

## **(Don't) Look Back: Three Portraits of a Lady on Fire**

The final image of a film of course bears a particular weight of meaning, as “anchoring proof and condensed summary of all the codes that were set within motion in the text as a whole”, while first images perhaps offer only “clues” about what is to come (Neupert, 1995, p. 32). This article begins, then, with the final shot of Céline Sciamma’s *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, 2019): a single, continuous take that starts in long shot, slowly pushing in to settle on a close-up of around 100 seconds as Adèle Haenel performs what she has described as a downhill “slalom” of emotion (2020), her Héloïse remembering lost love and the joy of music (Fig. 1). Sitting in a London cinema at this point, I became aware – in the intensity of the close-up and persistence of the long-take, those two uniquely cinematic techniques – of the idea that Héloïse might, finally, turn and look back at the camera; while, by the time we had cut to black, I knew that this was a far better film for the fact that she *does not*. In discussion with others, I have found that I was not alone in this sensation, and it further brought to mind Joan Copjec’s discussion of the cinematic shot/reverse-shot pattern and her observation that, “It is not the reversibility of the look but the unreturned look, the look that will not turn [me] into a fully observable being, that [troubles] the subject” (1994, p. 242n30). Such disruptions of vision, then, will be my focus.

Existing studies of the film have tended to centre on its feminist and queer implications – e.g, Emma Wilson (2021), Clara Bradbury-Rance (2022) – while Kelli Fuery (2022) has importantly connected it to Simone de Beauvoir’s phenomenology. This inquiry will build on such concerns, as they speak to the very fabric of the film, but will also offer an alternative, film-philosophical perspective on Sciamma’s work and the *unreturned look*. My aim in what follows is to explore the dynamics of looking and not looking in *Portrait of Lady on Fire* in terms of three distinct visual logics – what I’m calling three “portraits” of a lady on fire – that

take us through what would, in the parlance of film theory, be considered three modalities of the “gaze”. This will entail examining the film’s aesthetics in relation to Laura Mulvey (1975) and Iris Brey (2020), as well as frameworks of contemporary Lacanian psychoanalysis. But it will be my contention that reading these portraits through the final shot – and the *drama of recognition* that it evokes – compels us to turn, instead, to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* in its *heterodox*, post-Lacanian interpretation by the Slovene School. In fact, we might readily identify one of the film’s most celebrated scenes – wherein the characters join local women as they sing around a bonfire, and Héloïse and Marianne exchange meaningful glances before Héloïse’s skirts catch fire and she falls to the ground – as evoking the subjective relays and collective social matrices associated with the Hegelian movement of spirit.

Yet, Sciamma suggests that the film offers “A story about an artistic collaboration based on equality and a screenplay which is not based on a dynamic of conflict” (2020). Even if Héloïse’s arranged marriage and her mother’s deal with Marianne to paint Héloïse in secret could be seen as classic storytelling “conflicts”, I will show that *Portrait* offers an alternative to the dynamic of conflict found in the master/servant relation and the violence of the life-and-death struggle, while nonetheless negotiating the problem of intersubjectivity that Hegel describes in the “Self-Consciousness” section of the *Phenomenology*. In the passionate engagement between reciprocally viewing and reciprocally desiring women in Sciamma’s film, we will find the mediation of the self through the other and the recognition of the otherness within the self, in the coming into being of spirit as self-consciousness. Moreover, in the interruption of recognitive relays suggested by Héloïse’s fall to the ground and embodied in the film’s final shot, we will be led to see *Portrait* as moving dialectically from recognition to the absolute, with contradiction as the motor force.

Beyond the wider projects of Slavoj Žižek and Robert Pippin – and their evaluation by Dylan Shaul (2023) – what might be called Hegelian film-philosophy remains a relatively

underdeveloped area: even compared with Lacanian film analysis and certainly in contrast to the impact of Deleuze or Merleau-Ponty.<sup>1</sup> Todd McGowan has published an article on Hegel and sci-fi (2009), his Lynch book (2007) is framed with a Hegelian reference, his Nolan book (2009) suggests more sustained engagement with Hegel (while nevertheless wearing this philosophy lightly), and he regularly offers Lacano-Hegelian analysis of popular culture on social media. However, McGowan's recent turn to Hegel's philosophy more profoundly has entailed a turn *away* from film to a larger extent in his major published works (e.g., 2019). This article will draw on both Žižek's and McGowan's insights, while aiming to develop a more fully realised Hegelian approach to film-philosophy. It is my claim that a dialogue between *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and *Phenomenology of Spirit* is necessary to address the relation between form and content in both works: the movement of Hegel's analysis explains why Sciamma's narrative must pass through these three ways of looking, while her staging of the central love affair will pose certain questions to Hegel that also suggest new points of connection to Beauvoir. Moreover, a Hegelian reading of the film offers a framework to reconsider the history of "gaze" theory, allowing me to resituate that foundational concept in a new film-philosophical context.

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno, Badiou, and Deleuze all mention Hegel in relation to cinema but none elaborates a fundamentally Hegelian approach to film-philosophy. Nicholas Baer does put Adorno's Hegelian references into dialogue with Kracauer through the debate on indexicality and digital media (2023).



Figure 1: *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* – final shot.

### Prologue

Both Sciamma and Hegel start with a preface or prologue taking place *after* the main events. The film opens with Marianne directing life classes in her studio, as her students discover the eponymous “*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*” that instigates the film’s flashback recollection of her affair with Héloïse. The *Phenomenology* opens with a section written by Hegel *after* completion of the work, which similarly renders the subsequent narrative – what Jean Hyppolite called the *Bildungsroman* of spirit (1974/2000) – a “flashback” from the philosopher’s perspective. In beginning at the end, then, Sciamma and Hegel achieve three things. First, exposing the retroactive illusion: the unfolding of events in the past appears as necessary only from the vantage point of the present, thus countering the idea of Hegel as *teleological* thinker. Further, this reminds us that, for Hegel, philosophy – and reading the *Phenomenology* in particular – is a continual process of looking back and seeing again. As Robert Stern notes, “Only at the end of its journey is consciousness ready to understand what

has happened to it and why” (2013, p. 51); and it is only from the perspective of the end that everything will appear as always-already accomplished.

Second, in uncovering the painting of Héloïse, a “fourth portrait” is introduced, compelling me to clarify what I mean by the “three portraits” of Sciamma’s film. This is not simply to count paintings but to indicate three distinct *scopic regimes* at stake across the narrative and under which multiple images are produced. Importantly, it also reminds us that – as Žižek puts it – a dialectician must “learn to count to four” by including the subject herself within the Hegelian triad: as the self-relating negativity that makes dialectical movement possible (1991, p. 3). This will be a key lesson for Hegel and Sciamma alike.

And third, the role of the proem in each case is to introduce *lack* and *contradiction* as determining factors. Hegel writes in the *Phenomenology* that prefaces to philosophical works are superfluous, even misleading, because their truth cannot be captured in a summary of aims or survey of opinion (§1). He then proceeds to do exactly this with, for example, his famous summation that “everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as Substance, but equally as Subject” (§17; 1807/1977, p. 10), and implicit critiques of Schelling, Descartes and Kant (§16, §27). Hegel thus performatively enacts contradiction as a lesson for the reader in how to navigate the journey of the *Phenomenology*. Sciamma similarly sets out a key thematic – women looking at women – while also installing contradiction at the start of the narrative through the mimetic effect of the fourth portrait: showing its power to make present that which is absent even while insisting upon its very absence. In fact, the figure of *la jeune fille* is only meaningful *in* its absence: a lack that provides the driving force for the film’s dialectical movement through different ways of seeing.

