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**“Nous sommes à la même place”, Gender as Seriality in Céline Sciamma’s
*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu***

Lena MEYSKENS

Independent researcher

Since Céline Sciamma’s *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* premiered in 2019, the film has been nominated for multiple Golden Palms, Golden Globes, BAFTA and César awards. The movie has also been awarded a great number of prizes: the Queer Palm and Best Screenplay at the Cannes Film Festival, a European University Film Award, and a César for best camerawork. The tremendous success of the film does not limit itself to professional or academic circles. Mainstream media praise the film as well.

The film is set at the end of the 19th century in an old castle on an island at the French coast of the Atlantic Sea. Marianne, a young portraitist who has been invited to the castle, was assigned to paint the portrait of Héloïse without her knowing. While acting as Héloïse’s companion during the day, Marianne tries to observe her as closely as possible in order to paint the portrait at night. However, Marianne fails in keeping this a secret and comes clean to Héloïse. By then, the two already developed more than a friendship and Héloïse destroys the portrait so Marianne can stay longer. During their stay, they also find out that Sophie the maid is pregnant. Together they try to get her an abortion. Throughout the film, the quest for an abortion and the love story between Marianne and Héloïse are interwoven.

Veronica Esposito described the film as a “manifesto of the female gaze” (Esposito 8). However, Sciamma herself nuances the stateliness of the word “manifesto”: “I did not want to make a manifesto of the female gaze but make the gaze into the plot of the film” (Schuit, par 10, my translation). And thus, the gaze is not only a structural and formal approach throughout the film, but it is central to the narrative of the film as well. This begs

the question: how can we define this female gaze? In her book *Le Regard Féminin* (2020), Iris Brey discusses this concept at large : “un regard qui nous fait ressentir l’expérience d’un corps féminin à l’écran [...] c’est un regard qui adopte le point de vue d’un personnage féminin pour épouser son expérience” (Brey 12/1384). Nevertheless, for Sciamma the female gaze is not merely a reversal of the male gaze, or the embodiment of the female lived experience. The female gaze is also about sharing the experiences: “Si on me demande ce qu’est le female gaze, pour moi, c’est *partager*. Comment on partage l’expérience d’un sujet” (*Le Bleu du Miroir* 2019, my emphasis). Sharing an experience in this case, is not about dividing, but about the sum of all the individual lived experiences and can thus lead to collaboration and working together. Sciamma describes this as a “ronde de regards collaborative” which does not limit itself to the characters on screen but moves offscreen: “associés au sien les regards de ses comédiennes, de sa productrice, de son assistante à la mise en scène, de sa cheffe opératrice, de sa directrice de casting et de son monteur” (Brey 298-299/1384).

In this article, I would like to argue that it is not only the gaze that is collaborative. The physical embodiment of the female characters, the tropes and themes that are addressed are also collaborative, moreover, one could argue that these are *serial*. Serial in this context does not mean linear but plural. As I mentioned earlier, sharing adds up. In this way, seriality is introduced as a strategy to erase or temporarily suspend socio-economical differences between the three female protagonists.

Gender as seriality

Gender as seriality has been and still is used in feminist theory as a strategy to overcome hierarchical power relations in different directions: man versus women, women versus class and among themselves, and the various ways of identifying and approaching women. In this article I will apply the critical strategy of gender as seriality to the film

Portrait de la jeune fille en Feu. To develop my point, I will draw on the work of political thinker, feminist, and activist Iris Marion Young, more specifically on her influential essay: "Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective" (1994). Her later work discusses both the individual experience and the undertaking collective action at large from a phenomenological perspective. Due to this double phenomenological reading of inequality, Sonia Kruks writes of Marion Young's "binocular view of injustices" (Kruks 340) which will serve as a tool to analyze the film. I will elaborate on Young's notions of individuality and collectivity and how seriality is a strategy that can transgress individual differences and even hierarchical structures, without rejecting the traits that make them into separate identities. I will also link these to feminist theory today. Even though these essays date from the early nineties, her writing is still contemporary, to say the least.

