



“On ne peut rien contre une fille qui rêve”: Teenage Pregnancy as Maternal Empowerment or Maternal Entrapment in *17 Filles*

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ABSTRACT

17 Filles (2011), the first feature film of French directing sisters Delphine and Muriel Coulin, draws inspiration from a 2008 incident in Gloucester, Massachusetts, in which 18 high-school girls committed to a “pregnancy pact”, with the aim of conceiving almost simultaneously. The Coulins transpose these events to Lorient in northern France, and the film follows a group of *lycéennes* who agree to get pregnant at the same time, in a bid to reclaim control over their bodies and their futures. This article examines the ways in which the pregnancy plot of *17 Filles* seeks to interrupt and transgress the trajectory towards “successful” womanhood prescribed by society for young girls. The article further interrogates the positioning of motherhood in the film as an act of corporeal empowerment and female emancipation. In so doing, the authors problematise the feminist undertones of the film by exposing the extent to which the plot, at times, becomes entangled in the norms of the very institution that it seeks to subvert: namely, patriarchal motherhood.

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As Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones remark in their introduction to *International Cinema and the Girl*, if we want to examine the legacies of the various waves of feminism on gender roles in society, then it is perhaps towards the figure of the girl, and in particular the girl on screen, that we must direct our attention (3). Representations of girlhood in the mediascape have much to offer, they argue, to discussions of contemporary female subjectivity and to broader analyses of female empowerment and agency. A similar observation is made by Anita Harris in her study of girlhood in the twenty-first century; she argues that “young women are being constructed as a vanguard of new subjectivity” (1), and therefore considers young womanhood a central topic for analysis in current debates about society and culture (13). In this respect, the 2011 film *17 Filles* (dir. Coulin and Coulin) makes a valuable contribution to representations of girlhood, subjectivity and agency, as it focuses attention on a group of teenage girls who determine to take charge of their impending womanhood, and their place in society, through a reclaiming of the female body on their own terms – in this case, in a deliberate reconfiguration of “acceptable” reproductive activity.

In an interview with Thibaut Grégoire for *Camera Obscura*, the directors themselves echo Handyside and Taylor-Jones’s consideration of girlhood as the point where the multiple (and sometimes conflicting) legacies of feminism are made visible, describing the girls in *17 Filles* as “les héritières des grandes féministes” of the Second Wave – an inheritance they see as transmitted specifically through the girls’ agency over motherhood. In this article, we will examine the ways in which *17 Filles* can be read as radically subversive of the expected norms of girlhood, and disruptive to the socially prescribed linear trajectory towards womanhood. We will argue that teenage pregnancy in the film can be interpreted as an overt display of resistance to the institutions through which these norms are enforced, from education authorities to motherhood itself. This display is all the more provocative for its visible articulation of a quality that is both nurtured in and required of young girls – that is to say, precocious maternal desire – expressed at the “wrong” time, revealing the extent to which this supposedly natural instinct continues to be highly regulated. However, this welcome interrogation of the way motherhood is influenced by both patriarchal conceptions of femininity and neoliberal constructions of “successful” life trajectories for girls remains in tension with the film’s partial reproduction of troubling ideologies of motherhood, which ultimately undermines its own feminist efforts. With this in mind, we will also take care to expose and dissect the more problematic aspects of the film’s narrative, whereby the girls – in spite of their potentially liberating transgressions – are inadvertently drawn into a quagmire of maternal myths and restrictive expectations.

