



Semiotic Analysis of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*: Visual Codes, Cultural Meanings and Mythological Reflections

Seyda Sena Köylü*

Master Student, Institute of Social Sciences, Selçuk University, Konya, Türkiye

ORCID: 0000-0001-7490-4027

ABSTRACT

Today's cinema is being reshaped by feminist and queer-oriented aesthetic pursuits that produce alternatives to classical narrative structures and patriarchal gaze regimes. In this new cinematic language where the image functions as a political and cultural means of representation not only on the surface but also in deeper layers of meaning, semiotic analysis emerges as a prominent method of interpretation. In this context, *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019), directed by Céline Sciamma, stands out as a cinematic example that powerfully rewrites the representation of the female gaze, queer love, and mythological references in a contemporary context. In this study, selected scenes from the film were analyzed through a semiotic method. The analysis was based on Roland Barthes's semiotic model, with additional theoretical depth provided by Jacques Lacan's mirror stage theory, Laura Mulvey's critique of the male gaze, Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, and John Berger's critiques of female representation. Moreover, the analysis specifically focused on mythological meaning structures through the reinterpretation of the Orpheus and Eurydice narrative and the Demeter cult. The findings reveal that the film brings the female body and queer love into the process of subjectification at the cinematic level, and that it reverses the representational codes of classical art and mythology to create a new visual and political space.

Keywords: *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, semiotics, female gaze, queer cinema, mythology, representation.

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* **Corresponding author | Sorumlu yazar:** s.senakoylu@gmail.com

***Portrait of a Lady on Fire* Üzerine Göstergibilimsel Bir Okuma: Görsel Kodlar, Kültürel Temsiller ve Mitolojik İmgeler**

ÖZ

Günümüz sineması, klasik anlatı yapılarına ve ataerkil bakış rejimlerine alternatif üreten feminist ve queer odaklı estetik arayışlarla yeniden biçimlenmektedir. Görüntünün sadece yüzeyde değil, derin anlam katmanlarında da politik ve kültürel bir temsil aracı olduğu bu yeni sinema dilinde, göstergibilimsel analiz yöntemi öne çıkan bir çözümlenme aracı haline gelmiştir. Bu bağlamda, Céline Sciamma'nın *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (Tr. *Alev Almış Bir Genç Kızın Portresi*) filmi, kadın bakışını, queer aşkın temsiliyetini ve mitolojik referansların çağdaş yorumunu güçlü bir biçimde yeniden yazan sinemasal örneklerden biridir. Çalışmada, filmin seçilmiş sahneleri göstergibilimsel yöntemle analiz edilmiştir. Roland Barthes'ın göstergibilim modeli temel alınmış; ayrıca Jacques Lacan'ın ayna evresi kuramı, Laura Mulvey'nin ataerkil bakış eleştirisi, Julia Kristeva'nın abjection kavramı ve John Berger'in kadın temsiline dair eleştirileriyle çözümlenmeye kuramsal derinlik kazandırılmıştır. Bunun yanı sıra, filmde Orpheus ve Eurydice anlatısı ile Demeter kültü üzerinden mitolojik anlam yapılarına da özel olarak odaklanılmıştır. Analiz sonucunda, filmde kadın bedeninin ve queer aşkın sinemasal düzeyde özneleşme sürecine taşındığı; klasik sanat ve mitoloji tarihinin temsil kodlarının tersine çevrilerek yeni bir görsel ve politik alan yaratıldığı tespit edilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, göstergibilim, kadın bakışı, queer sinema, mitoloji, temsil.

Introduction

Cinema is not merely a narrative medium; it is also an audiovisual language through which social values, cultural identities, and ideological structures are reproduced. The language of cinema does not only provide the spectator with a narrative flow; it also renders social codes visible through multiple elements that range from the direction of gazes and the arrangement of framing to the use of symbols and the functionalization of spaces. Therefore, a semiotic analysis of cinema enables us to grasp not only the surface-level storyline but also the meanings that formal choices, images, and symbols correspond within their social context. In this sense, cinema can be deciphered as a visual archive of ideology and cultural memory.

Within this framework, Céline Sciamma's *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, 2019) emerges as one of the most striking examples of contemporary feminist cinema. While narrating the forbidden love between two young women in 18th-century France, the film adopts a strong critical stance toward the gender norms of its era. Awarded the "Best Screenplay" prize at the Cannes Film Festival, the film has attracted attention for reinterpreting an individual love story set in a historical context within the tradition of feminist cinema. By placing the female gaze at its center, Sciamma's film produces an alternative aesthetic to patriarchal cinematic language, thereby opening to question the male-centered visual codes of classical film history (Çöm, 2023).

Sciamma's approach can be directly associated with Laura Mulvey's critique of the male gaze in patriarchal cinema. Mulvey (1975) emphasizes that in classical cinema, women are often reduced to the position of the "looked-at object," represented in accordance with male desire. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, however, reverses this gaze by repositioning women as figures who look, think, and subjectify themselves. This perspective resonates with John Berger's observations on art history. According to Berger, throughout history women have been represented "in order to be seen," with visual culture constructed to cater to the male gaze. Sciamma subverts this representational pattern, removing women from passivity and situating them as subjects of their own gaze (Berger, 2004).

The focus of this study is the analysis of the visual and narrative structures of the film within the framework of Roland Barthes' two-tiered semiotic theory. Barthes posits that signs operate on both the denotative and connotative levels. For him, signs not only carry the direct meaning of something but also reproduce cultural, ideological, and political values by being imbued with these connotations (Barthes, 1979). This approach draws upon Saussure's linguistic model, adapting it to the multilayered structure of cultural products such as cinema. The analysis of cinematic signs, therefore, reveals not only the story conveyed by the narrative but also how that story is constructed, which symbols are employed to reinforce it, and what ideological meanings these symbols carry (Karaman, 2017). Consequently, the primary aim of this study is to analyze the visual elements employed in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* through a semiotic method, thereby uncovering alternative narrative forms of female representation. This analysis will not only contribute to feminist and queer cinema discussions but also offer a contemporary reinterpretation of the interaction between cinema and mythology.

