

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
April 2020

Portrait of a Lady on Fire (dir. Céline Sciamma, 2019)

Cast

Marianne, painter: Noémie Merlant: Previous hit *Heaven Will Wait* (16), as radicalized teenager
Héloïse, subject: Adèle Haenel: *Suzanne* (13); *BPM* (17); won two Césars, the French Oscars
Sophie, servant: Luàna Bajrami: *Happy Birthday* (19), with Catherine Deneuve; from Kosovo
Comtesse, mother: Valeria Golino: Love interest in *Rain Man* (88); prolific actress and director

Off Camera

Writer/Director: Céline Sciamma: Has directed four features and written scripts for others
Cinematographer: Claire Mathon: Won the César for Best Cinematography for this movie
Film Editor: Julien Lacheray: *Proxima* (19), about a French mom who's also an astronaut
Production Design: Thomas Grézaud: Two other Sciamma films, both set in contemporary era

Other films by Céline Sciamma ...

[*Water Lilies*](#) (2007) – Three teenage girls in a suburb of Paris (one of them played by *Portrait's* Adèle Haenel) meet through their memberships on different synchronized swimming teams. They experience romantic and sexual awakenings during the same period—sometimes via the same local boys, and sometimes via each other. Sciamma has said she chose synchronized swimming as a subject because to her it embodied “the *job* of being an adolescent girl: all this beauty and elegance performed above the waist, and all this hard work and confusion below.”

[*Tomboy*](#) (2011) – Extending her capacity to treat childhood gender and sexuality with remarkable tact and compassion, Sciamma crafted this story about a 10-year-old child of a middle-class French family who, seizing the occasion of a recent move, adopts a new crew-cut and demands to be called Mikaël. The parents, who have always understood this child as a daughter, do their best to understand Mikaël's new gender identity while continuing to wonder if it's a “phase.”

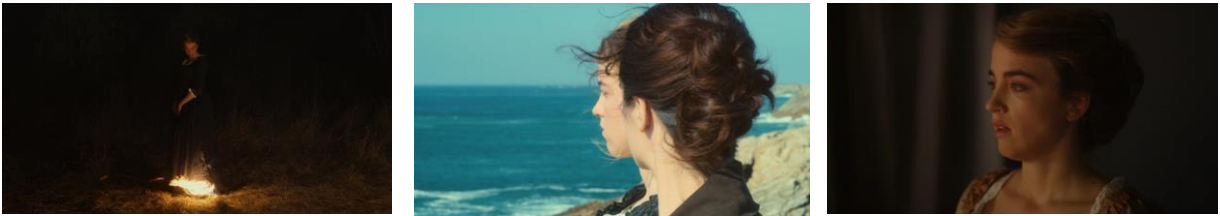
[*Girlhood*](#) (2014) – Resisting the lack of Afro-French characters in France's movies, this story follows teenage Marieme, a struggling student in an abusive household who takes up with three other black girls in her neighborhood who have formed a sort of gang. Through these relations, Marieme achieves some independence, but not always in healthy or sustainable ways—and eventually she may need to achieve her autonomy from this group of girls as well.

[*My Life as a Zucchini*](#) (2016) – Sciamma co-wrote the script of this hour-long, Oscar-nominated stop-motion animation film about the misfit kids at a French orphanage, and the camaraderie and joy they find in each other even as their lives remain sad, with plenty of setbacks.

[*Being 17*](#) (2016) – Another case of Sciamma being recruited by a different director to co-write a script—this one about two boys, initially enemies, who get raised by the same military wife in rural France during her husband's deployment. The boys eventually fall in love.

Facts about *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* you may appreciate...

In different interviews, Sciamma has described how her creative process began with a series of crucial images that a story might connect. These included, not surprisingly, the actual shot of Héloïse on fire, but also the shot of artist and muse standing so close together that their faces almost merge, and the long final shot of Héloïse at the orchestra, seen from the distant artist's perspective but also the audience's own perspective, now that we have learned to observe the way a painter might. It was not until she'd been working on the script for over a year that she devised the idea of having to paint a reluctant subject in secret, for extra drama. Thus, she could plot a sequence from a "stolen" gaze to a "consensual" gaze and then a "mutual" gaze.