BACKGROUND TO 17 FILLES

17 Filles is the first feature film of French directing sisters Delphine and Muriel Coulin. As noted by Amanda Hess, the plot was inspired by a real-life event that took place in a Gloucester, Massachusetts high school in 2008, which saw 18 teenage girls commit to a “pregnancy pact” with the aim of conceiving almost simultaneously. In the case of *17 Filles*, the narrative is transposed to the sleepy seaport of Lorient in south-west Brittany, home town of the Coulin sisters. In her 2019 analysis of topography and luminosity in film, Handyside describes Lorient – a town razed to the ground by Allied bombings during the Second World War and later rebuilt in a rather austere, industrial architectural style – as a space of economic decline and lost futures (127). It is against this background of decrepitude and paralysis that a group of 17 fresh-faced and energetic *lycéennes* decide to take hold of their future and literally breathe life back into their stale surroundings through procreation, much to the outrage of their parents and teachers. In the face of strong opposition from the adults around them, the girls declare their commitment not just to carrying their pregnancies to term but to each other, promising to raise their children together in a maternal utopia where chores will be shared, personal freedom will be protected, and outside disapproval will have no bearing. This vision never comes to pass, as the unity required to make it a reality cannot be maintained: the trust between the girls is shattered when the pregnancy of one girl is revealed to be fake; and after Camille, the first girl to become pregnant and the instigator of the pregnancy pact, loses her baby in a car accident and leaves Lorient, the remaining girls are shown to have returned to their respective families to raise their children.

It is possible to approach *17 Filles* from a number of critical perspectives. Judith Franco examines the way female communication and relations are enhanced by the film's art-house aesthetics, and proposes a reading of the girls' pregnancy pact as a "liminal model of connection between girls in the face of limited opportunities" (2). The film's visual aesthetics are also considered by Handyside in her above-mentioned analysis of the politics of place in *17 Filles*, where – drawing on Angela McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009) – she makes intriguing connections between the light-suffused cinematography and the postfeminist "luminosity" of the young, white and educated girls in question, who are presented as glowing beneficiaries of the struggle for gender equality, with the freedom now to "have it all". We similarly identify elements of a "postfeminist sensibility" in *17 Filles*, in particular a "preoccupation with the body" and "a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment" – both of which are, in this case, mediated through female reproductive capacity (Gill 149). In what follows, we will plot the film's positioning of teen motherhood along the twin axes of maternal empowerment and maternal entrapment, and examine it as a representation of the complexities and ambiguities of feminism in the current moment.

A MOTHER'S PLACE IS IN THE RESISTANCE: MATERNAL EMPOWERMENT

At first glance, *17 Filles* offers a blatant challenge to the negative stereotypes of irresponsibility and naivety which, as Wendy Luttrell remarks in her study of teenage pregnancy in the media, tend to dominate on-screen representations of this particular phenomenon. The film appears to align teenage pregnancy with free will, knowledge and emancipation: apart from Camille, whose pregnancy results from a contraception mishap, the other girls voluntarily choose to become pregnant once they have discussed it with each other, and are initially prepared to embrace (rather than resignedly accept) the consequences of their actions. Indeed, a sense of awe surrounds the pregnant girls at school: they strut around the *lycée* with their bumps on display, as classmates (in particular the boys) gasp, more out of reverence than horror. There is an outright rejection in *17 Filles* of what Kyra Clarke terms the "shame script" in relation to classic representations of teenage pregnancy – the girls resist the humiliation which might otherwise have been projected on to them, and overtly disrupt societal expectations by appearing proud and confident (261). Consequently, the film appears to overturn the broader narrative of failure commonly associated with teenage pregnancy, which, as Kyla Ellis-Sloan points out, is deeply bound up in contemporary neoliberal ideals that portray underage parents as not having made the "right" social or economic choices.

Teenage mothers in particular find themselves subjected to even harsher criticism in this regard for their deviation from what Angela McRobbie terms the "top girl" script – a preferred (if not prescribed) life-course path set out for girls in contemporary neoliberal societies in which feminist gains have been co-opted for capitalist profit, and ideas about womanhood are reshaped "to fit with new or emerging (neoliberalised) social and economic arrangements" ("TOP GIRLS?" 721). Girls and women are expected to take advantage of the education that movements for gender equality have secured for them, go forth into the world of work with a can-do and competitive attitude, retreat briefly from economic activity to have children, and then submit themselves to decades of juggling economic and reproductive labour while being grateful for "having it all" – in short, to be a "highly efficient assemblage for productivity" (McRobbie, "TOP GIRLS?" 722). This "new sexual contract", and the "middle class respectable status" it promises, depends upon girls' "refusal of early motherhood" (McRobbie, "TOP GIRLS?" 731–32). As McRobbie observes, girls are "now more harshly judged for inappropriate reproductive activity", as they are seen to have wilfully rejected the benefits of the "top girl" script ("TOP GIRLS?" 732).

