



Portrait of a Lady on Fire

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

The eruption of Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* at 30th place, the highest new entry in the poll, mirrors the meteoric rise of a director who had just begun her career at the time of the last poll. Her first three films, *Water Lilies* (2007), *Tomboy* (2011) and *Girlhood* (2014), did much to redefine coming-of-age narratives, opening new horizons on youth and queer desire while manifesting a coherent stylistic vision, characterised notably by pared-down visuals. As a result, Sciamma, an alumna of the prestigious Paris film school La Fémis, swiftly rose to the pantheon of French auteur cinema (she scripts all her films). Unusually in the French context, she adroitly coordinated this cinephile pedigree with her lesbian identity and strongly articulated political – including feminist – positions.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire brought Sciamma's work and status to another level. Her first costume film, set on a remote Breton island in the late 18th century, charts in a series of exquisite tableaux the intense passion between two women, a painter, Marianne (Noémie Merlant), and her model Héloïse (Adèle Haenel). Héloïse is to be married against her will to a rich man on the strength of the portrait. After initial resistance on both women's parts, the painting becomes the conductor for their love for each other.

In *Portrait*, Sciamma fights patriarchal oppression first of all by creating a utopian, if temporary, all-women's world. More fundamentally, the relationship between the two women develops as one of reciprocity and equality. The film thus rejects a hierarchical vision of desire and in the process updates the relationship between artist and model and the fetishised figure of the 'muse'. *Portrait's* egalitarian ethos evidently echoes Sciamma's own commitment – among other things she is deeply involved in the Collectif 50/50, which fights for gender equality in the French film industry. But the film resonated with the ambient culture in other ways. When it came out in France in the autumn of 2019, *Portrait* appeared as the perfect illustration of the female gaze, a concept newly 'discovered' in a country that was still coming to terms, only slowly, with the aftermath of the #MeToo movement, about which both Sciamma and Haenel (formerly a couple) spoke out in various contexts. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* demonstrates Sciamma's ability to make a timelessly beautiful film that also crystallises the gender politics of her era.

Ginette Vincendeau, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 2022-23

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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Fri 3 Mar 20:30; Wed 8 Mar 20:30

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Singin' in the Rain Fri 3 Mar 20:40; Thu 9 Mar 18:10 (+ intro by Miles Eady, Film Writer and Curator); Tue 14 Mar 14:30

Man With a Movie Camera (Chelovek s kino-apparatom)

Sat 4 Mar 15:30; Sun 5 Mar 10:30 BFI IMAX; Thu 9 Mar 20:50

Playtime Sat 4 Mar 17:00; Sat 11 Mar 20:30

The Searchers Sat 4 Mar 17:40; Tue 7 Mar 20:35

Seven Samurai (Shichinin no samurai)

Sat 4 Mar 18:50; Tue 14 Mar 18:40

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Sat 4 Mar 19:40; Sun 12 Mar 20:00 BFI IMAX

Tokyo Story (Tôkyô monogatari)

Sat 4 Mar 20:15; Fri 10 Mar 18:00; Wed 15 Mar 14:30

Shoah Sun 5 Mar 11:00; Sun 12 Mar 11:00

Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans

Sun 5 Mar 11:45; Mon 6 Mar 14:00; Mon 13 Mar 20:35

The Passion of Joan of Arc (La passion de Jeanne d'Arc)

Sun 5 Mar 14:00 (with live accompaniment); Wed 15 Mar 20:40 (with score)

Citizen Kane Sun 5 Mar 16:15; Tue 7 Mar 20:30

Cléo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7) Sun 5 Mar 17:45; Wed 8 Mar 21:00

2001: A Space Odyssey Sun 5 Mar 19:00; Thu 9 Mar 18:00

Vertigo Mon 6 Mar 20:30; Thu 9 Mar 14:30; Wed 15 Mar 18:10

In the Mood for Love (Fa yeung nin wah)

Mon 6 Mar 20:40; Fri 10 Mar 21:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:30

Late Spring (Banshun)

Mon 6 Mar 20:45; Tue 7 Mar 14:30; Sun 12 Mar 18:20

The Night of the Hunter Tue 7 Mar 18:00; Sat 11 Mar 20:45

Mulholland Dr. Tue 7 Mar 20:10; Tue 14 Mar 20:15

Beau Travail

Wed 8 Mar 14:30; Fri 10 Mar 20:45; Mon 13 Mar 18:20 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley, Reader in Film Studies, King's College London)

Close-Up (Nema-ye Nazdik) Fri 10 Mar 18:30; Wed 15 Mar 20:50

The Godfather Fri 10 Mar 19:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:15

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