Deconstructing the Filmmaker's Gaze

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Deconstructing the Filmmaker's Gaze

An Interview with Céline Sciamma

by Maria Garcia

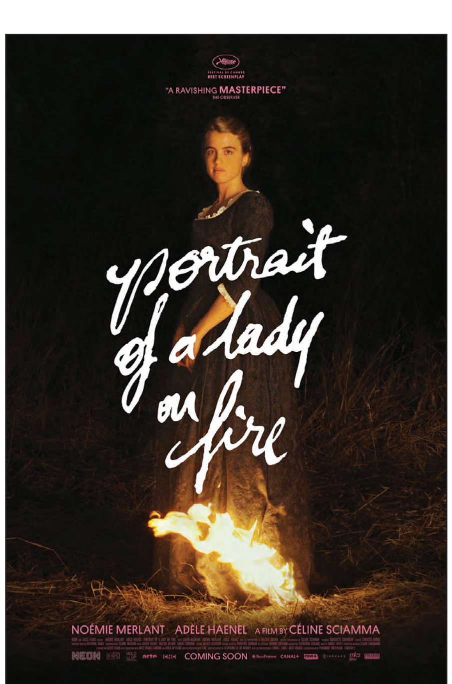
Photo by Claire Mathon

Portrait of a Lady on Fire, which screened at this year's New York Film Festival, establishes thirty-nine-year-old Céline Sciamma as among the world's finest directors. The movie is set in the eighteenth century, and co-stars Adèle Haenel for whom the part of Héloïse was written. This is Sciamma's first period film, and the first of her films to feature adult characters. It is a long flashback that begins when Marianne (Noémie Merlant), a portrait painter, recalls her brief friendship with the enigmatic Héloïse. Summoned from a convent school after her sister's death, Héloïse learns that she will take her sibling's place in an arranged marriage with a Milanese nobleman. In defiance of her mother's plans for her, Héloïse refuses to sit for a portrait, to be sent to Milan and that will seal her fate. Marianne is thus hired to pose as a companion and to paint the portrait in secret.

Making her first period film, the director of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* finds a new canvas for her insights into the complexities of female relationships and sexuality.

In *Water Lilies* (2007), Sciamma's debut, she portrayed a teenage threesome in which one of the girls in a heterosexual relationship (Haenel) has her first sexual experience with a female friend. That is a surprisingly uncommon event in films about girls. Best-known here for *Tomboy* (2011), her second film, the story of an adolescent girl who masquerades as a boy, and *Girlhood* (2014), her third, that follows a band of young black women from Paris's working-class suburbs, Sciamma's work is significant for its exclusive focus on girls and women. When not engaged in her own projects, she writes for other filmmakers; Sciamma penned Claude Barras's *My Life as a Zucchini* (2016) and André Téchiné's *Being 17* (2016). This year, she garnered the Best Screenplay prize at Cannes for *Portrait*.

The movie's title shots feature a woman's hand grasping a charcoal pencil; the hand sweeps over a white canvas, in anticipation of the first stroke. A cut to a wider shot shows Marianne's studio in which several female students are gathered to draw her visage. "First my contours," she tells them, and "then my silhouette." She warns her students to "take the time to look." The scene is as much an introduction to Marianne, through whom the story unfolds, as it is a lesson for the audience. Portraits on canvas, and on film, are constructed similarly, beginning with the "contours," the sketch that precedes the finer work accomplished by "looking" or by the artist's gaze. Sciamma's female gaze is decidedly feminist.



Marianne must commit to memory Héloïse's "contours," at first the shape of her ear, and then the line of her jaw. On their first walk along the Brittany beach near Héloïse's home, Sciamma uses subjective shots of Héloïse from Marianne's point of view, eliding the triangulation of the male directorial gaze—generally unattributable to any character in the film—designed to derive pleasure from the female body. ("Male" is used to distinguish the nature of the gaze, not the gender of the filmmaker.) Significantly, when Marianne's "looking" approaches desire, there is surprisingly little difference in the choice of shots; eroticism is minimized, making objectification nearly impossible.

Realistic representation of women and girls is a defining quality of the female gaze. In each of Sciamma's films, including *Tomboy*, female friendships are acknowledged as inherently physical, in contrast to those of men and boys. Heterosexual girls stroll hand in hand and lie on beds together, as they do in real life, and women and girls embrace and kiss; girls "dress up" as a form of play and teenagers trade clothing. Marking her departure from girlhood, *Tomboy*'s protagonist removes her T-shirt so she is naked from the waist up.

