

WHEN TOMBOY BECOMES A STRATEGIC TERM

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Tomboy is a 2011 French film centers around Laure, a 10-year-old's daily life with her new friends after moving to a new neighborhood with her family. The film begins with an opening scene showing Laure "driving" a car with her father while sitting on his lap. The spectators would have been tricked to believe that Laure is a boy by her boyish haircut and the "adventurous" activity if they have not seen the title prior to the viewing. While the film bears a straightforward title to suggest the theme, I shall declare that it does not necessarily associate Laure with gender nonconformity. The brilliant move made in the film is that it focuses on a pre-puberty girl¹ as such a character is then wrapped by a layer of vagueness in terms of gender reading. Although it seems to be as offensive to question why does Laure *choose* to be a tomboy as asking a homosexual person why does he/she *choose* to be gay or lesbian, the traces I found in the film indeed aroused my curiosity to ask such a question. Moreover, I propose that there is an alternative reading to the film with these evidence I found. Therefore, with no offense, I will be using "she" instead of "he" to refer Laure in this essay, and to investigate if she is a tomboy who refuses her female identity with a specific reason. The reason why Laure loves to behave as a boy is not because of gender nonconformity. What she really fears, as an individual sexed female, is the societal rejections, limitations and restrictions applied on female by the gender binary.² Laure chooses to be a boy does not mean that she hates her biological sex; rather, she fears to be *identified* and *treated* as a girl. The only way to avoid those disadvantages brought on female is to deploy a male identity; a disguise. Therefore, I consider that Laure's tomboyism is rather an alternative approach for her to be respected and treated equally by the other boys; that

¹ Whose bone structure and body shapes are no different to a pre-puberty boy.

² The limitation and restriction that girls should be feminine instead of masculine, and vice versa.

being a tomboy can thus be seen as Laure's strategy to eliminate the binary play among the group of kids she plays with.

The first scene is Laure driving with her father. In this scene, Laure makes her first appearance in the film as a boy through the participation of a masculine activity with her boys' clothing. Driving is often considered as a masculine activity in the traditional sense because it has been constructed by advertisements through the associations between driving, men, mechanics, joy and freedom. Most of the spectators would have already established a sense of affirmation toward Laure's tomboy identity in the very first scene because the title and the DVD cover had instilled them what should be expected before the first scene is ever revealed; it is inevitable to be "hinted" in such a way as it is never a complete experience to watch a film without knowing the synopsis or — at least — its title. While most of the spectators have established such a mindset toward the film, *Tomboy* is more than just a film about a tomboy who is presented in the way that she seems to have gender nonconformity. Laure takes on a masculine role with similar physical qualities and fitness as the boys of the same age, while Lisa, her new neighbor, plays the female character in the conventional sense. This does not mean that Lisa is weaker than Laure in anyway because she is identified as a female; as seen in the first game they take turns to play with other boys, Lisa demonstrates similar agility as Laure, and has even let Laure to win the round. Despite the equivalence of body fitness, Lisa tells Mickael (Laure's persona) that the boys do not want her to join their soccer games simply because she is a girl; "I don't have a choice. They say I'm useless," she explains. As Judith Halberstam notes in her article, "tomboyism tends to be associated with a 'natural' desire for the greater freedoms and

mobilities enjoyed by boys,³” Laure understands how she would have been treated differently if she did not play as Mickäel in front of the boys, though it is not until Lisa speaks out this prejudice that male’s opinion on one’s ability are heavily based on one’s gender. This also explains Lisa chose to play Truth or Dare other than soccer because she does not want to be labelled as weak and then excluded by the boys. For the first time, the two’s conversation brings up the topic and implies Laure’s belief as a tomboy, which also forecasts the potential extent of tomboyism she will employ later in the film.

A couple of days later, Laure is invited to go to swim in a lake. In order to swim with her new friends, Laure finds out her girl swimsuit and trims it to a swim trunk without hesitation. She then stands in front of the floor mirror, carefully placing the handcrafted clay penis into her trunk, then, with a light smile on her face — Laure becomes a boy now. Gender is not sex,⁴ one’s gender, as Judith Butler declares, is rather an act of performative in the sense that it constitutes as an effect one appears to express.⁵ Laure’s swim trunk and the clay penis — an obvious symbol of patriarchy — have perfected her Mickäel persona to be a more convincing role in front her friends, or even anyone else other than her family. “Gender is not a property of bodies or something originally existent in human beings,” De Lauretis writes, “but the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations. Gender is a representation [and] the representation of gender is its construction.”⁶ De Lauretis’ shares a similar view with Butler,

³ Halberstam, Judith. 1999. “Oh Bondage Up Yours!: Female Masculinity and the Tomboy” In *Sissies and Tomboys: Gender Nonconformity and Homosexual Childhood*. Rottnek, Matthew, ed. New York: New York University Press: 155.

⁴ De Lauretis, Teresa. 1987. “The Technology of Gender.” In *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 5.

⁵ Butler, Judith. 1993. “Imitation and Gender Insubordination.” In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Abelow, Henry, Michele Aina Baral, and David M. Halperin, eds. New York: Routledge: 314.

⁶ De Lauretis, Teresa. 1987. “The Technology of Gender”: 3.

believing that gender, rather than a mere identification of one's biological sex, is a set of effects generated by one's behavior. Moreover, De Lauretis suggests that "Gender is the representation of a relation" which constructs a social relation between "one entity and other entities."⁷ One is viewed and identified — whether as a male, female, transgender, etc. — by other people, and hence a relation is formed; that is, one's gender is determined by other people based on one's behaviors. This suggests that Laure is a boy in front of her friends as everyone (like Lisa, who is fond of and kisses this handsome boy) believes in her Mickäel persona. Therefore, tomboy is more like a term referring to Laure for her family and the spectators who know the truth, while she is a "boy-gendered" girl who has demonstrated masculinity and other similar qualities to her male counterparts in the narrative world.

