

The Logic of the Cinematic in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

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Abstract

The following analysis of Céline Sciamma's film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) begins by enlisting Jean-Pierre Oudart's notorious and controversial essay on suture in order to accentuate the nuances of the film's specific cinematic logic. However, except for the final section, this analysis minimizes Oudart's psychoanalytic concepts and instead emphasizes his theory's materialist dimension, which draws principally from the work of Noël Burch. Burch's work is invaluable for defining the specific form of film in terms of spatio-temporal articulation (camera placement, shot scale, duration of the single shot, editing, the dialectic between on-screen and off-screen space and sound), and the representation of character subjectivity (flashbacks, voiceover, the camera's representation of a character's awareness and optical experience of the film's diegesis). In the final section, Kaja Silverman's reinterpretation of suture theory and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis's analysis of cinematic enunciation are enlisted to investigate the relation between cinematic logic, the female gaze, and the enunciator in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*.

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The Logic of the Cinematic in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

Introduction

Jean-Pierre Oudart defines the logic of the cinematic not in terms of the progression of complete, autonomous images, but as the mutual articulation (the separation and linking) of a series of incomplete images. He demonstrates this logic via a remarkable collection of brief observations on Robert Bresson's *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962).¹ Oudart's theory also provides a discriminating method for revealing the cinematic achievements of Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019). The following analysis of Sciamma's film begins by enlisting Oudart's notorious and controversial essay on suture in order to accentuate the nuances of the film's specific cinematic logic. However, except for the final section ("Lack and the Look"), this analysis minimizes Oudart's psychoanalytic concepts and instead emphasizes his theory's materialist dimension, which draws principally from the work of Noël Burch.² Burch's work is invaluable for defining the specific form of film in terms of spatio-temporal articulation (camera placement, shot scale, duration of the single shot, editing, the dialectic between on-screen and off-screen space and sound), and the representation of character subjectivity (flashbacks, voiceover, the camera's representation of a character's awareness and optical experience of the film's diegesis). Oudart and Burch write compellingly about *the* general logic of the cinematic, although at times they seem to be writing about a specific type of postwar European art film. What is evident is that both analyze a small group of films in order to extract from them a general cinematic logic.³ In the final section of this analysis, Kaja Silverman's reinterpretation of suture theory and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis's analysis of cinematic enunciation⁴ are enlisted to investigate the relation between cinematic logic, the female gaze, and the enunciator in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. In *To Desire Differently*, Flitterman-Lewis analyses the work of three French women

filmmakers – Germaine Dulac, Marie Epstein, and Agnès Varda; arguably, with *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Céline Sciamma has earned a place amongst this illustrious group of filmmakers.

Oudart and Bresson

Oudart discovered the following five features of cinematic logic in *The Trial of Joan of Arc*: (1) its reliance on an absence created by off-screen space (“Every filmic field is echoed by an absent field”⁵); (2) the use of the lingering shot technique before the cut (“Bresson very consciously worked on the times of the image [such as] the slight time lapse separating the moment of succession of the shots”⁶); (3) its oblique camera angles (“In *The Trial of Joan of Arc* the camera’s obliqueness [is] at last openly admitted and established as a system”⁷); (4) its rejection of subjective (optical point-of-view) shots (“Dispelling the illusions and ambiguities of a ‘subjective’ cinema, [Bresson] has wilfully accentuated the divergence between the camera’s position and that of the character placed on the same side, thereby introducing infinite modulations of shooting angles”⁸); and, most importantly, (5) its emphasis on the spectator’s position in relation to the film (“*The Trial of Joan of Arc* is the first film to subject its syntax to the cinema’s necessary representation of the [spectator’s] relation to its discourse”⁹) – especially the spectator’s relation to the camera’s look and the characters’ looks. This last point (rhetorical in its apparent identification of ‘the first film’) brings Oudart to the specifically cinematic articulation of images. “In *The Trial of Joan of Arc*,” he writes, “the most important principle [...] is that the images are not first mutually articulated, but that the filmic field is articulated by the absent field, that is the imaginary field of the film,”¹⁰ and it is the spectator who posits this absence, which means (to paraphrase Stephen Heath) that cinematic articulation does not simply operate from image to image, but from image to image through the absence posed by the spectator.¹¹ Oudart defined

this cinematic logic in terms of an ‘exchange’ between incomplete transitive images, in which the spectator does not simply focus on the image present on screen (and therefore does not simply identify with the camera that produced the image) but anticipates the next image and recollects the previous image. The next and previous images are off-screen spaces that define and oppose the current on-screen space. In his formulation of the filmic field echoing an absent field, Oudart follows Burch’s analysis of Renoir’s *Nana* (1922), a film, Burch informs us, constructed around “the exhaustive use of off-screen space and its systematic opposition to screen space.” By analyzing Renoir’s film, Burch discovers that a film’s “entire visual construction depends on the existence not only of an on-screen space but also of an off-screen space that is fully as important.”¹²

Oudart singles out Bresson because he employs suture in a deliberate and reflexive manner – he demonstrates the workings of suture while using it: “In *The Trial of Joan of Arc* Bresson only allows himself to show the signs of communication [...]. Bresson does so within a cinematic field which, because he does not attempt to produce the illusion of its immediacy, gives back to the cinema a symbolic dimension, revealed in the very process of reading.”¹³ Bresson exposes the symbolic dimension of film, its signs of communication, by organizing the cutting from the filmic field and the absent field as a series of non-overlapping (discontinuous) spaces, via lingering shots (the shot is held for a few seconds longer than expected, sometimes with no human present in the frame, adding a syncopated rhythm to the cutting),¹⁴ and by rejecting subjective images and instead relying on oblique angles – moreover, different oblique angles from shot to reverse shot (during the interrogations, the judge is frequently filmed almost head on while Joan is filmed in three-quarter view). These techniques accentuate the divergences between the position of the camera, the characters, and the spectator, thereby enabling the film’s symbolic dimension to emerge.

