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I Look at You and I See Art: Sapphic Contemporary Cinema and the Desiring Gaze

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I Look at You and I See Art: Sapphic Contemporary Cinema and the Desiring Gaze

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The Division of the Arts
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by
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To those who are consistently left off-screen

Masha Shpolberg, thank you for your continuous encouragement, insight, kindness, and advice. This project could not have been accomplished without you and I am forever grateful for your belief in me and my work.

To my parents, who believed in me even when I didn't (and when I don't): thank you. I don't think I'll ever be fully able to express my gratitude for all that you've done for me. And to my sister, who has been a consistent goofy, bright presence in my life, keep that spark (although I don't think you could lose it even if you tried).

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And to those of you who identify as lesbians, or love women, or love non-men, I wrote this for us, and I hope I did us justice.

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Introduction

The woman in art has been an ever-present figure, whether she be nude, clothed, lounging, or poised. Perhaps she stares directly at the viewer or a lover; intermittently, she can even be caught looking at herself. The artist can easily manipulate the audience's viewing of her, whether that be through painting, sculpture, literature, or cinema. Art critic John Berger writes that "perspective . . . centres everything on the eye of the beholder" and that it "makes the single eye the centre of the visible world. Everything converges on to the eye as to the vanishing point of infinity."¹ In this view, the existence of the beholder's eye manufactures the way we see not only the woman and her relation to us, but the depiction of her body. Historically, the artist's gaze has been male, and frequently, that relationship between the artist/muse has been a mirroring of heterosexuality. Film theorist Laura Mulvey, in her famous article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, writes that woman is "bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning."² In many art forms, the woman is stuck as the object of the man's desire—the eye of the beholder—a gaze that seeks to derive as much from her as possible. In this is an absence of another prominent yet severely underrepresented gaze: the lesbian.

Queer stories have, throughout time, been eradicated from history and forced into the hidden corners of society. Due to society's determination to silence our voices, the queer gaze has not been allowed a dedicated presence in public, let alone in art. As scholar Amy Taubin put it in

¹ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 16.

² Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, p. 804.

1992, during an increase in mlm (men-loving men) representation and awareness, “queer cinema is figured in terms of sexual desire and the desire it constructs is exclusively male. . . [i]n indeed, women are even more marginalised in ‘queer’ than in heterosexual film; at least in the latter, they function as objects of desire.”³ Five years later, Maria Pramaggiore would argue for the need for more lesbian participation in the New Queer Cinema all the while explaining what hinders it: “[b]ecause lesbians have had limited access to filmmaking and because lesbian image making is of critical importance to notions of gender, sexuality, queerness and cultural power, it is important to acknowledge that lesbian cinema participates in New Queer Cinema *and* to recognize that contemporary lesbian filmmaking is not characterized with enough precision or specificity by such a term.”⁴ While Taubin makes a bold claim, she and Pramaggiore point to the practical difficulties faced by women wanting to make films about sapphic love. These hardships stem not just from the logistical issue of an unaccommodating film industry, but from the way in which women, and their bodies, have been seen generally.⁵

Mulvey explains that “[t]he determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.”⁶ This understanding of the woman’s historical position, especially under the gaze, influences the conversation around what

³ Amy Taubin, “Beyond the Sons of Scorsese,” as quoted in Maria Pramaggiore’s *Fishing for Girls: Romancing Lesbians in New Queer Cinema*, p. 65.

⁴ Pramaggiore, *Fishing for Girls*, p. 65.

⁵ Pramaggiore writes that “[t]oday’s entertainment corporations large and small are happy to promote films that uncritically embrace the power of the image and its accouterments, delighted to encourage mass audiences to consume a slice of an alternative “lifestyle” on-screen, recognizing queer subjects only when served up as delectable and exotic matinee fare,” in *Fishing for Girls*, p. 62.