## **First Portrait**

The first way of seeing is exposed as Marianne travels to the chateau where the story takes place. She is brought there by that tradition in Western art – identified by John Berger as restaging “The Judgement of Paris”, a beauty contest in which “The prize is to be owned by the judge” (1972/1977, p. 52) – which would turn women into erotic spectacle to be possessed and exchanged by men. Marianne must paint a portrait of aristocratic daughter, Héloïse, to seal her marriage to a Milanese nobleman and thus secure the family’s future. Héloïse’s mother, the Countess, tells Marianne that her own betrothal portrait was painted by Marianne’s father, thus signalling each family’s perpetuation of the traffic in women. In such paintings, Berger notes, if the woman can be understood as *looking back*, peering out of the image, then this is not to register her as a desiring subject. Instead, it puts her on display in acknowledgement – even provocation – of the desire of an imagined suitor for whom the image was created (1972/1977, p. 55-6).

### *Ways of Seeing and Not Seeing*

*Portrait of a Lady on Fire* also understands how to appeal to desire in precise cinematic terms. Héloïse’s existence is evoked as offscreen object before she becomes an onscreen subject. In the prologue, the eponymous painting establishes her as a source of fascination: as Sciamma herself notes, Marianne’s early line, “Who brought that painting out?”, suggests its offscreen presence and thus “creates a desire to see it” (2020). Héloïse is further evoked through dialogue emphasising her appearance and her mystery: the housemaid, Sophie, describes Héloïse’s “convent clothes” and “blond hair”, and warns Marianne that another artist has already failed to paint her for unknown reasons. Marianne discovers the evidence when she finds a large canvas tantalisingly facing the wall of her room. As she turns it around, we are afforded a brief glimpse of an indistinct surface before a reverse on Marianne as she gasps and steps backwards, the camera holding on her for a moment before a cut returns us to the painting of a woman in

a fine green dress. But it is unfinished. The sitter does not have a head: her neck terminating in blank canvas and a void where her face should be. Héloïse thus remains an anonymous fantasm – a blind spot within the diegesis – and in being withheld engages the mechanisms of desire as a want-to-see.

This logic of showing/not showing finds its clearest expression in the subsequent scene of Héloïse's introduction. Marianne is summoned to accompany Héloïse on a walk: she leaves her chamber and crosses the landing, pausing at the balustrade to peer down. This look is marked by a cut to a high angle shot (ostensibly Marianne's optical point-of-view) as the camera moves round and down the stairs to reveal a hooded figure at the bottom. Cut to a reverse shot from below Marianne as she walks towards the camera, staring intently just off screen; then matched by a following shot of the hooded figure (face obscured by large folds of fabric) as they leave the chateau and step outside. The camera pursues them in a single fluid motion and follows in medium close-up from behind. Now begins a pattern of reverse and following shots, the camera compelled by Marianne's curiosity as she is again shown staring intently at the mysterious figure who paces relentlessly away from her (Fig. 2 & Fig. 3). The blue hood begins to drop, revealing a head of messy blond hair and a cut transports the scene from gardens to windswept moors. Suddenly, the blond figure breaks into a run towards the sea, still with back to camera but with flailing limbs now emerging from beneath the robe to reveal stockings, gloves, and glimpses of pale flesh. The editing pattern breaks momentarily as Marianne's pursuit is shown in profile, the camera rapidly tracking her from left to right; then back to a following shot on the dashing figure, who slams to a halt at the cliff edge, and another reverse on Marianne as she too comes to a standstill. Another cut to the back of the blond figure, and now the decisive moment: at the end of this 80 second sequence – fully 20 minutes into the film overall – she turns and reveals her face, blue-green eyes fixing on Marianne as Héloïse looks back at her over her shoulder (Fig. 4).



Figure 2: *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* – shot (Marianne looks).



Figure 3: *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* – reverse-shot (Héloïse looked-at).





Figure 4: *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* – Héloïse turns.

This sequence offers the familiar grammar of cinematic desire in the shot/reverse-shot pattern: the subject is shown looking to provoke that want-to-see, which is then gratified by a reverse on the object of the look. Sciamma explains that she exploits this technique of withholding/revealing – the aesthetic logic of both veil and striptease – to make the “familiar” face of French movie star Haenel *unfamiliar* (2020), and thus *unseen* once more. In fact, such point-of-view cutting is representative of the film’s aesthetic logic overall at this point. The shot/reverse-shot technique maps onto the conventional mode of relation between artist and sitter, separating out self and other as subject and object across the cut. As a formal device it embodies the split between Marianne and Héloïse: as the former scrutinises the latter and attempts to render her likeness in oils. They remain distanced from each other – in what Laura U. Marks calls the “optical” mode of visibility based on mastery, mimesis, and the principles of Renaissance perspective (2002, p. 13) – and the acts of looking and being-looked-at here exist in a hierarchical relation, a dualism of active and passive being.

It is this aesthetic logic that characterises the film's "First Portrait": a scopic regime founded on the objectification of women – the making of women into image-objects – and the engendering of desire. In the film's emphasis on the role of painting in this tradition, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* reminds us of the connection between Berger's *Ways of Seeing* and Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). This becomes clear in Marianne's bargain with the Countess, who has instructed her to paint *in secret* because Héloïse is unwilling to sit for an artist and thus submit herself to the logic of exogamy. Marianne's method, therefore, entails a *voyeuristic* mode of looking as she discretely observes the unwitting Héloïse; and produces a *fetishistic* breakdown of Héloïse's body into pieces, as Marianne commits snatches of her features to paper when Héloïse is not looking. This way of seeing, of course, conforms precisely to what Mulvey describes as the "male gaze", and the investigation of a mysterious blonde here – identified with a painting, reduced to a collection of physical details, even wearing an eye-catching green gown – cannot help but evoke Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and the trouble in looking and being-looked-at which it entails.

### *Self-Consciousness*

It is, then, in Héloïse's rejection of this regime that the film announces its Hegelian concerns. Finding herself in an unequal relationship, Héloïse makes a demand for recognition in her encounters with Marianne of a kind considered by Hegel in the "Self-Consciousness" section of the *Phenomenology*. As it is commonly understood (e.g., Beiser, 2005; Stern, 2013), the movement of spirit here goes something like this: in response to the impasse of desire, wherein an endless series of objects is endlessly negated, consciousness turns instead to the encounter with other consciousnesses in the world (§174-175). The ideal of this process is the acknowledgement of each consciousness by the other as autonomous: the achievement of self-

consciousness whereby the subject *becomes a subject* by mutually recognising the other's subjectivity, thus bringing about "the unity of different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence" (§177; 1807/1977, p. 110). In practice, however, this goes awry as neither proto-subject is willing to concede and so they enter into a "life-and-death struggle" (§187; 1807/1977, p. 114), wherein each must be tested by putting their life at risk and thereby proving their freedom as worthy of recognition. This is only resolved when one subject chooses servitude rather than death and recognises the other as "master" (§191-192). Yet such recognition from a subordinate is worthless, rendering mastery an "existential impasse" (Kojève, 1980, p. 46). The experience of the servant then produces a new dialectic of stoicism, scepticism and unhappy consciousness (§197-230) as modes of relating to the world.

*Portrait of a Lady on Fire* offers an alternative vision of this process based not on the open conflict of Kojèvean "murder and bloody struggle" (1947/1968, p. 572) but on the modalities of negation in the intense exchange of looks between artist and sitter. Sciamma's version expands the Hegelian paradigm, perhaps accepting that "each risks [their] own life" in the movement towards self-consciousness but questioning the necessity that "each aims at the death of the other" (§187; 1807/2018, p. 78).<sup>2</sup> If the outcome of this encounter with the threat of death is – as Hegel puts it – "this pure universal movement, the absolute melting-away of everything stable [to reveal] the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, pure being-for-self" (§194; 1807/1977, p. 117), then the film proposes that this

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<sup>2</sup> On this point, Stern evocatively asks:

"Why couldn't I show my lack of concern for my biological nature and ends by risking my life in front of you in a non-conflictual way (*jumping off a cliff*, or fighting an animal, or enlisting in a good cause)? (2013, p. 94, emphasis added).

necessary effect of *melting-away* (or what Lacan calls *subjective destitution*) could be achieved through something closer to the quasi-suicidal gesture that Héloïse performs on the clifftop.

