



Lesbian Cinema without Lesbians

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Lesbian cinema without lesbians: portraits, lovers, siblings

JACKIE STACEY

A love story set in the late 18th century on a remote island off Brittany, *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu/Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Céline Sciamma, 2019) turns the act of one woman's intense and repeated gazing at another into a diegetic necessity. The rationale for this attentive observation is the painting of a commissioned portrait of a young woman, Héloïse (Adèle Haenel), to secure her match with a suitor in Milan; his plans to marry Héloïse's older sister have been recently thwarted by her death, assumed to have been a suicide. Having already sabotaged one painter's attempts to fulfil this commission, Héloïse discovers that her new companion, Marianne (Noémie Merant), has been employed to paint her portrait secretly, through surreptitious observation. The intimacy between painter and sitter is established through the suspenseful power play inaugurated by this successful deception; once exposed as such, however, Marianne's initial covert looking develops into an erotic desire whose long, slow burn becomes reciprocal. Opening some time after their affair, the diegesis is almost entirely in the present tense of Marianne's 'longing retrospection'.¹ Héloïse is transformed by the artist's gaze as she moves away from being an object towards becoming a desiring subject, one who looks back and turns the portrait painting into a collaboration. The increasing interchangeability of looking and desiring between artist and sitter organizes the erotic intimacy between the two women throughout the rest of the narrative. The looking that expresses their desires turns the task of one woman capturing the other's beauty on canvas for a man's

1 Emma Wilson, *Céline Sciamma: Portraits* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), p. 98.

pleasure into a painful paradox, with which each must reckon in their own way: if the painter satisfactorily completes the painting, she will be handing her lover over to a man for marriage; if the sitter acquiesces to her part, she will be facilitating her own unwanted fate. It is the artist's insistent, scrutinizing gaze that generates the circuit of desire, but the portrait becomes a kind of third term (created by the two of them) that will destroy their relationship. Inevitable loss thus structures the love story for both women – once a satisfactory portrait has been completed, their love is destined to become a memory. Herein lies the central tension that drives the narrative, even if, as its director Céline Sciamma has claimed, this love story avoids the more conventionally dramatized conflicts of its genre.²

The film's preoccupation with looking and desiring – with the creation and framing of the woman as image and with her place within the cultural imaginary – governs both the unhurried narrative and, as Emma Wilson puts it, the film's 'distinct style, pictorial beauty, clean lines and simplicity'.³ The *mise-en-scène* has a painterly aspect that focuses our attention on qualities of light, colour, texture, costume and setting. Visual rhyming and mirroring is emphasized throughout (figure 1): the women often shown in two-shot, producing an echo between the contours of their profiles, the cut and design of their dresses, the folds of their scarves and the gestures that form their growing intimacy. This 'shot/reverse-shot film' repeatedly stages a structure of looking and its return through which the two women fall in love.⁴ With the sparse musical score and sometimes minimal dialogue, it is the 'rhythm of desire' that accompanies the slowness and quietness of many of the scenes, while the quick wit of their dialogue when it does come produces a competitive flirtatious tension between the two protagonists.⁵ There is a precise 'six-step rhythm' in Marianne's physical approach to Héloïse in the portrait painting sessions that is underscored by a

- 2 Céline Sciamma, BAFTA Screenwriters' Lecture Series, *Bafta Guru*, 2 December 2019, <<http://guru.bafta.org/c%C3%A9line-sciamma-screenwriters%E2%80%99-lecture-series>> accessed 26 May 2022.
- 3 Wilson, *Céline Sciamma*, p. 91.

- 4 See 'Q&A with Céline Sciamma', Arclight Cinemas, 11 February 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_E-T5BwslHo> accessed 26 May 2022.

- 5 Sciamma, BAFTA Screenwriters' Lecture Series.



Fig. 1. Marianne and Héloïse in a two-shot, emphasizing the cut and design of their dresses. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Céline Sciamma, 2019).

- 6 Céline Sciamma, 'Screen Talk with Tricia Tuttle', BFI London Film Festival, 14 October 2019, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzb40RY-E6w>> accessed 26 May 2022.
- 7 Alice Blackhurst, 'The defiant muse', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 22 December 2019, <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-defiant-muse/>> accessed 26 May 2022.

- 8 Juliet Mitchell *Siblings: Sex and Violence* (Oxford: Polity, 2003).

- 9 Haptic visuality refers to the sense of physical touching and being touched by the image; see Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).
- 10 Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).
- 11 Annamarie Jagose, *Inconsequence: Lesbian Representation and the Logic of Sexual Sequence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. x.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. xiv, x.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. xi. Here Jagose draws on Lynda Hart's claims that identities are 'always produced retroactively [...] rather like (after)effects', in Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 9.

matching pattern of breathing.⁶ Their rising desire is not only felt through their increasingly intense mutual gazing, but can be sensed even in the background 'crackle of the fire' on the soundtrack that accompanies their interactions.⁷ In shifting from the required looking of the clandestine painter's professional eye to an expression of the lover's mutual pleasure, the painter's gaze extends a mode of spectatorship constituted through the framing of the female body as object to one inscribing the spectator in the pleasures of Marianne's and Héloïse's desire for each other. The first half of this essay reads *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* through the history of how desire between women has been theorized in feminist film criticism. Offering an argument about the horizontality of the axes of desire in this film, the second half draws on Juliet Mitchell's work on the neglected place of siblings in psychic formations in order to understand how Sciamma reconfigures conventional Oedipal scenarios.⁸

Portrait of a Lady on Fire offers a meta-reflection on the place of the woman in cinema and art history by immersing its audience in the reconfiguration of the visual pleasures that were foundational to the birth of feminist cultural criticism. The academic attention to *looking as desiring*, at the heart of feminist work since its inception, becomes the central diegetic trope here, inviting a critical reflection on the history of the 'male gaze' as the film holds us in the affective immediacy of female homoeroticism. The intensity of this combination – of critique and absorption – produces an exquisite balance that (knowingly or not) both speaks to long-standing intellectual debates and places its audience in proximity to the beauty of the everyday haptic visuality of this artistic and romantic encounter.⁹ Reading the film through these debates, I argue that it addresses and yet bypasses the intricacies of academic theories that have struggled with what Patricia White calls the problem of 'lesbian representability'¹⁰ and Annamarie Jagose describes as 'the deadlocked and perhaps irresolvable debate in lesbian studies about the visibility or invisibility of its foundational category'.¹¹ If White urges us to look back at the subversive encodings of prohibited desires on Hollywood screens through a model of 'retrospectatorship', Jagose argues that lesbian invisibility should be reframed as 'the most prominent symptom of culture's insistence on narrativizing sexuality as sequence': a narrativization that depends upon the foundational erotic grammars of 'deferral and displacement'.¹² Whilst both theorists share a refusal of the redemptive and reparative assumptions that take *more visibility* to be a sign of progress, White concentrates on the figure of the lesbian to retheorize sexual retrospectatorship, while Jagose takes the retrospective narration that configures the lesbian as 'anachronistic and belated' to be indicative of how modern sexualities are structured more generally.¹³ The search for the historical specificity of 'lesbian representability' in cinema only reveals the deep structuring forms and codes (White) that require it

to be the ‘inconsequential’ poor relation to a (self-authenticating) heterosexuality that seeks to stabilize itself through a disavowal (and projection) of its own retrospective – imitative and derivative – belatedness (Jagose). Only two of the many significant theorists on this subject, White and Jagose present indicative readings of the conceptual problems with the desire for the figure of the lesbian to appear on the cinema screen.¹⁴

Speaking to this desire quite directly and yet refusing common assumptions about its intelligibility, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is less concerned to *make this figure appear* than it is to elaborate cinematically the obstacles to its realization; instead it produces what we might call, borrowing from Clara Bradbury-Rance, ‘an embodied dynamic’ defined by ‘a mood of sexual potential’.¹⁵ The film’s preoccupations with representability and retrospection are not abstractions but are present throughout its prolonged attention to practices of image-making: drying the wet, blank canvases; the first marks of charcoal on the empty page; the brush strokes of oil paint; the finishing touches to the painting; the closing of the case around the final portrait. The gaps between bodily presence and the creation of its image, between imagining something and doing it, and between a gesture and its naming – all these are held in tension and never neatly folded into each other in the film. Ultimately its haptic modes of retrospectorship, to cite White’s term, immerse us in a physical sense of presence, as the film reflects back upon the illusions of its own tropes within the history of representational codes, protocols and temporalities.¹⁶ The language of art is paralleled with the language of love, as the formal structures of each are elaborated: the problem of not being able to ‘capture’ someone as an image on a surface; and the impermanence of desire making memory love’s most reliable form. The film constantly draws attention to the parallels between painting a portrait and narrating a love story: Héloïse asks ‘how do we know it’s finished?’; Marianne, replies ‘at one point, we stop’. Pushing against the fantasy of representation as ‘capture’ and of history as ‘restorative’, the film always moves away from these temptations in favour of a gentle reflexivity about the impasses of sexual signification. The fullness of representation is repeatedly resisted, even as the promise of immersion in a sense of bodily presence – or of presence as recoverable (from the tide, from memory) – is constantly revisited. In gesturing towards the historical absence of love stories between women on the screen, the film structures its own narrative around loss and memory. As it rewrites the desire to look at the female body *as form*, this tale of homoerotic love seems to play with conventional inscriptions of sexual desire in both the history of the cinema and of art, the coupling of which generates an indicative tension in the film between movement and stasis.

