
Content Analysis Of *Portrait Of A Lady On Fire* (2019)

The Queer Theory, Feminist Film Theory, and Semiotics Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Portrait Of A Lady on Fire (2019) is mentioned as the perfect example of a queer movie, being written and directed by Céline Sciamma; she is described as an auteur as her movies frequently revolve around the same themes. This movie starred queer individuals as well

Semiotics Analysis of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is understanding that the characters of a queer movie have a common flaw, many queer relationships, especially lesbian relationships. However, in this movie, visually intimate scenes are not shown explicitly and are not fetishized or meant to be portrayed as sexual, but are meant to show the depth of their affection. The director does not exploit the characters sexually.

This article revealed that the community's movie could not cater to the heterosexual audience and was written based on stereotypes for misleading represented through the eyes of heterosexual perspectives.

Keywords: movie, queer theory, film theory, feminist film theory, semiotics

INTRODUCTION

Portrait of a Lady on Fire (2019) is a French movie directed and written by Céline Sciamma. It won Best Screenplay and Queer Palm at the Cannes Film Festival and Best Cinematography for the Lumières and César's awards. Starring Noémie Marant and Adèle Haenel, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) tell the love story of

Marianne and Heloise. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is a perfect example of a queer movie being written, directed, and starred by queer individuals. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is about understanding the community. It is honest and authentic; many "queer" movies are not. Commonly, "queer" movies or characters cater to the heterosexual audience and are written based on stereotypes. Other than this common flaw, many queer relationships, especially lesbian relationships, are fetishized.

A great example of this can be seen in Kechiche's *Blue Is The Warmest Colour* (2013). An overwhelmingly abundant yet unnecessary amount of sex is present in this movie. Concerning the *male gaze*, the lesbian relationship is portrayed through the eyes of Kechiche and presented through the eyes of a heterosexual male. The movie loses its emotional depth and instead objectifies and sexualizes these queer characters and their relationship.

Over the past two decades, the unprecedented increase in queer representation in political, social, and cultural spheres has coincided with a shift in theoretical consciousness in a paradoxical feat of what could be called unfortunate timing with queer theory's dominance in the academic study of sexuality (Bradbury-Rance, 2019).

RESEARCH METHOD

Content analysis is a method of examining this subject of research using Queer theory, feminist film theory, and semiotics.

a. Queer Cinema

Queer is commonly used as an umbrella term for the LGBTQ+ community. It refers to sexualities opposed to heteronormativity and dates back to the 16th century. The term was first used as a "strange" or "different" synonym. However, it started being used to refer to homosexuals and same-sex relationships in a derogatory manner by heterosexuals (Mullhall, 2013). However, by the 70s-80s, arising of Poststructuralist, Postmodernist, and Feminist beliefs, people with non-normative sexual identities, started to reappropriate the word and use it as a

positive and reaffirming statement of their identity (Yue, 2014). This can be seen in the monumental movement of Gay Liberation, which stands to this day. Queer theory itself refers to the study of identity outside of heteronormativity and argues that one's identity in sexuality and gender are fluid (Giesecking, 2008).

New Queer Cinema was coined in 1992 by Ruby Rich in *The Village Voice* and *Sight & Sound* as she talked about the rise of independent LGBT (mostly lesbian and gay) filmmakers. The work of these filmmakers would show queer characters in a positive light, different than what was usually presented in cinema. According to Rich, the New Queer Cinema was pushed by the AIDS crisis, the government under Ronald Reagan, and Sony camcorders which aided in many activist videos (Rich, 2013).

Queer characters have been present in cinema since the early 1900s but weren't always portrayed appropriately. Even now, in the 21st century, this problem is still happening. There are three common problems: queer coding, queerbaiting, and fetishizing. Firstly, queer coding refers to characters who are written with "queer" stereotypes or traits but aren't necessarily revealed to be queer. Secondly, queerbaiting refers to the hinting of romantic relationships between characters of the same sex, but in the end, it is disregarded by the writer/filmmaker (Fathallah, 2014). This technique is meant to garner a larger audience by "baiting" queer audiences. Thirdly, the fetishization of LGBT+ relationships, most prominently lesbian relationships, is alarming. Many Queer relationships are sexualized and objectified to the point where it loses emotional depth. Character's lesbianism is challenging and stereotyped (Green, 2013)

b. Feminist Film Theory

Feminism aims to fight for women's rights and equality in a patriarchal society. Feminism is not about women intending to be superior to men but about the advocacy against impartiality between both sexes. It also touches upon the subject of sexes and equality of race, nationality, religion, and sexuality (Martin, 1994). Through feminism, women can work, go to school, vote, and fundamentally be in control of their own lives and bodies.

