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FROM OUR HOME TO YOURS

Pre-film lecture by Dr. John Pfeifer



PORTRAIT OF A LADY ON FIRE (Portrait de la jeune fille en feu)

INTRODUCTION

By its title, I expected the film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* to have something to do with the Henry James novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, published in 1881. Knowing the work of French film director Celine Sciamma, I thought perhaps it might be a feminist reworking of the classic novel or perhaps the works would share a common plot with a lesbian twist. I expected, at least, a direct reference to Henry James.

While none of my expectations were realized, what I found was much more. The James novel and the Sciamma film are both portraits of young women affronting their destinies and exploring the distances between their own desires and the male-imposed realities of their time. And that similarity is more than enough to make *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* one of the best films of 2019.

Set in the 18th century on an isolated island off the coast of Brittany, France, this film is a period drama that highlights the lives of two very different women. Marianne is a working-class portrait artist commissioned to paint the portrait of a young woman named Héloïse, who is to be married off to a Milanese nobleman in an arranged marriage. Heloise, who had been living in a convent before the suicide of her older sister necessitated her return and betrothal to that same nobleman, refuses to pose for a portrait which will be sent to the nobleman for his approval of the substitution.

Because she is a reluctant bride-to-be, Marianne arrives under the guise of companionship, observing Héloïse by day and secretly painting her at night by firelight from memory.

The film is book-ended by a pair of events. At the beginning of the film, we meet Marianne, a portrait artist, now teaching life study in Paris to a group of female art students, one of whom stumbles upon her titular painting, an arresting nighttime image of a woman whose dress is hemmed with flames. This painting provides a portal to the past. This painting, we gradually come to understand, is how Marianne has chosen to remember two

weeks she once spent in Brittany, and the film flashes back to the time when the painting was actually inspired. At the ending of the film, we are thrust back into the present and learn what has happened to the two women as they navigate the expectations of a male-dominated 18th century.

There are several reasons that I selected this film to be a part of this year's App Summer film line-up.

First, in a year that was characterized by brutality, violence, pain, and male dominance in foreign cinema, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is a film that celebrates beauty, art, love, and the "Feminine Gaze." According to Rachel Handler (*It's Cinema*, March 27, 2020):

"Believe the hype: The film is beautiful and shattering, a paean to the female gaze that's shot by women, directed by a woman, and starring almost exclusively women. It's the sort of movie that you can't shake: You'll never look at a rocky beach, an armpit, or a book's 28th page the same way again."

Second, the cinematography is beautiful and elegant. Filming took place in Saint-Pierre-Quiberon in Brittany and at a château in La Chapelle-Gauthier, Seine-et-Marne, a commune in the Ile de France region of North Central France. From the rocky coasts of Brittany to the spartan interiors of a formerly grand chateau, Claire Mathon shows her versatility by turning in one crisp and precisely framed image after the other, each a work of art in and of itself.

Claire Mathon's sensuous cinematography, glowing with candlelight and embers, is as much a character as the gorgeous women on screen.

Finally, this film brings biographical details from the lives of major female artists of the 18th century that were minimized at the time and subsequently ignored by history. Celine Sciamma did a lot of research and worked with an art sociologist to develop the character of Marianne. The artist's character in the film is loosely based on the life of Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, one of the few recognized women painters from that era. I will offer more specific details of the connections between the film characters and female artists of that time in a later section of this paper.

FILM FACTS

Principal photography on *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* began in October 2018 and was completed in 38 days — a relatively short period of time for a film of this scale, but required because of limited funding and possible because of the small, all-female cast.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire premiered on May 19, 2019 at the Cannes Film Festival and was selected to compete for the Palme d'Or. Although it lost the Best Film award to South Korea's *Parasite*, Celine Sciamma was recognized with The Best Screenplay award. The film also won the Queer Palm at Cannes, becoming the first film directed by a woman to win that award.

The film was released in France on September 18, 2019. It went on to receive 10 Cesar (French Academy Award) nominations including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, Best Cinematography, Best Production Design, Best Costume Design, Best Sound, Most Promising New Actress, and two Best Actress Awards. It won five French Academy Awards.

It was also nominated for Independent Spirit Awards, Critics' Choice Awards and Golden Globe Awards for Best Foreign Language Film, and was chosen by the National Board of Review as one of the Top Five Foreign Language Films of 2019.

The film was one of three shortlisted by the French Ministry of Culture to be France's submission to the 92nd Academy Awards for Best International Feature Film, along with *Les Misérables* and *Proxima*. *Les Misérables*, a violent film depicting the abuse of poor citizens, especially teenagers of sub-Saharan African or Maghrebi ethnicities by the police and rival gangs, went on to become France's submission for the Oscar. This Academy Award nominee also lost to the South Korean bloodbath *Parasite*. Interestingly, the extremely violent film *Parasite* won both the Best International Feature Film and the overall Best Picture awards at the 2020 Oscar ceremony (the first foreign film ever to win the Academy's Best Picture Award). To be perfectly honest, I did not appreciate *Parasite* as much as the Academy. In my opinion, *Parasite* starts out as a brilliant examination of social class differences in South Korea and quickly turns into a gory slasher film.

Of all the films in this year's App Summer line-up, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* had the most robust release and worldwide box office. The film premiered theatrically in the United States as a limited release on December 6, 2019, followed by a wide release on Valentine's Day, February 14, 2020. At its widest release, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* was shown on 334 U.S. screens all across the country.

The worldwide revenues for the film were in excess of \$9 million, a very respectable showing for a modestly produced foreign arthouse film. In the United States, the film grossed nearly \$4 million. The two biggest international markets

were in France and the Netherlands, earning \$2,304,294 in France and \$638,512 in the Netherlands. The film took in more than a quarter of a million dollars in each of the following countries: Italy, the United Kingdom, Spain and Norway.

