



The Main Feature

Season 41 – Issue 13 – Screening 24 March 2022

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

France, 2019

119 minutes Certificate 15

Writer-Director	Celine Sciamma
Cinematography	Claire Mathon
Production Design	Thomas Grézaud
Costume Design	Dorothée Guiraud
Score	Jean-Baptiste de Laubier, Arthur Simonini

Cast:	
Héloïse	Adèle Haenel
Marianne	Noémie Merlant
The Countess	Valeria Golino
Sophie	Luàna Bajrami
The Abortionist	Christel Baras
Workshop Student	Armande Boulanger
Man in the Salon	Guy Delamarche
The Boatman	Clément Bouyssou



The year is 1770. Professional painter Marianne (Noémie Merlant) journeys from Paris to a remote island off the coast of Brittany. The widowed Countess (Valeria Golino) has commissioned a portrait of her daughter Héloïse (Adèle Haenel), to be sent to a Milanese suitor she has never met. If he likes what he sees, then she and her mother will leave their isolated and relatively austere chateau for what the Countess promises will be a better life in a beautiful city. This will mirror the voyage from Milan which the Countess herself made as a bride twenty years before, preceded by her own portrait.

Héloïse however has no wish to be married, and has already refused to pose for one, male, portrait painter. She was living happily in a convent until her mother abruptly substituted her for her recently deceased elder sister, for whom the match was arranged. Hence Marianne is passed off as Héloïse's companion, and has initially to observe her surreptitiously and to paint in secret using the maid Sophie (Luàna Bajrami) to model her dress. On discovering the painting, which she says lacks her presence, Héloïse offers to sit herself, and the two women's relationship becomes ever more intense.

This is a film about power, identity, love, art and memory. *[Author's note: spoiler alert – If you don't want to know anything about what comes next, read no more until you've seen the film.]*



The women's lives are shaped by men, and circumscribed by the patriarchal society in which they live. Héloïse loved the "equality" of the convent, which as the film progresses is replicated between the three younger women as they live together alone in the chateau. She first rebels against, then accepts, her appointed future role of wife and mother. As a woman painter Marianne is officially barred from the prestigious field of 'history' painting, classical subjects and mythology, which is reserved for male artists who have studied from the nude model at the Academy. She has a choice, unlike Héloïse, but in practice it is an either/or one

between career and marriage. Sophie, pregnant by an absent man, sees no option but to abort her child.

Rather than having their own identities, in their relations with men the women are interchangeable with objects. The Countess and her daughter are chosen by their future husbands on the basis of their portrait images. This power structure embodies what is known in film and the visual arts as 'the male gaze', in which women are looked at and displayed for the benefit of men, with strong visual and usually erotic impact.

When Marianne and Héloïse come authentically and mutually to look at each other, the relationship is instead one of equality, of consensually seeing and being seen. For themselves. And that becomes indistinguishable from their love for each other.

At the end what remains and subsequently sustains both women – their lives outwardly 'successful' within the conventions of their time - is their memory of this brief time together being witnessed as their true selves. And art. As well as leaving her 'female gaze' portrait, Marianne gives Héloïse a nude sketch of herself, and makes a miniature of her lover for herself. Years later, hearing a passage of Vivaldi which the two had played together directly transports Héloïse back to their encounter, in sadness and in joy.

Portrait is director/writer Celine Sciamma's fourth film. It follows three coming-of-age dramas set in contemporary France and centred on girls. The central section of the film embodies the French feminist slogan *Liberté, Égalité, Sororité* (Liberty, Equality, Sisterhood). Together with Sciamma's *Bande de filles* (*Girlhood*, 2014), it is cited online as a resource on applying *sororité* to everyday life.

At Cannes 2019 Sciamma was awarded best screenplay and the Queer Palm for *Portrait*. The film enjoyed widespread acclaim abroad. In the view of Raphael Abraham, for example, it 'delivered an up-to-date and original take on the historical drama that speaks eloquently about the female and gay experience without resorting to didactic language or sermonising' (*Financial Times*, 14/2/20).