The first feature Oudart identifies – (1) every filmic field is echoed by an absent field – involves an intermediary: when attention is drawn to a particular section of off-screen space, it transforms from an absent space to an *imaginary space* (“a pure field of absence becomes the imaginary field of the film”¹⁵). If it is then manifest on screen, it becomes a concrete space anchored in the filmic field.

Non-overlapping or discontinuous space is a sub-feature of (1). Burch identified three types of spatial articulation between two successive shots: spatial continuity (overlap of space), and two types of spatial discontinuity – the joining together of two shots representing close (proximate, contiguous) spaces, and two shots representing two radically different spaces.¹⁶

Oudart in part defines cinematic logic in terms of spatial duplication – but not the actual duplication of the same physical space from shot to shot; instead, he defines the cinematic in terms of an oscillation between the actual on-screen space and an absent off-screen space (mediated through imaginary space). The relation between on screen and off screen becomes optimally cinematic if there is no overlap of space or objects between successive shots filmed in the same location (Burch’s first type of spatial discontinuity). An overlap of elements from one shot to the next “entails a substantial loss of ‘information’ and a real fissure between the elements forming the chain of the discourse and those unarticulated, excessive elements which end up forming a magma which paralyses the film by its inertia.”¹⁷ In place of these unarticulated, excessive (i.e., redundant) elements, Oudart instead praises films where there is no overlap from one shot to the next, a key characteristic of *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, whose scenes do not employ establishing shots and whose shot/reverse shot sequences are (with one exception) linked via off-screen looks, eyeline matches, character movement, and/or reaction shots.¹⁸

The five closely interrelated features that Oudart discovered constitute a system of cinematic logic, “a cinematic articulation irreducible to any other.”¹⁹ And this irreducible system is employed in a deliberate and reflexive manner not only in Bresson’s *The Trial of Joan of Arc* but also in Sciamma’s *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. (Kaja Silverman similarly demonstrated how Hitchcock’s *Psycho* [1960] employs suture reflexively.²⁰) The reflexivity of Sciamma’s film extends to her centering of the narrative around a female character, a visual artist (a painter) who, like Sciamma the filmmaker, demonstrates the functioning of the look while using it inventively to express female desire via a scenario in which three female characters look at each other equally – without inferiority, jealousy, or humiliation.

The equality between the three women and Sciamma’s effective use of cinematic logic are evident in the scene in the kitchen when the aristocrat Héloïse, Marianne the painter, and Sophie the maid discuss the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. There is no spatial overlap – no establishing shot showing the three women around the table, and no unarticulated, excessive elements repeated from shot to shot. Instead, each woman is filmed separately facing the camera almost head on, at a slight oblique angle, in medium closeup; the contiguous spaces the women occupy are linked via eyeline matches (their looks off-screen are prompted by off-screen voices, or they are reaction shots). The scene begins with Héloïse reading, intercut with Sophie and Marianne reacting. Héloïse looks off-screen right at Marianne and off-screen left at Sophie. When Marianne is on screen, she looks off-screen left at Héloïse and off-screen right at Sophie. And when Sophie is on screen, she looks off-screen left at Marianne and off-screen right at Héloïse. The scene is perfectly balanced in its movement from on-screen to off-screen space and its egalitarian presentation of the three women from radically different classes.

Cinematic Articulation

Speaking of her collaboration with director Céline Sciamma, cinematographer Claire Mathon highlighted key cinematic features of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*: “I always tried to immerse myself in the scene, in Céline’s thoughts. We always searched for the shots with the camera. We worked a great deal on the rhythm of the shots. [...] The relationship that I have with Céline is truly one of the cinema. We have a shared pleasure and faith in cinematography and in cinematographic fabrication.”²¹ Mathon’s emphasis on immersion in the scene, on using the camera to search for the right shots, emphasis on the rhythm of shots, plus her and Sciamma’s faith in ‘the cinema’ and cinematographic fabrication recall point by point Oudart’s comments of *The Trial of Joan of Arc*. Suture of course is a theory of the spectator’s immersion in film but, in the case of *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, immersion is framed by cinematic fabrication – a faith in the specific properties of the cinematic image and, more generally, the logic of the cinematic. Sciamma and Mathon’s work on shot rhythm recalls Oudart’s account of cinema’s specific articulation of shots – from absent field to imaginary field and finally to the filmic field, driven by the spectator’s anticipation and recollection. This rhythm is evident in the many scenes where the painter Marianne observes Héloïse on their walks on the beach and, later, in the film’s second half, during the portrait sessions. These latter scenes, organized primarily around shot/reverse shot, display the lingering shot technique. Chris O’Falt writes that “Sciamma and Mathon re-watched some of Ingmar Bergman’s films to study how he filmed women with a unique proximity and intimacy. Here, the director and cinematographer decided their camera should linger, almost as if reading the actresses’ thoughts and desires.”²² Bergman’s *Persona* (1966) clearly influenced *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, although Bresson’s precise, spare, minimalistic techniques are also evident – although not necessarily as a direct influence; rather, both Bresson and Sciamma are manifesting the logic of the cinematic using similar techniques.

