

# *Speech and Mourning in Anne Claire Poirier's Tu as crié "Let me go!": Towards an Empathic Cinema*

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**Abstract:** *This essay analyses the function of speech in Anne Claire Poirier's Tu as crié "Let me go!" (1996) and relates it to a personal and collective mourning process and to the elaboration of political claims. It first focuses on the role of speech, especially Poirier's voiceover, in the quest for mourning. It then studies the bonds created between people by speech in the film, and examines Poirier's treatment of the mother-daughter relationship. In the third part, it argues that Poirier's voice is a committed voice, speaking to break a taboo and to give voice to those who don't have one. It therefore asserts that the emotion conveyed by the film, mainly through spoken language, is given a political value. It suggests that this political use of emotion can be seen as a feminine cinematic strategy. To finish, the phenomenon of empathy is interrogated in relation to the elaboration of moral judgement. The emphasis is put on feminist re-readings of philosophical approaches to empathy. The essay thus demonstrates the fundamental role of speech in the empathic mechanisms of Tu as crié "Let me go!"*

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Anne Claire Poirier has always invested her films with very personal material. A recurrent method in her films is to raise fundamental issues through subjectivities and personal stories. But while her other films have some biographical component, her latest is entirely autobiographical. In *Tu as crié "Let me go!"* (1996), she addresses her own intimate drama: the death of her daughter, who was a drug-addict and a prostitute, and was murdered in 1992. It is through this very private story that she wants to address the larger issue of drug addiction as it is experienced and perceived in our society.

The aim of this essay is to explore the role of speech as a therapeutic and empathic enunciative strategy in Anne Claire Poirier's *Tu as crié "Let me go!"*. Poirier's film constitutes an interesting case study in that it is based on a very specific situation of enunciation, i.e. a filmmaker exploring her autobiographical experience in front of a film audience, and using speech as a way of going through her mourning. It is through talk that the process of recovery in bereavement can develop. In the film, speech is also fundamental to create human links between the mother and her dead daughter, but also between people sharing the same experience and with the audience at large. Spoken exchange creates a community of people sharing their pain and supporting each other.

Finally, Poirier's voice is interesting to look at as it is a voice committed to social change, speaking to break a taboo and to enable change in society. Poirier's cinema is quite specific in that it departs from the Quebec tradition of *cinéma direct*, where the voice's function is mainly to comment on the visual information, but still exploits the importance of orality in another way – mainly through the use of the voice as an emotional tool. In Poirier's cinema, the emotions conveyed by spoken language lead to moral judgement and political claims. Speech establishes the grounds for a community of shared experience and permits social formations through the creation of empathy. This revising of the oral tradition in Quebec cinema into an “empathic cinema” can be seen as part of a feminine/feminist aesthetic and ideological strategy.

### **Poirier's Oral Presence**

One of the main characteristics of Poirier's documentary is that it is commented by a voiceover, which is Poirier's very own voice, and which reads a text she herself has written along with Marie-Claire Blais. It is a very particular situation of enunciation: the filmmaker speaks about her own very intimate experience in front of an audience. Contrary to *Mourir à tue-tête* (1979), the filmmaker here does not speak through the voice of an actress. She is playing her own role. Generally there is less room for fiction in Poirier's latest film than in *Mourir à tue-tête*, where all sequences are more or less fictionalized. In *Tu as crié “Let me go!”*, the form is closer to traditional documentary form, in that there are no actors or any *mise-en-scène* of fictional scenes *per se*. The spoken text sounds like a personal diary, going back to the time of the girl's death (it begins with the words: “October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1992, 5.20 a.m. A young woman dies, strangled in her ransacked apartment”), then to the day when the policemen informed Anne Claire Poirier of her daughter's death, and then going through the trial of the murderer, and so on. This diary also goes back to the time when Yanne, the daughter, was still alive: her birth, her childhood, her first love and first experience with drugs, then all the time of her drug addiction and prostitution. All of these events are narrated by the voice of the mother in the first-person narrative. This voice speaks of the past in the present or the past tense, indiscriminately. Time is given an abstract quality where past and present mix, which allows Poirier to make the spectator sometimes live in the present tense an experience finished long ago for her (for instance: “You are not the same in these times of wandering when I'm waiting for you nights and days”). This mixing of past and present also indicates what the filmmaker underlines at one point in the film: that time has stopped and she is now unable to go on in life (“In the cinema, often black and white signifies the past... Fine for me, time has stopped with you!”). For the largest part of the film, we are stuck in a time of mourning, outside history. We are lost in a liminal time between past and present, neither real nor imaginary.

