



## Not at Home

Deborah Alexandra Martin, SELCS, UCL, [deborah.martin@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:deborah.martin@ucl.ac.uk)

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This split screen video essay compares sequences from two films, *The Innocents* (Jack Clayton, 1961) and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Céline Sciamma, 2019), emphasizing correspondences in the dynamics of space, gender, and movement in the films, and in their use of gothic conventions.

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### Creator's Statement

The video explores correspondences between sequences from *The Innocents* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, in particular their figuring of gender, movement, and space. *Portrait* draws on the visual motif of the gothic heroine more obviously evoked in *The Innocents*, with her archetypal exploration of the recesses of a haunted or mysterious house, her white nightgown, and candelabra. The split screen makes evident certain similarities in the gothic conventions of mise-en-scène, and of the movement of women's bodies in space: the night-time ascent of long winding staircases; the anxious glances and body and head movements; the suggestions of off-screen space and what it might conceal; reflections. Both *The Innocents*' Miss Giddens and *Portrait*'s Marianne are queer/class intruders, by turns dwarfed by the cavernous spaces they traverse, and confined by narrow passages which enclose them, framed by squares of wood panelling, as they journey through aristocratic houses.

In these sequences, as Mary Anne Doane writes of the horror tradition and of the woman's film of the 1940s, 'affect is condensed onto the image of a woman investigating, penetrating space alone' (135), an investigation which is conventionally read as a quest for (sexual) knowledge, with (haunted) houses suggestive of the topography of the unconscious, and staircases signifiers which '[articulate] the connection between the familiar and the unfamiliar' (135). *The Innocents* is a film in which women's desire cannot be directly represented, but can only be shown as ambivalent, uncertain, undecidable. Miss Giddens is a kind of detective, seeking out the (sexual) secrets of the house (and herself), but her looking is deeply uncertain, anxious: 'the woman's exercise of an active investigating gaze can only be simultaneous with her own victimization' (136). Marianne's gaze in *Portrait*, by contrast, is more steadfast, as befits the protagonist of a consciously feminist film which dedicates itself to the exploration of women's and lesbian

sexuality and desire and to the rewriting of gendered gazing in cinema, and in painting (Wilson, 91). Nevertheless, *Portrait* hints at the ‘problem of representability’ (White, *passim*) of women’s and lesbian desire by conjuring a ghostly Héloïse, an ‘apparitional lesbian’ (Castle) emerging from the recesses of the house to Marianne’s gaze.

The video also highlights the way gothic film convention constructs and expresses women’s spatiality and mobility. Again, this is more exaggerated in *The Innocents*, but in both films the expression of the feminine gothic happens partly through women’s bodies moving in circles, and in spirals, as bodies follow the contours of staircases, and as they perform anxious turns as reactions to noises or sensed presences, culminating in the final moments in which Miss Giddens’ body begins to repeatedly twirl around. This twirling echoes the ballerina trapped in a music box, repeatedly seen elsewhere in *The Innocents*, and from which the music used in *Not at home* comes. For Sara Ahmed, to feel ‘at home’ means ‘knowing which way we are facing’ (20). Drawing on Ahmed, and on Vivian Sobchack, Katherina Lindner writes about how ‘when we “go around in circles” we are disorientated, because, even though we might know where we are, we do not know where we are going. We are moving, yet stuck’ (100). The experience of being lost, stuck or disoriented, perhaps by one’s gender, class or sexuality, by the impossibility of subjectivity or desire, is suggested by these anxious, circular or turning motions. Points in the video where one woman’s anxious turns or movements seem to respond to those of the other, are suggestive of the ways in which gendered bodily movements echo and reverberate both through the bodies of film history as well as between the onscreen body and the off, ‘the intricate entanglement of cinema and the moving and specifically gendered (human) body since the very inception of the moving image’ (Lindner, 73).

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## Biography

Debbie Martin is Professor of Latin American Film and Culture at University College London. She has written books on Colombian women's cultural production (2012), on the Argentine director Lucrecia Martel (2016), and on the figure of the child in Latin American cinema (2019), as well as co-editing a collection on Latin American women's filmmaking (with Deborah Shaw, 2017). She has co-authored two video-essays with Catherine Grant: *Water turtles* (2019) and *Rites of the passage* (2021), both of which deal with Lucrecia Martel's films. *Not at home* is her first single-authored video-essay, it was made as an assignment set at the 2023 Middlebury College videographic summer school. Debbie is currently researching the intersection between environmental activism and Latin American film and visual arts.

## Review by Alison Peirse, University of Leeds

Deborah Martin's video essay offers a split-screen rendering of space, gender and place in *The Innocents* (Clayton, 1951) and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Sciamma, 2019). Martin deftly draws parallel between the two films, mirroring the ascent on the staircase, the candlestick shimmering, the sense of a woman, alone, the delicate, music-box soundtrack enhancing the sense of a growing, gnawing unease.

This sensation is where we find the success of this piece. We surely expect the unease of *The Innocents*, yet, in Martin's multiscreen, the unease soon infects *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. This haunting of one film by another creeps across the black barrier, between the images, two films no longer, tonally linked as one. After the midpoint this bringing-together takes full effect: as one woman looks, the other one sees, the multiscreen playing with our perception, the mirrored framings of the women bringing the films together, one colour, one black and white, as one.

A candle blows out, we watch the flames dance. The films are separated once more. The experiment concluded. This video essay thus becomes compelling evidence for why the split screen has always been, and remains, a dominant form in videographic criticism. Through careful attention to sound and image, Martin creates an original, powerful film experience that transcends genre.

## Review by Benjamin Sampson, Long Beach City College

Visual mashups tend to dominate the field of video essays, and not always for the good. Deborah Alexandra Martin's excellent video work "Not at Home" is all the more refreshing for its simplicity and acuity.

Martin's video compares two films from seemingly different eras and genres—the supernatural horror film *The Innocents* (Jack Clayton, 1961) and the queer period romance *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Céline Sciamma, 2019). Martin wisely restricts comparison to elements shared by both films—first, the roots of Gothic Romance literature found in both films (more overt in *Innocents*); and second, the subtext of lesbian desire in both (more overt in the contemporary *Portrait*). More specifically, Martin further restricts her view to the visuals of female bodies in space, with Miss Giddens (*Innocents*) and Marianne (*Portrait*) both moving through spaces, exploring the stairs and corridors of the respective manors, and, in Gothic fashion, the search for the buried secrets that haunt these homes.

On a formal level, Martin splits the screen evenly between the footage from each film, giving half the space to each and allowing the visuals and audio from each to overlay and interact in intriguing ways. Often the women seem to be responding to each other's presences, even representing the unseen force haunting both women. The music cues come from *The Innocents*, while the soundscape is often from *Portrait*, and the effect is crucial in combining the visuals. Martin's split screen editing in particular is masterful, with each side of the frame timed in response to the other in a constant and delicate dance of interaction.

On a thematic level, the comparison proves deeply evocative, making explicit what is implicit in each film. The Gothic trappings of *The Innocents* instantly reveal the Gothic structure of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, a story of queer feminine desire haunted by ghosts—the specter of Héloïse's familial obligations; the spirit of Héloïse herself, already haunting Marianne through the halls of the home; and the ghost of the entire love story, deemed impossible within patriarchal culture.

Indeed, these revelations end up returning favor in kind, with the queer narrative of *Portrait* highlighting the buried queer subtext of *The Innocents*. The implicit from content of 1961 is made explicit through the advancements of 2019, and the films become strange yet beautiful mirrors from different eras, reflecting on the ghosts of the past and present.

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