These portrait sessions are also constructed via oblique camera angles, which reject subjective (optical point-of-view) shots and which draw attention to the spectator's position in relation to the camera's look and the characters' looks. As with *The Trail of Joan of Arc*, in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, due to the oblique angles, the camera's look does not align exactly with the character's look; spectators do not, therefore, identify with the character's optical position; instead, they are put in or occupy their own place (their place is not concealed within a character's optical point-of-view). These scenes typically begin with Marianne at the easel looking down at her canvas and then off screen left, the latter look motivating a cut to Héloïse who in turn looks off screen right, motivating a cut back to Marianne. The cuts are not immediate but delayed for several seconds after the look off screen. The camera remains on the same side of the action as it cuts back and forth.

The final portrait session is different, in two ways: the scene begins with Héloïse, not Marianne, and the camera crosses the invisible line between the two characters, momentarily giving the impression that they are not looking at each other but are both looking in the same direction, although this perception is quickly readjusted based in part on previous knowledge of the studio. Marianne asks Héloïse to join her in front of the canvas. The camera remains focused on Marianne as Héloïse is heard off screen walking *behind* the camera before entering the shot screen right. The space directly behind the camera is rarely employed in film, although it is a feature of cinematic logic that distinguishes film from theatre by creating a malleable fictional space that transcends the limitations of rigid proscenium space. This feature again acknowledges the specific place the spectator occupies in the scene, a space separate from the characters.

Tracking shots can also manifest suture and the five features of cinematic logic.²³ Marianne entering the Chateau is filmed by a backward tracking shot as she walks upstairs. She remains in the center of the frame facing the camera but looking off screen left and right.

As the shot unfolds, some of that space is gradually revealed on screen and the previous space she occupied moves off-screen. This effect is more pronounced with forward tracking shots: the camera follows Marianne from behind and reveals new space to spectators as she discovers it. Although the forward tracking shot tends to film Marianne at a more oblique angle than the backward tracking shot, both types are linked to Marianne's awareness of off-screen space.

When filming characters, the camera is not always tied to their movement. The first time Marianne and Héloïse kiss, in the cave on the beach, the camera begins on Marianne as she looks for Héloïse. But the camera then moves forward, ahead of her, relegating her to off-screen space, before she finally catches up. The same happens during one of the portrait sessions: Marianne walks away from the canvas towards Héloïse (again in order to kiss her). The camera begins to pan and follow her but then moves ahead, relegating her to off-screen space; Marianne takes several seconds to catch up and return to the filmic field. These camera movements emphasize the camera's semi-autonomous status and its nonalignment with character subjectivity.

Ambiguity

Yet, despite drawing attention to the nonalignment of character and camera, and therefore character and spectator, both *The Trail of Joan of Arc* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* do contain optical point-of-view shots, shots which are framed in such a way that spectators see what the character sees from the character's vantage point within the diegesis. Furthermore, if the camera is not aligned exactly with the character's vision, it may still represent their perceptual awareness. To differentiate between these two types of perception, Edward Branigan distinguished the internally focalized shot (surface) from the externally focalized shot.²⁴ The optical point-of-view shot is internally focalized around a character's perception

(their surface experience) while the externally focalized shot is focused around a character's awareness. An externally focalized shot can either show the perceiver on screen (e.g., an over-the-shoulder shot, an external reverse angle where part of the character appears in the shot representing their awareness) or the character may be absent from the shot (an internal reverse angle). In the former case, there is an overlap, for the character appears in both the shot (of them looking off screen) and the reverse shot (of what they are looking at). In the latter case, the absence of overlap between shot and reverse shot, the shot becomes ambiguous, for it is sometimes difficult to determine if it is internally or externally focalized. Additional cues are needed to disambiguate such shots.

Oudart not only rejects overlap of space from shot to reverse shot, he also rejects subjective cinema (based on internal focalization/optical point-of-view shots), for it suppresses the spectator's look, hiding it inside the character's look. Oudart instead prefers externally focalized shots filmed as internal reverse angles, and promotes this stylistic choice to an essential feature of cinematic logic. Nonetheless, all three types of reverse shot (internally focalized, externally focalized plus the character, externally focalized minus the character) are similar in that they are all connected to a character.

Optical point-of-view shots in *Joan of Arc* are few, and secondary cues are needed to decide if the shot is subjective. When the judge looks through a hole in the wall of Joan's prison cell, the camera momentarily takes up his exact optical position looking through the hole at Joan, who is framed by fragments of the wall. The wall fragments are secondary cues that confirm the shot's subjective status.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire contains several optical point-of-view shots, as well as shots whose status is indeterminate. The film opens with the framing story, of Marianne teaching a drawing class to women. Several students look off screen (most filmed separately), thereby turning a specific area of absent off-screen space into an imaginary off-screen space.