The filmmaker is not only present on the soundtrack, she is also present on the screen. Although at the beginning of the film Poirier's voice seems to be an omniscient voice coming from a liminal time, impossible to situate, it becomes increasingly located as we begin to see her conducting the interviews. Her voice is then given a place, a body, as well as a connection with other people on the screen. She meets a dozen of people throughout the film: parents of drug addicts and dead children, ex-drug addicts or people

still taking drugs, doctors, psychologists and street workers, whom she interviews herself. Though most of the time she is not in the frame during the interviews, the spectator can see her two or three times in the frame. Her omniscient voice is then embodied at such moments. Besides, the rare moments when we see her on the screen are quite intense emotionally, because we see her sharing a painful experience with other people. Her presence is all the stronger because she comforts those other people, hugs them, takes their hands in hers, kisses their cheeks and so on. Thus the first-person presence is extremely powerful in the documentary. In the review of the film in *Séquences*, Carlo Mandolini writes “le je ici est indéniable” (53-54).

### **Filmmaking as a Process of Mourning**

One of the main reasons Poirier made this film was to stay close to her daughter beyond death, to understand what she had been going through during her years of drug addiction. Her film is a research into and a reflection on drugs. As far as the setting of the shooting is concerned, this is evidenced by the camera searching the last places where her daughter was (the streets, the hostel, the morgue), searching for signs, traces of the girl, and going through those places in long forward tracking shots. “In the traces of your last night, I’m looking for messages, smells, signs you would have let for me”, she says; or, later, “I walked in your last steps, I looked for you.” What is particularly interesting is that Poirier goes back to the places and meets the people that her daughter had talked to her about. There is a kind of heritage given by the daughter to her mother through language, that the mother can explore – with the audience – to try and understand her daughter. Thus the traditional situation is reversed: usually heritage goes from parents to children, and oral culture is transmitted from one generation to a younger one. Here it is the children’s unknown and silenced world that is transmitted to the mother so that she can now talk about it.

This reversal of situation is a very traumatic experience for Poirier; she underlines at one point that parents are the ones who should be dying first, and not the other way around. There is something fundamentally absurd in losing your children, which entails a painful loss of meaning. Poirier’s quest is an attempt at finding some meaning in this experience. One psychologist speaks about the parents’ need to find meaning *a posteriori* to the life and death of their children, to explain their drug addiction. They are giving sense to events that don’t necessarily have any. In an interview about *Let me go!*, Poirier said that she wanted to find a meaning in that which did not have one (Coulombe 4). And probably the main progress Poirier experiences through her film is to accept not to find meaning in the events of her daughter’s life and death. The film finishes on these words: “I continue my quest, I don’t have any answer. Troubling questions replace my old certainties. I run the risk of the incomfort of doubt, I choose hope.” Thus the progress of the film itself is inseparable from the the effort of going through mourning. Filmmaking and mourning are very closely linked in the documentary (she says– “I mourn for you in black and white”, while the film is of course shot in black and white). It actually seems to be a common feature of bereavement to feel the need to express one’s grief in that way. In *Lifting the Taboo: Women, Death, and Dying* (a book on women and death that the author wrote thanks to numerous interviews with bereaved women in Great Britain and

North America), Sally Cline writes that in all of the women's accounts of their personal mourning, you could find the "need to talk, make videos, take photos" (2). Filmmaking – and especially the practice of speech within the gesture of filmmaking – can be thought to function as an exorcism against pain and an effective progression in the process of mourning.

### **The Role of Speech in the Quest for Mourning**

Speech has a very important part in the quest for understanding, meaning and mourning. Indeed, confronted to the absurdity of her daughter's death, Poirier seems unable to find any answer in images. Poirier does not show us any photograph of her daughter or any other image of the past. The image of her daughter has disappeared, she is never present on the screen. Poirier's quest drives her to the different places of Montreal where her daughter was and which now seem empty, particularly the places like the hostel or the morgue, where there is no trace of Yanne to be found now, or even any trace of human passage. Another long sequence in a park shows several benches with nobody sitting on them, and in yet another one we see a trial room that is completely empty, and where there are a few microphones but nobody speaking into them. Those deserted places can be linked to the images at the very beginning of the film, which show the vast white space of an iceberg: this white vastness appears to us as an enigma, an immense absence of meaning. In brief, the empty places shot by the author emphasize the absence of meaning or answer in images when confronted to the absurdity of death, and thus point to the limits of the profession of filmmaker. Poirier says at one point in the film: "I saw the limits of my profession. You can't show everything! Coldly displayed, without transposition, pain can become obscene. Some images, when isolated from their context, run the risk of deceiving... of feeding voyeuristic desires with lying clichés." Peter Harcourt has compared Poirier's use of empty images with Alain Resnais's film *Nuit et Brouillard*, which juxtaposes the present-day images of the concentration camps with the verbal evocation of the horrors that once took place on those premises; those kinds of images show not only the impossibility to go back in time or to change past, but also the incapacity to fully understand the past (23). The cinematic representation of loss and the limits of this representation are thus central to the film's aesthetics.