The Relationship Between Cinema and Mythology

Mythology, as one of the oldest narrative forms in human history, functions as a discourse that transmits cultural memory through universal symbols, archetypes, and rituals. Myths are not merely remnants of the past but also representations of social order and the collective unconscious carried into the present. In this regard, cinema serves as a powerful medium that facilitates the reproduction of mythological narratives in the modern age. As a form of moving images, cinema is inherently an art of action and movement, and it conveys the discourses of

social life by encoding forms, figures, and representations into cinematic narratives (Aytaş, 2020, p. 91). From this perspective, cinema does not merely depict myths visually; it produces a designed cultural memory by transforming symbolic narratives into aesthetic objects that actively shape subjectivity and meaning-making processes (Ulutaş, 2020). Through cinema, mythological stories are transformed, updated, and endowed with new ideological meanings within contemporary social contexts. As emphasized in Tüysüz's study *Mitolojinin Sinemada Modern Yorumu (The Modern Interpretation of Mythology in Cinema)* (2019), myths are continuously reproduced across different art forms such as literature, painting, theater, music, and cinema. According to Tüysüz, myths are dynamic components of social culture, and cinema sustains these components through contemporary aesthetic pursuits. This renders cinema not only a medium of visual narration but also a cultural site where myths acquire renewed meanings in contemporary contexts. Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949/2010), argues that myths from different cultures share a common narrative structure. With the model he defines as the "hero's journey" (monomyth), Campbell brings myths together within a universal framework. This model has frequently been employed as a fundamental analytical tool in hero-centered cinematic narratives most notably in the *Star Wars* series (Vogler, 1998). Focusing on the ideological function of myth in modern societies, Roland Barthes, in his work *Mythologies* (1957/2014), defines myth as a "system of communication." For Barthes, myth is not the thing itself but rather a "form of meaning" (p. 109). Thus, mythological representations in cinema should be regarded not only as narrative devices but also as instruments of ideological reproduction. For instance, while classical myths often centered on patriarchal narratives of heroism, their feminist and queer reinterpretations in contemporary cinema signify a rewriting of the ideological nature of myth (Barthes, 2014). Carl Gustav Jung (1968/2019) argues that mythological narratives function as a bridge between the individual unconscious and the collective unconscious. Jung's theory of archetypes explains how universal figures such as the hero, the mother, the shadow, and the wise old man are continually repeated in myths and, consequently, in cinema. As Jung notes, "Archetypes continue to function in the human psyche even if they are not consciously experienced" (2019, p. 38), thereby highlighting the psychological continuity of myths. Cinema, therefore, serves as a crucial domain for the re-staging of archetypes within modern contexts.

There are also studies that examine the relationship between myth and cinema within feminist and queer frameworks. In their study on *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, Onat and Çöm (2023) demonstrate through a semiotic analysis how mythological references in the film intertwine with themes of gender and queerness. Similarly, Gül's (2018) master's thesis, which investigates the traces of Greek mythology in the cinema of Angelopoulos, analyzes how myths are carried into the narrative dynamics of contemporary art through examples of modern cinema. In this regard, studies on Parajanov's cinema are also noteworthy. The article by Aytaş and Demir (2024), *Narın Rengi (1969) Filminin Göstergibilimsel Analizi (A Semiotic Analysis of the Film The Color of Pomegranates (1969))*, reveals how a visual structure enriched with religious rituals, iconography, and mythological stories can generate multilayered meanings through semiotic analysis. Such analyses demonstrate that the relationship between cinema and mythology intertwines not only at an aesthetic level but also within cultural identity, ideology, and political contexts. Accordingly, the use of the Orpheus–Eurydice narrative and the references to the Demeter cult in Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* exemplify how mythological symbols are transformed through cinematic aesthetics. While the film reconfigures the Orpheus narrative by placing female characters at the center of the myth, the Demeter cult allows for a reinterpretation of women's ritualistic past in the context of queer desire and feminist aesthetics. Thus, the relationship between cinema and mythology necessitates a multilayered analysis on formal, thematic, and ideological levels.

Method

This study examines Céline Sciamma's *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*) through the method of semiotic analysis. Semiotics is an interdisciplinary field that undertakes the structural examination of processes of meaning-making and communication. Ferdinand de Saussure defined semiology as a branch of linguistics and argued that the sign consists of two components: the signifier (form) and the signified (concept). Roland Barthes, however, expanded this model and transformed it into a tool of cultural critique, demonstrating how ideologies in modern societies are "naturalized" through signs (Barthes, 1979; Bingöl, 2024). The study is based on Barthes' two-level semiotic model. In line with this model, the visual and narrative elements of the film are analyzed on both the denotative and connotative levels. In this framework, cinematic signs such as camera movements, use of light, costume, setting, color choices, silences, and direction of the gaze were selected as units of analysis. These elements were assumed to function not only as aesthetic devices but also as carriers of ideological discourse (Karaman, 2017). Thus, the film was interpreted not merely as a love story but also as a narrative of resistance and a form of counter-ideological representation. In addition to Barthes' approach, several theoretical frameworks were employed in the analysis process. Jacques Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage" was used to assess how the subject recognizes itself through an idealized image in the external world and how this plays a fragile role in the process of subject formation (Lacan, 2006, p. 94). The use of mirrors and frames in the film was considered as an analytical tool that reveals the relationship between subjectivation and social roles.