Embarking on her research, Sciamma discovered around 100 female painters who produced work or even sustained careers in the 18th century, virtually all of whom had fallen into historical obscurity. (She also found evidence of at least a few female art critics, working in a profession that has seemed even more closed off to women across history.) Sciamma decided that a biopic about one such woman would raise interest in *that* figure and make her appear exceptional. By instead constructing an invented woman, borrowing traits from lots of different case studies but also using her own imagination, Sciamma could offer a paean to a collective experience and a whole *idea* of women whose talents were effaced in their era—but nonetheless, they persisted!

Sciamma had worked with Adèle Haenel many times before but knew that playing the refined, physically controlled Héloïse would pose a welcome stretch for an actress who has mostly thrived in very contemporary dramas and comedies. Noémie Merlant, who plays the painter, was a new collaborator for both of them, and Sciamma elected to have no rehearsal period so the women's gradual acquaintance with each other could be caught authentically on camera. Sciamma has described how often people assumed from early press reports that Haenel must be playing the painter, because the role of a muse or model was too passive or "weak" for a major, multiple award-winning actress. This only fed Sciamma's and Haenel's drive to tell a story that refuses to make models or muses into passive, weak figures with no creative input.

Merlant has described how Sciamma's scripts are *extraordinarily* detailed, mapping out exactly when the actor should take a breath, when they will pause for a silent look, how many steps they take toward or away from other actors or objects, etc. At the same time, Sciamma invited unusually free collaboration with her actors: *What kind of look are you giving the other person in the scene? What do you think your character is feeling?* Not only did Merlant appreciate this way of working, but it helped her connect with Marianne's and Héloïse's experiences as women living within considerable constraints but also finding loopholes for self-expression.

Speaking of freedom and constraint, let's pause to consider these two actresses having to wear those enormous gowns and 18th-century high-heels while trudging through wet sand! 😞

As preparation, director Sciamma, cinematographer Claire Mathon, and [Hélène Delmaire](#)—the young painter who produced Marianne’s canvases for the film—visited the Louvre to seek inspiration. They dwelled on brush stroke techniques and lighting effects in paintings by such women as [Artemisia Gentileschi](#), [Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun](#), and [Adélaïde Labille-Guiard](#), all of whom lived earlier than this film’s era, and by well-known 18th-century male contemporaries like [Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot](#), [Jacques-Louis David](#), and [Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin](#).

Sciamma and her producers secured financing and clearances to shoot on location in Brittany in fall 2018, expecting the seasonally gray, “Brontëesque” skies of autumn would suit the Gothic visual mood Sciamma had originally envisioned. They discovered, however, that the fall was unusually bright and sunny! The filmmakers seized this opportunity to remind themselves they didn’t want *Portrait* to play primarily as tragedy but as a story of freedom, in art and in love.

The real difficulty posed by the weather of the exterior shots was that it had to be reproduced later when the crew moved to an empty, 150-year-old castle outside Paris, where they subsequently filmed all the interior scenes. Not only did this historical landmark pose challenges for a shoot—nobody could attach any lights to the walls or ceiling, and sounds tended to reverberate in the cavernous spaces, etc.—but the light coming through windows had to look as bright as what they’d captured weeks earlier by the sun-splashed Atlantic. Meanwhile, approximating the lighting effects of 18th-century portraiture, where light seems to emanate from *within* the subjects rather than from any external source, required its own lighting-design miracles. The team’s ingenious but extremely difficult solutions will be easier to describe in conversation!