In fact, throughout the film, the past exists only as memory spoken by Anne Claire Poirier or the people interviewed. The images of vacant and silent spaces and the absence of the daughter's voice or images are compensated for by the mother's recollection of the past. Absence is recorded by the mother's voice; voice functions as a substitute for presence. Confronted with the emptiness of images, speech is a way to think about the experience of loss and bereavement and to try and understand it. This is also of course the basic function of all the interviews. If at the end of the film we come back to the same images of the iceberg, the voiceover is now able to give some meaning to it, to turn it into a metaphor of the disappearance of Yanne. The image is the same, but the voice has gone through an important progress: while at the beginning of the film it refused the death of Yanne, it is now able to accept it, and to listen to the imaginary voice of the daughter asking "let me go!". Speech definitely has an appeasing function in the film. The voiceover functions as a kind of poetic exorcism against pain, repeating ritually

the name of the daughter at the end of each segment with a different epithet each time: for instance “Yanne the strong, Yanne the fragile, Yanne my difficult one,” or repeating the pronoun “she”: “she was a heroin addict, she was of service to men, she was beautiful, she was my daughter.” Poirier’s voice is not only simple prose but also very poetic, almost musical language. Several of the people interviewed refer to the soothing properties of language, the rock singer Dan Bigras at the end of the film for instance, but also Michèle Mailhot, the mother whose two sons died of an overdose, who wrote a book about this experience, and reads aloud her own words in the film. Poirier refers to Mailhot’s words as “words that upset and soothe me.” Another young drug addict speaks about the need to tell stories. She says that she writes as a liberating, relieving experience, and recites one of her poem aloud. She tells Poirier her own experience of addiction and prostitution, and she tells how some of her clients felt the need to listen to stories. Thus throughout the film a whole network of people unburdening themselves through language is constructed. This need to talk can obviously be linked to the kind of psychoanalytic therapy that bereaved people are seeking after the death of a beloved one, especially of a child. The idea of the “talking cure” is central to the film’s thematics<sup>1</sup>. In the film though, the use of speech is perhaps closer to a form of group therapy than individual therapy. More recently, the development of bereavement support groups further demonstrates the importance of talking and sharing a painful experience with other people in the process for recovery in mourning. The obvious benefits of bereavement support group through mutual support and understanding are convincingly illustrated by Poirier’s documentary.

### **The Fluidity of the Voiceover**

The addressee(s) of Poirier’s voiceover is fundamental to the documentary’s aesthetic and ideological strategies. The voiceover is not only characterized by an “I”, it is also characterized by a “you.” While at the very beginning of the film Poirier is speaking to the audience, she soon addresses her dead daughter. This addressee is established as fundamentally absent by expressions such as “You’re not here” or “Yanne my forever absent.” This is at the core of the mother’s trauma. She cannot be *there* for her daughter and similarly her daughter is not here to speak. The mother’s voice is separated from the child; as Janine Marchessault puts it in her article on the film, the mother’s omniscient voice “fails its maternal function to be everywhere, all-seeing” (217). This sense of traumatic eternal separation is illustrated by several sections of the film wherein the camera cannot reach the place where the death took place.

Thus Poirier’s voice is basically without answer, and she fights against this idea of having no answer. She wants to hear her daughter’s voice again, to “see and hear the impossible.” Poirier somewhat seeks to recreate the voice of her daughter by interviewing drug addicts and prostitutes. To one of these, she insists: “Tell me that it’s all over, say it to me again,” as if she wanted to hear the voice of her alive daughter again, to be sure that this person can still be saved. Actually, the only few words from Yanne (i.e. that the mother imagines coming from Yanne) are those of the title, “Let me go.” But here again their meaning is multiple and impossible to catch. “Let me go” can refer to the baby in the womb eager to come out, to the teenager’s general will to be free from any ties or rules, but also to her last words when she was murdered and which haunt her mother, or

