

Intimacy and Uncertainty in the Visual Politics of Haptic Visuality and Narrative Spacing—A Comparative Study of Portrait of a Lady on Fire and Anatomy of a Fall

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Abstract. This study investigates how contemporary women directors challenge and reconfigure the patriarchal logic of the “male gaze” through strategies of haptic visuality and narrative spacing. Using qualitative textual analysis, the study examines cinematography, mise-en-scène, sound design, and the role of silence and omission in shaping spectatorship. The findings reveal that Sciamma’s film generates intersubjective intimacy through reciprocal gazes, tactile imagery, and affective silences, while Triet destabilizes courtroom conventions by withholding visual certainty, emphasizing sound as embodied perception, and foregrounding epistemological gaps. Both films displace the spectator from a passive to an active interpretive position, thereby re-conceptualizing feminist theories of gaze, touch, and narrative. The research concludes that feminist aesthetics are not fixed but context-sensitive: in the romantic genre, they cultivate intimacy and desire; in the courtroom drama, they expose instability and power asymmetries. These results underscore the need to revise feminist film theory in dialogue with contemporary cinematic practice and highlight its continued relevance to cultural politics in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Feminist film theory, male gaze, haptic visuality, narrative spacing, spectatorship.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In the iconic bonfire scene of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Héloïse turns her gaze towards Marianne, her visage shimmering in the capricious firelight [1]. The flames here function not merely as part of the mise-en-scène, but as a metaphor for desire and transgression. Instead of sustaining voyeurism and objectification, the scene brings into view a gaze that is intersubjective and embodied, and that carries a resistant quality. In this moment, Sciamma rewrites one of cinema’s oldest motifs—the encounter of gazes. She turns it instead into a space charged with intimacy and resistance.

This recent shift in cinematic representation can be situated within the long-standing academic debate on the cinematic “gaze.” The concept of the “male gaze,” first introduced by Laura Mulvey in 1975, has become one of the most influential theoretical frameworks for analyzing gendered

representation [2]. Mulvey argues that mainstream narrative cinema is underpinned by two modes of visual pleasure: scopophilia and identification. Scopophilia designates the voyeuristic pleasure derived from looking, whereas identification positions the spectator to align with the male protagonist. Within such a framework, women rarely appear as active subjects. More often, they are cast as objects of desire, their bodies fragmented, stylized, and displayed for visual consumption. Men, by contrast, are positioned as the active bearers of the gaze, which works to reinforce traditional gender roles. At the same time, narrative strategies and camera techniques work to encourage spectators to inhabit the perspective of the male subject. In doing so, the patriarchal order is reaffirmed both within the cinematic frame and beyond it. This theoretical framework was later expanded by scholars such as Doane and Kaplan, who examined how cinema constructs gendered spectatorship through voice, space, and narrative positioning [3,4].

In contrast, films by women directors—such as *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and *Anatomy of a Fall*—disrupt this convention [1,5]. They unsettle and redistribute the dynamics of the gaze. Departing from positioning women as passive objects, they instead foreground a gaze characterized by intersubjectivity, ambiguity, and resistance [6]. Such visual strategies pave the way for new possibilities for reimagining the relationship between vision, power, and gender.

To further understand this shift, feminist film theory has expanded its analytical dimensions. For example, Laura Marks's concept of "haptic visibility" emphasizes a mode of viewing that evokes tactility through texture, skin, and surface detail, while Teresa de Lauretis's notion of "narrative space-off" highlights how silence and omission within narrative create spaces of interpretation for resistant subjectivities [7,8]. At the same time, contemporary theorists such as Gill and Orgad argue that the cultural logics of "intimization" and "self-perception" have increasingly become crucial sites of gender politics [9]. Taken together, these frameworks offer useful tools for analyzing how contemporary women directors reconstruct visual power and redefine the spectator's position.

1.2. Research gaps

Over the past several decades, feminist film theory has generated a substantial body of research on the politics of spectatorship. Research on the "male gaze" has revealed how patriarchal power is embedded in the very form of cinema [2-4], while discussions of the "female gaze" have sought to account for the emergence of women directors' visual strategies in recent years [10]. At the same time, theories centered on bodily perception have gradually gained prominence: Laura Marks's concept of "haptic visibility" is often applied in the study of cross-cultural and experimental cinema [7], while Teresa de Lauretis's notion of "narrative space-off" has, in turn, inspired discussions on women's narratives and subjectivity [8].