- 14 Other early work includes: Judith Roof, *A Lure of Knowledge: Lesbian Sexuality and Theory* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1991); Andrea Weiss, *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Cinema* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992); Mandy Merck, *Perversions: Deviant Readings* (London: Virago, 1993); Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Subjectivity and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1994); B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Amy Villarejo, *Lesbian Rule: Cultural Criticism and the Value of Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). For a synthesis of these debates and the responses to them through and since queer theory, see Clara Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema After Queer Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp. 1–15 and 140–43, respectively.
- 15 Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema After Queer Theory*, p. 13.
- 16 The film’s many citational tropes include its Hitchcockian gestures – especially to *Vertigo*, *Marnie* and *Rebecca*, and its romantic coastal location as the setting for impossible love that brings to mind, inter alia, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (Karel Reisz, 1981). This intertextuality cites histories of how woman-as-image has saturated the cultural imaginary, including in relation to art history. See Wilson, *Céline Sciamma*.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire opens with a series of voice-over instructions about looking, about paying attention to the details of female form: its contours, pose, gestures, the placement of the hands. Point-of-view shots of the first charcoal marks on blank drawing paper are followed by several close-up shots of young women nervously beginning their portraits, looking back and forth between the sitter and the lines on the page. ‘Take time to look at me’ – the voice-over directs the students in the art class and members of the cinema audience to observe the body slowly and closely, as we await the reveal of the object of study. The cut to Marianne as both sitter and teacher shows her posing against a cloth backdrop that is draped on a large frame to hang like curtains. The green dress, the left wrist holding the right, and the direct look to the young artists all prefigure the later scenes in which Marianne will arrange Héloïse as her sitter in the Brittany house. Here as there, the female sitter contradicts her passive role, intervening in the processes of image-making. At the end of the opening scene, Marianne’s composure is interrupted when she sees a painting at the back of her studio that a young student has brought out of storage without permission – the painting that provides the film’s title (and yet turns out *not* to be the most important portrait in the film), prompting the flashback to the love story. As the painting is slowly revealed in close-up, our gaze shifts from the formality of Marianne as teacher/sitter to the scene we are told was painted a long time ago: a single female figure in a rural landscape is turned away from the viewer, her blue dress has caught fire at the hem as she stands against the vast clouds of a stormy sky. Our attention shifts from Marianne, as self-staged object of her students’ gaze, to Héloïse, as the enigmatic focus of ours: the first a sitter controlling with precision how she is being observed; the second a tiny painted figure in the distance, set ablaze, who remains unavailable to scrutiny (figures 2 and 3). The image sets the scene for the flashback to the love story that produced the painting, as we are held poised between the logic of retrospection and the immersion of presence.

The interchangeability of the subject and object of looking and desiring here subverts their inscription in classical narrative cinema and offers an opportunity to read the film through long-standing criticisms of the male gaze and of masculine spectatorship. The film also speaks more broadly to the history of feminist repurposing of structuralism and semiotics to critique the cultural and economic exchange of women between men. Set in the late 18th-century marriage market, the love story between Marianne and Héloïse is itself occasioned by the imperative for women to be objects of exchange; this both necessitates the portrait and circumscribes the affair. This is a love story imagined through classic patriarchal kinship structures, a system of exchange famously diagnosed by Claude Levi-Strauss and elaborated by early feminist critics such as Pam Cook, Claire Johnston and Gayle Rubin, and later by Elizabeth

Figs 2 and 3. The shift in gaze from a self-staged Marianne to the distant, burning figure in the painting, in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Céline Sciamma, 2019).



17 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969); Pam Cook and Claire Johnston, 'The place of women in the cinema of Raoul Walsh', in Phil Hardy (ed.), *Raoul Walsh* (Colchester: Vineyard Press, 1974); Gayle Rubin, 'The traffic in women: notes on the "political economy of sex"', in Rayna Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York, NY: Monthly Review, 1975); Elizabeth Cowie, 'Woman as sign', *mf*, no. 1 (1978); Barbara Creed, 'Feminist film theory: reading the text', in Annette Blonski, Barbara Creed and Frida Friberg (eds), *Don't Shoot Darling: Women's Independent Filmmaking in Australia* (Richmond: Greenhouse Publications, 1987).

18 Creed, 'Feminist film theory', p. 301.

19 Ibid.

Cowie and Barbara Creed,¹⁷ in which women as signs are the "objects" not partners in the exchange'.¹⁸ These structures locate the birth of desire in and through precisely the cultural system that produces women as 'the equivalent of a sign [...] that is circulated between people [...] and] in which men of the group "speak" and the women "are spoken of"'.¹⁹ The history of active masculine subjects and passive feminine objects that made classical narrative cinema particularly well suited to early feminist psychoanalytic, structuralist and poststructuralist criticism is reinscribed in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, which locates the interchangeable subjects and objects of desire in and through precisely the economic and cultural systems that made them unimaginable. The father figure may be absent and replaced by a relatively benign and strikingly beautiful mother (La Comtesse, played by Valeria Golino) but the kinship structures still determine the fate of her daughters as objects of exchange in the marriage market.

The film reflects upon its own framing and image-making processes by using a very different medium – late 18th-century painting – to both contrast with and underscore its own formal ambitions to reinscribe

cinema's traditional gendered structures. The formal moves that have conventionally assigned femininity the place of passive object in systems of representability are reworked through the language of love and desire in paradoxical ways. Art works as the almost-but-not-quite *mise-en-abyme* of cinema here. The difference between the two media is everywhere present, and yet their structures reiterate each other performatively. Translated imperfectly as 'placed' or 'thrown' into the abyss, *mise-en-abyme* has been defined as referring to 'a series of apparently endlessly overlapping, enclosed networks of conceptual or structural spaces which form a kind of labyrinth leading to a shifting, ever unattainable nucleus or centre'.²⁰ The concept is invoked here to consider how the film generates a sense of the history of image-making and modes of spectatorship through imitative repetitions that also undo any claims to a transparent narration of that history. The tropes of the frame within the frame (doorways, windows, paintings, curtains) and of the image within the image (the art school, the portrait painting, the gallery visit) immerse the audience in a compositional aesthetic that repeatedly reminds us of the conventionalities of these forms and their pleasures, even as it inscribes us within them so compellingly through its insistence on our affective presence.

The portrait in this love story becomes the *mise-en-abyme* within the film. Framed in this way, it is as if this homoerotic desire has an 'unattainable nucleus', and the portrait confirms this by holding the 'will have been' of the relationship from its inception. The temporal structure of the narrative builds its own reflexivity through the multiple paintings, each of which promises to emblemize a frozen moment – yet all of which open out onto other dimensions of time in different ways. If the first of these portraits that we see evokes the film's title, several of the others could be read more figuratively in relation to it: the scrubbed-out face in the ruined portrait by the first painter, a sign of enraged refusal; the final successful portrait, the limit point to the passion of the lovers. The symbolic function of the portrait here seems overdetermined. It is the source of deceptions, the object of bargains, the locus of power struggles, the site of compromises and the evidence of remembering. It carries both the future perfect of inevitable loss and the traces of the dead sister's legacy. The sign of and barrier to the continuation of the lovers' desire, the portrait ultimately confirms the necessity of their separation. If we understand the *mise-en-abyme* as a framing structure that 'shows points of similarity to the frame',²¹ thereby centring repetition, then the reiterative presence of the portrait places the reproducibility of woman as image (that cornerstone concept of early feminist film theory) at the heart of the desire between the two women. To use Jagose's phrase, this intensification of the symptomatic 'logic of sexual sequence' (as always, a belated imitation) sutures the imitative structures of femininity into the homoerotic charge of this film.²² The repetition within the belatedness of sexuality is reproduced here in the visual forms of exchange that organize femininity.

20 R. Cardwell, "'Beyond the mirror and the lamp": symbolist frames and space', *Romance Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1989), p. 271; cited in Marcus Snow, 'Into the abyss: a study of the mise en abyme' (Dissertation: London Metropolitan University, 2016), p. 3.

21 Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (London: Routledge 2009) p. 156; cited in Snow, 'Into the abyss'.

22 Jagose, *Inconsequence*, p. x.

23 Lee Edelman's embrace, rather than refusal, of the figurations of homosexuality in heterosexuality's disavowal of the death drive is indirectly analogous here. See Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

24 For examples of such attempts, see the 'Deconstructing "difference"' special issue of *Screen*, vol. 28, no. 1 (1987); Joseph Bristow (ed.), *Sexual Sameness: Textual Differences in Lesbian and Gay Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992).

25 Jackie Stacey, 'Desperately seeking difference', *Screen*, vol. 28, no. 1 (1987), pp. 48–61.

26 Robyn Wiegman, *Feminist Theory*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2006), p. 91.

27 The most significant re-readings of psychoanalysis through the lens of what came to be named 'queer theory' include Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Gender* (London: Routledge, 1990); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990); de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love*, Edelman, *No Future*. More recent work notably includes Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Noreen Giffney and Eve Watson (eds), *Clinical Encounters in Sexuality: Psychoanalytic Practice and Queer Theory* (Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books, 2017).

Portrait of a Lady on Fire takes the designation of desire between women as *merely imitative* – in the homophobic imaginary, the poor copy of a heterosexuality whose originary difference is assumed exclusively to generate desire – and intensifies this relationality to a defiant pitch of excessive reiteration that approaches yet never quite delivers a sense of pastiche. In other words, instead of eschewing female homoerotic desire *as imitative* (to counter the authenticity that heterosexuality claims for itself), this film turns it into the art of love.²³ If the interchangeability of the sisters is the retrospective impetus for the narrative, then the endless reiterative potential of woman as image becomes the performative sign that provides the drive of homoerotic desire. By layering these questions of representability, the *mise-en-abyme* works at one remove to instantiate formal repetitions and substitutions that are not reducible to identity; instead the film leans towards a slide from similarity to sameness without ever arriving there. This slide is reminiscent of a particular moment in the history of academic debates about desire between women in the cinema that I want to revisit briefly here.