Furthermore, Laura Mulvey's (1975) critique of the male gaze in patriarchal cinema constituted one of the primary reference points. The study examined how Sciamma's camera establishes an alternative cinematic language that highlights female desire and the queer gaze, rather than reproducing the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975, p. 15). Julia Kristeva's (1982) concept of "abjection" provided a framework for analyzing how the female body is suppressed and constrained in cultural representation; within this light, the film's staging of the body and desire beyond normative representational codes was interpreted (Kristeva, 1982, p. 38). John Berger's (2004) critique of the representation of women in art history was also employed in the analytical stage. Based on Berger's observation that "throughout history, women have been represented in order to be seen," the study evaluated how female characters in the film are positioned not only as the looked-at but also as figures who construct the gaze and emerge as subjects (Berger, 2004, p. 47). The analysis of details such as hands, gazes, and body language made this reversed representational practice visible.

The scope of the research encompasses contemporary films that incorporate mythological references reinterpreted within feminist and queer aesthetics. However, the study is limited to Céline Sciamma's *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*. The film was selected through purposeful sampling, as it both centers the female gaze and reinterprets the Orpheus–Eurydice myth and references to the Demeter cult within a queer aesthetic. Methodologically, therefore, this study carries out a multilayered analysis grounded in Barthes' semiotic approach and deepened through the theoretical contributions of Lacan, Mulvey, Kristeva, and Berger. Specific scenes from the film were taken as focal points for the analysis. In particular:

1. The scene of the burning dress (the metaphor of fire and the visualization of memory),
2. The rocky passage scene (the birth of female identity and the transgression of social boundaries),
3. The fireplace scene holding the flames (the relationship between the artist-subject and desire),

4. The headless mirror reflection scene (the reduction of identity to social representation),
5. The face-in-the-mirror scene (the female gaze and queer subjectivation),
6. The museum portrait scene (the conflict between social roles and individual memory)

These examples constitute the primary sample of the study. In this way, both visual codes and cultural meanings have been analyzed in a multilayered manner.

The Mythological and Cultural Background of the Film Poster: The Demeter Cult and Women's Rituals

In the film poster, one of the protagonists, Héloïse, is depicted standing upright in a dark natural landscape while the lower part of her dress is set ablaze. This scene can be read not merely as a visual metaphor but also as a cultural symbol that carries traces of rituals exclusive to women in Ancient Greece. When associated with the fertility and reproductive festivals held in honor of the agricultural goddess Demeter, the image acquires a profound mythological subtext.

The Demeter cult, in Ancient Greek mythology, symbolizes fertility, motherhood, and rebirth. The Demeter and Persephone rituals known as the Eleusinian Mysteries not only celebrated the cyclical renewal of nature but also functioned within the collective memory of women as symbols of purification, empowerment, and resurrection (Burkert, 1985). Among these rituals, one of the most remarkable was the Thesmophoria, a festival attended solely by women, during which rituals symbolizing fertility were performed (Uzunoğlu, 2021). In this context, the flame in the poster symbolizes not only destruction but also rebirth, inner transformation, and the expression of repressed desires. In such rituals, fire represents purification and the acquisition of a new identity. Thus, Héloïse's burning skirt signifies both a rite of passage and a threshold where the experience of womanhood is tested by fire (Detienne, 1989).

In the corresponding scenes of the film, the protagonists exchange gazes, engage in increasing physical intimacy, and ultimately consummate their relationship. The flames in the poster symbolize this inner awakening that precedes union. In this sense, the poster is not only an aesthetic composition but also a cinematographic manifestation of mythological archetypes and the ritualistic past associated with women.

Semiotic Analysis of the Film

The film narrates the story of Marianne, a young painter who is commissioned to secretly paint the portrait of Héloïse, a woman forced into marriage, and how an emotional intimacy gradually develops between them. The portrait that Marianne creates through her observations is not merely a physical representation, but also a reflection of the emotional bond and the gaze shared between women (Çöm, 2023). Late 18th-century France presents a social structure in which women are defined by roles of marriage, motherhood, and obedience. The film addresses this period not only within an aesthetic framework but also with a critical perspective. In a time when women were excluded from artistic production and rendered invisible in the public sphere, Marianne's identity as a female painter acquires further significance (Çöm, 2023; Bingöl, 2024).

One of the film's central scenes is when Marianne, Héloïse, and their servant Sophie sit around a table and read aloud the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. This scene contributes directly to the thematic depth of the film, functioning not merely as a mythological reference but as a structural motif embedded at the narrative's core. The brief dialogue that follows the reading illustrates the plurality of interpretations: while Marianne relates Orpheus' choice to art by saying,

“Perhaps he made a choice; not the lover’s, but the poet’s choice,” Héloïse subverts this interpretation by re-subjectivizing the woman: “Perhaps it was she who said, ‘Turn around.’”

This short exchange resonates dramatically later in the film. As Marianne departs the house, Héloïse, standing in her wedding dress in the corridor, calls after her: “Turn around!” This utterance functions both as a direct reference to the myth and as a farewell that acknowledges the inevitable end of their relationship. For Héloïse, who must marry, and Marianne, who must leave, the moment becomes a breaking point crowned by the final look of their love.

According to the classical version of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, the two figures, bound by deep love, are separated immediately after their marriage when Eurydice dies from a snakebite. Orpheus transforms his grief into music and begs the gods to return her. Hades consents under one condition: Orpheus must not turn to look back at Eurydice until they reach the surface. Yet, just as they are about to emerge into the light, Orpheus cannot resist and looks back, losing her forever. In the film, this myth functions not only as a parallel narrative but also as a powerful visual metaphor. Marianne’s final glance at Héloïse is not only a scene of separation but also a transformation of love into memory. This final image of Héloïse remains in Marianne’s mind and later permeates her portraits and drawings just as Orpheus transforms his loss into music. In this sense, the gaze becomes not merely an act but a process of both loss and memory production (Çöm, 2023).

