

# Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*: What sort of “gaze” does this film reveal?

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14 March 2020

*Written and directed by Céline Sciamma*

*Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*) is a historical drama written and directed by French filmmaker Céline Sciamma (born 1978). Set in the 1770s on a desolate, isolated island off the coast of Brittany in northwestern France, the movie is a static tableau in which three women bond in a world without men.

Marianne (Noémie Merlant), a painter, is rowed out to the windswept coastal mansion where the young, aristocratic Héloïse (Adèle Haenel) resides. The artist has been commissioned to paint the latter's portrait.

The chilly, bleak castle is sparsely furnished. Héloïse's mother, a widowed countess (Valeria Golino), explains to Marianne that she must find a way to paint her daughter's portrait for a prospective wealthy Milanese suitor. The young woman does not want to be painted (and “sold off,” presumably), so the work has to be somehow completed without her knowledge.

In the countess's absence, the two young women—attended to by a spunky maid, Sophie (Luàna Bajrami)—fall in love. Among other incidents, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* treats the drama of Sophie's abortion, which, oddly, Marianne renders in oil on canvas. Much intense and steady staring goes on between Héloïse and Marianne as they eventually move from observing one another to a more intimate connection. Looming over the relationship is the portrait and its ultimate purpose—the arrangement of a socially beneficial (and unhappy) marriage.

The lack of masculine presence apparently makes possible a carefree, unbounded freedom enriched by painting, literature and music. It is a condition simultaneously liberated from and threatened by “patriarchy.”

Even though Sciamma has certain technical skills and a stylish touch, the movie's premise of a manless “utopia” is barren and, frankly, stupid. The director imagines and invents a world matching her own sensibility and proclivity as an upper middle class feminist, not a world many would want to live in. It is possible of course to fill more than one film with the cruelties inflicted on women by men, but

unless those cruelties are recognized ultimately to be the product of *class society*, even fiery exposés wear thin and take on a selfish, self-justifying coloring.

“I wanted to use the tools of cinema so you would feel patriarchy without actually having to embody it with an antagonist,” Sciamma declares in a recent interview with the *Independent*. The filmmaker contends that men in art and cinema are “unaware of their privilege. Ninety per cent of what we look at is the male gaze. They don't see themselves anymore.”

In *Portrait*, Sciamma intends to “deconstruct the male gaze.” According to the theory of the “male gaze,” developed by feminists and postmodernists, the content of one's work is decisively determined by one's gender. Male filmmakers (and artists generally) have treated women merely as objects of desire. Such theorists deny the possibility of a relatively objective and truthful gaze. They forget to ask one critical question: do our *subjective sensations*, no doubt affected or distorted in all sorts of ways (by class, gender, nationality, etc.), nonetheless have *objective significance*? In any event, in considering such works as Sciamma's, it might be more useful to speak instead about the “complacent, petty bourgeois gaze.”

Sciamma (in all seriousness, one gathers) says that *Wonder Woman*, the idiotic, pro-war 2017 superhero blockbuster directed by Patty Jenkins, changed her life. “It's about feeling seen as a viewer,” she says. “*Wonder Woman* is thinking about me. It's thinking about my pleasure, about my sisters, about the history of cinema and women's representation. It gives us joy but also rage. Like, ‘Why do I not get this more often?’ Now, we get it more and more, because there's new writing for women, but it's an addictive feeling. Once you know it, you want it.”

In Sciamma's universe, the few scenes in which they are present suggest that men are endlessly destructive: the uncaring male clods who row Marianne in a small dingy under hazardous conditions don't react when her artistic tools of the trade fall overboard. It is left to her to rescue them (in a scene obviously referencing Jane Campion's *The*

Piano 1993). The rude, brutish gender is also no help when Marianne must climb a cliff to reach the estate. Sophie's horrid abortion is the product of some man's attentions, consensual or not. And of course, Héloïse must meet with the approval of a potential husband who will undoubtedly disrupt or curtail her sexual orientation.

