

# SCREEN QUEENS

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## Hearing the Crackles in the Background: Listening and Female Intimacy in 'Portrait of a Lady on Fire'



*Pyramide Films*

“One must show the ear and study its cartilage closely, even if it’s covered with hair. It must be of a warm and transparent hue, except for the hole, which is always strong.” The voice of Marianne (Noémie Merlant) utters these words in Céline Sciamma’s *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. Marianne follows Héloïse (Adèle Haenel) up an echoey staircase in the castle belonging to her mother, the Countess (Valeria Golino). Positioned between them, the

camera films the back of Héloïse's head, her golden curls, and her ear, before cutting to a shot of Marianne. It is the sound of the female voice, and not an exchange of looks, that activates a space of intimacy – a sort of connective tissue – between them. Tellingly, later in the film, it is the ear that receives the final brushstroke in Marianne's portrait of Héloïse. The act of listening, perhaps even more so than looking, confirms Héloïse's active role as co-creator of her own image.

A romantic period drama set in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Brittany, Sciamma's film depicts a love affair between a painter, Marianne, and her unhappy subject, Héloïse. Héloïse's refusal to have her portrait painted, which is to be sent to a male suitor in Milan, requires Marianne to paint her in secret. But after discovering the truth about Marianne's task, she agrees to sit for a second portrait, on the condition that her relationship with the painter is reciprocal.

The film has received much attention for its portrayal of the 'female gaze', but little has been written about the power of listening. I find this striking because the film's ecstatic climaxes are overwhelmingly musical. The first features a group of local women chanting in front of a bonfire, producing a scene of community that nurtures the crescendo of desire between Marianne and Héloïse. It is Héloïse's love of music that brings the women closer together. When Héloïse asks Marianne to describe what it's like to hear an orchestra ("Tell me about it"), Marianne says it's difficult to recount the experience in words. Instead she plays a few bars from Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, communicating feelings through doing, not telling.

This scene foresees the dramatic finale, when Marianne attends a concert and sees Héloïse across the room. Héloïse, now married and with a child, doesn't return her look. Her muscles tense as the music fills her body. She gives herself up to its sound, smiling, with tears rolling down her cheeks. The music fills her with life. The memory of love sustains her, despite the straitjacket of heterosexual marriage, which never supersedes the lesbian romance. In this film, the

absent husband 'gets the girl', but in no way does his presence defeat the lesbian love story, which holds its own at the centre of the screen.



*Pyramide Films*

### **Hearing the 'female gaze'**

Reviews of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* exuberantly praise its assertion of the female gaze, something Sciamma has highlighted in interviews, describing the film as a 'manifesto about the female gaze'. In an openly lesbian film, that revolves around female-authored acts of creation, one must relish the desiring looks, words, and gestures that are exchanged. What I find more progressive, though, is the film's portrayal of female bonding, which is conveyed most effectively by the soundtrack. Sciamma negotiates the differences between platonic, maternal, and erotic female bonds but she avoids the perils of conflating one with the other. The film refuses to de-eroticise the lesbian love story, but it also refuses to keep this story strictly separate from the scenes of female intimacy that forge affinities between the different groupings of women (Sophie the maid, Marianne the painter, Héloïse the noblewoman, Héloïse's mother, the Countess, the woman who performs the abortion, the chorus of local women, Marianne's students).

In my view, the selective attention given by critics to acts of looking over listening, causes the queer sonority of female desire to fall into the shadows. While historically, theories of

sexual difference tend to privilege sight over sound, Sciamma's film indulges us sonically in ways that shouldn't be ignored. The film's sound design asks us to lean in and listen to the queerness of the female bonding and desiring in play. Shifting attention to what we can hear exposes the problem with interpretations that subdue the political force of the film's queerness. For example, to lavish praise on Sciamma for flipping the script, by replacing the 'male gaze' with the 'female gaze', as some critics have suggested, implies that this neat strategy is capable of countering pervasive heteronormativity. But as [Alice Blackhurst](https://lareviewofbooks.org/contributor/alice-blackhurst/) (<https://lareviewofbooks.org/contributor/alice-blackhurst/>) writes of the film, 'its interests are less unilaterally scopical than cerebral, kinetic, and multisensory'. If the sonic dimension of cinema was probed to the same extent as the visual dimension, the narrowly defined 'female gaze' could be expanded and transformed, becoming more flexible and multisensorial. In the case of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, when we *listen* to the relations of intimacy between the female characters, we gain a stronger sense of the subversive force of Sciamma's representation of queer female desire. Indeed, through its soundtrack, the film challenges some of the dominant visual conditions on which lesbian legitimacy depend.

