

# "Little Girl," Reviewed: A Brilliantly Directed Documentary About a Transgender Child

A French girl's confrontation with transphobia reveals the country's hidden fractures and her own strength of character.

September 20, 2021

If any doubt remained that documentaries depend, for their emotional power, on the same sort of directorial artistry as dramatic features do, the French director Sébastien Lifshitz's new documentary "Little Girl" (in limited theatrical release, including at Film Forum) would suffice to dispel it. The film is centered on Sasha, a seven-year-old girl who's growing up in a town near Reims and who has been, from earliest childhood, aware of her gender dysphoria. Assigned male at birth, she expressed, in early childhood, her identity as a girl; her parents, after some initial incomprehension, have been strongly supportive of her, but she endures cruelly indifferent rejection, both social and official, because of her identity. At her school, the principal and her teachers insist on treating her as a boy, and "Little Girl" depicts the family's effort to help Sasha gain formal

recognition of her gender at school and social recognition by her classmates and their parents.

Lifshitz could have made a conventionally informative documentary, using sound bites, interviews, and film clips; the political significance of the subject nearly invites such an approach. Yet he has done nothing of the sort. "Little Girl," instead, is an immersive, experiential film, a work of creative nonfiction that, above all, portrays Sasha's experience with an ardent, dramatic attentiveness; its distinctive style seems uniquely crafted to the implications of her story. Lifshitz introduces Sasha as she chooses her outfit, putting on a glittery dress and then selecting between a plain, cloth headband and a tiara in the mirror. She sees herself and Lifshitz sees her, in a fixed and concentrated closeup that, in the movie's wide-screen cinematography (by Paul Guilhaume), offers a resonant moment of self-contemplation that would be so in any child's life but which gains power from the specifics of Sasha's childhood.

Sasha's mother, Karine, discusses the child's situation with an empathetic psychologist from the family's home town. She explains that Sasha described herself as a girl before the age of three—or, rather, all the more remarkable, said that she would become a girl when she "grows up." The psychologist recommends that Sasha see a specialist with expertise in gender dysphoria, who'd likely be found not locally but in Paris. This scene, in combination with the closeup of Sasha at home, sets the tone for the movie. It

features no formal interviews, except with Sasha's parents, who are seen in long closeups or side by side, discussing their experiences at length while addressing the unseen and unheard filmmaker just off camera. Lifshitz doesn't trim their remarks to significant snippets but lets voices be heard at length, observes discussions advancing in intricate detail as if watching thought in motion, and, above all, looks closely at Sasha, contrasting, with fierce cinematic clarity, the undue conflicts that she's suggested and the crystalline integrity of her identity.

Sasha is identified as a girl everywhere she goes, except in school, where the stiff-necked administration refuses to honor her identity. As a result, Sasha is treated as something of a pariah there, and she's deprived of the most ordinary sorts of self-expression that define French childhood. The school's administration claims merely to be following bureaucratic dictates in continuing to identify Sasha according to her official documents, but her parents take the refusal for something more ideologically motivated. (Her father hints at the school's, and the community's, religious conservatism.)

When the family seeks additional medical counsel, it's not only to provide emotional support and practical guidance but also to persuade the school system to recognize Sasha as a girl. The first sequence of Sasha and Karine's meeting with the psychiatrist who specializes in gender dysphoria, Dr. Anne Bargiacchi, in an office in a Paris hospital, is among the most moving and cannily constructed

sequences in recent movies. It runs nearly ten minutes, and it depends on a sharp-minded combination of directorial restraint and assertion. Bargiacchi is on camera only briefly, though her questions calmly guide the wide-ranging discussion in which Sasha and Karine describe the hostility that Sasha faces at school. The doctor characterizes gender dysphoria from a medical perspective and indeed provides the family with a letter to the school attesting to the medical importance of correctly identifying Sasha's gender officially and publicly. The sequence is filmed entirely from the side, with the crew stationed in a fixed position beside the desk, mostly observing mother and daughter in the subtle, tender intricacy of their bond—and, above all, in extended closeups of Sasha that reflect the depth and intensity of her experience, and the momentous breakthrough of a professional authority's acknowledging and helping affirm her identity for the first time.

The glimmers of happiness that illuminate Sasha's face during this sequence, the very gradual and subtle yet unmistakable shifts in her expressions, have an overwhelming emotional force. Sasha's discussions in the course of these images are similarly moving and illuminating: Lifshitz lets what she says and what she doesn't say inform his artistic practice. When it comes to documentaries such as "Little Girl," in which the filmmaker and crew are embedded with the film's subjects, I'm always curious about the transactional side of the filming—the process by which subjects and filmmakers negotiate the

terms of the joint venture. In "Little Girl," this question matters all the more, given that Sasha is only eight years old, and Lifshitz, implicitly yet no less powerfully, uses scenes such as the one in the psychiatrist's office to suggest her relationship to being filmed.

Sasha is an astoundingly self-aware presence on camera. There isn't an iota of insincerity or manipulateness in how she interacts with the camera, but she clearly knows what she doesn't want to talk about in its presence. Her hesitations and silences are revelatory. They suggest that Sasha is more keenly aware, at the age of eight, than many adults ever are of the inherent relationship between selfhood and officialdom, the inherent conflict between private life and public authority, the difference between who one is and who others say one is. If Sasha seems to be in control of her public image, it may be because she has had to negotiate it from the very start of her conscious life. The movie's distinctive style and the method by which it's realized evoke a virtual collaboration between Lifshitz and Sasha in the telling of her story.

Lifshitz's depiction of Sasha's conflicts wends through a wide range of her experiences: her frustrations in a ballet class, where a teacher who's unseen is described as treating her monstrously; her improving social life and the new complications that it poses in school; the ongoing hostility and sheer nastiness of school officials; her choice of clothing; a family vacation; the presence of a transgender teen who is both a babysitter and a self-

conscious role model for Sasha; the looming prospect of puberty and the medical decisions that it will entail. But, above all, “Little Girl” is an extraordinary work of portraiture, which, like classical portraiture, is both the reflection of an individual and of her place in the times. Lifshitz’s passionately attentive images of Sasha reflect her extraordinary strength of character and depth of sensibility—and reveal the moral and political truths of the society around her, its vectors of progress and its forces of repression, the character of those who care for Sasha and of those who do her harm. With a limited, intimate focus, “Little Girl” becomes a grandly diagnostic analysis of French society, distilling the country’s fault lines into a few indelible images.

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