Their looks motivate a cut to a new area of space read as their point of focus. In this new shot is Marianne, who performs the role of model as well as teacher. This is what Branigan calls a multiple point-of-view shot, in which “several characters see the same object.”²⁵ Marianne in turn looks off screen to one of her paintings, called “Portrait of a Lady on Fire.” The painting triggers the main story, a memory flashback following Marianne as she meets Héloïse to paint her portrait. The memory begins with Marianne on a boat, looking at the rowers and towards the shore. The camera’s position in the boat confirms that it is momentarily aligned to her optical vantage point.

Yet, on shore, shots focalized around Marianne are momentarily ambiguous. Several shots appear to be optical, representing the diegesis from her perspective. However, Marianne walks into what at first could be read as her optical point-of-view shot, therefore dispelling the shot’s status as subjective. For example, on her arrival at the Chateau (located off the Brittany coast) she looks off screen toward the Chateau, followed by a shot of the Chateau – although the shot does not represent the focus of her attention, for Marianne is in the shot, approaching the door. Moments later she is shown to her room. She looks off screen, motivating a cut to a shot of the room, filmed as an internal reverse angle with a slow pan that replicates a character’s inquiring look taking in the room’s vast expanse. However, Marianne then walks into this shot, transforming it into an external reverse angle that moments before appeared to be an internal reverse angle representing her optical point of view. The same scenario is repeated when Marianne walks with Héloïse along the cliff edge on their first meeting: Marianne looks off screen, followed by a shot of Héloïse walking along the cliff. This shot is indeterminate between representing Marianne’s awareness and her optical experience. A few seconds later Marianne walks into the shot from screen right, thereby providing a secondary cue that it is not an optical point-of-view shot representing her experience but is an external reverse angle representing her awareness.

A variation of this indeterminacy occurs in a subjective travelling shot. Marianne discovers that she is the second artist to be hired to paint Héloïse, for the first artist failed to complete the portrait. In her room Marianne uncovers a mirror and sees the first painter's canvas in the reflection – the mirror image reflects off-screen space containing another image (this off-screen space is shown simultaneously within on-screen space). Marianne turns around, looks off screen toward the canvas, and begins to walk forward; cut to a forward travelling shot moving toward the canvas. This appears to be an optical point-of-view shot, whose angle and forward momentum match Marianne's movement towards the canvas. Yet, after several seconds she walks into the shot. The moment Marianne enters this travelling shot its status is confirmed to be a non-subjective, external reverse angle. All these ambiguous examples confirm that the reverse shot's angle turns out to be oblique. The purpose of this ambiguity is to stage the separation between the character's look and the spectator's look, to draw attention to that separation, which facilitates the emergence of the film's symbolic dimension. Furthermore, all these examples use lingering shots to draw attention to the film's technical aspects.

On one occasion shot/reverse shot is combined with a temporal ellipsis. Marianne, wearing her rust-colored dress, looks off screen, followed by a shot of the empty stool where her subject (Héloïse) is meant to be sitting. Marianne then enters this reverse shot. However, she is now wearing the green dress that Héloïse should be wearing. Shot/reverse shot – especially when linked by an eyeline match – conventionally establishes spatial proximity *and* temporal continuity across the cut, but this example subverts the latter convention by introducing a noticeable and measurable temporal ellipsis between the two shots. When manifest on screen, the reverse shot, transforming from an absent to imaginary to concrete space, is not as the spectator imagined, which draws attention to the signs and conventions of the shot/reverse shot filming technique.

The canvas Marianne paints is a self-contained image that records and fixes her vision. As she paints, the camera closely aligns to or is identical with her optical point-of-view as she faces the canvas and as her hand enters the image from the lower frame line. Yet, the first painting does not entirely represent Marianne's vision, nor was it painted with Héloïse's consent. She says "It's not only me" who painted it, by which she means she followed the rules and conventions of portraiture, and a specific type of portraiture – a painting of a woman to be sent to her unknown suitor. Marianne therefore subsumes her vision under the male gaze; she is initially inscribed in the film as an artist upholding a patriarchal representational system, but she is a woman artist painfully aware of this system's limits and faults. When Héloïse objects to the first portrait, claiming it has no presence, Marianne destroys it – a defiant act that serves as a turning point in their mutual sexual attraction. The second portrait also serves its official purpose, but it is doubly coded, for it was created out of an equal exchange between two women (painter and subject), an exchange charged with eroticism.

On two occasions the spectator shares another of Marianne's visions, of Héloïse in a wedding dress. But on both occasions this vision is a hallucination, an internal mental image (of what Marianne finds unpleasurable) projected into space. The first time the vision appears on screen it is seen via what appears to be an optical point-of-view shot: Marianne, filmed in profile, looks off screen, followed by a 90-degree cut to the vision of Héloïse. Because this vision belongs to Marianne, the reverse angle is plausibly read as an optical point-of-view representing her experience. But, after a few moments, Marianne walks into this shot, which means it is no longer an internal reverse angle representing her optical point of view, but as an external reverse angle, for she (as well as Héloïse) is the object of the camera's look. Nonetheless, the image of Héloïse remains Marianne's internal mental image. Stylistically, this sequence is unusual in that Marianne's profile shot is a marked alternative to the way she

is usually filmed looking off screen – either via an oblique angle or via a head on shot, and it also represents on screen an internally focalized experience (a hallucination). The second time the vision appears, it is a single shot which combines the camera's perspective with Marianne's internal mental image. Marianne walks towards the camera and the camera tracks back to keep her in frame when the vision appears behind her.