In my analysis, I will focus on two key sequences in the movie which are interrelated: the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and the quest for an abortion. After introducing the plotline and some general observations of the film, I will discuss the love story between Héloïse and Marianne, which can be read as a phenomenological critique of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Secondly, I will analyze the abortion attempts, the abortion itself and its reenactment in which all three women are involved. These sequences illustrate how the individuality and class differences of the characters are transgressed in a serial connection without denying or erasing their identity.

Individuality

Young's writing is so pertinent because it touches upon issues that are still at the heart of contemporary queer and feminist theory. At the end of the seventies, much critique surfaced regarding the generalization of 'the women's experience' since it was not taking class, income, ethnicity etc. in consideration. In her book: *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), Young addressed the issue of identity politics. She discusses at large

how “the injustice of the cultural imperialism which marks and stereotypes of some groups at the same time that it silences their self-expression” (Young 1990, 24). On a side note, she pinpointed that when trying to move beyond this cultural imperialism and aiming to obtain equal rights, the marginalized identities are asked to conform to the norm (e.g., gay marriage) instead of making their own laws and structures adapted to their own socio-cultural situation. This issue is still uppermost in feminist and queer activism and discussed at large in *Queer Intentions*(2019) by Amalia Abraham where she explores the decline of queer underground clubs (i.e.) in relation to the acquisition of the right for gay people to marry. For example, the character of Marianne would not *want* to be in an arranged marriage. The fact that the women in the film come from different socio-economic backgrounds does not imply that they all prefer to be in the highest class.

Feminism does not address one single issue anymore but turns to multiple topics and matters. Whereas some women long for marriage and a family, other women are still pressured into it. For some, sex work is an emancipated and liberating job, however, for a considerable number of women it is the only way to earn a living. The same applies to the female characters in the film. They encounter different sorts of constraints imposed by the patriarchy, moreover, the patriarchy even divides them because it impacts each of them in a different way. As a result, an emancipated life will not look the same for all three of them.

Furthermore, Angela McRobbie writes of “female individuation” which characterizes post feminism as well: “Girls must have a life plan. They must become more reflexive in regard to every aspect of their lives, from making the right choice in marriage, to taking responsibility for their own working lives” (McRobbie 261). In this way, as Katherine Angel writes in her book *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again* (2021), women are

still charged with the responsibility for their own safety in the #MeToo discourse, be it in the guise of “the girlboss” who takes control of every aspect of her life.

The notion of ‘female individuation’ is enhanced to extreme proportions by social media and influencers who promote products by companies under the pretext of emancipation and feminism to such an extent that feminism and capitalism are no longer distinguishable: “the newest generation of feminists have never known a world different from the one in which the fight for our rights and the representation of our experiences is tied up with capitalism and our individual relationship to our bodies” (Gamble 599/1404).

The complexity resulting from this female individuation and how these complexities interact with each other, have already been illustrated by the series *Mrs. America* (2020) about the political battle between Phyllis Schlafly and Gloria Steinem and the film *Misbehaviour* (2020) which covers the boycotting of the miss world elections in 1970. These evolutions raise the question how to regard individual women as a group and talk about them as a group despite what separates them from each other. This burdened sense of responsibility is so deeply rooted in society that women reinforce this accountability upon each other which makes it even more challenging to dismantle the constraints.

Collectivity

In 1994, Young wrote the essay “Gender as Seriality: thinking about women as a social collective” that was included in the anthology *Social Postmodernism, Beyond Identity Politics* the following year. Her point of departure was one of the pressing dilemmas of feminist theory at the time:

On the one hand, without some sense in which “woman” is the name of a social collective, there is nothing specific to feminist politics. On the other hand, any effort to identify the attributes of that collective appears to undermine feminist politics by leaving out some women whom feminists ought to include. (Young 1994, 714)

It goes without saying that this matter remains pertinent to intersectional feminism, which Young herself preludes in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy* (1997). Whereas speaking of women in general is too nondescript, designating certain characteristics to a group of women will inevitably exclude other women and deny historical context. How, then, can we speak of women and identify them as a collective without assuming there is a universal or quintessential aspect that is inherent to being a woman? Can we speak of women and validate all identities that identify as such instead of categorizing them into smaller compartments? The danger of exclusion lurks around every corner when focusing on identity.