Toward the end of the film, in a scene set in an exhibition, one of Marianne’s paintings is revealed as a reinterpreted version of the Orpheus myth. In this portrait, the lovers are depicted facing each other. A man observing the painting comments, “It is as if they are saying farewell to one another,” articulating the emotional intensity of the gaze. This remark encapsulates not only the content of the painting but also the entire narrative structure of the film. When evaluated in the context of Barthes’ concept of myth, this scene demonstrates how the Orpheus narrative is re-signified through the film and transformed within the framework of gender politics (Barthes, 1979; Bingöl, 2024). Sciamma’s rewriting displaces the male hero from the center of the myth, situating women both as narrators and as subjects of the story. As Berger (2004) asserts, positioning women not merely as the looked-at but as subjects who look constitutes a fundamental step in the transformation of visual culture. The film achieves this transformation through a classical myth, reconstructing mythological history within the framework of feminist cinema.



Figure 1. The staging of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth – Héloïse’s line “Turn around!” (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, dir. Céline Sciamma, 2019).



Figure 2. Marianne's final gaze at Héloïse - a visual reference to the Orpheus myth (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, 2019).

The film opens with painter Marianne encountering, in her classroom while posing for her students, a painting she once created. The painting depicts a solitary female figure whose skirt is aflame against the darkness of night. Within the narrative, this scene does not function as an actual event but rather as a representation revived in memory, symbolizing the painter's emotional connection to the past. As the story unfolds, it is revealed that this image is, in fact, a reflection of Héloïse's portrait. Thus, the scene occupies a dual position: it appears both at the beginning of the narrative and, emotionally, at its conclusion. Although temporally situated in the past, it operates at the narrative level as a visual "monument" that foreshadows the future.

Signifier: A solitary female figure with a burning skirt, presented in the form of a painting.
Signified: A dark natural setting, a static figure, and a small flame as the sole source of light.
Meaning: The woman's inner combustion, the representation of repressed desires and love, and a visual metaphor for lasting memory.


According to Roland Barthes' (1979) semiotic model, while this image denotes a woman in flames within a nocturnal landscape, at the connotative level it carries profound cultural, emotional, and ideological significance. The flame here is not merely a physical phenomenon but also a symbol of transformation, the burning intensity of love, and the embodiment of suppressed desire. The painting further marks the intersection of memory and representation that is constructed throughout the narrative. The image that remains within the painter's memory symbolizes the enduring visual permanence of love.

John Berger's (2004) critique of "the way women are represented" becomes functional at this point. Marianne transforms her past relationship into an object of the gaze; however, this gaze, unlike the traditional male gaze, is suffused with loss and longing. Here, woman becomes simultaneously subject (the one who lives) and object (the one who is remembered). The structural features of the painting, and particularly the use of fire, also carry references to the Demeter cult and the fertility rituals exclusive to women in Ancient Greece (Burkert, 1985; Uzunoğlu, 2021). As in the Thesmophoria festivals, fire here can be read as a symbol of purification, transition, and inner strength. Héloïse's static posture signifies a transformation of love from a bodily interface into an inner process of subjectivation. From the perspective of the film's narrative strategy, this scene serves as an anchoring point of the narrative: it is both a visual summary of the past and the future, and a bearer of both memory and representation. The painting shown to the audience at the beginning of the film later acquires its emotional context as the story progresses. It demonstrates that Marianne is not only a painter but also a witness.



Figure 3. Héloïse’s figure in flames as recalled in Marianne’s memory – a visual reference to the permanence of love, the inner burning of desire, and a frozen moment in memory (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, 2019).

Table 1. Semiotic analysis of the painting of the woman in flames

SIGN	SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED
A painting depicting a solitary woman with her skirt on fire within a night landscape.	Dark sky, boundless emptiness, a woman fixed to the ground, and the small light of a flame.	A visual metaphor representing a woman left alone in endless darkness, embodying her inner energy and emotional burning.
	Denotation A painting depicting a woman, standing still in the darkness of night, with her skirt catching fire.	Connotation The inevitable emergence of suppressed passions under social constraints; the burning force of love and freedom.

Marianne disembarks from a boat full of men and slowly makes her way to the shore carrying canvases, entering a passage beneath a large rock formation. An official tells her, “you will come out from these rocks.” Beyond functioning as the film’s spatial opening scene, this sequence marks the beginning of the character’s journey in both a personal and historical context. It symbolically conveys the woman’s position in society, her relationship with her body, and the struggles she is destined to face.

Sign: A solitary female figure passing through a natural rock passage.
Signifier: The shoreline, the exit from the sea, the rock formation, Marianne’s body burdened with canvases, and the voice of the male official observing her.
Signified: The woman’s individual journey from a male-dominated world toward her own feminine space, the transgression of social constraints and patriarchal boundaries, and the beginning of fertility and rebirth.

According to Roland Barthes’ (1979) semiotic model, this visual structure can be read at the denotative level as the act of walking through a natural passage, while at the connotative level it is associated with the character’s subjectivation, transformation, and resistance. The rocky passage is not only a natural element but also a threshold, a boundary, and a site where the individual reconstructs herself. In 18th-century France, women’s participation in public life, art, and intellectual production was highly restricted. Women were largely deprived of social rights

and individual freedoms. Olympe de Gouges' *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen* (1791/2010) constitutes one of the earliest systematic documents demanding equal citizenship for women (Gouges, 1791/2010; Trouille, 1997). Marianne's solitary passage is thus not merely a geographical movement but a symbolic walk that challenges a space historically closed off to women. The form of the rock formation through which Marianne passes resembles a cervix. This symbolism is often associated in cinema with images of female fertility and rebirth. Erich Neumann (1995) describes figures such as caves and passages as the "womb of the feminine." The passage thus represents the threshold at which Marianne steps into her creative female identity. Julia Kristeva (1982) interprets such crossings where bodily boundaries are transgressed as foundational moments in the cultural subjectivation of women. The name "Marianne" not only evokes the female allegorical figure of the French Revolution but can also be interpreted as a version of the Virgin Mary (Marie/Miriam) in Christian iconography. Mary embodies both sacred fertility and the virtues of patience and resistance. In this sense, Marianne's individual journey parallels the symbolic birth of the feminine experience (Mills, 2011).