### **The sound of intimacy between women**

Sciamma confidently exploits ambiguity in ways that undermine cinematic strategies that objectify, fetishise, or erase lesbian sexuality on screen. Predictably, as [Sciamma has revealed](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzb40RY-E6w&t=2761s) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzb40RY-E6w&t=2761s>), her approach has provoked trite heterosexist kickback from interviewers along well-trodden lines ('it's lacking sex', 'it's not sexy', 'you're afraid of shooting a sex scene', 'where is the sex scene?'). The presence of ambiguity also infiltrates the soundtrack. The soft crackling of fire seeps into the *mise-en-scène*. It replaces the familiar association between the smouldering fireplace and Hollywoodian heterosexual romance, with an excessive and disruptive crackling that lingers queerly in the background. However, beyond the obvious thwarting of representational conventions, what I find so beautiful and subversive about

the sound design is the way sonic proximities are formed that trace intensities and affinities between the female characters. For example, the sound of crackling later merges with the liquid trickles of the women kissing, before evolving into the moist sound of Héloïse mixing green paint with Marianne's paintbrush, contaminating the materiality and individuality of artistic creation with the liquidity of mutual attraction.

The crackling sound also accompanies Marianne's conversations with Héloïse's mother, and with Sophie (Luàna Bajrami). After pouring Marianne's wine, marking the class division between them, Sophie's relationship with the painter changes: she sits down next to her and responds to questions about Héloïse's past, before reciprocating, posing questions to Marianne in return. Similarly, the rustling sound produced when Marianne handles the green fabric of the dress, held by Sophie, and later worn by Héloïse, connects the three women together. In other scenes, the fragile sound of Marianne's charcoal touching the canvas, forms symmetries with the delicate sound of Sophie running her fingers over a sprig of rosemary, guided by touch more than sight, as she crochets an image of the herb.

Delicate symmetries of sound can also be heard in the layering of different sorts of breath and vocalisation. The erratic breathy sound of Marianne experiencing menstrual pain, joins up, in a delayed solidarity, with the terser sound of Sophie's gasps as she undergoes an abortion. These sounds, which give voice to social taboos that are rarely represented on screen, are again similar to, but entirely different from, the later sounds of Marianne and Héloïse giving pleasure to each other in bed.

In Sciamma's film, Héloïse's dress catches fire, inspiring the painting called 'Portrait of a Lady on Fire' that sits at the back of the art room where Marianne teaches her students. The small circle of fire at the bottom of Héloïse's dress is like a miniature of the bonfire (signalling community), and the fire in the castle where Marianne sleeps (signalling intimacy).

Likewise, our listening moves from the foreground detail of

crackling flames to the ever-present ambient backdrop: the sound of the sea, the wind, the crackling, the friction, the silence. The background sound functions like an unruly swell of desire, the connective tissue that refuses to subside.



*Pyramide Films*

### Stepping back: “When do we know it’s finished?”

It would be remiss not to mention the Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman’s pioneering exploration of lesbian sexuality in *Je Tu Il Elle* (1974), as well as her *Portrait of a Young Girl at the End of the 60s in Brussels* (1994). Sciamma has cited the influence of Akerman – her frontal shots, and her magnum opus *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) – on the kitchen scene in her film (‘I was thinking more of Chantal Akerman than Vermeer’). Akerman’s cinema invents its own codes, and Sciamma follows in her footsteps. However, one key difference between Sciamma and Akerman is each artist’s approach to categorisation. Akerman rejected attempts by commentators to categorise her, and her films, whether as ‘feminist filmmaker’, or ‘lesbian film’, [stating](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1394708.pdf) (https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1394708.pdf) ‘I’m not making women’s films, I’m making Chantal Akerman’s films’. By contrast, in a recent [BFI screen talk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzb40RY-E6w&t=2763s) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzb40RY-E6w&t=2763s), Sciamma refreshingly embraces the description of her film as a lesbian love story. She doesn’t accept that ‘lesbian’ is a label, nor does she accept that the word is limiting. For Sciamma,

lesbianism is an expansive 'imaginary'. It represents something wide, dangerous, and exciting, embodying creation and invention.