For Sciamma, female sexuality is fluid and sexual liaisons are often serendipitous. Héloïse and Marianne could be bisexual, heterosexual, or homosexual. Their bond first springs from their shared sensibilities: Héloïse's anger at her mother for selling her in order to support them, and Marianne's sympathy for that anger, are treated as understandable and commonplace, acknowledging the long history of female bondage under patriarchy. The democratizing female gaze erases class differences, too: Marianne, Héloïse, and Sophie (Luàna Bajrami), the housemaid, represent three different segments of society, yet each struggles for some measure of independence.

In a delightful scene, the three women discuss the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, an archetypal story of star-crossed lovers—and perhaps an inspiration for *Portrait*. This reflexive element, a defining attribute of the female gaze, is as significant as the instance of intertexuality represented by the Ancient Greek myth. Forbidden love chronicles the failures of patriarchy and shatters the illusion of personal freedom. Sciamma's choice of myth is also a reference to female bisexuality. Though married to Orpheus, Eurydice was in the woods with the naiads (female river nymphs) when she died from a snake bite. Shot in tight, shadowy close-ups, the scene is an excellent example of Sciamma's use of mise en scène to represent the women's constrained lives.

Shared authorship is another element of the female gaze. In *Portrait*, after Héloïse declares her disappointment with Marianne's painting, the artist realizes that she has forgotten her own instructions to her students to "look." Viewers will be reminded of that title shot of the indecisive hand moving across the bare canvas—Marianne's hand. She is Sciamma's stand-in, so that shot is reflexive and inclusive of the audience. It invites viewers to reconsider the affection between the two women, especially when Héloïse finally agrees to sit for Marianne, inviting her to "look" freely.

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Héloïse (Adèle Haenel, left) and her portrait painter Marianne (Noémie Merlant) progress from friendship to romance in Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*.

Sciamma's female gaze is felt in the persistent theme of possession in Portrait. *The need to possess is the defining quality of patriarchal societies, the root of female oppression. When Marianne and Héloïse kiss, instead of eroticism Sciamma delivers a denouement. Marianne tells Héloïse that through the painting she will give her to another, and Héloïse accuses her of bearing a grudge. Marianne would have Héloïse resist her fate, but even as the audience senses that will not be the case, and the women look to the future, the moment of their lovemaking is evanescent. Marianne learns from Héloïse how to live in that instant, in the bonfire scene that sparks their desire. In her struggle to contain Héloïse's wisdom in the frame of the canvas, Marianne is freed of the need to possess her.*

Cineaste *spoke with Sciamma when she was in New York for the screening of her film at the New York Film Festival.*—**Maria Garcia**

Cineaste: *So many people say that Xavier Beauvois is a mentor to you, but I don't see it in your films. Are there other filmmakers or movies that have influenced you?*

Céline Sciamma: I am a cinephile and cinema has been the center of life for me since teenagehood, but when I make a film I'm not much into references. For instance, I never watch films several times. I always like to discover new things. A mentor would be Chantal Akerman. I had thoughts of her during the film. Rather than references, there are directors I always think about—Jacques Demy, Jane Campion, and Akerman. It is not about their style; it is much more about the fact that they invented something. There is this belief I have in cinema and my thoughts about some filmmakers that make me brave when I am about to make a film.

Cineaste: *In your first shot of Héloïse, when we see the back of her head, covered by the hood of her cape, what flashed through my mind was* Camille Claudel *[1988]. I am not sure why—maybe she, too, had a cape—but also because it was another rare film, especially in the 1980s, in which a woman's gaze seemed to prevail.*

Sciamma: That's because it was the project of Isabelle Adjani. Bruno Nuytten directed it, but it was Isabelle's project. And, yes, it was a rare film.

Cineaste: *Do you write quickly because an idea for a film has been in your head for a long time? Also, are your screenplays very detailed in terms of camera placement and movement?*

Sciamma: I think about the film a lot and then write quickly. The process of writing for this script was three months, which is very short. I thought about it for three years. I wrote *Tomboy* in two weeks and shot it in twenty days, but this one took a long time to write and film. I gave up on it at one point. My scripts are detailed, like the films. There are not many sequences. The scripts are accurate but not profuse. I indicate a lot of sound in the screenplay, but no camera rules because I'm not a storyboarding kind of director. Even if it is not written, though, I have choreography and rhythm in mind. The gazes are written in because this film is about women looking at each other; they were noted in the scene as turning points, for instance.

