minister of Education Vincent Peillon was reported by international news television station France24 as saying: “The national school system is in no way teaching gender theory. It teaches equality from all points of view, and in particular, equality between women and men” (Bamat 2014). This separation of

equality from gender theory only confuses and disregards what could be a more informative and progressive discussion of gender theory.

Feminist philosopher Judith Butler, most known for her work on gender performativity, has become an often referenced figure during these gender theory controversies. Butler has recently become both famous and infamous in France due to her work published over two decades ago on the subject. Cited as a founder of gender theory, in these contexts Butler is often referred to superficially, more for argumentative ammunition than as a source of knowledge or as a reference to discuss what actually is gender theory. I do not intend to discuss what Butler proposes or argues in regards to gender theory, but instead to point out a very illuminating observation she had on her current celebrity and notoriety around the subject. When asked by American publication *The Boston Globe*, Butler declined to comment on the demonstrations and protests occurring in France but suggested that “fundamentally, the fear that propels these protests... is the fear of disorder” and the “absence of rules” (Zaretsky 2014). Inline with Butler, this aversion to gender theory is not necessarily grounded in a real debate about what it entails or represents but rather a means to be dealing with an underlying anxiety apparent in the current status of French national identity as understood through the family.

This backlash towards what is supposedly gender theory comes forth as a desperate response to protecting this particular family unit. The family can be understood as perhaps one of the last spaces in contemporary France where traditionalist, conservative, religious, and rightwing sectors have

held on to some power. Although this could be seen as a minority, this minority is still in fear that without its hold on the family, French identity as such is in danger of being consumed by “non-French” (i.e. immigrant, Islamic, radical, American, queer) visions that are altering institutions of sex, family, and education. Many of these visions cross one another in Sciamma’s film *Tomboy* and its position within French education and culture.

III. SCIAMMA’S *TOMBOY* IN FRENCH SCHOOL AND SOCIETY

The attack of gender theory and its apparent threat took various arenas in France but it is especially well illustrated by the controversy surrounding the film *Tomboy*. On February 19th 2014, French television channel Arte aired *Tomboy* against the public demands of Civitas who claimed the film to be propaganda in favor of gender theory. Civitas called for the prohibition of *Tomboy* via an online petition arguing its screening would promote an ideological position regarding gender identity much like the one apparently found in the l’ABCD de l’Egalité. Although the film aired with little to no major reaction from opponents, the petition took up enough media attention as to cause some public debate. But this is an ongoing story. Two weeks prior to the February 2nd Manif Pour Tous demonstration, parents received mobile text messages to support a collective action to keep their children out of school to protest gender theory and related curriculum such as the inclusion of *Tomboy* as part of the Ecole et Cinéma⁴ educational program (Bamat 2014; Eads 2014; Stille 2014). The film is treated as a propaganda piece that would potentially instill the idea into the young students’

mind that they can freely choose to be boys or girls regardless of sex—what gender theory is understood by the opponents of the film as promoting.

Tomboy is an award-winning French independent film that was released and distributed three years before it began to be considered controversial in these debates around marriage and family. The film's narrative centers around a ten-year-old girl named Laure who pretends to be and passes as a boy after moving to a new town. The title of the film itself provides a sense of foreshadowing of what the story will entail. Yet, the story sets itself up to not only demonstrate how gender can be understood (through dress, preferences, interactions with others, etc.) as performance and choice but also how it limits and restrains.

After being recognized as a boy by the neighborhood children, Laure from then on introduces herself to her new friends as the new boy in town, Mikäel. Until we are shown otherwise, this character is gendered masculine in various stereotypical ways. From her sporty dress, short hair, and wanting her bedroom walls painted blue, Laure is not Laure but initially an unnamed boy. It is only when Lisa asks for his name do we know him as Mikäel.

The audience comes to know, from scenes at home, that Mikäel is Laure. If one understood what is meant by "tomboy", one already had a clue about the film's protagonist. If not, one is meant to be surprised. This sense of ambiguity (and fluidity) is what drives the film forward. The discovery of Laure being female (and connected to femininity) in the narrative happens soon after first meeting and playing with the neighborhood children. Who we are introduced to as Mikäel is with younger sister Jeanne in a bathtub

bathing and playing together. They are singing songs, roleplaying about being movie stars and make-believing with toys. Their mother yells from another room to make sure they wash their hair. After doing so, she comes in to get them out of the bath. She first brings a towel and dries Jeanne. Then we hear her say, "Laure! Get out of the bathtub!" Standing up, Laure's body is shown naked after a bath. Laure wraps a towel around herself. Stepping out of the tub and drying herself, she looks towards the floor and then to the mirror. The camera cuts away.

Laure's thin, pre-pubescent, androgynous body and short hair are now seen alongside her sex. Up to this point, Mikäel was just another little boy. From driving with her father, to the way she moves, to the contrast her appearance has against her highly feminized little sister Jeanne, Laure's ambiguity makes it possible to recognize Mikäel.

