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Subverting the ‘male gaze’: how is a ‘female gaze’ evident in the works of Sophie Calle and Céline Sciamma?

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ABSTRACT

In 1975, based on Freudian psychoanalytic techniques, Laura Mulvey coined the term 'the male gaze' to express the patriarchal practices evident in films. Referencing Freud's theory of scopophilia in particular, Mulvey explained that women are traditionally depicted as passive and 'other', while men are seen as active and the driving force of the narrative. It was argued that spectators are encouraged to identify, and do identify, with this portrayal and heterosexual binary. While this dynamic is visible in many films, especially at the time when Mulvey's article was published, it does not account for diversity in spectator experience, nor does it necessarily encompass films created by women. Therefore, this dissertation explores the possibility of a 'female gaze'. There is undeniably a difference in the way female artists treat and present their female subjects - a difference in tone, comprehension, and empathy, communicating the shared lived experience of women throughout the contemporary period. The female gaze exists in retaliation to male-dominated spaces in the art world, and has developed from the experiences of artists as women; it does not exist simply because women are different from men. Both Céline Sciamma and Sophie Calle construct their own versions of a female gaze within their work, however they do so differently. Therefore, it is important to consider how female creatives depict this new gaze, to identify their techniques and distinguish why a continuity does not always exist. Sciamma and Calle have been chosen as they contradict and subvert the male gaze theory, creating a new dynamic for female subjects and spectators in their art.

INTRODUCTION

Laura Mulvey and the 'male gaze'

Laura Mulvey coined the term 'the male gaze' in 1975, and her theory underpins the inspiration for this dissertation. Mulvey defines this gaze as 'the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form' (1975, 6). She argues that in films, women are typically presented as passive and to be looked at, 'an objectified other', while men are seen as active, the driving force of the story who come to possess the female character (Mulvey 1975, 9). This is partially achieved through camera techniques: the way women are displayed is crucial to the construction of a male gaze (Mulvey 1975, 18). A quote from director Budd Boetticher is a succinct summary of Mulvey's argument: 'in herself the woman has not the slightest importance', because what she represents for the male character holds much more significance (Mulvey 1975, 11). While a rather pessimistic stance, this male gaze is a dominant force in film creation. The mainstream use of this practice ultimately affects viewers, and creates a paradox for female spectatorship, as audiences are encouraged to identify with the male gaze portrayed on-screen.

Mulvey (1975, 9) takes her argument from Freudian psychoanalysis, referencing his scopophilia theory in particular. Scopophilia is defined as 'taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze'; Mulvey witnessed this concept on-screen via the objectification of women (Mulvey 1975, 9). However, this objectification creates a paradox: while representing something to be desired and owned, women are also feared due to their sexual difference. Mulvey refers to Freud's 'castration complex' throughout her work, suggesting that this subconscious fear of the other also encourages the fetishization of woman in order 'to circumvent her threat' (1975, 17). Although Freud's works can be seen as

misogynistic, and his theory of scopophilia particularly phallocentric, Mulvey (1975, 7) argues that it is necessary to use the tools of the patriarchy to understand and eventually change it.

It is therefore important to consider the context of Mulvey's article. It was created at a time when female cinematographers were only just gaining access to the film industry, and thus a more androgynous language for film analysis did not exist. It could be argued that under the circumstances and dominating patriarchal structures in cinema, such a language could not have been created, and only now is this expression available to women (McCabe 2004, 10). Furthermore, Mulvey has recently stated that she chose psychoanalysis as her methodology because of the 'social reality' at the time (2019, 240). Freud's theories relating to sex and scopophilia are 'an account of a society which entrenched male power in the gendered unconscious', thus relating to what Mulvey had experienced in her own life and on-screen (Mulvey 2019, 240). This suggests that both film and the male gaze are intrinsically linked to societal structures, and it is therefore vital to acknowledge social context in order to use Mulvey's theory in film analysis.

While acknowledging the 'paradigmatic significance' of Mulvey's work, Jackie Stacey suggests that applying only this theory to film analysis can be problematic, and potentially reductive (1994, 50). Stacey (1994) argues that psychoanalysis negates many facets of female spectatorship when applied without consideration of other disciplines, and ignores the importance of spectators in creating meanings. She states that it 'collapse[s] gender and sexuality into a totalistic binarism of masculinity and femininity', therefore 'leaving uncontested the assumption of heterosexuality in the processes of cinematic spectatorship' (Stacey 1994, 63). This suggests that while the male gaze theory is a valuable springboard for film analysis through a feminist lens, it does not leave room for differences outside of the heterosexual binary in female spectatorship. It implies that women in the audience must either identify with the passive, stereotypical, female figure, or want to possess the female character

as an idealisation of themselves. Therefore, Stacey argues for the importance of spectators in the 'production of meaning', but also for the expansion of psychoanalysis concepts to consider possibilities outside of the traditional gender binary when analysing films (1994, 80, 67).

However, Mulvey observes this herself within her work. She suggests that in hindsight she had 'missed a lot of possible nuances in the argument' (Mulvey 2019, 244). While the original work does not leave room for different facets of spectatorship, Mulvey has since recognised that it would be possible for a 'lesbian gaze' as women are 'untroubled by castration anxiety' (2019, 245). Mulvey (2019, 246) maintains that this did not feature in the original essay due to her experiences, however she suggests that progress in gender and sexual politics has led to a diversification in spectatorship and gender definitions, so an adaptation of her theory is possible. Therefore, although the theory was not particularly inclusive when first published, it does not remain static. As the male gaze and film production are intrinsically linked to society, it seems evident that they should adapt and follow societal change.