To avoid exclusion, Young proposed the concept of gender as seriality, drawing from Sartre's *Critique de la Raison Dialectique* (1960) and his notion of "groups". For Sartre, the members of a group must consciously identify with one another, recognize that they do indeed belong to the same group and that they are all about to undertake action towards a certain goal they have in common. In short, the identification process takes place amongst themselves during their intentional being towards action. The latter makes a group both mutually inclusive as exclusive at the same time.

Young, however, slightly deviates from Sartre's notion of groups. She writes: "A series [...] is not a mutually acknowledging identity with any common project or shared experience. Women need have nothing in common in their individual lives to be serialized as women" (Young 1994, 735). Women as a series do not have to share nor recognize mutual character traits¹. Moreover, they do not need to have anything in common, it is about their intentionality and directiveness towards action: "'Woman' is a serial collective [...] it names a set of structural constraints and relations to practico-inert objects that condition action and its meaning" (737). A series of women is not a group of women which

¹ Without historicizing the concept, Young seems to perceive womanhood as a universal human condition or more specifically as the feminine condition.

share a certain background or an identity trait. It is the individuality of each woman that makes a collective of women into a series. Also, her definition transcends the individual experience. It is about mutual intention and direction. A series of women can thus be defined by a certain situation or context that brings them together and by their state of being towards undertaking deliberate action towards a certain goal.

In her definition of women as a collective of a series, Young borrows another concept of Sartre, being the practico-inert: "Practico-inert meaning the matter with which praxis must work and Praxis being deliberate, goal-oriented human action" (Buchanan "pratico-inert"). In other words, her definition of a series focuses on certain structural constraints and relations to the matters of goal-orientated human action that brings a group of women together.

I would like to emphasize here, that Young's notion of seriality does neither deny nor undermine the individuality and identity that characterize post feminism. The aforementioned "*binocular view of injustices*" (Kruks 340) is what gives Young's feminist theory a phenomenological dimension. For Young, phenomenology is an instrument to explore the "'lived' side of women's involuntary location in gender (and other social) structures" (337). In her writing she pleads for styles and theoretical tools "that move back and forth, fluidly, between the large-scale 'structural' or 'poststructural' and the subjectively 'lived' aspects of women's subordination, between 'gender' and 'lived body'— until it may be seen how each twists into and comes to inhere in the other" (340). In my analysis, I aim to examine the three female characters of *Portrait d'une jeune fille en feu* through Young's "binocular vision". I will constantly move between the individual and the group of women to demonstrate how gender as seriality is used as a strategy to move beyond individual differences and make the whole more than its sum.

It should be noted that this idea of seriality or this sense of collectivity has been something that Sciamma has dealt with already in her previous movies. Whereas her

2017 movie *Bande des Filles (Girlhood)* was centered around the individual experience within a group, her movie *Portrait de la Jeune fille en feu* (2019) is about a collective experience that transgresses individual identity traits.

The film

Portrait de la jeune fille en feu premiered in 2019 in France and has been produced, written, directed, and acted by a series of women. Adèle Haenel, Noémie Merlant and Lujan Bajrami play the leading roles under the direction of Céline Sciamma. Remarkably, there is no classical or tangible conflict throughout the film. As Batuman wrote in *The New Yorker*: "Sciamma increasingly doesn't care about antagonists. In "Portrait", she decided "not to tell about the obstacles, the enemies, the traps, men" (Batuman 24/30). The movie can be considered as an exploration of how "the character's desire is itself a source of conflict" (25/30).

Nevertheless, at the beginning and the end of the movie, another antagonist namely the patriarchy, is made tangible in the film. The men too are represented as a series, always *en masse* (e.g., the group of rowing men in the boat and the men visiting the exhibition at the museum). Furthermore, the presence of men is especially palpable due to their absence throughout the inner and middle part of the film. In this way, men and women are represented opposite from each other, not as individual characters but as series²; gender is represented as seriality.