This vision becomes a reality and confronts Marianne as she leaves the Chateau. Héloïse, wearing the wedding dress her mother purchased for her, runs after Marianne and stops on the stairs; she asks Marianne, who is just a few feet from the Chateau's entrance, to turn around and look at her (thus enacting her interpretation of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, in which Eurydice asks Orpheus to turn around); Marianne turns around and looks off screen; cut to Héloïse, hence conforming to shot/reverse shot. Although the shot of Héloïse is not Marianne's exact optical point of view (for Héloïse does not look into the camera, but a few degrees off eyeline) it still represents Marianne's awareness. But, at the exact moment the spectator shares Marianne's view of Héloïse, Marianne walks away (off screen footsteps) and closes the door (the image of Héloïse goes dark as the door closes; the darkness in the diegesis signifies the mythic underworld but it also becomes a fade out that returns the film to the framing story). The reverse angle on Héloïse, representing Marianne's awareness, lingers for a few seconds even though Marianne has walked away. Or, more accurately, the moment she does walk away, the alignment between the character's awareness and the spectator's look vanishes, for the alignment was fleeting. This scene is the opposite of the previous shot/reverse shot sequences, for Marianne does not on this occasion enter the reverse shot but does the exact opposite, exits the scene entirely.²⁶ Furthermore, the diegesis's plunge into darkness, and the merging of this darkness with the filmic device of the fade out, is a marked moment of cinematic fabrication that momentarily takes the spectator out of the film.

Off Screen

André Bazin's famous metaphor of the frame as a mask²⁷ conceives film space as a homogeneous continuum, part of which is revealed by the shot on screen; the key implication here is that continuity exists between what is on screen and what is off screen. In contrast to Bazin, Burch argued that off-screen space "has only an intermittent or, rather, *fluctuating* existence during any film," adding that "structuring this fluctuation can become a powerful tool in a filmmaker's hands."²⁸ Burch argues that only a small number of filmmakers "are aware of, let alone concerned with, the possibility [...] of organizing [shot] transitions – that is, the articulations between shots as a function of the total composition of each successive shot."²⁹ For Burch (and Oudart), the mutual articulation of incomplete shots is key to the logic of the cinematic. This logic oscillates between on-screen and off-screen space, whereby the off screen is the absent space, part of which becomes imaginary and then concrete when manifest on screen in the next shot (unless there is spatial overlap, resulting in unarticulated, excessive elements that may, in Oudart's phrase, "paralyse the film"). Cinematic logic is created out of a series of non-autonomous shots and by rigorously structuring off-screen space, for the spectator's awareness of off-screen space determines the how and when the next shot appears.

Directors such as Bresson draw attention to the cinematic articulation of shots by varying the delay of the cut, defying expectations by adding a syncopated rhythm to the editing (for a long delay expands the spectator's sense of off-screen space). Burch identified six zones of off-screen space: the spaces beyond each of the four frame lines, a fifth space behind the camera, and a sixth space, hidden within the frame. To make a film following the logic of the cinematic involves a rigorous structuring of this off-screen space in relation to on-screen space. Each segment of off-screen space is defined by: (1) a character's look to a

specific area beyond the frame, (2) via an entrance into or exit from the frame, or (3) from an off-screen sound. Off-screen space is also acknowledged if (4) off-screen characters are momentarily shown reacting to events on screen, or if (5) on-screen space is empty (either at the beginning or ending of a shot), a technique rarely employed in *The Trial of Joan of Arc* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (with a few notable exceptions).³⁰

Entrances into and exits from screen left and screen right are common, for film continues to imitate theatrical conventions. (Yet, even here, Sciamma creatively reworks these well-worn conventions via ambiguous point-of-view shots, creating a syncopated rhythm when Marianne enters screen right or left into a frame ambiguously coded as her viewpoint.) Filmic space is more malleable than theatrical space, for characters can enter from the top or bottom frame lines more easily than in theatre. The top frame line is used effectively in a scene in the Chateau's kitchen showing Sophie trying to induce an abortion. Only the bottom half of her body is visible on screen, with her feet suspended in space; the space above the top frame line never appears on screen – it remains an imaginary off-screen space. Spectators can only guess that Sophie is somehow suspending herself from the ceiling.

The fifth and sixth off-screen spaces are rarely used, even though they contribute to the break-up of theatrical space and to the creation of cinematic logic. Héloïse walking behind the camera (discussed above) draws attention to the fifth off-screen space. Earlier, in her first meeting with Marianne, Héloïse is momentarily hidden within the frame in two separate sequences. Firstly, Héloïse is filmed from the back, rapidly walking away from the camera, with her cape hood initially concealing her appearance from both Marianne and the spectator (who at this moment in the film is closely aligned to Marianne's off-screen look as it frames the back of Héloïse's head). As with the first painter's portrait, the film camera cannot initially frame and capture Héloïse's appearance. But when Héloïse finally turns around, she looks momentarily at the camera and then a few degrees off screen at Marianne.