⁶ Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, p. 808-9.

it means to be watched—and to watch—as a woman. Subject to the consistent position of an object, the heterosexual male has been the determining gaze, especially in classical Hollywood cinema. With the emergence of New Queer Cinema and the rise of art films, that gaze now begins to shift. Classical film narratives still have difficulty deviating from the heterosexual/heteronormative structure in involving queer people not just as side characters or as an afterthought. Art films, which have more leeway in their narrative structure and are more prone to taking risks, are thereby often better suited to explore queer temporalities. American film theorist David Bordwell said that, in classical cinema, there are “two plot lines: one involving heterosexual romance (boy/girl, husband/wife), the other line involving another sphere—work, war, a mission or quest, other personal relationships.”⁷ This narrative structure shapes the audience’s expectation of films, which is inherently centered in Adrienne Rich’s idea of compulsory heterosexuality. This does not mean that queer stories do not or should not exist in classical narrative cinema but rather that the industry does not prioritize them at large. Moreso, the emotion and look into private moments in art films make it an encouraging medium for exploring the queer gaze.

Before delving into my explorations of the films, I would like to clarify the use of language throughout this work. I will most frequently use the term “lesbian,” which focuses exclusively on women who only love other women or non-men who love non-men. However, the spectrum of identities of women who love women is much broader. Often ignored and pushed to the side, the lesbian identity is commonly substituted for the use of other terms. As American historian Judith M. Bennett puts it, “the refusal to use ‘lesbian’ defers to homophobia and

⁷ Bordwell, *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures*, p. 19.

thereby promotes heteronormative misconceptions of the past.”⁸ When appropriate, I will bring in the term “women-loving women” (wlw) in an effort to recognize the varying identities⁹ that can include attraction to women and non-men, as well as the term “queer.” These sexualities include but are not limited to: bisexual (a person attracted to two or more genders); pansexual (attraction towards people regardless of their gender identity); and queer itself (an umbrella term, and a reclaimed slur, for those who are not heterosexual or cisgender¹⁰). Occasionally, the term “sapphic”¹¹ will be incorporated throughout the thesis as well, which is more inclusive than “lesbian” but with a stronger focus on women-loving women than “queer.”

Gender, just like sexuality, has also evolved from the binary terms of “woman” and “man.” This can include the acknowledgment of transgender individuals (a person whose gender identity does not correspond to their assigned sex at birth), intersex (an individual born with reproductive anatomy that does not fit into the binary language of “male” or “female”), nonbinary (a person who does not identify as either a man or woman), and the list goes on. The term “non-man” (an individual who does not identify as a man) has recently been added to the conversation around lesbianism, some preferring the definition of “non-men loving non-men” to let the term be more inclusive to those who exist outside of the gender binary but experience attraction only to non-men. Across all three films I examine, none of the characters openly identify as anything other than a woman. Thereby, the cisgender experience will be pushed to the forefront; however, that does not mean it is the *only* experience. Unfortunately, many films have

⁸ Bennett, “*Lesbian-Like*” and the Social History of Lesbianisms, p. 12.

⁹ I am only listing a few here but the list of sexualities is vast and there are various identifiers that can include non-men/non-men attraction.

¹⁰ Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer>, accessed 23 April 2023.

¹¹ Related to Sappho, a poet whose work (from what has been recovered) depicts feelings of attraction and admiration toward women.

yet to take the necessary steps to become more inclusive of varying identities, keeping characters centered in the binary.¹²

Cinema has the ability to make queer lives visible in a way that cannot, arguably, be done in any other medium. In all three films I explore—*Blue is the Warmest Color* (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013); *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Céline Sciamma, 2019); *Rafiki* (Wanuri Kahiu, 2019)—film as a medium is able to foreground not only the gaze, but the presence of wlw relationships in time and space. Yet, other artistic mediums influence and become incorporated into all three films and into how we, the viewers, watch them. The layers of the gaze through these multi-media presentations allow for a look into wlw desire and existence that is often “represented as mere refuge from male abuses, rather than as an electric and empowering charge between women.”¹³ The lack of acknowledgment of stories about queer women makes those that come forth that much more prevalent and cinema, in that sense, can portray those intimate moments. Two women may look at each other in a painting, but that painting only allows for a suggestion of desire. Cinema can make it difficult to question its presence as it emphasizes that love is an act. It cannot truly be captured in a still image as it is always a succession of moments.