The three female protagonists are vastly different when it comes to their social and economic status which resonates with McRobbie's notion of female individuation. They

² I would like to make a difference here between serial and plural characters. Serial characters are a specific kind of plural characters. I am here referring to the forthcoming article: "The Plural Protagonist. Or: How to Be Many and Why" (2023) by Ronald Geerts in which he discusses plural characters at large. Plural characters find themselves in the same context whereas serial characters enter a goal-oriented relationship with each other.

are affected by the patriarchy in a different way and so are the practices to emancipate them. Héloïse comes from a wealthy family, she is the subject of Marianne's painting and represents the muse. Therefore, Héloïse is the subject of Marianne's painting, not the object. She has no agency over her future; her fate is sealed. Marianne belongs to the working class and is a portraitist who continues her father's business and as an employee of Héloïse's mother. She arrives at the island for a rather unusual assignment: to paint the portrait of Héloïse without her knowing. At the time, it was common to send a portrait of a young woman at marriageable age to the family of a potential husband. If the family approves of the painting, they can get married. The reason for the secrecy is that Héloïse refused to pose for the previous painter because she does not *want* to get married. She had witnessed how the thought of marriage had consumed her sister, who jumped off a cliff to escape from the restricting circumstances of matrimony. Therefore, Marianne must pretend to be a regular companion, invited to help her fight her loneliness and paint the portrait at night. When Héloïse's mother leaves the island to visit the potential in-law family, Héloïse and Marianne are left alone in the castle on the island, isolated from the rest of the world with Sophie, the maid of the household who finds out she is unintentionally pregnant.

By implementing gender as seriality as a strategy hierarchical power relation: poor-rich, artist-muse, servant-mistress, lover-beloved, life-death are temporarily suspended or transgressed from the moment they are alone at the castle. Their joint residency forms the heart of the movie and the focus of my analysis. Throughout their stay in isolation, two central plotlines develop: the love-story between Héloïse and Marianne and the abortion of Sophie. Both storylines are interwoven and have equal weight within the film. The storyline is not told from one perspective but shaped as a *series* of actions the women carry out.

Orpheus & Eurydice



Fig. 1. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (0:02:05).

First, the viewer sees seven separate shots of young women who are sketching, attentively looking up and down from their sketchbooks. Only after a few shots, we see it is Marianne who is posing while giving directions to her students. Her attention is suddenly captured by a painting at the other side of the room. She breaks the shared concentration when she anxiously asks "Qui a mis là, ce tableau?". The following moment the film reveals the entire class of students sitting next to each other, all shifting their attention from their individual sketches to the painting behind them (Fig. 1.). We see seven art students who tear their gaze away from their own work and simultaneously turn around to direct their attention to the same painting at the back of the class.

The opening scene already stresses both the individuality and the collectivity of the art students. Not only do they visually form a series across the screen, but all eyes also meet the same object at the same moment. Moreover, the dynamics between observing to draw someone and the model looking back or forward is a Leitmotiv throughout the whole movie that already echoes the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Consequently, the film starts with a reversal of the Orpheus-Eurydice or poet-muse relationship whereby the painter is drawn by a series of young girls. To show how relative or reversible this power dynamic is. It sets the tone for the rest of the movie.

In the next scene, we see Marianne at the back of a rowing boat. In front of her, four men are rowing with their backs turned towards her. When one of her trunks falls



Fig. 2. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (00:18:34).



Fig. 3. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (00:18:45).



Fig. 4. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (00:19:14).

overboard, she jumps off the rowing boat to retrieve her luggage. She does this on her own initiative without asking or consulting the men rowing the boat, who are not helping her either.

Throughout these two scenes, Sciamma underlines the individuality of Marianne by not making her part of the series formed by her students and the men in the boat. By doing so, Marianne is represented as a highly independent character.

