

# The Art of Female Gaze and Emotional Expression: A Study of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

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## Abstract

This paper explores the use of the female gaze, emotional expression, and visual composition in Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* to challenge traditional gender power dynamics. By subverting the male gaze, the film allows its female characters, Marianne and Héloïse, to reclaim their agency and subjectivity through the mutual act of looking. The film's deliberate framing and use of color—particularly the contrast between Héloïse's blue and Marianne's red—serve as visual metaphors for the characters' emotional states and the tension between freedom and societal constraints. Additionally, silence is employed as a powerful narrative device, heightening the intensity of their relationship through nonverbal communication. This analysis demonstrates how *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* reshapes gender relations by centering women's experiences, desires, and identities, offering a profound meditation on love, art, and autonomy.

**Keywords:** female gaze, gender power relations, visual composition, emotional expression

## 1. Introduction

In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), directed by Céline Sciamma, the depiction of women and their relationships transcends conventional cinematic boundaries. This film intricately weaves the narrative through the female gaze, emotional expression, and the profound exploration of gender power relations. By focusing on Marianne, a female painter, and Héloïse, her subject, the film presents a unique perspective on the ways in which women perceive, represent, and understand themselves. The film's mastery in using visual composition, color, and emotional intensity speaks volumes about the evolving consciousness of gender identity and autonomy, particularly female identity. Through careful analysis of these

elements, we can understand how *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* reshapes gender power dynamics, allowing female characters to reclaim agency and selfhood.

## 2. The Female Gaze and Gendered Power Relations

### 2.1 Subverting the Male Gaze

In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the concept of the "female gaze" is central to the film's exploration of gender power relations, a deliberate subversion of the dominant "male gaze" that has shaped much of cinematic history. The "male gaze," as outlined by Laura Mulvey, refers to how women are often objectified in visual media, reduced to passive objects of desire, framed primarily for male consumption and pleasure.

This conventional gaze strips women of agency, positioning them as ornamental subjects rather than complex individuals. Sciamma's film, however, offers an alternative by immersing viewers in a world seen entirely through the perspective of women, where women are not merely seen but also see themselves and each other with autonomy and depth.

Sciamma's intentional exclusion of men from most scenes is a powerful statement in itself. The narrative takes place in an isolated, male-free environment where Marianne and Héloïse can engage with each other without the pressure of male scrutiny. By removing male characters from the equation, the film creates a space where female characters can explore their own desires, experiences, and relationships, untethered from patriarchal control. This absence of male authority allows the female gaze to flourish, prioritizing an exchange of looks that is reciprocal, intimate, and devoid of objectification.



Picture 1.

The relationship between Marianne, the artist, and Héloïse, the subject of the portrait, plays out through a series of gazes that challenge the conventional power dynamics seen in historical portraiture. Instead of a male artist shaping the image of a passive female subject, the relationship here is based on mutual observation and respect. Marianne, as the artist, is both the creator and the observer, but she does not impose a narrative upon Héloïse. Rather, she seeks to understand her in all her complexity. The film highlights the process of seeing and being seen as an act of emotional and intellectual engagement, not possession. This shifts the act of looking from one of domination to one of equality and collaboration, a subversion of traditional power structures that have often silenced women in visual arts.

## 2.2 Reclaiming Female Subjectivity

At the core of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is the idea of women reclaiming their own subjectivity, both in how they are represented and in how they experience the world. Sciamma illustrates this through Marianne's and Héloïse's evolving relationship, where each woman gradually asserts her individuality and identity. The process of painting becomes a metaphor for the reclamation of the female image, as Héloïse refuses to be passively depicted. Initially, Héloïse resists the portrait by rejecting the notion of being objectified, refusing to pose or allow herself to be observed without her consent. Her defiance is a refusal to be commodified, a direct critique of the historical role women have played in art as passive muses for the male gaze.

