

# Feminist metaphors: Women and lesbians in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

Duanduan Fan\*

Shenzhen Foreign Language School, Shenzhen, Guangdong, 518000, China

\* Corresponding Author Email: fanduan@stu.hebmu.edu.cn

**Abstract.** *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is directed by Celine Sciamma and premiered at the Cannes Film Festival on 19 May 2019. The story in this film happens in France in the 18th century when homosexuality was not admitted, and the female social situation is like a commercial good to accomplish their duty for family and wealth. Hence, Celine Sciamma uses some implicit metaphors to release the disadvantaged social status of ladies and to show the ladies' effort to pursue their identity. The metaphors depict the change in the protagonists' inner thoughts. Like the portrait, in the beginning and end of the film, the meaning is different. This paper is based on the scene and plot in *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire* to analyze how the key metaphors convey the message of feminism and the love between lesbians. By telling the love of lesbians, Celine Sciamma shows that lesbians search for recognition of their homosexual identity and want a homosexual discourse. Feminism is comparatively directly depicted by the camera movement, which gives the power for ladies to gaze at others.

**Keywords:** Metaphors, Feminism, Lesbians, *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire*.

## 1. Introduction

*The Portrait of a Lady on Fire* was directed by Céline Sciamma. She helped organize a protest march at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival to draw attention to the festival's chronic neglect of female directors. The political struggle for equal rights drove the creation of *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. Subsequently, this film premiered at the Cannes Film Festival on 19 May 2019. Then, it was released in many countries such as Australia, Ukraine, and Israel. The film depicted the taboo relationship between Marianne, a female artist, and Héloïse, a rich young lady. In this film, Céline Sciamma paid attention to the mature ladies and the love of lesbians. The story in *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire* took place in France in the 18th century. At that period, homosexual relationships could not be carried out openly. Céline Sciamma used a lot of shot-reverse-shots to let the audience suture into the protagonists' point of view, and through these shots, audiences could indirectly infer the emotional progress between them. In this film, Céline Sciamma showed her excellent talent by using the female gaze to depict the love between the lesbians. The movie was nominated for a Palme d'Or at the 72nd Cannes Film Festival, received the Queer Palm Award at the 72nd Cannes International Film Festival, and was nominated for Best International Film at the 35th Independent Spirit Awards. In addition, Céline Sciamma made the 32nd European Film Award shortlist for Best Screenplay. She was awarded the 24th Florida Film Critics Association Best Director Award on December 24 for her work "The Portrait of a Lady on Fire." It is evident from this that the general public enjoyed and found this movie to be quite popular.

Due to its popularity and numerous awards, there are many papers analyzing this film. Some of these papers focus on the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, attempting to interpret how Orpheus and Eurydice represent Marianne and Héloïse. Some papers pay attention to the gazes between the characters in this film. Given the current lack of research on feminist metaphors in this film, this study aims to fill this gap. This paper is based on the plot and specific elements in "Portrait of a Lady on Fire" to analyze how the status of women and the love between lesbians are represented in this film.

## 2. Analysis

### 2.1. Portrait

The marriage was a key point in the film, which directly pointed out the women's social status. In the marriage, the portrait, a metaphor for females, was an object to be gazed at, which was a way of objectifying women. In the middle of the 18th century and before, a woman's role was to be a pretty and serene object, the painting's muse [1]. They couldn't speak and "have no choice" just like Héloïse [1]. The artist would make them pick up a perfect smile to welcome the male gaze from outside the picture frame [1]. The portrait would be sent to a man the girl never met. Like a commercial good, the girl would be chosen by the man. Subsequently, the portrait would accompany the girl to her spouse's home, which represented the girl transferred from her original family to her new spouse. Meanwhile, the portrait itself was evidence of the oppression of women in the mid-18th century. As previously said, the portrait represents Héloïse as a victim of the gaze [2]. It links her to the Milanese nobleman she has no prior knowledge of in the future [2]. Through the portrait on the wall, we can see a woman's tragic life and status at that time. When Marianne first arrives at the lady's home in *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Héloïse's mother informs us that the negative perception of women in society is reflected in their place as the "object" under scrutiny[3]. The portrait serves as both a painting and a symbol that highlights the negative perception of women in society[3]. When people gaze at the portrait on the wall, they are staring at and judging the women. Women had no right to refuse to be gazed at. Like a portrait pinned to a wall, the women were confined to her spouse's side. Also, as portraits are limited by the frame, women's freedom and rights are limited by the rules, conventions, and ideas. This social situation that was not conducive to women was not only caused by men but also maintained by some females. However, even as she recognizes that she was herself reduced to an image and an object of exchange, La Comtesse would see the same done to her daughter, an indication of how women are acculturated to accommodate the gaze and perpetuate the very system that contains them [4]. La Comtesse had the exact same experience and feeling as her daughter, Héloïse. Even though her eldest daughter chose to jump off a cliff to her death in order to avoid this destiny, marrying someone whom she didn't know, La Comtesse still did not resist but kept looking for painters to portray her little girl.