If the "top girl" script is therefore simply another means of reinforcing gender norms to suit a particular economic and patriarchal social structure, under the guise of empowerment, then rejecting this prescribed trajectory of girlhood can be encoded as a subversive act. Such subversion is at the heart of *17 Filles*, as the girls deliberately opt to interrupt their studies to become underage, single mothers. Their refusal to stick to the "top girl" trajectory of school-work-motherhood marks them out as disobedient (if not ungrateful) subjects and draws the disapprobation of their parents and teachers, whose reprimands and despair again invoke the discourse of failure: they exhort the girls to abandon their pact in order not to throw away

their lives, and in doing so reveal both their deep attachment to the “normal” timeline for female activity in the reproductive and economic spheres, and the extent to which it has become embedded into social norms. Of particular concern for these figures of authority is the sheer number of girls who have entered the pregnancy pact; in this local school, a group of 17 pregnant girls certainly stands out. In a telling scene, a journalist covering the pregnancy pact describes it as “une crise”. This particular term speaks to the implicit danger of what Kathryn Rowe Karlyn describes as “Girl World” – that “liminal space between childhood and adulthood where girls rule” (78). Girl World may be presented as a space of superficiality and silliness – think *Clueless* (1995) and *Mean Girls* (2004) – but it is also where girls begin to explore their own desires for “power and other pleasures forbidden to girls and women”, to test the limits of the bonds they can sense around them (Rowe Karlyn 78). Girl World is a place of disruptive “unruliness”, itself “implicitly feminist because it destabilises patriarchal norms”; girls must therefore be regulated, disciplined and tamed before their unruliness becomes too powerful (Rowe Karlyn 11). Girls are taught to desire (heterosexual) relationships, but always to be wary of their emotional, reputational and physical consequences; they are taught to present themselves as desirable subjects but not to display desire themselves (Gill 151–52). In *17 Filles*, the girls’ unruliness goes far beyond experimenting with fashion, dating unsuitable boys, or even petty thieving: they have chosen to skip whole “steps” on their journey to womanhood, in a way that visibly disturbs the social order and its accompanying norms, and that cannot be regulated by outside forces (because, as the film reminds us, French law stipulates that no minor may be forced to have an abortion against their will).

The irony that the girls’ rebellion consists in actively choosing something they are taught to desire (motherhood), but just at the “wrong time”, further exposes the ways in which motherhood continues to be highly regulated in contemporary society. Postfeminist interpretations of motherhood would categorise it as simply one more area in which educated, successful, liberated women may exercise their freedom to choose; but when girls do choose it outside the narrow temporal confines laid down by the “top girl” script, they are harshly criticised. And yet the promises of this script seem to be an illusion in Lorient: jobs are scarce, and the only apparent career paths are those leading to the army for men, and to unemployment or low-paid work for women. By contrast, motherhood appears to lead to a socially respectable status and a regular income, via the generous French state payments for maternity leave and child support – which are, it must be acknowledged, deeply imbricated in the pronatalist tenets of the French state and thus not a wholly unproblematic influence on what appears to be the girls’ “alternative”, freely assumed choice (a point to which we will return later). In what might be read as a proactive stance against the stagnation that seems to await them after school, the girls in *17 Filles* approach motherhood as an economic proposition rather than something they are “called” to do; one scene shows them clustered around a laptop, calculating their potential income before and after the birth (560 euros per month before the birth of the baby and 748 euros after). There is no mention of any of them working alongside being a mother, apart from perhaps returning to school to complete their education. That they do not see motherhood as an end to but only a pause in their studies again rejects the script of teenage pregnancy as only ever being equated with failure; that they do not see it solely as a “calling” undermines the assumption of a maternal instinct inherent to all those with female reproductive organs.

