

## The Banlieue Girl Gang

by Silvia Bombardini



être cécile

Ever since the dawn of the digital age, the world at large may have wistfully listened in to the swan song of youth subcultures, that the unforgiving speed of commercial appropriation appears to have discouraged at last. Social contexts are said to have moved online, and the children of the web take much greater care when crafting and performing their virtual persona than in subscribing IRL to any one dress code. But is this really unanimously the case, or have we fallen prey once more to a privileged point of view? A closer look by way of cinema reveals how, not even fully on the outside yet of those urban hubs in which millennials' distinctiveness and self-absorption define their struggles, the ideal and image of belonging to a close-knit group retains among the youngsters incredible power. Ever more so, naturally, if it's a sisterhood. The recently released *Girlhood* by Céline Sciamma, promptly nicknamed "*the French ciné-poet of youthful angst*" by critic [Leigh Singer](#), sheds light on a very current, genuine and rough, increasingly influential but still luckily unexploited reality: that of the suburban, varsity-clad teenage girl gang.

The style of the all-black cast in Sciamma's gang is directional, but not unreserved. They snicker as young girls do to the dubious fashion taste of strangers, wear shoplifted dresses when they lip-sync and dance,

keeping the anti-theft tags on, to Rihanna's *Diamonds* in a hotel room. The storyline follows newbie Marieme as she embraces their local, subtle subcultural symbolism: does her hair in waves rather than braids, puts on lipstick and a leather jacket, a golden necklace bearing the new street name their leader, Lady, has chosen for her – Vic, as in *Victoire*. Still, they switch to joggers and sports bras when it's time to fight. Cutting with a pocket knife the one her rival is wearing, and brandishing it as a token seals Vic's undisputed triumph.

Fashion has been looking, too. Loyalty is, after all, the seemingly outdated value that many brands nowadays are attempting to salvage. And toughness, in womenswear, is in urgent demand. Subcultural sensibilities of a new kind, informed by the present day instead of nostalgia, find their way back to international catwalks for both men and women – think of the work of Nasir Mazhar or Ashish, Gosha Rubchinskiy or Hood By Air. True, the outfits lose some impact when cherry-picked at leisure and worn occasionally at best by fashion weekers around the globe, but at the end of the shows, when the models walk in together, in total-look as a fearless group, there's no questioning their archetype. While fit and craftsmanship might be gaining importance among younger customers, it's still for meaning that the 21<sup>st</sup> century teenager will faithfully shop. As Christopher Shannon puts it in an interview with [Steve Salter](#), "*a tracksuit is just a tracksuit if you have nothing to say or no point of view*". But it's the girls of *Girlhood* who drive the argument home: rather than talk, they'll show you. What they're proof of, is that the patented, bourgeois and fetishized *je ne sais quoi* of French charm has grown stale. Even Caroline de Maigret, who more than anyone personifies it in popular culture, mocks the stereotype in her written guide on *How To Be Parisian Wherever You Are*. And Sciamma isn't the first one either to bring this altered idea of gritty, post-individualist Parisian adolescence to the big screen: having left festivals' film buffs largely unimpressed last year, Larry Clark's *The Smell of Us*, the tale of a libertine skaters' clique and the seminal director's first foreign movie, still caught the eye of longtime fan Jonathan Anderson. A [collaborative photobook](#) was launched at Colette in March, featuring portraits of Clark's uninhibited young cast – still very white though, and with one single girl in it, however fierce she proved to be – dressed up in self-styled ensembles from J.W. Anderson's current and past pre-fall collections.

Clark's intuition might have brought him to France – he is, after all, the man responsible for 90s cult *Kids*, Chloë Sevigny's first film, whose 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary is currently celebrated with a capsule collection by skatewear-turned-mainstream label Supreme –, but it was *Girlhood* that truly unveiled a new direction: one that aims not for downtown, but skirts the Périphérique. At the same time, upcoming brands like the *Vêtements* collective arise all around the capital, with the hope to reflect, so frontman [Demna Gvasalia](#) tells to i-D, what "*is going on around us today in Paris and its suburbs*". Spring 2015 also saw the debut on the official Paris Fashion Week schedule of streetwear veteran Andrea Crews, who too, surely not by chance, happens to be a collective, in their case even led by a female designer. An attitude more than just a wardrobe, defined by kinship and at times by rank, one would be hard pressed to list the key items of a

gang girl's style, subjected as it is to neighbourhood rules: in Marseille, for instance, she would forgo her smartphone in favour of a little flip mobile, notes nightlife photographer [Ewen Spencer](#), who captured the city's youth for the second issue of his zine Guapamente. Still, the upcycled bralettes, snapback caps and boxing shorts in Andrea Crews' *Paris Museum Tour* collection echo the look of those *Girlhood* suburbs. Other trending staples are the plain white socks occasionally gussied up with ruffles, artfully lived-in sweats, a satiny letterman jacket with stripe rib trims, or the trucker, adorned with back patches or chain-stitch slogans of a revitalised feminist nature. The art of the slogan tee or sweatshirt, not yet exhausted, is particularly mastered by young London-based brand and celebrity magnet être cécile, that twists the longing for Paris anyone who finds themselves elsewhere is supposed to feel to comply with this new attitude – via statements such as, indeed, *Girl Gang*, *The Saint-Honoré Girls* or *presque parisienne*, French phrasing for *almost Parisian*. While the banlieue may not yet be the new Rive Gauche, a more real and rowdy, attainable, relatable and updated notion of French femininity presents itself.