Feminist film theory analyses how women are presented and represented in film. In the era of Classical Hollywood cinema (and even now), women are often

objectified and represented as the male character's desire or as passive characters that are written with no depth with the objective of supporting the male character (Smelik, 2016). Mulvey, in her journal, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1989), talks about the *male gaze*. The male gaze refers to three gazes: camera, characters, and spectators. In-camera, this refers to how male directors (or female) portray women through the POV of the camera, framing, angle, etc. Many male gaze-dominated films take advantage of the camera to *gaze* at and sexualize the female body. The gaze of the characters refers to the way male characters treat and *gaze* at the female characters or how female characters are written and portrayed by the filmmaker. The spectator's gaze refers to the audience who identifies with the male gaze through the film.

However, according to the male gaze, many women filmmakers strive to make known the *female gaze*. The female gaze in films does not necessarily mean the objectification of men, as women are in the male gaze. Instead, it refers to how a film is brought differently in the eyes of a female director. With the female gaze, women are no longer objectified and sexualized for the male character's (or director's) desire. Women characters are written with depth and emotional complexity with a desire of their own, and in essence, women are empowered. Films with the female gaze can represent what women want and what they are.

c. Semiotics.

From the Greek root *sema* or “sign” and the word *semeiotikos*, semiotics refers to the study of signs, objects, and meaning. Signification becomes the process of finding underlying and secondary meaning in objects that may not represent themselves otherwise. Saussure says that there are two elements in signs: the *signifier* and the *signified* (Saussure, 1983). The signifier refers to a sound or visual image, while the signifier refers to its concept.

Barthes further explores this and states that the signifier, or *form*, can take shape as anything from objects, sounds, images, etc. There are two levels of meanings too understand the relationship between the form and its concept: denotative and connotative. Denotative refers to the meaning of the sign/object literally, while connotative refers to the underlying meaning of the object, which is influenced by the interpreter's culture, ideology, experiences, etc. Opposing Saussure, Barthes

accentuates the study of the connotative level instead of the denotative (Barthes, 1968).

Symbolism is often used in literature, film, and art to add complexity and depth. Therefore, semiotics is often used to analyze these artworks to interpret and understand their underlying meanings. Especially in film, filmmakers are equipped with many elements that can be used as a sign, from the plot and character itself to the set and props, and even to technical elements such as sound, lighting, angle, and framing.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Portrait of a Lady on Fire (2019) is a French movie directed and written by Céline Sciamma. It won Best Screenplay and Queer Palm at the Cannes Film Festival and Best Cinematography for both the Lumières and César's awards. Starring Noémie Marant and Adèle Haenel, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) tell the love story of Marianne and Heloise.

Set in 1770 France, Marianne, a painter, is hired to paint Heloise, a reluctant bride, as a pre-wedding gift for her suitor. Before the arrival of Marianne, a painter had failed to paint Heloise as she would not pose for him. Therefore, Marianne is hired to paint in secret. She pretends to be her companion for walks, observes every feature and movement by day, and tries to remember it as she paints by night. However, as the portrait is finished and Marianne comes clean to Heloise, Heloise critiques it and says that it lacks life and presence. Hearing that, she destroys the portrait.

However, working on the second portrait was different. Heloise was now willing to pose, and their bond became stronger and inescapable. The portrait becomes a collaboration of both painter and muse and a product of the growth of their relationship. Both women finally confess their loves, not through speech, but intense and fond gazes, delicate touches, and fiery passion in their smiles. Nevertheless, their relationship was bound to end.

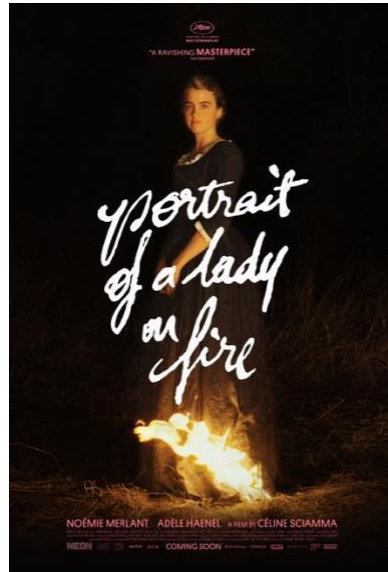


Figure 1 . Portrait of a Lady on Fire film posters
Source: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8613070/>
source: Lilies Films (2019)

Tragically as both cannot escape their fated destinies, despite after parting, the memory of their short-lived but beautiful affair would always stay with them, even after years later.