From the moment Marianne first meets Héloïse, this emphasis on Marianne's independence slowly fades away by merging her with the image of Héloïse, both emotionally and on-screen. When Marianne is about to see Héloïse for the first time, the camera alternates between how Marianne is looking out for Héloïse (Fig. 2.) and what Marianne is seeing in the moment (Fig. 3.). The constant switching accelerates as Héloïse goes outside and starts running towards the cliffs. Just in time she stops and turns around towards Marianne. Both women stand in front of the ocean in the wind and glance to each other without the other looking back until Héloïse does look back (Fig. 4.).

This scene contains a series of gazes and glances that starts bridging the gap between Marianne and Héloïse, and between character and spectator as well. The latter is an example of the aforementioned "ronde de regards collaborative" (Brey 298/1384); a succession of gazes that moves off screen from the viewer to Marianne, from Marianne to Héloïse and Héloïse who looks the spectator in the eye. Even though the women are looking at each other, within the shot they are depicted in the same direction. On the rocks, at the beach always facing the sea in similar postures. Only during these moments conversations take place, as if both women need to be directed towards the same object, namely the spectator, to be able have a profound dialogue.

Later in the film, when the portrait is almost finished, Marianne confesses to Héloïse that she is in fact a painter commissioned by Héloïse's mother to paint her picture. Héloïse then destroys the portrait. In this brief moment, when the painting is destroyed, their

painter-model hierarchy is being dissolved. What separated them from each other is literally erased. From this moment onwards hierarchical power relations will frequently be suspended for a short amount of time by replacing the non-reciprocal gazes by mutual ones.

In another scene, this suspension is more explicitly shown through dialogue. While Marianne is trying to paint Héloïse's face, she says that she would not want to change places with her. Héloïse answers: "Nous sommes à la même place, exactement la même place, venez ici" (01:02:00). Marianne stands next to Héloïse and is looking towards her usual position behind the easel which echoes the opening scene where a class of students was drawing Marianne. Héloïse, in turn, describes what she sees; how Marianne frowns when she is overwhelmed and how Marianne breathes through her mouth when she is troubled. Whereas the relation between painter and model is always represented and told from the perspective of the painter who is inspired by his or her muse, this short dialogue introduces the voice of the muse. Héloïse has been watching Marianne as well and describes what she saw. As a result, the painter and muse become each other's equal instead of each other's opposite.

Héloïse and Marianne finish the painting together. However, Sciamma suddenly reminds the spectator of the temporary nature of this harmony. Marianne admits that she would like to ruin this portrait as well because this means that the process of the arranged marriage is set into motion. Héloïse answers: "vous n'êtes plus de mon côté, vous me rapprochez la suite, mon mariage, vous n'êtes plus solidaire" (01:32:55). For a short inevitable moment, the two women are separated because their paths merely crossed and are now facing different futures. A breach emerges in the harmonical relationship.

This rupture does not last. After they reconcile, they spend one more night together. Marianne starts drawing a sketch of Héloïse. When she is finished, Héloïse asks Marianne to draw herself so she has a keepsake. Marianne does so on page 28 of her

book about Orpheus and Eurydice. Once again, without denying the different fates that lie ahead of them, the hierarchy between them is withheld. Contrary to the non-reciprocal approach of the Orpheus myth where the painter turns around to remember her and capture her in his poetry, both women can remember each other by means of the portraits. Consequently, the series of portraits of Héloïse that have been painted throughout the film in function of revealing and remembering, is expanded by a self-portrait of the painter so that the muse can remember the artist.

In another scene, Héloïse is reading aloud from *Orphée et Eurydice*. The attentive faces of the three women, lit by candles, are shown separately but quickly after one another. Each with their own individual thoughts but glancing at each other. When the ending of the story evokes the question: “why does Orpheus turn around?” Sophie thinks him to be transgressive, whereas Marianne argues that he chooses the memory over Eurydice over her real presence. Héloïse wonders: “peut-être c’était elle qui lui a dit: retourne-toi” (01:11:26). In this scene, the individuality of the three women is emphasized while simultaneously, they are represented as a series: each of them contemplating the myth from a different point of view, the images of their concentrated faces in rapid succession. This scene, which is very similar to the card scene I will discuss in the next section, clearly demonstrates Young’s binocular vision, constantly moving from their individual lived experience to the women as a series.

A few years later, we see Marianne at an exhibition where she has exhibited her own work under her father’s name. In a room full of men, Marianne stands in front of her painting in which Orpheus and Eurydice are turned towards each other, whereas they are normally shown one after another trying to escape the underworld (01:48:33). When suddenly Marianne cleaves through the room full of men to stand eye to eye with a portrait of Héloïse and her daughter where she holds a book open at page 28. In this way, the previous series of portraits, formed by the portrait of Héloïse, the sketch of Héloïse

and the self portrait of Marianne, continues and even communicates to Marianne. Through the portrait of Héloïse in the gallery, Héloïse tells Marianne she has a daughter and that she has not forgotten her by indicating the page number where Marianne sketched a self-portrait for her. Even after their love affair, the women keep reversing the hierarchical structures that are in place in the world they inhabit.

In another scene, in the concert hall, we see Marianne once again transgressing the territory of men in the same way as she walked through the museum. When she takes a seat, she notices Héloïse at the other side of the theater. This last series of gazes is not reciprocal. Marianne is closely watching Héloïse, who is paying attention to the orchestra and does not see Marianne. However, we hear the orchestra is playing the very same music on the harpsichord during their stay together. Based on the intense facial expressions and her accelerated breathing, the spectator can assume that she is remembering Marianne.

Abortion

After Héloïse's mother has left for Italy, Héloïse, Marianne and Sophie are alone in the castle. It soon becomes clear that Sophie is unintentionally pregnant and that she does not want to keep the baby. Without using too many words, collective action is undertaken to prevent the baby from being born. As for a sidenote, throughout the film, the abortion is not a subject of discussion. Sophie simply tells Marianne that she does not want to keep it. Without uttering a word and sensing each other in a corporeal sense. All three of the women collectively engage in making sure that the baby is safely removed.



Fig. 5. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (00:54:30).

At first, they try to provoke an abortion themselves by having Sophie run back and forth on the beach (Fig. 5.) Because the running has no effect, they decide to prepare a potion. They go looking for the necessary herbs in the dunes (Fig. 6). The shot shows the three women crisscross across the screen,

each successively bowing down and disappearing, once more composed as a series. At night Sophie collapses because the potion made her sick. Marianne and Héloïse take her to bed (Fig. 7) and all sleep together in the same room. The other two women watch over her. During these



Fig. 6. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (00:55:24).

three scenes, Héloïse, Marianne and Sophie move towards the same goal and form a series as described by Young. The visual composition reflects the seriality through the positions of the three women on the screen: in a row, crisscross or as a cluster yet always sharing the same intention.

Because the potion did not have the desired effect, the three women go into the village (Fig. 8.) to make an appointment with the midwife. Once again, this becomes apparent without words or a dialogue but through a series of events and actions. The three women do not have to explain anything to each other. Instead, they intentionally undertake action. The spectator sees them gathering around a fire and after a while it becomes clear what they



Fig. 8. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (01:11:37)

are about to undertake. Suddenly, all the women of the village

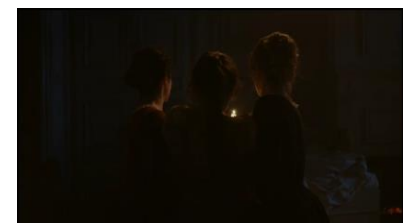


Fig. 7. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (00:57:51)

gather around the fire while producing humming sounds (Fig. 9). No further context is given, they simply start to

harmonize, or one could even say “to serialize”. Their singing drowns out the crackling



Fig. 9. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (1:13:56).

sounds of the fire. The women seem to perform a ritual, but it still comes across very improvised and intuitive. In addition, this choral series of women embraces the protagonists and encapsulates them in an even larger series of women(hood). The collective singing echoes and expand the working together of the three women to provoke an abortion and it embeds their mission in a community of women. Within this space the previously mentioned structural hierarchy disappears.



Fig.10. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (01:23:24).