Portrait was passed over for France's entry to the Best International Film Oscar in favour of Ladj Ly's *Les Misérables*, which centres on present-day tensions between the Parisian police and the Muslim population. Sciamma has said of her film's reception in France, "It's all about respecting the great masters and it's conventional ... They don't even know about the fact that 'male gaze' exists. You can tell it's a country where there's a lot of sexism, and a strong culture of patriarchy."

"I really wanted to make a love story, even a story about friendship, without that old dynamic [of male power over a woman]", adds Sciamma. In my view she has amply succeeded.

Des Coles

César awards 2022

It's a coincidence that the club is showing a French language film shortly after the 47th César award ceremony held on 19 January 2022 – the French equivalent of the Oscars or the Baftas which sets out to honour the best of French (or mainly French) cinema.

The biggest winner was *Illusions Perdues (Lost Illusions)*, an adaptation of a big 19th century novel by Honoré de Balzac about a young man from a small town seeking to make his fortune in Paris and in journalism. The costume drama received seven Césars, including Best Film, Best Supporting Actor (Vincent Lacoste), Most Promising Actor (Benjamin Voisin), Best Adaptation (Xavier Giannoli and Jacques Fieschi), Best Cinematography, Best Costume Design and Best Production Design.

It was followed closely by *Annette*, according to Mark Kermode a 'tragicomic musical fantasy in which a starry cast (Adam Driver, Marion Cottillard) is augmented – and arguably upstaged – by a puppet in the title role' which won five awards: Best Director (Leos Carax), Best Sound, Best Editing, Best Original Music and Best Visual Effects.

There was also an honorary César for Cate Blanchett.

For my money, the most interesting award went to the admirable Valérie Lemercier as Best Actress in *Aline*, a musical biopic of a character called Aline Dieu who rises to international stardom and closely resembles the Canadian pop songstress Céline Dion. Valérie Lemercier deserves to be better known – she is an actress, screenwriter, director and singer and



Aline is her sixth film as both star and director. She has won two Césars as Best Supporting Actress in *Les Visiteurs* (1993) a fantasy comedy film in which a 12th-century knight and his squire travel in time to the end of the 20th century and find themselves adrift in modern society; and in *Orchestra Seats* (2006) where she plays an actress who has been type-cast by her role in a popular TV soap opera and who yearns to do more artistically rewarding work.



Lemercier's earlier films as writer/director show she has a nice line in comedy exemplified by her 2005 film *Palais Royale!* where she plays a speech therapist who marries a prince in a mythical kingdom and turns the tables on her unfaithful husband (Lambert Wilson) and her conniving mother-in-law (Catherine Deneuve). Similarly, she directed, wrote and starred in *Marie Francine* (2017) about a 50-ish year-old who breaks up with her husband and goes back to live with her parents.

Michael Hipkins

Comments and reactions to: **Limbo**

No of reaction slips received = 22

Average score = 6.18

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	~	~	~	1	1	3	7	8	2	~	~

Thought-provoking – beautifully shot. This will haunt me for some time

Did not bear a second viewing. Too slow. Characters not developed. Curious ending.

Wanted to like it but hard to appreciate!

Sad reflection of system. Slow and boring film

The characters grew on the viewer as the film progressed, ie we got to know them. Bleak – like the scenery

Excellent photography. But some shots too long and film rather slow

A valiant attempt to show what asylum-seekers go through, and the toll it takes

Very powerful – conflict continues even when cameras/media are absent

I thought he was going to play Oud Lang Syne

Position	Film	Average score
1	Breakfast at Tiffany's	7.20
2	Nomadland	7.13
3	Parasite	7.07
4	The Farewell	6.85
5	The Personal History of David Copperfield	6.67
6	Permission	6.60
7	Pain and Glory	6.59
8	The Crimson Pirate	6.42
9	Baby Driver	6.19
10	Limbo	6.18
11	JoJo Rabbit	6.04
12	Bait	5.35

Forthcoming attraction: 14 April 2022 – **Official Secrets**



There's something interestingly tough and forthright about this slow-burner from director and co-writer Gavin Hood. It is a beady-eyed spy drama that has shrewd things to say about the British establishment's tendency to spite under pressure, about the eternal duality of cockup and conspiracy, about the Kafkaesque problems involved in defending yourself legally against a treason charge, and, importantly, about the kind of young, vulnerable people that we end up depending on to tell us how we are governed.

Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian