



Change and Continuity in Contemporary Children's Cinema

Noel Brown

To talk about “change and continuity” in children’s cinema presupposes that there are norms and conventions against which films are measured. As Steve Neale (2000b) correctly notes, generic forms may “be dominated by repetition, but they are also marked fundamentally by difference, repetition, and change” (173). Recognizing these points of “difference” and “change” in established genres not only highlights their fluidity but also serves to confirm that there are visible features that recur across a large body of texts. The fact that certain films marketed to children provoke surprise or dismay based on their content suggests that the form must be understood in relation to—and, to some degree, must be governed by—generally accepted conventions. These overarching conventions, as I have elsewhere argued, include the reaffirmation of family and community, the foregrounding of child or childlike figures, the minimization of strongly “adult” situations or representations, the broad negation of ambiguity, and an emotionally uplifting resolution (Brown 2017, 13–16). While children’s film is in a constant state of flux, changes are always measured against narrative patterns that most of us unthinkingly recognize and accept.

My intention in this chapter is not to provide a thorough survey of current trends in children’s film. Rather, I would like to consider two interrelated issues: First, what are the boundaries of children’s film? Second, to what extent is the form perceptibly changing? In addressing these questions, I will

N. Brown (✉)
Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK
e-mail: brownn@hope.ac.uk

adopt *My Life as a Courgette* (*Ma vie de courgette*) (2016)¹ as a case study. One of the most acclaimed but controversial children's films of recent years, the French-Swiss-animated feature was widely interpreted as a radical intervention within the children's film genre due to its frank engagement with supposedly "adult" themes. In the sections to follow, I will explore the issues surrounding this ambivalent reception with reference to a range of paratextual discourses, alongside close textual analysis of the film. In the process, I will emphasize the ways in which the film engages with the inherited conventions of the genre in ways that both challenge and reaffirm our shared conception of children's cinema.

CURRENT AND RECENT TRENDS IN CHILDREN'S CINEMA

Historically, there have been two major currents in children's cinema. The first is the noncommercial film, typically produced under the auspices of state-funded organizations. They are often made under pedagogical or propagandist principles and aim to inculcate certain moral and behavioral practices in their young audience. Producers of such films include the *Soiuzmultfilm* and *Soiuzdetfilm* studios (Russia), the British Children's Film Foundation, the Children's Film Society India, and the Children's Film Society (China). The resulting productions may be viewed as cultural expressions of national sovereignty: In the case of the then-Soviet and Chinese films, the explicit aim was to disseminate the dominant ideologies of the nation-state, and such films are/were rarely seen outside of their country of manufacture. The second is the commercial production made for profit rather than for pedagogical purposes and, thus, predicated on the economic necessity of attracting as wide an audience as possible. Hollywood is the exemplar of this model. Its child-oriented productions—usually termed "family films"—utilize textual strategies aimed to transcend their base audience of children; strategies include the addition of themes, allusions, subplots, adult stars, and more sophisticated humor (e.g., wordplay or innuendo).

Since the 1980s, most children's films internationally have been produced not under the auspices of the nation-state, but by an oligopoly of multimedia conglomerates. Non-commercial children's films continue to find limited distribution in schools and festivals in countries such as China, India, and several countries in continental Europe, underpinned by an enduring desire for children to view films that reflect local values and customs. However, there is a felt incompatibility between this familiar emphasis on films reflecting cultural heritage and the apparent economic necessity for them to transcend regional specificities (in style, idiom, and ideology) and reach a larger, transnational market. Global policies of financial deregulation have led to drastic reductions

¹In this chapter, I will use the international English-language title, *My Life as a Courgette*, rather than the alternative title, *My Life as a Zucchini*, which was titled for distribution in North America.

in levels of state finance for children's films, leaving smaller producers reliant on international co-production and distribution deals. In Europe in recent years, such enterprise has typically been accompanied by protectionist initiatives intended to promote a pan-European cinema based on a mixed economic model of centralized organization and funding boosted by private finance.

The impact of these political and financial shifts on the content of children's film has been substantial. The explicitly politically driven films produced in communist Russia and China have largely given way to explicitly commercial productions drawing on transnational funding and distribution networks and often intended to rival—or at least to imitate—mainstream Hollywood family-oriented blockbusters. The relatively big-budget European family films, *Asterix & Obelix vs. Caesar* (*Astérix & Obélix contre César* 1999) and *Arthur and the Invisibles* (*Arthur et les Minimoys* 2006), drew on pan-European funding and distribution streams and addressed an international market. Smaller-scale productions rely heavily on international film festivals as “shop windows” for achieving commercial distribution. *My Life as a Courgette* is one such example: It received financial support from the public broadcaster France 3 Radio Télévision Suisse, but its IMDb page lists a further twenty-one commercial coproduction participants, and it was premiered at the Cannes Film Festival. However, surveys commissioned by the European Children's Film Association (ECFA) reveal the extent to which children's films on the continent have struggled to secure even regional distribution. Almost half of the ninety European children's films surveyed that were produced between 2000 and 2004 were shown in only one other European country outside the country of origin. Similarly, of the 161 films released between 2004 and 2007, only fifteen were screened in more than ten countries in Europe, and less than half of that number were distributed by independent companies (Vanginderhuysen 2005).