finally to her words as a dead person whose death has to be accepted. By the end of the film, Poirier “accepts to hear and listen to her daughter’s cry,” “let me go,” that is to say to accept her death. “I listen to you, I hear you well, I do not hold you back any more,” she says. The voice of the mother and that of the daughter finally merge, Poirier taking up Yanne’s words, “I let you go mon amour.” This is another characteristic of the voiceover: it is very fluid, since it also sometimes addresses God or the audience at large instead of Yanne, or it can even become the voice of the daughter herself speaking to her mother: “Don’t hold me back, maman, in front of my first love, a drug-addict that I want to save. Let me go!” This points to a kind of blurring of the borders between the identity of the daughter and that of the mother. Their two voices melt, they become one. As Janine Marchessault notes in her analysis of the first paragraphs of the spoken text, “as the descriptions of her daughter unfold, she moves from “la” (the) to “ma” (my), from an objective description ‘the strong’ to a possessive noun, ‘my difficult one’, that makes the description her own. It is a description of her own self, her identity so intricately – physically, emotionally, psychically – tied to her child” (215-216). There is an obvious will from Poirier to recreate the original unity of mother and child. This is also emphasized by such phrases as “Yanne my life lost,” or “I grow old prematurely, you were my youth. [...] Your death foreshadows mine.” Feminist psychoanalytic theorist Nancy Chodorow argues that the connection between mother and daughter may be even stronger than between a mother and her son, or more precisely that the original unity of mother and child somewhat continues in the mother-daughter relationship. “Mothers tend to experience their daughters as more like, and continuous with, themselves. Correspondingly, girls tend to remain part of the dyadic primary mother-child relationship itself. [...] By contrast, mothers experience their sons as a male opposite” (166).

### **The Mother-Daughter Bond**

The closeness of the mother-daughter relationship is of course a very important theme in the film. Poirier emphasizes the reciprocity at stake in this relationship: “You want to be as your mother and you disown her, you recognize yourself in your daughter and you reject her. You were so much like me.” The author is particularly hurt by the fact that she was absent at the moment of her daughter’s death, which seems to her basically anormal, as if the two of them were only one person. “You were there, [...] I was not there,” she insists several times. “How come I didn’t die that day?” she asks, thus unifying their two lives, their two bodies. The death of a child for a mother has indeed often been discussed in terms of a loss of an aspect of one’s self. In *Maternal Bereavement*, Linda Edelstein writes, “The mother takes care of, but also identifies with, the child, thereby gaining from the child’s progress. When the child is lost, some aspects of the mother’s identity are lost, too” (40).

The body has always played an important aesthetic and thematic role in Poirier’s whole body of work. “Le corps est plus qu’un thème dans les films de Poirier, il en est la matière vivante et palpable” (Prevost 24). This film is no exception. Poirier not only privileges direct relationships with her interviewees, she also privileges intimate and physically close relationships with the people that remind her of her daughter. The most

painful passages of the film are probably those where she evokes the lost proximity with Yanne's body. "What I miss most," she says, "is to touch you! Stroke your skin, your back, your long neck. Put your head on my lap, take your hand in mine." Or at another point: "you're coming back, you put your hands on my face, my hands on your knees." She also evokes the dead corpse of Yanne, which is experienced as a physical pain by the mother, as a tearing in her own body: "I think about the freshness of your body, your assassinated body, and I weep," and later "People were talking about a corpse, a body... yours, your manipulated body, your humiliated body, your body of my body". Finally Poirier notes how the death of a child is experienced as the reverse of giving birth, and thus recreates the original unity of mother and child. Poirier here comes back to a specifically feminine theme that she had notably explored already in *De mère en fille* (1968).

### **The Oral Sharing of a Common Experience**

The need to establish direct relationships through speech is paralleled by a fight against marginalisation and a will to share a common experience. One of the basic role of the interviews with other parents of dead children is to be able to share an experience that is too painful to keep for oneself. One of the people interviewed speaks about the need to share this experience, to talk about it with others. Poirier's aim is to find together with other parents a solution to the problem of drug. "In your name and in the name of those who resemble you, I'd like to make a call to the parents of drug victims." Similarly, she believes in the power of speech between drug addicts to help each other. She suggests that ex-addicts share their experience of addiction to help others go through the same way. The same gesture is very much obvious in *Mourir à tue-tête*, where women die partly because of their inability to share their shame and fear. Poirier is aware of the importance of such an oral sharing of a collective experience, whether it concerns the parents or the victims themselves. As I will argue, common experience becomes the ground for a shared sense of justice. The main problem with drugs is the marginalisation of its victims. To make her quest, Poirier had to "enter the margin," to take up again her own terms. She evokes how direct contact with the victims of drug is fundamental to comprehension. She speaks about the street workers, who were "humanized by the direct contact with the pain and fragility of human beings." Of course, speaking about drug addiction is all the more essential that it is a topic that is usually silenced. For Poirier, speaking about a taboo subject represents a political gesture onto itself.

