Teaching Nearby, Learning Nearby

Inspired by the Teaching Women’s Filmmaking conference hosted by Istanbul Bilgi University in April 2021, this video essay considers the learning experience inside and outside the classroom as represented in Joanna Hogg’s *The Souvenir* (2019) and Céline Sciamma’s *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019). Both films demonstrate that pedagogy is most effective and most affecting when teachers and learners can share their experiences as equals, outside the hierarchical structures of the traditional classroom.
Creators’ Statement: Teaching Nearby, Learning Nearby

This video essay was inspired by our conference on Teaching Women’s Filmmaking, a collective experience marked particularly by Catherine Grant’s keynote title Making Nearby, after filmmaker-scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha’s concept of filmmaking as “speaking nearby” (Balsom). Grant’s talk raised the question of how the pedagogy of academia and the lived experience of women might be brought closer together. Through close readings of women’s films and alternative modes of scholarship, our conference aimed to challenge the hierarchical form and lineage of the traditional classroom by gleaning, stitching, and weaving together the drive to learn and the power of lived experience. This interrogation was further crystallized in Katie Bird’s “young (women) filmmaker(s),” a video essay linking Bird’s experience as a filmmaking student to The Souvenir (2019), Joanna Hogg’s fictionalized account of making her student film in the 1980s.

Inspired by Grant’s call to see scholarship differently and by Bird’s work on The Souvenir, our own video essay puts Hogg’s feature into dialogue with another film, also directed by a woman, also released the same year: Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Céline Sciamma, 2019). Both films revolve around love affairs, each impossible for its own reason, and each film inspires reflection on lived experiences beyond the classroom.
as stories of learning and personal growth. Finally, both films share their titles with paintings that serve as artifacts for the transfer of memories that surpass and transgress their material forms.

*Portrait of a Lady on Fire* opens in an art classroom, the camera capturing each student in turn before showing the protagonist Marianne as she poses for them. This act alone, exposing herself to their gaze, framed at the same eye line, is subversive. She is not teaching them, but moderating a learning environment where they are all participants. In *The Souvenir*, the protagonist Julie returns several times to her film school, seeking to advance her capstone project. This site, to borrow the term applied by education researcher Christine Edwards-Groves (2018), invokes specific “practice architectures” that emphasize the pedagogical conditions that Hogg experienced as a student as well as the methods and ideologies that she would have been expected to apply in her own artistic practice. These conditions are less than ideal for Julie, with scant evidence of the more recent shift towards “students work[ing] with staff to co-create the learning” (Orr & Shreeve, 3). Instead, Hogg’s portrayal alternates between a top-down model of professorial involvement and a more lateral, collective experience of students completing their projects together. Unlike Sciamma’s fictional, 17th century pedagogical utopia, Hogg represents a 20th century education in the arts as she herself experienced it.

The classrooms in the two films are distinguished from one another in their display of position and power: *The Souvenir* is marked by hierarchy and condescension, while *Portrait* demonstrates reciprocal interaction and the integration of lived experience with formal education. While the classroom frames both these films, their most memorable moments come from their central romantic relationships, which are also crucially formative experiences of interpersonal learning. Instances of teaching nearby in *Portrait* emerge from the reciprocity of closeness when Marianne and Héloïse ask each other to listen, or to look, as they alternate the roles of teacher and learner. Héloïse, who knows about music from her time in a convent, learns from Marianne a secular piece: a concerto from Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*. In turn, Marianne, a trained painter, takes her cue from Héloïse to bring those skills to an entirely new subject: the housemaid Sophie’s abortion.