In a similar vein to differentialist feminist thinkers such as Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, for whom motherhood is a potential locus of female empowerment, *17 Filles* depicts the maternal as something that imbues women with agency – and indeed the girls move into a position of control when they become pregnant. Despite their utmost determination, there is very little the adults can do to reverse the situation; and there is a sense of unbreakable solidarity between the girls, who go everywhere together and refer to themselves as “les inséparables”. Their unity as much as their number appears to deeply trouble the adults around them – a microcosmic vision perhaps of the way strong female bonds are feared for their capacity to empower women in new ways of living. Women who are seen to be too close to other women have long been stigmatised as unnatural, witchy, lesbian; women are instead encouraged to see other women as competition, as the enemy, and to hand-wring over the exclusivity, meanness, even the potential criminality of “girl gangs” (Chesney-Lind and Eliason). By contrast, this “girl gang” appears to be in a position of both power and

positive transformation, one only emphasised by the film's apparent keenness to present the pregnancies as a reclamation of the female body itself. If the postfeminist landscape is one that is preoccupied with the body and mandates "constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling [...] in order to conform to ever-narrower judgements of female attractiveness", girlhood is the training ground for this obsession, where the injunctions of diet culture and the threats of rape culture begin to make themselves heard (Gill 149). In an early scene in *17 Filles*, the girls are shown in their underwear outside a classroom in the corridor of the *lycée*, each waiting to undergo an individual medical examination, during which their bodies will be measured and scrutinised. In another scene, those same bodies are seen being timed as they jog around the school; the sense of unwillingness is palpable in many of the girls, some of whom escape to the beach and hide there for part of the run. The school is a place where the girls' bodies are monitored and regulated; when they are outside its confines they are free to lay claim to their corporeality, to inscribe their ownership on their bodies, in expressions of agency that range from illicit smoking to deliberately seeking impregnation. The pregnant body is subsequently returned to the *lycée* where its heavy, swollen contours stand in stark contrast to the slim, lithe and rigorously disciplined female bodies supervised by the school authorities at the beginning of the film. The pregnant shape, therefore, becomes in and of itself a threat to the order of the *lycée*. This is made clear in the scene of the class photo, where the photographer is visibly uncomfortable with the obviously pregnant teenagers, and struggles to position them in the shot – or, more accurately, to hide their protruding bellies.

This reclaiming of the female body through the maternal in *17 Filles* extends well beyond the rebellious act of becoming pregnant, as the girls engage in transgressive behaviour throughout their pregnancies. When pregnant, the girls pay no heed to the rules and regulations about how to conduct oneself "properly" while carrying a child, as dictated by master narratives of maternity that delineate appropriate behaviour for mothers in increasingly narrow terms. Indeed, as Élisabeth Badinter remarks, pregnancy is so tightly governed in contemporary culture and society that "être enceinte n'est pas loin d'entrer en religion" (100). However, the girls in *17 Filles* are frequently seen smoking, consuming alcohol (in one party scene, Camille is seen drinking directly from a litre bottle of vodka) and partaking in vigorous and, at times, dangerous physical activities – for example, kicking around a burning football and recklessly diving into a swimming pool. The latter incident is particularly revelatory of the control that they retain over their bodies while pregnant, as it takes place during an antenatal swimming class where, at first, all their movements are closely monitored by an instructor. They are navigating the pool slowly and gently when, all of a sudden, another of the pregnant girls jumps in jubilantly from the side – and once again, the order that the adult authorities have tried to maintain is dismantled. Also of note in relation to this new-found corporeal agency gained during pregnancy (which, we should add, is most often seen as a time when the female body is "out of control", in a state of hormonal and physical disturbance) is the way in which the girls continue to position themselves as sexual beings after they become pregnant. They remain confident in their ability to arouse sexual interest and are shown kissing boys during the various party scenes. In this respect, the traditional notion of the pregnant woman as both asexual and sexually out-of-bounds is reversed and the master narrative of maternity as a state of "purity" for women is challenged.