### **Breaking a Taboo: the "Committed Voice"**

As she did with rape in *Mourir à tue-tête*, Poirier decided to tackle the subject of drugs in *Tu as crié "Let me go!"*, not as a sensationalist enterprise, but to demystify the issue. Both are taboo subjects. The author says at one moment that her daughter "est morte à tue-tête," which evidences the parallel between the two films. Poirier wants to put an end to this silent cry in both films. In *Tu as crié "Let me go!"* Poirier repeatedly evokes the need to break the silence, the taboo surrounding drugs and overdoses, which sometimes even prevents people from treating addicts correctly. The ultimate aim of the documentary is clearly stated by Anne Claire Poirier herself: "My choice to share my

quest in a film comes from the need to break the hypocritical silence surrounding drug addiction.” Poirier goes far beyond the personal quest for mourning. The personal material involved is used mainly to serve a social cause. Her claims are clear: she is in favour of methadone treatment, and against the prohibition of drugs. She is against the war on drugs as it exists now and which victimizes even more the victims and protects the real culprits.

Poirier questions our collective attitudes regarding the problem of drugs. For her, our behavior towards drug addiction is a serious collective drift that can be only addressed by a collective claim. That is why she, as a mother personally involved in this problem, assumes the responsibility to act. She takes the means available to her, that is to say filmmaking, as a way to put the margin back into the center. As she states, “Drug addicts are condemned to silence and shame, they have no voice to make themselves heard. We who know them, [...] who know their pains, their distresses, together we can give them our voice.” She takes up again the image developed in *Mourir à tue-tête*, saying that “we must hear the cry of angels rise.” Drawing from her personal and other people’s subjective experiences explored in the films, she develops her claim: “To break silence. In the name of Guillaume, Chaton, France, André, in the name of Christian, François, Karen, in your name.”

Obviously speech is given the weight of act in the film; it is social action on itself. If we come back to Anne Claire Poirier’s career as a feminist filmmaker in the NFB, giving her voice to a part of the population that is not listened to is probably the main feature of her whole body of work. Her personal voice has always tried to join the voices of women at large. When she was accused of being too narcissistic or merely poetic in her filmmaking,<sup>11</sup> notably compared to filmmakers whose films were considered more “political” or “social” at the end of the 60s (Michel Régnier, Colin Low), those accusations often overlooked the fact that simply expressing oneself as a woman – for instance, showing and speaking about the body of the pregnant woman in *De mère en fille* – was already a political gesture in itself, at a time when society only saw film images created by men and heard words belonging to men. Tackling the subject of rape was a very political gesture at the time of *Mourir à tue-tête*. Similarly, just speaking about drugs and raising the debate about the prohibition of drugs is a political gesture. Poirier’s voice is a committed voice, speaking throughout the film to demand the right to health, dignity, compassion and life of drug addicts. The power of speech is especially felt by the spectator through the effect of Poirier’s voiceover, which is a really strong emotional tool of persuasion.

### **The Political Value of Emotion**

As she often does in her films, Poirier goes from intimate, personal, subjective stories to tackle fundamental social problems. This is her way of touching the audience. In fact, reflexion makes its way through emotion, which means that emotion is given a political value. It is through the expression of Poirier’s pain that the entry into politics is made. Faithful to the kind of aesthetics that she privileges, Poirier does not limit herself to strict direct cinema but rather leaves much room for her own subjectivity and

imaginary world, here mainly through her poetic voice. “Pour elle, le cinéma n’est pas un lieu seulement pour dire des choses, c’est un lieu de création où le contenu s’insère dans une forme qui doit être belle. C’est en peintre et en poète qu’elle voit et fait parler ses films” (Prevost 18). In Poirier’s documentaries, there are often large segments of fiction, and fiction and non-fiction are often juxtaposed in such a way that it becomes difficult to make a division between the two. In *Tu as crié “Let me go!”*, the imaginary, the more fictional part, concerns mainly the voiceover. In other words, she departs from direct cinema because the images we see are almost obliterated by the text and the voice instead of being merely completed by them as often in direct cinema. This is a strategy often used by Poirier. Pierre Véronneau wrote in 1985 about *30 minutes, Mr Plummer* (1963):