Some authors have suggested that when used in specific contexts, the male gaze can be a useful cinematic tool. Lauren Rohrs believes that, as a 'normalized [indicator] of heterosexual attraction in film', the male gaze can be used to 'normalize homosexual relationships' (2019, 7). Rohrs uses the example of Disney's 2017 remake of *Beauty and the Beast*. She argues that the homosexual male character in this film is subtly identified by 'his gaze towards another man', rather than exaggerated and hurtful stereotypes of homosexuality (Rohrs 2019, 10, 19). This is an interesting subversion of the male gaze, which, ironically, makes films more diverse through a traditionally narrow heterosexual technique. However, while in this instance the approach was perhaps successful, it is not without fault. Rohrs (2019, 20) identifies that there are some ethical implications. Despite being 'an accepted, subconscious indicator of sexual attraction', the technique still necessitates the objectification of another person, thus rendering it problematic (Rohrs 2019, 18, 20).

My research on the male gaze led me to consider if an opposite exists. Mulvey's theory is undeniably useful in film analysis, however it does not encompass films created by female producers. Films such as Céline Sciamma's *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) have been created in opposition to the male gaze, aiming instead to reconstruct the way women are presented in film. This active process of redefining representations of women is also evident in other forms of visual art, such as the works of Sophie Calle. Both artists develop distinctly female narratives in their work, resulting in new artistic approaches to engaging with female experience. In doing so, they each subvert the traditional practices of the male gaze, and subsequently redefine ways of looking at women in art and film. Despite this, a universality is not apparent across their methods, as they employ different techniques in their explorations of female experience. Therefore, it becomes necessary to consider and compare how the female gaze is developed by female creatives. Thus, this dissertation will identify and discuss how Sophie Calle and Céline Sciamma actively construct a female gaze in their artistic methods.

CHAPTER ONE

Sophie Calle: Subverting power structures

Sophie Calle is less overt in contradicting the male gaze in her artwork, and upon first glance does not seem to actively fight against it. This could be because of her medium; as the male gaze theory is situated firmly in cinematography, it is perhaps easier to identify divergence from it in films. Nevertheless, there is a subversion of the practices which sustain the male gaze in Calle's artwork. Calle achieves this by emphasising her own centrality and agency within her works, whether physically present in the imagery or as an audible narrator to her artistic process. This is particularly evident in *Suite vénitienne* (1980) and *The Shadow* (1981), in which Calle becomes the follower and then the followed respectively, harkening back to the voyeuristic tendencies of film noted by Mulvey (1975, 9). *Prenez soin de vous* (2007) is also conducive to a female gaze theory, as Calle and 107 other women take control of a narrative previously driven by a man. Therefore, this chapter will be dedicated to analysing these works by Calle in order to discern how she constructs a female gaze in her artwork.

Calle is known for her 'typically voyeuristic, predatory and solipsistic work', and *Suite vénitienne* epitomises this (Kemp 2013, 313). It is a clear example of distortion of the male gaze, as the woman in the piece (Calle) becomes an active agent in the narrative, rather than a traditional passive other. In 1979 Calle met a man briefly, who she names 'Henri B.', before running into him again at an art gallery. Upon learning that he was travelling to Venice the next day, she decided to follow him and take photos from a distance. Calle followed Henri B. for two weeks, until he eventually confronted her when she strayed too close to her subject. Calle was obliged to 'restage it and retake the photos using another man' when Henri B. refused to give her permission to use the original images (McFadden 2014, 148). Despite this, the final

outcome 'blurs the distinction between fact and fiction by using the material of daily life coupled with storytelling' – it is almost film-like in narrative (McFadden 2014, 143).

However, it is the process of this artwork rather than the end-product which incites the most interest (Edwards 2018, 71). Through the act of following, Calle makes Henri B. the object of her pursuit, a reversal of the heterosexual interactions typically seen in films. Calle 'alters the passive component to Mulvey's theory' by refusing this role, and transferring it to a man (McFadden 2014, 150). Phoca likens this to 'voyeuristic espionage', as Calle 'projects her scopophilic gaze' onto Henri B. (1998, 102). Therefore, from the offset both the terminology and practices of the male gaze are used, albeit in reverse. Calle's centrality in this piece is reinforced literally by the repetition of her name as the Venetian word for alley: 'calle' (Kemp 2013, 320). Kemp suggests that this traps Henri B. as 'a character in her story', for whichever way he turns in Venice, he is surrounded by her (2013, 320).