Analysis of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

1. Queer Cinema

The film is a case in point of the shift from a medium-specific reading of gazes, bodies, desires, and framing to a more diffuse cultural history (Mayer, 2015). Queer studies are experiencing a methodological renaissance. In both the humanities and the social sciences, scholars have started to identify the protocols and practices overshadowed by dramatic advances in queer theory (Brim & Ghaziani, 2016).

Portrait of a Lady on Fire is considered a perfect example of a queer movie being written, directed, and starred by queer individuals. Portrait of a Lady on Fire is about understanding the community, and it is honest and authentic. Many "queer" movies are not. Commonly, "queer" movies or characters cater to the heterosexual audience and are written based on stereotypes. Other than this

common flaw, many queer relationships, especially lesbian relationships, are fetishized.

A great example of this can be seen in Kechiche's *Blue Is The Warmest Colour* (2013). An overwhelmingly abundant yet unnecessary amount of sex is present in this movie. Relating to the *male gaze*, the lesbian relationship is portrayed through the eyes of Kechiche and is presented through the eyes of a heterosexual male. The movie loses its emotional depth and instead objectifies and sexualizes these queer characters and their relationship.

However, in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the relationship between Marianne and Heloise is presented purely as two people who fall in love. Sex scenes are not shown explicitly and are not fetishized or meant to be portrayed as sexual, but are meant to show the depth of their affection. Sciamma does not exploit her characters sexually, yet she displays scenes after they have made love and brilliantly displays a visual gag of Marianne rubbing a hallucinogenic substance on Heloise's armpit, which ought to look like a sex scene.

Sciamma can show that a lesbian relationship is as normal as a heterosexual relationship and does not make it feel forced or *shameful*, as many films do. She portrays the relationship between Heloise and Marianne so naturally and is not an *in-your-face* attempt. The movie is set in the 1770s; Sciamma showed that being queer is normal and not something "new." It has always existed but has been overthrown and shamed by heteronormativity.



Figure 2 . Heloise and Marianne

Source:

<https://www.heraldnet.com/life/slow-burning-passions-ignite-in-dazzling-portrait-of-a-lady/>

source: Portrait of a Lady on Fire (2019) Neon/Lilies Films

Even though Sciamma portrays the relationship naturally, the LGBTQ community would still be condemned in the 1770s. Therefore, Marianne and Heloise are also careful in the way that they show affection. This is mostly seen in how they would gaze and smile intensely at each other, often aided with close-ups and POV shots.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire (2019), as many queer films do, has a tragic ending. However, unlike most of these films, it is also joyous. This is because we see that both Heloise and Marianne still hold each other fondly in their memory after all these years. It is shown in Marianne's painting of Orpheus and Eurydice, her portrait of a lady on fire, Heloise's page 28, and Heloise experiencing a wave of emotions as she hears Vivaldi's Summer: Presto.

2. Feminist Film Theory

Feminist filmmaking has emerged since the mid-nineties, with new strategies for narrating desires that are expansively polymorphous and unexpected and deeply shot through feeling (Johnson, 2004). Portrait of a Lady on Fire is said to be a manifesto of the *Female Gaze*. The female gaze does not necessarily sexualize men the way women are sexualized through the male gaze. The female gaze instead lets the audience into the perspective of the world and film through the eyes of a female director. This can be seen in the depiction and representation of characters, the storyline, and film techniques. In Portrait of a Lady on Fire (2019), Sciamma focuses on strong female characters who are written with depth and character, their love and female friendship, but with strong overtones of the patriarchal society in which they, and us spectators, live in.

Not only do we see the female gaze through how Sciamma realizes the movie as a female director, but we also see the female gaze through Marianne and Heloise's characters. We see them gazing at each other, especially during the film's beginning, when Marianne has to paint Heloise in secret. Because of this, Marianne tries to observe Heloise's every feature and movement attentively. During these scenes, Sciamma switches to a POV shot, and we can see what Marianne sees. Furthermore, we also see them gazing at each other as their language to represent their love and see how they *see* each other.