Portrait of a Lady on Fire reaped extraordinary reviews at last year’s Cannes Film Festival, where the big winner was *Parasite*. *Portrait* settled for the Screenplay prize and was picked up for U.S. distribution by Neon, the same company that released *Parasite* here. The unprecedented response to the Korean film made it hard to release or promote *Portrait* as vigorously as the company had intended, which is why the movie’s national release got delayed by two months. (They had initially intended a Christmas release.) The movie won the Best Cinematography prize from many American critics’ groups last year and was nominated for 10 Césars, which are the French Oscars—winning for Cinematography there, too. At Neon’s victory party for *Parasite* on Oscar night, director Bong Joon-ho made a speech in the room about the brilliance of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, describing its huge box-office performance in South Korea (more viewers than anywhere else but France!), and urged people to spread the word in 2020.

Broad conversation topics about *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*...

Freedom vs. Constraint: As I’ve mentioned, Sciamma and her collaborators saw the opposition of freedom and constraint as the informing tension within the story, as well as in their own process of making it. As you watched, would you say your thoughts tilted more toward the burdensome impositions on the characters’ lives (the forced marriage, the dead sister’s protest, the servant’s predicament, Marianne’s labors of finding work, the prohibition against exhibiting her paintings under her own name) or were you more preoccupied with the various freedoms and resistance these characters managed (Marianne’s ability to work and avoid marriage, Héloïse’s success in deferring her mother’s plan, the love affair, the abortion, the reciprocity and mutual support sustained over the week among all three women)?

Taking Instruction: Both the storyline and the filmmaking in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* often feel designed to help us “see” the way Marianne does—sharing her desires and emotional perspectives, but also her meticulous, painterly gift for observation. Many shots of Héloïse, especially when Marianne is just getting to know her, are filmed directly from Marianne’s POV, so that *her* process of studying Héloïse is identical to *our* getting to know her. Did you find, over the course of the film, that you were relating to faces or to entire shots the way Marianne might—appreciating subtleties of profile, posture, movement, fabric, light, etc.? Did *you* admire her first completed portrait of Héloïse before both women decided it was a failure? Did you “see” in Héloïse what Marianne does: her anger, her nervous habits, etc.? And/or did you see in Marianne what Héloïse eventually describes about her? Did you feel by the end that *Portrait* had trained you in a new way of seeing, or sharpened your senses?

Artists and Muses: One [admiring reviewer](#) called *Portrait* a “complete deconstruction of the artist-muse relationship.” Indeed, Sciamma and her leads maintain that they all wanted to demonstrate that muses, models, actresses, and other people who are the visual *objects* in art are also creative, mindful *subjects* in helping to shape and determine that art. Sciamma also had a [funny quote](#) about how often she’s been praised for managing to depict these women’s bodies and desires without being voyeuristic or exploitative: “It’s not like you have to scratch your head for hours thinking, ‘How am I *not* going to objectify this woman?’ It’s not that hard!” How would you describe your sense of the power dynamics between Marianne and Héloïse? Is it so simple as there being *no* power dynamic? Is “power” not a useful word?