Furthermore, Calle conveys an obsessiveness and a compulsion to own the subject throughout the written elements of the piece. As argued by Baudrillard, *Suite vénitienne* is indicative of humanity's strange desire to 'posséder l'autre' (1990, 162). This is emphasised when Calle lists hotels she contacted in her search for Henri B.: 'one hundred and eighty-one names', to be exact (Calle and Baudrillard 1988, 12). The all-consuming nature of this chase is highlighted by Calle when she reminds herself 'I must not forget that I don't have any amorous feelings towards Henri B.' (1988, 20). This is symptomatic of her voyeurism and is reminiscent of the strong feelings that cinema can induce. It also reinforces the objectification of Henri B.: he is merely a spectacle to be observed and pursued. Thus, any feelings towards him are illusionary and impede Calle's aims. This, alongside the seemingly oblivious Henri B., induces a 'voyeuristic anxiety' in her spectators, as rather than being a facet of the artwork or a technique employed for effect, voyeurism becomes the subject of the entire piece (Hand 2005, 464). As the spectator becomes complicit in the act of following, Welch implies that such art

can be 'disconcerting' and uncomfortable: 'it feels like an invasion of the private sphere at its most intimate and vulnerable' (2009, 55). However, this voyeurism is simply an exaggerated, magnified, and literal version of what spectators see regularly in films. If anything, audiences should be familiar with this technique. This raises the question: is such artwork uncomfortable because of the 'stalking' element, or have we as audiences simply been conditioned into viewing this dynamic as male-driven only? Unlike Sciamma, Calle's female gaze does not change the way women are traditionally viewed in art. Instead, she literally subverts the gender roles of the male gaze, thus constructing her own version of a female gaze: one that subjects men to the patriarchal practices usually endured by women.

Throughout *Suite vénitienne* Calle plays with intimacy, creating a juxtaposition of the public and the private, the seen and the unseen: what was public but unseen now becomes both private and seen. While this may seem contradictory, paradoxical even, it is a dynamic that runs throughout the entire piece: in Calle's photography, writing, and even the role she plays herself. However, it is most striking in the subjects and moments she chooses to photograph. Her images seem innocuous, despite the 'stalking' element, and not particularly scandalous at all. And yet, Calle takes a fleeting moment that was public when physically present, but unobserved and of little importance to witnesses other than herself, and immortalises it, to be displayed before countless viewers who are removed from the initial experience. This transfers the images into the private sphere, as now the spectator is privy to something that was initially fleeting and not physically possible for their observation. In this way, Calle creates an intimacy that was not initially there, nor initially intended by the subjects themselves. This is particularly evident when Calle presents a series of images together, documenting movement or a journey. For example, we see Henri B. with a woman walking towards what appears to be a church (see Figure 1). Calle's presentation of these images makes the subjects seem to move purposely, as if this was intended to be a secret rendezvous. This is reinforced by the structure on the page;

the viewer follows a narrative from left to right, top to bottom, like in a newspaper article. It feels almost chase-like, particularly as we never see the subjects' faces. This is in fact reminiscent of scandal – such images are usually taken by the press or detectives, following unsavoury men committing unsavoury acts. Calle's use of structure and presentation, and her choice of images, create an atmosphere of intimacy and intrigue. The spectator feels as if they should not be looking, even though these moments happened in public, and yet they cannot look away. A scandal or morally dubious event is expected, when Henri B. is in fact merely sight-seeing with his wife.

The transformation of an innocent holiday into a salacious trip is emphasised by Calle's use of space when exhibiting her works. In 1983 Calle presented her work 'as a sound installation in a confessional booth', reinforcing the intimate dynamic, and implying that she has rendered a private experience visible to others (Taylor 2010). This is ironic, as Henri B. and his wife were not trying to hide anything in the first place. Is Calle herself the confessor, admitting to her own voyeuristic acts, or is this a technique employed to heighten the intrigue surrounding the seemingly covert operations of Henri B.? I would argue both. Calle continually plays with this flux between public and private, follower and captivated victim. She dons a blonde wig and disguises her appearance so as not to be caught, all the while lamenting her developing feelings for Henri B. that she must remember are not real. She pursues this man in secret and objectifies him, but also labels herself as 'submissive' (Calle and Baudrillard 1988, 6). This is indicative of 'les logiques opposées du mensonge et de la vérité' that Calle weaves throughout her artwork, as the distinctions between fabrication and reality become blurred (Baudrillard 1990, 165). Calle develops an intimacy surrounding the images of this man, both between herself and her subject, and within the spectator who feels that they view the piece with prying eyes (Palmer 2014, 205). This intimacy is further emphasised when Calle chooses to isolate particular body parts in her photography (see Figures 2 and 3). As Hand argues,

'taking a photograph is an act of 'choosing'', and Calle uses this to great effect (2005, 464). In taking close-up images such as Figure 3, Calle constructs a narrative of careful intimacy. This is closer than a private detective would venture, uncomfortably close even, and to focus so intently on the nape of neck implies an emotional involvement or attachment; this is perhaps something only a lover would do. The significance of this image in particular is emphasised as it is featured on the front cover of her 1988 book. This highlights that she intends on playing with the boundaries between public and private from the outset, and sets the tone of ambiguity in her relationship to Henri B. that continues throughout the piece.