For Hegel, self-consciousness is fundamentally a question of *freedom*; while Kojève emphasises Hegel's depiction of entry into the life-and-death struggle as a form of *suicide*, further noting that suicide offers the ultimate choice of freedom from any situation (1980, p. 248n34). Similarly, the first section of *Portrait* is haunted by the spectre of suicide. Sophie tells Marianne that she suspects Héloïse's older sister threw herself from the cliffs to avoid marriage. Marianne discusses this with the Countess, and asks Héloïse if her sister wanted to die. Héloïse – sitting on a blanket embroidered (but left unfinished) by her sister – explains that she received a letter apologising “For leaving me to her fate”, thereby occupying her sister's position directly. And, on what she believes is their last day together, Héloïse expresses her wish to go swimming *even if she does not know how*: shedding her skirts and stepping into the sea, before returning, shivering, to Marianne whom she asks, “Did you see me?”. Héloïse's willingness to risk her safety to pursue her desires is affirmed by her explanation on the clifftop that she yearned not in fact to die (*mourir*), but simply to run (*courir*): to be free.

### *Looking the Negative in the Face*

Héloïse recognises that *really jumping off a cliff* would simply bring an end to the dialectic. Both freedom and death are an *appearance of negativity* but the latter can be only an *abstract* negation leaving nothing behind. Suicide therefore “‘manifests’ freedom [but] it does not *realize* freedom, for it ends in *nothingness*” (Kojève, 1980, p. 248). Similarly, negation in death and freedom in *Portrait* is displaced onto the struggle for recognition but, unlike the theatre of master and servant, Héloïse and Marianne's drama – in de-emphasising this aspect of violent,

*external conflict* – compels us to recognise the role of *self-relating* negativity in the emergence of self-consciousness.

On the clifftop, Héloïse experiences her infinitude through the fear of death: not as a servant encountering the threat of an external master but, as Žižek would have it, as the servant who encounters the upsurge of their *own immanent negation* – the negating force at the very core of being – in risking her life (2012, p. 994). What is essential, therefore, is not the dualism of a life-and-death conflict *between* master and servant, but the dialectical struggle *within* the subject as it prepares the way for the emergence of spirit. In Sciamma's vision, Héloïse announces her independence from her existence in this dash towards the precipice: she is not reducible to this painting, this marriage, this desperate fate, nor is she reducible to life itself as it comes close to ending on the rocks below. Héloïse strips herself of everything that is inessential about her being – recall the stripping away of clothes on the beach, too – and thus realises that *pure universal movement*, where everything is up for grabs and the subject's own negativity emerges.<sup>3</sup>

Crucially, for Sciamma and for Hegel, this scene requires the presence of another. In the Kojèvean vision, this is because each must be tested and proven worthy, while Sciamma's *mise-en-scène* returns us to the very question of recognition to offer an alternative perspective on the *Phenomenology*. Héloïse may have demonstrated to Marianne that her identity is not reliant on mere existence – i.e., she has achieved self-consciousness – but has Marianne proven likewise? She pursues Héloïse but has not similarly staked her life. Instead, the film's reciprocal editing and point-of-view pattern suggest another way is possible. Importantly, Héloïse does not simply run: she stops and she *turns*. She *looks back* at Marianne (Fig. 4), calling her to bear

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<sup>3</sup> Here, I draw on McGowan's (2020) insights into the *Phenomenology*, albeit adapted to different ends.

witness (“Did you see me?”). With this look, she interpellates Marianne as another subject in equal standing: reversing Althusser’s stage directions to constitute *her* as worthy of recognition and thus able to recognise in return. In their mutual encounter with the appearance of self-negation, each subject might therefore recognise that “[spirit] wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself”. In dashing towards the edge, Héloïse “[looks] the negative in the face” (i.e., faces her own immanent negation) but she also compels Marianne to do the same: in bearing witness to the quasi-suicidal gesture and not turning away, Marianne might also “tarry with the negative”, face up to this revelation of subjectivity, and “[convert] it into being” (§32; 1807/1977, p. 19).

Yet mutual recognition still lies ahead for Héloïse and Marianne. At this stage, the truth of self-consciousness remains with the servant in their *dread* and in their *labour* (§193-194; 1807/1977, p. 117). Héloïse has felt the fear of death – the form of internal negation – but, Hegel insists, “Without the formative activity [*das Bilden*], fear remains inward and mute”. Dread must be combined with work – external negation of the world, through which the servant’s “own negativity [...] becomes an object for [her]” – so that spirit might emerge (§196; 1807/1977, p. 119). The subject’s otherness *qua* absolute negativity is thereby recognised as both internal and external at the same time. *Portrait* will eventually achieve such dialectical unity-in-difference but, for now, internal and external negation remain divided across its characters. Héloïse, who previously found solace in the introspection of holy orders, embodies *internal* negation as she encounters her own nothingness on the clifftop.; while, as an artist, Marianne sells her labour to survive. This cultural work should be distinguished from Sophie’s manual labour, but portraiture *is* a form of labour on matter that negates (i.e., transforms) the world. It modifies, creates, and destroys – with hands, brushes, oils, and canvas – and should thus be considered *Bilden* in Hegel’s sense.

*A Portrait / Aporia*

This division of the labour of the negative indicates the aporia to which the First Portrait leads. Despite the dramatic impact of the clifftop scene, Marianne cannot recognise Héloïse while they remain determined by this scopic regime: indeed its logic is defined by the impossibility of such recognition. On their walks together, Héloïse *looks back* at Marianne, who frequently refuses to meet her glance so they remain in the unequal dynamic of artist and sitter, subject and object. Yet, in the film's tendency towards a longer take, there is no external clash in the cinematic language (i.e., montage); instead, the images are *internally* conflicted, blocked or empty (Fig. 5 & 6), suggesting the failure of reciprocity.



Figure 5: *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* – failed reciprocity.

As Hegel would anticipate, such lack of recognition leads to an *impasse*, which reveals *contradiction*: Marianne's attempts to paint *without recognition* produce a portrait *without likeness*. It is a clumsy composition: smile awkward, face too round, eyes an indistinct shade of grey. Héloïse dismisses it, observing, "The fact it isn't close to me, I can understand. But I

find it sad that it isn't close to you". She does not recognise herself there – Marianne has not reflected her image back to her, which is understandable given the circumstances of its creation – but more than that she does not recognise *Marianne* in the portrait. She does not find any trace of the artist as subject within the work: it manifests the missed encounter between them. Marianne responds indignantly, deferring to the big Other of her artistic training – “There are rules, conventions, ideas [...] Your presence is made up of fleeting moments that may lack truth” – even while Héloïse is looking for connection: “Not everything is fleeting. Some feelings are deep”. Marianne is incapable of reciprocating but this is not simply a personal failing: the impasse is unavoidable as long as they remain bound to a hierarchical mode of relation without recognition. The scopic logic of the First Portrait is an attempt to create likeness that renders resemblance impossible. It has replaced Héloïse as a living being and put in her place a set of mortifying conventions that leave no room for the subjectivity of either artist or sitter.

In fit of pique, Marianne *defaces* the painting with a rag, reducing the visage to a smear recalling the motif found in the work of Hélène Delmaire – who produced the canvases used within the film – where faces, and particularly eyes, are dashed away in a thick strike of paint. This iconoclastic gesture renders literal the symbolic blockage of the present aesthetic regime as a dead end without the possibility of recognition (Fig. 6). But this becomes a *determinate negation* (§79), creation through destruction, as together they convince the Countess to give Marianne five days to complete another version: now with Héloïse as willing participant. The very *failure* of the painting dialectically opens the possibility of a *new* scopic regime: a “Second Portrait” that will sublimate the previous one, establishing a different logic based on *mutuality*.