In Hogg’s film, Julie and her lover visit Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s 18th-century painting *The Souvenir* – currently housed at London’s Wallace Collection – which depicts a scene in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s epistolary novel *Julie* (Thorpe). The hierarchical, masculinist transfer of knowledge in this dialogue is also reflected in Hogg’s reconstruction of a filmmaking school in 1980s London. While Fragonard’s
painting brings intertextual resonance to Hogg’s film, the eponymous painting in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is purely a product of its diegesis, marking a moment of joy that (we argue) the artist/teacher recounts to her students, even if this joy is tempered by the end of the affair that inspired it. This end was intrinsic to the story, for “[w]hy should [Sciamma] show people overcoming constraints, through some combination of ingenuity and intense desire, when most people had failed to overcome those constraints, regardless of how ingenious they had been or how intense their desire?” (Batuman). These constraints and desires, as well as their effects and aftermath, are inherently teachable, but Marianne’s impulse to share her deeply personal experience stands in sharp contrast to the film school professors in London. While Marianne puts her vulnerability on full display, Julie’s professors never draw on their own lives, defaulting instead to work by Hitchcock and myriad other familiar, canonized figures. Dealing with such a suffocating environment, it’s clear why Julie seeks external inspiration: if her professors only ever teach from outside themselves, how can they convince her (as they try to do!) that personal experience is worthy of art?

Still, in *The Souvenir* Julie manages to overcome her creative constraints, anticipating the even more emphatic victory that concludes the film’s sequel, *The Souvenir: Part II* (2021; released too late to be included in our video essay). The first installment ends with a tracking shot, followed by an epilogue that shows Julie moving from darkness into light through the huge door of the studio; as it slides open, she steps outside into the open air. The Julie of Fragonard’s painting, a shadow of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s protagonist, must remain trapped within the boundaries of the frame: a docile figure, awaiting enlightenment from the male tutor, her illicit lover, reintroduced into her life by her unsuspecting husband. While the Julie of the painting is circumscribed both by her husband and her lover, the Julie of the film finally surpasses the personal and pedagogical narratives that had captured her.

For Héloïse and Marianne, catharsis comes with the shared experience of music: unbeknownst to Héloïse, Marianne observes her reacting with emotion to the full orchestration of the same piece she had played for her during their time together. Though quite different at first sight, the concluding shots of the two films – one on a film set, the other in a concert hall – are similar in a subtle way. Both are instances of remembrance and reconnaissance that are revealed as stories of growth; furthermore, they both show that women’s lived experiences can be commemorated and conveyed through art.

Sciamma’s *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* narrates an imaginary past in which “intimate relationships [can] play out on a fantasy plane of total political equality” – including relationships that incorporate teaching, whether inside or outside the classroom
Meanwhile, Hogg presents a painful learning curve that becomes bearable only with the understanding that her films transcend the restrictive environment they portray, refusing to reproduce the practice architectures that scaffolded her own turbulent education to create in their place a new paradigm (Edwards-Groves). Through fictionalized autobiography, both *Souvenir* films ultimately, even ironically embrace the professors’ advice to draw on life in creating art; however, in order to do this, Hogg must jettison their models of teaching and learning. In other words, to finally do as they say, she rejects what they did in the classroom. *The Souvenir* and its sequel are, in themselves, a lesson in creating art that is founded on the complexity of lived experience and fostered through a social approach to pedagogy that “would not allow for a teacher-centric account to dominate the discussion” (Edwards-Groves).

As spectators, our phenomenological journeys through each film may evoke different, perhaps opposing emotions, even as these films demonstrate a shared dream of a more enlightened pedagogy. Both films suggest that teaching and learning happen best not when subjugated to hierarchies of power, but rather when teachers and learners are free to seek a shared experience of transcendence. This dream recalls the radical pedagogy of the late bell hooks, whose words conclude this essay more as a provocation to further reflection than as a finalizing comment:

> When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive...When professors bring narratives of their experiences into classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators. (21)
Acknowledgements

The creators of this video essay are indebted to Katie Bird for her generous and attentive comments on an earlier version. Heartfelt thanks as well to Catherine Grant and all the participants of the Teaching Women’s Filmmaking conference, hosted online by Istanbul Bilgi University in April 2021, for providing the energy to follow up this stimulating event with new work. Finally, our thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Author Contribution

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References