Perhaps the most subversive and progressive aspect of the maternal narrative in *17 Filles*, however, stems from the girls' dream of an alternative form of mothering outside the nuclear family, which emerges during one of their many discussions together as a group – conversations that in and of themselves are evocative of the feminist solidarity and collectivism that Caroline Sweetman sees as enabling women to "take courses of action that would not be available to them as individuals" (218). The girls' vision is founded on their desire for an all-female community, in which mothering would be a shared activity among friends (challenging, we suggest, stereotypes of the solipsistic female adolescent). This imagined caregiving cooperative reconfigures traditional and heteropatriarchal relationality: the girls bravely envision an alternative form of kinship in a process that Judith Halberstam would describe as a "forgetting of the family", in favour of a creative system of relations outside normative societal structures (317). In this new relational paradigm proposed by *17 Filles*, female friendship and lineage are privileged, and presented as a means of rendering motherhood less oppressive.

Reflecting on the absence of father figures in the film as a whole, in this maternal utopia there is no place for fathers; in the few instances where we know who the father of one of the babies is, it is clear that he will not be involved in the raising of the child – as is the girls' wish. The teenage boys function as little more than sperm donors in the film, with one of them even being paid fifty euros to “do the deed” (in the case of Clémentine, the last of the girls to become pregnant). In contrast to the portrayals of *Girl World* in films from the 1990s and early 2000s examined by Rowe Karlyn, the world of these girls is neither “daddy-identified” nor even desirous of male presence; instead, they dream of a world beyond patriarchal influence, where female solidarity reigns (98).

However, the power and origin of that solidarity appears limited to themselves: at one point in the film, one of the girls states triumphantly that their mothering will be improved because of the reduced age gap between them and their offspring, apparently meaning that they will understand their children better; and yet their impending motherhood does not improve their relationships with or understanding of their own mothers. Indeed, there are few examples of positive intergenerational connections in this film, as mothers and daughters seem at odds with one another – an indication, perhaps, of the disconnect between different generations of women (and different waves of feminism) which are common in depictions of *Girl World*, and of the film's ambivalent if not contradictory attitude towards motherhood itself, to which we now turn (Rowe Karlyn 11–12).

FALLING PREY TO THE INSTITUTION: MATERNAL ENTRAPMENT

Reading the maternal narrative in *17 Filles* as one that has the potential to subvert societal norms concerning motherhood and to liberate women and their bodies, however, is a limited and perhaps superficial interpretation. Further probing reveals that the representation of maternity in the film corresponds just as much, if not more, to the master narrative of motherhood from which it purportedly deviates. Throughout the film, a number of maternal myths are perpetuated that are deleterious to an empowered experience of mothering.

First, as observed by Mona Chollet, the glamorisation of the expectant body in *17 Filles* is striking. This, in turn, closely correlates with what Imogen Tyler refers to as the neoliberal cultural phenomenon of the “pregnant beauty” (22). As Tyler explains, this trend privileges a perfect shape during pregnancy and thus idealises and commodifies the maternal, while simultaneously presenting it as a site of freedom – in sync with the regulation of female subjects through the postfeminist mechanics of personal choice. In *17 Filles*, not only are all the girls conventionally attractive – to the extent that a reviewer for *Le Monde* remarked that “le casting a exclu les disgracieuses” (Sotinel) – but the camera repeatedly lingers on their bumps, fetishising them and their neat protrusion from an otherwise slender body. The girls incarnate the glamorous pregnant body so often encountered on the covers of women's magazines but which is almost impossible to achieve in reality, generating immense pressure and shame for women whose pregnant forms do not adhere to this unreachable ideal – and yet it is notable that their success in achieving this “goal” comes at the price of failing to be a “top girl”.