However, in much of the scholarship, these frameworks tend to be examined separately. Currently, analyses of the gaze remain largely situated within a visual-psychoanalytic paradigm. By contrast, studies of haptic cinema emphasize sensory immersion but seldom engage with issues of gender and power [6,11]. Similarly, the potential of "narrative space-off" as a strategy of resistance has rarely been explored. Few works consider it in dialogue with either the politics of the gaze or the haptic dimensions of the image.

Existing scholarship also highlights the limits of its scope. Much of it concentrates on the Anglo-American context or on case studies of individual directors. In recent years, however, the works of major European figures such as Céline Sciamma and Justine Triet have yet to receive the level of scholarly attention they deserve. Even as research on women directors expands, films are often examined one by one, with little effort made to compare them across genres. Yet genre is never neutral. Historical romances tend to idealize heterosexual desire, while courtroom dramas often

reaffirm institutional authority [12]. This makes it important to ask how women directors, through strategies such as “haptic visuality” and “narrative space-off,” might challenge or rework these conventions.

1.3. Research aims and questions

Building on these research gaps, this article aims to examine how contemporary women directors challenge the visual power of the “male gaze” through cinematic and narrative strategies. Using Céline Sciamma’s *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* [1] and Justine Triet’s *Anatomy of a Fall* [5] as case studies, the study draws on Marks’s concept of “haptic visuality” [7] and de Lauretis’s notion of “narrative space-off” [8], and, with reference to recent theoretical developments [9,13], examines how women directors unsettle patriarchal conventions of representation in cinema. This article situates the two films within feminist film theory as well as current scholarship on gender and spectatorship. In doing so, it shows how cinematic form can serve as a site of resistance.

On this basis, the present study poses the following questions:

1. How do Sciamma and Triet, through cinematic form and narrative design, weaken or subvert the visual power of the “male gaze”?
2. How are “haptic visuality” and “narrative space-off” differently articulated in the genres of historical romance and courtroom drama?
3. How do these visual strategies interact with contemporary gender politics, and what significance do they hold for feminist practices of spectatorship?

1.4. Methodology and materials

This study employs qualitative textual analysis, conducting close readings at the level of individual scenes in Céline Sciamma’s *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and Justine Triet’s *Anatomy of a Fall* [1,5]. The analysis focuses on cinematography, mise-en-scène, shot composition, and editing rhythm, as well as on how silence, ambiguity, and narrative ellipsis shape the position of the spectator. This study juxtaposes two very different genres: a historical romance and a contemporary courtroom drama. By setting them side by side, it asks how women directors use cinematic strategies to unsettle traditions that have long been tied to patriarchy.

The choice of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and *Anatomy of a Fall* as case studies is based on three main considerations: First, both films have received wide critical acclaim worldwide and won awards at major international festivals such as Cannes, Venice, and the Oscars, which makes them highly representative within contemporary screen culture [1,5]. Second, Sciamma and Triet are significant voices in contemporary European cinema, yet compared with their Anglo-American counterparts, their work has not received sustained scholarly attention. Finally, although the two films differ markedly in genre, both seek to unsettle traditional structures of gaze and narrative power. This makes them an ideal site for cross-genre comparison through the theoretical frameworks of “haptic visuality” and “narrative space-off.”

2. Analysis

2.1. Portrait of a lady on fire

The authors are strongly encouraged to use this document for the preparation of your paper. Please use the .docx format (all versions after Word 2007 for PC and Word 2011 for Mac) and do not add any text to the headers (do not set running heads) nor to the footers. Unlike the fragmented close-ups

of female bodies often seen in classic cinema, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* favours extended takes and eye-level medium shots, placing Marianne and Héloïse's entire figures within balanced compositions [1]. This form of choice not only resists the pleasure of voyeurism but also introduces the audience into a mutually subjective viewing mode [2].