Héloïse's eventual decision to sit for Marianne is not one of submission, but one of agency. She becomes an active participant in her own representation, aware of how she wishes to be portrayed. This act of self-determination symbolizes a rejection of patriarchal norms that have long dictated how women should look, behave, and present themselves. In traditional portraiture, the artist—often male—controls how the subject is seen, thus exerting a form of power over them. However, in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, this power dynamic is flipped. Héloïse is not merely the subject of Marianne's gaze; she gazes back, challenging Marianne to see her as she is, not as a romanticized or idealized version of femininity. Their relationship evolves into a collaborative project where both are involved in shaping the final image, illustrating a new form of female subjectivity and self-representation.

This reclamation of the female gaze extends beyond visual representation into the emotional and psychological realms. The film allows both Marianne and Héloïse the space to express their desires, emotions, and intellectual aspirations without judgment. The subtle gestures and shared silences between them create a rich emotional landscape that stands in contrast to the often simplistic or externalized portrayals of female desire in male-centered narratives. Sciamma avoids sensationalizing or fetishizing their relationship, instead emphasizing its emotional depth and the shared experience of two women finding their own identities in a world that has denied them full autonomy.

## 2.3 Female Agency and Power

Throughout the film, the shifting power dynamics between Marianne and Héloïse reflect

a broader commentary on gender power relations. Marianne, as the painter, holds the initial power in their relationship, as she has the ability to shape Héloïse's image. However, Héloïse's refusal to be seen on anyone else's terms reasserts her agency. The balance of power in their relationship is negotiated through mutual recognition and respect, illustrating how women can share power and space without falling into hierarchical or patriarchal structures.

The act of creation itself—the painting—becomes an assertion of female agency. Marianne's work as an artist places her in a traditionally male-dominated field, yet her ability to capture Héloïse's likeness and spirit subverts the notion that art and creation are exclusively male pursuits. In the end, both women become creators of their own stories and images, not through submission to societal expectations, but through a mutual, empowering act of creation.

Through these intricate dynamics, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* not only redefines the female gaze but also offers a revolutionary portrayal of gendered power relations. Women in this film are given the space to be seen as fully realized individuals, reclaiming the power to determine how they are viewed, represented, and understood. This reclamation of agency extends beyond art, becoming a broader metaphor for the ways women can challenge and reshape the power dynamics that have historically silenced them.

### 3. Visual Composition and the Power of Silence

#### 3.1 Framing Women's Bodies through Composition

In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Céline Sciamma employs visual composition not just to frame scenes but to tell a story of emotional and psychological intimacy, particularly through the relationship between Marianne and Héloïse. The film masterfully uses framing to reflect the evolving dynamic between the two women, often positioning them in equal visual weight within the frame. This balanced composition is a deliberate choice, subtly conveying a sense of mutual respect and equality in their relationship, a rarity in the context of historical depictions of women in film, where one figure often dominates the other. Here, neither character is placed above the other, neither in terms of narrative importance nor in the literal visual hierarchy within the shots.

Sciamma's careful use of symmetry suggests harmony and equilibrium between Marianne and Héloïse, even when tensions arise. The recurring close-ups of their faces—particularly their eyes—serve to draw the audience into their intimate, internal worlds. The camera captures not just the physical likenesses of the women, but their unspoken emotions and thoughts, creating a deeply personal connection between the viewer and the characters. This visual approach mirrors the theme of Marianne's painting process, as her artistic gaze is not about objectifying Héloïse, but rather about understanding her subject on a deeper emotional and psychological level.



Picture 2.

The natural landscapes that often serve as backdrops to their interactions—wide expanses of sea, rocky cliffs, and coastal vistas—create a contrast between their confined lives and the freedom they experience in each other's company. In these scenes, the women walk side by side, their physical proximity underscoring

the emotional closeness that develops between them. The slow, deliberate pacing of these scenes allows the audience to feel the weight of time passing, emphasizing the transient but intense nature of their relationship. Sciamma's use of composition, therefore, not only frames the women in the literal sense but also captures the emotional growth and liberation they experience as their bond deepens.

### 3.2 The Use of Silence as Emotional Power

Silence is another powerful narrative device in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, used to communicate emotional depth in ways that dialogue often cannot. Sciamma's decision to forgo a traditional musical score for much of the film enhances this silence, creating a space in which subtle gestures, expressions, and movements take center stage. The quiet moments in the film force the viewer to focus on the unspoken tensions between Marianne and Héloïse, intensifying their emotional connection. Rather than relying on verbal exchanges to convey desire, love, and pain, Sciamma allows silence to speak, using it as a vehicle for emotional resonance.