Children's film is in a constant state of flux, but two broad trends are particularly evident in Western cinematic traditions: the increasingly un-sentimentalized representation of difficult and perhaps traumatic issues and the reaffirmation of the politics of social and cultural diversity. In mainstream Hollywood, the most visible registers of change are evident in portrayals of empowered black and female child protagonists and in modern revisionist adaptations of fairy tales in films such as *Frozen* (2013) and *Maleficent* (2014), in which conventional expectations for heterosexual romance and male heroism are consciously subverted. Yet controversial political issues are still routinely avoided by major Hollywood productions, or else they are presented through nonliteral modes of representation such as allegory or metonymy. By contrast, low-budget European productions, freed from the commercial need to avoid offending large groups in society, have routinely addressed contentious issues directly. For instance, in the Swedish film *Kidz in Da Hood* (*Förortsungar* 2006), a multiethnic gang of suburban children

exhibits greater acceptance of racial and cultural “otherness” than the authorities, who attempt to deport an orphaned ten-year-old girl from Sierra Leone. However, as we shall see in relation to *My Life as a Courgette*, the depiction of particularly “adult” themes and situations in children’s film is still taboo.

Children’s film inevitably reflects social and cultural constructions of childhood and adulthood, and these constructions are highly localized in that they are embedded within the larger belief systems of their cultures of origin. What is viewed as suitable for the consumption of children is liable to vary dramatically across different cultural traditions. Indeed, there are some basic incompatibilities between definitions of children’s film in North America and those of several other countries. These incompatibilities are both obscured and illuminated by the international commercial dominance of Hollywood cinema, which tends to advance particular narrative and story patterns. This is especially true in the family entertainment arena, with Hollywood family-oriented films comprising a majority of the highest-grossing films ever at the global box office (Brown 2017, 3–4). In a fiercely competitive international marketplace, the fact that an overwhelming proportion of children’s films attain only limited distribution and are not widely seen outside of the country of origin has several consequences, one of which is that many films that do not conform to a predetermined commercial ideal (measured against the standards of mainstream Hollywood cinema) are either confined to coterie audiences or are never produced in the first place. Only a handful of films made under these conditions achieves runaway success and gain wide-scale international production.

However, productive engagement with the inherited conventions of the genre has occurred most commonly in films either produced without an explicit commercial mandate or where the commercial pressures associated with big-budget production are less acute. Many of the most unconventional children’s films of recent years have been made in Europe. The notoriously profane Danish-animated feature *Terkel in Trouble* (*Terkel i knibe* 2004) delights in subverting commonly held standards of acceptability in children’s cinema and was marketed internationally as “The Psycho Family Film of the Year.” However, its seemingly mature modes of address are not especially incongruous in Denmark where the boundaries between “children’s film” and “adult film” are virtually nonexistent. In 2007, eleven Danish children’s and youth films attracted fifty-nine percent of theatrical admissions, and in 2014, German children’s films comprised seven out of the top twenty films at the national box office (Rössler et al. 2009, 64; Brown 2017, 92). This phenomenon corresponds with a broader, undeniable, and international embrace of what is ostensibly children’s culture among audiences of all ages. However, it is clearly a two-way process: just as the broader popular culture has become more “juvenilized” in some regards, so too children’s cultural forms have become more identifiably “adult.”

DISCURSIVE PATTERNS

That children's film is a contested site is evident. Yet much of the time, identifying a children's film appears to present no problem at all; a very basic definition of a film produced for and consumed by children can be applied to a wide range of texts. Few people, for instance, would seriously disagree that *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *The Red Balloon* (*Le ballon rouge* 1956), and *Frozen* are children's films.² The difficulty lies in categorizing films where the intended and actual audience base is not entirely clear. The children's film category might, for instance, include films that center on the experiences of children but that appeal more to adult sensibilities, such as *Pan's Labyrinth* (*El laberinto del fauno*) (2006) and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008). Textual analysis is valuable in bringing these ambiguities to light. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Brown 2012, 2017), it is only through reference to contextual and paratextual discourses that we can begin to understand patterns and shifts in how children's film is popularly understood. These discourses include not only marketing and publicity materials, but also censorship ratings, professional and nonprofessional reviews, and social media discourses. Together, these discourses represent what Steve Neale (2000a), following Lukow and Ricci, has called "the intertextual relay" (2–3).³

