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"Regarde-moi"

Looking at Looking in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*
(Sciamma, 2019)

Bachelor's project in Film Studies

Supervisor: Ilona Hongisto

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the 2019 film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Sciamma) and to determine whether it challenges the traditional ways of looking in film. My aim is to investigate whether the film represents an alternative to Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory and classic Hollywood's use of looking.

The method section in the essay is inspired by discourse analysis adapted to analyse four different dimensions or levels of looking using Foucault's concept of the "grille". The analysis is thus divided into four distinct arguments to investigate whether the film challenges Mulvey's gaze theory. In addition, the essay places the film within the history of lesbian cinema.

The results indicate that *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* uses looking as a fundamental tool for establishing the power dynamic between its main characters and the audience in a way that is seemingly in contradiction with the male gaze and traditional ways of looking in classic Hollywood narratives. However, it is impossible to confidently determine whether looking in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is part of a new and larger discourse change within lesbian cinema.

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“Another film that isn’t afraid to ask... will these lesbians be lesbians together?”

(Saturday Night Live, 2021).

The history of lesbianism on screen is one of constant conflict between visibility and invisibility as evidenced by the sarcastic tweet from the Twitter account of the infamous comedy show, Saturday Night Live (SNL). The above quote is taken from a sketch aired in April 2021 that presents a fictitious film titled “Lesbian Period Drama”. The sketch points to an apparent trend in recent queer filmmaking where lesbian narratives are restricted to dramatic period pieces set in the 18th century. One such film is *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Sciamma, 2019), which is the subject of this thesis. The filmic development is interesting, because the narratives necessitate vague cues about the characters’ queerness; the characters cannot be openly lesbian if the story takes place in the 18th century countryside.

In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* two young women meet at the end of the eighteenth century. One is a painter. The other, Héloïse (Adèle Haenel), is a noblewoman who is forcefully betrothed to an Italian nobleman after her sister, who was supposed to marry him, commits suicide. Héloïse has refused to pose for a portrait intended to serve as a wedding present for her betrothed. Consequently, in a desperate attempt to procure the portrait, her mother hires a painter, Marianne (Noémie Merlant). She is to follow Héloïse, under the ruse of companionship, and observe and memorize her face for the portrait. On numerous strolls along the lonely shoreline of Bretagne, Héloïse and Marianne seemingly keep communications to a minimum. However, their silence is loud on account of their curious stares and seemingly longing gazes. Their companionship starts out cold, however, they fall in love and share a brief, but intense relationship in the comforting absence of authority.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire is first and foremost a story of two star-crossed women. Societal obligations and cultural norms prevent them from being together, and so they are left with limited time and the mere memory of one another. This fact forces them to constantly

seize the opportunity to look at one another and take in every single detail. Looking, or as they appropriately introduce it in the SNL sketch: “Academy Award-Winning Glance Choreography” is essential to the narrative of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. The act of looking has historically been used to create and underline tension between characters on screen when explicit action is not possible.

In this essay, I will look at the “glance choreography” of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* by applying Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze. Male gaze theory attempts to explain why humans feel pleasure when watching film. Rather problematically, however, the theory’s focus is a psychoanalytic approach to the male spectator and his exclusive role as the observer. Hence, the woman’s inevitable role is as the observed and objectified. The theory leaves room for no other spectator than the male one, and his gaze is forever an objectifying one. Thus, the theory seems inadequate when looking at queer cinema. I will apply a modified model based on my assumption that the film consists of four distinct dimensions, or levels, of looking that establish the dynamic between characters and spectator. The dimensions consist of three of Mulvey’s original dimensions: (a) the camera’s gaze, (b) the character’s gaze at one another, (c) the spectators’ gaze at the screen, and my addition to the theory, (d) the character’s gaze at the audience. In applying these dimensions to an analysis, I seek answers to the question: How does Sciamma’s *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* challenge the theory of the male gaze and the fundamental rules of looking in film?

Next, I will give a brief introduction to the history of lesbian representation and its connection to the question of visibility. Then I will present the methodology used for the analysis of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* before the analysis itself.

Theoretical background

2.1. Lesbians on Screen: A Brief Introduction to Invisibility

The Motion Picture Production Code was created as a reaction to a growing concern about the moral wellbeing of Hollywood and its productions leading up to the 1930s. The code banned certain activities in films, such as profanities, nudity, blasphemy, drug use, and homosexuality. The Code developed from a list of suggested, morally correct “Don’ts’ and Be Carefuls” to a strict list of necessary exclusions (Kuhn & Westwell, 2020). After the introduction of the rating system in 1968, the code was abandoned. However, it had created a cinematic discourse where the representation of homosexuality was restricted, and thus rarely seen during a large portion of the 20th century (Bradbury-Rance, 2019, p. 19). The presence of homosexuality during these years was limited to the “... subversive interpretation” (Farmer in Bradbury-Rance, 2019, p. 17) of the audience. In other words, it was non-existent, but for what the viewer could imagine based on the subtext of the film.