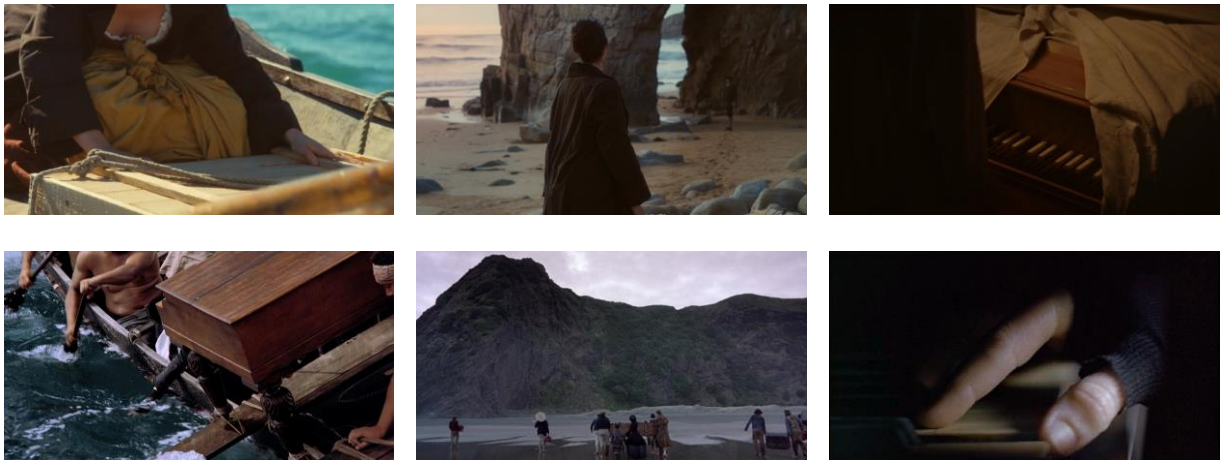
Remembrance of Things Past: Within the narrative, the love affair between Marianne and Héloïse is already presented as having happened “a long time ago”... though it’s surprising that Marianne uses that phrase to her students, since she looks about six minutes older in the framing scenes than in the main body. Still, Sciamma and her collaborators have talked about how much they wanted to explore how new love feels in the moment, especially if you know the clock is ticking. Furthermore, they wanted to pay tribute to how inspiring and affirming love can remain even after relationships end, and your memories of it become more selective, embellished, or poetic. Is this distinction important for how you watched the movie? Did it feel especially significant in relation to specific scenes or moments?

The Third Wheel: This whole sheet has really emphasized the roles of the two main characters but I think Sophie is a fascinating figure. There’s *so much* to discuss in relation to her. Do you think she’s correct in her guess about Héloïse’s dead sister? Do you think she’s aware of the affair between Héloïse and Marianne? Do you think she would have sought or received Héloïse’s help in securing the abortion if Marianne weren’t also there, and the Comtesse briefly relocated? Did you understand the character as ethnically or racially distinct from the rest of the household (the actress hails from Kosovo, with a last name common in southeast Europe), and if so, does that matter? Would you say that she achieves a kind of equal footing with Héloïse and Marianne while the three are living alone? Is that an idealistic description? What did you make of Marianne and Héloïse’s decision to paint an image of her abortion? Did it matter to you that we do not see her consent to this plan, or see the completed image?

Imitating Life: Writer-director Sciamma was the longtime romantic partner of Haenel, who plays Héloïse. She wrote this script amid their breakup. Does that change the story for you?

Key moments and figures to contemplate in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*...

Image: As we eventually see with “Pg. 28,” artists often embed little tributes to key inspirations or influential texts. The montage of young female painting students at the beginning of this movie parallels the contemporary prologue that director Jane Campion attached to her movie adaptation of Henry James’s [*The Portrait of a Lady*](#) in 1996. Also, the images of Marianne’s arrival to Héloïse’s home echo several images from Campion’s most famous film, *The Piano*:



Character: I haven’t said much about the Comtesse, whose Milanese ancestry marks her, too, as a woman displaced over time by patriarchy and other people’s contracts, but looking now for some control over her own destiny and (possibly?) hoping to secure her child’s happiness. I’ll be curious what you all made of this character, her motives, and her ways of relating.

Costumes: The first costumes we see in the film—the bold red dress in which Marianne travels, the green costume in which Héloïse has been painted, and the blue gown in which the Comtesse receives her new employee—associate these characters with different colors that in some cases will follow them across the movie, and in other ways will rotate among them in suggestive ways. (Look, for example, at what Héloïse and her mother are wearing in the scene when the Comtesse finally returns to Milan and requests that her daughter follow her out of the room, away from Marianne.) The jewel-toned hues of these dresses stand in total contrast to the pale pastels of the interior walls and furnishings, and to the palette outside. How did you see costuming as helping to tell the story or contribute to characterization?