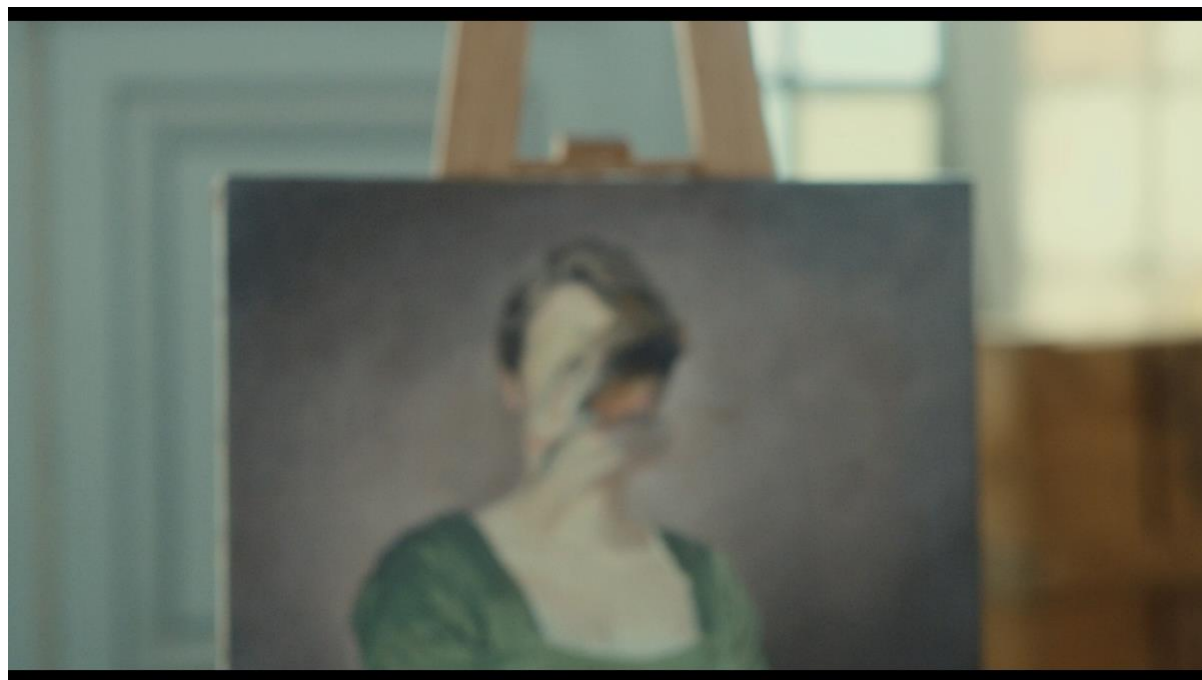


Figure 6: *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* – the aporia of the First Portrait.

### Second Portrait

Having destroyed her first painting, Marianne tells the Countess, “It wasn’t good enough. I’ll start again”. Crucially, however, the dialectical emergence of this new “Portrait” should *not* be understood as *evolutionary progression* from one logic to the next in what Žižek calls a “continuous course of transformations”, whereby contradictions are successively overcome. Instead, the film insists (in concert with Žižek) that dialectical movement “consists in the incessant repetition of a beginning *ex nihilo*, in the annihilation and retroactive restructuring of supposed contents” (1989/2008, p. 162). The second painting – commissioned in response to the failure of the first – begins again, with the void of a blank canvas rather than a progressive adjustment (e.g., overpainting/repainting) of the previous work, which has been annihilated by Marianne.

The possibility of a “Second Portrait” is established by restaging the artist/sitter relation between Marianne and Héloïse, radically re-envisaged by Sciamma as what Hegel calls the crucial “turning point” in the emergence of self-consciousness (§177; 1807/1977, p. 110). This

begins at their first sitting: Héloïse poses for the new portrait and as Marianne arranges paints and brushes, she tells her, “Look at me”. As Marianne looks up, the film cuts to a reverse on Héloïse, whose eyes turn towards her; then a rapid cut back to Marianne in much fuller close-up, eyes wide, mouth slightly agape as she is confronted by Héloïse’s presence. Previously, Marianne had enjoyed the position of voyeur, observing Héloïse from a distance, but here Héloïse *looks back* and Marianne is made aware of her own regard. This signals the beginning of a dialectical movement of self and other from which will emerge self-conscious: what was shown to be *blocked* by the logic of the First Portrait will now be opened as a new way of seeing.

At the next session, a new painting emerges: the face now the *first* part to be completed, with a much closer resemblance. As she sits, centrally composed in medium shot, Héloïse beckons Marianne to join her on the *other* side of the easel, and to *look back* at where she stands. She explains, “If you look at me, who do I look at?”: the implication being that *when you’re looking at me as you paint, I am also looking at you*. Marianne is astonished to see that she is *also* an object for the eyes of another viewing subject. She now understands that this is *not* (and has never been) an unequal dynamic but an encounter between independent consciousnesses (Fig. 7). The *mise-en-scène* has not changed, but its significance has been retroactively altered: what Marianne took to be a one-way relation of looking and being-looked-at was, always-already, a two-way relay of looking-looked. In other words, the peepshow was really a window.



Figure 7: *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* – “If you look at me, who do I look at?”

### *The Movement of Recognition*

Héloïse’s intervention is captured by Kojève, where he notes: “In order that mutual and reciprocal recognition [...] be established, it suffices for the [servant] to impose [herself] on the Master and be recognized by [her]” (1980, p. 21). However, where Kojève imagined further violence, Sciamma presents a non-conflictual, visual model entailing a fundamental change in perspective as a version of what Hegel calls the “movement of *recognition*” (§178; 1807/2018, p. 76, original emphasis). This allows for the new mode of relation and co-creation in the film’s Second Portrait. Marianne had been operating as an independent consciousness but, in being seen by Héloïse, she sees both Héloïse’s and her own self differently: in the “speculative unity of mutually recognising self-conscious subjects within communal intersubjectivity” (Sinnerbrink. 2004, p. 276). Marianne’s revelation is that her identity depends not only on how she sees Héloïse, but also on how she is *seen by her*. The outcome of this decisive turning point is the realisation that, “Self-consciousness exists *in and for itself* through the fact that it exists

in and for itself through another; that is, it exists only in being recognised” (§187; quoted in Sinnerbrink, 2004, p. 277). However, Hegel’s vision of such mutual recognition comes in a preview of the potential outcome of the master/servant dynamic, which – as we saw – goes awry in phenomenal experience. Sciamma thus envisages here what Hegel perhaps could *not* at this point in the *Phenomenology*: a *successful* transition from unequal to mutual recognition, between two independent yet reciprocally constituting/constituted consciousnesses, as Héloïse recognises Marianne, and Marianne recognises her.

Fuery frames this relation in terms of Beauvoir’s discussion of reciprocity as “rejecting the objectification of the other, instead valorising the paradox of being both subject and object, separated and connected” (2022, p. 202). In focusing on “women’s experience not often screened” – same-sex desire, abortion – and emphasising the embodied dimension, Sciamma’s film demonstrates “that our recognition of the other is more sensuous than perceptual, that is, sexuality is always already embedded within our perception” (Fuery, 2022, p. 214). Here I would build on Fuery’s important insights by emphasising the Hegelianism of *both* Beauvoir and Sciamma, particularly where they point to forms of mutual recognition between women. While Beauvoir’s wider project in *The Second Sex* ultimately bears on the question of “brotherhood [*fraternité*]” for men *and* women (1949/2011, p. 766), Julie K. Ward observes that Beauvoir’s fiction and life-writing tentatively explore possibilities of cognitive communities of *women*: particularly with sister, Héléne, and friend, Zaza. Moreover, in the discussion of lesbianism in *The Second Sex*, Ward suggests, we find an implied answer to the specific question of women’s mutuality (Ward, 1999, pp. 39, 45-6). Seeming to anticipate Marianne and Héloïse’s affair, Beauvoir notes,

Between women, love is contemplation; caresses are meant less to appropriate the other than to re-create oneself slowly through her; separation is eliminated, there is neither fight nor victory nor defeat; each one is both subject and object [...] in exact reciprocity. (1949/2011, p. 429)

Ward argues that, while Beauvoir never makes the argument explicit, it is here we find “the means by which women attain [mutual] recognition”. Ward suggests, however, that this model brackets the importance of *work* for emancipation, which Beauvoir otherwise references in Hegel and Marx (1999, p. 46). Again, this is where Sciamma’s film-philosophy goes a step further in exploring the mutual implication of love *and* work in the co-creation of a painting and a relationship between two self-consciousnesses. Héloïse not only consents to the image but also mixes and adds paint to the canvas, as well as contributing to the labour of running of the chateau, eventually embodying both internal and external modes of negation.