In pre-queer feminist theories of spectatorship, the terms 'sexual sameness' and 'same-sex desire' were used to disturb what would now be called the 'heteronormative' logic of the dominant psychoanalytic conceptual paradigms of the time.²⁴ Within these paradigms, terms such as 'lesbian' or 'gay' were read as social identity categories rather than psychic identifications or desires, and were thus deemed incompatible with Freudian and Lacanian models of the visual pleasures of spectatorship grounded in a theory of the unconscious. Looking back now with queer hindsight at these early interventions, including at my own, the problems with these paradigms for theorizing desire between women in the cinema seem obvious; and yet the conceptual solutions to the limits of 'sexual difference theory' for understanding homoerotic desire on the screen continue to pose questions several decades later.²⁵ Threatening to reduce homoeroticism to a desire for identity, the term 'same-sex desire' has been deemed by some to be in danger of reinforcing heterosexuality as the originary site of difference. Robyn Wiegman writes that 'Queer desire, I could lovingly affirm, was many things, but the heteronormative idea that it was "same sex" attraction [...] was absurd'.²⁶ At the risk of repeating a much-cited gesture: before Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, the adjective 'same-sex' potentially threatened to reduce this desire to mere imitative function; after the impact of this (and many other) queer publication(s), 'reiterative imitation' began to name how sexuality, and importantly gender, function more generally; and yet many still refused the associations of queer desire with sameness.²⁷ More recently Ben Nichols has suggested that queer theorists, to a large extent, have reiterated this pathologizing aversion to 'sameness' through their assumption that 'anti-homophobic enquiry should proceed in the name of the different and difference'; for Nichols the task might instead be to interrogate more precisely the

28 Ben Nichols, *Same Old: Queer Theory, Literature and the Politics of Sameness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), p. 4.

29 For a discussion of this generic trope, see Jackie Stacey "If you don't play, you can't win": *Desert Hearts* and the lesbian romance film', in Tamsin Wilton (ed.), *Immortal, Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image* (London: Routledge, 1995) pp. 67–84.

30 See Louise J. Kaplan, *Female Perversions: the Temptations of Emma Bovary* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1991).

31 *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966) is the most obvious intertext here.

cultural history of the underlying aversive associations with categories of 'sameness'.²⁸ In the context of feminist film theory, I take up Nichols's more general challenge to pursue an exploration of the representational dynamics between similarity, sameness and identity.

When read through this (albeit briefly glossed) theoretical lens, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* seems to display a knowingness about femininity as the overdetermined sign of sameness, playing with iconographies of mirroring and copying in its explorations of the interchangeability of 'woman as sign' in patriarchal systems of exchange. The reiterative place of woman as muse in both art history and the marriage market signals the fetishization of female beauty through its repeated circulation: reproducibility betrays the value of apparent distinctiveness. In the film's clandestine portrait painting, for example, the green silk dress first seen in the ruined painting of the previous artist is worn in Héloïse's absence by substitutes, or by no 'body' at all. Importantly, this substitutional femininity only works through a logic of whiteness: centring white femininity, variations of it mark difference within an assumed frame of shared whiteness. The blue-eyed, fair-haired Héloïse and the brown-eyed, dark-haired Marianne reiterate classic Hollywood tropes of differences between white women in lesbian romance films: the one-of-each-type (the blonde and the brunette) are shot to maximize their visual matches.²⁹ Like the design of white feminine perfection in *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958), the substitutional logic of the woman as object of the gaze in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* becomes apparent as the processes of its assemblage are staged before the camera: the green silk dress of the sitter echoes Madeleine's dress in *Vertigo*, when Scottie first sees her in Ernie's restaurant, while the shots of the folds of Héloïse's blonde hair – curled and pinned at the back – are reminiscent of the hairstyle that becomes part of Scottie's obsessional focus (figures 4 and 5). To centre the portrait as the site of the reproduction of an idealized fantasy of white female beauty is to invoke the use of such paintings in Hollywood cinema – *Vertigo* and *Rebecca* being only two of a number of films that could be cited here (figures 6 and 7). But to take such a classic trope of patriarchal desire as the ground for homoerotic intimacy is to make the reproducibility of sameness signify differently; and it is *this* appropriation of such classical terrain in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* that perhaps thrilled contemporary lesbian and queer audiences, whose pleasure in such 'stolen phallic trophies' countered their apparent marginality to the history of dominant cinematic imaginaries.³⁰

If Marianne and Héloïse move from eroticized antagonism towards love and rapprochement and then into separation and loss, the symmetries of their presence within the frame and the echoes of their dialogue never completely collapse into an imaginary of sexual sameness as narcissistic merging, even if they cite such conventions.³¹ When the slide from similarity to sameness – and from interchangeability to merging – manifests at the end of one of the sex scenes, Héloïse's blue



Figs 4 and 5. The folds of Héloïse's hair, in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Céline Sciamma, 2019), are reminiscent of the focus on Madeleine's hair in *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958).



Figs 6 and 7. The painting as a sign of the substitutional logic of feminine desirability, in both Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and *Rebecca* (1940).

32 Wilson, *Céline Sciamma*, p. 95.

eyes momentarily appearing brown, the phantasmatic quality of this moment is signalled by their use of a hallucinogenic plant that Marianne promises will ‘stretch out time’.³² Here we might read the film with reference to its generic and critical histories, marking out the previous assumption of heterosexuality as *the* signifier of the difference that generates desire. The differences between the lovers are also signalled through masculine and feminine ascriptions: Marianne has stepped into her father’s professional shoes and will continue to work as an artist, submitting her paintings in his name; Héloïse, in contrast, moves from convent to marriage and is afforded none of the masculine privileges and agency of her lover. But in one of the portrait sittings Héloïse contradicts this logic of their differences, replacing it with another that puts them in ‘exactly the same place’, shifting the register of sameness from identity to a competitive match, an equivalence that demonstrates each can read the other’s habitual gestures equally well. To Marianne’s observation that ‘when you’re moved you do this with your hand, when you’re embarrassed you bite your lip, when you’re annoyed you don’t blink’, Héloïse offers ‘when you don’t know what to say you touch your forehead, when you lose control you raise your eyebrows, when you’re troubled you breathe through your mouth’. Here, as elsewhere, however, reiteration never signifies exact replication but instead introduces the space to imagine something somewhat differently. In this exchange between Marianne and Héloïse, each gesture directly precedes the naming by which it is made apparent. This proximate yet not identical positioning of gesture and observation suggests that resemblance here is an asynchronous match: the slight delay of the retrospective recognition of what has been described brings into focus a lack of identity between bodies and language. Even in its closest appropriation of clichéd iconographies of sexual sameness – one woman’s body mirroring the other’s after sex in the framed symmetrical contours of their profiles – the film’s commitment to foregrounding its own borrowings loosens the representational folds of its tropes. As Wilson argues, ‘On the last night before they separate, they lie face to face, equals, sisters staying awake, lovers drinking in each other’s image’.³³ The conditions of possibility of this love story between women generate new structures of desire and identification that necessitate a different model of psychic cathexis, as I shall go on to argue in the second half of this essay, via Mitchell’s theory of horizontality.

Perhaps this is what Sciamma means when she claims that there is no ‘female imaginary’ in the cinema because ‘there is no corpus’; there have been so ‘few films to date that have had desire between women at their heart [... and] I have been raised in a heterosexual world, so my imaginary is a heterosexual one’.³⁴ When people asked her if making a ‘lesbian love story’ was not restraining, ‘like a label’, her reply was ‘it’s not a label, it’s an imaginary’.³⁵ In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the blank canvas becomes the literal and metaphorical tabula rasa: Marianne’s case that slides overboard on her outward journey contains the two blank

33 Wilson, *Céline Sciamma*, p. 96.

34 Céline Sciamma and Adèle Haenel on *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, *Vpro Cinema*, 24 May 2019, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxMGkM-IL5c>> accessed 26 May 2022.

