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CORE 111

22 October 2022

Listen: Silence and the Mundane as Musical Dialects in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

We live in a society inundated by artificial noise: to stimulate, to learn, to entertain, and to simply fill the empty space in between. We believe we absorb more with constant stimulation around us, but what are we missing in exchange? As the duration of stimulation has increased, so have the thresholds of our conscious senses. Our patience and sensitivity have weakened, and accordingly our ability to listen. Therefore, we generally neglect the subtle intimacies of ordinary sound. And while natural forms of stimulation are rare, silence is even rarer. As a sound in itself, silence generates a dialogue of vulnerability beyond what can be expressed through a standard musical score, particularly within the context of forbidden love. Lesbian love affairs like that of Marianne and Heliose in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* were stigmatized as unnatural and uncomfortable in 18th-century France and are even today, just as is silence and the mundane in modern day. Celine Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* activates this proximal relationship between silence and the silenced quality of lesbian affairs, boldly asserting a diegetic score composed of the conventionally mundane as opposed to the traditionally profound to mimic the courage and authenticity of the lovers. She recalibrates the viewer's threshold of auditory processing to reveal intimacies of psychological developments of a lesbian love affair in tandem to character experience. The realism of diegetic sound reveals the reality of choosing between physiological desires and societal perceptions of gender and class orientations.

The diegetic score and minimal dialogue allows the character actions to become a dialogue in themselves, as is particularly critical within the secretive necessity of same-sex relations. From the tempo of footsteps to the stroke of the artist's hand and the silence interspersed in between, subtle movements hold a voice of their own. Following the painter Marianne's arrival, the first conversation between Marianne and Heloise occurs in the form of footsteps prior to their meeting eye-to-eye. Descending downstairs, Marianne's footsteps shift from a brisk walk to a slowed step together, halted by a pause at the next flight upon spotting Heloise facing the door below. Marianne's final three steps, taken in gradual hesitance, transition into Heliose's quick-paced, sharp footsteps, fading into the crunch of the leaves and sea air as the threshold opens (18:54-19:40). Stylistically speaking, these footsteps set the tempo of the scene to demonstrate psychological state. Here, Marianne shifts from confident and self-assured to tentative and confused, with Heloise adopting control of the situation in her ambiguity and unpredictability. Similarly, the number of footsteps taken may imbed suspense or completion, depending if the amount is odd or even, or if the footing is indistinct or crisp (Lessons from the Screenplay). Sciamma utilizes this technique to indicate a power shift from Marianne to Heloise, Heloise realizing she is observed as a painter equivalent to her observation of her subjects. Subsequently, Marianne takes thirteen steps—an odd number—characterized by lighter scuffs and the creaking of floorboards rather than definite clicks to meet Heloise's place of observation, her steps back brisk and resolute in their annoyance (1:05:08 - 1:06:18). Without words, the cadence and touch of her footsteps act as a means of response.

By extension, the strokes of charcoal against the page or the brush against the canvas mediates a dialogue between the artist and her perception of and attitude toward her subject. Namely, the contrast between Marianne's view of Heloise and that of society is articulated by the

contrast in sound and character of her strokes. The graceful touch of authenticity with which Marianne captures Heloise by candlelight contrasts starkly with the manner of her initial paintings of Heloise (102:41-103:51). The first two portrait attempts end in frustration and anxiety. In an effort to capture a proper likeness, Marianne abruptly smears the face with a cloth to destroy it in exasperation, accentuated by the sound of her striking and smearing the canvas (51:18-51:23). The authenticity of emotion in the moment associated with the spontaneous sketch allows for rhythmic, melodious strokes grazing across the paper. The strokes establish fragility and intimacy of movement, fluid and organic like art and the development of their love. Yet, the tension between Marianne and Heloise, due to the painting's association with societal constructs of marriage and female presence, produces strokes of heavy handed, inconsistent meter, characterized by bursts of urgency and pauses of unsatisfied hesitance. Therefore, the quality of the artist's touch also produces a tempo with psychological implication, whether a steady moderato (moderate rhythm) or tempo rubato (irregular rhythm) in musical speech. Her strokes by night alongside Heloise are charged with admiration, tranquility, and truth of character, and those by day with frustration, hostility and debilitating ideals of society.

Moreover, the naturally occurring sounds of the diegetic score mimic and amplify the emotional and psychological states of the characters. The film is underlaid with ambient sound of faint wind, waves, and the crackling of fire, depending upon the time of day and setting. As Marianne struggles to paint Heloise, she lies restless in her bed, all the aforementioned components present and intensified in their volume to emphasize the vividness of Marianne's struggle to do Heloise's character justice (55:19-55:45). Accordingly, the wind and waves sound storm-like, mirroring her turbulent psychological state, while the snapping of fire identifies her passion for Heloise, soon to become the "Lady on Fire." After completing the final portrait,

Marianne and Heloise embrace at the sea's edge during high tide, the wind battering and waves crashing as the women gasp in cries of desperation, suffocated by societal frameworks and deprived of love's life force (1:39:29-1:40:34). Marking the relationship's end, their emotions overwhelm them as do the sound of the waves, their tides as if an amplification of the rushing of blood to the mind, desperate for a remedy of free-will beyond their time. The waves are associated with short-term liberation and autonomy, the women taking walks along the beach each day, yet also the triumph of society over individual narratives of same-sex love in the grander scheme of time. The vastness of the ocean represents the expansive burden of women and same sex couples of 18th-century France, unable to escape the ocean's reach. Another diegetic aspect mirroring psychological state is a faint vibrational hum infiltrating the background when Marianne begins hallucinating spectors of Heloise dressed as a bride in the darkness of the castle hallways (1:33:45-1:33:56). While not present in reality, this hum remains consistent with the diegetic score in that it occurs within the reality of the character's setting. For Marianne, the hum exists, as if to represent the rushing of blood to the mind, increased heart rate, and brain fog, seemingly freezing the vibrations of time and space. The vibrations foreshadow the long-term resonance Heloise will have within Marianne's life, echoing in unison with but physically absent like Heloise's projection. This hallucination takes physical form at the film's close, Heloise at the top of the stairs bearing a wedding dress—white like that of societal expectation but also reflecting the freshness of a new canvas—bathed in a paint-like light from the door's stream of light (Sun). As Heloise leaves, she slams the threshold shut behind, its vibration echoing through the chasm of the space to emphasize the finality of their physical narrative, yet not of the memory (1:51:41).