The Motion Picture Production Code prohibited any displays of homosexuality on screen. Consequently, filmmakers had to turn to the implicit and find ways to get around the censorship. In the same way as sex would have to be hidden in the subtext of films during the era of the Code, they had to imply queerness by the power of the unseen. As a result, unwritten conventions were established to connotate homosexuality on screen, often in the form of stereotypically homosexual traits.¹ The representation of male homosexuality was deemed immoral, and censorship has been a key part in guiding its trajectory to modern representation.

¹ So-called “connotative homosexuality” (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009, p. 316) was often indicated by applying stereotypical traits to characters to portray queerness, for example by having queer men be effeminate and dressing queer women in suits. The queerness of the characters was never mentioned, so it was up to the spectator to read the subtle signs. Filmmakers’ efforts to contend the Code has remained a much-discussed theme in film after the Code was abandoned (Kuhn & Westwell, 2020).

Lesbian representation has followed a different path than the representation of male homosexuality through the history of cinema. According to Bradbury-Rance (2019), lesbian film has been mainly influenced, not by censorship, but by the lack thereof. As she explains, lesbianism has suffered from a "... lack of outright censorship that renders the lesbian more presently absent throughout the twentieth century than her male counterpart" (Bradbury-Rance, 2019, p. 20). While homosexual relationships between men was likened to blasphemy and heterosexual sex, lesbianism was not even mentioned in the censorship laws. The lack of mention throughout history has rendered lesbian cinema a sub-category of a larger, queer cinematic discourse. Bradbury-Rance describes that between 2011 and 2018, there were 92 films nominated for the Queer Palm at Cannes (Bradbury-Rance, 2019, p. 7). Out of those, a stark minority have lesbian narratives. Queer cinema remains male-dominated, both during production and through narratives. One could argue that the past invisibility and the current representation of lesbianism on screen have fostered a need within queer filmmaking to reinvent the ways in which lesbians are represented.

The first examples of lesbians were ill-fated and lonely, with no chance of happiness in a homosexual relationship. This depiction of the lesbian was common in the general post-code representation of homosexuality. Queerness was "... silly and comedic, villainous and scary, or shameful and tragic" (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006, p. 94). Lesbianism is visually present, but without hope of a happy existence. It signifies the "... dialectic between visibility and invisibility, possibility and impossibility, significance and insignificance" (Traub in Bradbury-Rance, p. 4). Lesbians are present, but at the same time alone and shameful about their sexuality. Bradbury-Rance references films such as *The Children's Hour* (Wyler, 1961) where two women are accused of being in a relationship. What follows is disastrous as one of the women commits suicide because she cannot cope with her sexuality. Gradually the depiction has changed in accordance with societal norms.

In the 90s', even if the socio-political climate had changed dramatically when considering queerness, lesbians were "... not born, they're seduced" (Berenstein in Bradbury-Rance, 2019, p. 5). Films from this era focused on the lesbian's realisation of their queerness, often through the careful and seductive guidance from a more experienced lesbian, or through a teen coming-of-age narrative.² *Imagine Me and You* (Parker, 2005) exemplifies the meet-cutes that took centre stage during the early 2000s. The main characters are unlikely partners; they meet at the wedding of one of them, and the other is apparently not over her ex.

The next wave of lesbian representation came in the form of well-established couples, perhaps best exemplified by the 2010 film *The Kids are All Right* (Cholodenko) featuring a lesbian couple, their two children, the children's sperm donor, and all the quarrels of normal family life. This brings us back to the present, where there is an apparent trend of 18th century dramas.

The development of lesbian representation on screen has seen a change from invisibility to more recent visibility. There has been an attempt to distance lesbian cinema even further from the heteronormative, which is apparent in the increasingly diverse stories about lesbian women. The stories are distanced from the stereotypical representation of lesbianism of the past. Additionally, the distancing can be seen in the composition of production teams that now include more women and LGBT+ individuals.³ Queer film is separating itself from the male dominated Hollywood studios by adhering to newer trend where queer people get to tell their own stories on screen.

² Examples from this period of coming-of-age narratives include *Show Me Love* (Moodysson, 1998) and *But, I'm a Cheerleader* (Babbit, 1999). Of course, the coming-of-age theme is far from dead and is still found in numerous queer films such as *Booksmart* (Wilde, 2019).

³ Newer films such as *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (Akhavan, 2018) and *Happiest Season* (DuVall, 2020) as well as television series such as *Euphoria* (Barnett et al, 2019-2021) and *Feel Good* (Hampson & Martin, 2020-2021) all have a more diverse cast and crew to tell contemporary stories of queer women.