Examination of such discourses can reveal important differences in how children's film is conceptualized. The aforementioned *Terkel in Trouble* won the "Best Children/Family Film" award at the 2005 Robert Festival in Copenhagen, has a "7" rating in Denmark, an "11" rating in Sweden and Norway, and has more conservative "15" and "R" ratings in the UK and the USA, respectively. Similarly, *My Life as a Courgette* was rated "PG-13" in North America; has a "PG" rating in Britain, Australia, and New Zealand; a "10" in Brazil; "7+" in Turkey; "6" in Switzerland; and was not age restricted at all in France, Germany, and many other European markets. The absence of consensus in these instances reflects textual ambiguities that suggest a perceived liminality in these films' generic identities. Interestingly, IMDb and the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) completely avoid identification of *My Life as a Courgette* as child-oriented; instead, both label it as "Animation," "Comedy," and "Drama." In contrast, [Allmovie.com](#) classifies the film as "Children's/Family" and "Comedy Drama"; [Metacritic.com](#) classifies it as "Drama," "Comedy," "Animation," and "Family"; and Netflix's numerous tags include "Adult Animation," "Movies for ages 8 to 10," "Movies for ages 11 to 12," "Comedies," and "Dramas."

The premiere of *My Life as a Courgette* at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2016 brought the film to the attention of international critics. Although

²Or to use the broader term applied to productions that reach a larger, multi-demographic audience, "family films."

³Coined in 1984, in Gregory Lukow and Steven Ricci's article "The 'Audience' Goes 'Public': Inter-textuality, Genre, and the Responsibilities of Film Literacy" (*On Film* 12: 28–36).

Variety noted that “this is not the stuff of which kids’ movies are typically made” (Debruge 2016), and *Screen International* observed that the film “falls into that zone of animation that’s mature enough for adults to appreciate” (Nesselson 2016), both reviewers emphasized the film’s suitability and appeal for older children. A. O. Scott (2017) from *The New York Times* also highlights this point:

A bit of caution may be in order for parents. While nothing shown onscreen is graphic or disturbing, the movie is frank about the way the characters have been treated and also about their natural curiosity regarding the adult world. Viewers who have read contemporary young-adult literature will be able to handle it, though their parents may feel uncomfortable at times. Children of Zucchini’s age or younger might be freaked out.

Conversely, some critics interpreted this film squarely as an “adult” animation, a mode of cinema that includes the more challenging, less sentimental features of filmmakers such as Ralph Bakshi, Jan Švankmajer, and Isao Takahata. For instance, *The Shenzhen Daily* thought it is “geared towards adults more than children” (2016). Similarly, Brian Viner (2017) from *The Irish Daily Mail* claimed that the “troubling but touching tale” is “definitely not for young children despite its brand of stop-motion animation,” and Ross Miller (2017) from *The National* more ambiguously deemed it “childlike but adult themed.”

A great many other reviewers, while reaffirming its appeal for young audiences, acknowledged narrative complexities that might problematize straightforward categorization as a “children’s film.” The boundary between “children’s film” and “childhood film” has always been rather uncertain; Robbie Collin’s (2017) review in *The Telegraph* registers parallels with François Truffaut’s great film about childhood, *The 400 Blows* (*Les quatre cents coups*) (1959): “Think of *My Life as a Courgette* as less of a children’s film than a film about childhood which children can watch, and you’ll have some idea of the quietly extraordinary tone it manages to strike.” In a similar vein, Peter Rainer (2017) from *The Christian Science Monitor* identified it as “a movie that tries to get childhood right, for a change,” pointing out that “this is no children’s cartoon special.” Finally, Steve Rose (2017) from *The Guardian* termed it “A film about childhood that doesn’t treat viewers like children.” The clear implication that *My Life as a Courgette* transcends the category of children’s film appears to be underpinned by a tacit belief—necessarily unspoken—that a production that deeply engages children is liable to be shallow and vacuous. By this logic, *My Life as a Courgette* cannot possibly be a children’s film because children’s films are not this good.

Conversely, yet another trend in critical discourses surrounding the film is to view it, more or less straightforwardly, as suitable for children and adults alike. Charlotte O’Sullivan (2017) from *The London Evening Standard*

proclaimed it as “sophisticated, yet totally kid-friendly.” Likewise, Joshua Rothkopf (2017) from *Time Out* found it to be “a family film that doesn’t underestimate its young audience.” Meanwhile, the film’s cross-demographic potential was noted both by Geoffrey Macnab (2017) in *The Independent*, who explained that it “should appeal both to adults and to older children,” and by Kevin Maher (2017) from *The Times* claimed that the film “convey[s] the darkest themes about childhood isolation and neglect without scaring off the film’s pre-teenage target audience, or sending the accompanying adults into a morbid neurasthenic stupor.” Finally, Mark Kermode (2017) from *The Guardian* wrote that “this beautifully tender and empathetic film addresses kids and adults alike in clear and compassionate tones that span – and perhaps heal – generations.” The suggestion that the film has an instrumental function in bringing children and adults closer together will be discussed in greater detail below.

