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?French Girls?: The Vision Behind the Film

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In conversation with director Hyun Lee and producer Georgia Noe, the Australian independent feature becomes a starting point for a wider discussion about representation, the fashion industry, creative freedom and the uncertain journey from making a film to finding its audience.

What does it mean to be seen when you are not necessarily the one deciding how others see you? In Hyun Lee’s French Girls, modelling offers Mia an unexpected route into a world that seems to welcome her without requiring her to know exactly what she wants from it. Yet the more she is looked at, directed and photographed, the more complicated the question of agency becomes.

Rather than approaching the fashion industry through its familiar glamour, Lee is interested in what happens around the images: the small talk, the awkward encounters and the ordinary moments that rarely become the centre of a story. Mia moves through situations that another coming-of-age film might treat as decisive turning points, often appearing more interested in observing her surroundings than in directing the course of her own life.

Behind the camera, the film's unconventional approach presented its own questions. Lee had to confront the ethical difficulties of representing real people through non-professional performers, while producer Georgia Noe helped bring the project to life with limited resources and a production process that depended on flexibility. For both women, French Girls became an experience shaped as much by uncertainty as by creative intention.
In conversation, Lee and Noe discuss the decisions behind the film, what they learned from making it and why getting an independent feature made is only part of the challenge.

Hyun Lee on watching people as they are

Lee describes wanting to observe the fashion world almost as though she were making a nature documentary. The comparison reflects her interest in behaviour rather than spectacle, in watching people when they are not consciously performing for the camera.
“I really love the natural cadence of how people talk when they're just truly unselfconscious and being themselves,” she explains. Ideally, she says, the camera would feel invisible, allowing people to behave as they might in real life. Although French Girls is mostly scripted, she wanted some scenes to retain that

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observational quality.

She is particularly drawn to the silliness of small talk, conversations that do not appear to be about anything important and the awkwardness that can emerge when people interact at work. These moments are not necessarily moving a plot forward, but they reveal something about the people inhabiting the scene. In a film about fashion, they also create a contrast with the carefully constructed images through which the industry is usually understood.

The distinction matters because Lee does not want every encounter to announce its significance. Life is not always organised around moments of revelation, and people do not necessarily become more articulate or self-aware when something important happens. Sometimes they simply continue talking.
That interest in ordinary behaviour extends to Mia, whose passivity becomes one of the film's defining characteristics.
“She’s much more of an observer than an active participant in her own life,” Lee says.

She sees a connection between Mia's behaviour and the experience of being a model. Models can find themselves in situations where other people make decisions about even the smallest details of their appearance: someone puts on their shoes, applies their makeup or tells them where to look and how to position their fingers during a shoot. They are physically present at the centre of the image, yet much of the work involves following instructions.

For Lee, this makes passivity more than a personality trait. It becomes a source of conflict. Mia's willingness to go along with things can make life easier in the moment, but she must eventually learn to manage conflict, say no and choose a direction for herself rather than simply allowing circumstances to carry her along.
The film does not require Mia to have a fully formed plan for her future. Instead, it questions the expectation that young people must always be actively building towards something. Yet Lee's answer also makes clear that drifting is not without consequences. Being open to experience is one thing; losing the ability to decide what happens next is another.

When ambition becomes a contradiction

Mia's lack of conventional ambition is particularly striking because she becomes increasingly desirable to the industry without appearing to pursue it with much determination. Lee says this dynamic came partly from her own observations of people working in fashion.
She had noticed that some of the most successful models she met were not necessarily the ones most aggressively pursuing modelling. Opportunities seemed to arrive for people who were relatively relaxed

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about the profession, whose energy did not suggest that they desperately needed to succeed.

Lee sees something compelling in this apparent effortlessness. Wanting something too intensely can sometimes become counterproductive, whereas a person who is not trying to force an outcome may appear more comfortable in themselves. Mia embodies that quality, and so does the performer playing her, whose natural presence contributes to the character's effect.
But Lee does not treat this as a simple formula for success. Mia's passivity can work in her favour, attracting opportunities she might not have secured by actively chasing them. At the same time, she risks being swept into a current she has little control over.

It is this contradiction that gives the character her complexity. Mia can appear free because she is not constantly striving towards a defined goal, yet that same absence of direction can leave her vulnerable to other people's decisions. Her circumstances invite the audience to consider whether freedom is simply the ability to move without a plan, or whether it also requires the ability to choose where one is going.