Importantly and tellingly, the filmmaker sets her movie in the period leading up to the French Revolution. She is indifferent, however, to the massive suffering of the population that led to one of the greatest upheavals in history. Maid Sophie is blissful as she romps with a noblewoman and a bohemian. Even a crowd of female peasants have a grand time, singing and dancing during a ceremony in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. If there had been no men, the film's logic suggests, France in the 1770s would have been a paradise—a sentiment not shared by the population nor the thinkers of the day!

This is how Peter Kropotkin, in his famed work *The Great French Revolution, 1789–1793*, describes the conditions in pre-revolutionary France: “The people groaned under the burden of taxes levied by the State, rents and contributions paid to the lord, tithes collected by the clergy, as well as under the forced labour exacted by all three. Entire populations were reduced to beggary and wandered on the roads to the number of five, ten or twenty thousand men, women and children in every province; in 1777, one million one hundred thousand persons were officially declared to be beggars. In the villages famine had become chronic; its intervals were short, and it decimated entire provinces.”

Following the ascension to power of Louis XVI in 1774, Kropotkin writes, “revolts were continually on the increase,” produced by “despair and misery.” In fact, a continuous series of riots broke out between 1775 and 1777. In Paris in April 1775, the rioters “plundered the bakeries, distributing whatever food they could seize among the crowd; but they were dispersed by the troops, and two of the rioters were hanged at the Place de la Grève, and as they were being hanged they cried out that they were dying for the people.”

An approach such as the one Sciamma adopts, a provocative lack of interest in the conditions of the people in the years before 1789, would have been almost unthinkable in French cinema in an earlier day. Here we have the utter self-absorption and social indifference of the crowd that seeks, for example, to lynch filmmaker Roman Polanski.

When the César film awards named Polanski best director for *J'accuse* (*An Officer and A Spy*), defying the diktats of both the #MeToo witch-hunt and Emmanuel Macron's government, *Portrait*'s lead actress Haenel and a dozen other #MeToo supporters marched out of Pleyel Hall in protest. Polanski explained why he decided not to attend the awards ceremony: “Activists are threatening me with a

public lynching. Some have called for demonstrations, others are planning to make it a platform,” he told Agence France Presse.

*J'accuse* is a valuable and compelling film about the Dreyfus Affair, the historic 1894–1906 struggle to clear a French Jewish officer framed on charges of spying for Germany. The Dreyfus case pitted the forces of social reaction in France against the socialist movement and all honest opponents of monarchism, the Catholic Church and the military.

None of this interests people like Sciamma and Haenel. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Haenel frothed: “Distinguishing Polanski [for *J'accuse*] is spitting in the face of all victims. It means raping women isn't that bad.”

Of course, it means no such thing. Polanski pleaded guilty to a single charge of unlawful sexual intercourse in 1977. He was sentenced to 90 days in prison. A psychiatric evaluation concluded he was not a danger to society, and he was released for exemplary conduct. A judge reneged on the deal and threatened to lock Polanski up for decades, leading to the filmmaker's flight from the US.

As Polanski's victim in 1977, Samantha Geimer, has recently explained, “A victim has the right to leave the past behind her, and an aggressor also has the right to rehabilitate and redeem himself, above all when he has admitted his mistakes and apologized.”

With considerable sophistry, Haenel suggests that the effort to suppress *J'accuse*, “isn't censorship—it's about choosing who one wants to watch. And old rich white men, rest assured: You own all of the communication channels.” That Polanski continues to be persecuted by US authorities, that the French government has openly declared war on *J'accuse*, that no distributor in the US, Canada or the UK dares to show what has been an immensely popular film in France—none of this smacks of “censorship” to such sensitive artistic spirits!

It will not take much to tilt this selfish, socially oblivious layer in an explicitly and ferociously ultra-right direction.



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