Many readings can be made of Mikäel in regards to identity, sexuality, and adolescence but it is important to consider the film's title. Mikäel is actually a "tomboy", a girl who exhibits behaviors and style of a boy. With this in mind, Mikäel is not a figure that necessarily embodies notions of homosexuality, transexuality, transidentity or intersexuality (even though Laure seems perhaps to take tomboy-ness a step further). By using the term tomboy, Laure is understood as a female who does not relate to her gender. She prefers to do as boys do. She decides to perform as her preferred gender and fittingly changes her name to do so. Being Mikäel, Laure is able to experience as fully as possible what it is to be her gender preference—but keeps it a secret because something does seem "wrong" about it. Her secret only goes so far. She is made to abide by the gender binary,

to assume her assigned gender as based on her sex, towards the conclusion of the film. Laure's family—particularly her pregnant mother—and summer's end limit her performance. She cannot continue it. School will begin soon.

There are various scenes of outing in this film that in fact reinforce the notion that boys are boys and girls are girls. When Jeanne finds out, she understands something serious is happening but goes along with the secret. When their mother finds, she cries and even slaps Laure. The bathtub scene, the scene of narrative outing before the characters find out, is when the spectator becomes aware of what Laure has done and can have their personal reactions. Because Laure is a child, the film does not delve into what was the reasoning or plan behind her actions. Laure just does it. I believe it is unnecessary to know why or how Laure came up with this idea. It has more to do with some desire to be who she wishes to be. Regardless, by the end of the film, the sense of policing is accepted.

Just as various groups in France are using gender theory to promote their own positions on the subject, this film has also been approached superficially. In many ways, this film provides a beautiful narrative of the problems of growing up and figuring out who one wants to be. It concentrates on the perspective of the children characters and does not try to explain why Mikäel, his sister or friends do what they do. In this way, everyone participates in Mikäel's performance in various degrees. However, these children also repeatedly demonstrate that the gender status quo overrules one's agency in this process even when family and school are not present or involved. Before Laure is outed to and policed by her mother, the film repeatedly demonstrates gendered spaces and their boundaries. From the football games,

going to the bathroom outdoors, playing with make up, and kissing, these children are aware of how boys and girls should be.

As Mikäel, our protagonist spits, plays football, even takes off his shirt during sports matches and goes swimming with his friends. The performance is done so well, Mikäel often is able to beat the boys at their own games (he fights and wins in defense of his sister) and even his apparent failures as a boy are seen as other issues (his friends think he wet himself when in fact he was hiding his body while urinating in the woods; he initially says he likes to watch rather than play football). Mikäel carefully observes the neighborhood boys to be able to fit in, mimicking their spitting and scratching. Lisa and Mikäel also share a romantic connection that culminates in kissing between the two characters, a desire other boys in the group have. Lisa is unaware of Mikäel's sex but is attracted to him because he is different than the other boys. The film demonstrates this gender binary in contradictory ways—it shows that there is equality since Laure succeeds as Mikäel but at the same time this equality is based on Mikäel's performance.

In the film's concluding scenes, Laure is traumatically revealed and outed to her friends and their parents. School will start and Laure cannot continue being Mikäel. Her mother believes the best solution to go to all his friends, to apologize and let them know. When the neighborhood gang finds out, they have to make sure of Laure's sex. They hold him down, then make Lisa check since she is a girl. They remark that if Laure is a girl that Lisa is disgusting for kissing her. She unquestionably agrees and submits to having to affirm Laure's sex by looking down her shorts. She does so. We are not shown the group's reaction but instead are shown Laure sitting

down with her head between her knees alone in the woods.

The final scene of the film is a reunion of Laure and Lisa, in which Lisa asks Laure her name as she did in the beginning of the film and she replies with "Laure" and a small smile. Although by the conclusion Mikäel must return to being Laure, this film is still considered almost as gender theory propaganda by its opponents. It is discussed as a text that will teach children how to choose sex and gender, which is considered unnatural and even dangerous for them. If one really understands the film, Laure's return to Laure is actually a story about how one cannot be outside of the heteronormative gender binary.

Although the film does contain a sensitive narrative, it is a very moving and emotional work that is beautifully shot with terrific actors, particularly the children. This is a main reason why this film was chosen for the *Ecole et Cinéma* curriculum in France. *Ecole et Cinéma* itself was not up for debate here, but the inclusion of *Tomboy* in its catalogue stirred up controversy. According to the catalogue, this film is intended for primary school viewers from ages 8 to 11, through grade CE2 (Cours élémentaire deuxième année) to CM2 (Cours moyen deuxième année). Those opposing the film consider it as inappropriate for this age group. Mikäel's ability to pass in this fictional work is considered threatening, and even more so because it is a cinematic work meant to be shown to primary school students. Little attention is actually made that Laure is only able to be Mikäel outside of the family and outside of school, outside of the spaces that are intended to rear children as citizens.