Public statements made by filmmakers (as well as by studios and distributors) constitute an important intertextual relay, playing a significant part in forming generic identity. In this regard, interviews given by *My Life as a Courgette*’s director, Claude Barras, and screenwriter, Céline Sciamma, are especially revealing. Statements given by both figures support the claim that they were consciously addressing child audiences while attempting to draw on a wider range of generic conventions that are generally employed in children’s cinema. Barras’ interests in social realism and modes of animation outside the mainstream aesthetic are evident; he has spoken of Tim Burton, François Truffaut, Ken Loach, and the Dardenne brothers as direct inspirations (Barras 2016). While admitting that his decision to adapt Gilles Parris’ young-adult (YA) novel as a children’s film was based on perceived financial necessity (the need to broaden the audience base beyond that of adolescents and teenagers), Barras has expressed his intention to extend the parameters of the format:

I had noticed that there was not much diversity in children’s films, which are mainly about entertainment. Maybe we think we need to constantly entertain children, because we’re ashamed of the world we’re offering them. But since I love Ken Loach’s films and the Dardennes brothers’ films, I thought perhaps I could make a social realist film for children. (Barras and Sciamma 2017)

Sciamma was engaged as screenwriter on the basis of her expertise in youth-oriented maturation narratives, having written and directed the YA dramas *Water Lilies (Naissance des pieuvres)* (2007), *Tomboy* (2011), and *Girlhood (Bande de Filles)* (2014). According to Barras (2016), “Céline has a real gift for speaking about childhood and adolescence, coming-of-age stories.” Yet Sciamma has also spoken of her admiration for the more family-oriented films of Studio Ghibli and Pixar, making the point that

it's not what you talk about; it is how. Disney movies like "Bambi" and "Snow White" have deep subjects [...] We took these young characters very seriously and gave them complex backgrounds [...] I thought about my own experiences growing up and watching movies by Steven Spielberg like "E.T." I remember how strongly I felt that kids could be heroes. (quoted in Wolff 2017)

Sciamma has also stated, unequivocally, that *My Life as a Courgette* is a children's film, not a YA film:

For *My Life as a Courgette* it wasn't about writing a film for puppets or for an animation genre, it was about writing a film for kids. I always try to picture the audience as the most intelligent audience possible. For *Courgette*, I was obsessed with the fact that this was going to take kids very seriously as characters, and very seriously as an audience. I see the audience as people searching for emotion, people looking for trouble, people looking for being consumed by an intense narrative. (Sciamma 2017a)

However, rather than viewing children's film and youth films as antithetical, she has emphasized the similarities between them, speaking of her intention to treat the characters "as grown ups" and to "take children very seriously as an audience, believing in their intelligence" (Barras and Sciamma 2017). She also highlighted a natural affinity between *My Life as a Courgette* and her own directorial projects: "It's not just about youth, but youth at the margin. There's a strong social context to work with; you can be political and make propositions" (Sciamma 2017b).

Barras' and Sciamma's statements on the film raise a number of questions regarding the identity of children's cinema. Sciamma's claims regarding the parallels between *My Life as a Courgette* and her YA films suggest that the boundaries between children's and youth cinema are more fluid than is often imagined. Indeed, her conception of children's cinema as a vehicle both for political activism and for exploration of explicitly "adult" themes indicates that the traditional dichotomy between "children's cinema" and "adult cinema" is, at best, uncertain. The fact that numerous reviewers made references to the film's "adult" themes is revealing, insofar as it is based on a presumption that the filmmakers reject: children are psychologically and/or cognitively unprepared for complex realities. Although this conception of children as vulnerable and not yet competent has been challenged in a number of recent Hollywood films, Sciamma's conviction of children's film's potentiality for contentious political comment is diametrically opposed to the Hollywood model, which, historically, has been characterized by a utopian, universalistic, and avowedly nonpolitical worldview. However, it does accord with the intentions behind the children's films of social realist directors, such as Ken Loach and Satyajit Ray, as well as a number of recent European films.

MY LIFE AS A COURGETTE

A brief synopsis of *My Life as a Courgette* is probably sufficient to raise eyebrows among people with even a passing familiarity with the conventions of the children's film genre: Courgette, a nine-year-old boy with an absentee father, accidentally kills his alcoholic mother and is sent to an orphanage to live with other children who have suffered various forms of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse at the hands of adults. Only the ending fulfills expectations for a "happy end": the boy, alongside Camille, another orphaned child (whose father murdered her mother then committed suicide), is adopted by a kindly policeman. Yet perhaps what most clearly distinguishes *My Life as a Courgette* from the majority of children's films is its conception of its young audience as psychologically competent to deal with complex and traumatic realities. As I have argued elsewhere, the content of children's films (indeed, their very existence) is determined by their adult manufacturers' conception of children's requirements—not just as consumers, but also as young citizens requiring moral and behavioral guidance (Brown 2016, 258–61). Explicitly didactic modes of children's cinema, including propaganda films, are predicated on such a view. In contrast, children's cinema in Western Europe has tended to address children as young people possessed of greater moral autonomy.

