Brigitte Rollet  
Université de Versailles-Saint-Quentin

Girls will be girls… or won’t they? Jacqueline Audry’s Young Heroines in Post-War French Cinema

Jacqueline Audry (1908-1977), one of only two French female directors of the post-war period, was also the first filmmaker to choose young girls as protagonists for her multiple adaptations of well-known literary classics. Her originality stems from the creation of modern heroines from femalebildungsromanby authors such as the Comtesse de Ségur, Colette and Dorothy Bussy. This article examines constructions of girlhood from 1869 to the Belle Époque, concentrating on the characters of Sophie, Gigi and Olivia, who appeared on the French screen between 1946 and 1951. My analysis concentrates on the various ways and devices used by Audry to convey transgressive messages about women’s sexuality and gender politics in a still conservative France, despite the publication of Le Deuxième sexe in 1949.

The films of Jacqueline Audry provide a particularly valuable reflection on the nature of “girlhood” since a large part of her impressive body of work is devoted to the specificity of this crucial period between childhood and adulthood: the conflict between girls, society and parents, the physical changes of adolescence that focus attention on the body, girls’ “sentimental education” and their first loves.

From her first full-length feature, Les Malheurs de Sophie, released in 1946 to her last (unreleased) film, Le Lys de mer some twenty-five years later, the director constantly questioned what it meant to be a “girl,” using different cinematographic genres and adapting various French and foreign writers who all contributed to express her views about girlhood. More than any other female French director, Audry is constantly rewriting the bildungsroman and feminizing it. She is also

1 See Filmography.
2 See Kleinbord Labovitz 1988.
probably the first director who so openly and directly addressed a female audience. More importantly perhaps, her filmic career started in the immediate post-war period, at a time not particularly “women-friendly” despite the right to vote accorded to French women in 1944.

In this paper, I shall consider three major aspects of the subject, starting with the choice of filmic genres (mostly costume dramas and Belle Epoque films), the alternative feminine education suggested in the films, followed by the Utopian-gynécée created by the director from literary models. I shall concentrate mostly on the characters of Sophie (in Les Malheurs de Sophie), Gigi and Olivia (from the eponymous films released in 1949 and 1951 respectively).

Before turning to the fictional filmic “girls,” I would like to introduce the authentic “girls” who created them: Jacqueline Audry, born in 1908 and her more famous older sister, Colette, born two years earlier. Colette regularly contributed the scripts and dialogues of her sister's films (from the early days of her cinematographic career, including Sophie and Olivia). I shall come back to her role but for now it would be worth noting that her writings, from Aux Yeux du souvenir published in 1946, which evokes their childhood in sometimes and somewhat Colettian tones, to La Statue in 1983, which tells of her love affair with one of her female teachers, are in many regards close to her sister's interests and concerns for female adolescence.

Far from me to adopt here the idea and approach with which I was taught literature at the Sorbonne some thirty years ago, which can be summarized by « l’auteur, sa vie, son oeuvre » (et ses soucis). After having taught Audry’s films for many years, the personal documents from the Audry family which I am lucky to have been recently given, as well as a close reading of Colette Audry's books, have provided new insights and enriched my analysis of the films. Jacqueline herself, in a conference she gave in Oran in the mid-1950s, revealed fascinating details about her birth and childhood which did not appear in the chapter Colette devoted to her sister in Aux Yeux du souvenir:

Si l'on peut s'imaginer et admettre que le caractère, les aspirations et les aptitudes d'un être se déroulent dans les toutes premières années de la vie, les miennes se sont dessinées dans les trois premiers jours. À l'approche de ma naissance, si ma mère attendait un enfant, mon père, lui, attendait un garçon et ce désir influença toute son attente. Le berceau était bleu, le prénom choisi masculin et l'on avait promis à Colette âgée de deux ans, un petit frère.

Le berceau resta bleu, le prénom se féminisa et Colette devint l'aînée d'une petite sœur. Mais pendant trois jours, ce père déçu ne voulut pas