



VALENTINE'S DAY FILMS

Portrait of a Lady on Fire

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

There are some films so exquisite that any attempt to put them into words feels like an act of violence. Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (the French title translates more accurately as *Portrait of a Young Girl on Fire* – the difference at the level of power and freedom matters) is just such a film. It seems spun of gossamer, at once tensile and tenuous. 'Take time to look at me,' a voice commands in its opening moments. This moment is fleeting, it implies. Appreciate it while you can.

After a brief prologue, the film opens in earnest as artist Marianne (Noémie Merlant) arrives on the Brittany coast sometime in the 18th century. She is sodden and panting, having thrown herself off the skiff bringing her to shore in order to rescue her materials, which have been swept overboard in a gorgeous, wordless scene (and one of very few to feature a man). On the beach, in the dusky half-light, the rocks form a proscenium arch. She wrings out her skirts and climbs to the isolated manor house that will be her lodging for the next seven days.

Marianne has been given a week to paint the portrait of Héloïse (Adèle Haenel), the second daughter of an unseen merchant. The painting will be sent to a prospective suitor in Milan; if he likes it well enough, he will marry the girl. Héloïse's older sister, it's suggested, has killed herself rather than accept the same fate. Héloïse herself has chosen another form of resistance: refusing to sit for the portrait. Marianne's assignment must be carried out in secret with the aid of maid Sophie (Luàna Bajrami), while she poses as a chaperone to the young woman. What follows is a love story, one that is thrilling, erotic and all the more pleasing for feeling at once strange and familiar. The plot incorporates elements of Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith*, Choderlos de Laclos's novel *Dangerous Liaisons* and Stephen Frears's film version, and du Maurier's and Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, as well as the latter's *Vertigo*. A gorgeous, extended shot of a weeping woman listening to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* brings to mind Jonathan Glazer's *Birth* (2004) and Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* (2001).

The film's compositions, meanwhile, recall artworks both timely and anachronistic: turning in the candlelit kitchen, Sophie looks like Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*; Héloïse, her hair escaping from its pins, resembles Gerhard Richter's *Betty*; a portrait spoiled with turps becomes a Francis Bacon portrait. Repeated inserts of a ghostly Héloïse in a wedding dress add a dash of gothic symbolism.

Merlant has the air of a beautiful small animal, an ermine or a mink. Her eyes are quick, dark, darting. Haenel is slower, with the dazed look of an animal bred in captivity. Their very physiques capture the contrast in the two women's freedoms and fates. This is a film of shapes and textures: the seashell curve of a perfect pink ear, the stiff folds of a brocade dress, the scratching of charcoal over crisp cream paper.

Much of the film is a chamber piece, centring on the three women (four if we count Valeria Golino's ambivalent matriarch) within the confines of the house. There are excursions to the exterior, but even here the women struggle to

breathe freely. Their corsets pinch, and they wrap scarves around their faces to protect them from the wind and sand and salty air – all those coarse elements they secretly long for. Time and again these women return to the beach and the boundless horizon. Cinematographer Claire Mathon, who also shot Mati Diop's *Atlantics* (2019) and Alain Guiraudie's *Stranger by the Lake* (2013), once more demonstrates an affinity for water: for rushing sea tides and the foaming crests of waves.

The film's most indelible scene takes place on the beach, as the three protagonists stand around a bonfire with other local women. An uncanny, thrumming sound starts up, one that seems to come from below the world itself and to resonate within our bodies. It is like something from Lucile Hadžihalilovic or Gaspar Noé. Gradually it resolves into the sound of these women singing: 'Fugere non possum' – we cannot escape. There is a paradoxical beauty here. None of these women can flee their fate, but here, in their connection to one another, there is consolation – and something like freedom.

Catherine Wheatley, *Sight & Sound*, March 2020

Céline Sciamma on 'Portrait of a Lady on Fire'

This is a film all about the female gaze. How important was it for you to have a female director of photography, in this case, Claire Mathon?