### *An Aesthetics of Mutual Recognition*

This new mode of relation and, crucially, its basis in consensual *co-creation* is the essence of the film’s Second Portrait. Its logic is expressed formally by the shift in this “turning point” scene from shot/reverse-shot to the *two-shot* (Fig. 7) as visually expressing the new-found egalitarianism and blossoming love relation between the women. The scene begins in the familiar way: the back-and-forth pattern of singles for each speaker recalling the old dynamic of Héloïse as *observed* and Marianne as *observer*. Seeming to acknowledge this, Marianne tells her, “Forgive me, I’d hate to be in your place”; off-camera, Héloïse retorts: “We’re in the same place”. The film cuts to Héloïse in medium shot, underlining her more emphatic, “Exactly the same place. Come here. Come”; Marianne enters the frame and Héloïse beckons, “Step closer”. Héloïse thus takes control of the situation: commanding first the camera to address *her*, and then Marianne to cross the divide and enter into *her* shot, the space of the “object”. As Héloïse bids her to “Look”, the camera begins to push in: intensifying the delivery of her vital question – “...who do I look at?” – and settling on a medium close-up of the pair as Marianne recognises that she too is an object of the look. As Marianne leaves the shot, the camera reframes slightly to settle on a fuller close-up on Héloïse, centre-frame: a viewing subject in her own right. The

scene's final shot returns to a single on Marianne at the easel but, where previous images had given her in medium close-up, this is a much longer, three-quarter shot of the artist's figure (Fig. 8). The scale here denotes *Héloïse's* literal point-of-view just as we have gained insight into her philosophical perspective on their relationship: she is (also) the one who looks, Marianne is (also) the one who is looked-at. Even the shot/reverse-shot pattern is thereby transformed into a cinematic vector for reciprocity.

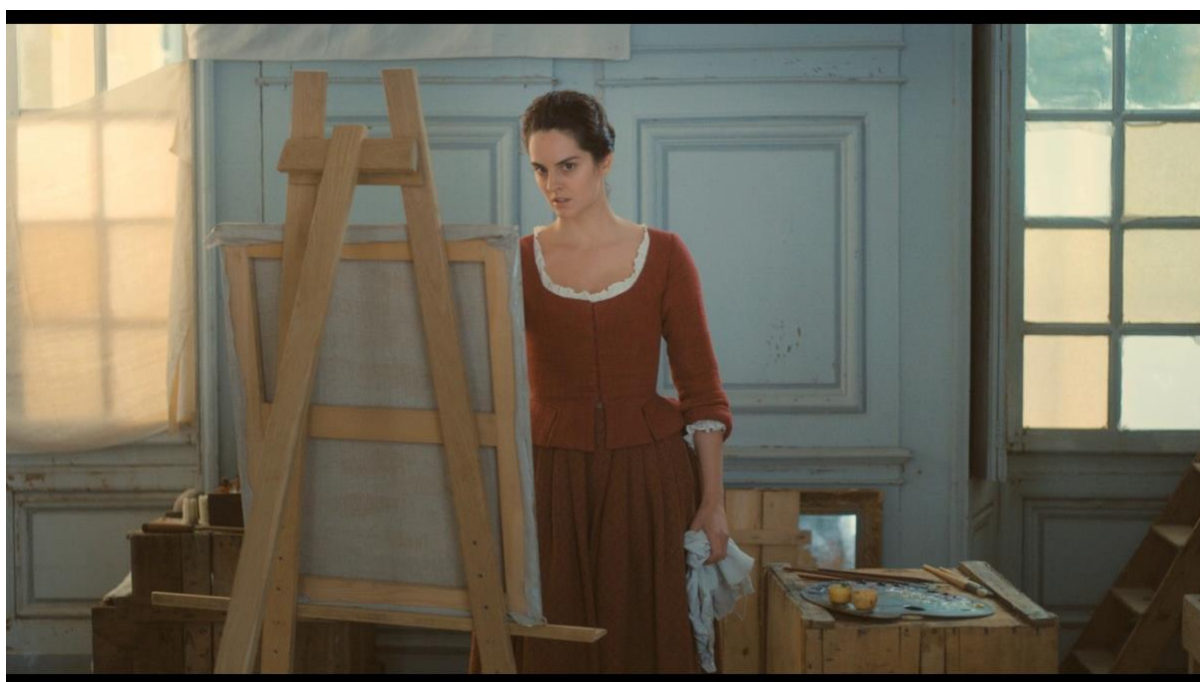


Figure 8: *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* – Héloïse's perspective on Marianne.

The use of the two-shot in this sequence is an acknowledgement that the pair are on more equal footing as subjects: it is a visual manifestation of their mutuality. The device recurs as a motif throughout the latter parts of *Portrait*: the film now holding them *in equal regard*, as they hold each other (Fig. 9). In fact, Sciamma emphasises the “horizontal” relations between characters. She notes that Héloïse's reflection on her time in the nunnery – “equality is a pleasant feeling” – is “One of the key lines in the film” for the way it expresses both the character dynamic and the impulse behind the screenplay itself as a story of love and artistic collaboration “based on equality” (2020). The *horizontality* in this combination of romance and

co-creation is expressed by the two-shot in a directly cinematic way. The film thus stages the possibility of the reciprocal mediation of the self through the other and the other through the self that Hegel identifies, in the life of spirit, as the emergence of self-consciousness. That “spiritual daylight of the present” (§177; 1807/1977, p. 111), as Hegel puts it, into which we step with Héloïse and Marianne is the logic of the Second Portrait. This necessitates a rethinking of the relations of looking/looked-at in conventional film theory and the concept of the “gaze”.



Figure 9: *Portrait of Lady on Fire* – two-shot as reciprocity.

### *The Hegelianism of the Female Gaze*

The scopic regime of the Second Portrait – as an aesthetics of mutual recognition – is, importantly, also the visual logic towards which the film itself aspires. The *horizontality* that Sciamma identifies within the film was also at stake in the production itself: “I tried to create a more horizontal way of working that is very collaborative. The film is all about that” (Stevens 2022). Thus, in opening space for a new kind of cognitive community within both its storyworld and the world of its own creation, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* substantiates

Sciamma's claim that it is "a manifesto about the female gaze" (St. James 2020). This, Sciamma defines, as follows: "not to objectify or to sexualize. The aim is to share the experience of the character" (Garcia, 2019, p. 10); it is "a strong opportunity to make new stuff, new images, new narratives" (St. James 2020). It is cinema that establishes *new audio-visual languages* which, as Fuery notes, give expression to as-yet under-represented aspects of experience. *Portrait* is an example of Sciamma's feminist praxis – a putting into motion of ideas around mutuality, co-creation and desire – that makes a vital contribution to our understanding of the capacities of film.

This is recognised by Iris Brey, who cites the film as paradigmatic of what she herself defines as "*le regard féminin*" (2020): a non-objectifying, sensuous aesthetic of desire focused on collaboration rather than domination. Where Brey insists that the "female gaze" does not "[take] pleasure in looking at a person by objectifying them, like a voyeur" (2020), we can recognise that *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* does in fact engage the modalities of voyeurism under what I have called the First Portrait. Yet Marianne is shown to observe Héloïse not simply to reproduce this relation but, ultimately, to *critique* it. The turning point does not just reverse the hierarchy of subject/object; it coins a new cinematic language based on mutuality in the two-shot. Further, where bodies *are* revealed, they are not "on display" as Berger describes the nude in art history; rather, they are simply *naked* (1972/1977, p. 54). As Marianne dries herself by the fire, for example, she is unclothed and the carefully balanced shot is strongly aestheticised but it is not objectifying: the long take, deep-focus composition allows her to exist as an embodied subject on screen.