Figure 3 . Heloise

Source:https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8613070/mediaviewer/rm3458576641?ref_=ttmi_mi_all_sf_26

source: Portrait of a Lady on Fire (2019) Neon/Lilies Films

Through the female gaze, Sciamma accentuates equality that can be found in the relationship of the three women, whether it be in Marianne and Heloise's romantic relationship or their friendship with Sophie. In Marianne and Heloise's romantic relationship, we can see that it is based on equality and respect in gender, social status, and hierarchy. This is evident in their process of creating Heloise's second portrait. Marianne destroys it after Heloise is critiqued about how her (first) portrait lacked life. Marianne did not know Heloise at that time and only painted her through glimpses and fleeting moments. Therefore, the painting did not represent her and her character.

However, the second portrait became a collaboration between Marianne and Heloise, painter and muse. It was no longer the work of the painter but of both. This portrays that they saw each other as equals. This is most evident in the scene where Marianne is painting and Heloise is posing. Marianne is framed with a medium shot, while Heloise is framed with a wide shot, which makes her seem exposed. Marianne says that she would hate to be in Heloise's place and mentions all her idiosyncrasies that she has caught on. In response, Heloise says that they are in the same place. She says, "when you look at me, who do I look at?" She also sees Marianne. She then proceeds to tell Marianne all her idiosyncrasies in return. This shows that Marianne is not merely a spectator and Heloise a subject, but they both are observers of each other, ultimately realizing that the portrait is

not just Marianne's work but Heloise's. The scene ends with Heloise framed with a medium shot while Marianne is framed with a wide shot.



Figure 4 . Heloise and Marianne
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-fQPTwma9o>
source: Portrait of a Lady on Fire (2019) Neon/Lilies Films

Regarding their friendship with Sophie, who, as a maid, fundamentally has a lower status than both Marianne and Heloise, their friendship was also built upon respect, *philia*, and equality. This can be seen in how both Marianne and Heloise cared for Sophie, especially during her difficult journey of abortion. They brought her to "doctors" and brewed her concoctions; they even let her sleep on the same bed with her.

With the female gaze, Sciamma lets the audience feel the presence of men and the constructions of patriarchy while barely presenting male characters in the film. The plot itself is entwined in this, where Heloise is set to marry a man she does not know to preserve her family's status. In the 18th century, women commonly had no say in marriage, and daughters were forced to marry for wealth, status, and family name. The looming consequences of the patriarchal system are also shown in many other scenes, mainly in a subtle yet impactful way. In the beginning, when Marianne was on the boat rowed by a group of men, her canvas was thrown into the water because of the harsh current. With the concept of *courtesy* and *chivalry*, especially in the 1700s, one would expect the men to retrieve it for her. Instead, they watch as it floats further and further from the boat, resulting in Marianne jumping into the water to save it. Another we see at the end of the movie is when Marianne's portrait of Heloise is being boxed up. Instead of Marianne, we see a man nailing the box shut. This represents that

Heloise was also being boxed up by a man as a woman, particularly in marriage. Sciamma was even able to make every other scene that had male characters feel very uncomfortable to watch, for example, at the exhibition, mostly filled by men and barely by women. It was even later revealed that Marianne submitted her paintings to exhibitions under her father's name so that they may be displayed. This shows that talented women could not showcase their work because of men's rules.

Even female artists and painters of that time are not documented and known as many male painters, concluding that they have been overshadowed and even erased in art history by men.

However, one of the most impactful scenes where we see the consequences of the patriarchal society is shown in the *abortion scene*. Sophie had an unwanted pregnancy and wished to have an abortion. Abortion then and now has always been denounced by society, but mostly by men. However, who are men to tell women what to do with their bodies? This issue is present now and has been present since centuries ago. There were no professional doctors to conduct the abortion, and instead, midwives were to do the job with improper medicine. Before going to a midwife, Sophie herself had to try to induce miscarriage by brewing an abortifacient tea, fatiguing exercise, and even hanging herself to pass out. These dangerous and unsuitable methods for abortion show that women's health is not prioritized. The fact that men cause pregnancies, but methods to resolve unwanted pregnancies are denounced shows how ridiculous and binding these male-centered rules are. With this, Sciamma also wanted to show part of history that's never been revealed and accentuated through the paints of the abortion process.