35 Sciamma, ‘Screen Talk with Tricia Tuttle’.

canvases for her commission; the erasure of the face in the previous artist's portrait, and in Marianne's first attempt, suggests a scraping away of what went before. The tabula rasa is the 'scraped tablet' that is always already inscribed in the history of the significations that have been erased. When Marianne dives fully clothed into the sea after her case, the camera follows her and we become part of the 'yet to be' that is signified by the lost object – a sign of her livelihood that will become the locus of her desire. This prefigurative gesture is then echoed in the shot of Marianne, sitting naked later that evening, in front of an open fire, smoking her pipe and flanked by the two wet, blank canvases. Her pale, white-skinned body – on which this love story has yet to be written – cites the empty drawing paper of her students; the moist canvases to either side prefigure the sexual pleasures that lie ahead (figure 8). This fireside scene frames a triangulation of a desire yet to be inscribed. The partial wetness of the two canvases catches the flickering firelight, registering the traces of their immersion and potential loss in the sea. These are the surfaces on which the portraits will become both a sign of desire and the confirmation of its impossibility. The loss is inscribed in the processes of signification itself, foreshadowing the problem of representation and of the unrepresentable. The canvases are reminiscent of that which cannot be articulated through language and yet is vital to its formation, something evasive that will remain below and behind signification – what Lacanians might name 'the Real'. In the film such elusiveness stretches beyond this to become the emblem of desires that have not historically registered in our cultural imaginary. They foreshadow the losses that the portrait covers over when it delivers Héloïse to her rightful place as wife and mother in the future: the place assigned to her, that originally belonged to her sister, as an object of exchange. That there are two, not one, of these canvases is already an articulation of the problem that lies ahead for the artist, one that is made symptomatic of the structure of looking and desiring itself. If feminine interchangeability suggests identity, then the play on the slide from



Fig. 8. A prefiguring of the sexual pleasures to come, in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Céline Sciamma, 2019).

similarity to sameness in the film is punctured by the force of inevitable separation.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire is not just about looking, it is about looking back – about the retrospective as a structural form. The mode of spectatorship is itself retrospective: from the narrative structure and generic reworking of the historical romance to its layers of citationality, its reliance on shot/reverse-shot sequences and its direct inclusion of the Orpheus myth, a tale of prohibition on looking back at the beloved. Retrospectatorship (to cite White’s term again) provides both method and outcome, invoking a critique of historical absences that it makes intensely diegetically present. As Alice Blackhurst puts it, the ‘cerebral, kinetic and multisensory’ qualities of the film activate ‘a space of intimacy – a sort of connective tissue’ between the two women, its slow beauty blending their erotic pleasures with daily routines and domestic activities.³⁶ These are frequently triangulated with and through their easy sociality with Sophie (Luana Bajrami), whose domestic labour as the maid blurs into a filial kinship of shared cooking, eating and connecting to the women in the nearby village. Retrospection and loss direct the film’s opening, but they also linger throughout the flashback, as looking establishes forms of desire that are haptically located in the textures and spaces of these everyday interactions. As the construction of longing through an anticipated absence – for a love that has already been lost – becomes the ‘connective tissue’ between the two protagonists, it holds the audience in this atmosphere of *retrospective anticipation*.

These structural moves – from lost love to the presence of mutual feminine fascination, which in turn reflects on a more general absence in the history of cinema itself – gesture towards the wider ambition of the project whose success is evidenced in the fizzing excitement that surrounded its release and exhibition. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* successfully generated its own critical context that gained momentum, almost mythologizing the film as the perfect manifestation of what lesbian cinema had lacked to date: the diegetic and extra-cinematic worked in conjunction as retrospective forms that echoed each other. It was as if there had never been a female gaze or a love story between women on the screen before. Gwilym Mumford writes in her *Guardian* review, for example, that ‘*Portrait of a Lady on Fire* should carry a health warning: “this film can cause uncontrollable swooning”’. What she refers to as the ‘dizzied infatuated reactions’ to this film are a significant factor in understanding the appeal of the film’s use of the retrospective.³⁷ Amplifying what the film establishes in this respect, the publicity, promotion and reviews emphasize the successful construction of a female gaze, its use of a predominantly female cast and crew and the exceptional ‘chemistry’ between the two protagonists.³⁸ The looking

36 Blackhurst, ‘The defiant muse’.

37 Gwilym Mumford, Review, *The Guardian*, 21 February 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/feb/21/celine-sciamma-portrait-of-a-lady-on-fire>>, accessed 24 May 2022.

38 As Sciamma details, the film was enthusiastically reviewed everywhere except in France, where ‘They don’t find the film hot. They think it lacks flesh, it’s not erotic. It seems like there are some things they can’t receive.’ Sciamma, qtd in *ibid*.

back that structures the narrative also works through the implied lack of similar pleasures for audiences to date. Steph Watts, for example, begins her *Curzon* podcast by announcing ‘we’re in love’, promising ‘an hour of audio-swooning at the film that has had critics declaring undying love and using more fire emojis than any other before it’.³⁹ From the ecstatic reactions in the post-show discussions at over 40 film festivals, ‘from Cannes to Aspen and Zurich’, it seems that *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* succeeded in making its audiences feel they had been given something in spectacular abundance for which they had always longed,⁴⁰ offering a long overdue experience to an audience hungry to make erotic desire between women on the screen their own.

If the film knowingly contradicts the absence of a female, and especially a ‘lesbian’, gaze, the retrospective form presents both pleasure and critique simultaneously. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* speaks to debates that have been of concern to feminist film criticism for several decades: how to find a language for desire between women in the context of its historical erasure; and how to conceptualize identifications and desires without reducing them to a social phenomenon. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* resolves some of these issues by locating its subject matter in a time prior to the emergence of modern sexual identity categories. The meticulously researched period detail gives a seriousness to its engagement with the neglected labour and lost history of female painters in the 18th century; but if this is a ‘period piece in a contemporary form’, this is partly because it so easily invites a dialogue with long-standing feminist debates about the dearth of love stories between women in cinema.⁴¹ *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* gets to have it both ways: its pleasures are not restricted to one particular group, and yet they constitute a contemporary lesbian and queer audience, as if they might have been. The 18th-century location provides the rationale for this homoerotic relationship to emerge from the everyday practices of female bonding and solidarity. In the ecstatic atmospheres that followed the screenings, the mood was not unlike those at queer/LGBT film festivals: if its 18th-century diegesis avoids attaching homoeroticism to a type of person (the ‘lesbian’ who had yet to be invented), then its 21st-century reception claimed the film for the lesbians and the queers in the audience nevertheless.⁴²

Sciamma’s optimistic gloss, in post-screening interviews, of countering the male gaze set the terms and tone of the discourses through which the film circulated. The successful construction of a female gaze was widely praised, while the lesbian question was often navigated via a historical location that made such labelling unnecessary. This language of the female gaze offered an ingenious ambiguity: for those preferring to avoid the L word altogether, it provided the perfect evasion; for those identifying with it, the flirtatious dynamics in the post-screening discussions with Noémie Merant and Adèle Haenel hardly needed naming, and Sciamma’s own previous relationship with Haenel (following the making of *Water Lilies*) was made no secret. Sciamma

39 Steph Watts, Podcast: *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* special with Céline Sciamma, *Curzon*, 28 February 2020. <<https://www.curzonblog.com/all-posts/portrait-of-a-lady-on-fire-podcast-celine-sciamma-interview>> accessed 26 May 2022.

40 Mumford, Review.

41 Céline Sciamma and Adèle Haenel on *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*.

42 I use both terms as a shorthand, as part of my argument that follows is that the film offers pleasures that appeal to each category, and of course these sometimes overlap, as the identifications with these terms might; but, as I shall demonstrate, they are also implicitly in tension here.

43 Sciamma, BAFTA Screenwriters' Lecture Series.

avoided an anachronistic naming of her 18th-century characters as 'lesbians', perhaps also relieving her of the representational burden of identity politics. At her BAFTA lecture in London she gestured towards her live audience and announced: 'when I devised the film, I was thinking about all of you – it was about actual bodies in the cinema'.⁴³ A ripple of delight ran through the auditorium, everyone seemed flattered to have been held in her mind as she wrote the script for this beloved film. The gesture was at once inclusive (*all* of you) and available for some to imagine their privileged place as 'the actual bodies in the cinema'. In reviews and interviews Sciamma is rarely named as a 'lesbian filmmaker', despite this being her most explicitly erotic film to date; yet lesbian critics delighted in her openness about her sexuality, championing both the director and her most recent film. Mythologized by its promotional discourses and its 'swoony' reception alike, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* has circulated through a kind of fantasy register that allowed claims to adhere easily and critical terms to remain untested.

44 Ibid.

Discussions of the much-celebrated female gaze in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* have been accompanied by frequent claims that this love story between two women is based on equality. There is no conflict between the lovers in this film, Sciamma suggests: 'no gender hierarchy, no social hierarchy, no intellectual hierarchy'; it is a 'love story based on equality [...] there is no bargaining here'.⁴⁴ The film is radical, revolutionary even, it is asserted, in its lack of conflict, its commitment to equality and negotiation between the lovers, as well as to the more democratic dynamic between the members of the all-female household that is located within a community of women in the nearby village. Key to this utopian aspiration is the way in which Sophie triangulates the dyad of the lovers and connects them to the women in the village. The mutual desire between Héloïse and Marianne is finally ignited at the fireside gathering of the night fair (with an atmosphere not unlike a coven of crones) when the three go to the village for advice about Sophie's unwanted pregnancy; and on the morning after Héloïse's and Marianne's first night together, the pair rise early to accompany Sophie to the 'abortionist' there. The two witness the scene as Sophie lies on the bed, next to an infant who takes her finger in its hand as she endures the pain of the procedure; here, as elsewhere, the film oscillates between cycles of life and death that bring one into close proximity with the other. Later that same day, the three women collaborate as Héloïse restages this event, challenging the conventional exclusions of portraiture. Erotic desire between women in the film is thus repeatedly located within an idealized vision of its place within conflict-free female solidarity.