Where Brey claims "if bodies are eroticized, the gesture must be conscious" (2020), the frankness of naked bodies – particularly bodies together – in *Portrait* offers new forms of eroticism and sensuous imagery. Brey identifies the multiple, material contours of landscape, costume and flesh through which "the female sex becomes tangible". It is felt in



The folds in Marianne's pockets that hide her tools for sketching Héloïse's face, the folds in Héloïse's green silk dress as Marianne paints it and thus discovers it [...], the fold in the rock that welcomes their first kiss. And finally the fold of Héloïse's armpit, under which Marianne's finger slips (2020).

In contrast to the detached, optical mode of viewing that characterises the First Portrait, this is expressly proximate, *haptic* imagery that, as Marks would recognise, more directly engages image and body. Yet, Sciamma does not straightforwardly *destroy visual pleasure* through abstraction, for example, as Mulvey or Marks might advocate. Instead, as Bradbury-Rance observes, such imagery establishes a queered form of visibility: refusing the more explicit modes of sexual representability common to contemporary French cinema, in favour of the “ambiguous legibility” of, for example, a hand penetrating an armpit (2022, p. 179). There is, Bradbury-Rance asserts, a radicality precisely in denying such overt “representation” while embracing instead an alternative paradigm in the ambiguity of aesthetic tactility.

The reciprocity of such eroticism affirms Beauvoir’s contention that women find mutual recognition *corporeally*: experiencing her body both as it is to herself and, crucially, as it is to others through her touch (1949/2011, p. 429). The film therefore demonstrates that, in a situation of mutuality and passion, consciousness (and with it, love) can flourish. This is emblematised in the complex auto/allo-portrait created as Marianne sketches for Héloïse on page 28 of her book. It is rendered in three images – a medium shot of a mirror reflecting Marianne’s face, resting over Héloïse’s pubis, her body defocused; a close-up of Marianne’s drawing; a three-quarter shot of Héloïse reclining, the mirror now defocused (Fig. 10) – that present a queering of the relay of looking and looked-at more nuanced than the overtly legible two-shots used elsewhere. These fragmented and layered images are certainly eroticised, even to the point of a certain fetishism, but without reducing the participants to something less than subjects. Both women are present, are looking at each other, within one image; yet they are doubled in another visual language of desire indicating the Hegelianism of Sciamma’s “female gaze” as the film’s Second Portrait. The mirror-body conjunction of Marianne and Héloïse

constitutes a visual manifestation of the speculative unity of self and other: an image of the mediation of the self *through* the other and the recognition of the otherness *within* the self, in the coming into being of spirit as self-consciousness, or – as Hegel famously puts it – the “‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’” (§177; 1807/1977, p. 110).<sup>4</sup>



Figure 10: *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* – auto/allo-portrait.

### *Second Portrait / Second Aporia*

The logic of this Second Portrait, however, leads to a further impasse, exposing contradiction once more: mutual recognition between Marianne and Héloïse allowed a new painting to be created – and their passionate affair to bloom – but completion of the painting means their

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<sup>4</sup> Hegel elsewhere describes love as “the most immense contradiction” (1820/2003, p. 199) wherein the subject both loses itself and finds itself through the other, as a form of unity-in-difference: thus rendering it – as *Portrait* affirms – isomorphic with mutual recognition (understood not as overcoming but as *preserving* such contradiction).

relationship must end. As the composition nears conclusion, the pair contemplate the canvas in characteristic two-shot. Marianne tells Héloïse “I’d like to destroy this one, too [because] Through it, I give you to another”. As she speaks, she separates from Héloïse and the camera reframes to create a single on Marianne. Then, the reverse on Héloïse, another single as she turns and walks away. They argue in shot/reverse-shot, Héloïse seemingly acknowledging the shift in cinematic framing away from the two-shot as she tells Marianne, “You’re not on my side now”, adding: “You blame me for what comes next. My marriage”. The formal schism here reminds us of what has always existed between them and cannot be ignored any longer: the contradiction of the First Portrait persists, becomes intractable. While the Second Portrait allowed passion and self-consciousness to develop, it remained in service to the logic of exogamy and now their recognitive community will be broken up. In a properly dialectical way, then, we might say that success inevitably leads to failure here – not to *establish* mutual recognition as in the master/servant dynamic, but to *maintain* it in the persistence of wider social inequality – and failure is once again *revelatory*.

Crucially, mutual recognition is *not* the end of the story: neither for Hegel, nor for Sciamma. If it *were*, then we would be in the realm of Robert Brandom’s “spirit of trust”, a third and “final” form of recognition wherein alienation is overcome (2019); or we would be at the end of Todd Haynes’ *Carol* (2015) – another film about the queer dynamics of looking between women – which ends with the reciprocal meeting of glances between Carol and Therese. In short, we would have a vision of dialectics without negation. By contrast, Hegel’s discussion of mutual recognition comes in *the middle* of the *Phenomenology*, while Sciamma adds a coda to her work that radically alters its film-philosophical significance. If we were ever tempted to read their narratives in terms of a telos of *overcoming contradiction* – i.e., towards unity as ever-greater synthesis in mutual recognition – then this is what forecloses such

possibility. Sciamma and Hegel alike show that the movement of the dialectic is *towards ever-greater contradiction*. It is not that Hegel simply decides to move on to another stage of analysis, any more than Héloïse and Marianne simply decide to split up and move on with their lives. Each finds that mutual recognition *cannot be sustained* and must necessarily fail. Neither the *Phenomenology* nor *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* can end on reciprocity: there *must* be a further stage.

### **Third Portrait**

The emergence of this further stage – the film’s “Third Portrait” – entails a shift in ontology from canvas to screen, and a shift in our relation to contradiction: the dialectical movement starting again on a new scene. As noted at the outset, this enquiry was instigated by my encounter with the film’s final shot: a portrait of Haenel as Héloïse, produced not by Delmaire or her fictional counterpart Marianne but by Sciamma and the camera of Claire Mathon. From this shot emerged the idea that Héloïse might, finally, turn and look to the camera. Throughout the film, *looking back* has proven vital to both the development of self-consciousness in the artist/sitter dynamic and the upswell of passion that ensued. In slightly different context, Mark W. Turner's cultural history of cruising identifies the “backwards glance” as a vector of queer desire and connects this to the question of reciprocity, describing the exchange of looks between potential lovers as “an act of mutual recognition” (2003, p. 9). Although Turner’s frame of reference is neither Hegelian nor Beauvoirian, he highlights the question implicitly posed here as being “was our advance mutual?” (2003, p. 95): an inquiry that resonates in the ambiguities of Marianne and Héloïse’s first flirtations. As Fuery observes, Héloïse’s query on seeing the first painting – “This is how you see me?” – could be taken as aesthetic criticism (i.e., its lack of resemblance), or as “discreetly [questioning] the veracity of the eroticism that

has been growing between them” (2022, p. 221). She might have taken Marianne’s looks to be desirous and was responding in kind.

To appreciate the significance of the *refusal* of a “backwards glance” in the final shot, it is worth considering the counterfactual possibility – i.e., what would have happened if Héloïse *had* looked back – as well as the significance that the film gives to the act of looking back itself.

“...*ne flectat retro sua lumina...*”

Retrospection is, firstly, a motif in *Portrait*’s re-envisaging of the Orpheus myth. As Kaja Silverman observes, Orpheus and Eurydice’s story is “insistently backward-turning”. In Virgil’s version, “Orpheus journeys to Hades because he cannot forget Eurydice, and he violates the ban on looking at her because his thoughts are directed towards her”. Ovid’s emphasises that Orpheus’ own death “clarifies [his] vision, giving him a new kind of ‘hindsight’” that finally allows him to look back safely at his wife (2009, pp. 47, 52). When Marianne, Héloïse and Sophie gather to consider the myth, it is from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* that they read, first with excitement and then dismay at the fate of the couple. Sophie expresses dissatisfaction with Ovid’s judgement on Orpheus – “His sole fault was loving her” – exclaiming, “That’s horrible. Poor woman. Why did he turn?”. Initially, Héloïse follows the text – “He’s madly in love. He can’t resist” – but Marianne offers a counterinterpretation: the look back at Eurydice was born not of passion but as a *choice* made by Orpheus to relinquish the love object in favour of his art. Marianne calls it the “Poet’s Choice” to embrace her memory, rather than the “Lover’s Choice” of being reunited in her arms. Héloïse, by contrast, interprets the look back as a choice made by *Eurydice*, to provoke Orpheus and thus consign them both to their fates: “Perhaps she was the one who said, ‘Turn around’”.