Furthermore, not only is pregnancy depicted as a state of glowing health and beauty in this film – in line with narratives that frame maternity as a time of positive transformation in a woman's life, marking her passage from girlhood to womanhood – it is also presented to the spectator as, for the most part, an entirely unproblematic biological event. The girls appear to sail through their pregnancies with very little difficulty, apart from one instance of mild uninterest in food. Any medical issues that do arise – such as a problem with the placenta and light bleeding – are quickly resolved, and the pregnancy resumes its normal course. The risk of sexually transmitted diseases is equally brushed aside, with only one character making any reference to it whatsoever. In this respect, *17 Filles* can be starkly contrasted to the 2011 film *Un heureux événement* (dir. Rémi Bezançon), which gives a much more honest (if humorous) account of the uncomfortable, inconvenient and indeed frightening effects of pregnancy on the maternal body. The airbrushing of the realities of pregnancy in *17 Filles* merely perpetuates images of maternity as a natural, effortless event which women (in this case girls) are “born to do”. Furthermore, the film is complicit in the erasure of the perfectly normal and common bodily struggles that many women have with pregnancy and maternity-related processes. As Jacqueline Rose comments, society does not want to see “the stuff that mothers deal with

on a daily basis”, stating specifically that bodily necessities and issues relating to pregnancy and motherhood are “brushed under the carpet and/or consigned to another hidden, intimate world” (46).

Secondly, even more pernicious than the glorification of the physical state of pregnancy in *17 Filles* are the various problematic sociopolitical messages concerning maternity that are disseminated by the film (likely unconsciously, which only speaks to the extent to which such messages are internalised). In her detailed analysis of motherhood on-screen, Kelly Oliver draws our attention to the fact that “pregnancy, childbirth and child-rearing have traditionally been the ways that women could gain recognition [...] from a patriarchal society that values them only insofar as they create future citizens” (765). As alluded to above, although the girls in *17 Filles* do not turn their backs on education entirely, they see motherhood as a direct route to a defined and respectable social status, to money, and potentially to personal fulfilment. At one point, Camille remarks of her pregnancy, “Ça va me pousser à faire quelque chose de ma vie.” This is not to denigrate the fact that many women find fulfilment in motherhood, but it highlights the way in which female status in society continues to be inextricable from female reproductive function. More subtly but much more insidiously, maternity emerges not only as a means of improving the girls’ lives – where education and the job prospects that flow from it appear to hold little appeal or promise – but as having the potential to rescue their surroundings, which is to say Lorient itself, from an obvious economic and social downturn. Diane Negra comments on this trope as a feature of the postfeminist romantic comedy, where motherhood is often depicted as having the power to redeem, transform and enrich the lives of its female characters (65). Throughout *17 Filles*, shots of Lorient suggest degeneration and discontent among its inhabitants. Juxtaposed with these are scenes featuring the sea, full of vigour, joy and possibility. It is interesting to note that in French the words for “sea” (*la mer*) and “mother” (*la mère*) are homophones, and indeed the power of the sea to create and reshape is mirrored in the procreative, potentially transformative power of the girls’ bodies. When Clémentine’s parents mock their daughter and her friends for believing in the power of their pregnancies to effect meaningful change in their lives, Clémentine defiantly claims, “Nous, au moins, on va essayer, on ne va pas rester comme des cons.” Her pregnancy, in its daring and its subversion, differentiates her from the parents she sees as stuck; it comes to represent dynamism, mobility, where the discourse of failure would characterise it as an anchor, a trap. In the same way that *la mer* serves as a refuge for the girls from the grimness of Lorient and what they perceive as their inevitable following in the footsteps of their mothers, so too maternity (*la mère*) is posited as a lifeline of sorts for this town in economic and social decline: the pregnant girls are revered as the town’s saviours by some of the adults, who see the girls’ choice to become young mothers as a sign of progress. The girls, unbeknownst to them, are being drawn into the sociopolitical discourse that turns to maternity for rejuvenation in times of economic deflation. Camille, however, privately worries that their rebellious decision will have power only in its potential; at an ultrasound appointment, she quietly asks the nurse, “Et si ça changeait rien?”