Like other rhetoric circulating about the film, this championing of equality and community harks back to early radical feminist debates about whether relationships between women could ever be equal, and whether erotic desire between women belonged within a wider

- 45 Adrienne Rich 'Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence', *Signs*, vol. 5, no. 4 (1980), pp. 631–60. For a detailed engagement with Rich's essay in relation to this film, see Megan Wilson 'What's behind the word? Céline Sciamma's cinematic lesbian imaginary' (MA dissertation: University of Manchester, 2020).
- 46 See Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema After Queer Theory*, pp. 78–96.
- 47 This phrase is borrowed from Susan Potter's excellent paper, 'Sex scenes: *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*', from the Sussex Contemporary Directors Symposium on Sciamma, 9 December 2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Tx9X3I49oc>> accessed 26 May 2022. The longer essay, 'Sex scene and unseen: *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (Céline Sciamma, 2019)', is forthcoming in *French Screen Studies* as part of a special issue on the films of Céline Sciamma, edited by Frances Smith.
- 48 Stacey, 'Desperately seeking difference'.
- 49 Teresa de Lauretis, 'Film and the visible', in Bad Object-Choices (ed.), *How Do I Look: Queer Film and Video* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1991), and *The Practice of Love*.
- 50 Sigmund Freud, 'On narcissism: an introduction' (1914), in Joseph Sandler, Ethel Spector Person and Peter Fornagy (eds), *Freud's On Narcissism: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2018) p. 101 (my emphasis).
- 51 De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love*, p. 120.
- 52 Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 11, 12.

commitment to female solidarity – what Adrienne Rich famously named the 'lesbian continuum'.⁴⁵ This slippery distinction between homoeroticism and homosociality runs across much of Sciamma's work. Intent on blurring the boundaries between eroticism and other modes of intimacy, her films have repeatedly embedded homoerotic desires within female social relations. In *Water Lilies* (2007) and *Girlhood* (2014), respectively, a synchronized swimming team (a female-only sport) and a girl-gang are sites of erotic tension, intense mutual observation and envy.⁴⁶ If the 18th century provides *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* with the rationale for this particular elaboration of female bonding beyond the couple, the eroticization of identification in her previous work is located in the 'same-sex' activities of adolescence. The micro-scrutiny of the female body – its contours, gestures, stylizations and affects – as the site for narcissistic identification, envious attack and homoerotic desire has been at the heart of Sciamma's 'cinematic optics'.⁴⁷ Most recently, in the fabulations of *Petit Maman* (2021), this blurring of boundaries crosses generational axes as the twinned protagonists play out vertical intimacies through horizontal encounters.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire not only returns us to the idealization of female solidarity in early lesbian feminism but also to unresolved disagreements in feminist film theory about how to conceptualize desire between women, and the related homoerotic pleasures of spectatorship. In my own early work I argued that the obsessive micro-observations of one woman by another, who lacks the qualities she admires and seeks to replicate, could be read as producing a female homoerotic spectatorship, even if this did not appear to be the apparent purpose of such scrutiny.⁴⁸ For Teresa de Lauretis, however,⁴⁹ this model of pleasure conflated identification and desire in ways that simply exemplified the third type of narcissism identified by Freud: 'A person may love: [...] According to the narcissistic type: (a) what he himself is (i.e. himself), (b) what he himself was, (c) *what he himself would like to be*'.⁵⁰ In her re-reading of psychoanalytic theories of perversion and fetishism, de Lauretis argues for the specificity of lesbian desire in the cinema, rejecting my analysis as merely an instance of a de-eroticizing 'woman-identified female bonding'.⁵¹ But, as Diana Fuss argues, perhaps Freud's distinction is a 'precarious one at best, its epistemological validity seriously open to question'. Fuss instead asks, rhetorically, 'What is identification if not a way to assume the desires of the other. And what is desire if not a means of becoming the other whom one wishes to have?'.⁵² In the context of Sciamma's films, this insistence upon the absolute division between desire and identification might be revisited for the ways in which her work repeatedly draws us into a space of imprecision: the slide from female scrutiny or envious competition into an articulation of erotic desire. In the pre-queer theoretical context of the late 1980s, the association of homoeroticism with narcissism was avoided as a discourse with a pathologizing history; but, with post-queer hindsight, a better move on my part back then might have been to amplify – rather than

side-step – the significance of such eroticized ‘narcissistic’ identifications. My reading of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* here reopens these previous debates through the film’s citational retrospection that disturbs the boundaries between desire and identification, insisting on the homoerotic pleasures in spaces of ambiguity through its refusal to collapse ‘sexual sameness’ into identity.

If there is something unpromising about the prospect of such a love story for those who doubt that equality could ever really be ‘sexy’, Sciamma’s film strongly contradicts such preconceptions. The vision of the film, Wilson argues, depends on ‘balance and equality’, and ‘favours dual participation of artist and model and no duality of activity and passivity, of looking and being-looked-at-ness’. The emphasis on horizontality, she writes, connects the two protagonists in the film’s ‘gilded imagining of sexual intimacy, proneness, and reclining’; but she goes on to suggest that although ‘the lovers are seen equally’, it is, in particular, ‘Héloïse’s face, her presence, her body, [that] capture attention, respond to the camera’.⁵³ And yet,

however close the artist comes, however vivid the rendering of skin and flesh, of gestures and demeanour of the model [...] some inner world is withheld. This removal is tantalising and erotic, as the loved one is never fully touched and the sense of remove, of distance, is vital.⁵⁴

For Wilson it is this unavailability that generates the force of Marianne’s desire – ‘Haenel plays Héloïse with an inscrutability, a still face, and unwavering gaze’ – and the ‘glory’ of the film ‘comes in her gradual relaxing, when character and actress give themselves over to tenderness, intimacy and trust’.⁵⁵ The predominance of Héloïse within the frame, she argues, ‘is apt as these sequences are Marianne’s memories of their shared love’, and ‘the double staging of the portrait allows the film leisurely time to focus on the act of painting, on the appearance and disappearance of Héloïse in paint’.⁵⁶ The slowness of the film seems to stretch out their time together, as if it were on their side, but the transformation of their present-tense passion into a memory is inscribed from the start of their brief encounter. If the obstacles that typically delay the fulfilment of desire in love stories highlight the impossibility of its longevity in a way that actually intensifies it, here – *contra* the genre – this cannot be overcome, and the couple are left with indirect communications and memories. These tensions are organized through the anticipatory retrospective temporality of the diegesis: the opening flashback structure; the portrait painting that will have been done; the intensities of the present time of the love story that must end; the memories evoked by Marianne’s sightings of Héloïse in the future. These multiple temporal framings hold the couple in extended spaces of loss and memory that function as replacement obstacles to the desire not to separate.

⁵³ Wilson, *Céline Sciamma*, pp. 91, 93.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

57 Patricia White, 'Sketchy lesbians: *Carol* as history and fantasy', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 69, no. 2 (2015), pp. 8–18; Mandy Merck, 'Negative Oedipus: *Carol* as lesbian romance and maternal melodrama', *Sequence: Serial Studies in Media, Film and Music*, vol. 2, no. 3 (2017), pp. 149–66.

58 Sciamma, BAFTA Screenwriters' Lecture Series.

Inextricable from the film's bid to tell a love story based on equality rather than conflict is the apparent refusal of an underlying Oedipal narrative structure; the much commented-upon absence of male characters does not *necessarily* account for this non-Oedipality. There are numerous examples of absent fathers and phallic mothers who have offered opportunities for readings of Oedipal triangulations in the history of cinema; there are also instances of the mother–daughter relationship forming the basis for readings of intimacy between women through a 'negative' Oedipus, one organized around the dynamics between the female characters, as Mandy Merck has argued in dialogue with White's reading of *Carol*.⁵⁷ Yet *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* does seem to operate outside a classical Oedipal framework for several reasons: the absence of paternal authority; the triangulations between women; a mother figure who is authoritative but not phallically monstrous; the gaze that is arguably redirected through visions of kinship and intimacy. Read through an exclusively vertical lens, it might seem that there *is* a striking absence of conflict between the lovers in the film. Sciamma's claims about equality and female solidarity, however, refer less to the history of early lesbian sexual politics or feminist film theory and more to the normativities of scriptwriting and filmmaking that have relied on inequality for erotic narrativization.⁵⁸ Eschewing traditional generic expectations, Sciamma has explained how she sought to contradict the assumption that conflict makes the best drama, and that unequal power relations generate the most compelling desires. Refusing the obstacles to romantic fulfilment that typically provide desire with its requisite delays and deferrals, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* newly imagines forms of pleasure that offer the perfect match with contemporary feminist equality politics. Taken at face value, the critical tensions explored over several decades of theoretical debates about whether, and in what form, a female gaze was either possible or desirable appear to have been resolved in this ambition to deliver erotic desire free from antagonism. From a psychoanalytic point of view, however, equality in love may still seem a dubious goal, since our adult desires are understood to have their origins in the intimate vertical inequalities of early childhood – the antagonisms and ambivalences of which shape psychic dynamics that cannot be wished away.

Read another way, however, conflict is not absent from this love story; or rather, there is a structuring absence in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* in the unspoken antagonism that underlies the relationship between Héloïse and her dead sister. Located primarily outside the intimacy between Marianne and Héloïse, this violent sibling dynamic nevertheless impinges on the conditions of possibility of their romance throughout. If the film cannot easily be read psychoanalytically through the vertical Oedipal paradigm, with a shift in emphasis to include horizontal kinship we might argue that the love claimed to be based on equality is dependent upon displacing the

59 Mitchell, *Siblings*.

60 At the Sussex Contemporary Directors Symposium on Sciamma, Fiona Handyside and I discovered that we had both been working with Mitchell's *Siblings* to read the film but with rather different motivations and intentions. Handyside's paper, 'Sisters in the films of Céline Sciamma', is part of a larger project on French cinematic girlhood and of an edited collection in progress on 'Screen Sisters'.

