



fish

*Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Portrait de la jeune fille en feu)*  
(France 2019)

**Spoiler alert: You may prefer to read this review after the screening**

DIRECTOR : Celine Sciamma

RUNNING TIME : 120mins

RATING :

**Synopsis:**

This French historical drama written and directed by Celine Sciamma, is set in the late 18<sup>th</sup> C. It tells the story of a forbidden affair between an aristocrat and a painter commissioned to paint her portrait.

**Review:** Mark Kermode.

What a thrillingly versatile film-maker Céline Sciamma has proved to be. Her impressive screenplay credits include Claude Barras's *My Life as a Courgette*, a tenderly empathetic, French-Swiss stop-motion masterpiece that earned an Oscar nomination for its vividly resilient depiction of children in care. In each of her very different projects, Sciamma has struck an accessible chord by focusing tightly on specifics, finding the key to universal appeal in the unique, tiny details of each story and character.

For her fourth feature as writer-director, Sciamma ventures to a new world of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. We first meet Marianne (Noémie Merlant) teaching life study in Paris to art students, one of whom stumbles upon her titular painting. An arresting night-time image of a woman whose dress is hemmed with flames, this painting provides a portal to the past. Through it, we are transported back to Marianne's stormy, sea-bound arrival at a remote Brittany residence where she is to paint former convent girl Héloïse (Adèle Haenel). Héloïse's countess mother (played with imperious fragility by Valeria Golino) intends to send the painting to a Milanese nobleman; if he approves, her daughter will be wed and they will both be transported to a new life. But Héloïse has no desire to be married, and has already defeated one painter who left without ever seeing her face. So Marianne, who has been brought here on the pretext of being a chaperone and companion, must study and paint her subject in secret, looking without appearing to look...

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**FILMS IN THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS INC**

10.00 am Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> May 2022

8.15 pm Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2022

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## Review: Cont.

That this deception should soon be revealed is no surprise – the electric tension between the pair prevents either of them from keeping secrets for long. Yet when confronted with Marianne’s first attempt to capture her likeness, Héloïse is appalled. “Is that how you see me?” she demands, stunned less by Marianne’s deceit than by the lack of life – of “presence” – in her picture. “The fact it isn’t close to me, *that* I can understand,” she says bitterly. “But I find it sad it isn’t close to *you*.”

What follows is an intellectually erotic study of power and passion in which observed becomes observer, authored becomes author, returning time and again to a central question: “If you look at me, who do I look at?” It’s a question that reverberates throughout Sciamma’s playfully literate film, which rightly won the Cannes prize for best screenplay in 2019. We hear it echoed in a historically accurate discussion of the way the art world keeps women in their place by proscribing the subjects of their gaze, their inquiry.

More significantly, it informs an ongoing debate about the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice that runs like a silver thread through the drama. “He doesn’t make the lover’s choice, but the poet’s,” Marianne says of Orpheus and his fateful decision to look back as he ascends from the underworld. But perhaps that decision was not his to make? Could Eurydice be the author of her own fate, the commander of *his* gaze?

Digitally filmed in tactile, painterly hues by Claire Mathon, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (the French title uses the less Jamesian “jeune fille”) seamlessly intertwines themes of love and politics, representation and reality. At times it plays like a breathless romance, trembling with passionate anticipation. Elsewhere, it seems closer to a sociopolitical treatise, what Sciamma has called “a manifesto about the female gaze”. Ghostly images of Héloïse in her wedding dress lend a quasi-gothic edge, and there’s something of the Brontës in the cliffside walks she embraces with abandon. Yet Sciamma is careful to keep such heightened emotions rooted in the firm soil of social realism.

A subplot about young maid Sophie (Luàna Bajrami) dealing with an unwanted pregnancy finds Sciamma at her most quietly radical, not only confronting but also *depicting* a taboo subject and its representation, refusing to look away, finding strength in sorority.

Musically, Sciamma keeps things sparse and diegetic, mirroring Héloïse’s cloistered experience (she longs to hear an orchestra), emphasising her silenced sense of imprisonment. All the more significant, then, that a signature scene bursts into vibrant song – a chorus of live vocals and handclaps that momentarily lifts the film into an ecstatically uncanny reverie, as mesmerisingly magical as anything I can recall seeing on screen.

Source: [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com) Mark Kermode 1/3/2020 / Last modified on 12/12/20. Edited extracts ~ accessed 8/5/21

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## Some Thoughts on: *A Lion Returns*

What a great return to form by FISH. Despite an obviously very low, partly crowd funded budget, this was powerful, engaging and heartfelt film making. It was both intriguing and involving to a very high level.

Right from the opening scene we were emotionally engaged and immersed in the drama ahead. Why was this film so captivating from its very opening scene, when Jamal tries to justify his Isis experience and plead to see his sick mother, and his brother Omar, tries to argue him out of it? I think it was so accessible so early because it involved family, the setup was revealed immediately, the issue was easily understood and the fabulous script was delivered with passionate authenticity by a very effective cast. We, the audience, couldn't escape the very intimate rear seat of the car along with the two brothers. Most of us would have been aware of the political background and held pretty firm opinions already, most of us have probably experienced/endured uncomfortable family moments at the odd 'compulsory' social 'do', so we were there from the get go!

As the film progressed we were exposed to issues of family loyalty, betrayal, resentment, forgiveness, love, disappointment, compassion, intolerance, rejection and stubbornness. How to resolve the clash of such heartfelt passions on both sides? Peacefully or violently?? Both in the back seat of the car and in the final shot, (sorry), of the film, a gun was introduced. This ambiguous final moment opened a Pandora's box of possibilities. I loved being given the right to decide for myself as to what would be the likely outcome.

The production of this film had such a 'ring of truth' about it, that I'm sure the creative team behind it, must have drawn very heavily on their own real-life experiences. Having said all that, this was not a perfect film either. Some scenes were over long, time frames blew out at times and keeping a family gathering, including zillions of kids, confined to the backyard without food or toilets for that amount of time so that the 'secret visit' could take place, defied belief!! All of these minor blemishes paled into insignificance, however, as this gripping family dilemma totally engulfed us.

This is why I love FISH so much. You go along with often no expectations or pre-conceived ideas and then are, more often than not, blown away by powerful story-telling.

You've done it again FISH, many thanks.

**Ross Armfield.**

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## COMING UP:

June	<i>Only the Animals</i> [France/Germany]	Sunday 19 <sup>th</sup> & Tuesday 21 <sup>st</sup>
July	<i>A War</i> [Denmark]	Sunday 24 <sup>th</sup> & Tuesday 26 <sup>th</sup>

## Message from the President

With this newsletter you will have received a renewal form for the period January to June, 2023.

This particular renewal process which applies to current members only is to overcome the procedural problems caused by Covid and will allow us to revert to the normal renewal time next year.

Please keep your current [red] membership card till the end of 2022 after which a new card will be issued.

You will be able to hand in your renewal form at our May screenings. Otherwise, please ensure that your renewal reaches us by May 20.

We hope to see you at our screening of '*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*'.

**Sandra Gillespie.**



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