Each reading reveals something of the reader: the servant girl cannot comprehend disobeying divine commandment, the painter identifies Orpheus as the paradigmatic artist, while the chattel bride searches for emancipation in Eurydice's fate. In fact, the film explicitly positions Marianne and Héloïse as Ovidian figures. Marianne is twice confronted by a spectral vision of Héloïse in bridal dress, whom she turns to look at before the figure recedes into darkness; and Marianne's painting of the mythic scene in the film's coda presents Eurydice in those same white robes, while Orpheus' match the blue of the artist's own dress. Such gestures can be seen as repetitions – whether anticipatory or retrospective – of the moment the couple themselves must separate. With the painting completed and Héloïse fitted for her wedding gown, Marianne leaves the chateau: her trajectory echoing the earlier dash to the cliff but now the camera follows *her* rather than Héloïse. As Marianne reaches the door, Héloïse calls out, “Turn around”. Marianne pauses and looks back to see Héloïse for a final time, as “Eurydice” grants her Orphic release to the life of an artist and the image fades to black, bringing the narrative proper to a close.

### *Looking at the Camera*

Looking back can also be recognised as a feature of Sciamma's general cinematic grammar: in the form of direct address, or near direct address, in the look to camera. Her first feature, *Water Lilies* (*Naissance des pieuvres*, 2007) is close kin to *Portrait*: both exploring the emergence of same-sex desire between women and featuring Haenel as the object of fascination. Here, however, the backdrop is teenage synchronised swimming, rather than eighteenth-century portraiture, and affection is not reciprocated in the same way. The last image of Haenel's Floriane – eyes closed, dancing alone, indifferent to others – preserves her as unobtainable and unknowable, while the film ends with its ingenue protagonist, Marie, reunited with best-friend,

Anne, as they float on their backs in the pool. In the film's final, overhead shot, Marie seems to look up at the camera (Fig. 11). The distance renders this uncertain – it could simply be her natural eyeline or it could be direct address – but the gesture does seem to *look forward* to Héloïse and Marianne's dynamic. In particular, in the early parts of *Portrait*, Héloïse's demand for recognition is often signalled by looks or near looks to camera that cannot always be accounted for in terms of Marianne's optical point-of-view (Fig. 12).



Figure 11: *Water Lilies* – direct address?



Figure 12: *Portrait of Lady on Fire* – looking back.

In his study of the technique, Tom Brown makes the useful distinction between “direct address” as overt appeal beyond the diegesis and the plain fact of *looking at the camera* (2012, p. xi). Sciamma’s examples might fall under the latter category rather than indicating something more self-reflexive, but they nonetheless highlight the question of looking in important ways. Brown notes that direct address is particularly salient for film as a medium and becomes “a rich metaphor” where “problems of vision (insight, foresight, other kinds of perceptiveness)” emerge (2012, p. xii); and, as we have seen, *Portrait* is a film more deeply concerned with “problems of vision” than most. Moreover, as Brown observes, direct address occurs with “greater frequency in the final shots of films than at any other point” (2012, p. 175). I would therefore suggest that it was the Orphic retrospection thematised and enacted within the film – combined with this general tendency for direct address to come at the end – which conjured the possibility (if not the expectation) that Héloïse *would* look back in the film’s final shot.



And what if she did? Brown suggests that, among other things, intimacy, confrontation and intrusion frequently characterise cinematic direct address (2012, pp. 13-18). We might then think of *Make Way for Tomorrow* (Leo McCarey, 1937) or *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days* (Cristian Mungiu, 2007) as prototypes for my own counterfactual scene. Depending on Héloïse's demeanour, a look back at the end of *Portrait* could have given us such possibilities: from a hostile look, like an eye suddenly glaring back through the keyhole, to a gentler look, granting the Orphic release permitted to Marianne as she left the chateau. In *refusing* to look back, then, the film gives us *neither* the respite of the Poet's Choice *nor* the union of the Lover's Choice. Instead, it provides a space in which we are captivated by a spectacle of lack.

### *The Address of the Gaze*

In this final scene, there is no harking back to the union of the two-shot, while – importantly – the shot/reverse-shot pattern is also disrupted. This was Copjec's point in observing that it is the *unreturned look* which troubles the subject. In the final shot, it is no longer Héloïse's demand for recognition but the *absence* of recognition that determines the image. This breakdown in recognitive relay reveals what McGowan identifies as the *desire* "behind" the demand for recognition, which ultimately causes its *failure* (2023). Such desire characterises the logic of the Third Portrait, as the film insists upon the crucial Lacanian split between the eye and the gaze (1978/1998, p. 67). The first two stages of the film – the First and Second Portraits – remain within the realm of the eye: the exchange of looks, organisation of the visual field, and imaginary dyad of intersubjectivity. The final shot moves decisively to the moment of the gaze, the encounter with the Real, in the very refusal of the look.

At the last, we are left to contemplate our own subjectivity in this *failure* of recognition. We are thrown back onto the question of our own desire in a Lacanian encounter with the gaze

as such, the gaze as *objet a* within the visual field. This is usually identified with a *distortion* in the image – e.g., the anamorphic skull in Holbein’s “The Ambassadors” (1533) (Lacan, 1978/1998, pp. 88-89) – but here, it is the very *absence* of disturbance within the image that is so disturbing. In fact, where Erika Balsom insists that *Portrait* “remains a film before which we are all perverts at the keyhole, looking in on a private world that does not acknowledge our existence” (2020), I would counter that it is precisely in the refusal to grant overt recognition here – e.g., direct address – that the spectatorial position is in fact acknowledged by the address of the gaze.

Such an encounter might be interpreted in terms of Merleau-Ponty’s influence on Lacan in Seminar XI: as a chiasmic exchange between self and world along the vector of desire, with the “blot” or “stain” indicating that the image already takes into account the presence of the subject.<sup>5</sup> This would, in fact, be how to understand the finger pointing to Page 28 in Héloïse’s portrait as Mother and Child from the film’s coda: a seemingly inconsequential detail – like Lacan’s paradigmatic sardine can, floating on the waves (1978/1998, pp. 95-96) – whose presence nonetheless has a transformative effect on the image. From a conventional point-of-view, we might see a young family in good health, just as we see the wealth of Holbein’s diplomats. Yet once we spot the disturbing/alluring detail, our perspective shifts entirely as we recognise a *memento* – here of love rather than death – addressed to the desire of a specific spectator: confirmed by the reverse on Marianne’s ambiguous smile of recognition.

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<sup>5</sup> McGowan cites the moment in *Psycho* (1960) when Marion’s car stops sinking into the swamp, drawing the spectator in at the point of their desire, as a cinematic example of such a gaze (2015, p. 69).

*From the Rational Gaze...*

With its last shot, however, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* opens a different, *Hegelian* possibility as it resonates with what McGowan calls the “impurity of [...] reason” as “the manifestation of the subject’s desire in shaping the world” (2019, pp. 74, 76). He notes that the “turn to reason [in the *Phenomenology*] brings the subject *proximate* to the world rather than creating a safe distance. It involves the subject in what it perceives” (2019, p. 76, emphasis added). Mathon’s camera performs the same function here, making us *proximate* to Héloïse and involving us in the spectacle more directly (Fig. 1). We are permitted no distance from the contradictory emotions she experiences in this shot – recall that Haenel described the scene as a downhill slalom of feeling – which brings us closer, in turn, to our own experience. In this final shot we might feel, with Tarkovsky, the time pressure of the long take and we access, with Epstein, the very soul of cinema in the close-up: not through the hapticity of the image found elsewhere in the film but – in a paradoxical way – through the *optical* organisation of the shot as it steadily pushes in on Héloïse. The proximity of the camera to Haenel – chest heaving, eyes glinting with tears – in the final shot renders this image a pure cine-portrait. While aligned with Marianne’s point-of-view, it is a vantage point available only to the cinematic spectator thus indicating the self-reflexivity of the film’s scopic regime at this stage. It is a “Third Portrait” based ultimately on the *failure* of recognition, shifting emphasis from the intra-diegetic relay of looks to the very act of looking at the screen itself.

The form of the final shot, then, brings us to Hegelian reason as the form of our engagement with the world; but crucially this engagement should be understood as “the apprehension of [...] contradiction” (McGowan, 2019, p. 78). If, as Hegel says, “What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational” (1820/2003, p. 20), then – McGowan insists – this is no apologia for the status quo but an insistence on the contradictions of actuality itself

(2019, pp. 80-81). It is for this reason that the encounter with what I might call the “rational gaze” in the film’s final shot takes us even further: to the very conclusion of the *Phenomenology*. We know this is the end of the line for Marianne and Héloïse. Marianne tells us as much in the unusual shift of register to *voiceover narration* here – “I saw her one last time” – again indicating the self-reflexivity of the sequence; while the refusal to turn gives us no respite, no chance of release: “She didn’t see me”. We have exhausted all possibility except to persist, with Héloïse, in the duration of memory, love, *and loss*. The film in fact *reverses* the meaning of the Orphic decision: where the Lover’s Choice (of not looking back) once promised reunion with the love object, now the refusal to turn denies the possibility of such final satisfaction. We are unable to relinquish the object (as in the Poet’s Choice) but we find that it can only be the *object of lack* with which we are left. There is no other option available so we no longer simply *apprehend* contradiction in the world, but find that it is *inevitable*.

*...to the Portrait of the Absolute*

We have therefore reached the stage of *absolute knowing*, which McGowan characterises as “the point at which the subject recognizes that there are no more conceivable paths out of contradiction” (2019, p. 176). The movement of the dialectic might continue but we now know that it can only ever lead to failure: the impossibility of the master/servant dynamic resolving itself only in the greater contradiction of the impossibility of sustaining mutual recognition, resolving again only in further impossibility. This is why, McGowan suggests, “one might rename absolute knowing the recognition of the inevitability of contradiction” (2019, p. 176). Otherwise said, the failure of recognition in this shot insists upon the recognition of failure as such.

In this way, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* also highlights those moments when Beauvoir in fact reads Hegel *correctly*, despite what otherwise seems to be her acceptance of the doxa that he is an irredeemably teleological thinker and apologist for tyranny (cf. 1948/1962, p. 8). This would suggest a return to the image of Hegel as philosopher of ever-greater synthesis; yet other passages in Beauvoir seem to indicate the contrary. For example, in the “Myths” section of *The Second Sex*, she straightforwardly references Hegel’s model of self-consciousness through the mediation of the other, concluding: “This is why the life of the human being is never plenitude and rest: it is lack and movement; it is struggle” (quoted in Bauer, 2001, p. 185). Far from being, as Nancy Bauer puts it, “The one apparently un-Hegelian feature of this paragraph” (2001, p. 185), this sentence is Beauvoir at precisely her *most* Hegelian. As the last shot of Sciamma’s film insists, there is no final rest or plenitude, only *lack and movement*: what, in the “Absolute Knowledge” section of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel calls “restless” negativity (§805; 1807/1977, p. 491). Similarly, even where she critiques a “Hegelian act of surpassing” leading to “further synthesis”, Beauvoir describes the absolute precisely when she suggests, “failure is not surpassed, but assumed” (1948/1962, p. 13). The dialectic does not lead to some final overcoming but only to the final assumption of failure. In short, if – for Hegel – absolute knowing entails knowing that contradiction is absolute, then we should understand Sciamma’s Third Portrait, simply, as *a portrait of the absolute*.

***“It wasn’t good enough. I’ll start again”***

Sciamma and Hegel alike show that the movement of the dialectic is towards *ever-greater* contradiction: the impossibility of the master/servant dynamic resolving itself only in the greater contradiction of the impossibility of sustaining mutual recognition, resolving again only in further impossibility. This is why neither the *Phenomenology* nor *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

can conclude with reciprocity: there *must* be a further stage, the Third Portrait as encounter with contradiction as such, with the absolute knowledge that contradiction is absolute. This is what is precipitated by the encounter with the gaze in the film's final shot. *Portrait* thus presents a dialectical undoing of the role of recognition in Hegelian philosophy, ending with its ruination: a failure that insists instead upon the ineluctability of contradiction. This necessitates a rethinking of the "gaze" in film theory and film-philosophy: not as the property of any given look or viewing subject, but as the immanent point(s) of failure within the very organisation of the visual field.

Nonetheless, one might counter by suggesting that the final shot simply returns us to the "male gaze": the "voyeuristic" slow push in and "fetishising" close-up evoking once again the visual treatment of Madeleine in Ernie's restaurant in *Vertigo*. Moving left and then forwards, the camera gives a perspective motivated by the protagonist but impossible to any point-of-view except itself: the figure framed for consideration in profile and (medium) close-up, the blonde with the (green) dress, pure cinematic spectacle. And, as Balsom notes, despite emphasis on a *female gaze*, "voyeurism is the very ground of cinematic fascination and cannot be escaped [so] easily", while "there is power and pleasure in being an object" (2020). Perhaps we arrive, then, where we started: with the terms of the First Portrait and its unequal visual register.

Yet this cannot be the case because – in going to the very end here – *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* has brought about a *parallax shift*: a fundamental change in perspective signalling a concomitant, ontological change in the object itself (Žižek, 2006, p. 17). The final shot enacts what Fredric Jameson notes is the "return to the reality of appearance" in the third moment of the Hegelian dialectic (2006). Where there was *appearance* (a way of seeing based on inequality) and then the revelation of *reality* (the negation of that way of seeing through an always-already existing reciprocity), we now reach the negation of negation in a new

perspective on that old way: the reality of appearance in the Third Portrait as the speculative unity of “gazes”, voyeurism/fetishism *and* radical disruption in a single image. This shot *does not* advance us to some higher level of synthesis, where the dialectical movement of spirit might finally come to rest. Instead, it returns us, Möbius-fashion, to the start and the aesthetic logic of the First Portrait but having now passed *through* the dialectic of the gaze, we recognise the aporia of this way of seeing and must view things differently. It might *look* the same (i.e., repeating the same cinematic techniques), but we now perceive it through the necessity of contradiction. The gaze is not the look, but where the look falters. We understand this, as Hegel suggests, because “The true is the whole” (§20; 1807/2018, p. 11): we cannot simply skip ahead and apprehend contradiction in the final shot directly. It is necessary to pass through the series of failures presented within the film and only then to look again. Then we will find that *the whole is un trou*: determined by impossibility or a point of contradiction.

For Hegel, philosophy itself – and reading the *Phenomenology* in particular – entails a repeated processing of looking back and starting again: something emphasised by the Preface to the *Phenomenology* and by Sciamma’s prologue, and then elaborated by their respective narratives. Where Marianne says to the Countess (of her first painting), “It wasn’t good enough. I’ll start again”, this could be taken as the rationale for each stage of Hegel’s project: a return to failure to fail once more. To paraphrase Žižek, then, “far from being a story of [...] progressive overcoming”, Sciamma’s dialectic is “a systematic notation of the failure of all such attempts” to overcome the impasses of the gaze. It brings us, in an encounter with the gaze as such, to “‘absolute knowledge’ [as] a subjective position which finally accepts ‘contradiction’ as an internal condition of every identity” (1989/2008, p. xxix). In finally staging the very failure to do so, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* compels us to look back – at Hegel, at recognition, at the gaze – and to see them anew.

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