The U.S. distribution rights are owned by Neon, and the DVD for Region 1 and Blu-ray for Region A is set to be released by The Criterion Collection on June 23, 2020.

CINEMA AND THE FEMALE GAZE

Before one can fully understand the “Female Gaze” in cinema, it is important to define the concept of the “Male Gaze.” Defining “Male Gaze” is very much like defining obscenity. When the United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart was asked to describe his threshold test for obscenity in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, he wrote:

“I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; ...but I know it when I see it.”

Women and men alike know the “Male Gaze” when they see it.

Tori Telfer, in her article “How Do We Define the Female Gaze in 2018?”, knows it when she sees it and provides this example of the male gaze:

“A camera pans slowly over the curves of a woman’s body — and every woman in the audience rolls her eyes. That sensual, ravenous, kinda porn-y perspective? It’s our old friend, the male gaze, a theoretical term coined in 1975 by the film critic Laura Mulvey that’s pretty much exactly what it sounds like. In cinema, the male gaze looks while the female body is looked at; the gaze can come from the audience, from a male character within the film, or from the camera itself. Think of the scene in *Transformers*, when Megan Fox “fixes” a car by leaning sensuously toward its engine as the camera slithers around her taut abs (she’s wearing a crop top, of course), and then up the front of her body, and then down her back. It’s palpably gross. We’ve seen the technique onscreen a million times.”

She goes on to define the “Female Gaze” later in that same article:

“What is the female gaze, then? It’s emotional and intimate. It sees people as people. It seeks to empathize rather than to objectify. (Or not.) It’s respectful, it’s technical, it hasn’t had a chance to develop, it tells the truth, it involves physical work, it’s feminine and unashamed, it’s part of an old-fashioned gender binary, it

should be studied and developed, it should be destroyed, it will save us, it will hold us back.”

Director Celine Sciamma has earned a reputation of making films that explore gender fluidity, same-sex attraction and the female gaze. She is a founding member of Le Collectif, a French movement aiming to correct the gender imbalance in international filmmaking.

“The fact that men are almost always front and centre of cinema leaves them unaware of their privilege. Ninety per cent of what we look at is the male gaze. They don’t see themselves anymore.”

In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Ms. Sciamma makes a film that showcases women and the “Female Gaze.” There are no men in this film. Both the director and the cinematographer are women. The attraction portrayed on the screen between the two leads is subtle, a slow burn, and the women treat each other as subjects, rather than objects to be possessed or treated as a commodity.

Sciamma’s attention to the female gaze is best described by Tomris Laxly in her review of the film (RogerEbert.com, February 14, 2020):

“It’s not the secret bedroom trysts that Sciamma’s film renders the most erotic. It’s the suggestive longing, the camera’s respectful caressing of the skin, the studious stares that the two women get locked in that prove to be the most rousing. These gazes — first, exchanged out of obligation, then, cherished more and more — are stirring, simply because the lovers-to-be have no choice but to dwell in their private safety when any kind of sexual release seems out of the question for them.”

While the plot and the subject matter could easily have bred a film that was nothing more than a provocative, salacious, lesbian love story (think *Blue is the Warmest Colour*), Sciamma deftly weaves a story of two women helping each other to navigate the patriarchal customs of the 18th century. Sciamma explains her perspective:

“My work has always been about not being conventional and male gaze is convention,” she said. “It’s not just because I’m a woman behind a camera, because women can actually reproduce male gaze, because that’s our education. I think my movies are very much about the female gaze. ... But it’s not going to happen magically if you’re a woman. It’s still something you have to deconstruct, but it’s not something you have to be vigilant about. I don’t have to think, ‘How am I not going to objectify women?’” (From a review by Kate Erbland, *IndieWire*, December 5, 2019)

WOMEN ARTISTS OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

In developing the script for *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Celine Sciamma wanted to develop the character of Marianne in accordance with the historical truth about women artists of that time. Biographical details from the lives of major female artists, as well as prominent citations of their practices, are interweaved throughout the film. According to Sciamma, “the fact that we invented that painter in complete accordance with the historical truth of the time is why she isn’t a fantasy or a symbol.” Scholars have recently begun to recognize the women artists working at the end of the 18th century, and Sciamma elected to “invent one to talk about all of them.”

No artist reflects Marianne’s character more than that of the French portrait artist Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, also known as Madame Le Brun. Like the character of the film, Madame Le Brun attended a convent school and left after her first communion. She too learned the skills of a portraitist from her father who died when she was a teenager. By the time she was in her late teens, Élisabeth was painting portraits professionally to support herself. Her big break came in 1778 with the opportunity to paint the Queen of France, Marie Antoinette, for the Queen’s mother, Holy Roman Empress Maria Theresa of Austria. As her career blossomed, Vigée Le Brun painted more than 30 portraits of the queen and her family, leading to the common perception that she was the official portraitist of Marie Antoinette. She was one of only 15 women to be granted full membership in the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture between 1648 and 1793.

THE ENDING

From the opening scene of the film, we know that Marianne and Héloïse will not end up together as acquaintances, true friends, or lovers. The ending is neither happy nor tragic. The ending simply reflects the way in which women experienced the patriarchal customs of the 18th century. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* tells the story of women from the past in a way that acknowledges both societal constrictions and personal gains. Sciamma has suggested that “women’s progress occurs in cycles. ...I aimed to create a new kind of story, built around the inevitability that my characters cannot end up together ... it would not be respecting the lives of these women to make them even think, maybe we could escape.” In the end, these women cannot change their story; they cannot escape the world into which they were born. I hope you enjoy *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* directed by Celine Sciamma.