A basic presumption in childhood studies is that the differences between children and adults are not purely (or even primarily) biological, but rather derive from the maintenance of social and behavioral distinctions. As Neil Postman ([1982] 1994) argues, central to this binary is the withholding of privileged knowledge from children during the socialization process, ostensibly to protect them from complex, confusing, or traumatic realities. One such example is children not being permitted to partake in sexual acts; the conviction that early exposure to sexual behavior will psychologically damage children is reflected in stringent forms of censorship (one pertinent example is anxieties surrounding free online access to pornography), reflecting an extreme Romantic conception of childhood as an unfettered realm of presexual innocence that must be preserved until the child achieves physical and psychological maturity. Indeed, such a view no doubt explains the insistence on the part of many critics—especially in the more puritanical North American landscape—on categorizing *My Life as a Courgette* as an adult film in defiance of the claims of its producer and screenwriter.

The film begins with an extended, panning shot of a blue sky dotted with white clouds that partially obscure the sun. The credits sequence then cuts to a scene in which the film's central character, the skinny, blue-haired, nine-year-old boy, Courgette (voiced by Gaspard Schlatter), is seen drawing pictures of a bespectacled man—whom we assume is his father—wearing a superhero cape. In one picture, the figure is tall and imposing, his arms outstretched; in another, he is seen flying, horizontally, while surrounded by chickens (an allusion that is not explained until later in the film,

when Courgette remarks that “mum always said [his father] liked chicks very much”). One such image is drawn on a homemade kite, which the boy then tethers to his bedroom window and flies outside. Without any dialogue, the film’s opening establishes the father as both absent and longed-for, thus following a long tradition of children’s fiction that deals with the psychological impact of an incomplete family on the child. Where the film deviates from most prior texts is in the aggressive behavior, the alcoholism, and the subsequent death of the mother, a figure generally portrayed in film (and in society at large) as nurturing and protective. Five minutes into the film—after the mother’s death—the film title appears against a backdrop of heavy, gray clouds and audible rain, replacing the earlier image of blue skies and sunshine; in this way, it is established that the film’s visual and auditory channels are anchored to the subjectivity of the central child figure.

The importance of the film’s representing the subjectivity of the child is worth elaborating on. In the initial sequence between Courgette and the policeman, Raymond, immediately after the mother’s death, there are two primary vantage points on the action—both variations on the classical continuity style editing pattern of shot/reverse shot. In the first shot, Raymond is seen from Courgette’s perspective in an over-the-shoulder shot writing his police report on his computer. In the reverse shot, we see Courgette from Raymond’s vantage point, allowing us to register the child’s responses to the policeman’s questions. Raymond’s computer screen is only partially in the frame, and attentive viewers will notice details (in French) regarding Courgette’s name, age, and the details of his mother’s death. But full knowledge is denied to us; these pieces of information are irrelevant to Courgette and, by extension, to the film’s juvenile audience base. Might we speculate that the partially obscured computer screen represents Courgette’s incomplete knowledge and comprehension of the situation (initially, he refuses to believe that his mother is dead) or his lack of interest in the kind of mundane procedural detail that tends to consume the working lives of grown-ups? Such information only becomes interesting to Courgette much later in the film when he and another boy break into the orphanage records to uncover the secret of Camille’s background, a development that—in conjunction with Courgette’s evident sexual awakening—represents a step in his coming to terms with the psychological complexities of the adult world. By the same token, the background to the breakup of Raymond’s family is never explained; it is mentioned that his son “lives very far away” and “I don’t see him any more ... Sometimes it’s children who abandon their parents.” No further details are offered; again, the motivations of the film’s adult characters are never brought sharply into focus as the viewer’s knowledge is restricted to the realm of Courgette’s own experiences.

There are two significant exceptions to this use of subjective camera. In the first, the orphanage children are taken on a trip to the Swiss Alps. They witness a boy falling over in the snow and being picked up by his mother. One

of the children remarks, "His mum is pretty," and another replies, "Maybe that's not his mum." The mother and boy turn to face the orphaned children, and their point-of-view shot of the children's curious, analytical gaze lasts a full thirteen seconds. This unusual composition serves to highlight the otherness of the orphaned children, their lack of understanding of "normal" family relationships, and their sense of their own alienation from society—an alienation that is never definitively resolved. The film's second disconcerting long take occurs after Courgette and Camille have driven off with Raymond to a new life in a seemingly secure nuclear family structure. The remaining five children—Simon, Jujube, Alice, Ahmed, and Beatrice—glumly look to the camera for several seconds in a reminder (to the audience?) that many children remain isolated and dispossessed. While it is central to the film's ultimately hopeful view of social care that the orphanage children appear safe and happy in the community that is provided for them but which they have also made for themselves, these analytical cuts compel the viewer, momentarily, to view them—as they surely view themselves—as lost and Othered.