Now I will present the fundamentals of Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory as a starting point for this analysis.

2.2. The Traditional Male Gaze

British feminist film theorist, Laura Mulvey, proposed the theory of the "male gaze" in the 1970s. The male gaze is, according to her, the result of a "... world ordered by sexual imbalance" where "... pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey, 2006, p. 346). When boiled down, it is a question of who controls the narrative and who has the power to objectify and gaze. Mulvey's original article takes a psychoanalytic approach to the act of looking in film. She bases her assumptions on Freud and his theory of psychosexual development. Detailed discussions of the elements of psychosexual development are well beyond the scope of this essay and, as I will discuss later, Freud's psychoanalytic theories are, at best, problematic. But the theory still has enlightening views on film perspective.

Cinema is built on the male gaze. It can be seen in cinema's intense wish to accurately represent reality by using techniques such as deep focus, camera movements that follow the actions of the protagonist, and invisible editing (Mulvey, 2006, p. 348). Accuracy is key to identifying with the characters in the film, and according to Mulvey it is one of two key mechanisms for creating feelings of pleasure when watching.⁴ In addition to the cinematographic techniques that promote the male gaze, *mise-en-scène* plays an equally pivotal role. One way in which *mise-en-scène* focuses the male gaze is through costume. Costumes for female characters are "... intricately designed to maximize what are considered their most sexually appealing aspects and downplay their "problem areas"" (Benshoff and Griffin, 2009, p. 245). The same goes for the application of make-up. In addition, the three-

⁴ Mulvey's examples are limited to Hollywood film, Hitchcock and Sternberg in particular, but she tends to generalise to cinema in general. I will be speaking of a great, universal "cinema" in this essay.

point lighting found in classical Hollywood cinema amplified the effects of the costumes and make-up to present women in the most flattering way to appease the male spectator. *Mise-en-scène* contributes to the reduction of women to the objects of voyeuristic gazing.

Rather problematically, however, Mulvey's original paper neglects any other spectator than the male one. In a later text, she continued the discussion with the addition of a theory regarding female spectatorship.

2.3. The Female Gaze

Mulvey argued that women, similarly to men, tend to take the viewpoint of the male protagonist in films. As viewers, they participate in the voyeuristic pleasure of looking at women. John Berger explained that "Men look at women; women watch themselves being looked at" (Berger in Gauntlett, 2008, p. 41). The male gaze is transferred to women, who look back on themselves with the same critical gaze as men. Through experience, women adopt the gaze and are equally guilty of the voyeuristic pleasures of looking at other women through the eyes of the male protagonist. This male view of women can also be said to apply to the real lives of women outside the cinema.

In a later text, Mulvey further explains the experience of the female spectator as a "... masculinization and consequently makes the case for 'visual transvestism'" (Evans & Gamman, 2005, p. 23). Again, Mulvey argues that the pleasure women experience when watching film comes only from her identification with men and adopting the male form. Mulvey's rigid structure for pleasure experienced when viewing film does not allow for an explanation for female or lesbian visual pleasure, however. In fact, Mulvey's theory is limited to a filmic discourse where there is a much smaller pool of different, potential viewers and main characters. So, contemporary film theorists working within feminist film theory, have questioned Mulvey's male gaze, and adapted it, to cover a wider range of identification between viewer and film.

Freud once said about his own theories that “. . .to those of you who are women this will not apply - you are yourselves the problem” (Doane, 1982, p. 74). It goes without saying that Mulvey’s Freudian theory of the male gaze is not particularly apt at explaining female spectatorship, nor does it account for any other gender identity or sexual orientation. And so Mulvey’s theory, though it has survived and is still discussed and used almost 50 years after its conception, has not been uncontested.

The possibility of expanding the male gaze to include women has been much discussed. Eva-Maria Jacobsson (1999) believes that in films where the roles of the male gaze are simply reversed, with a tough, leading female and an objectified male sidekick, the male gaze is still dominant. The female main character is masculinised and presents masculine traits to gain power of the gaze, and thus, it remains a masculine gaze. In other words, the heterosexual gaze will always remain male, according to Jacobsson. Her theory works as an extension of Mulvey’s, but with the added potential of female main characters.

Documentary filmmaker Zoe Dirse (2013) questioned this logic by posing the question: what happens if both the bearer of the gaze and the object of it are women? Does this allow for a distinct female gaze? Well, yes and no. One could argue that simply replacing men behind and in front of the camera with women does not remove the male gaze, because there is still the argument of women placing themselves in traditionally masculine roles to gain the power of the gaze and thus, keeping the gaze masculine. Dirse, however, argues that the factor that separates her films from the male gaze, is the connection she has with the objects on screen. There is little way of proving her right or wrong, but she brings up an interesting difference between films where the main character is a heterosexual woman and films where all the parts involved in the gaze are women. This brings me on to lesbian representation and the lesbian gaze in cinema.