The three women would also cook, play, and even discuss literature. In one of the scenes, they read a passage about the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. The myth tells the story of Orpheus, the poet, and Eurydice, who is married. One day Eurydice dies from a snake bite, and because Orpheus loved her so much, he goes to the underworld and pleads to take her back. Hades allows this under one condition: Orpheus does not turn to see Eurydice on their way back, or she will be taken back to the underworld. Unexpectedly nearing their way out, Orpheus turns to look. Learning that Orpheus turned to face Eurydice and caused her to die once

more, the three started interpreting it through their eyes as a woman and also through the eyes of Eurydice. Many would interpret the Greek myth as a tragic romance, where Orpheus loved Eurydice so much that he turned to face her. However, in this scene, Sciamma changes the way viewers see this myth. Sophie gets angry and says that Orpheus should not turn to look at Eurydice because he knows the consequences. She says that it is not romantic but cruel and foolish. Marianne suggests that Orpheus turned around because, as a poet, he believed that the memory of Eurydice would mean more to him than Eurydice herself. Heloise also suggests that maybe it was Eurydice who told Orpheus to turn around; maybe it was a choice she made for herself. These bold interpretations provided a female gaze toward a Greek myth written from the male protagonist's perspective.

CONCLUSION

Semiotics analysis on *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) reflected on (a) The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice presents itself as a reoccurring and important pattern in the portrait. The tragedy and the loss between them symbolize Heloise and Marianne's relationship that is fleeting. They both realize that they will have to part, just as Orpheus and Eurydice did, and all that will be left is a memory. After their discussion session about the myth, Marianne recurrently started seeing an apparition of Heloise dressed in white. However, whenever she would turn, the apparition would disappear into thin air. This symbolizes how their relationship will end up exactly like Orpheus and Eurydice. However, even knowing so, both still wanted to continue their brief but intense affair. After they both part and Marianne is about to leave, suddenly, from behind her, Heloise utters the words "turn around." Marianne looks, and this is the last time they meet for a long time. This symbolizes Heloise's interpretation of how Eurydice was the one who told Orpheus to turn around and Marianne's interpretation of the poet's choice of memory.

However, the reoccurrence of the theme does not end there; it appears one last time during Marianne's exhibition, a few years after the affair. She had painted the story of Orpheus and Eurydice but portrayed it very differently than what was

conventional. Typically, a painter would either portray the scene of Orpheus turning and Eurydice dying or the scene right before Orpheus turns to look. However, Marianne depicts the parting between Orpheus and Eurydice as if they are bidding farewell. This symbolizes her memory of Heloise and their short-lived relationship that remains significant even after all these years. While this symbolizes Marianne's memory, page 28 of Heloise's book symbolizes hers. Before they parted ways, Heloise asked Marianne to draw herself on page 28 of her book, which becomes the only part of Marianne that she has. At the same exhibition years later, one of the painters had painted Heloise with her daughter, with a book on her lap. Examining it closer, Heloise subtly opens her book to page 28 as a symbol of their love.

The second element is (b). Fire is an element used in the portrait to signify the passion and desire of Marianne and Heloise's love. It is first seen when Marianne accidentally fires Heloise's previous portrait. The fire catches perfectly on the heart of the portrait, symbolizing their growing love. After this, we see them standing on opposite sides of the bonfire. The large flames burn as they stare at each other before it burns Heloise's dress. After a while, it was not until they realized that her dress had caught fire, as they were too lost in each other's eyes. The fire represents their burning love, and this scene becomes the film's turning point, where they both finally realize and act on their feelings for each other.

Third elements (c.) The portraits symbolize Marianne and Heloise's relationship that grows closer and closer. The first portrait did not succeed in depicting Heloise because it lacked life and presence. This is because Marianne had to do the painting in secret (and so it was based on fleeting memories) because Marianne followed the rules and conventions of painting, but mostly because the painter and the muse did not have a connection. In order to paint the muse truthfully and authentically, the painter must understand the muse. Taking this further, Heloise, the muse, becomes a collaborator on Marianne's second portrait. As they become closer and equal, the second portrait is given life by the painter and the muse. However, we see the portrait that depicts Heloise the best in Marianne's painting "Portrait of a Lady on Fire," shown at the beginning of the film. Marianne takes inspiration from the bonfire scene outside of the conventions and rules of how a portrait should be. Later in the movie, it is also

revealed that this was when Marianne first wanted to kiss her. This portrait then represents their burning passion and love for each other that is eternal.

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