61 Mitchell, *Siblings*, p. xv.

62 *Ibid.*, p. ix.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

structural barriers to the romance onto the lateral axis of the sibling relations. It is this dynamic that I shall now read through Juliet Mitchell's theory of the neglected significance of siblings to psychic formations of desire.⁵⁹ In what follows, I reconsider claims about the absence of conflict in the film's narrativization of desire and examine on what ground the so-called equality between the lovers is established.⁶⁰ Mitchell demonstrates that horizontal kinship is not free of antagonism; equally, I determine that the conflict driving the narrative of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* has been disavowed through claims about the film's commitment to equality between the two lovers.

According to Mitchell, this horizontal emphasis on the importance of psychic dynamics between young siblings establishes a much neglected foundation for peer-to-peer desire. It is this aspect of the film – the importance of the sibling history to the desire between the two women – that Mitchell's work helps to elaborate. This is less an alternative to Oedipus and more a remarkably overlooked psychic dimension that might be set alongside, or even read in conjunction with, the vertical axis. For Mitchell, the focus on the psychic structures of Oedipal and castration anxiety in psychoanalysis has led to the occlusion of the vital place of the sibling dynamics of infancy and early childhood; the significance of these sibling relations challenges the ways in which 'our social imaginary can envisage only vertical authority'.⁶¹ Noting that 'Peers replace siblings', Mitchell asks why we have not 'considered [...] lateral relations in love and sexuality or in hate and war'.⁶² We have, she argues, long needed 'a theoretical paradigm with which we might analyse, consider and seek to influence' such relations.⁶³ If Mitchell is right about the significance of this neglected lateral axis, then how might this shift the framing of our models of homoerotic desire in cinema? Sciamma's work provides the ideal focus for answering this question, since its preoccupation with the queer kinship of love and hate – and especially of rivalry – in peer and sibling relations runs throughout her oeuvre. In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, as in much of Sciamma's work, the horizontal dominates the narrative and pushes Oedipal verticality to the edge of the frame; indeed, in *Petit Maman* the vertical is transposed onto the horizontal.

These horizontal entanglements form a part of all sexual dynamics, but for Mitchell there is something particular to their configuration in formations of homosexuality (to use the psychoanalytic parlance). To understand the significance of siblings for homosexuality, she argues, 'we need to start by thinking about the construction of the ego and the ego-ideal – what I am and what I would like to be'.⁶⁴ The concept of the ego-ideal can be 'an underlying structure for homosexuality', she suggests: 'the sibling, I believe, is the figure which underlies such nearly forgotten concepts as the ego-ideal – the older sibling idealized as someone the subject would like to be, and sometimes this is a reversal of the hatred for a rival'.⁶⁵ With Mitchell's shift towards the horizontal, an ego-ideal may not be based on 'an Oedipal taking in of the father, but an

64 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

internalization based on sibling-peers'.⁶⁶ The reversals of sibling love and the idealizations that turn to hatred are thus key to understanding the tensions between sameness and difference within adult relationships. As she argues, 'the adored sibling, who is loved with all the urgency of the child's narcissism, is also loathed as its replacement'. It is this threat of being replaced that for Mitchell explains sibling psychic significance: 'The sibling is *par excellence* someone who threatens the subject's uniqueness. The ecstasy of loving one who is like oneself is experienced at the same time as the trauma of being annihilated by one who stands in one's place.'⁶⁷ Here Mitchell refers to the child's narcissism and its place in idealizations. She considers the possibility that the child forms its 'ego-ideal not so much on the Oedipal father as on a peer [...] The infant would then develop his own narcissistic ego from these initial identifications with other children – particularly siblings.'⁶⁸ For Mitchell, the sibling thus moves centre stage in the psychic formation of desire, especially, though not exclusively or necessarily, for homosexuality, and the identification with the ego-ideal – with 'what I would like to be' – provides the central form of erotic structure.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 10.68 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

This model of psychic relationality through sibling love (and hate) opens up Freud's third category of narcissism – loving 'what he himself would like to be' – to new interpretations. The sibling becomes the figure of idealized identification, the one in relation to whom sameness and difference are unconsciously worked through. For Mitchell, the desire to be like someone is also a recognition that one is *not yet* like them – that one is indeed *different*. This form of narcissism becomes integral to sociality as an ongoing process rather than being a pathologized aberration of femininity and homosexuality. As Mitchell suggests, for the child, 'the primary identification with the peer group [unlike the parents] is [...] *subject not to negation but to differentiation*: you are like others but with differences'; this also 'means that love and hate, rivalry, jealousy and envy are social, and can be specifically lateral acquisitions in a group'.⁶⁹ The extension of psychic formations to include these 'lateral acquisitions' speaks quite directly to Sciamma's own preoccupation with competitive dynamics between peers in childhood, adolescence and early adulthood in all her films, but especially in *Tomboy* (2011), *Water Lilies* and *Girlhood*. It also speaks to her desire for equality in matters of love, since, according to Mitchell, psychoanalysis has shown how 'intense jealousy, rivalry and envy among siblings (and later, schoolchildren) are reversed into demands for equality and fairness'.⁷⁰ This reversal is key to how we might read the apparent lack of conflict between the lovers in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 14 (my emphasis).70 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

The film's antagonisms are located in the sibling relation. This is not merely background to the love affair but inaugurates its possibility and continues to structure the pleasures of its eroticism. For Mitchell, peer relations provide the scene for trying out and trying on what can be enacted through femininity and masculinity, and for exploring sexuality in all its forms. In what we might call Sciamma's cinema of horizontality,

the sibling is often the model for the peer, providing the underlying structure of an interplay between identification and desire.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire is haunted by Héloïse's unnamed dead sister. The most literal manifestations of this are Marianne's two sudden visions of Héloïse as a fleeting apparition in a white wedding dress. These function like phantasmatic portraits: their form vivid, their signifiers opaque. Whether a hallucination, premonition or figment of the imagination – we remain uncertain of their diegetic status – each echoes the other in its derealized style. Luminously yet briefly, flash-lit, centre frame and surrounded by the darkness of the domestic interior, Héloïse appears ghost-like, staring straight ahead in the wedding dress that unites her with her sister's fate (figures 9 and 10). At first glance this figure might even *be* the ghost of her sibling; at second it could be Héloïse appearing *as* her sibling. At these moments the sisters seem entangled, without boundaries, as if the death of one were manifest in the body of the other. A third shot of Héloïse standing alone on the stairs in this dress, just before Marianne departs, repeats the framing and cut to black of the previous two, offering a glimpse of a spectre from the past; but it is briefer, the camera lingering on Marianne longer than on the reverse-shot



Figs 9 and 10. A luminous ghost, Héloïse appears united with her sister's fate, in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Céline Sciamma, 2019).

Fig. 11. A reminder of Héloïse's defiance, gifted to her lover, in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Céline Sciamma, 2019).



of the lover she must leave (figure 11). Héloïse wears the same dress, which now belongs more fully to her after the previous farewell scene in daytime lighting has shown her mother fitting it in preparation for the wedding. The wedding dress is the emblem of sibling interchangeability and of Héloïse's status as object of exchange on the marriage market. These three shots belong to three different scenes that punctuate the structure of the love story: after the first kiss, following sex, at the moment of the separation. They also map the terrain of a shift in Héloïse from a psychic space outside the symbolic order (the Real, psychosis, the hallucinatory) to a position within its representational and signifiatory imperatives: the portrait leading to the marriage. The shift from the derealized to the more realist visual style marks the sibling substitution and Héloïse's reluctant acquiescence to replace her sister in the marriage, obeying the law of the mother, if not the father.⁷¹ The vision of Héloïse on the stairs, however, lingers like a phantasmatic reminder (or remainder) of her defiance, which she has gifted to her lover as an image for remembrance.

Assumed to have committed suicide to avoid the arranged marriage that has now been passed down to Héloïse, the sister in her act of self-violence symbolically annihilates her younger sibling, to whom she hands on a fate that she herself could not bear. Leaving the arranged marriage for Héloïse to inherit, the older sibling bequeaths to the younger a life that she herself had deemed unliveable. This structural bequest is a violent one: *I nominate you instead of me to live a life worse than death*. Reframing the erotic dynamics in the film through this sibling relation prompts my proposition that the bid to read desire as structured around equality in this film depends upon the repression of this lateral antagonism. The sister's assumed suicide produces a kind of psychic annihilation of her younger sibling, if read through Mitchell's argument that the conflicts between older and younger siblings are located in a perceived threat to our very existence. Read in this way, the

71 Mitchell makes the case for the 'law of the mother' being more important to sibling dynamics, especially in relation to gender rather than sexual difference. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

life bequeathed to Héloïse is not so much unliveable as a living death-in-life.

Mitchell argues that

the appearance of the new baby who stands in our place or the older sibling who was there before we existed [... generates] an identification with the very trauma of this sense of non-existence that will be ‘resolved’ by power struggles: being psychically annihilated creates the conditions of a wish to destroy the one responsible for the apparent annihilation.⁷²

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. xv.