2.4. The Lesbian Gaze

There are two leading theoreticians in the development of Mulvey's gaze theory regarding lesbian spectatorship: Jackie Stacey and Teresa de Lauretis. The discussion between them involves two opposing views, both based on the original male gaze theory. By extension both are distinctly coloured by Freudian psychoanalysis, however, one much more so than the other. In 1987, Jackie Stacey proposed that there is a homoerotic aspect in all films that depict relationships between women, even when the relationships are not of romantic or sexual character (Stacey, 1987, p. 57). Stacey argues that all woman/woman relationships have a homoerotic undertone because viewers will identify with the women on screen and the homoerotic relationship between the women on screen is mirrored in the relationship between the female characters and the spectator. Her model of female identification does not, unlike Mulvey's male gaze, make a distinction between voyeuristic desire and identification. In the case of female identification there are "...forms of desire which include, though not exclusively, homoerotic pleasure" (Stacey, 1994, p. 29). Stacey, then, claims that all women identify with women on screen and part of that includes homoerotic pleasure.

An opposing look to Stacey's was proposed by Teresa de Lauretis, who argued that Stacey's theory of the convergence of desire and identifications strayed too far from the original theories of Freud (and by extension of Mulvey). Her theory of female spectatorship went back to Freud's strict separation between visual desire and identification, but more importantly, it criticised Stacey for using all female relationships as objects of homoeroticism. It, as De Lauretis explains, sweeps "... lesbian sexuality and desire under the rug of sisterhood, female friendship, and the now popular theme of the mother-daughter bond" (De Lauretis, 1994, p. 116) instead of considering "... erotic contemplation of women by women" (De Lauretis in Evans & Gamman, 2005, p. 35). De Lauretis argued for a rigid separation

between mainstream film and lesbian cinema, completely opposed to Stacey's idea of universal homoeroticism in female/female relationships on screen.

Lesbian representation was to De Lauretis a "... site of real liberation for all female subjects" (Hollinger, 1998, p. 11). The lesbian couple together takes the place of the male subject and they project a "... coupled female spectatorial position that is subversive of patriarchal, heterosexist norms" (De Lauretis, 1991, p. 225). The result of this is a theory that unlike the male gaze assumes the position that both parties in the relationship are active and passive, both observed and observing at the same time. This is in contradiction to the male gaze and thus, the female spectator is "... offered empowerment as an active desiring female subject" (Hollinger, 1998, p. 12). In other words, the doubled woman allows for an exclusion of the usual male subjects and their proposed, objectifying gaze.

Now, the purpose of this essay is to look at whether *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* challenges the fundamentals of Mulvey's male gaze and the tradition of looking in cinema. I wish to come up with an alternative approach to the gaze with Stacey and De Lauretis as potential expansions to Mulvey's theory. I will now present a methodological tool to analysing films through gaze theory based on Michel Foucault's discourse theory.

Method

3.1. Discourse Analysis

The theory of discourse was originally developed to explain how "... formally recognised 'experts', worked to constrain certain groups" within institutions (Gauntlett, 2008, p. 126). Discourse theory is founded on the idea of societal power structures and how these structures allow people to create meaning within their own time. Michel Foucault believed that people cannot "have" power; they can only exercise it and express it in social interactions

through norms, language and concepts used to define actions.⁵ David Gauntlett defines *discourse* as "... 'a way of talking about things' within a particular group, culture or society" or as "... a set of ideas within a culture which shapes how we perceive the world" (Gauntlett, 2008, p. 18). The general idea of Foucault is that discourse is the ways in which we can create meaning within our historical context. Meaning and reality are constructed through language. The words used to construct reality reflect the values and attitudes in that reality.

The expression of language is not limited to spoken or written conversation but extends to all media. The relation between discourse and cinema is as apparent as its relation to any other part of society. Cinematic discourse then, describes how people talk about film, make film, and by association, representation on screen. Because discourse is set through communication and language, people who are at the front of a subculture will be the main contributors to discourse. As I have described earlier, for example, the Motion Picture Production Code dictated appropriate representation in cinema through censorship for a large portion of the 20th century.

3.2. The Grille of Gazes

Discourses are painfully abstract, and their patterns can be difficult to spot, so when utilising discourse theory for analysis it is helpful to look closer at Foucault's theory of the "grille".⁶ The grille describes how different mechanisms of prohibition overlay the discourse in a kind of grid pattern and create black fields, like the black spaces in a crossword puzzle (Gundersen, 2016, p. 10). These black fields are the mechanisms that uphold society's taboos

⁵ David Gauntlett (2008) uses the example of a company boss to explain this idea. Company bosses might seem powerful in their work environment. They can exercise power over their employees at work, however, this apparent power disappears as soon as the social situation changes. When they leave work, their power disappears.