Sound: The labor of painting, like the lives of women in past eras, is often treated daintily by filmmakers, but Sciamma often uses sound to make sure we won’t get that impression. Listen to how heavy Marianne’s crate of canvases is, how heavy the furniture sounds as she tries to move it around, how much exertion goes into prying open the cases containing her stuff...

Image: *Portrait* builds to Marianne’s first glimpse of Héloïse, disguising her first with a hooded cloak and then by positioning Marianne and the audience behind her, all the way through her sprint toward the sea. The mysterious Héloïse’s loose stab at a chignon recalls (and Sciamma has confessed to this intention) the famous chignon of the enigmatic Madeleine in *Vertigo*. Jimmy Stewart’s character follows Kim Novak’s to an art museum (she’s obsessed with portraiture!) and all the way to the San Francisco Bay, into which she jumps. I’m interested in how Sciamma tips her hat to *Vertigo* just often enough to signal another story of romantic obsession, only to push her story into less neurotic, controlling, male-dominated territory.



Language: Héloïse finally turns around, confessing she’s “dreamed of that for years,” Marianne asks if she means dying (“*Mourir?*”) but Héloïse clarifies she means running (“*Courir!*”). As you see, these words rhyme in French, so this exchange flags them as opposites *and* echoes.

Perspective: The camera in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* relates to Héloïse and Marianne with an ambiguous combination of subjective and objective viewpoints. For example, sometimes we assume we’re peering through Marianne’s eyes, only for her to suddenly walk into the frame (so, the shot *can’t* be from her vantage). Sometimes, as we examine each portrait-in-progress, we’re unsure if we’re studying the canvas from Marianne’s or Héloïse’s vantage or if we’re just getting our own chance to look. The same is true of the long shot of Héloïse at the finale. This shot starts by connoting Marianne’s POV but, especially as we zoom closer and closer, more heavily implies the film spectator’s own privileged perspective. In this way, *Portrait*’s camerawork is ALWAYS playing with two questions at the heart of the story. First, who has the power of gazing on another person, and who is the object of that gaze? Second, moment-to-moment or on the whole, does *Portrait* give an “objective” account of what transpired between Marianne and Héloïse, or are we immersed in some subjective POV on that affair?

Identity and Imagination: So many movies about two women—especially when at least one of the two is an artist—have a habit of drawing them into an overtly or implicitly sexual bond while also forcing us to question if one of the women is even “real,” or if the whole story is a figment of one person’s headspace. That trope repeats everywhere from Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* (about two women cooped up alone in a seaside home, and which Sciamma often visually quotes) to David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive*, where the first three-quarters turn out to be a dream one character is having, to Darren Aronofsky’s *Black Swan*, where Natalie Portman’s and Mila Kunis’s characters emerge as two sides of the same psyche, but the basic “reality” of the narrative is an unresolved riddle. *Portrait* makes feints in these directions with its departures from realism—the psychedelic episode where Héloïse’s eyes change, the visions of Héloïse in her satin dress—but I don’t think we doubt these women’s existence.

Music: *Portrait* lacks a music score almost entirely—a brave choice since, as Sciamma has said, trying to communicate two characters falling in love without any musical cues at all is a tall order! It's worth flagging, too, that the two conspicuous uses of music are opposed in almost every way: the excerpt from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* (melodic, all instrumental, male-authored, canonical, instantly recognizable to many spectators) and the spontaneous chorale that suddenly emerges at the nighttime feast by the bonfire (ambient/antimelodic, all vocal, sung exclusively by women, unrecognizable, hard even to discern as "music" when it starts). The Vivaldi comes back in the final scene, which gives it a certain pride of place within the movie's structure...unless you hang around for the credits, suffused by the women's chorus!



Doubling: The spectacle of Héloïse shivering on the beach after her first-ever attempt at swimming recalls Marianne's comparable chill in the early scenes, after diving into the ocean to retrieve her canvases. This is one of *many* instances in the movie when framing, costume, behavior, or other elements present different characters as "doubles" for each other, despite all the other signals we've received that stress their hierarchical or temperamental divisions. That tension becomes important in the ways we hear arguments like Marianne saying, "I'd hate to be in your place" and Héloïse insisting, "We're in *exactly* the same place." Are they?