This strategy is first demonstrated in the seaside scene at the beginning of the film. Marianne initially looks over Héloïse's shoulder, evoking a traditional voyeuristic dynamic; however, the shot-reverse-shot structure is broken when Héloïse suddenly looks back. As Scateni points out, this “reversal of the gaze” forces the audience to acknowledge female subjectivity rather than being merely passive objects of viewing [14]. This scene not only responds to Mulvey's concept of the “male gaze” but also complicates it: the gaze is redistributed, generating a new visual logic [2].

This resistance is then further reinforced in the portrait scene. Marianne, as the painter, seems to hold the power of representation. Yet the film disrupts this by inserting Héloïse's steady returning gaze, which unsettles the hierarchy between artist and subject. The audience is thus placed in an oscillating viewing position, and the authority of representation itself is shaken [2].

This visual logic is transferred to the tactile level in the bonfire scene. The flames flicker on Héloïse's skin and fabric, the sound fades briefly, and the narrative pauses. The camera's close-up highlights the texture, inviting the viewer to engage in a tactile way. As Marks puts it, this is a way of “seeing through texture and surface” [7]. Sciamma does not express desire through nudity, but rather evokes embodied emotional experience through light, texture, and rhythm [7,15].

Finally, the film creates a “narrative space-off” through omission and silence. Desire is never presented directly; instead, it is conveyed through pauses, concealment, and deferred revelation—for instance, the prolonged silence after the first kiss. Such narrative ellipses compel the spectator to construct meaning within the gaps, thereby opening a space for resistance to patriarchal storytelling [8].

In sum, Sciamma's strategies resist the “male gaze” not only at the formal and narrative levels but, more importantly, by reconstructing the conditions of spectatorship and inviting viewers into a mode of looking that is intersubjective and embodied.

2.2. Anatomy of a fall

Unlike Sciamma, who reshapes spectatorship in the romantic genre through intersubjectivity and haptic visuality, Triet's *Anatomy of a Fall* turns to the courtroom drama, a genre centered on institutional authority, and subjects it to systematic destabilization [5]. Traditional courtroom films often rely on panoramic shots and narrative closure to affirm the transparency and truth of the law. Triet, however, disrupts this convention through obscured perspectives, heightened emphasis on sound, and the omission of key events [10].

This can be seen in the courtroom scenes, where Sandra is often filmed at an oblique angle or partially obscured from view. This visual strategy denies the spectator a position of “objective panorama” and calls institutional authority into question. As Galt observes, such framing exposes the tension around the impossibility of truth in legal imagery, a point that resonates with Berlant's analysis of institutional authority and unstable subjectivity [12,16]. Unlike Sciamma, who reconstructs an intersubjective gaze within a romantic space, Triet weakens the stability of the visual anchor, leaving the spectator in a state of epistemological uncertainty [2,17].

The film then extends “haptic visuality” into the realm of sound. The dull thud of Samuel's fall, the surrounding noise, and the blurred sounds perceived through Daniel's hearing impairment together underscore the embodied and unreliable nature of perception. As Marks suggests, this is an expansion of “haptic viewing”: the spectator does not “see the truth” but rather “feels uncertainty”

through sonic blurring and reverberation [7]. This auditory form of haptic experience not only broadens the scope of the theory but also reinforces the spectator's unstable position within the courtroom narrative.

Finally, the film constructs an epistemological void through narrative ellipsis. The crucial moments of Samuel's fall are never directly presented, leaving the audience to interpret the events amidst ambiguous testimonies and conflicting narratives. This blank space is not an emotional delay, but rather a core means of creating a space of uncertainty. As Elsaesser argues, Triet transforms the "uncertainty of truth" into an interpretive responsibility that the audience must bear, a point further developed by Buckland in his analysis of narrative complexity [18,19].

To conclude, by means of visual obscuration, auditory tactility, and narrative omission, Triet recasts the courtroom drama, shifting it from a space of truth-disclosure to one of truth's absence. Compared with Sciamma's strategies, Triet does not offer an intersubjective space of intimacy but instead compels the spectator to confront institutional bias and the gendered crisis of credibility. This divergence not only shows how women directors mobilize the forces of "space-off" and "haptics" across different genres, but also lays the groundwork for the comparative discussion that follows.