In such instances, the film's deliberately homemade, slightly whimsical aesthetic is deceptively simple; the expressionistic rendering of the children with tiny bodies accentuates their vulnerability, but their disproportionately large, oval heads place emphasis on their facial features, particularly their large, round eyes, which communicate emotion more clearly than do more impressionistic forms of animation (or, perhaps, live-action film with human actors). But much of the substance of the film is contained within its perceptive depiction of the minutia of the child's physical and psychological world. In reaffirming Courgette's resilience and his capacity for self-reliance, the film also makes a genuine attempt to probe the psychological realities of life as a child rather than impose implicitly didactic images of idyllic childhood. An early scene, for example, shows Courgette quietly collecting his mother's empty beer cans and making them into sculptures in his bedroom. At a psychological level, it can be inferred that this behavior is a coping mechanism by which Courgette attempts to process his mother's alcoholism and its consequences. Several children at the orphanage have idiosyncratic behavioral quirks (or coping mechanisms); one girl conceals half of her face with her fringe to cover a scar and raps a fork against a glass to signify anxiety, while another habitually wets the bed. Symbolically, however, the beer can sculptures may also represent something fundamentally life-affirming in Courgette's nature: when faced with something that is essentially useless (a can with no contents) or damaging (his mother's alcoholism), his native tendency is to attempt to create something of beauty and value from it.

Despite the film's depiction of the orphanage as a transitional space from which some of the children will not escape until they enter adulthood, this environment is still strongly favored over the dysfunctional domestic spheres from which they came. Courgette tells Camille: "Sometimes I dream I'm grown up and I'm still with my mum. She's still talking to herself, drinking

beer. And I drink a lot, too. I'm quite happy to know it will never happen." In this regard, Courgette learns that he is not alone, particularly when Simon tells him of the circumstances that led to the other children being at the orphanage:

You see Bea? Her mum got deported. Bea came home from school one day and she was gone. Jujube, his mother spends her time opening and closing the fridge. Click-clack, click-clack, all the time. Or she starts scrubbing the toilets for weeks. She's completely nuts. Ahmed's father, well, he held up a shop. Can you imagine, a hold-up? In a service station, to buy him trainers. And Alice, her dad, they say he was a real creep. I don't know. And Alice, she used to have nightmares every night. He's in jail now...We're all the same. There's no-one left to love us.

Although the film's engagement with the daily realities of the orphanage children is similarly frank, it often resorts to humor as a means of recuperating trauma. In one of Courgette's letters to Raymond, he reveals that Ahmed "wet the bed again," while Jujube repeatedly makes himself sick by eating toothpaste because his mother "told him it'd be good for his health." Another exchange, in which the preadolescent children attempt to come to grips with sexual intercourse, is worth replicating (from the English subtitles):

Jujube: Hey, Simon?

Simon: Yeah, kid?

Jujube: Can I ask you something? Do you know how the thing's done?

Simon: What thing?

Jujube: The thing, with boys and girls.

Simon: I know it all by heart. My parents had films. It's kind of strange. Well, if you want to, you wriggle a bit like this, then the girl wriggles too, and then, bah, pow, you see?

Jujube: What pow? Does the willy explode?

Simon: Yeah, it explodes.

Jujube: No, but seriously, Simon!

Simon: [Imitating] I mean, I'm so tired! [falls back on the bed, as if asleep]

Jujube: And what does it do to girls?

Simon: Well, girls mostly just start talking loudly about how much they agree. Like, "Oh, yes, yes, yes!" Like this.

This exchange of dialogue might simply be taken as representing children's natural curiosity regarding dimly understood adult behaviors that are still perceived as illicit. However, it is hinted that there is incipient sexual attraction between Courgette and Camille. The long take of Courgette's enraptured gaze as Camille first emerges from the car at the orphanage and the later scene of them alone, staring at the night sky while revealing their most intimate secrets to one another, suggest an incipient sexual attraction between them. If the alcoholic mother's beer cans represent a transitional object for

Courgette, then his recycling of them to make a boat for her may well signify both a graduation from the childhood trauma they represent and a token of the changing priorities of adolescence. While this kind of metonymy falls well short of the more explicit sexual maturations that take place in youth-oriented films such as Sciamma's own *Girlhood*, it still strays markedly from normative constructions of screen children as presexual.