Furthermore, although *17 Filles* is keen to present these multiple pregnancies as a choice (except in the case of Camille, who maintains that hers is the result of a contraceptive failure), there are suggestions throughout the film that the girls’ knowledge of the realities of pregnancy and motherhood are so limited as to cast doubt on their capacity to make an informed decision about either. They ask the pharmacist if they can share a pregnancy testing kit; they are amazed at the information they read about the developing foetus; and many giggle and squirm at a video depicting a real-life birth, shown to them by the school headmaster in an effort to halt further expansion of the pregnancy pact. It becomes disputable whether these girls are truly reclaiming their bodies and freely choosing to be mothers, when it is clear that much of its reality escapes them. It might be argued that women are deliberately misinformed or deprived of such information by society in a bid to coerce them more readily into motherhood; indeed, this is a central theme in *Un heureux événement*, where the protagonist, Bab, repeatedly asks why neither her mother nor her female friends ever told her what pregnancy and childbirth would really be like, and instead described it in glossy, unrealistic terms. Certainly, in *17 Filles*, the girls’ ignorance – albeit a source of much humour in the film – is disturbing, given the serious impact on their lives of the decision they have made.

Perhaps most distressing is their lack of clear explanation for why they want to have a baby. We may surmise that their motivations are connected to a desire for fulfilment, or for independence from their families; they frequently claim to have no more need of their parents, because “c’est nous qui décidons maintenant”. Camille is candid about her frustration at being considered less-than-adult, saying, “J’en ai marre que tout le monde me prenne pour une gamine”, and certainly her mother makes it clear that her daughter’s decision to continue the pregnancy marks her passage into adulthood, with all the independence but also responsibilities that that implies. But nothing further than these vague desires – longings common to every adolescent – is ever confirmed. Decoupling the choice to have a child from an unconscious sense of “duty” is a valuable and necessary feminist act, but in *17 Filles* there seems to be no good reason given at all, and this is troubling when considered alongside the age and status of the mothers in question. Franco explores the pregnancy pact in terms of “contagion”, a trope “so often derided as a pathological site of cultural exchange between women” and which, we suggest, is further linked to the above-mentioned suspicion which attaches to young girls in groups (3). But the use of contagion to frame these pregnancies implies that it is a condition that is *caught*, not *chosen* – and this further undermines the portrayal of the girls as active agents in their reproductive activity. Franco refers to Catherine Driscoll’s work on feminine adolescence, which pinpoints the pervasive cultural tendency to consider teenage girls as suggestible, malleable, prone to shallow “group-think”; a closer look at *17 Filles* raises worrying questions about whether its narrative is simply a reformulation of such discourses on teenage girls, especially as no clear answers are given for their reasons for choosing maternity (Franco 4). On a wider scale, the film might be seen as (again unconsciously) raising questions over how much choice women actually have when it comes to maternity.

Alongside these questions is a concern about motherhood as an institution that threatens women’s individuality. While the girls in *17 Filles* are not clearly delineated as individuals even before the pregnancy pact – for example, their bedrooms, usually a haven for personal expression, are almost identical – their lack of individuality becomes more pronounced afterwards: they move in what can only be described as a maternal tribe and, when the camera focuses on their bumps, it is sometimes difficult to discern which belly belongs to whom. Furthermore, all 17 girls appear to embrace the idea of young motherhood with equal zeal and zero qualms – surely unrealistic, considering that they appear to have little real knowledge of what their decision entails, and perhaps a reflection of the increasingly troubling, cult-like edge that the “tribe” develops as the film progresses, as the solidarity that once united the girls morphs into a vicious lack of tolerance for deviation or ambivalence. When Florence, one of the youngest girls and a loner, is revealed to have been feigning her pregnancy in a desperate attempt to find acceptance among the group, she is callously cast aside and branded a “traître” – a word that not only suggests the betrayal of trust between the girls, who believe they only have themselves to rely on, but implies that Florence is now an aberrant intruder in a group defined not by friendship or common feminist cause, but by its female reproductive function.