Ce qui étonne le plus dans *30 minutes, Mr Plummer*, c’est sa manière de rendre le texte indépendant de ce qui se déroule à l’image. [...] Cette mise en voies parallèles du texte et de l’image peut déjà sembler [...] une tentative de fictionnaliser le documentaire par le texte en appauvrissant volontairement l’information visuelle, en la blanchissant pour ainsi dire, laissant au texte le pouvoir coloriant – et alors Poirier se démarque de la majorité des tentatives passées où de toute manière la voix se voulait harmonique à l’image, en quelque sorte homogène, ne se désignant pas au spectateur comme véritablement off. (27)

The documentary form is juxtaposed to other formal or narrative strategies, it is somewhat subjectified by the voiceover. *Tu as crié “Let me go!”* would thus retain some features of the third category of docu-fiction defined by Gilles Marsolais in “Les Mots de la tribu”: “docu-fiction autobiographique: viserait à définir une “démarche mi-fictive, mi-documentaire concernant l’auteur-même du film”, démarche qui fait appel à la juxtaposition de divers procédés techniques ou narratifs, voire à leur fusion” (140), while also keeping with the formula of the documentary essay (a very personal approach to a social or political issue). Poirier has always refused to look for strict realism or objectivity, which are impossible to achieve, and has chosen evocation instead. She wants to communicate things as she feels them and not as they are seen. As she says, “La transposition, pour moi, c’est de ne jamais oublier d’investir ce qu’on a ressenti devant une certaine réalité” (6). The spoken text is a way of investing images with her subjective perception of them. But the emotion transmitted by the personal, poetic voiceover does not only follow her own emotional trajectory through mourning, it also allows for a journey towards reflexion, that is, collective political reflexion. Sentiment leads to moral judgement. André Loiselle has similarly analyzed *Mourir à tue-tête* as a mix of didacticism and emotions, “between the empowerment of feminist propaganda and the despair of masochistic melodrama” (22-23). For Loiselle, in Poirier’s films “the distinction between melodramatic emotions and counter-cinema politics becomes impossible to discern” (40). Thus the following distinction between emotions and reason, enchanting storytelling and rational political demonstration, is challenged by Poirier’s cinematic strategy.

### **A Feminine Cinematic Strategy?**

Talking about the use of the spoken text in film, which Poirier used at a time when it was obviously against the trend at the NFB, the author links speech to a feminine

aesthetics in a citation which is worth quoting extensively for our interest in the political value of emotions:

À l'époque ce n'était pas à la mode, c'était presque quétaine, hors courant. On était en plein éblouissement du cinéma direct. C'était un coup d'éclat quand on faisait un film sans un seul mot. Or moi j'ai adopté le parti-pris contraire; j'aime bien avoir le sens de la contradiction d'autant plus que je n'ai jamais compris ce phénomène du silence-absence; les mots, la parole peuvent avoir une telle puissance d'émotion; il faut bien reconnaître que l'art avec lequel nous nous exprimons est visuel, très concret, qu'il a un rapport moins direct avec l'âme que le son; l'œil va chercher à l'extérieur de soi tandis que le son pénètre, entre en nous-mêmes. Je ne parviendrai jamais à le rejeter. Nous l'utilisons parfois comme béquille, je ne crois pas que ça puisse remplacer les images; comme j'ai beaucoup d'affection pour les sons et les mots, ça m'a peut-être parfois joué de vilains tours et c'est un risque que j'assume. J'ai toujours cet amour du son qui entre en moi. Pierre Schaeffer disait un jour que ce n'était pas pour rien que l'œil, c'est masculin et que l'oreille, c'est féminin. L'œil est d'avantage associable à l'organe sexuel mâle extérieur, tandis que l'oreille serait plus semblable au vagin... et pourquoi pas? (Poirier 5)

Though this kind of gender differentiation is obviously quite questionable, the quote points to Poirier's perception of speech as a central force for intensifying emotions in the viewer, and to her view of this strategy as a specifically feminine one. If speech is given a rebellious value in Poirier's film, it is mainly by taking the path of emotions.

### **Empathy as a Basis for Moral Judgement**

Poirier gives a political value to emotions. This joins recent re-evaluation of emotions as capable of basing moral judgement. Against the traditional thought that emotions necessarily distort our sense of what matters and why, it is now often said that emotional reactions reflect or embody our most important evaluative commitments. They can reveal distinctive forms of value and motivate moral behavior, as well as other kinds of social interaction that make communal life possible.<sup>iii</sup> The phenomenon of empathy is particularly interesting to study in relation to Poirier's film in the way that it brings different people's emotions into harmony and makes successful human interactions possible. Emotions play a salutary role in evaluative thought with the phenomenon of empathy. It has been suggested by a number a writers over the years (first among them, David Hume) that empathy is important as a precursor to and motivator of moral behavior. By producing emotional understanding of the plight of others rather than mere intellectual understanding, empathy induces us to care about that plight, rather than ignore it. But we should first define the term "empathy."