The portrait was like a restriction to women in the mid-18th century. However, through the portrait, Céline Sciamma conveyed the message of feminism and showed the power of women. In an era where females are often voiceless, Céline Sciamma empowers her characters with the freedom to explore their identities and express their voices [5]. When Héloïse and Marianne lay on the bed facing each other, the portrait was no longer the bondage and shackles of women. They escaped from external oppression. The meaning of this portrait was not to win male favor and male viewing. It was just for the sake of remembrance between lovers, which was a way to show these two ladies' desires and emotions. Marianne depicts herself in the mirror as Héloïse sees her—desired and adored—by flipping her reflection [5]. They looked at each other, but they looked in the mirror as well. The power of the gaze shifts between the characters in this scenario [2]. When it arrives to the picture, Marianne, who is typically the observer, is suddenly the object; this time, she is staring at herself [2]. This scene helped demonstrate the equal relationship and sexual desires between lesbians.

In a nutshell, in *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the portrait, an object to be gazed at, symbolizes the loss of women's choice and freedom in their lives. However, when the portrait is no longer because of the mission but because Marianne is willing to paint it from the heart, the portrait becomes a way for characters to seek their identity and desire.

### 2.2. Fire

The fire is an important element in *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. The burning fire illuminates the darkness and attracts Marianne's gaze, eventually leading her to "look at" and "look into" it [1]. The fire not only hints at the relationship between Marianne and Héloïse but also symbolizes female power. *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire* can be interpreted as a portrait depicting a burning lady, with

"burning" considered an action [1]. The first scene featuring fire in *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire* occurs when Marianne arrives at the island and uses the fire to illuminate the room. In this scene, the fire warms Marianne. Under Héloïse's questioning, Marianne admits that the previous portrait, based on stereotypical expectations of a wife, was not vivid. Marianne ignites the previous portrait, whose face was erased, using candlelight, burning the tangible portrait to resist invisible oppression, serving as a metaphor for the women in the film's enduring yearning for freedom [1]. At this moment, Marianne's male gaze starts to dissipate, and the relationship between the two women deepens. The love between lesbians is likened to the fire in Héloïse and Marianne's hearts. The third scene occurs when Héloïse and Marianne attend a bonfire party. They gaze at each other through the bonfire until they notice Héloïse's dress is on fire. That night, their love ignites like a fire. Considering their developing love, the fire can also be interpreted as a fire in Héloïse's heart that becomes the love of her life [1]. The fire represents their burning love, marking a turning point in the film where they both realize and act on their feelings for each other [6]. In *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the burning fire challenges women's disadvantaged social status, resisting being gazed at and symbolizing women's resistance against patriarchal society.

### 2.3. Music

In *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the music, a metaphor of feminism, is mentioned three times. Diegetic music only appears in three moments of the movie, and there is no extra-diegetic soundtrack[7]. The two main protagonists' relationship is emphasized in every musical scene[7]. The first scene is when Héloïse talks about life in the cloister with Marianne. The medium shot depicts the facial expressions of Marianne and Héloïse. Héloïse mentions that the music is what she misses the most. Also, life in the cloister is equal, and she has options. In this scene, superficially, the music is her favorite thing. Actually, the music represents Héloïse's desire to control her destiny and a symbol of freedom. Subsequently, Marianne explains the richness of music from Summer on the harpsichord by playing the piano. At this moment, Marianne is in the male's point of view and still wants to persuade Héloïse not to resist her marriage by pointing out that in Milan, there's a lot of music, and she will enjoy attending concerts there. This reason works because Héloïse really enjoys music. One of the few things, according to her, that could persuade her to get married is the chance to see a complete symphony performance[5]. Finally, the music occurs the last time Marianne sees Héloïse, and Héloïse doesn't notice Marianne's presence. Through the medium shot, the audience is sutured into Marianne's point of view to observe Héloïse's facial expression, with her happiness and then becoming tears of regret. Although Héloïse has the option to attend the concerts, she still loses her lover. This scene resonates with an earlier one in that Héloïse is allowed to go outside to attend a music party for one day, but she is aware of the absence of Marianne. In both two scenes, Héloïse has the freedom to listen to music, but Marianne can be there for Héloïse, and Héloïse loses Marianne. This kind of scene helps demonstrate the love between Marianne and Héloïse: they are an integral part of each other.