One of the most pertinent aspects of the film's address to child audiences is its attempt to impart moral lessons. As with various other cultural forms for young people (e.g., fairy tales), children's cinema has a socializing imperative. In many cases, it is explicitly didactic, aiming to inculcate and naturalize shared values and behavioral norms. But *My Life as a Courgette* is more akin to a particular stratum of post-1970s mainstream Hollywood family films that, according to Peter Krämer (1998), evidence a form of "social work." Films such as *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and *The Lion King* (1994), he argues, typically (re)construct a happy, functional, and generally nuclear family unit, but, in the process, they deal with often discomfiting realities—such as the absence or death of the father in the films mentioned above—that their central child characters must overcome. In Krämer's estimation, these films offer lessons to child spectators that can be applied to "real-world" situations. *My Life as a Courgette* functions in a similar way. Sciamma has spoken of her intention that the film would foster "a sense of solidarity ... It's about how you can love and be loved, even when you've had a very wrong start in life. It's also about what a family is, or can be, how we bond" (Barras and Sciamma 2017). Courgette's letter to Simon at the end of the film reinforces this point: "Dear Simon, you said the home was a place for those without anyone left to love them. But I think you made a mistake, because we haven't forgotten you. And we haven't forgotten the others, either." Tellingly, in the film's final shot, Courgette's kite is again flying in the breeze, but this time the drawing of the absentee father is replaced by a photograph of the orphanage's children.

However, one way that the film deviates from the conventions of contemporary Hollywood animation is in its avoidance of strategies of dual address (e.g., intertextuality, adult jokes) that place equal emphasis on the perceived requirements of adult viewers. Instead, *My Life as a Courgette* assumes that young (preteen) audiences are capable of understanding and appreciating the same content as adults. Sciamma (2017b) argues that

You often find with animation, the Pixar movies, the Disney movies, that the filmmakers are trying to give adults some reason to bear the film – they're winking at them, adding all these levels of reading it. Courgette is the opposite, everybody's watching the same film, we don't wink at anyone.

This claim lends weight to the contention that children's films can deal with complex issues without making concessions to adult viewers in the form of

dual address. It also poses a similar question of children's film to that which Maria Nikolajeva (1998) has asked of children's literature: will the boundaries between "children's film" and "adult film" continue to blur to the extent that the former becomes indistinguishable from the latter and, therefore, disappears completely?

Based on the evidence of *My Life as a Courgette*, the provisional answer must be in the negative. The film adheres to many traditional features of children's cinema that date back to the early twentieth century, such as its emphasis on the child's psychological maturation (the learning of responsibility and coping with loss) and the pronounced importance of friendship and kinship ties. Nor does it definitively transgress widely held standards of acceptability in children's film. It is not violent, and it is only mildly profane; even the notoriously sensitive US trade industry, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), felt that nothing beyond a "PG-13" rating—allowing access to younger children accompanied by an adult guardian—was warranted. The broken family unit, as in Hollywood family films such as *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* and *Finding Nemo* (2003), is reconstructed, and the film ends on a broadly hopeful, uplifting note; social institutions (police, welfare services) are portrayed as competent, trustworthy, and nurturing. In his otherwise complimentary *Variety* review of the film, Peter Debruge (2016) repeats a familiar criticism of children's fiction: the difficulties in which the central character finds himself, he argues, are resolved too easily, failing to reflect the intricacies and the messiness of "real life" (happy endings, of course, are a structural inevitability in most children's movies). In short, *My Life as a Courgette* is still recognizable as a children's film.

To speak of the film's particular distinctiveness, then, is not to suggest that it is radical in all regards. Where it is most significant is in its conviction that no issues should be off-limits; divorce, murder, suicide, child abuse, sexual intercourse, and racism are all discussed freely by the central children, but the discussions are framed by the subjectivity of the child. Their knowledge of and experience with these issues and events are only partial, and discussions are carried out with the honesty and curiosity of people who are still learning about the world but feel none of the embarrassment and self-consciousness that adults routinely feel in relation to taboo subjects. Again, Postman's ([1982] 1994) claim that the cultivation of shame is one of the hallmarks of the social transition from childhood to adulthood is pertinent, and we may also recall A. O. Scott's (2017) observation that *My Life as a Courgette* will make *parents*—but not children—feel uncomfortable. Ultimately, the conservatism of many children's films is not a reflection of the desires of young people, who usually wish to graduate from the restrictions of childhood (a fact evidenced by their desire to see teen- and adult-orientated films). Rather, it reflects the limitations that society imposes on youth: children's film is an instrument of adult civilization. Just as the innocence and precocity of screen children, such as Shirley Temple, underscores a cosseted

model of childhood as adults wish to view it, *My Life as a Courgette*'s profane, fractious, and damaged children represent an attempt to engage with children as they really are.

CONCLUSION

My Life as a Courgette invites comparison with a number of recent child-oriented transnational films that deal with similarly complex issues. The New Zealand production *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* (2016) also centers on an orphaned boy who has to cope with the death of a parental figure and must pass through the child welfare system. While hinting at the child's burgeoning interest in sex and other typically "adult" concerns, the film also reintegrates the orphaned child into a more-or-less "traditional" nuclear family by the end of the film. Like *My Life as a Courgette*, *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* resides in a kind of liminal, generic space, not always ascribing to long-standing conventions of children's film but, nonetheless, addressing a broad, cross-demographic audience. The recognition in such productions that children may suffer from emotional problems that are not easily resolved has often been praised by critics who decry the relative moral simplicity of many children's films. The recent British film *Just Charlie* (2017) focuses on an adolescent boy with gender dysphoria and was widely praised for its insight and emotional depth.