An ambiguity in roles and relationships is also evident in Calle's piece *The Shadow*. In 1981 Calle had her mother hire a private investigator to follow her around for a day and 'provide photographic evidence of [her] existence' (Calle 2003, 101). This seems to be an inversion of *Suite vénitienne*, as Calle is now the followed subject. However, both pieces have the recurring theme of Calle constructing her own narrative, as she becomes a female 'flâneur' in the ways in which she interacts with spaces in the cities (Saint 2011, 131). Pollock suggests that 'the flâneur symbolizes the privilege or freedom to move about the public arenas of the city observing but never interacting, consuming the sights through a controlling but rarely acknowledged gaze' (2003, 94). This is usually a role constrained to the male sphere, and yet it is one which Calle embodies in both pieces. Furthermore, her gaze is both 'controlling' and 'rarely acknowledged': she guides our experience as viewers by controlling what we are allowed to see, while this control is simultaneously unnoticed due to her perceived submissive role as a woman. This stereotype feeds into Calle's manipulation of role expectations and the relationships she presents. This suggests that Calle's role, perhaps ironically, accords her some freedom as she moves through spaces, as she appears neutral and non-threatening. Thus, this pretence allows her to get physically closer to her subjects, a necessity for her photography due to the available technology at the time.

In *The Shadow*, it was necessary for the private investigator, as the photographer, to be physically close to Calle, reflecting an intimacy that she maintains throughout the piece. Despite being the subject of an investigation, Calle remains central and in control throughout; indeed, she chooses to play the role of a typical submissive woman. Calle goes to a hairdresser and states 'It is for "him" I am getting my hair done. To please him' (2003, 104). This suggests that she is playing a part for him, perhaps to win his affections, much like in a film. It is reminiscent of her 1979 piece, *The Striptease* (see Figure 4). In both artworks Calle appears to perform for others, and yet remains in control of the narrative. She also alters her appearance in both pieces, as well as in *Suite vénitienne*. Although she gets a haircut in this instance rather than donning a blonde wig as she does in her other works, they are all still indicative of a woman who is choosing which facets of herself to reveal. She is in fact changing her appearance right before our eyes: we see a continuous dialogue with herself, as she fashions and re-fashions her persona. While she attributes this to wanting to look nice for the detective, thereby developing an intimate connection, this is a misleading technique that she uses regularly within her artwork as a means of control.

This is also evident in her interaction with spaces in the city: it is impossible to know if this is a genuine reflection of her day. Not only does Calle control where she takes the private investigator, she also chooses which of his photographs to display in her exhibitions. The detective seems to take an active role, as he takes the photos, but it is Calle who determines both the initial location and the finished product. For example, Calle takes the private investigator through the Luxembourg Gardens 'where [she] played as a child and where [she] received [her] first kiss in the spring of 1968' (Calle 2003, 104). This is further evidence of public but unseen moments becoming private and seen. Calle has purposefully chosen a location that is a physical manifestation of private, personal events in the past, creating an intimacy between herself and the detective. It is as if she is encouraging him to uncover

different layers of her personality, all the while constructing those layers herself as we follow her journey through Paris. This contradiction is particularly evident in the way Calle chooses to present her work in exhibitions. At the Pat Hearn Gallery in New York in 1991, *The Shadow* was displayed in a similar format to a detective's open case book (see Figure 5). On a superficial level, this is reminiscent of the private investigator's profession, and highlights the way in which Calle was photographed. However, this format also gives the impression of an unsolved case: the book would not be open if the case had been solved. This reflects Calle's continually changing persona, and how she is constantly constructing her own narrative. As Calle's artwork progresses through the decades, it becomes clear that the artist's 'true' self is something we will never be privy to.

Calle's 2007 piece *Prenez soin de vous* also demonstrates this, when she had a group of women respond creatively to a break-up email that she had received. Although many years after *Suite vénitienne* and *The Shadow*, this is also a piece in which Calle's true self is hidden, despite the fact that her personal life is on full display (Jordan 2013, 261). Kemp argues that 'Prenez soin de vous is not self-expressive but instead sees the artist withdraw into a carapace of fake or borrowed feeling' (2013, 318). Calle uses a real event from her life, but then hides behind the interpretations of 107 other women, deemed a 'collective solipsism' by Browning (2009, 120). What upon first glance seems to be women uplifting other women against the actions of a man, is actually evidence of Calle yet again veiling her real thoughts. While it is true that we see women taking control of a previously male-dominated narrative, we also become aware of the constant flux that Calle creates between public and private, seen and unseen, and fiction and reality.

CHAPTER TWO

Céline Sciamma: Reconstructing the narrative

Butler asserts that it is not possible to attribute a universality to feminism, as female experience is multi-faceted and varies from culture to culture, and this can be seen clearly when comparing the work of Calle and Céline Sciamma (2006, 5). Sciamma's interactions with gender contrast to that of Calle, particularly regarding the artist's overt presence in the work. However, a female gaze exists in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, nonetheless. Much like feminism, the female gaze cannot be defined in universal terms. Female creatives do not have to follow a formulaic approach in creating new ways of engaging with female experiences. As stated by Sciamma, 'I hope we are collaborating to achieve this revolutionary gaze': collaboration in aim does not have to equal duplication in form (Garcia 2019, 10). This links to Cixous' conceptualisation of 'l'écriture feminine', as she contends that there is 'no general woman', thus no homogenous form of female expression (1976, 876). Moreover, Mayne argues that it is problematic to assert that 'women's cinema' - and subsequently the female gaze - 'is any and all films made by a woman' (1990, 1). It is reductive to constrain all art produced by female creatives within the same boundaries. However, unlike Mulvey's conception of the male gaze which is determined by 'active scopophilia' on the part of the director and film audience, the female gaze is as dynamic and complex as female experience (1975, 10). A heterosexual, normative binary of male versus female gazes does not account for diversity within art and artistic practices. It is necessary to acknowledge that the female gaze is presented and interpreted differently depending on the artist concerned: universalism in content is not an essential attribute of the female gaze. Rather, the female gaze concerns the presentation of women in ways which actively contradict the traditional, patriarchal depiction of gender in art. Therefore, this chapter will consider how Céline Sciamma portrays a female gaze in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*,

despite using artistic and cinematic practices which differ from Sophie Calle's interpretation of this gaze.

Sciamma has stated that she finds cinema to be a 'very misogynistic world', so tries to fight against this in her productions (Macnab 2019). She is known for creating films that focus on diverse female experience, such as *Water Lilies* (2007), *Tomboy* (2011), and *Bande de Filles* (2014). Each of these films highlight the diverse nature of female experience, with a particular focus on perception of the self in relation to gender. This is also evident in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, which Sciamma describes as a film 'about women looking at each other' (Garcia 2019, 9). While this seems to immediately situate Sciamma's work within a shared universal female experience, her practices run deeper than that. *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* follows the love story of two women in eighteenth-century France, Marianne and Héloïse. Marianne has been commissioned to secretly paint the wedding portrait of reluctant bride-to-be Héloïse, who must take the place of her late sister in an arranged marriage. What begins as a commission masqueraded by companionship, develops into a true friendship and eventual melancholic romance, as the women are unable to be together due to social conventions at the time. This is a film fully concerned by female experience from the outset, with very few male speaking parts, thus rendering a stereotypical gender domination impossible. Some critics have gone as far to say that 'le masculin est aboli' in this film (Sotinel 2019). Like Calle, Sciamma subverts traditional patriarchal practices and thus stereotypical gender hierarchies through her directorial choices, with Massonnat arguing that this film 'prolonge et approfondit ainsi l'œuvre résolument féministe de Sciamma' (2020, 212). However, she does so to a different effect, developing an equal and empathetic way of looking at her female characters.

This is seen most notably in Sciamma's treatment of nudity and the painter-muse dynamic present throughout the film. Unlike a traditional female muse, Héloïse is not objectified by her painter. Garcia suggests that Sciamma achieves this through 'subjective shots

of Héloïse from Marianne's point of view, eliding the triangulation of the male directorial gaze' typically used to 'derive pleasure from the female body' (2019, 8). This is further emphasised by the equal nature of their relationship. As noted by Stevens, when Héloïse eventually agrees to sit for a portrait, she remarks that just as Marianne looks at her to complete the painting, so too does Héloïse look at Marianne: 'subject and painter "are in the same place" ("Nous sommes à la même place") and so play the same roles' (2019, 52). This reinforces that domination, even in the traditional hierarchy of painter versus muse, has no place in this film, and that both women are of equal importance. This is also despite their difference in social class, as Héloïse is an aristocrat destined to marry a Milanese nobleman, and Marianne is a bourgeois painter. We see this clearly in the scene where Héloïse, Marianne, and Sophie, the house maid, sit together and read the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. The women are all placed at the same level in the shots – there is no hierarchy. The reactions of each woman to Ovid's tale are also accorded equal importance, and are considered in turn. In using these techniques and creating a balance between the three women, Sciamma eradicates any form of gender domination from her film, which is consistent with her natural and uneroticized treatment of nudity.

We are confronted with nudity very early on in the film, through a moment that was intended to be private. Marianne dries herself by a fire, having previously jumped into the sea to save her canvases when they fell off the boat. This may seem reminiscent of Calle's technique of redefining private moments and making them public, however, Sciamma's directorial choices portray this moment differently. Marianne sits nude in front of the fire, framed by her two canvases. Although this is a private moment, Sciamma does not create the same feeling of voyeurism within the spectator as Calle. Sciamma achieves this through her choice of shot. Here she has chosen to use a medium shot, and thus minimises the feeling of intrusion: the spectator is allowed close enough to Marianne to become invested in the story, but not so close as to objectify her. When Sciamma does use close-up shots in this scene, they

are of Marianne's face or hands, emphasising the action of drying out her canvases, and thus her profession, rather than objectifying parts of her body (Oliver 2017, 452). It creates a neutral gaze, removing the intimacy needed for a voyeuristic triangulation between director, actor and spectator. Furthermore, Marianne is placed in the centre of the shot, and sits independently from anything else in the room. This establishes her as central to the narrative, and coupled with this neutral gaze, indicates her agency, as she is independent from a constricting, voyeuristic gaze by the director and spectators. Although these techniques differ from Calle's, both artists create a female gaze as their work places women as active agents in the centre of their narratives.