The absence of music means that natural sounds—the crackle of fire, the rustle of clothing, footsteps on stone—become more pronounced, grounding the film in a tangible reality. These auditory details heighten the intimacy of the scenes, making the audience acutely aware of the characters' physical presence and the quiet spaces between them. For example, the sound of Marianne's pencil scratching on paper as she sketches Héloïse adds a layer of intimacy, as it becomes a kind of communication in itself. This focus on sensory details aligns with the theme of observation and understanding that runs through the film, where seeing and feeling become as important as hearing and speaking.



Picture 3.

Silence also plays a crucial role in defining the emotional landscape of the film. In moments of

silence, Marianne and Héloïse communicate volumes through their body language—fleeting glances, slight touches, and lingering stares become the primary means of expressing their growing affection and desire for one another. In one of the film's most poignant scenes, Héloïse and Marianne sit together in near silence, exchanging looks that carry the weight of all that is left unsaid. This scene exemplifies the power of silence to convey what words cannot—their recognition of each other's inner lives and the inevitable loss that awaits them.

By minimizing dialogue, Sciamma also allows the audience to feel the isolation of the characters, particularly Héloïse, who has been cut off from the world by her impending forced marriage. The silence that surrounds her mirrors her emotional state, amplifying her loneliness and her desire for connection. As Marianne enters Héloïse's world, their shared silences become a space for emotional exploration, where the restrictions of language and social convention fall away, allowing them to connect on a deeply personal level.

The visual composition and silence in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* work in tandem to subvert traditional cinematic techniques, focusing instead on the internal experiences of the characters. Through framing, Sciamma visually represents equality and intimacy, while silence allows for a richer exploration of the emotional terrain between Marianne and Héloïse. Both techniques invite the audience to engage more deeply with the film, not through overt action or dialogue, but through observation, reflection, and an appreciation for the emotional nuances that drive the characters' connection. This slow, deliberate storytelling becomes a feminist act in itself, reimagining how women can be represented in art and cinema—on their own terms.

## 4. Color and Emotional Expression

### 4.1 The Symbolism of Color

#### 4.1.1 Blue and Héloïse's Emotional State

Héloïse is frequently seen wearing a blue dress, which reflects her emotional state and the themes of isolation and restraint that define much of her character. Blue, as a cool tone, symbolizes calm, melancholy, and distance, all of which mirror Héloïse's situation as she faces an arranged marriage she does not desire. The blue of her dress also connects her visually to the landscape around her—cool tones of the sea



and sky that dominate the coastal scenes. These blues convey a sense of confinement and emotional suppression, suggesting that Héloïse, like the sea she walks beside, is bound by forces beyond her control. The blue also represents Héloïse's inner solitude. Her life has been shaped by isolation, first in a convent and then on this remote island, where she lives with the expectation of her future marriage. The coldness of the blue echoes her resigned, emotionally restrained response to the life that has been chosen for her, as well as her initial reluctance to engage in any meaningful connection or express desire. It reflects her struggle with societal expectations, her internal resistance to being painted, and her initial reluctance to explore her own desires and autonomy.

#### 4.1.2 Red and Marianne's Passion



**Picture 4.**

In contrast, Marianne often wears red, a color symbolizing passion, vitality, and emotional intensity. Red is frequently associated with Marianne's role as an artist, signifying her creativity, independence, and emotional openness. The contrast between the blue of Héloïse's dress and the red of Marianne's underscores the tension between restraint and passion, and between societal expectations and personal freedom. Marianne's red dress not only represents her own fiery artistic spirit but also her growing desire and emotional connection with Héloïse. One of the most visually striking scenes occurs during the bonfire, where

Marianne, wearing red, stands across from Héloïse, whose face is illuminated by the fire. The fire itself, along with Marianne's red dress, symbolizes the passion and intensity that has begun to kindle between the two women. Red, in this context, is not just about romantic or sexual desire; it also symbolizes Marianne's rebellion against the societal norms that seek to control her art, her love, and her autonomy. Red is further tied to Marianne's role as a creator. As an artist, she occupies a position of power traditionally reserved for men, and her red dress visually emphasizes her challenge to gender norms. Her bold, passionate nature contrasts with the restraint represented by Héloïse's blue dress, highlighting their distinct but complementary roles in the story.