Cineaste: *Your film is a long flashback in which Marianne's memories are triggered by her painting of Héloïse. We are reminded of this in the scene where Marianne, Héloïse, and Sophie, the maid, are reading the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice. Marianne says that Orpheus chose the treasured memory of his wife. Is the memory of love the subject of your film?*

Sciamma: The dynamic of the lost love is clearly at the center of the film, and the movie is a big flashback, but those two timelines—the memory and the chronicle of this love being born—are somewhat contaminated by one another because Marianne has these visions of Héloïse in a white dress, a dress she has never seen. She is haunted by a future image of her, which might be the case with all love stories. We are obsessed with the way they start and maybe already haunted by how they will end. It is not about cherishing the memory; it is about cherishing the dynamic of love. I recall a sentence from an American poet, Mary Oliver [1935–2019], who passed away recently. She wrote that a broken heart is an open heart that will never close to the world. Love makes us curious about both love and art because art is about love.

We can talk about this idea of living in a memory rather than in the moment, but I tried to craft a film that says "I love you" is always something that you say in the future. I don't have a reference but I thought a lot about *Mulholland Drive* [2001]. The entire structure of that movie is about how "I love you" is always something you say in the past. These two women meet, and an hour later they're saying, "I'm in love with you." As viewers, we are like…what? It's because it has already happened. I tried to craft a film to explain that "I love you" is always something that you say in the future. I don't think it is about fetishizing the memory. I think it is about creating this new dynamic, proposing another image of love. It is not about possession or separation; it is more about being open.

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In ***Portrait of a Lady on Fire*,** **the initial friendship between Héloïse (Adèle Haenel) and Marianne (Noémie Merlant) grows out of the recognition of their shared sensibilities.**

Cineaste: *At the beginning, Marianne disembarks from the boat that brings her to the island where Héloïse lives. Your editing is quite noticeable. It makes no pretense of real time. Did you want to avoid the illusion of real time?*

Sciamma: The movie makes different pacts with the audience. The first one is that there is this woman on a boat. She is going to jump into the water when the chest that contains her canvases goes overboard—and the movie is going to jump into the water, too. This action scene is not conventional—it is not what this woman would do in another film. Then you have another pact, that the film's pace and rhythm is going to be different, and that there will be no transitions, only big scenes. There is also another rhythm that harvests each situation and examines it very carefully. I'm not sure that answers your question but, yes, I thought a lot about that transition, from the boat to inside the castle.

Cineaste: *Where did you film?*

Sciamma: There were two locations. All the exteriors are in Brittany, and that was eight days of shooting. The rest were in a castle about fifty kilometers from Paris.

Cineaste: *And you left it relatively untouched?*

Sciamma: Yes, the walls were that color and we didn't touch them.

Cineaste: *It seemed to me, throughout the film, that if I could articulate the nature of the light, I could tell the story. That's a bit of an exaggeration but, just as in a painting, this movie is defined by the light. How did you decide upon the lighting of the scenes?*

Sciamma: Strangely, everybody I spoke with expected that we had conversations about the lives of painters. We did talk a lot about painting, but mostly regarding how we were going to shoot somebody painting as well as show the paintings that we did for the film. My cast and crew were laughing at the thought that we would be asked about how every frame is a canvas. It's true, but it's not about whether it is a Vermeer or a Georges de la Tour. We didn't take the "answers" of any one painter, but instead asked ourselves a painter's questions about the light. It's the same question in the cinema. You shoot your canvas, which is the screen, and that involves the light sources, the color, and the shadows. These are questions a painter asks as well—yet in cinema we also ask ourselves about the music, literature, and painting. We become experts of a sort.

That's what I love about the cinema. I get to ask questions about the other arts and in the process wonder about cinema. Regarding the light, we referred to one painter, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, a landscape artist from the nineteenth century. He made several very beautiful portraits of women in landscapes, and in those paintings the light seemed to be coming out of his female subjects. We liked that. There are a lot of his paintings here in New York.

"The Curious Little Girl," by French painter Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot.

Cineaste: *Your production design is spare and you left a lot of space around the performers. I was aware of your composition, the strong sense of the frame, and struck by the fact that no one walks outside the confines of the frame. In that sense, I thought you were saying something about the women—namely, that their hearts are free but their existence is not.*

Sciamma: Yes, I never photographed the women getting out of the frame. I never do that in my films; I hate that. Cinema is what is in the frame, especially when you are looking at women. Cinema is the only art where you can share somebody's loneliness. That's why cinema can portray women because if you want to share their intimacy, then you have to show the loneliness. Otherwise, if they are in the world, they will be social, especially in this period because it would have been demanded of them. So, yes, the film is a lot about the frame. The frame allows us to look at something and also defines the world.