The girls manifest an increasingly exclusionary and derisive attitude towards women who are not mothers: at the beginning of the film, the newly pregnant Camille tells her friends, “Vous ne pouvez pas comprendre ce que je ressens”, implying that motherhood is entirely unintelligible except to fellow pregnant people; and she doubles down on this attitude when she excoriates the school nurse for asking her to put an end to the pregnancy pact, insisting that she, the nurse, could never understand the girls’ motivations or emotions on the topic as she has never had children of her own. While Camille certainly finds support and solidarity among the girls who are living a similar experience to her, her dismissal of non-mothers as irrevocably uncomprehending subjects ignores the fact that all women, when deciding whether to become mothers or not (if indeed they have this choice), engage in their own way with an imagining of maternity. It is also an attitude that further entrenches divides between women, overturning their struggles to be differentiated as individuals beyond their reproductive capacity, by dividing them simplistically into “mothers” and “not-mothers”, and thus, as Natalie Edwards notes, creating deep-seated tension between them (22). This can only serve to reinforce cultural stereotypes about non-mothers as somehow “unnatural” or lacking in a certain essentially feminine knowledge, and to buttress idealising and normative views of femininity which “continue to position motherhood as the ‘true’ goal of every woman and to stigmatise the non-mother” (Rodgers 76). In contrast, then, to the utopian sisterhood envisaged by the teenage

girls earlier in the film – one with the potential to promote rhizomatic affective relations that privilege the “we” in a neoliberal context that more generally gives precedence to the individual (see Harrod et al.) – we find a casting out of those who are deemed not to belong, and the weaponisation of maternity as a tool to reinforce dividing lines rather than break them down. Again we return to the question of choice in motherhood: if this is how non-mothers are treated, do women truly have choice in their decision to become mothers?

CONCLUSION

As we have established in this article, it is difficult to definitively ascertain the extent to which *17 Filles* manages to subvert master narratives of maternity through adolescent rebellion, or whether, in fact, it ends by replicating the prescribed ideologies it sought to critique. That the directors themselves unequivocally designate the film as feminist (Grégoire) and fail to recognise its more reactionary aspects illustrates the extent to which prescriptive ideas around motherhood are so embedded within society as to be almost imperceptible. Indeed, the implicit power of these narratives appears to make itself felt by the end of *17 Filles*, as a reprise of the “natural order” takes place: the girls give birth and resume their studies as planned, but the dreamed-of maternal utopia is never mentioned again. The final scene of the film is significant in this respect, mirroring an earlier one and inverting its meaning: the girls are shown with their babies by a playground roundabout where they themselves gathered at the beginning of the film, contemplating their uninspiring futures in Lorient; by the film’s end, returned to the same roundabout, they have succeeded in making a dramatic change but perhaps not much of a *difference* to that future. Their power, flaring briefly luminous when channelled through a communal identity, has been extinguished, and they once again become vulnerable individual subjects whose resistance to the status quo seems impossible without mutual support. The unruly danger of *Girl World* appears to be contained by a narrative closure that “domesticates” its protagonists (Rowe Karlyn 79) and “[dismisses] their social project as misguided escapism” (Franco 7).

We are conscious, however, that the impact of a narrative ought not to be reduced to its conclusion, and while *17 Filles* oscillates between a superficially empowering, refreshing depiction of maternity and a more noxious and troubling one, it nonetheless offers a thought-provoking view of the ambivalence of collective and individual power. That a “girl gang” of this nature is portrayed as both a source of support for girls and, less positively, as an exclusionary *bloc* points up the tensions between collectivism and individuality that are at the heart of the experience of teenage girlhood itself, and feminism at large (Downing 8) – tensions that cannot be resolved by insisting on a singular interpretation of maternity, femininity or feminism, which is perhaps reflected by our own double exploration in this article.

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