### 2.4. Myth

There is a Greek myth that plays a vital role and is mentioned multiple times in *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. Through this Greek myth, Céline Sciamma hints at the tragic end of the story between Marianne and Héloïse. When the countess departs for several days, Héloïse reads the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice to Marianne and Sophie. In this scene, the camera moves slowly sideways and only captures one person at a time. Instead, medium closeups of each lady are shot individually, practically head-on, at an oblique angle, and with eyeline matches connecting the contiguous locations the ladies inhabit (their off-screen looks are triggered by off-screen voices, or they are reaction shots)[8]. Through this kind of camera movement, Céline Sciamma depicts a delicate balance between these three girls, clearly showing their reaction toward others' explanation of the myth. The myth goes that Orpheus loses his lover, Eurydice, because she dies by bitten by a snake. Orpheus decides to venture into the Underworld and tries to bring Eurydice back to life. Touched by Orpheus'

sorrow, Hades accedes to Orpheus' request, on one condition: Orpheus must not look back at Eurydice until they both reached the world above. However, unable to hear Eurydice's footsteps, Orpheus turns back. The Greek myth appears in the film repeatedly, revealing the tragic ending between Marianne and Héloïse. Like Orpheus and Eurydice, they both understand that they must part ways and that all that will remain is a memory[6]. Through the Greek myth, the audience can understand the different thoughts of the characters. Marianne thinks that when Orpheus turned, it was the poet's choice, not the lover's. According to Marianne, Orpheus turned around because, in his capacity as a poet, he thought that Eurydice's memory would hold greater significance for him than Eurydice in person[6]. In Marianne's opinion, Orpheus voluntarily gives up his lover due to his identity as a poet because Orpheus thinks that memory is the best. At the end of the story, Marianne makes the same decision as Orpheus, an artist's choice. In order to pursue her career as an artist, she gives up her lover, Héloïse. Through this explanation, Céline Sciamma makes Marianne become "Orpheus". Typically, this myth is always seen as a male gaze, as Orpheus chooses to view Eurydice. However, Céline Sciamma looks at the myth in a whole new way. Héloïse offers an additional theory, speculating, "What if Eurydice had instructed him to turn around? And if it was Eurydice who had asked him to return?" [7]. Instead of the choice that Orpheus views Eurydice, Eurydice controls Orpheus' emotions, and Orpheus has no way to resist. Héloïse claims that Orpheus disobeyed the law because of his intense love, not because of strict "reason"; he "couldn't resist"[7]. These audacious interpretations offer a feminine perspective on a Greek myth told from the viewpoint of the male protagonist[6]. In the story between Marianne and Héloïse, Héloïse becomes Eurydice, and Marianne cannot resist Héloïse. At the end of the film, the point-of-view shot moves with Marianne seeing the portrait of Héloïse. Marianne walks through the crowd and stares at a new portrait of Héloïse, which is like Marianne hearing Héloïse's voice calling. Héloïse, like Eurydice, controls Marianne's action, and Marianne has no way to resist. Compared with being chosen by men, the ladies have the power to control their destiny and a say in their own story. Héloïse's understanding of the myth also applies to her own story. She does everything she can to resist outside oppression as well as the male gaze to find her own voice and rights.

### 3. Discussion

Undoubtedly, Céline Sciamma is an outstanding French director of the new generation[9]. With only four feature films, she breaks the stereotype and makes a difference in the industry[9]. In *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Céline Sciamma tries to assert that homosexuality is not a new or abnormal thing by depicting the love between Marianne and Héloïse. Sciamma can demonstrate that a lesbian relationship is just as natural as a heterosexual one, unlike many other movies that portray them as forced or humiliating[6]. Like heterosexuality, both Marianne and Héloïse have sexual desires toward each other, which is a way for Céline Sciamma to express feminism. Instead of the male gaze, the audience is invited to align with the protagonists' point of view and their lesbian desires towards each other, undermining dominant patriarchal frameworks. Through this approach, Céline Sciamma expresses the rights of lesbians.

Céline Sciamma aims to give the power of gaze to the female characters in the film. Traditionally, in Hollywood films, the power of gaze is given to male characters, who have the right to gaze at others, and audiences suture into these male characters' points of view to gain pleasure by looking at others. In *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, through camera movement, Sciamma redistributes the power to gaze between the main characters and the audience. The results demonstrate how *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire* uses gazing as a crucial tool for establishing the power dynamic between its primary characters and the spectator, in contrast to the masculine gaze and typical ways of looking in classic Hollywood narratives[2]. Each of Héloïse and Marianne's prolonged looks, stares, and glances in *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire* allows them to "belong" to the other; their back-and-forth combats the gaze's power[2]. Also, the gaze in the film doesn't give the audiences a sense of scopophilia, because the audiences are invited to engage the gaze between these main characters. The

camera movement lets audiences involve in protagonists' gaze. The spectator is no longer simply a spectator but a recipient of Héloïse's gaze[2].

