

The Art of Looking (Back): The Female Gaze in Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu and Little Women

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Abstract : In recent press interviews to promote Portrait de la jeune fille en feu (2019, translated to Portrait of a Lady on Fire in English), director and screenwriter Céline Sciamma and actors Adèle Haenel and Noémie Merlant repeatedly state that they understand the film as (if not uniquely, then unusually) produced via and supportive of 'the female gaze'. Such a way of seeing stands in opposition to 'the male gaze', first theorised by Laura Mulvey as the way in which the female figure is a bearer, not maker, of meaning, a silent signifier through and against whom the male creator/viewer produces his fantasies and obsessions. What, then, is the female gaze? How does a woman produce meaning in and through film? Portrait de la jeune fille en feu and another very recent film, Little Women (2019, directed by Greta Gerwig), are unlikely companion films that understand the female gaze to be the act of one woman looking at another woman, a looking that is mediated through the production of art. In Sciamma's film this looking is sexual and mediated through painting and in Gerwig's film looking is familial and mediated through writing. In the schema of these films, art, love, looking and meaning are produced through collaboration. The painted and the painter, the written and the writer, are no longer rendered as subject and object but as dual creators, both always seeing and seen. The gaze of the cinematic woman, mediated through shared artistic practice, is 'the desire-that-gives'.

Keywords : female gaze, Gerwig, Sciamma, shared artistic practice

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