2.3. Comparative analysis

After the individual analyses of the two films, it becomes clear that their visual strategies reveal both commonalities and important differences. Both employ haptic visuality and narrative space-off to challenge the power logic of the "male gaze," yet they follow divergent paths. Sciamma tends to generate intersubjective relations of desire through immersion in emotion and intimacy, whereas Triet uses narrative structures of ambiguity and uncertainty to compel the spectator to take on the task of critical interpretation. The former invites the spectator to feel intimacy, while the latter forces them to confront uncertainty.

This difference is not only reflected in the narrative atmosphere but also reveals potential breakthroughs at the theoretical level. Sciamma demonstrates how female desire can be represented within a non-objectifying visual context, thereby responding to, and extending Mulvey's critique of the "male gaze" [2]. Triet, by contrast, shows that haptic strategies can move beyond the visual surface, extending into sound and the very structure of legal narrative, thereby pushing Marks's notion of "haptic visuality" and de Lauretis's theory of "narrative space-off" into new contexts [7,8,13]. These two works, therefore, not only resonate with established feminist film theory but also extend its boundaries through concrete cinematic practices, redefining the relationship between spectator and image [10]. As Gledhill argues, the negotiation between pleasure and critique is itself a central dynamic of feminist spectatorship [20].

3. Discussion

3.1. Theoretical implications

This study raises three core questions: how do female directors undermine the visual power of the "male gaze"? How do "haptic visuality" and "narrative space-off" function across genres? And how do these strategies interact with contemporary gender politics? A comparative analysis of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and *Anatomy of a Fall* reveals that both directors undermine the visual logic of patriarchy, but in very different ways [1,5].

In Sciamma's film, mutual subjectivity replaces dominance: Héloïse's look back breaks the voyeuristic viewing relationship and invites the audience into a relational viewing mode [10,20]. In contrast, Triet's courtroom drama undermines authority through instability: angled compositions and obstructed views refuse to offer viewers a stable "panoramic shot"[12]. Both weaken the "male gaze", but also expose the limitations of the theory—Mulvey's model assumes that the audience is passive, while these films reposition the audience as intimate or uncertain active participants [2].

Similarly, haptics and narrative space-off are activated in different ways across genres. The haptic visuality of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* [1] —through fire, fabric, and skin—immerses the spectator in an atmosphere of emotional intimacy [7,15]; *Anatomy of a Fall*, by contrast, shifts haptics to the auditory dimension: the dull thud of Samuel's fall, the ambient noise, and Daniel's impaired hearing together underscore the embodied experience of uncertainty [5,19]. Narrative space-off also takes distinct forms: Sciamma's emotional ellipses gesture toward unspoken desire, whereas Triet's epistemological gaps resist the closure of legal discourse [8,20]. This contrast demonstrates that feminist strategies are not confined to a single genre but operate flexibly according to context: creating intimacy in the romance film and generating uncertainty in the courtroom drama [6].

3.2. Developments and extensions

The contributions of this research are mainly reflected in three aspects. Theoretically, the two films demonstrate that feminist film theory is not only still applicable but also needs to be revised. Mulvey's "male gaze" assumes that the audience is a passive recipient, but both Sciamma's mutual subject gaze and Triet's narrative of uncertainty force the audience into an active interpretive position [2,10,16]. Marks' "haptic visuality" originally focused on visual texture, while Triet extended it to the sound dimension, breaking the premise of visual centrism [7,15]. De Lauretis' "narrative space-off" initially emphasized the blank space of desire, while Triet's film demonstrated its potential to generate epistemological blanks in legal narratives [8,20]. These films are not "examples" of existing theories, but rather interlocutors that force theories to shift in practice [13].

At the methodological level, the research demonstrated the unique value of text close reading combined with feminist theory. Microscopic image details can be closely linked to macroscopic cultural politics: the scene of looking back at the seaside not only reveals the reverse shot mechanism but also touches upon the ethics of queer viewing [14]; the soundscape of Samuel's fall is not only a technical treatment but also involves public issues such as women's credibility and judicial justice [19]. This methodology provides a reference for analyzing streaming films, digital images, and cross-media narratives, as both tactile experiences and spacing strategies play an increasingly important role in these contexts [9,11]. Of course, future research can also combine audience research and industry research to complement the limitations of text analysis.