The unexpected ethics of representation

Lee's experience in fashion photography informed her approach to the film, but making French Girls also challenged her assumptions about working with young female performers.
She had initially believed that being a young woman herself would make it relatively easy to navigate those relationships ethically. In practice, she found the process much more complicated than she had anticipated. “The ethics of working with non-actors is really difficult, even when you're trying your best to be ethical,” she says.
Her concern centres on representation, particularly when performers are playing versions of themselves and aspects of their real lives become part of a fictional story.

Communication can be difficult, and even when a filmmaker believes they are acting responsibly, someone involved may feel misrepresented or feel that they did not have sufficient agency over how they appeared on screen.
Lee describes these as ethical grey areas that demand sensitivity. Her answer is revealing precisely because it does not suggest that good intentions automatically resolve them. The filmmaker ultimately has considerable influence over how a person is presented, what material is included and how the finished film shapes an audience's understanding of them.

The decision to work with non-professional performers was nevertheless deliberate. Lee likes the aesthetic of real people and is sometimes frustrated by films in which everyone appears conspicuously attractive or immediately recognisable as an actor. She wanted a world populated not only by familiar stars but also by

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ordinary people, whose presence could make the film feel less constructed.
The choice was also practical. With such a small budget, working with established actors would have been difficult even if she had wanted to do so. A limitation therefore aligned with her creative instincts, although the resulting approach brought responsibilities that extended beyond casting

The tension is especially relevant to a film about fashion, where people are constantly being looked at, evaluated and presented to others. Mia's appearance helps create opportunities for her, but being desirable to an industry does not necessarily give her greater control over her image. Lee's reflections on her own process add another layer to that idea: the person behind the camera also decides how others will be seen.

Looking at fashion with empathy

When asked how she hopes audiences will interpret Mia, Lee does not insist on one definitive reading of the character. Some viewers may see her as free, others as lost. What matters more to Lee is the attitude audiences bring to the people and world depicted in the film.
She hopes viewers will approach the characters, and the world around them, with empathy. In her experience, fashion attracts a particular kind of hostility and condescension. People often project stereotypes of vanity, narcissism and superficiality onto the industry, treating those who work within it as though they are somehow removed from ordinary life.

Lee wants to challenge that distance.
“We all wear clothes, everybody,” she says, comparing fashion to food as a universal part of human existence. The industry may be built around images, but the people within it are not simply the images they produce. Models are often young women navigating complicated circumstances, sometimes in lives they did not actively set out to pursue.
That perspective connects directly to Lee's interest in observation. She does not need to idealise the fashion industry or deny its absurdities in order to ask audiences to look at its people more generously. Nor does she need to make Mia entirely admirable or entirely lost.

When the dramatic becomes mundane

That willingness to let contradictions coexist also shapes the film's movement between ordinary life and more absurd or uncomfortable situations. Lee is interested in the way reality can be stranger than fiction, but also in how dramatic moments can remain stubbornly banal.
She recalls a poem, though she cannot remember its exact wording, about someone experiencing a crisis and weeping on the floor of their apartment. In the middle of that distress, the person notices a crack in the paint and begins thinking about how it needs to be fixed. For Lee, the image captures something

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recognisable about being human: even at the height of an emotional upheaval, the ordinary world does not stop demanding attention.

She tries to bring that quality into the film. In one scene, a dramatic situation unfolds at a police station while people are also complaining about the parking system. The mundane detail does not cancel out the seriousness of what is happening. Both exist at once.
It is a useful way of understanding the film's tonal shifts. Lee is not necessarily trying to push every scene towards a bigger dramatic payoff. She is interested in how people inhabit situations, including the small distractions and frustrations that persist even when something consequential is taking place.

That approach also helps explain why Mia does not always respond to events in the way a more conventional protagonist might. Life does not reliably announce what matters, and people do not always understand the significance of their own experiences while they are living through them. Lee's observational style leaves space for that uncertainty, and lets us sit with it.

Georgia Noe: Finding the potential in an unconventional proj

For producer Georgia Noe, the appeal of French Girls lay in Lee's vision, the world she wanted to create and the people who had come together around the project. Noe recognised that the film was unconventional, but rather than seeing that as a reason to question whether it could sustain a feature, she was drawn to the opportunity to help make something different. The financial reality made the undertaking particularly unusual. Noe described the film's budget as roughly equivalent to what someone might earn from writing an episode of a Paramount television show. For an independent feature, that meant a great deal depended on people's willingness to contribute their own time and resources.