"Empathy" entered our language early in the 20th century as a translation of the German term *Einfühlung*, used in aesthetics to refer to some involuntary bodily mimicry of a work of art, then projection onto this work of an emotional response fitting with the acquired bodily posture. Theodor Lipps eventually came to think the phenomenon could occur in interpersonal cases as well (403, 409-411). To "empathize" is thus to react to the

perceived feelings of another with vicarious emotional reactions of one's own. The moral and political value of empathy has been considerably explored by David Hume – though he actually uses the term “sympathy” in his writings.<sup>iv</sup> By “sympathy,” Hume meant the empathic phenomenon in which an emotional state is transmitted from model to observer. It is a “propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to, our own” (1978: 316). This definition describes the audience's reaction to the film by Anne Claire Poirier. Most viewers confess they couldn't help crying, or even that they felt during the film as if they had lost their child – even if they don't have one. Empathy is definitely a way of experiencing emotions we would never feel on our own. For Hume, sympathy is fundamental for social life and the creation of a sense of justice:

Tho' in our actions we may frequently lose sight of that interest, which we have in maintaining order, and may follow a lesser and more present interest, we never fail to observe the prejudice we receive, either mediately or immediately, from the injustice of others. [...] Nay when the injustice is so distant from us, as no way to affect our interest, it still displeases us; because we consider it as prejudicial to human society, and pernicious to everyone that approaches the person guilty of it. We partake of their uneasiness by sympathy. (499)

In other words, sympathy enables us to feel for others, and thus to approve of justice and disapprove of injustice. Hume quotes Horace to say that “the human countenance borrows smiles or tears from the human countenance” (1975: 54). This quote and other remarks suggest a view of empathy as an involuntary catching of the other's reaction, a kind of noncognitive “contagion” process. Hume's definition of empathy as an involuntary reaction has been perceived as undermining the social dimension of his political theory. Pall S. Ardall, for instance, writes that Hume's writings “show how mechanically he thinks about the way in which emotions and opinions are transferred from one person to another” (46). Hume suggests that sympathy may be more self-referential than social or directed towards the other: “Our affections depend more upon ourselves, and the internal operations of the mind, than any other impression” (1978: 319). In this view, we do not feel the other person's emotion but project our own experiences and feelings onto our perception of the other person's behavior. As Nancy Hirschmann argues, “this suggests a problematic individualism” (180). It does not seem to me that this individualistic and non-cognitive definition of empathy applies to the experience the audience can make of Poirier's film. Indeed, as I have mentioned earlier, many viewers said they felt like they experienced the pain of losing a child during the film even if they were childless. *Tu as crié* “*Let me go!*” would thus enable us to discover unknown emotions vicariously, emotions that we have never experienced before but that we feel by sharing them with Poirier and the people interviewed.

### **The Feminist Views on Empathy**

It is therefore worth turning to less individualistic, more social and maybe more cognitive views of empathy, and particularly to feminist writing on empathic mechanisms. Feminist and moral theorist Carol Gilligan, in her book *In A Different*

*Voice*, links feminine morality with an “ethic of care.” She argues that women tend to privilege relationships, connectedness and responsibility in the formation of moral judgement, rather than a right-based morality relying on abstract rules and laws. “Women’s construction of the moral problem [is] a problem of care and responsibility in relationships rather than one of rights and rules” (73). What Gilligan develops is a feminine morality promoting a social and other-directed view of empathy. She calls the ability to share the other’s feelings “co-feeling” (Gilligan and Wiggins 122): in this trait, I am not projecting my own framework of experience on the other’s situation but rather participating in the other’s feeling by imagining that I have his/her own experience. Psychoanalytic theory seems to sustain Gilligan’s argument. In her famous *Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow asserts that women develop a different sense of the self and its relation to the world than men because of their responsibility for the care and nurturance of infants. Without going into too many psychoanalytic details of the formation of the subject, we can say that little girls are psychically – as well as culturally – less induced than little boys to see themselves as separate and different from the mother (as we have already mentioned earlier) and thus from other people. Girls arguably perceive the world as connected with the self. For Chodorow, “girls emerge from this period (of formation of the self) with a basis for ‘empathy’ built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not. Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another’s needs or feelings as one’s own” (167). For both Gilligan and Chodorow, the capacity to empathize is a basis for knowledge. Indeed, you learn about other people’s experiences of the world by sharing their feelings. Feminist theorists think that perceiving the feelings and experiences of others is “an epistemological framework for ‘knowing’ the world.” (Hirschmann 176). Materialist feminists such as Nancy Hartsock similarly ground a feminist epistemology on an ethic of care. If women’s tasks in society differ from one culture to another and depend on the period in history, caretaking (cooking, cleaning, and especially taking care of the children) has been the major practice of women and mothers throughout history. Women would tend to draw from this way of experiencing the world an epistemology placing relationships, responsibility, and concern for the others at the center of knowledge. Accordingly, intersubjectivity and relationships replace objectivity and rules in the formation of a moral consciousness. The individualism of Hume’s definition of sympathy is thus countered by feminists’ view of empathy, co-feeling and a connected way of knowing the world.<sup>v</sup> Moreover, the feminist concept of empathy is far more cognitive than the one found in Hume’s writing. While for Hume sympathy is a natural, involuntary, mechanical emotion occurring almost by accident, for feminists it is rather a cognitive, social and interactive dynamic developing through relationships so as to create the social formation. To again take up Nancy Hirschmann’s terms, “the sympathy that connected knowers engage in is an ongoing interpersonal process that creates and constructs both the social formations that individuals participate in, and the individuals that make up these social formations” (189).