To elaborate further, the lack of dialogue and music make us more focused upon subtle differences in character interactions, from body language to microexpressions, as is so critical within the context of lesbian love. For instance, Marianne notices how Heloise moves her hand, bites her lips, and doesn't blink when she is touched, embarrassed, and annoyed, respectively. Similarly, Heliose notices how Marianne touches her forehead, raises her eyebrows, and breathes through her mouth when she is speechless, loses control, and is troubled, respectively (1:04:23 - 1:05:58). In other words, the pause of a step, lingering of a glance, stroke of a pencil or brush, slam of a door, inhale or exhale of a breath, or rustling of sheets all become critical forms of speech. Likewise, so do the silence of pauses in between, creating a pacing of hesitancy to urgency, reminiscence and despair. The traces of sound mimic the traces of love we receive between the characters. So too, the authentic presence and intimate quality of diegetic sound, and particularly the artistic stroke of a hand, advocate for affairs of lesbian love as equally authentic and intimate in their realness. Walking up an echoey staircase as she studies the characteristics of her subject, Marianne ponders, "One must show the ear and study its cartilage closely, even if it's covered with hair. It must be of warm and transparent hue, except for the hole, which is always strong" (21:29-21:45). And upon finishing the painting, Marianne's final stroke is appropriately upon Heloise's ear (1:42:13) (Albertine). By societal standards, the silence required to listen is swiftly rendered as awkward, bland, lonely, and ominous. As the film demonstrates, it doesn't have to be. Silence for these characters becomes organic, intimate, real, liberating, and counterintuitive but most of all, emotional. Hence, the film cares tremendously about listening, specifically, to one another in all the subtleties of silence and the mundane, and in dialogue transfiguring into many forms. Further, it pleads the viewer to hear the characters' truth.

With this being said, one may assert that the absence of nondiegetic music weakens the emotional effectiveness of the film. Music is a powerful force with the quality to inform, transport, heal, excite, sadden, disturb, and to instill many more connections with the audience. It has profound emotional capability. Yet ironically, while music is the initial force of attraction that unites Marianne and Heloise, only three instances of music are present in the entire score. Vivaldi's composition, "Summer" from the Four Seasons becomes a metaphorical narration of their love story. Marianne introduces the piece to Heloise on the piano towards the beginning of their love story, among the first instances of their chemistry, yet is unable to remember its end due to her and Heloise's inability to complete their love story (38:30-39:58). Prior to this moment, Heloise has only known the music of the church organ and the conventional ideals the institution represents. Likewise, Marianne and Heloise coincidentally attend the same orchestra in Milan where this piece is performed following the end of their relationship, Heloise unaware of Marianne's presence (1:55:54-1:28:28). The music's increasing intensity combined with Heloise's emotional reaction, mirrors the evolution and climaxes and transcendent quality of their love beyond physical articulation. Marianne describes the piece concluding, it's " Not merry, but it's lively," a metaphor for their relationship (39:01). Their time together was made lively with its authenticity of passion, but solemn in its predetermined impossibility by societal standards. More so, the piece describes a coming storm, symbolic of the diegetic score of wind and waves speaking to their tempestuous love, intense in the passion of its life followed by the calm of their parting. Hence, while this musical piece was emotionally impactful and bonding for the two lovers, Sciamma limits its presence in order to optimize its effectiveness. By this, I mean effectiveness is weakened by overuse, so selectively strengthens Marianne and Heloise's musical connection for heightened viewer response. The language of music derives its power from the

language of realism and intimacy within the ordinary. Therefore, rather than watering down our emotional response, we are alerted to the pivotal importance of a scene and its emotional implication when music is present. This selectivity emphasizes the need to listen as well as the weight of the message being presented.

Consequently, through her diegetic score, Sciamma grants the viewer autonomy over their emotions and advocates for us to treat the emotional context of same-sex love accordingly. Typically, a musical score provides the viewer with an auditory indication of the events about to unfold, not accessible to the character. However, a diegetic score liberates dictation of predetermined emotional responses, just as the women are liberated in acting upon the truth of their hearts. It orients the viewer with the character's psychological and mental states. Our abilities to notice subtle intimacies and emotional shifts of character movements and states are heightened in turn, honing a pitch for female autonomy, and specifically autonomy for sexual minorities. What's more, Sciamma mimics the courage of the lovers in her boldly stylistic choice of a diegetic score. The realism of the sound parallels the realism of love, no longer ignored as are everyday sounds. Through Sciamma's eyes, lesbian affairs are as real in quality as the qualities of everyday life. The score is predominated by the traditionally silenced, reorienting both lesbain love and its metaphor of the mundane into the foreground of conversation, respect, and acceptance. The diegetic score demands a reset on the threshold of human senses as well as of quantifications and judgements regarding love. Alongside same-sex relations, the audience is encouraged to destigmatize the uneasiness of silence and the mundane, Sciamma entrusting these newly-discovered emotions to be our guide rather than embedded music.

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