Cineaste: *One of the two musical interludes in the film is Vivaldi's "Spring" concerto from* The Four Seasons. *Is it a favorite of yours or did you choose it because you felt it was a good fit for the film?*

Sciamma: I never wanted another piece of music for that scene. It was there from the beginning. When I gave up on the film at one point, that scene got me to go back to it. It was Vivaldi all the time. I love it, even though it has been washed out by hundreds of telephone music-on-hold programs. I wanted a "democratic" hit from classical music so that everybody could identify it immediately. Everybody should be able to connect to this moment, and I liked the fact that people would hear it again, not on the phone, and appreciate how beautiful it is.

Cineaste: *And is the woman's chorus music from Brittany? What are the words? Are they Latin?*

Sciamma: Yes, it's Latin, and we composed the lyrics for the film. It is an adaptation from a sentence by Nietzsche that I liked when I was a teenager: "The higher we soar, the smaller we appear to those who cannot fly."

Cineaste: *Your restraint with regard to the sex scenes in the film made me revel in your female gaze, as did Héloïse's insistence that Marianne paint Sophie's abortion. Should we discuss* the *female gaze or your female gaze or both?*

Sciamma: Yes, we can talk about both my gaze and the female gaze. My gaze is definitely a convention. It's been done and redone. In a way, it is easier to talk about the male gaze. The female gaze is a departure from that and I think it can be achieved by both men and women filmmakers. Just because you're female does not mean that you automatically have a female gaze. You have to deconstruct and learn to invent. I hope we are collaborating to achieve this revolutionary gaze.

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Cineaste: *The first time we see Héloïse, we wonder if Marianne is seeing her as a painter or as a lover. I don't think I've ever encountered that confusion in a film with a male gaze because in that case it is understood immediately as erotic.*
Sciamma: Yes, I am trying not to objectify or to sexualize. The aim is to share the experience of the character, rather than being a triangulation between the director, the woman, and the viewer. It is about a departure. This is not about being politically correct, which is not relevant; it is about inventing new stories and new emotions.
Cineaste: *In the scene in which Héloïse and Marianne are in bed together, you depict the moments after sex, but what else did you do that makes it a female gaze, not one pointedly given to eroticism through the viewing of the naked female body?*
Sciamma: I don't find it that difficult, I must say. It's a big philosophical question, but you find a "local" solution. That's the definition of cinema. If you set out to do a horror film, you must find a way to scare people. At that point in the film, when we share their intimacy, they are both in the frame. They're naked but they're not exposed; even the way their breasts are flat against their chests is natural.
Cineaste: *And they're talking.*
Sciamma: Yes, that's right. It's all those things, in addition to the fact that the camera is still and not traveling around the body. There is no editing in that scene. The female gaze is also a grammar that develops within the film; by the time of that scene, we respect this character. This is an image among many other images. You can show nudity, and maybe I could have shown graphic sex, but it still would have felt okay to be in the room with them because it is not at all voyeuristic. It is also about how the images are a dialogue and how you build trust with the audience. In that scene their being naked is just a fact. We take pleasure in the fact that they're naked because we share their intimacy. The female gaze is mostly about sharing the experience of the character and having a very active gaze because when women are objectified, the gaze is reactive.
Cineaste: *I didn't think much about Sophie's pregnancy until the scene where the boatman is in the kitchen with her. He's rather rough, and I wonder if you were suggesting the possibility of a rape.*
Sciamma: I don't know if she was raped, but I think the man has something to do with the maid being pregnant. I never think about the backstories of my characters. They're not people. They don't exist. It's a hypothesis. I did not want the viewer to think that she would get an abortion because she was raped. She's getting an abortion because she doesn't want that child.
Cineaste: Water Lilies, *Catherine Breillat's* The Sleeping Beauty *[2010], and only one or two other films I can think of are about a heterosexual or bisexual woman's first sexual awakening with another woman.*
Sciamma: There was Todd Haynes's *Carol* [2015], but you mean the first sexual experience. You're right—*Water Lilies* is the same, but maybe they both are heterosexual or bisexual. They are in a category that maybe didn't exist at the time. We referred to "Sapphic love" then, and I hate to think of those times. It's not a word I would use today. I wanted to portray the rise of sexual desire but that was mostly because in my previous film, *Girlhood*, it was about teenagehood. It is a contemporary story about the rise of desire as a realization of self.

In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, these are grown-up women. Yes, it is the first time for Héloïse, but I wanted to portray a love story that is not about self-realization or the first discovery of one's self; it is about being with another person and this chemistry is quite different from *Water Lilies*. Also, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is about the long period of desire that occurs before love. I think this contemplation of desire is not portrayed often enough. The film is also about two women, so there is no gender domination. Another dynamic is at work, and in the eighteenth century there was not even a way to talk about that relationship. ■

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