The camera is close to or identical with Marianne's optical point-of-view. Secondly, on the cliff, Marianne is filmed in profile looking out to sea. She then turns her head away from the camera to look into the shot. As her head turns, Héloïse is revealed to be standing next to her, also looking out to sea; the spectator retrospectively realizes that Héloïse was hidden within the frame. When Marianne turns to look at the sea once again, Héloïse is once more hidden. In the first sequence, the camera, Marianne, and the spectator are closely aligned, for they view Héloïse from the back. But in the second sequence only the spectator witnesses Héloïse's appearance and disappearance within the shot. The effect is created for the spectator, who is no longer aligned with Marianne's look.

Another cinematic shot begins with an empty frame showing long grass. All of a sudden Héloïse, Marianne, and Sophie stand up; they were initially hidden within the frame but emerge together from it; their narrative role is to look for a plant, but the simultaneous orchestration of their movement into the frame from the sixth off-screen space far exceeds this narrative function, as attention is drawn to the cinematic frame and organization of space within it. As the empty shot begins anticipation is created about where a character will enter on-screen; being hidden within the frame challenges the spectator's expectations, because such an entrance is not the default value.

Sound, voice, and synchronicity also play important roles in defining on-screen and off-screen space. Synchronicity anchors a voice to a body on screen. Silverman argues that the synchronous voice is crucial to dominant narrative cinema, for it contributes to the reality effect by attempting to abolish lack.³¹ In contrast, a voice unanchored in a body on screen is nonsynchronous; it opens up a gap between voice and body that can potentially disrupt the impression of reality. Yet, a nonsynchronous voice does not automatically make a film reflexive or subversive; instead, the gap it creates needs to be accentuated.

A voice-off is a nonsynchronous voice that is located within and draws attention to one or more of the six off-screen spaces. There are only a few significant nonsynchronous moments in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, for off-screen voices are eventually anchored in an on screen body. However, in the opening scene in Marianne's class, Marianne remains off screen for 30 seconds while she is heard giving her students instructions on how to draw. In one of the portrait sittings, the camera remains fixed on the canvas for 35 seconds while Héloïse and Marianne (except her hand) remain off screen talking about painting. And in the film's final shot the orchestra remains a permanent off screen source of the music while the camera focuses on Héloïse for almost two and a half minutes.

On several occasions, Marianne's voice is privileged, although always in relation to seeing Héloïse. In one instance, after seeing Héloïse for the first time, access is granted to her internal voice as she describes how to draw a face. Marianne also becomes a character-narrator when her voice-over punctuates the final few scenes of the film, as she recounts the two times she saw Héloïse again (in another painting and at a concert). Marianne's voice-over is significant not only because (like all voice-overs) it is nonsynchronous and directly addresses spectators, but also because it belongs to the character who controls the look.

Lack and the Look

Burch established a general truth about cinema, that absence is disavowed by the logical flow of incomplete images, in which the filmic field manifests on screen the absent and imaginary fields of off-screen space. Oudart formulated his theory of suture by combining Burch with semiotics and Lacanian psychoanalysis: for semiotics, all representation is burdened with lack of being and referents (the world of objects). In Lacanian psychoanalysis, lack becomes the prerequisite for the formation in the symbolic order of subjectivity, which is designed to overcome lack and separation. Oudart combined Burch, semiotics, and Lacan to investigate

how filmic discourse contains absence and lack through the formation of a subject position that attempts to immerse spectators in a film's diegesis via a simulated reality effect, which abolishes the impression of absence and lack from their consciousness.

However, in her reinterpretation of suture theory, Kaja Silverman points out that Oudart understands lack not in terms of the absent referent but as the absent enunciator, and he did not discuss suture in terms of sexual difference. Silverman identifies three types of lack. In the first, all individuals experience semiotic lack (although unequally), a symbolic castration involving separation from the world of objects due to their accession to language and culture. In cinema, subject positions and the reality effect attempt to abolish this first type of lack. The second type of lack, again experienced by all individuals, is key to the theory of suture: subordination of the spectator's look to the look of the invisible enunciator outside the film whose agency and vision organize and control the film's space, time, and narrative trajectory. Silverman goes further than Oudart by discussing a third type of lack, this time only experienced by women within patriarchal societies: she argues that the operation of suture articulates sexual difference by attempting to maintain a coherent male subjectivity via the disavowal of his symbolic castration and subordinated look – achieved by imposing this dual sense of lack upon the female body. In other words, in dominant narrative film practice, “the female subject's involuntary incorporation of the various losses which haunt cinema, from the foreclosed real to the invisible agency of enunciation, makes possible the male subject's [...] imaginary alignment with creative vision, speech, and hearing.”³² Silverman argues (via a reinterpretation of Mulvey) that dominant narrative film practice attempts to restore the male spectator's sense of lack and establish his look as powerful by constructing female characters as passive and inferior spectacles constrained by and limited to the task of attracting the male gaze (in which the film frame, editing, and cinematography transform women into fetish objects, by over-emphasizing parts of their body), and by staging the