At the cultural level, the two films highlight the migration and differentiation of feminist aesthetics in a transnational context. Sciamma's rewriting of romantic films echoes the queer visibility debate in the European art film tradition, emphasizing the dematerialized representation of female desires [10]; Triet's deconstruction of court authority echoes the "credibility crisis" in the context of the global #MeToo, highlighting the tension between institutions and gender power [6,12]. This indicates that feminist imaging strategies can not only transcend cultural boundaries but also adjust their ways of resistance and criticism according to contextual differences.

3.3. Summary

In conclusion, although the two films take different paths, Sciamma generates desire through intimate immersion, while Triet forces the audience to undertake interpretation through an uncertain narrative [10,20]. However, the two jointly lay the foundation for a revelation: the film-watching practice of contemporary feminism is not merely "seeing differently" but is incorporated into films in different ways. This reset not only promotes the development of feminist film studies at the theoretical level, demonstrates the cross-disciplinary value of textual analysis at the methodological level, but also responds to the practical challenges of contemporary gender politics at the cultural level.

4. Conclusion

This article explores how female directors challenge and reconstruct the power logic of the "male gaze" through "haptic visuality" and "narrative space-off" strategies. Taking Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and Justine Triet's *Anatomy of a Fall* as case studies, the study answers three core questions: How do female directors weaken the "male gaze"? How these strategies operate in different types, and how they interact with contemporary gender politics.

The research results show that the "male gaze" has not only been resisted but also re-conceptualized. In Sciamma's romantic films, the mutual subject gazes and emotional blanks place the audience in a network of intimate and empathetic relationships; In Triet's courtroom films, occlusion, tactile sound, and narrative omission force the audience to confront uncertainty and participate in the judgment and construction of the truth. These two paths jointly reveal that the audience is no longer passive gazing objects but active participants, and their positions are constantly reset due to the film's strategy.

Further comparison reveals that "haptic visuality" and "narrative space-off" are cross-genre transferable feminist strategies. In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, they create an emotional intimacy through visual texture and silent blank space; In *Anatomy of a Fall*, they create epistemological uncertainty through blurry voices and the absence of narrative. This indicates that feminist aesthetics is context-sensitive: in romantic films, it creates an intimate space of desire; In the courtroom drama, it reveals the fragility of authority and truth.

The significance of these findings is reflected on three levels: Theoretically, this study shows that feminist film theory still retains strong interpretive power, but it must evolve along with contemporary cinematic practice. Concepts of the gaze need to be reconsidered, tactile strategies can extend beyond the visual into sound, and narrative spacing may function simultaneously on emotional and epistemological levels. Methodologically, close textual reading proves effective in connecting micro-level cinematic details with broader cultural politics. Culturally, feminist strategies demonstrate cross-border flexibility: Sciamma's works highlight the articulation of female desire within the European art film tradition, while Triet's works resonate with the credibility crisis that has emerged in the global #MeToo movement.

Future research can further expand on these findings. For instance, examining gender and body issues in science fiction films or documentaries might reveal new forms of tactile and spacing strategies; Cross-cultural comparative studies (such as the works of female directors in East Asia, Latin America, or the context of streaming media) also help to understand the variations of these strategies in different social environments. Furthermore, discussions on how virtual reality, interactive images, or algorithmic recommendations shape feminist viewing styles will also deepen our understanding of contemporary mediated intimacy and gender politics.

A comparative analysis of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and *Anatomy of a Fall* shows that contemporary feminist film-watching practices do not merely mean "seeing differently" but also mean dwelling in films in different ways. By reshaping visuals, sounds, and narratives, Sciamma and Triet have transformed film into a field interwoven with intimacy, resistance, and uncertainty - they not only offer critical tools for film, but also open new imaginative Spaces for audiences, gender, and politics in the 21st century.

Like the gaze exchanged by the bonfire, these images reveal a mode of looking that moves beyond dominance and certainty: at once intense and fragile, intimate yet unsettled. In such light and shadow, cinema becomes a call that continues to burn—inviting spectators to see one another, and the world, in new ways.

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