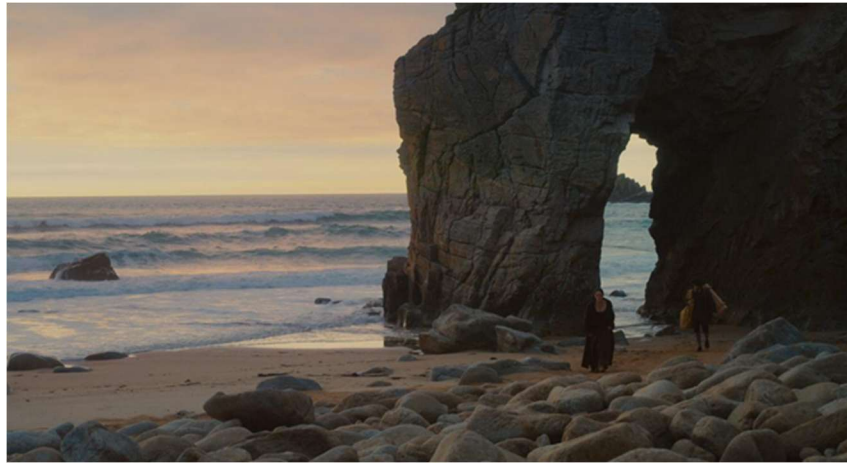



Figure 4. Marianne disembarking from the boat and passing through the rocky passage to the shore a visual reference to the birth of female identity in the 18th century, the transgression of social boundaries, and the representation of fertility (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, 2019).

Table 2. Semiotic analysis of the scene of marianne passing through the rocky passage

SIGN	SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED
A coastal landscape, a massive rock formation, and a female figure.	The sea, waves, rocky passage, and the two walking characters.	A woman emerging into an open space by passing through a natural boundary (the rocky passage); the pursuit of freedom and the transgression of limits.
	Denotation The woman walking along the coast, passing under a large rock formation, and advancing toward the open shore.	Connotation The woman's desire to transcend traditional boundaries and social constraints; the symbolism of liberation parallel to nature. The rocky passage functions as a metaphor for a difficult transition and individual transformation, while the sea represents freedom and infinite possibilities.

The scene in which Marianne sits naked before the fireplace, holding a small flame taken from a candle in her hand, carries an extraordinary density of meaning in both narrative and cinematographic terms. This moment demonstrates that the artist is not merely someone who observes, sketches, or looks, but also a figure who directly confronts her own desire, body, and the emotions she creates (Barthes, 1979; Kristeva, 1982).

Sign: The figure of Marianne sitting naked in front of the fireplace, holding a small flame in her hand.

Signifier: Nudity, dim light, the small flame taken from a candle, and the natural and vulnerable posture of the body.


Signified: The artist's immersion in her own body, desires, and creative process; a symbolic moment demonstrating that desire belongs not only to the object but also to the artist-subject.

According to Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, the scene denotes the simple image of a naked woman by the fireplace playing with fire. At the connotative level, however, it becomes a turning point in which the artist redefines herself as both subject and object, internalizing her own desire and gaze (Barthes, 1979). Within Julia Kristeva's framework on the relationship between body, subject, and desire, this scene reveals that the woman is not merely the representation of desire but its bearer and producer (Kristeva, 1982). Marianne here is not only the one who gazes at Héloïse; she also assumes the vulnerability of visibility, nudity, and participation in desire. This reverses John Berger's critique of the historical representation of women solely as objects of the gaze (Berger, 2004). The female artist emerges not only as the one who directs the gaze but also as the one who appears and exists as subject. This dual representation transcends the boundaries of patriarchal visual culture. The flame, made tangible in her hand, symbolizes not only desire but also creation. By holding fire, Marianne represents not only her inner passions but also her creative energy (Neumann, 1995). The empty canvases in the background symbolize emotions, bodies, and memories yet to be shaped. This scene demonstrates the transformation of the artist into a subject who not only observes others but also uses herself as material within the creative process (Kristeva, 1982; Berger, 2004). Nudity here is not exhibitionism, but liberation, confrontation with the self, and a state of pure existence.



Figure 5. Marianne holding a small flame with her naked body before the fireplace – a visual metaphor for the artist's direct confrontation with her desire, her body, and her creative identity (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, 2019).

Table 3. Semiotic analysis of the scene of marianne holding a flame by the fireplace

SIGN	SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED
<p>A female figure sitting naked in front of the fireplace, holding a small flame in her hand.</p>	<p>Nudity, dimly lit atmosphere, candlelight, and a small flame.</p>	<p>The woman holding fire in her vulnerable, natural state; the direct relationship between body and passion.</p>
	<p>Denotation The scene of a naked woman sitting in a dark room by the fireplace, holding a small flame lit from a candle in her hand.</p>	<p>Connotation The woman's direct engagement with her desires, her freedom, and her existence; nudity representing a pure state of being liberated from cultural norms; fire symbolizing passion and inner energy; the simultaneous visibility of the woman's fragility and strength.</p>

According to Jacques Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage," between the ages of six and eighteen months the child recognizes its image in the mirror and begins to distinguish between the "I" (*je*) and the "other" (*moi*). Yet this recognition is an illusion: the child perceives itself as an integrated, controlled body, though this wholeness is not real but symbolic (Lacan, 1949/2006). The mirror, in this sense, is a surface upon which the self is socially constructed. In other words, the subject comes to know its body through an external gaze, mediated by the gaze of others. In this scene, the woman's reflection in the mirror is headless. The "bodily wholeness" required for ego formation in Lacan's mirror stage is absent. The woman is reflected as a body without a head that is, without mind, identity, or self-awareness. This signals the fragmentation of the subject upon entering the symbolic order. Here, the woman is not a fully integrated subject but a figure that exists only through the "visibility" offered to her by society. According to Lacan, when the subject recognizes itself externally in the mirror, the "ideal ego" is formed (Lacan, 2006). In this scene, however, the woman cannot see her ideal self; what is shown to her is only her social attire, posture, and bodily image. Her identity, desire, and consciousness are excluded from this frame. The mirror thus becomes not a surface that constitutes the subject, but one that fragments it. In the film, a woman in a green dress is reflected in a golden framed mirror, yet her head remains outside the frame. This scene symbolizes the reduction of woman's identity to mere social appearance, the exclusion of her thought, desire, and subject position. Interpreted through Lacan's mirror stage theory, the scene highlights the fragmentation of the subject and the deviation from the ideal ego (Lacan, 2006).