The 2020 César Awards in France saw Sciamma's film receive 8 nominations, including Best Film, Best Director (the only film by a woman in these categories), Best Actress, Best Original Screenplay, Best Sound, with Claire Mathon awarded the film's only prize for Best Cinematography. The category for Best First Feature Film included a nomination for Mati Diop's *Atlantics*, with the prize going to Mounia Meddour's *Papicha*. Meanwhile, the disgraced director Roman Polanski won Best Director, after receiving the highest number of nominations. This deplorable outcome prompted **Adèle Haenel** (<https://www.dazeddigital.com/film-tv/article/48228/1/why-adele-haenel-roman-polanski-cesar-awards-walkout-france-metoo-film-industry>) to walk out in protest, followed by Sciamma and the *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* team, and by Aïssa Maïga, who later joined protestors outside the ceremony. In her courageous **speech** (<https://www.essence.com/entertainment/french-oscars-black-nominees/>) at the ceremony, Maïga drew attention to the stereotypical and minor roles regularly given to Black actors in France, stressing that decision-makers, especially those in charge of funding and casting, need to take some responsibility in order to create change. As Maïga rightly declared, it is a systemic problem: 'it doesn't only concern our hyper-privileged environment; it concerns all of society'.

Last year, the French-Senegalese filmmaker Alice Diop made a series of crucial points in a podcast episode by *Kiffe ta race* (Grace Ly and Rokhaya Diallo) called 'Césars So White', that are important to recall. Awarded the César in 2017 for her short film *Towards Tenderness*, Diop explains how critics in France tend to discuss her film chiefly for its 'sociological perspective' on the French suburbs. She is forced to become a 'spokesperson' for the suburbs, while the artistic value of her work – her questioning of society through formal inventiveness – is ignored. Diop, Ly and Diallo then discuss the obstacles for non-white directors to make fictional feature-length films, with Black characters at their centre,



who aren't always from deprived backgrounds, and who represent universal concerns. I am left wondering, could a Black French female director have made a fictional, commercial feature – a love story, indeed, a lesbian love story – that would become a universal manifesto about the 'female gaze'? Could she make a film that draws on 18<sup>th</sup>-century Western portraiture, focusing (non-voyeuristically) on the experiences of Black female sitters, without the film being side-lined for being 'about' blackness? Would she receive adequate funding? Would her film be heard, or selectively unheard?

Sciamma's film is ravishing in its tender presentation of an adult lesbian love story. It prioritises images of women collaborating, taking the spotlight off competitive-fuelled acts of desire. It defies the heterosexist depictions of lesbian sexuality on screen that oscillate between fetishization *or* total erasure, and through its soundtrack, it loosens the stiffness of *ways of seeing*, understood only in terms of looking, not listening. However, I feel that critics and reviewers of this film could reflect more attentively on the partial exclusivity of the white female gaze. The 'female gaze' tends to be discussed as an empowering unmarked norm, as though race and whiteness are irrelevant in this context. Confronting the film's presentation of white lesbian subjectivity, one could begin by exploring the connotations of purity associated with the opening white screen. This image could be compared to the later haunting, almost deathly, visions of Héloïse in her wedding dress. The purity, embodied by the film's first image, is immediately tarnished when it is touched by a piece of charcoal. We hear an aural shimmer, like a sign of impurity, whose ubiquitous presence, like the crackling flames, demands a closer listening.

by Albertine Fox

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directors, the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard, and co-teaches a course on gender, sexuality and cinema. She loves experimental film, and enjoys writing about Chantal Akerman's work, most recently an article about Akerman's *South*. Albertine has an interview coming out later this

year with the Lebanese filmmaker Corine Shawi, and at the moment she's conducting conversations with other filmmakers for a book on listening and documentary.



1 reply »

Your focus on the rarely discussed sound of the film is something which must be lauded. That and your lucid writing skills make this a cohesive essay on the ways of listening and watching a film because I, as a cinephile, always look at the cohesive aspects of the film including the sound and score.

Reply

Thank you for your gifts of interpretation.

★ ([https://screen-queens.com/2020/04/14/listening-and-female-intimacy-in-portrait-of-a-lady-on-fire/?like\\_comment=7747&\\_wpnonce=63828e0ea9](https://screen-queens.com/2020/04/14/listening-and-female-intimacy-in-portrait-of-a-lady-on-fire/?like_comment=7747&_wpnonce=63828e0ea9))

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