Component 2 Section A: Global film

Core study areas:
- Key elements of film form
- Meaning and response: aesthetics and representations
- Contexts of film

Rationale for study: Portrait of a Lady on Fire is an exquisite love story, but also an exploration of the ‘gaze’ – the power of looking, the experience of being looked at and how men and women may look in different ways. The film won several major film awards, including Best Screenplay at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival.

STARTING POINTS – Useful sequences and timings:
“First encounter with Héloïse” 18:41 – 22:35
“Marianne reveals the portrait” 48:51 – 52:55

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 – STARTING POINTS: Key elements of film form (micro features)

Cinematography
- Carefully framed shots linger for long periods on the faces of the characters. The dialogue is sparse, but the long takes enable the actors to show the full range of nuanced emotions.
- The camera often follows Marianne’s sightlines, showing how she is stealing glances at Héloïse’s face and hands (and ear!). You should consider the meaning of these looks. When do they change from professional observation into desire, then love?

Mise-en-scène
- Sciamma deliberately avoids the usual lush costume and set design associated with period dramas. The most extravagant outfit, Héloïse’s green satin dress, is selected by Marianne to make an appealing portrait for a male suitor. The rest of the time, the characters’ costumes are plain and unadorned.
- Marianne’s paintings are the central props of the film and the narrative. Compare and contrast the two portraits of Héloïse that Marianne paints. The first follows the ‘rules and conventions’ of portraiture, but it appears lifeless. How is the final painting different? Consider how it captures Héloïse’s defiance and strength, her ‘presence’. How does this show the change in the characters’ relationship?

Editing
- The pace of the film is deliberately slow and studied, reflecting the purposeful gaze of the artist, then later the adoring gaze of a lover. Many of the sequences are dominated by a shot/reverse shot structure, emphasising the themes of looking and power. They allow us to fully understand what Héloïse or Marianne are staring at, as well as the emotional intensity they are feeling.
Sound

- There is only diegetic music in the film. Music is the first thing that breaks through Héloïse’s frosty exterior. When Marianne plays the piece that reflects a coming storm, a strong connection is made between the two women.

- The long periods of silence, with only the sounds of wind or sea, emphasise the physical isolation and loneliness of the characters.

- The central piece of music is a simple women’s choir and handclaps at the bonfire party. This is one of the emotional heights of the film. You should consider the impact of this music on your own emotions.

- Consider the final scene at the opera. How does Héloïse respond to the orchestra? What’s the emotional impact for Marianne (and us, the spectator) as she watches Héloïse’s experience from afar? How does this connect the main themes of the film?

Performance

- The lead actors, Noémie Merlant (Marianne) and Adèle Haenal (Héloïse) rehearsed their roles separately and only met on the first day of shooting. Consider why Sciamma made this decision and how it may have affected the performances.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS: Meaning and response

Representations

- Portrait of a Lady on Fire is unusual in that there are barely any male characters at all. The most significant is the unseen Milanese suitor, whose desiring gaze Marianne must initially appeal to and to which Héloïse refuses to submit. The initial portrait offends Héloïse with its lack of ‘presence’. What does this suggest about the way women conform to or resist the ‘male gaze’?

- Consider the representation of women’s lives when they are free from the restrictions or influences of men. Think about the strong friendship that develops between not only the lovers, but also with Sophie the housemaid. Consider the scenes when Marianne has period pains or the subplot with Sophie’s unwanted pregnancy.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS: Contexts

Social

- The film’s treatment of patriarchy is very unusual, considering there are no main male characters on-screen throughout. Despite this, the female characters are constricted by male power in many ways. Consider what this tells us about women’s lives in the historical period (18th century Europe) and how it also reflects issues of gender and power today.

Cultural

- One of the main themes of the film is the difference between the male and female gaze. The term ‘male gaze’ was coined by film theorist Laura Mulvey to describe how women (and men) are represented on the screen. She suggested almost all films are “made by men, for men”, portraying male characters as active and powerful and women as weak and submissive. Mulvey said these portrayals appealed to and reinforced the male spectator’s “fragile sexual ego”. Consider the ways Portrait of a Lady on Fire explores these issues.
Political/Institutional

- Sciamma said in an interview that her aim was not to use a historical setting to comment on present day issues of gender and sexuality. Instead, she wanted to “transmit from the past what has never been transmitted, which is the intimate lives of women.” Consider how the film tries to achieve this.

- Sciamma is a founding member of the 50:50 group, made up of over 1,500 filmmakers addressing gender imbalance and sexual harassment in the film and TV industries.

KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS

“If you look at me, who do I look at?” 1:03:35 – 1:06:10

- Consider how this scene pushes the theme of watching/being watched into new territory. What is Sciamma saying about what it is like to be observed? Is it the frozen, submissive and disempowered position some may assume?

- Consider the dialogue in this focus scene – how does it show the women have become incredibly close and attuned to the nuances of the other’s body language?

- What does this scene tell you about the power dynamic between Héloïse and Marianne? How has it changed since the start of the film?

- Consider the extended two–shot shot used when Héloïse tells Marianne to “Come here.” It feels as if Marianne is ‘stepping into’ the world of the painting. How does the composition of the shot achieve this? How does this recast the roles of the observer/observed?