**Conclusion – The Fundamental Role of Speech in the Empathic Mechanisms of *Tu as crié* “Let me go!”**

In Anne Claire Poirier's *Tu as crié "Let me go!"*, the basic structure of the film aims at constructing the kind of social formations described in feminist definitions of empathy. First, the interviews establish a sharing of traumatic or painful experiences. By giving a voice to parents of drug-addicts and to drug-addicts themselves, Poirier helps people understand each other more completely. With Poirier's film, you do not project your own experience onto the other (not everyone has experienced drug-addiction or prostitution; not everyone has lost a child); on the contrary, the different people in the film as well as the audience come to hear the other's account in a profound way and know about his/her experience by participating in his/her emotions. Poirier's voiceover communicates her pain, and hence her political position, moral claims and sense of justice, to the audience. The emotional involvement of the spectator is achieved through sympathetic understanding. Through her very personal approach to the subject, and her communicating to the audience her sense of loss, Poirier insures our emotional involvement, which means that we inevitably empathize with her pain and thus come to share her emotional and political position. The voiceover conveys its emotion and experience to the audience, while at the same time we see the author sympathizing with the people she interviews: she connects people, creates a community of shared pain and common experience. This community created through speech is the basis for a common judgement on the failures of society, and common claims for social change.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In *Men Don't Cry... Women Do: Transcending Gender Stereotypes of Grief*, Terry L. Martin and Kenneth J. Doka write that women traditionally have a greater need than men to talk about the loss of their child and seek external support. "Mothers expressed a greater need to talk about the loss than fathers. [...] Women were inclined to use strategies that were more emotion-focused and support-seeking" (Martin and Doka 102). Put in this way, these kinds of essentialist statements are of course problematic, but permit to point to some cultural assumptions about men and women's different reactions to a child's death. As I will later argue, Poirier's use of speech can indeed be seen as part of a feminine strategy.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of *De mère en fille*, Michèle Favreau described Poirier's feminine "I" as an "effusion toute narcissique" (37).

<sup>3</sup> See for instance: *The Rationality of Emotion* by Ronald de Sousa; *Emotions and Reasons: An Inquiry into Emotional Justification* by Patricia Greenspan; and *Valuing Emotions* by Michael Stocker and Elizabeth Hegeman.

<sup>4</sup> A contemporary use of the term "sympathy" involves the kind of sentiments one feels for another person's plight with a degree of motivation to help that person. Sympathy is thus closer to "pity" but without its negative connotations. In other words, you feel sympathy for another person (you want to help him/her), but through empathy (which is not an emotion on itself but a way of acquiring an emotion), you feel the other person's fear, pain, sadness, etc. This distinction can be found notably in Chrismar 257-266. However, Hume's use of the term sympathy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is closer to the contemporary definition of empathy.

<sup>5</sup> For a feminist reading of Hume in relation to Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*, see *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics* by Annette Baier; particular chapters 4 "Hume, the Women's Moral Theorist?" (51-75) and 5 "Hume, the Reflective Women's Epistemologist?" (76-94).

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<sup>iii</sup> See for instance: *The Rationality of Emotion* by Ronald de Sousa; *Emotions and Reasons: An Inquiry into Emotional Justification* by Patricia Greenspan; and *Valuing Emotions* by Michael Stocker and Elizabeth Hegeman.

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