When the actual abortion takes place, there is a shift in the way series are being represented. The abortion is not a collective experience. It is Sophie who has the abortion. While she is laying on the bed, another kind of series forms (Fig. 10). We see three generations of women represented around the bed: the midwife, Sophie and the two children. Héloïse and Marianne are present with her in the same room forming a series once again. During the abortion we see Sophie from above. While she is suffering from the discomfort and the pain on the bed, the baby next to her grabs her finger and touches her face. The baby confronts Sophie with what is; the life inside of her or what could have been; mothering a baby. When Marianne turns away, it is Héloïse who encourages her to turn around and watch: “regardez” (01:23:30) In this scene, they all must face the abortion, including Marianne and Heloise.

Later that very evening, after Sophie wakes up, they decide to recreate the abortion (Fig. 11.) It is especially important to note that even though “the action of the abortion itself” has been performed and their collective goal has been reached, the three women keep sticking together to deal with the emotional aftermath of the abortion. Héloïse and Sophie start to reenact or even dramatize the abortion and Marianne takes her sketchbook to

put it onto paper. Although Sophie is the one who undergoes the abortion, all three women participate in the process and attempt to collectively navigate the aftermath. In doing so, the focus shifts from the individual experience to how the three women, together, approach the situation. As a result, the film portrays a collective experience that momentarily suspends the socio-economic disparities that separate them. This quest for an abortion and its impact demonstrates Young's binocular vision the clearest. Despite being constrained by societal structures, Marianne, Héloïse, and the midwife collaborate to assist Sophie, and thus partake in a shared lived experience, depicted as a series.



Fig.11. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (01:25:58).

It is worth mentioning that abortion has, both historically and currently, been a factor that creates distinctions among women based on their social status. Nevertheless, Sciamma makes this conceivable by setting the film on an island, isolated from the inhabited world. By doing so, she gives women the utopian possibility to abolish the class differences. In addition, she makes the abortion into an option created by women themselves and not by the patriarchy.

In between their abortion attempts, the women practice other, more recreational activities such as playing cards and reading. The card scene is a variation on the theme of depicting the women as a series in a circle as it is shot in a circle panorama view. Alongside, the spectator sees their faces lighting up in the dark, watching the game and one another closely. In another shot of their hands laying cards on the table, whose hand belongs to whom is barely discernible to the viewer (Fig. 12.). This is the first light-hearted scene in the film, where the women laugh freely and simply



Fig.12. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (01:04:00).

“are” without any restraints because they are equal players in the game and represented as such.



Fig. 13. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (01:07:42).

The same applies for the shot where they are together in the kitchen. The lady of the house is preparing dinner whereas the maid is embroidering a piece of linen. Once again, the three women are portrayed in one line, emphasizing their collective seriality, although engaged in distinct activities

(Fig. 13).

Conclusion

By analyzing the joint residency of the three main characters on the island through the lens of Young’s “binocular vision”, I have demonstrated how the women in the film form a series, without losing their individual identity traits or denying the structural differences that separate them. However, during certain scenes these traits and differences are interrupted, reversed, or equalized. The women form a series through the visual composition of the characters on the screen, the sequence of gazes connecting the viewer and the characters, the succession of different actions and activities, and the overlay image that equalizes the women and shows them identical in their identity but preserves the structural constraints and individual identity traits that make up their character. Even though the fate of the three main characters is controlled by a patriarchal society which prevents Héloïse and Marianne from being together and separates the three women in three different classes, by representing women as a series in these various ways, Sciamma transgresses hierarchical power relations between painter and muse, maid and lady of the house, lover, social and economic classes. Consequently, representing gender as seriality becomes a strategy to move beyond class-related politics or representations of women. Instead of focusing on the individual

experience i.e., the female individuation, yet without denying it and without bringing any discredit to it, the film moves beyond individuality and depicts a collectively lived experience. Employing seriality as a strategy to challenge hierarchies and structural positions proves ineffective if utilized only once in a work or a body of work. Demonstrating gender as seriality as a strategy is successful only when applied repeatedly and across diverse aspects of a work. This is precisely what Sciamma achieves in the film, incorporating a series of students, gazes, actions, portraits, bodies, and embodiments. Consequently, the movie explores unexplored terrain.

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