Metaphors like portrait, fire, music, and myth used in *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire* introduce a new way to implicitly depict women's situations and feminism. Through these metaphors, Céline Sciamma indirectly points out the disadvantaged status of women and gives the female characters a chance to control their destiny and resist patriarchal society. Moreover, like codes, these metaphors hint at the development of the story and the change in the relationship between Marianne and Héloïse. Sciamma explained that rather than following conventional painting conventions, such as using an open bird cage to symbolize a woman losing her virginity after marriage, the film's final artwork aims to create a new visual coding that may have real-world implications beyond the cinematic[10]. This is because it demarcates queer space. Prior to this film, the number "28" had no importance; however, the film adds value to it by treating it as a secret between the director and the viewer. In an interview, Céline Sciamma hopes her film will have a real-life influence by expressing how she wants people to acquire tattoos that read "page 28" and wondering if anyone will hide notes on that page.

#### 4. Conclusion

The story in *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire* follows the timeline. As Héloïse's marriage approaches, the affection between Marianne and Héloïse grows deeper and deeper. In this film, there are four metaphors: portrait, fire, music, and myth, to implicitly depict the female's disadvantageous social situation and convey the message that the ladies want to control their destiny and seek their own identity. The portrait, an object to be gazed at, releases the women's situation, which has no voice and loses freedom. Moreover, the fire is a representation that the women make an effort to destroy the patriarchal society and break the stereotype of ladies in the mid-18th century. Also, music occurs in the scene that emphasizes the development of the relationship between Marianne and Héloïse. Finally, mentioned several times, the Greek myth shows the ladies' power that women have a say in their story instead of being chosen by men. Using these metaphors creates a new way to give the female characters the power to control their fate.

In this film, by depicting the love between lesbians, Céline Sciamma tries to assert that homosexuality is as normal and common as heterosexuality. Moreover, through camera movement, the right of gazing is given to ladies and the audiences are no longer spectators but recipients of the protagonists' gaze. Analyzing the metaphors can reveal how the protagonists' inner thoughts change and how the story as well as the relationship between protagonists develop. Also, the metaphors serve as cues to hint at the women's social situation under patriarchal society and the ladies' power to seek their own identity. This paper doesn't show all the details of the metaphors. So there's still room for more thorough analysis and interpretation.

#### References

- [1] Zhao S. Artists and Muses: Identity and Self-Recognition in Portrait of a Lady on Fire and Blue is the Warmest Color//2022 3rd International Conference on Language, Art and Cultural Exchange (ICLACE 2022). Atlantis Press, 2022: 675-681.
- [2] Haagenen-Løkke Y J. "Regarde-moi": Looking at Looking in Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Sciamma, 2019). Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 2021
- [3] Jing L. The "Male Gaze" in Lesbian Sexual Relations - Based on Portrait of a Lady on Fire/2022 8th International Conference on Humanities and Social Science Research (ICHSSR 2022). Atlantis Press, 2022: 1835-1838.
- [4] Waites K J. Subversive Seeing and Sisterhood in Céline Sciamma's Portrait of a Lady on Fire (2019). Female Friendship: Literary and Artistic Explorations, 2022: 79.
- [5] Cheng X. CARquivando o passado, pintando o presente: representações da diversidade e do feminismo no Portrait of a Lady on Fire. Revista FAMECOS. 30, 1 (nov. 2023), e44857.

- [6] Hartawan, M., Agustinus, D., & Santyaputri, L. Content Analysis of Portrait of a Lady on Fire (2019). *VCD*, 7(1), 2022: 29-42.
- [7] Stevens, B. E. "Not the Lover's Choice, but the Poet's": Classical Receptions in Portrait of a Lady on Fire. *Frontière×s : revue d'archéologie, histoire et histoire de l'art*, 2020: 45-58
- [8] Buckland W. The Logic of the Cinematic in Portrait of a Lady on Fire. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 39(2), 2020: 254-271
- [9] Shi J. Analysis on the Scenes of Water Lilies and Portrait of a Lady on Fire//2nd International Conference on Language, Art and Cultural Exchange (ICLACE 2021). Atlantis Press, 2021: 127-130.
- [10] Pelling M. Recentring Peripheral Queerness and Marginal Art in Portrait of a Lady on Fire (2019). *Humanities*, 2021, 10(2): 73.