narrative drama of lack, setting up female characters as transgressors who must subsequently be investigated, made to confess, and punished.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire disrupts the projection of male lack onto the female subject by returning lack to representation and the enunciator – and it achieves this by (1) thematizing the enunciator, representation, and lack, and by (2) modifying cinematic logic. Firstly, thematization: in the first half of the film, Marianne tries to paint a portrait of Héloïse who is absent from the reverse shot. Sketches, memory, Sophie, and Marianne herself (wearing the green dress) try to stand-in for the absent Héloïse. Furthermore, Héloïse stands-in for her absent sister, who committed suicide after refusing the arranged marriage organized by her mother; Héloïse must subsequently fulfill the arranged marriage. Like Héloïse, Marianne is similarly a stand-in, the second painter hired to paint Héloïse's portrait. Héloïse's absence is also apparent in the first painter's portrait, the male painter (never seen) who was unable to fill in her face because she refused to pose for the portrait. Like all figurative paintings, the first painter's portrait is a representation, but this portrait with the missing face accentuates the lack at the center of representation, a lack the male painter was unable to abolish or contain. Marianne attempts to abolish this semiotic lack with which the film is burdened. Yet, her first attempt is also unsuccessful. She erases her first portrait and sets out to create a second one, which succeeds because Héloïse agrees to pose for her. Lack also pervades each character's narrative trajectory – but not by restaging the patriarchal narrative drama of lack: instead, both women realize they must spend their lives apart, so they consciously prepare for and fill in that absence with memories and images.

Marianne not only stands-in for the first painter, who failed to overcome lack; the examples discussed here also attest to Marianne's central role as a stand-in or delegate for the enunciator ('the director') outside the fiction whose agency and look organize and control the

film's diegesis.³³ Marianne channels the enunciator's look into the fictional diegesis and succeeds where the first painter failed by eventually fixing that look onto Héloïse.

Marianne's status as a stand-in for the enunciator raises multiple issues, many of which Sandy Flitterman-Lewis has already addressed. She asks: "how can we define a 'desiring look' when the position of looking is feminine?"³⁴ This moves the argument beyond thematization and brings it to the second strategy feminist cinema employs to disrupt the projection of male lack onto the female subject: it is not simply a matter of placing a female character at the center of a narrative, for cinematic logic also needs to be modified.

Flitterman-Lewis identifies multiple possibilities:

a problematization of the enunciating subject itself and the indication of alternative positions, a denaturalization of the gaze structured according to phallic logic, a shift of emphasis in the quality and intensity of the controlling look – as well as in its object, a new recognition of what Chantal Akerman calls '*la jouissance du voir*' (the erotics of vision unhampered by the structures of voyeuristic definition), and, at the level of the diegesis, differing structures of point-of-view and identification as well as the creation of new possibilities for destabilizing the inevitability and homogeneity of the patriarchal narrative.³⁵

And in terms of marks of enunciation in particular, she argues that "a feminist cinema will attempt to restore the marks of cinematic enunciation so carefully elided by the concealing operations of patriarchal cinema, or at least it will work to undermine them."³⁶

Portrait of a Lady on Fire enacts many of the possibilities Flitterman-Lewis identifies, which places Sciamma amongst the group of prominent French women filmmakers analyzed in *To Desire Differently*. Marianne is not excluded from the symbolic order and its

scopic regime as represented in the film (eighteenth century Europe), although her access is restricted; she functions by exercising a form of negotiated resistance to its patriarchal values. Her vision, as a stand-in for the enunciator's look, does not simply conceal the enunciator's absence (the second type of lack Silverman identifies), but is constructed and rendered ambiguous by the reflexive employment of film's material elements, especially the film frame, camera placement, editing, and cinematography. After meeting Héloïse, Marianne's equivocal point-of-view shots, filmed at oblique angles that stage the separation between the character's look and the spectator's look – the scenes on the cliff, the travelling shot that unveils the first painter's incomplete portrait, the shot of the empty stool, the first vision of Héloïse in a wedding dress, and the shot of the real Héloïse wearing the dress – ambiguously position Héloïse as object of this look. These shots, together with the editing rhythm governed by an oscillation between the filmic field and the absent field (with no spatial overlap from one shot to the next and an occasional pause before the cut), plus the pronounced moment the camera crosses the line, and the extended moments sound and voice remain off screen, expose film's symbolic dimension, its signs of communication – but also the patriarchal values embedded in the gaze and in the symbolic. The film begins to create new possibilities within the symbolic, a different mode of textual organization in which its reflexive elements create a different cinematic logic and desire that bypass the traditional patriarchal attempt to codify lack as female castration – a cinematic logic governed by *la jouissance du voir* that does not project lack onto female characters for the purpose of disavowing the male sense of lack, for it refuses to frame female characters as subordinated others, as objects of the male gaze. In other words, the enunciator avoids turning the film frame, editing, and cinematography into a fetish for male spectators and avoids restaging the drama of lack and punishment. Instead, within the diegesis it is the (unseen) male painter who is unable to disavowal his own lack and is banished from the film.³⁷

Portrait of a Lady on Fire is created from a cinematic logic that challenges the assumption that a male character, the camera, and the spectator should automatically and unproblematically be aligned. Instead, the film aligns a female enunciator (director) and female character (Marianne the painter). The film does not masculinize the female character – it avoids simply inverting gender roles (it does not place Marianne in the position of a male painter and appropriate the male gaze for her); instead, it deploys the gaze in a deliberate and reflexive manner, thematizes it, demonstrates its discursive procedures, and transforms it in order to express female desire.