Sciamma also chooses to accord her characters privacy in their most intimate moments, limiting the possibility for fetishization of nudity or homosexuality. As Marianne and Héloïse explore their relationship and become more intimate, the scene frequently cuts to the next morning. The viewer is aware that the women have slept together, but they are not allowed access to this part of the relationship. Sciamma removes the voyeuristic tendency of a traditional gaze through this technique. The closeness of the women in their relationship to each other is reflected in the combination of medium close-up and regular close-up shots; the viewer is invited into their story at a controlled distance. However, they still retain agency as Sciamma restricts which parts of the characters are accessible to the audience. This enables a more empathetic reaction from the audience as they become invested in Héloïse and Marianne's relationship, while also facilitating a respectful treatment of female characters. This contrasts to films such as *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (Kechiche 2013), which explores homosexual relationships in an extremely sexualised way. By removing this sexualised gaze, Sciamma gives validity and agency to the characters, and develops a new way of looking at female relationships. In turn, this can also validate the experiences of women in the audience, who are perhaps used to seeing homosexual relationships only portrayed erotically. This

encourages a more diverse spectator experience, moving away from 'visual pleasure […] based on voyeurism or fetishism' (Cairns 2006, 9). Sciamma shows it is not necessary to have full access to Marianne and Héloïse's relationship in order to empathise with them, and thus develops a new way of looking at women, particularly women who are in love with each other.

Natural settings used in the film also serve to naturalise the women and their sexuality, which proves essential in avoiding an 'othering' or fetishization of Marianne and Héloïse's relationship. The beach becomes their haven, as a location away from the painting where societal norms do not exist. The beach is a recurring motif; the sea as a natural and unpredictable force reflects the freedom that both Marianne and Héloïse feel when they are together in this space. There is a real sense of space and location as being crucial to their relationship, and this is particularly evident when Héloïse's mother leaves for five days (Handyside 2011, 83). Once the countess is no longer present, the freedom felt outdoors can also be explored indoors, and thus the relationship blossoms. The countess represents the constraints of a life dictated by men, in that she has arranged Héloïse's marriage and was herself impacted by male decision-making in her own marriage. Thus, once she leaves, this constricting presence and reminder of what awaits Héloïse is minimised, and the women are able to inhabit their spaces freely, constructing a new, egalitarian society for themselves.

This female sphere is evident both through the treatment of social hierarchies and how the presence of women is portrayed throughout the film. Héloïse, Marianne, and Sophie all come from different social backgrounds: the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, and the working class respectively. However, other than their evident differences in profession, few distinctions are made between the women once the countess leaves the island. They create a 'solitude sociale' which becomes their 'espace de liberté' (Godin 2021, 22). Each woman wears a primary colour, which could reinforce their status, but in fact shows that all three of them are integral to the story and female experience. This is seen clearly when Marianne and Héloïse support Sophie

in her attempts at abortion. Héloïse, the most sheltered of the women, appears to be the most conscious of the importance of recording female experience, and of representing truth, as she encourages Marianne to paint the abortion scene. This is perhaps because Marianne has been able to mostly escape the entrapments of conventional eighteenth-century female life, such as arranged marriage, whereas Héloïse is consumed by this reality. This presents Sophie as a subject worthy of memorialisation in art, removing the supposed importance of class distinctions. In addition, it reinforces the diverse nature of female experience, and also harkens back to the fact that universal terms cannot define women. Sciamma is aware of this, showing us multiple facets of female life. Despite the film's melancholic ending, we are also privy to female joy, for example when the three women play cards together in the kitchen. Thus, the characters are not defined by one action or emotion, and we see a new way of viewing female experiences outside of traditional gazes and boundaries.

Moreover, this small female society seems to completely disregard social hierarchies and conventions, and in fact actively opposes them. In one kitchen scene Héloïse, the aristocrat, takes on Sophie's role and cooks for the women, while Sophie, the house maid, embroiders some fabric, a typical hobby for rich women. This is a direct subversion of class rules at the time, implying that class is neither a relevant nor defining feature of the relationship between these women. Furthermore, almost every scene contains only women, and when men are present, they are never in the foreground. Sciamma creates a great emphasis on the physical presence of women, which in turn reinforces a female narrative, giving women the space to express their experiences and stories. Thus, Sciamma prevents not only a gender domination in her film, but also a class domination.

Sciamma also emphasises the presence of women and the female voice through her use of sound, or lack thereof. *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* does not have a soundtrack, with only three pieces of music played in the entire film. However, Sciamma uses this cinematic device

purposely as a means of amplifying female stories, choosing to use diegetic sound rather than a backing track. This immerses the spectator in the story of Marianne and Héloïse, creating a sense of reality and shared experience as the characters and audience hear the same sounds. Music is only used at the most pivotal and emotional moments, such as in the final scene, when Héloïse appears to relive her relationship with Marianne as she listens to an orchestra play Vivaldi's Concerto No. 2. Furthermore, the women's voices are given a great prominence in the film, particularly as they appear to have been laid over all other sound. This is evident in the echoey feature to Marianne and Héloïse's voices that is apparent even when they are outside. This places the female voice above all else, and thus establishes the importance of female narratives. Therefore, Sciamma actively works towards producing a female gaze as she prioritizes female experiences in her film, thereby giving weight to female voices.