This was my first film with Claire Mathon. I have always worked with female DPs. I know nothing else. It's more a question for the actors as they've worked on different sets. Cinema has a strong hierarchy. And that's the same even on my sets. I'm in charge; I get to create the world I want to live in for two months. You have power. The question is: what are you going to do with that power? I'm not saying there's no hierarchy on my sets, but I tried to create a more horizontal way of working that is very collaborative. The film is all about that. It's all about how there is no muse. The model and the artist are co-creators. I find it strange that people want to work differently. We should be asking this question to male directors. They seem to enjoy their own company very much.

Even though it's a spoiler, I have to ask about the ending, because, after the slow-burn of the romance up to that point, it opens up such a flood of emotions. Could you explain how you arrived at the moment Marianne goes to the gallery and sees a portrait of Héloïse with the secret 'page 28' reference – the page in the book where Héloïse had asked Marianne to draw herself.

It took me a long time to figure out. I wanted Marianne to see Héloïse in a painting and that there would be a secret within the painting. But what kind of secret? The obvious one in art history is the open door of a birdcage. When a birdcage is open or closed in a painting it tells us about the girl's virginity. When there are animals, it's sexual metaphors. If I were to submit to a convention like this, it would have worked pretty well and people with that knowledge would have enjoyed the little wink. But that's the thing. You want to find something new and think of something that's going to really belong to the film.

And so this book idea finally came up. And suddenly I knew it was the right idea because there's several elements to it. The fact that there will be a finger in the book, and that this will be sexy. The fact that a number is a common

language: everybody will get it, even those who don't speak French. And there's the mystery also because this number didn't mean anything before the film, but it will suddenly: it's that language that you now speak and a world you become part of. It belongs to the film but will live beyond the film. I want people to get 'page 28' tattoos. I wonder if anyone will hide notes at that page. I know that now when I want to hide something in a book, I'll put it on page 28.

You could have ended the film there, but you keep going...

The final scene at the theatre [when Marianne sees Héloïse at a concert] was actually the first scene I had in mind. It was inspired by a poem by Mary Oliver, which says that a broken heart is an open heart to the rest of the world. I wanted a story relevant to today. There was no book to adapt, no painting out there. This is our imaginary, and a tribute to the other imaginaries out there that don't exist. There's nothing worse than realising your imaginaries don't exist – you can go your whole life without seeing things. We're activists for cinema today. We hope you experience something, that we give you the urge to go to the cinema or make some cinema.

Céline Sciamma interviewed by Isabel Stevens, *Sight & Sound*, March 2020

**PORTRAIT OF A LADY ON FIRE
(PORTRAIT DE LA JEUNE FILLE EN FEU)**

Directed by: Céline Sciamma
©: Lilies Films, Hold-Up Films & Productions, Arte France Cinéma
A Lilies Films production
In co-production with: Arte France Cinéma, Hold-Up Films & Productions
With the participation of the:
Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée
With the support of the: Région Île-de-France
With the participation of: Canal+, Ciné+, ARTE France
In association with: Pyramide Distribution, MK2 Films, Cinécap 2
Presented by: Lilies Films
International Sales: MK2 Films
Produced by: Bénédicte Couvreur
Production Manager: Claire Langmann
Assistant Director: Delphine Daull
2nd Assistant Director: Anais Couette
Script Supervisor: Cécile Rodolakis
Casting: Christel Baras
Written by: Céline Sciamma
Director of Photography: Claire Mathon
Steadicam Operator: Mathieu Caudroy
Visual Effects Supervisors: Alain Carsoux, Jérémie Leroux
Editor: Julien Lacheray

Art Director: Thomas Grézaud
Costume Designer: Dorothee Guiraud
Make-up: Marie Luiset
Hair: Catherine Leblanc
Original Music: Para One, Arthur Simonini
Sound: Julien Sicart, Daniel Sobrino
Supervising Sound Editor: Valérie Deloof
Stunt Co-ordinator: Benoît Talenton
Historical Consultant: Severine Sofio

Cast

Noemie Merlant (*Marianne*)
Adèle Haenel (*Héloïse*)
Luana Bajrami (*Sophie*)
Valeria Golino (*countess*)
Christel Baras (*the angel maker*)
Armande Boulanger (*student in workshop*)
Guy Delamarque (*man in the living room*)
Clément Bouyssou (*boatman*)

France 2019
122 mins

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