⁶ It has been translated to mean something along the lines of "grid", but for the sake of sticking to his original terms, I will refer to it as a grille.

and silenced subjects. In this analysis, I will consider four such mechanisms of the male gaze and apply Foucault's grille to *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*.

Through her article, Mulvey introduces three distinct kinds of gazes: (a) the camera's gaze on set, (b) the characters' gazes at each other, and (c) the viewer's gaze (Evans & Gamman, 2005, p. 22). The camera's gaze is male dominated because the people in control behind the camera (writers, directors, producers etc.) have traditionally been predominantly men. The gaze of the viewer is a two-sided one - partly driven by the voyeuristic tendencies of humans and the pleasure of seeing people on screen and further driven by the narcissistic satisfaction of identifying with the main character. Additionally, the gaze of the viewer is controlled by the cinematography, editing, and mise-en-scene of the films to objectify the women in the narrative. The gazes of all the characters are connected to that of the main character, who again, has often been male.

My proposed grille consists of four dimensions. The three first represent each of Mulvey's distinct gazes. The fourth dimension is a type of gaze that neither Mulvey, nor Evans and Gamman mention in their texts; the characters in the film gazing at the audience. The obvious reason as to why Mulvey does not mention this gaze is that it does not necessarily support her theory of the gaze. When characters stare directly into the camera, for example during a POV shot, the cinematic illusion can be broken, and the audience is quickly reminded that they are the spectators of a fictional narrative. The male gaze, according to Mulvey, relies on the illusion of identification with the main character, and so, one would assume that breaking the illusion would imply a disconnect from the male gaze. However, I will later argue that this kind of shot can both strengthen the male gaze and simultaneously weaken it depending on the nature of the shot and the narrative context of the gaze.

The combination of Mulvey's theory of the gaze and Foucault's discourse analysis allows me to analyse *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* through a lens of changing discourses. By

looking back to Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, I can use her theory as a steppingstone for my analysis. Mulvey's theory, perhaps problematically, is rigid and lacks the depth I believe is needed to analyse the dynamic of looking in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. Gaze theory is an essentialist reading of spectatorship and thus, does not account for the cultural knowledge any viewer brings with them into the theatre. The addition of Foucault's discourses can give a more nuanced picture of the alternative gaze because it allows me to look at the gaze in the context of socially contextualised identification and queer representation. Now I will apply the four-dimensional grille to the film to investigate whether *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* challenges the theory of the male gaze and the fundamental rules of looking in film.

The Gaze in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

4.1. Dimension One: The Camera Eye

On April 26th, 2021, the 93rd Academy Awards ceremony could perhaps mark a changing discourse in the film industry. Chloé Zhao became the second woman ever to receive an award for directing for her work on *Nomadland* (2020), eleven years after the first one was won by Kathryn Bigelow for *The Hurt Locker* (2009). She is also the first woman of colour to receive the award. The award, while seemingly progressive, points to a general lack of women in the film industry. The same trend is apparent if you look to France as well however: only one woman, Tonie Marshall, has won the French national award for film merit in directing, the César Award (Allociné, 2021). *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is not a product of Hollywood directly, though it follows a traditional narrative structure developed in the Hollywood system.

The production of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is strikingly and uncommonly female led. It was written and directed by Céline Sciamma, who was in fact nominated for a César Award in 2020 for directing it. Sciamma is also openly queer, and she has directed several

films with queer stories in the past. In that context she clearly takes a stand against the voyeuristic tendencies of the past regarding sex between two women on screen (Robertson, 2008). Gaze theory has been used to describe the power exercised by the traditionally male directors, producers, writers, and cinematographers. The men behind the camera "... use the camera as an instrument to look at women" (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009, p. 244). In this way, the relationship between directors and actors is reminiscent of the relationship between the painter and the person being painted. In addition to Sciamma, the film's cinematographer and the producer were female. The idea of the camera as an eye is not uncommon within the world of film and it has thus, been a natural development of gaze theory to look at the gaze of the camera and the cinematographer. By utilising females to fill the commonly most "powerful" positions on set, the camera eye is a distinctly female one.

Sciamma's goal of avoiding the traditional male gaze can be seen in most parts of her production, from writing to shooting. One way where this is visible is in the setting of the story. She has chosen to avoid men almost completely. Yes, there is an implication of negativity connected to the Milanese nobleman, but other than that the women in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* live completely separated from men. There are cinematographic aspects that separate this film from other arguably more traditionally voyeuristic films, such as the much discussed and critiqued *Blue is the Warmest Color* (Kechiche, 2013) where there are graphic displays of sex in a seemingly studio-lit apartment. In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the cinematography is consistently close to the characters. There is an intimacy created throughout the entire film that allows the viewers to feel like part of the narrative rather than as spectators. Sciamma has commented on her cinematography tactics in the past and says that she chooses "...really simple ways of shooting, sticking to the point, very close up" (Robertson, 2008) to limit the feeling of voyeurism in a scene.