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Notes

¹ Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Cinema and Suture," *Screen*, 18, vol. 4 (1977/78): 35–47. First published in *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1969.

² Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1973). First published as a series of ten essays in *Cahiers du cinéma* throughout 1967.

³ Stephen Heath raised the issue of whether Oudart identifies a general logic (a property of film language defined in terms of the subject's relation to discourse) or whether he identified a particular type of filmmaking (a style, a form of writing). See Heath, "Notes on Suture," *Screen*, 18, vol. 4 (1977/78): 60–62, especially note 17.

⁴ Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), esp. pp. 222–36; Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), Chapter 1; Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema*, expanded edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 11–23.

⁵ Oudart, "Cinema and Suture," 36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 44–45.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹¹ "The major emphasis in all this is that the articulation of the signifying chain of images, of the chain of images as signifying, works not from image to image but from image to image through the absence that the subject constitutes." Heath, "Notes on Suture," 58.

¹² Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, p. 18.

¹³ Oudart, "Cinema and Suture," 46.

¹⁴ Burch also mentions that Bresson uses the lingering shot technique: In "*The Trial of Joan of Arc*, [...] what counts primarily here is the duration of successive shots as well as sequences, and even of

the intervals separating the beginning or end of a line of dialogue from the beginning or end of a shot or sequence.” *Theory of Film Practice*, p. 63.

¹⁵ Oudart, “Cinema and Suture,” 43.

¹⁶ Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, p. 9.

¹⁷ Oudart, “Cinema and Suture,” 36.

¹⁸ On one occasion in Joan’s prison cell (when she is presented with a dress), Bresson does film a shot/reverse shot sequence with overlapping space. Bresson uses overlapping space extensively in his shot/reverse shot sequences in his earlier film *Pickpocket* (1959).

¹⁹ Oudart, “Cinema and Suture,” 35.

²⁰ Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, pp. 203–13.

²¹ Claire Mathon, quoted in Chris O’Falt, “‘Portrait of a Lady on Fire’ Cinematography: The Perfect 18th Century Digital Painting,” *Indiewire* (February 28, 2020):

<https://www.indiewire.com/2020/02/portrait-of-a-lady-on-fire-cinematography-claire-mathon-celine-sciamma-1202214143/>

²² Chris O’Falt, “‘Portrait of a Lady on Fire’ Cinematography.”

²³ Suture is not limited to shot/reverse shot or to editing in general. Part of the concept’s notoriety in the 1970s was generated from critiques that erroneously identified it with shot/reverse shot. For a discussion of this issue, see Heath, “Notes on Suture,” 64–65.

²⁴ Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 100–106.

²⁵ Edward Branigan, *Point of View of the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film* (Berlin: Mouton, 1984), p. 116.

²⁶ This departure scene on the stairs is also a reversal of the first meeting when Marianne walked down the stairs and Héloïse was waiting near the door. The scene is a reversal not only because the two women have changed positions, and that one scene represents an initial meeting and the other a departure, but also because in the initial meeting Marianne does not call out and Héloïse opens the door without turning around.

²⁷ André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 105.

²⁸ Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, p. 21.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 35–36.

³⁰ Burch points out that Bresson employed empty spaces extensively at the beginning and ending of shots in films such as *A Man Escaped* (1956) and *Pickpocket* (Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, p. 26). There are only a few empty spaces in shots at the end of *Joan of Arc* during and after Joan is burnt at the stake, signifying of course her absence. Whereas Bresson combined overlapping spaces and empty frames in *Pickpocket*, in *Joan of Arc* he changed his style and employed non-overlapping spaces but dropped the use of empty frames.

³¹ Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, p. 45.

³² Ibid., p. 32. In the same chapter Silverman analyzes *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960) as a film that reflexively dramatizes the displacement of lack from the male to the female subject: “*Peeping Tom* makes abundantly clear that [the structure of fetishism] works to conceal male rather than female lack, and to promote the imaginary coherence of the male rather than the female subject” (ibid, p. 35). She adds that “it is not so much the film’s preoccupation with voyeurism and murder as its refusal to be complicit in a general cultural disavowal of male lack which provoked such hostility from the popular press at the time of its original release” (p. 37).

³³ To conceive the director as an enunciator is to place emphasis on language, discourse, and unconscious operations (dream logic, fantasy, male ego defenses such as voyeurism and fetishism) as the ultimate source of a film’s meaning, rather than an actual expressive individual.

³⁴ Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently*, p. 19.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 20-21.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 22-23.

³⁷ Marianne almost suffers the same fate, after destroying her first painting by rubbing out Héloïse’s face (therefore making it look like the male painter’s portrait). Marianne is perilously close to miming the male painter’s actions and vision, but she manages to transcend both in the second portrait, whose creation parallels her evolving sexual relationship with Héloïse.