All of these films raise the question of whether it is time to take the lead from children's literary studies and consider the YA label as a category of contemporary children's cinema. As noted above, *My Life as a Courgette* does not support a case for the impending obsolescence of children's film. However, the explicitly youth-oriented, government-funded films produced in Denmark for audiences of all ages offer a more compelling example of the fluidity between the "children's," "youth" and "teen" categories, as may so-called "tween" franchises such as *High School Musical* (2006–2008), *Twilight* (2008–2012), *The Hunger Games* (2012–2015), and the Marvel Cinematic Universe (2008–). While those Hollywood multimedia franchises engage adolescents and teenagers as part of an inclusive, all-age address, Scandinavian youth films are more akin to post-1970s literary traditions of YA social realist novels by writers such as Robert Cormier, Judy Blume, and Aidan Chambers, sharing a conviction that it is futile to withhold knowledge of unpalatable or difficult realities from young people.

Within mainstream Hollywood, at least, this view has yet to gain much traction. Partly, this is due to an apparent belief among Hollywood executives that films that explicitly address only one demographic section (e.g., young adults) will find limited commercial success in comparison with blockbuster family films in the Disney and Pixar mode. Another consideration, however, is the taboo that still surrounds depictions of children in relation to "adult" behaviors. *The Book of Henry* (2017) concerns a terminally ill, eleven-year-old

boy who discovers that his adolescent neighbor is being sexually abused by her stepfather and makes plans to kill him. That the film was a resounding box office flop, and was almost universally panned, can be attributed not merely to the perceived absurdities of the premise, but also to its still-controversial violation of two broad conventions of Hollywood children's film: that on-screen children should ascribe broadly to the Romantic archetype of the innocent child and that films that address young children should avoid representations of extremely unpleasant, traumatic, or potentially corrupting issues and events. Recent examples of films (or elements within films) that have been seen as inappropriate for children's consumption suggest that the supposition that "anything goes" in contemporary children's film cannot be true.

At the outset, I posed two interrelated questions: What are the boundaries of children's film and to what extent is the genre perceptibly changing? Answering these questions is far from straightforward. The textual ambiguities of *My Life as a Courgette*, and the lack of consensus regarding its generic identity, suggest that children's cinema is in a process of transition. On the one hand, the film takes care to avoid being excessively violent, pessimistic, frightening, or otherwise unpalatable for child viewers. Moments of disquiet are only intermittent and may be thought to be supplanted by the "happy ending" for Courgette and Camille. On the other hand, the film explicitly focuses on children's alienation from society and engages, with sometimes surprising frankness, with behaviors and knowledge that, in most cultures, are off-limits to younger children. Furthermore, the resolution is double-voiced, for while Courgette and Camille find new homes, the majority of the orphanage children do not. Whether the optimistic cadences of the film's final sequence are sufficient to recuperate the scene that precedes it—in which the orphanage children despondently watch as Courgette and Camille "abandon" them—is liable to rest on the subjectivity of individual viewers. Such sequences may well linger in the memory long after the final credits and draw comparison with "youth films" intended for older children and adults—such as Sciamma's *Girlhood*—that recognize the marginalization of young people but see no possibility for reintegration within civilized society. The final shot of the photograph of the orphanage children on Courgette's kite invites us to ponder their future prospects, even as it reaffirms the bonds they have forged.

While some critics have viewed *My Life as a Courgette* as a rupture, it would be truer to see it in context of broader, ongoing processes of engagement with the inherited conventions of children's cinema. All commercial children's films reflect dominant sociocultural practices as well as the conditions of the marketplace. *My Life as a Courgette* is still recognizable as a children's film, but the controversy it generated on release points to its eschewal of some of the inherited conventions of the genre. Like many contemporary films for children, this film is both surprisingly "adult" and ineffably "child-like," striving to represent the many facets of contemporary childhood. Its

more radical elements reflect the inherent heterogeneity of children's film, which may be made in a wide array of styles and genres, representing many different regional and national cultural traditions. The ongoing internationalization of the genre—facilitated, in part, by transnational flow of digital cultures—has made its formal instability far more visible to critics, audiences, and scholars. At one time, children's film and family entertainment were seen largely as the domain of Hollywood. Despite the continued box office dominance of English-language films produced in the USA (most of which center on the experiences of white, North American children and their parents in a nuclear family structure), such a view is now untenable. At the time of writing, children's cinema may be the most diverse and creative it has ever been. Although children's films continue to reflect social constructions of childhood, much of the specificity of the genre lies in its ability to offer a unique perspective on culture and society. It is hard to envisage a time when this quality is viewed either as expedient or outmoded.

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