Another aspect of the production that might shed light on the effect of the gaze in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is the close relationship between the director and actresses. Looking back to Dirse (2013), she believed that the reason why there is a humanisation of the objects of her films as opposed to a male gaze objectification, is the connection she has with the subjects. It is an interesting theory to mention, especially in the case of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* because the director has a close relationship with the actresses and has worked with Adèle Haenel on projects in the past. Dirse describes that what happens when both the author of a work of art and the object of the art, are women, who are familiar with one another it allows them to remove themselves from "... the various forces that police the social appearance of gender" (Dirse, 2013, p. 26). Preconceived ideas of gender roles disappear in a sense, and if there are no genders, there is no male gaze. She is implying that if women are left to themselves in filmmaking, they have the potential to move away from the discourse where they are the objects of the male gaze and assume the gaze themselves.

4.2. Dimension Two: A Battle of Gazes

The second dimension of the grille consists of the characters' looks at each other. The director of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* has said in interviews that she has created a "... manifesto of the female gaze" (Syme, 2020). I argue that Sciamma has realised her manifesto by rearranging the traditional power structure between the women in her film. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* does not have a male protagonist. In fact, it barely has any male characters at all. Traditionally, the power of the gaze has been given to the male protagonist only. However, in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* the use of prolonged glances, looks, and stares between Héloïse and Marianne allows the power to "belong" to either one of them; it is constant back-and-forth and battle the power of the gaze.

The portrait Marianne is commissioned to paint is an interesting object of analysis regarding the gaze. Firstly, the symbolism of the painting is undeniably the basis of the story.

Paintings commissioned as part of a dowry to a future husband were a symbol of status among wealthy Europeans. The marriage between Héloïse and the Milanese nobleman is a business transaction. She is being married to this man because her sister, who was originally marrying him, passed away; these women are disposable and easily replaced commodities. The painting is coming with her to Milan to signify the transferring of Héloïse from her family to her new spouse, like the keys to a new house. John Berger was an art critic and one of his most influential works describes the art practices of European portraits. He claims that the women in paintings often look away from the painter and that as a result they "... grant all the "power of the gaze" to the male painter and the man who commissioned the painting. The females represented on the canvas have no control; rather they are on display for the male's enjoyment" (Gauntlett, 2008, p. 239). The painting is a symbol, but it is also an excuse for Marianne to look at Héloïse in a way that she would not have been able to otherwise. One could argue the painting process resembles the situation described by Berger with an unknowing woman being painted by a gazing painter. However, as I will describe later, the gazes shared between the women are not as one-sided as in Berger's theory of historical portrait paintings.

Héloïse and Marianne are in a constant battle of looks. As Marianne paints, she says that she could not stand to be in Héloïse's position. That is, she could not stand it if she were observed. Héloïse counters by saying: "If you are looking at me, then who do you think I am looking at?" Marianne might be the one painting, but they are both looking. The back-and-forth of their perspective gazes is completely contradictory of the male gaze as described by Mulvey and it is visible in several scenes in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. De Lauretis' theory of the lesbian spectator explains that the lesbian couple as a unified double is strengthened by their battling looks. Both Marianne and Héloïse are the subject and the object of the gaze.

In an interview, Celine Sciamma has said that she wanted to create “... a love story with equality” (Taubin, 2019). The equally shared power within Marianne and Héloïse’s relationship fits quite well with De Lauretis’ theory of lesbian representation and its general theory of the lesbian couple as a unit rather than a case of subject versus object. The battle of looks between them is indicative of an arguably fairer division of the power of the gaze than in traditional films with an observing male main character and the female subject of his gaze. De Lauretis’ doubled subject/object theory created, according to her, an “... equivalence of look and desire” (De Lauretis, 1991, p. 227).



Image 1: Marianne paints a portrait of herself for Héloïse by use of a mirror.

A scene that perfectly encapsulates the multi-layered battle of gazes and this equivalence of looks involves two other portraits painted by Marianne (Image 1). Right before the couple is forced to go their separate ways, Marianne paints a miniature portrait of Héloïse to remember her by. Héloïse expresses sadness as she will not have a painting of Marianne and so asks if Marianne can paint a portrait of herself. By propping a mirror up against Héloïse, Marianne paints a portrait of herself. In this scene, the power of the gaze bounces around between the characters. Marianne, who is usually the observing party when it comes to

the painting, is suddenly also the object; she is gazing at herself this time. The scene is pivotal in their relationship because they are both able to look at each other while simultaneously looking at themselves – Marianne in the mirror and Héloïse through the portrait. The identification with the main character is an essential part of the psychoanalytic approach to looking because it allows the viewer to imagine themselves as the idealised hero. However, the battle of the gazes in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* refuses the viewer that idealisation because neither character is an idealised hero who controls the narrative. They control it together, as equals.