Sign: The image of a woman in a green dress, headless in the reflection of a golden-framed mirror.

Signifier: The green dress, baroque mirror, static pose, dim interior.

Signified: The reduction of the woman's identity to social visibility, the construction of the subject according to the external gaze, and the separation of the body from subjectivity.

In Lacan's terms, the mirror here does not offer the promise of "wholeness imposed on the subject from the outside," but rather reveals the subject in its incomplete, repressed, and unrepresented state. The woman's headless reflection is associated with her inability to enter the symbolic order of ego formation, since her desire, language, and mind have been erased from the image (Lacan, 2006). Read alongside John Berger's (2004) historical framework of

the gaze, this scene embodies the legacy of a visual culture in which women are “compelled to see themselves both as they are and as they are looked at.” Julia Kristeva (1982), meanwhile, interprets the absent head as a cultural symbol that transforms the body into a non-subject.



Figure 6. The headless female reflection in the mirror – symbolizing the reduction of the subject to social representation, the fragmentation of the self, and the construction of identity through the external gaze within the framework of Lacan’s mirror theory (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, 2019).

Table 4. Semiotic analysis of the scene of the headless mirror reflection

SIGN	SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED
The reflection of a woman in a green dress, headless, in a golden-framed mirror.	The color green, heavy fabrics, an old dimly lit interior with furniture, framed mirror. Denotation The reflection of a woman wearing a green dress, whose head is not visible, seen in a mirror.	The existence of the woman rendered identity-less, visible only through her social role. Connotation The suppression of the woman’s individual identity; her reduction to a mere social figure who is “meant to be seen.” The absence of the head represents the erasure of subjectivity, leaving only the body as existing for social expectations. The mirror symbolizes both self-perception and how the external world perceives women.

In the later scenes of *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*), the visual narrative centers not only on the gaze but also on hands. Throughout the film, hand movements, moments of touch, and deliberate framing of hands constitute Céline Sciamma’s conscious cinematographic choice. Hands are positioned not merely as physical appendages but as carriers of emotion, touch, and desire. This becomes particularly evident when the painter Marianne, while creating Héloïse’s portrait, focuses not only on her face but also meticulously on the position of her hands.

The portrait scene directly references Renaissance art history. Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* (1503) is particularly significant in this context. Leonardo attributed great importance not only to facial expression but also to the symmetry of hands and the wholeness of the body. In the portrait, the model’s hands are foregrounded; the fingers resting lightly in a crossed position

convey grace and serenity. Sciamma, however, does not reproduce this classical representational tradition; instead, she confronts it (Smarthistory, 2025.). The line Marianne utters while sketching her model is central to this scene: “*I cannot paint you smiling. I think I can, but it doesn't work.*” This remark suggests not only a technical insufficiency but also the impossibility of representing emotion. Much like the famous “enigmatic smile” of the *Mona Lisa*, here too the viewer senses that something is missing but cannot precisely define what it is. Sciamma frames this representational crisis as the inner dilemma of a painter confronting heteronormative art history.

Historical documents on Leonardo da Vinci’s life suggest that he may have had homosexual inclinations. This orientation could have influenced the way he represented the body and desire in his art. Sciamma draws a parallel through her portrayal of emotional and sexual intimacy between women. The painter is not merely one who looks at the model but a subject who develops an emotional and bodily relationship with her. Yet, because this relationship is rendered invisible or invalid by society, the smile can never be fully “captured.” In this context, the prominence of hands is not merely a reference to Renaissance aesthetics. It also symbolizes the process of women’s subjectivation. In Renaissance art, female hands were generally depicted as passive, concealed, and disciplined (Harris, 2001). Sciamma overturns this tradition by presenting women’s hands as spaces of touch, reciprocity, resistance, and sensation.

Julia Kristeva’s (1982) theory of the repressed body in cultural representation functions here through the motif of hands. Hands, as carriers of desire and memory, become not only corporeal but also epistemological dimensions. The gaze no longer directs itself at the painter’s hand; rather, the gaze is constituted by what the hand itself draws. In conclusion, this scene is a queer confrontation with the visual codes of classical art history. Sciamma restages Leonardo’s representational crisis yet this time through the female body, the female gaze, and female desire. The portrait is completed, but the smile remains unseen. The hands enter the frame, but the emotions they hold can never be fully captured. At precisely this point, representation is born not out of wholeness but out of the desire carried by absence.



Figure 7. The scene in which Héloïse poses for the portrait - her body posture, the position of her hands, and the half-smile provide a visual reference to Renaissance portrait aesthetics and the representation of the *Mona Lisa* (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, 2019).