The agency that can be reclaimed through constructing one's own narrative is also evident in the recurring motif of Orpheus and Eurydice. In the traditional story, Orpheus tries to save his wife, Eurydice, from the underworld. Hades grants him his wish under the condition that he does not turn to look at her until he leaves. Orpheus turns to see his wife too soon, and she is returned to the underworld forever. This outcome is discussed by Marianne, Héloïse, and Sophie in the film. Marianne states that Orpheus made the poet's choice rather than the lover's choice, choosing the memory of Eurydice over their relationship, while Héloïse suggests that Eurydice could have told him to turn around, taking control of her fate. This foreshadows a later scene when Marianne must leave, and perhaps out of hope, tries to make the lover's choice by leaving without looking back at Héloïse. However, Héloïse tells Marianne to 'retourne-toi', thus securing the end of their relationship and reclaiming some agency over their fate. This is indicative of Sciamma's wish to construct a new gaze; in this moment she highlights the importance of 'seeing' female experience, whilst also emphasising the need to elevate female voices and agency in cinematic narratives. Furthermore, Marianne and Héloïse's relationship

reflects that of Orpheus and Eurydice, as their story follows a very similar trajectory. This is seen most notably in the film's timeline, as the audience watches the relationship through Marianne's memory. This creates a sentiment of loss from the outset, especially when Marianne sees ghostly apparitions of Héloïse in her wedding dress throughout the film, which is Marianne's last view of her lover. Stevens suggests that much of the film is a 're-enactment of that archetypal loss' as we see events unfold through Marianne's memory: as the film is 'mostly in remembered past, any 'looking at' is always a 'looking back'' (2019, 46-47). This motif of reflection and 'looking back' suggests that we have to be active agents in seeing and defining our own stories, particularly as Sciamma accords Marianne the agency of which memories of Héloïse she shares, and which remain private.

The phrase 'retourne-toi' is also significant as it is the first use of the informal 'tu' between the women, which is reminiscent of how their relationship has transcended traditional, formal boundaries, both in terms of social norms and communication. Communication takes a new form in this film as it shifts from the linguistic sphere to the artistic sphere, with Héloïse and Marianne communicating through artwork. Sciamma makes explicit reference to her female gaze by centring the film around a woman painting another woman, and thus narratives literally created by women. This is shown when Marianne paints Héloïse's portrait for a second time, in a way that Héloïse feels is a true reflection of herself. This highlights the importance of listening to female voices when choosing how to represent female experience. However, just as Sciamma uses her art to convey messages about the female gaze to her audience, the female characters in the film also use artwork as a means of communication. Héloïse sends Marianne a message through a portrait of herself which is exhibited in the Salon. She discreetly displays the page number which hides a self-portrait of Marianne, painted before the couple had to part ways. This is a detail which would only hold significance for Marianne, and shows her that Héloïse still thinks of her. This bitter-sweet moment highlights the importance of looking with

a critical eye in order to find and understand female experience, to see beyond traditional and stereotypical first impressions. In this scene, and throughout *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* as a whole, Sciamma illustrates the need to explore female histories and experiences further, and to elevate female voices in the process.

CONCLUSION

The 'female gaze'

In conclusion, it can be argued that a female gaze does exist, however it does not take just one form. This is seen clearly in the distinctions between Calle and Sciamma, who both actively contradict the male gaze through their artworks, but use different techniques to achieve this aim. Calle literally subverts traditional gazes by making women the voyeuristic and dominant forces in her work, whereas Sciamma creates a new and empathetic way of looking at women in film; both gazes are valid. It is in fact this difference in their artistic and cinematic techniques that designates them such excellent examples of the female gaze: they are proof that universalism is not a necessary attribute in defining female experience. As they actively subvert traditional practices, they reframe the way the spectator sees women and female experiences. Their conscious choices to break with tradition lead to diverse and multi-faceted artistic methods, highlighting the possibility for multiple female gazes, individual yet united in constructing new ways of looking at women. They convey that constructing a female gaze is an active process, subsequently offering an escape from the constricting nature of the male gaze.

The female gaze and conversations about elevating diversified female experiences in the art world are necessary to move past stereotypical presentations of women. Furthermore, Calle and Sciamma show that the diversity of female experience cannot be encompassed in a traditional male gaze. Both artists convey that it is possible to break away from constricting gazes and traditional mainstream approaches, and to do so with success. It is their way of looking and method of depicting women that facilitates their construction of a female gaze, as well as their content. Calle and Sciamma have actively developed artistic methods that are

distinctive in their subversion of the male gaze, and this political act continues to distinguish their work from others in the field.