However, interestingly, the focus of the scene remains on Héloïse, because as I will get to in the next part, the spectator's gaze often follows that of Marianne.

4.3. Dimensions Three and Four: Observing the Observer

I find it useful to look at the final dimensions as a unit, because the looks exchanged by viewer and character are at play in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. Because not only is the battle of gazes directly contradicting the male gaze by allowing both parts in the relationship to control the gaze, but it also contradicts the idea of the pleasures of identification.

Marianne is arguably the main character in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. The viewer follows Marianne's journey to the island and as she acquaints herself with her new, temporary home. The viewer *is* her as Héloïse turns to look at her, several times during the film. Our identification with Marianne gives the possibility for the viewer to take an active part in the relationship between the two women. As viewers we become an active recipient of the gaze as well as a spectator. In the previously mentioned scene (Image 1), for example, Marianne's gaze is directed toward Héloïse and the mirror resting on her body and so the viewer is never watching Marianne's full figure in the bed.

Another aspect of that same scene typifies what I will discuss in this part of the analysis; Marianne's gaze is directed towards her own body, but her eyes in the mirror look in the direction of the camera. So as a viewer, your gaze is directed in several directions, both towards Héloïse, but also towards the gaze of Marianne, who, unlike most characters in film, looks back at you.



Image 2: Héloïse turns toward Marianne and looks directly at the spectator.

The most striking example of characters looking back at the viewer in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* also happens to be the viewer's first introduction to Héloïse. She has previously only been mentioned in conversations and Marianne has yet to meet her. As Marianne descends the stairs to meet Héloïse for a stroll, we are introduced to a cloaked and hooded character at the bottom of the stairs. Up until this point in the film, the viewer has not been introduced to Héloïse at all. In fact, we learn her name seconds before seeing her face for the first time. The next sequence of point of view shots follows the slow unveiling of Héloïse; first her hood falls to reveal her hair, then she runs ahead and her cloak flies aside to reveal her dress, and finally, she turns around and stares, seemingly, directly into the camera (Image 2). Following the introduction of Héloïse, the roles are reversed as she follows Marianne into her room to fetch a book. Héloïse stands in the doorway and stares at Marianne while she

does this, again, staring in the direction of the viewer. Once again, the viewer is placed in the middle of their intense battle of gazes using a POV-shot.

Seeing through the eyes of the main character is an important part of engaging and identifying with them. Laura Mulvey's perspective is that the POV shot is inseparable from the identification with the character and thus articulates voyeurism "... more clearly than any other device" (Smith, 1995, p. 84). I would argue that if the POV shot is met with a returning gaze from a character in the film, the voyeuristic illusion can be broken. On the other hand, being observed by the characters can be uncomfortable and leave the viewer feeling exposed. Additionally, voyeurism is defined by the ignorance of the observed; they cannot know they are being watched. The dialectical nature of the character's gaze at the audience calls for an expansion of the theory of the gaze.

The introductory shot of Héloïse is fundamental in the redirection of the power of the gaze in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. As a spectator, one usually identifies and sympathises with the main character of the narrative. In the case of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, at the point of Héloïse's introduction, we have only Marianne's narrative with which to identify. The dynamic between the viewer and the narrative shifts as Héloïse returns our gaze and involves us directly in their battle of gazes. The spectator is no longer simply a spectator, but a recipient of Héloïse's gaze. Her gaze, in complete contradiction with Mulvey's male gaze, reminds the viewer that they are watching, almost intruding on the narrative. Whether her gaze is an objectifying one is difficult to assess, however. Looking has already been established as a powerful force within the world of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. Héloïse resists the gaze when she refuses to sit for the portrait which clearly symbolises her loss of freedom and her being "sold" to a man as an object. The act of looking controls the narrative of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and so when the spectator is brought into the gazing it might not be a question of whether the gaze is erotically objectifying or not, but rather a clear statement

about who is in control in the narrative. De Lauretis argued that the unified lesbian couple was an empowering structure for the female spectator, however in this film, we become the observed in a situation that has traditionally only been observing and it can at times feel disempowering.



Image 3: "If you're looking at me, who do you think I am looking at?" Marianne takes the perspective of Héloïse and the viewer is watched by the two of them.

Image 3 shows the scene previously mentioned where Marianne is painting and Héloïse challenges her idea of herself as the spectator in their relationship. The scene is interesting because it emphasises the relationship between them and the equality of their gazes, but it also strengthens the film's challenging of traditional viewer/character relationship. Once again, the spectator is being watched and by placing them in the position of the painter it forces the spectator to evaluate their own role as viewers.