Although former Minister of Education Vincent Peillon stated the school system "in no way teaching gender theory", he worked, alongside Vallaud-Belkacem, in developing l'ABCD de l'Égalité which is being blamed

for indoctrinating primary school students with gender theory. With such a polemic on these issues, it is surprising to hear opposing sides often saying the same thing as one another. One side opposes gender theory, the other one is no way involved with it. Both demonstrate an aversion to it on the grounds that France has other values.

IV. AVERSION TO GENDER THEORY

As mentioned previously, aversion is a strong dislike, an opposition, repugnance, a hostility towards something. The aversion to gender theory here seems to be generally felt by all sectors of the French political public but for different reasons. For some, it is to protect certain institutions of family and sexuality and their related roles. For others, it is to demonstrate their allegiance to the state and the nation—for Peillon to support gender theory would, in his mind, not be the best way to support gender equality, something his government supports. He stated that keeping genders as they are allowed for the greater ease of regulating the equality between them and to address each genders' needs.

Wendy Brown (2006) in *Regulating Aversion*, argues that dislike, disapproval, and regulation lurk at the heart of tolerance, a hallmark of modern day liberalism. Tolerance is part of the achievement of the modern Western nations and societies, as a means to decreasing conflict through divisive lines. It began with a means to approach religious conflict but we now see it as a way to defuse conflict between cultures, races, ethnicities and sexualities. Brown argues that tolerance is in fact a way of regulating the sense of dislike and aversion of the *other* without

actually having to deal with it. To tolerate, not to accept or affirm but to allow under certain conditions, such as legal conditions, what is undesired, abject and deviant. It is part of how we in modern times have negotiated with certain modes of identity and citizenship. In the case of France, tolerance is being discussed in similar ways but all seem to be pointing to a crisis of national identity. The idea to keep things as they are is to support tolerance—same-sex couples can be together but they cannot represent traditional marriage or have access to traditional families. France as a nation supports equality but there is a resistance towards making differences equal.

Tomboy is being understood in various arenas as a subversive text in which gender is being articulated as a construct, an identity, a performance that points to destabilized notions of normality and conventionality. If this little girl Laure is able to pass and be Mikäel, it is because certain systems and codes of gender are not as fixed and stable as once believed. The film becomes in part an example of the instability of once unquestioned institution of gender, and therefore sexuality and family. Nonetheless, by its end, *Tomboy* only affirms these rigid roles and their necessity in other systems and institutions such as family, school, and therefore society as a whole.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This perceived danger by oppositional groups and even the government, of the promotion, in any degree, of gender theory in French national education and culture is a reflection of the current state of affairs in France. The focus on gender theory appears to be hiding what is a greater problem. By focusing on issues such as the family and same-sex marriages, it

seems to tune out other anxieties that French national identity is experiencing. To attack a film such as *Tomboy* is not necessarily about the threat this film poses to the development of gender identities in children but rather that times are changing.

With such a strong focus on the preservation of traditional modes of masculinity, femininity and the nuclear family there is an attempt to preserve and protect the nation. Current affairs in France have demonstrated that the country has been suffering economically, with rising unemployment rates and declining industrial productivity. There is an anxious need to preserve what is closer to home, to what is domestic: the family. As mentioned, families have often been considered the building blocks of nations. To have little Laure be Mikäel and to present this as an adolescent narrative only further complicates these traditional modes and roles and therefore presents an unprecedented threat. Children are supposed to be receivers of these constructed family roles and to comply to these proper, prescribed roles at home and at school, not to make it up and experience it on their own. This is all part of a greater narrative of instability of the nation. If one sees *Tomboy* until its conclusion and reflects on what the story actually represents, one knows that the normative and conventional is what is in fact reinstated.

ENDNOTES

- [1] La Manif Pour Tous stands for "Demonstration for All", a play on words off of Mariage Pour Tous which translates to "Marriage for All", the campaign supporting the same-sex marriage bill in 2013. La Manif Pour Tous is a group of organizations responsible for the majority of large demonstrations that opposed this bill and currently opposes gender theory, adoptive and procreative assistance for same-sex couples.

- [2] Vigi-Gender can be understood as "Gender Watch".
- [3] L'ABCD de l'Egalité translates to "the ABCs of Equality". It is also related to one of the three pillars of the French national slogan "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité" (Freedom, Equality, Brotherhood). It intends to address issues of equality and to educate students on what equality means and what it entails. In my understanding, it becomes evident that the backlash towards the project demonstrates something inartistically problematic to this motto. The importance of brotherhood and liberty seems to trump equality. Men should be men. One should be free to decide what their children learn. Equality is taking the backseat due to fears around gender and family.
- [4] Ecole et Cinéma translated to "School and Cinema". According to their website, the Ecole et Cinéma is a program set up to allow students to experience the cinema by engaging with films that are selected for their artistic quality and their ability to excite and stir up questions. The films chosen come from a national catalog collectively developed by teachers, researchers and filmmakers, and the program has been running for the past fifteen years with 17.6% of primary schools participating in the program.
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