In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the transferability of the ‘sense of non-existence’ from one sibling to another provides a framework for reading the early tensions between Héloïse and Marianne. In this sense Héloïse is structurally ‘in conflict’ with her dead sister, who, in killing herself, turns her sibling into an object of exchange in the marriage market and robs her of the life, however limited, that she might have continued to have in the convent (with her ‘books and music’). Here there is no possibility of destroying the ‘one responsible for the apparent annihilation’. This ‘conflict’ is less the typical rivalry between siblings and more the violent consequence of a literal annihilating abandonment – annihilating in that it necessitates the replacement of one sister by the other. And although the love affair offers a vision of another life, it is one that must also be relinquished and that comes into being only because Héloïse has been confirmed as an object of exchange. Having lost her sister, she must now love and lose for a second time. For Mitchell the sibling relation is one organized around death and the prohibition of murder: ‘The child begins to know about death, and therefore that one must not kill one’s brother, because the very existence of that brother in the first place has been experienced as a *death* of the subject’s self’.⁷³ In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, this becomes the bequest: either follow the same path towards the cliff edge, or endure the pain of an arranged marriage already marked as a fate worse than death. The structural antagonism between the siblings underpins the romance that is circumscribed by the dead sister’s violent acts. It is she who was originally destined to marry the man for whom Marianne’s portrait of Héloïse has been commissioned, and it is her broken body that Sophie reports finding dead on the beach below the cliffs, not long before Marianne’s arrival by boat. Again it is Sophie who triangulates this connection back to the dead sister, as well as functioning herself as something of a younger sibling to the lovers. These displacements and replacements structure the narrative: Marianne’s arrival follows Héloïse’s sister’s suicide, which inaugurates Héloïse’s return from the convent; the arranged marriage transfers from one sister to the other; the love story between painter and sitter will become a memory when curtailed by the marriage necessitated by the sister’s death. Just as the older sibling found no future in her fate, so the lovers begin an affair that can have no future in theirs.⁷⁴

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁷⁴ For a discussion of the refusal of futurity in queer theory, see Edelman, *No Future*.

75 Mitchell, *Siblings*, p. 16.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

77 *Ibid.*

Mitchell resurrects the concept of the ego-ideal ‘not [as] identical with the superego’ – as in Freud, where it became subsumed as ‘the internalization of the authority of the father-figure’⁷⁵ – but as a lateral model based on recent clinical observations. In one of these, Ricardo Steiner takes a patient who is an artist as a template for rethinking the ego-ideal, noting that this ‘creative artist uses his predecessors (other artists) as internal models’. For Mitchell, what is interesting about this claim is that ‘these models – though long dead and buried – are imaginatively experienced as the same age as the subject [...] they are “lateralized”’.⁷⁶ It is, however, only once he differentiated himself from the ego-ideals of past ‘heroes’, and stopped using them as rivalrous/imitative models, that they could become creatively ‘useful’ to the patient. Until then, ‘he imagined they were the same as him and the only way he could conceive of going forward artistically was to eradicate the self-same rival who threatened his uniqueness’.⁷⁷ Re-reading Steiner’s vertical account of his patient, Mitchell demonstrates how the lateral idealizations of siblings, then peers, must be worked through in the process of differentiating self from other and in understanding the underlying compulsions of annihilating rivalrous envy.

This emphasis on the importance of lateral differentiation provides a framework for reconceptualizing the structures of desire and identifications in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. Each protagonist is transformed through their encounter with the other: Marianne shifts as an artist from over-valuing the protocols and rules of her predecessors towards producing a portrait through her affective connection with the sitter; Héloïse moves from refusal to acceptance of the imposed obligation to replace her sister in marriage by becoming the desiring subject of homoerotic love. Sibling identification is built into the kinship structures of familial demands: since the older sister cannot marry the chosen suitor, the younger one must take her place. In this sense ‘identification’ is an unwelcome imposition from the outside. Héloïse has been *identified with* her sibling, whatever her own psychic investments. The two daughters are treated as interchangeable in this transaction that establishes their indistinctiveness. The echo with the mother’s life – her marriage portrait for *her* Milanese husband still hangs on the wall – extends these relations vertically. But for Héloïse the imposed identification with her dead sister for whom she grieves sits alongside the prospect of the loss of her own life. For Mitchell the story of sibling relations is one founded on bereavement and grief: ‘Only the process of mourning establishes the dead person as other than the bereaved [...] but before [...] the self-other differentiation takes place [...] it is as though the self must be mourned’.⁷⁸ In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the structural dynamic between Héloïse and her dead sister turns the former into a substitute for the latter. In the romance between Marianne and Héloïse, the painter and sitter shift from artist and exchange object to participants in their shared collaboration; both agree that the portrait must be finished and the marriage should proceed. The question of interchangeability

78 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

carries over from sibling to lover, albeit with very different implications: in the sibling relation it negates subjectivity; with the portrait painting it becomes a sign of agency. But grief sits at the heart of each. It arranges the impetus for the love story and it lays the foundations for the loss that will follow the lovers' separation. Read this way, equality, if it exists here at all, lies in the equal measure of the pain of the lovers' inevitable loss. The sister's violent end is inextricable from the romance between Marianne and Héloïse that drives the narrative.

This drive could be read as the transformation of a melancholic yearning into a reconciled place of mourning. Freud's theory of melancholia locates the emptiness of grief not in the world but in the bereaved person themselves – within the subject's lack of *self-regard* without the lost object. Mourning enables some kind of restoration of the ego with the internalization of what was valued in the lost object. But Freud cautions against any strict separation of these processes of mourning and melancholia, and argues that they share many affective qualities – absorbedness of the ego and a disinterest in the outside world – and that the temporal co-ordinates are neither linear nor progressive. My reading of the film is not a reparative one of love healing the loss of another;⁷⁹ rather, I have drawn out the antagonism that has had to be repressed in the extra-cinematic discourses circulating about equality and the female gaze. In that spirit, the psychoanalytic theory of suicide as violent rage becomes important, shedding a rather different light on Marianne's comment to La Comtessa that Héloïse is angry rather than sad, and thus on any inference that she will not lose a second daughter in the same way. Héloïse's withdrawn state at the beginning of the film might instead signify the internalization of the devaluation this implies; and her own association with suicide, as I discuss below, binds her both to her sister's state of mind and to the self-violence of such a solution. In psychoanalytic terms, with her sister's death Héloïse has lost her 'love-object', and the violence of that loss belongs to the melancholic orientation towards an emptying of the self of value rather than the 'love-object', or indeed the world. This devaluing of femininity *as merely substitutional* is inaugurated by a death that bestows a double annihilation: the suicide of a sibling who is now unavailable to love; the delegation of what made her life unliveable to her younger sister. Both demonstrate the negation of the subjecthood of woman as a functional sign of patriarchal exchange. If the bereaved melancholic feels emptied of themselves by loss and turns the rage of abandonment inward, it may be that suicide is the only path to ridding themselves of the object that has annihilated them.

That Héloïse is following in her dead sister's footsteps towards an unwanted marriage is not only integral to the film's structural impetus, it is also manifest in the classically Romantic *mise-en-scène* of the blustery cliff-top walks, crashing waves and rugged beach scenes. The spectre of the sister's suicide provides the limit point for the boundary between love and death in these wild landscapes and seascapes. Love and death share

79 See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid reading and reparative reading; or, you're so paranoid, you probably think this essay is about you', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123–51.

the same settings: the sister fell from the cliffs, while Marianne and Héloïse encounter each other on the beach throughout their growing intimacy. In their first scene together, the act of following establishes the dynamics not just between Héloïse and her dead sister but between the artist and her unknowing sitter, as they walk one behind the other from the house out onto the cliffs. In this triangulated lateral tension, Marianne at first appears to be the follower, as the camera is positioned with her behind the cloaked and hooded Héloïse, whose face has yet to be shown. When Héloïse suddenly dashes towards the cliff edge, Marianne chases her; having just heard of the sister's suicide from Sophie in the preceding scene, Marianne assumes, as do we, that Héloïse might now become the follower and jump. At the very moment Héloïse turns at the precipice, the reveal shot introduces the face of the woman who is to be painted (figure 12). The first exchange of looks is also their first exchange of words. The anticipation of seeing her sitter's face for the first time becomes an encounter with the boundary between life and death – an encounter with Héloïse through the spectre of her dead sister begins their relationship. What Mitchell refers to as 'the rendering of trauma into an imitation of death' here marks both a literal and metaphoric turning point: 'in trauma, subsequently imagined or enacted as death, the ego or the 'I' or subject position is annihilated'.⁸⁰ Seizing life from the momentary prospect of death, a close-up of Héloïse brings her into the frame for the first time.

Like a reversal of the Orpheus/Eurydice tale – the myth that they will read aloud together with Sophie later in the film – this turn to look back at the follower confirms life instead of death, running not falling. Héloïse becomes the sister who does not make a sibling identification, despite her identical structural inscription as bride-to-be. On reaching the precipice, she turns away from her sister towards living, and towards the 'companion' who will become her lover. In Mitchell's terms, in differentiating from the dead sibling through mourning, this self-other

80 Mitchell, *Siblings*, p. 9.

Fig. 12. Héloïse turns at the precipice to reveal the face of the woman who is to be painted. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Céline Sciamma, 2019).



relation begins to establish a distinct subjectivity. The instantiation of difference confirms the centrality of the sibling relation in this triangulation: the refusal of repetition, of becoming a replacement, is the marker of potential separation. The turn to look back is the moment in which Héloïse – the sibling deemed disposable and interchangeable with her dead sister – articulates her desire: ‘I have dreamt of doing that for years’. Following the path towards death, she distinguishes herself by veering off to confirm its opposite. The fear that Héloïse *might* follow her sister resurfaces at intervals throughout the rest of the film: when she nears the cliff edge on their walks; when she bathes for the first time in the rough sea not knowing if she can swim; when she disappears alone from the house in anticipation of her mother’s return and Marianne’s departure. The association with death – literally and figuratively – holds the siblings in the same frame, triangulating the intimacy between the lovers as the dead sister’s ghostly presence adumbrates the romance. This triangulation is intimately connected with another – the one involving Sophie, who found her mistress dead on the beach and narrates the story to Marianne.