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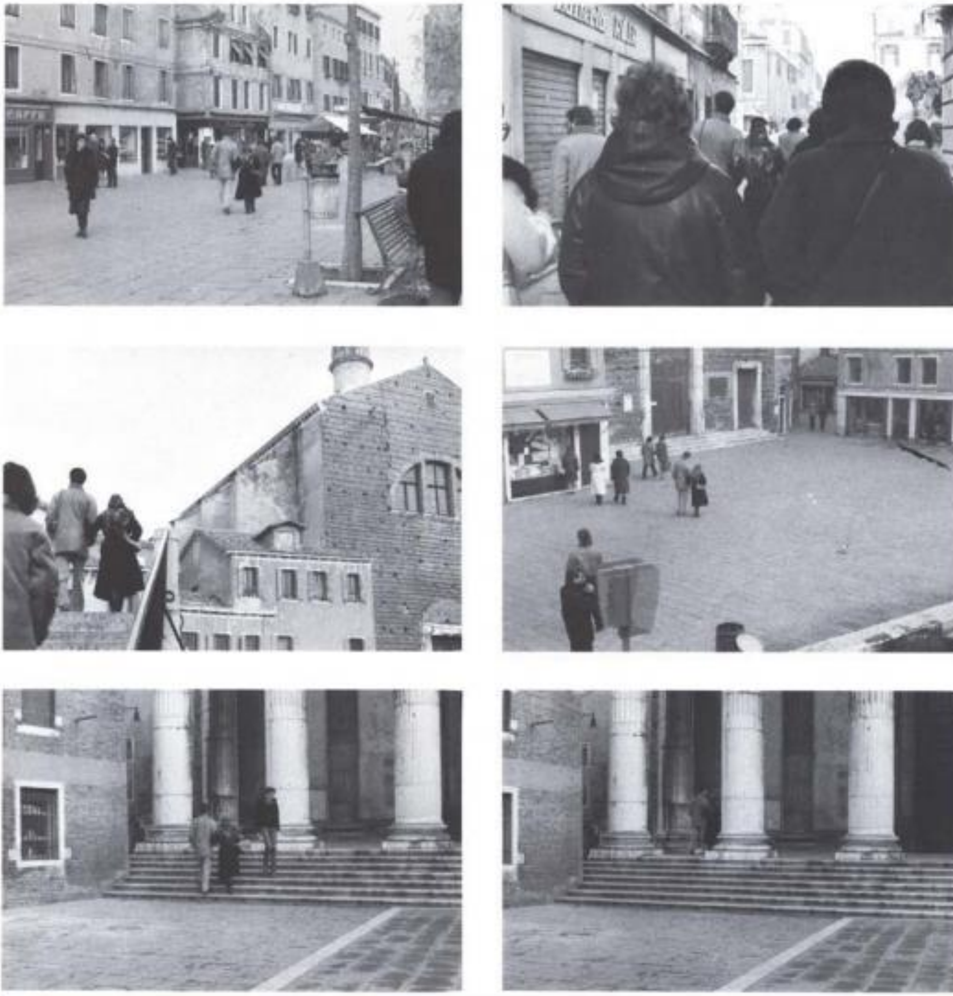
<u>APPENDIX</u>

Figure 1



Calle, Sophie. *Suite vénitienne*. 1980. Photographs, text and maps.

Figure 2

Calle, Sophie. *Suite vénitienne*. 1980. Photographs, text and maps.

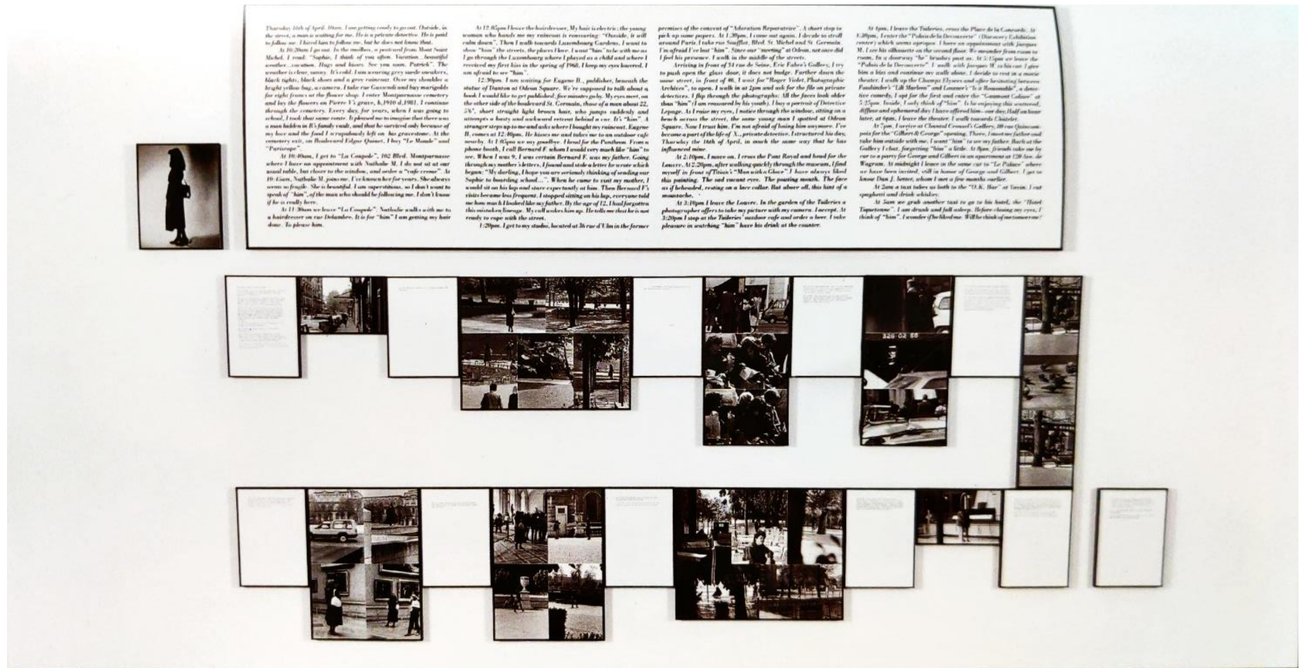
Figure 3

Calle, Sophie. *Suite vénitienne*. 1980. Photographs, text and maps.

Figure 4

Calle, Sophie. *The Striptease*. 1979. Photographs. In Calle, Sophie. 2003. *M'as-Tu Vue.* Munich: Prestel, 259.

Figure 5



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