As Noe explains, not everyone is in a position to put their own resources into making a film. Getting a first-time filmmaker's project off the ground can be especially difficult within a local industry where opportunities and funding are limited. A great deal therefore has to fall into place before a project like French Girls can become a reality.
What excited Noe was the possibility of being part of a process that offered unusual creative freedom. She felt the film was being made under circumstances that might not easily be replicated, and she wanted to take part in that journey. At the same time, she recognised that the route to an audience would be unconventional and that finding a sales agent or distributor could prove difficult.

Noe also sees the film as something that may outlast the circumstances of its production. Films can become time capsules, preserving a particular moment, group of people and way of working. Even if the path to a wide audience is uncertain, the finished work can remain available for people to revisit and refer back to in

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the years ahead, long after the premiere passes.

Working around the limitations

The film's limited budget shaped the production, but Noe does not describe it as a process dominated by one catastrophic financial problem. Instead, the team worked with a minimal crew, called in favours and used locations they could access. The practical approach was to make the most of what was available and adapt when circumstances changed.Some of the challenges came from the lives of the people involved in the production. During filming, Mia was taken to Paris for a major campaign, which resulted in a longer break than anticipated. When filming resumed, changes in the performers' appearances, including their hair, had to be accommodated.

The script was adjusted to work with the circumstances rather than insisting that production continue exactly as originally planned.
Other costs were harder to avoid. Certain tasks required professional help, creating expenses that could not simply be resolved through favours or improvisation. Post-production also depended on waiting for the necessary pieces to fall into place.
For Noe, patience was the most consistent requirement. The production had to work around people's schedules and circumstances, while accepting that some delays were unavoidable. She notes that many of these obstacles are not unique to small independent films. Locations can fall through and plans can change on productions with much larger budgets, too.

The difference, in part, was the shared understanding among those who had agreed to work on French Girls. Everyone knew what kind of project they were joining and what the limitations would be. Because much of the work was undertaken voluntarily, the expectations were clear, and there was a collective understanding of what the team was trying to achieve. Noe's account complicates the familiar narrative of independent filmmaking as a series of financial emergencies overcome through ingenuity. In this case, the process was also sustained by relationships, patience and a willingness to adapt. The production's limitations were real, but they did not necessarily become a source of constant conflict because the people involved understood it.

What comes after making the film?

When asked what she would carry into her next project, Noe does not identify the production process or the budget as the central lesson. Instead, she returns to the challenge of getting a film into the world.
She wants to continue working with female-led stories and helping emerging filmmakers secure their first opportunities. She sees value in being part of a process that allows new voices to make work, particularly when those filmmakers might otherwise struggle to get a project off the ground. Noe is still emerging

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herself, and she speaks about this as a shared journey rather than a position from which she has already reached a final destination.

Yet her experience with French Girls has also made her think more carefully about distribution. It would have been valuable, she says, to have a distributor or sales agent involved earlier in the process. The film had its world premiere in Sydney and also screened in Melbourne, but securing the right route to a wider audience remained difficult.There is no easy fix, Noe acknowledges, and no single formula that guarantees a film will find its viewers. Nevertheless, she sees the relationships created through French Girls as an important outcome. The experience has connected people who may work together again, and those connections could lead to greater interest and more opportunities for future projects.

Her answer brings the conversation back to the distinction between making a film and ensuring that people can see it. Creative freedom and committed collaborators can make an unconventional project possible, but they cannot, on their own, guarantee distribution. For Noe, thinking about the pathway beyond production is something she wants to take seriously into her next work.

Making space for the unfinished

Speaking with Lee and Noe reveals two connected but distinct perspectives on French Girls. Lee is interested in the distance between how people are seen and how much control they have over their own representation. Her observational approach allows characters to remain awkward, contradictory and difficult to categorise, while her experience with non-professional performers has made her more conscious of the ethical responsibilities involved in translating real lives into fiction.

Noe's reflections bring the realities of independent production into view: the generosity required to make a small film possible, the need to adapt when circumstances change, and the difficulty of finding an audience once the work is finished. Her experience suggests that a film's creative journey does not end when production wraps. In some ways, another uncertain process begins.
In French Girls, being seen does not necessarily mean being understood. Mia's apparent freedom is complicated by her passivity, just as the attention she receives does not necessarily give her control.

Behind the film, Lee and Noe have also had to negotiate the gap between intention and outcome, whether in representing real people or finding a path for an independent work to reach viewers.
Neither offers an easy resolution. Perhaps that is fitting for a film whose interest lies in observing rather than explaining everything. French Girls leaves room for ordinary moments to sit alongside the absurd, for people to remain contradictory, and for both filmmaking and life to unfold without always knowing where they are going.

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