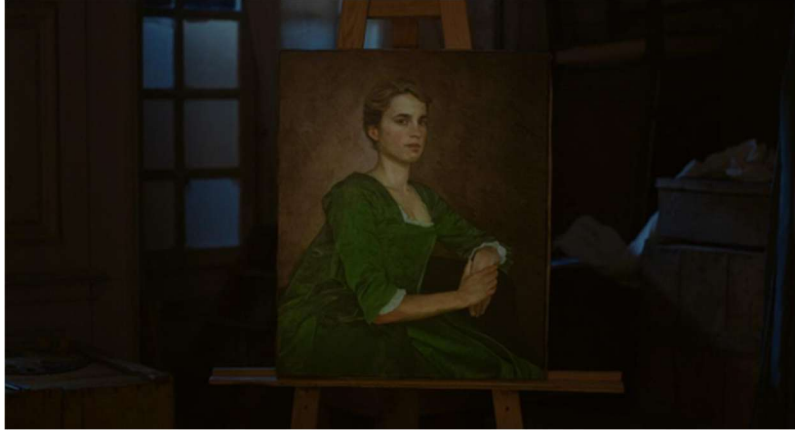


Figure 8. Marianne's completed portrait of Héloïse a queer rewriting produced through the female gaze, reflecting desire and unrepresentable emotions through the hands and expression (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, 2019).

In one of the later scenes, Sciamma most powerfully conveys the cinematic representation of female desire and the female gaze. Lying half-naked on the bed, Héloïse's body bears a small mirror in which Marianne's face is reflected. This composition points not merely to physical eroticism but also to an emotional and intellectual union. Through this scene, Sciamma directly challenges the gaze regime privileged by patriarchal cinema (Mulvey, 1975, p. 12).

Sign: A half-naked woman lying on a bed, with the reflection of another woman's face placed in a small mirror on her body.

Signifier: White sheets, bare skin, a directly gazing face, round mirror.

Signified: Female desire, the reflection of love, a secret communication between two subjects, and the circulation of the gaze between them.

According to Roland Barthes' (1979, p. 45) semiotic framework, the denotative level here is the surface relation between the body and the mirror; at the connotative level, however, the scene represents female desire as self-owned, produced by the female gaze, and embodied cinematographically.


Within Jacques Lacan's (2006, p. 94) theory of the mirror stage, the subject becomes divided at the moment of recognizing itself as whole in the mirror: on one side lies the "ideal ego" endowed with the gaze, while on the other, the lack of the real self persists. Sciamma queers this theory by reversing its logic: the mirror no longer reflects an idealized self but becomes the projection of Marianne's desire onto the body, an organic bond uniting two subjects. The reflected face is not merely the "ideal ego" but the queer subject who recognizes herself as the bearer of desire (Lacan, 2006, p. 105). Contrary to Laura Mulvey's (1975, p. 15) critique of male-dominated cinematic narratives, in this scene the female body occupies both the position of looking and being looked at. The gaze, moving together with the hand, transforms sexuality and subjectivation, subverting the power dynamics Mulvey outlined. The mirror represents not a mere physical object but the subjectivity imbued with female desire.

In line with Julia Kristeva's (1982, p. 38) notion of the bodily expression deemed "abject" for resisting cultural norms, this scene stages identity and affective exchange through mirror and sexuality as a cinematic representation of "bodily memory." The white sheet functions as a symbol of maternity, purity, and vulnerability. The placement of the reflected face at the level of the pelvis grants desire both physical and intellectual possession. This resonates with Locke's concept of the "sensitive self," suggesting the unity of body and soul (Ryan, 1987, p. 102).



Figure 9. Marianne’s face reflected in the small mirror placed on Héloïse’s body a powerful representation in which the female gaze, desire, and queer subjectivation are visually internalized onto the body (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, 2019).

Table 5. Semiotic analysis of the scene of the woman’s face reflected in the mirror

SIGN	SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED
A half-naked woman lying on the bed, with the reflection of another woman in a small mirror placed on her body.	White sheet, bare skin, the directly gazing female face, and a small round mirror.	A woman’s desire, the reflection of love, and the secret connection established through the mutual gaze of two subjects.
	<p>Denotation A woman lies wrapped in sheets; in the small mirror positioned at her pelvis, the face of another woman is visible.</p>	<p>Connotation A union symbolizing both the physical and spiritual dimensions of love and desire; the female body becoming both the object and the subject of desire and the gaze; the use of the mirror blending identities and emotions; the embodied and mental possession of the beloved.</p>

The Last Look: Representation of Hidden Memory Amid Social Roles

In one of the film’s final moments, Marianne, while visiting a museum, sees Héloïse’s portrait. Yet the portrait no longer represents individual love or the desired body; instead, it embodies a socially sanctioned identity: that of a wife and mother. This scene powerfully illustrates, through visual language, both the erasure of love by society and the resistant persistence of its hidden memory.

Sign: A painting displayed on a museum wall depicting a woman in white clothing with a small child.

Signifier: The female and child figures, white garments, solemn postures, the gesture of a hand pointing toward a book or page.

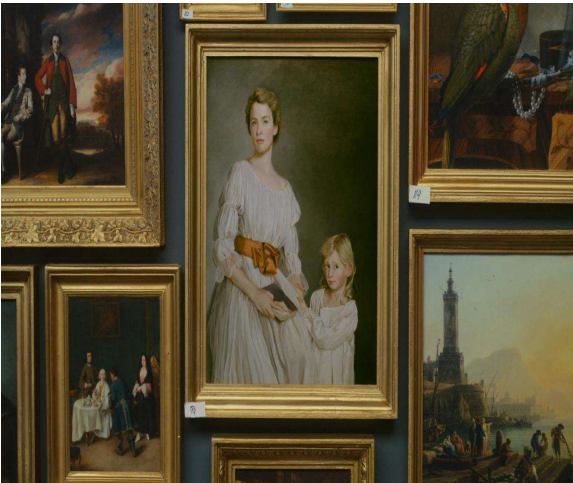
Signified: The idealization of femininity and motherhood; through the hand’s gesture, a hidden reference to the memory of love.