Costumes: During the interlude when Héloïse, Marianne, and Sophie are together in the kitchen of an otherwise-empty house, in typically unimaginable parity—the artist and the aristocratic daughter cooking, the servant making art—the costumes are suddenly blue, white, and red, the French national colors of Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité. Is this a vision of national utopia?



Image: Sciamma has quoted French memoirist [Annie Ernaux](#), who says, "I don't believe there is a single museum in the world whose collections feature a work called *The Abortionist's Studio*." I.e., how is this widespread and longstanding practice still *so* taboo in all artistic traditions, including that of cinema? What if we take *this* image as *Portrait's* centerpiece?

Other films you might enjoy in tandem with *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*...

Artemisia (1997) – This French biopic of 17th-century painter Artemisia Gentileschi, whose great subject was Judith’s beheading of Holofernes in the Bible, was, like *Portrait*, the work of a female director and a Golden Globe nominee for Foreign Language Film. 20 years later, it’s out of print on DVD and missing from any streaming platform. If public libraries were open, you could rent it—and maybe, once they return, you should! I saw it in the theater way back, and while it’s not a perfect movie, the whole story and several images have really lingered. A complement to Sciamma’s film. (If you speak French, it’s [hiding on YouTube](#).)

[Little Women](#) (2019) – Sciamma’s determined reinvention of the artist/muse relationship as something more than the stereotypical male/female, active/passive, genius/vessel dyad reminds me of Greta Gerwig’s determination to tell the tale of the March Sisters in a way that honors this period-specific classic while also infusing it with modern resonance. Her version re-examines the parts we have distorted and strongly centers Jo’s yearning to produce art.

[Farewell, My Queen](#) (2012) – This movie explores an emotional intimacy and maybe even a sexual involvement that Marie Antoinette may have had with a woman who served her in the final days of her court. I gather different historians lend different levels of credence to this rumored bond. As a different story of how a lesbian affair might have played out in 18th-century France, but also a compelling inquiry into power and history, joining figures we remember with others who get written out of the record, it’s a fair pairing with *Portrait*.

[High Art](#) (1998) – *The Breakfast Club*’s Ally Sheedy deservedly won several big awards for this U.S. indie about a lesbian photographer based on Nan Goldin, having an affair with a young female assistant editor at a photography magazine. When Sheedy’s character decides to make their liaison public by centering her new lover as the subject of her comeback photo spread—knowing that the editor may just be using her as a means to a big break—the movie asks its own version of *Portrait*’s questions about power, gazing, and desire. The debut feature for writer-director Lisa Cholodenko, who later did *The Kids Are All Right* and *Olive Kitteridge*.

[End of the Century](#) (2019) – To me, *Portrait*’s only rival as last year’s best LGBTQ film was this Argentinian story about two men who have a seemingly random hookup while on vacation in Barcelona, only to discover they may be more connected than they thought. It’s a completely different movie from *Portrait*, but it, too, is interested in the line between *seeing* a lover and *imagining* a version of them. It uses amazing, unpredictable twists to explore the differences between what it might be like to stay with someone and what it would mean to let them go.

[Call Me by Your Name](#) (2017) – I know several of you watched this during the award-winning heyday of its release, but revisiting it in the direct aftermath of *Portrait* is a great idea. Both stories believe ardently that love can be transformative even when it can’t be permanent, both use other means than dialogue to convey desire, and the endings have much in common.

[Atlantics](#) (2019) – This puzzling, ghostly, Senegalese tale about a teenage girl, a forced wedding, a missing boyfriend, and a specific time and place differs from *Portrait* in many key respects but *incredibly* was shot back-to-back by the same genius cinematographer. I [love](#) this movie.