Although Laure enjoys the boyish behaviors such as imitating to spit and to play soccer topless like other boys, it does not mean that she rejects to be identified as a girl. First, she does not show any sign of disapproval when Lisa suggests to put makeup on her to "make" her like a girl; she does not even wipe off the makeup after leaving Lisa's home. Moreover, instead of embarrassment or unpleasantness, she smiles shyly when her mother praises her that she looks lovely and great. This also hints that Laure is treated as a "daughter" instead of a "son." Laure is a tomboy in her parents' eyes while her tomboyism is tolerated to some extent. Laure's younger sister, Jeanne, is an opposite to Laure since she has been granted all of the femininity; a girl who has nice and long hair; who likes to wear cute dresses; who likes the color of pink... While Laure's father is open-minded enough to allow her to explore new things freely, such as driving, wearing boy's clothes, painting her room to blue,⁸ and sipping beer because "it won't do any

⁷ Ibid., 4-5.

⁸ A reference to boy's associated color.

harm,” all these has constructed a traditional family — a miniature that reflects the larger context of the societal gender binary.

The conflict eventually breaks out near the end of the film, which leads to Laure’s self-reflection and re-evaluation on her tomboyism. It starts with the fight between Laure and one of the boys, and the boy’s parent comes to Laure’s home to “talk to Mickael’s parent.” Laure’s persona has immediately disclosed, but her mother responds, “I’ll punish *him*.” She uses *him* to refer Laure when talking to the boy’s parent because she does not want others to know that her daughter is a tomboy. Although she understands and tolerates Laure’s preference to dress, play and behave like a boy, she explains to Laure that it is necessary to tell Lisa (and other people) the truth because the school is about to begin, and there is no way for Laure to go to school as a boy. Laure’s mother is not doing this “to hurt you, or to teach you a lesson” because she knows that the society is strictly binary and has way less tolerance to Laure’s tomboyism than her family. One cannot help it but to compromise, suggesting that Laure should go out as a girl. To this Halberstam pinpoints that “tomboyism is punished where and when it appears to be the sign of extreme male identification [such as] taking a boy’s name or refusing girl clothing of any type.”⁹ Although Laure has been trying to break down the gender binary and prejudice through her male persona — which she has achieved some remarkable success throughout the summer as shown in the film — she realizes that she would no longer receives any kind of supports once she steps out the doorstep of her home. The scene where Laure walks along the wood shall thus be seen as a re-evaluation on her tomboyism, wondering if she should persist

⁹ Halberstam, Judith. 1999. “Oh Bondage Up Yours!: Female Masculinity and the Tomboy”: 155.

what she loves to be, or to make a compromise as her mother hints. Halberstam has also cited a TV special featuring a research study on tomboys:

One girl, Simone, aged eight, only played with boys, wore boys' clothes, and told the interviewer that she really liked to wear ties "especially with my suit." Simone showed no signs of shame about her gender identity in the short interview segments... the mother recalled that Simone used to like to refer to herself as a boy and for a while would only wear boys' underwear. Simone's mother admitted that this had disturbed her and that she had expressed her distress to her daughter. Simone no longer said she was a boy or expressed a strong preference for boys' underwear. This suggested that Simone had been trained out of certain extreme forms of male identification.¹⁰

It is unclear on how exactly has Simone been "trained out of certain extreme forms" of her tomboyism, but it is quite disturbing to see such a seem-to-be-instilled change. Although this is not an essay that advocates to abandon tomboyism in any way, the above research Halberstam cited has provided a site that explains Laure's final decision. She agrees with her mother because this is the only way to maintain her friendship with Lisa. We do not see much sign of pain or reluctance for Laure to make such a huge compromise to the reality. In the end of the film, the two girls meet again in the same place. Lisa asks Laure's name once again the same way as the first time they met. This time, Laure hesitates and firms herself, then replies with her real name "Laure." The film ends with her slight smile after her self-reintroduction, hinting that the two's friendship starts over again; though this has now become a girl-girl friendship. Compared to the

¹⁰ Ibid., 167-68.

first time she introduced herself, we can see that there has been a change on her. Be it a good change or not, Laure has picked her side on friendships over the boy's rights.

Although the ending has been commonly read pessimistically as a tomboy's surrender who sacrifices her equal rights as a boy in return for friendship, the film has rather provided an alternative reading with the issues mentioned above since it documents Laure's self-exploration and her role development. With the critical ending scene, it is clear that tomboyism is a strategy for Laure to avoid herself being labelled and treated as a girl so that she would be able to participate many masculine activities that would have been restricted from as a girl. As such, *Tomboy* does not provide any solution nor advocacy to tomboyism. What the film offers to the spectators is merely an opportunity to see how a tomboy would react when she realizes that tomboyism is yet to be widely accepted (at least in the French society). Laure has decided to compromise for Lisa, and this has reflected the hopelessness toward the societal gender binary as the film ends happily with the two's reunion.

Reference

- Halberstam, Judith. 1999. "Oh Bondage Up Yours!: Female Masculinity and the Tomboy" In *Sissies and Tomboys: Gender Nonconformity and Homosexual Childhood*. Rottnek, Matthew, ed. New York: New York University Press.
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