According to Roland Barthes' (1979, p. 45) distinction between denotation and connotation, this scene presents at the denotative level a socially coded image of motherhood and womanhood. At the connotative level, however, the hand's gesture signals the persistence of Marianne and Héloïse's love in both personal and collective memory. In Jacques Lacan's (2006, p. 94) theory of the mirror stage, the subject develops an illusion of a unified and ideal self through its mirror image, though this image is produced externally. Similarly, the portrait on the museum wall functions as a "mirror" of society's construction of the ideal woman, wife, and mother. Héloïse's love and desire are erased from this idealized image. Yet the hand's gesture represents a fissure in this ideal order, embodying the resistant memory of love. The recurring visual motif of hands throughout the film here again plays a critical role.



Figure 10. The portrait of Héloïse with a child on the museum wall a visual representation of the conflict between society's idealized image of woman and mother and the memory of queer love. Through the hand gesture, a hidden reference is made to the shared memory of Marianne and Héloïse's love (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, 2019).

Table 6. Semiotic Analysis of the Museum Portrait Scene

SIGN	SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED
A painting displayed on a museum wall depicting a woman in white clothing with a small girl.	Female and child figures, white garments, solemn and composed postures, the gesture of a hand pointing toward a book or page.	The idealization of femininity and motherhood through the representation of the woman and child; simultaneously, the hand's gesture refers to the hidden memory of love.
	Denotation In the museum exhibition, a painting portrays a young woman and a girl in a classical composition, with serious poses and simple garments. The woman's hand is prominently shown pointing to a page or a sheet of a book.	Connotation The woman is made visible through the traditional role of motherhood, her individual identity being suppressed. Yet the gesture of the hand makes an implicit reference to "Page 28," evoking the hidden memory of Marianne and Héloïse's love. Despite the roles imposed by society, personal love and individual memory continue to persist in an invisible yet enduring form.

Julia Kristeva's (1982, p. 38) concept of abjection suggests that what is repressed re-emerges at the border of representation. In this case, the gesture of the hand pointing to "Page 28" becomes a silent resistance, recalling Marianne's earlier grasp of Héloïse's hand and their shared love. As Laura Mulvey (1975, p. 15) argues, in patriarchal cinema women are typically reduced to objects of the gaze; here, however, Héloïse's gesture becomes a language of subjectivity, representing her own desire and past. As John Berger (2004, p. 47) has observed, women in art history have often been represented according to the societal gaze. This portrait operates within the same mechanism. Yet Sciamma, through the subtle code of the hand gesture, reveals that queer love and individual memory remain too powerful to be erased.

Conclusion

The relationship between cinema and mythology is shaped at the intersection of one of humanity's oldest narrative forms and one of the most influential modern visual media. While mythology transmits cultural memory from generation to generation through universal archetypes and symbols, cinema reproduces and transforms these symbols within contemporary contexts, embedding them with ideological meanings. As Roland Barthes (2014) emphasizes, myth is not merely a narrative of the past but also a form of ideological communication in modern societies. Thus, the reinterpretation of mythological narratives in cinema is not only an aesthetic choice but also a reconstruction of gender, desire, and power relations. In this regard, Céline Sciamma's *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*) reconfigures mythology from a queer and feminist perspective, revealing cinema's transformative power over myths.

This study analyzed Sciamma's *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) through a semiotic framework, focusing on the cinematic representation of the female gaze, queer love, and mythological references. The analysis, conducted across six selected scenes, demonstrated how the film's visual codes, cultural signs, and narrative structures mediate multilayered processes of meaning production. In addition, the film's poster and the representation of hands were incorporated into the analysis, allowing for a deeper examination of the connections between cinematic aesthetics and visual culture.

One of the most significant findings of this study is that the film consciously transforms the classical codes of patriarchal cinema and heteronormative love narratives. Sciamma's cinema liberates female characters from being passive objects of the gaze, reconfiguring them as figures who look, think, desire, and become subjects. Cinematic elements such as hands, gazes, mirrors, bodily representation, and portrait aesthetics make visible, through a powerful cinematic language, female desire, queer love, and processes of subjectivation. In this respect, the film reverses Laura Mulvey's (1975) critique of the male gaze, offering a strong example of how the female gaze and the queer subject can be constructed in cinema.

The analysis of mythological references demonstrates that the film is not merely an individual love story but also a practice of rewriting that resists cultural memory and ideological representations. The reinterpretation of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth displaces the male hero from the center of the narrative, positioning female figures as both subjects and narrators. References to the Demeter cult, meanwhile, signify the updating of ritualistic memory specific to women through a feminist aesthetic. In this way, Sciamma transforms Roland Barthes's (2014) assertion that "myth is an ideological communication system" into its opposite, turning myth into a tool of counter-ideological resistance. The study's theoretical framework also supports these findings. Jacques Lacan's mirror stage theory was used to make sense of processes of subjectivation and identity construction within the film; Julia Kristeva's concept of *abjection* revealed how the female body is staged as a site of resistance against normative

representational patterns. John Berger's (2004) critiques of the representation of women in art history illuminated Sciamma's feminist intervention into classical art history and portrait aesthetics.

Portrait de la jeune fille en feu is not only a film that expands the aesthetic and ideological boundaries of feminist and queer cinema but also a powerful narrative that offers a critical intervention into classical art, mythology, and film history. Sciamma's film does more than make queer love visible; it endows collective memory and cultural representation with an alternative aesthetic-political discourse. The multilayered semiotic analysis conducted in this study has revealed that the film is not only a love story but also a narrative of resistance, a practice of memory, and a politics of representation.

The contribution of this study lies in examining the aesthetic strategies of feminist and queer cinema through Barthes's semiotic model, thereby uncovering the ideological dimensions of the cinema-mythology relationship. Nonetheless, its limitations must be acknowledged. The analysis has been restricted to a single film and conducted through specific scenes. Future research might undertake a comparative study of Sciamma's entire filmography or mythological rewritings in contemporary European queer cinema. Moreover, the use of alternative theoretical frameworks such as postcolonial theory or performativity in gender theory could further enrich the reading of representational strategies in broader contexts.

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