In classical films that directly exemplify the male gaze, such as *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954), the main character uses tools to "... curate, and then amplify" (Bradbury-Rance, 2019, p. 128) the gaze. In the case of *Rear Window*, the main character has a camera with a zoom lens to peek across his backyard and observe the movements of his female

friend. In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, however, Marianne's tool is her painting. Not only does it necessitate her gazing at Héloïse, but it also amplifies her gaze as she must carefully replicate her gaze on the canvas. The portrait is as I have argued before a symbol of Héloïse as a victim of the gaze. It connects her to her future with the Milanese nobleman she knows nothing about. The process of painting additionally underlines the distribution of power in the film because it allows for a narrative investigation of looking.

Conclusion

To summarise, in the case of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* the camera gaze is distinctly female. The film's writer-director, producer, and cinematographer were all female. Through both the narrative and the production process, Sciamma has made a conscious effort of highlighting the alternative gaze presented within the film. Second, I have argued that there is a battle of power in the use of looking between the Marianne, Héloïse, and the viewer that ultimately redistributes the power that according to Mulvey's male gaze has been exclusively held by men. This redistribution of power is indicative of a change within an industry that previously has given the power of the gaze to men only. These levels of gazing represented by the dimensions of the grille are, I argue, representative of the alternative gaze, distinct from the male gaze theory.

As mentioned, Freud's proposed theory of psychosexual development is, at best, problematic. Mulvey's use of Freud as her main source for explaining identification and the pleasure of spectatorship is as a result just as problematic as Freud's own theories. As mentioned, Freud's theories were not proposed to explain female behaviour or mentality. The English author Richard Webster claimed that Freud's work is characterised by a "... 'distaste' and 'disgust' ... of different forms of sexuality" (Gullestad, 1998, p. 9). Therefore, one could question the whole basis of using Freud's theories to develop an idea to explain the erotic pleasures of the visual experience. While there is no doubt that there has been a tradition of

predominantly male characters and their gazes in Hollywood cinema, it might be valuable to understand this tradition from another angle than through psychoanalysis. Nonetheless, Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and the following alternative gazes provide an explanation as to why people's identification and visual pleasure might be a driving force in the objectification of women on screen.

Freud said of his own theories that they were not meant to be "... the foundations of the science upon which everything rests" (Freud in Gullestad, 1998, p. 93). His theories were not made to form the foundation of science. Instead, they are "... the top of the whole structure, and they can be replaced and discarded without damaging it" (Freud in Gullestad, 1998, p. 93). Mulvey's theory and by extension all theories that use her male gaze as their foundation, however, places his theories as their foundations. This creates a house of cards where Freud makes up the bottom layer; knock him down and the house tumbles to the ground. One of the reasons why Freud's theories are not really fit to form the foundation of scientific theories is because they cannot be falsified. This also applies to Mulvey, whose theories, as a result, are mere suggestions for analysing the objectifying gaze.

Another important discussion is the limited sample I have used to conduct a discourse analysis. Discourse describes the ways aspects of society are discussed and thought about within that society, and thus, describes the trends within said society. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is, I believe, part of a changing discourse regarding the theory of the male gaze because it provides different gazes and redistributes a power that has once been exclusively held by men. It additionally belongs to a new discourse within queer cinema that allows queer people to tell their own stories, a fact I have argued changes the gaze of the camera. However, by only applying the theory to one film, there is limited potential to generalise my findings.

Finally, Dirse (2013) questions Mulvey's binary thinking regarding visual pleasure. Historically there has been a strict and uneven binary gender division in society where men

have had proportionally much more power than women. However, there are changing sentiments when it comes to not only the gender binary, but also with the strict heterosexual/homosexual binary this essay has worked with. Queer identities are much more visible in the current episteme than in 1975 when Mulvey published her first article about the male gaze.

The question of binary reading of film spectatorship allows for future research distanced from said binary. Other directions of research could look at different variables for cinematic identification, like socio-cultural background, ethnicity, age, or even religion. It could be beneficial to look at it separate from psychoanalysis, whether that be through more modern branches of identity psychology or through a sociological perspective.

In conclusion, I argue there is a distinct shift in the use of looking in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. I believe the male gaze boils down to a question of who can possess the power of the gaze. In traditional Hollywood cinema the power of the gaze was exclusive to the male spectator and the male main character. By applying techniques to redistribute the power between not only the main characters, but also between the characters and the viewer, Sciamma challenges the traditional male gaze. I cannot confidently conclude that film's use of looking is part of a larger discourse change in lesbian cinema as I have only looked at a few theories regarding a single film. However, the recent developments in lesbian cinematic discourse toward period dramas might not be as restrictive as one might think. While the stories call for vague cues about the character's queerness, films like *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* empower their characters through other techniques, like the gaze. The question remains if these kinds of discourse changes will allow "...lesbians to be lesbians together" in the future.

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