#### 4.1.3 Interaction of Colors and Emotional Expression

The contrast between blue and red throughout the film serves to highlight the evolving emotional relationship between Héloïse and Marianne. Blue, often a symbol of distance and emotional coldness, reflects Héloïse's initial hesitation and her restrained emotional world. Meanwhile, red symbolizes the passion that slowly develops between them. This interplay of colors visually represents the internal emotional shifts that take place as Héloïse gradually allows herself to explore her desires.

The use of color in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is far more than an aesthetic choice; it serves as a narrative device that deepens the emotional and thematic complexity of the film. Héloïse's blue dress represents her emotional isolation, restraint, and the societal limitations imposed on her, while Marianne's red dress symbolizes passion, creative freedom, and rebellion against those very constraints. This dynamic interplay of colors helps to convey the rich emotional journey of the characters, making the film a visually striking meditation on love, autonomy, and identity.

#### 4.2 The Awakening of Female Desire

Color also plays a crucial role in depicting the awakening of female desire, one of the central themes in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. Unlike traditional narratives dominated by the male gaze, Sciamma's film presents female desire as a complex, multifaceted experience that is tender, intellectual, and emotional, as well as physical. The progression from cool blues to warm reds visually charts Héloïse's gradual awakening to

her own desires, both sexual and emotional, through her relationship with Marianne.



**Picture 5.**

The painting process itself becomes a metaphor for desire and self-discovery. Marianne's act of painting Héloïse is not merely an artistic endeavor; it is an intimate exchange that allows both women to explore their desires and identities. In this context, color takes on an added layer of meaning. As Marianne paints, she captures more than Héloïse's outward appearance; she attempts to understand and represent her inner self, her spirit, and her desires. The shift in the color palette from the cool, restrained tones of Héloïse's initial portrait attempts to the warm, the final portrait reflects Marianne's growing understanding of Héloïse as more than just a passive subject.

As Héloïse becomes more actively involved in the creation of her own portrait, she moves from being an object of observation to a subject with agency, reinforcing the film's larger themes of female empowerment and self-definition. This transformation is mirrored in the film's color progression, with the bright, fiery reds symbolizing Héloïse's growing autonomy and her embrace of her desires.

Color in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is not just a visual tool but a thematic one, deeply intertwined with the film's exploration of desire, identity, and power. Through its careful use of reds, blues, and other tones, the film visually communicates the emotional evolution of the characters, the conflict between freedom and constraint, and the intensity of the love that blossoms between Marianne and Héloïse. Sciamma's masterful use of color creates a rich, symbolic landscape that enhances the narrative's emotional depth and complexity, offering a poignant meditation on the nature of female desire and autonomy.

## 5. Conclusion

*Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is a groundbreaking work of cinema that transcends traditional depictions of women in art by offering a nuanced, multi-layered exploration of gender, power, and identity. At its core, the film reclaims the female gaze, allowing women to be seen and represented on their own terms, free from the objectifying lens of patriarchal norms. Through the intimate relationship between Marianne and Héloïse, Sciamma creates a space where women not only engage in self-discovery but also actively participate in shaping how they are portrayed. This marks a significant departure from conventional cinematic portrayals of women, where their identity is often dictated by male perspectives. The film's use of silence, composition, and color deepens this exploration, creating a visual and emotional landscape that reflects the characters' internal struggles and desires. The symbolic use of reds and blues illustrates the tension between passion and restraint, while the absence of a traditional score enhances the emotional weight of their unspoken connection. Sciamma's deliberate pacing and visual storytelling invite viewers to engage deeply with the themes of love, loss, and autonomy, offering a poignant reflection on the complexities of female existence. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* stands as a powerful meditation on the intersection of art, love, identity, and the ways women can reclaim agency over their stories and desires.

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