The turn to look back at the follower becomes a recurrent trope about the threshold between life and death, connecting Héloïse to her sister and to Marianne in an antagonistic triangulation. Her dead sister’s bequest is that she must live a fate worse than death or face death itself. In the first cliff-top scene, the turn back to look at the follower is indicative of a turn towards the life drive; in other scenes the turn signifies more ambiguously, as it does in their discussion of the myth of Orpheus and his wife Eurydice. When Eurydice is mortally poisoned by a snake, Orpheus begs the gods to return her to him. They agree, but as she follows him out of the underworld he breaks the one prohibition set by the gods, and turns to look back at the beautiful Eurydice. As a consequence, she dies for the second time and Orpheus must return alone. In the scene where Héloïse reads this tale aloud to Marianne and Sophie, each woman interprets it differently. Sophie is outraged by Orpheus looking back, but for Marianne ‘he chooses the memory of her, that’s why he turns ... He doesn’t make the lover’s choice, he makes the poet’s’. Héloïse proposes that maybe Eurydice was the one who said ‘turn around’. These disagreements map out the risks of intimacy: is the poet’s choice the ruthless one; is the call from the follower a murderous or a self-sacrificing one? Here Marianne and Héloïse speak indirectly to each other about the contours of their own desires – desires that are literally set ablaze in the following bonfire scene, which occasions the film’s eponymous portrait. Antagonism inaugurates the love story even if conflict remains unelaborated. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is a film of equal antagonists.

Read through the myth, to turn around and look back is to kill off the loved one and to relegate her to memory (the poet’s choice); but to be the follower who bids the departing lover to turn around is to make the murder into a collaboration. Héloïse’s suggestion that Eurydice might

81 Wilson, *Céline Sciamma*, p. 105.

have called out for Orpheus to turn around prefigures the same instruction to Marianne that occasions the apparitional visions of Héloïse discussed above. Each such appearance is a spectre that interrupts the logic and flow of the narrative events. The third ‘turn around’ is her final speech act to Marianne before they separate indefinitely. For Wilson, ‘the intrusion of this image’ suggests that ‘her lover is already pictorial a vision, a shade lost like Eurydice’; Marianne has not retrieved Héloïse from this ‘Underworld’.⁸¹ But perhaps its significance is more ambiguous. Is Marianne to bear witness to the social death of the bride-to-be; is Héloïse confirming the agency of a woman deemed to have none; or is this a romantic performative through which both women make a commitment to remembrance in testing the consequences of this previously contested scene? The impossibility of their desire confirms its continuation.

The final scenes of the film return to the present tense of the art studio, from which Marianne narrates her two last sightings of Héloïse, both in crowded public spaces – the first is a portrait in a gallery, the second is across the audience in a concert hall. If any reparation *is* offered, it is perhaps the aforementioned shift from melancholia to mourning that signals a greater acceptance of loss. In these spaces the couple is fleetingly ‘restored’ as their intimate history is encoded for their exclusive pleasure: in Marianne’s painting of Orpheus and Eurydice, where they face each other at their moment of separation; in a final portrait of Héloïse, with a child, where she holds open a copy of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* at page 28, the same page on which Marianne had earlier drawn herself for Héloïse. Each painting holds a secret communication to the other lover. The tears shed at the concert by Héloïse refer us back to her question to Marianne about what an orchestra sounds like. Their intimacy in these two public spaces cites classic romantic tropes from art and cinema, but places homoeroticism, finally, at the centre of these histories, even as such reflexivity draws attention to their previous exclusively heterosexual signification.⁸²

82 Again the point is not the precision of the citation but the recognizability of the referential style of these scenes, for example in the history of art – Mary Cassatt’s *In the Log* (1878) and *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (1879) and Federico Zandomenighi’s *Au Theatre* (1885) – or in cinema – in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, Scottie is introduced to ‘Madeleine’ as she moves through a crowded restaurant, typical of the director’s use of crowd scenes to generate intensity or suspense.

Left with a mode of spectatorship that seems to an academic eye to scan across decades of feminist film theory as well as the history of cinema and art, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* delivers lesbian pleasures through a queer apparatus that also surreptitiously undoes them. If the latter seems to have gone unnoticed by many, this evinces the power of the desire for the former. The queerness of this cinematic vision is less legible in its celebration of perversity (the signature embrace of New Queer Cinema) than in its insistence upon the mutability of sexual imaginaries and upon the gap between desire and its representability on the screen. Lesbian cinema without lesbians, the film achieves an ingeniously queer vision.

Sciamma’s cinematic optics, combined with Mitchell’s psychoanalytic siblings, prompt us to imagine sexual spectatorship differently. Their shared emphasis on horizontal social dynamics brings to the fore psychic

⁸³ Strictly speaking, in psychoanalytic terms envy is a dyadic desire – to envy something somebody else has, and to wish to have it oneself – while jealousy is a triangulated desire in which the subject not only wishes to have that something, but also gains satisfaction from the other person no longer having it.

⁸⁴ Mitchell uses the term ego-ideal to refer to ‘what I would like to become’, in *Siblings*, p. 11. In more Lacanian terms, there is a distinction between the ideal-ego (the perfection the subject strives to attain) and the ego-ideal (the subject seeing itself critically from that point of perfection and judging itself as lacking), but this is not a distinction used by Mitchell in this context.

⁸⁵ In this sense, the film echoes others discussed in Stacey, ‘Desperately seeking difference’.

⁸⁶ Sciamma, ‘Screen Talk with Tricia Tuttle’.

formations that have often been forgotten in vertical tales of Oedipus.⁸³ For each, sibling rivalry is key to desire and jealousy is inextricable from love. My argument here seeks to open up another way of seeing desire between women on the screen, one characterized by the underlying structures of sibling formation – rivalry and jealousy – as well as by the reversals of idealizing love and murderous wishes. Taking place horizontally rather than through the negating law of the father, these dynamics involve the sameness of sibling equivalence (as the child *not* the adult) and the necessity of differentiation through a combination of identifications and desires that remain in convergent process. More mutable and porous than sexual differentiation – always looking over its shoulder to the threat of interchangeability – the sibling distinguishes itself through a recognition of the shadow of its sameness with its horizontal other, and has to learn that *filial sameness is not identity*.

Mitchell’s proposition that an ego-ideal grounded in sibling dynamics can be ‘the underlying structure of homosexuality’ speaks to my reading of the place of the dead sibling in the homoeroticism of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*.⁸⁴ The sibling relationship here is defined by the sister’s suicide and consequent annihilating bequest. Absenting herself from the protective role of the older sibling – and thus no longer available as an object for idealization or repudiation – she manifests only phantasmatically through a substitutional logic. Forcing her younger sister to take her place, she becomes the agent of filial violence and forecloses her availability as the ego-ideal for the younger sibling. Yet if the sister’s suicide at first condemns Héloïse to this unwanted marriage to a stranger, it also provides the conditions of possibility for her erotic love of another woman. It might be tempting to read Marianne, according to the film’s substitutional logic, as a symbolic replacement ego-ideal for Héloïse (a shift in object-choice) – and there is a sense of the former introducing a certain worldliness to the latter.⁸⁵ More interestingly, though, the film substitutes this gesture with another: the *idealization of an erotics of presence* – of touching every moment together, forever, an idealization that is extended to the audience. Not a substitution of object-choice but of aesthetic form: eternal love becomes the space through which erotic intimacy ties the couple to another world. And yet, the romantic conventionality of what we might term the ego-ideal of the couple here is precisely, maybe even perversely, generated through the inevitability of loss of presence.

The yearning for the time of love to stretch out beyond itself (as the herbal rub in one sex scene promises) is generated by the curtailment necessitated by the sister’s suicide. The antagonism between siblings *is* the underlying structure of homoerotic love. Once the two become lovers, jealousy and possessiveness generate judgement and reproach as each accuses the other of lacking bravery in facing their imminent separation. As Sciamma puts it: ‘the first time you fall in love is also the rise of jealousy, and it feels like there’s this black ink in your body’.⁸⁶ The black ink here is a metaphor borrowed from (inter alia) Marcel

Proust's reference to jealousy taking a grip on the body like an octopus. Sciamma is referring here to *Naissance des Pieuvres* (birth of the octopus), the original French title of *Water Lilies*, in which the obsessive scrutiny of another girl's physical accomplishments in an all-female competitive sports team condenses the mix of devoted idealization and antagonistic jealousy into a form of homoerotic spectatorship. If 'peers replace siblings', then the annihilating emotional antagonisms and intense rage between the teenage protagonists in *Water Lilies* can be read as a repetition of a kind of homoerotic sibling rivalry.

Sciamma's cinema presses on the fine line between identification and desire, and between tenderness and antagonism. The slide from one to the other ties us into the structures of looking that drive her narratives. Placing an emphasis on youthful initiation – first love, first sex, first kiss – these films open up categories of gender and sexuality to an indeterminacy, even as the potential cruelty of peer surveillance and annihilation for getting identity wrong is never far away, and the homoeroticism of hypervigilant mutual observation holds homosexuality and heterosexuality in close proximity in ways that unsettle the assumed teleologies of sexual identification and identity. Whereas the earlier films placed rivalry and jealousy at the heart of the peer dynamics of childhood and youthful interactions, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is an *eroticized antagonism of equals* generated by a sibling death with murderous implications. But the consequences of this violence remain opaque and unpredictable throughout the film. As with all Sciamma's work, spectatorship is never about revelation; it is always, queerly perhaps, concerned with the elusiveness and transience of sexuality.

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