Chapter I focuses on *Blue is the Warmest Color*. The film’s depiction of sex between two women has led to a steady stream of discourse around pornography. Although the sex shown only takes up a small fraction of the time in the film, its presence overwhelms the discussions about it. The questions that arise are as follows: what exactly constitutes porn? Is the sex simply explicit or truly pornographic and further, is Abdellatif Kechiche’s depiction of Adèle and Emma

¹² I would like to add that these are the terms and definitions most widely used and understood at the time of writing. Language is ever-evolving and it could be that, eventually, these terms will no longer be the most up-to-date on expressing queer experiences. However, I think it is important to center them within a larger context of LGBTQ+ community and expression.

¹³ Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, p. 658.

together an act of oversexualization? Is there a “correct or incorrect way” to portray two women intimately? Adrienne Rich writes that “even so-called soft-core pornography and advertising depict women as objects of sexual appetite devoid of emotional context, without individual meaning or personality: essentially as a sexual commodity to be consumed by males. (So-called lesbian pornography, created for the male voyeuristic eye, is equally devoid of emotional context or individual personality.)”¹⁴ Sex between two women is often seen as taboo not because it is an improper portrayal of sex, but because it makes the audience watching uncomfortable. This focus in *Blue*, while a necessary conversation, does overshadow the complex presentation of Adèle and Emma’s relationship throughout the rest of the film. Following them over the course of an unspecified period of time, but certainly a couple of years, Kechiche allows us to see what longevity in a queer relationship can look like. By not limiting them to squish the entirety of their relationship into a short timeframe, Kechiche gives us the opportunity to see *why* Adèle and Emma ultimately do not end up together. It is a choice that is not made for the characters, like in the two other films I look at, but instead something they actively decide for themselves.

Chapter II is an in-depth look at *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, which emphasizes the constrained presence of time among two characters bound by the gaze. Marianne, the protagonist, launches us into a memory of their love story, which began with her undertaking of painting Héloïse but only in passing. Through portraiture, Céline Sciamma shows the evolution of their connection and how Marianne’s gaze transforms as she falls in love. Unlike *Blue*, this film is structured on the ability to capture Héloïse and to do so in a short period of time. We are aware, from the beginning, that whatever transpired between the two has already come to an end,

¹⁴ Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, p. 641.

influencing our viewing experience. Furthermore, Sciamma's depiction of the body relates consistently to its portrayal in painting. Our understanding of the body does not come initially from sex but rather from the intimacy of studying someone closely. While we are shown intimate moments between Marianne and Héloïse, Sciamma never gives us a sex scene as compared to *Blue*. The film is structured on the association between the gaze, the body, and desire while refraining from bringing us too far into the private moments between the women. Its depiction of intimacy is very different from *Blue* in its emphasis on shared vulnerability rather than the sex act itself.

Chapter III, on *Rafiki*, takes us into a relationship that plunges the characters into an actively hostile environment. *Blue* and *Portrait* exist in a world that passively acknowledges society's opinion: the difficulty of being queer is implicitly there, but the love stories take place largely in isolation from broader social forces. This allows for an escapist viewing experience, where we are able to focus on the characters' relationship to the exclusion of all else. *Rafiki*, by contrast, situates its characters in an explicitly homophobic milieu. This profoundly influences the progression of the relationship between the two women, forcing the viewer to be constantly aware of the presence of others and their possible views on Kena and Ziki. This restlessness makes the private moments between the two women that much more valuable. Wanuri Kahiu, similarly to Sciamma, does not explicitly show sex between the two women but alludes to it. Juxtaposed with *Blue* and *Portrait*, Kena and Ziki are never shown in the nude. Even their possible sex scene is shot with them clothed, complicating the notion of what sex can look like. Furthermore, Kena and Ziki's physical presentations play a prominent role in how they are perceived. Kena, who dresses more stereotypically masculine is contrasted with Ziki, who

presents as quite feminine, thus bringing up discussion of butch/femme identities. While neither woman takes on these identities, it is interesting to look at how queerness can become attributed to a certain physicality and how those stereotypes influence narratives. Privacy and intimacy, in this love story, are not only scarce but valuable, as they are few and far between.

Ultimately, my aim is not evaluative; it is not to judge whether these three films are an “acceptable” illustration of wlw love. Instead, it is to engage critically with each work to see how each director goes about this sort of storytelling and what communal themes arise from them all. It’s about time that wlw and queer love stories are pushed to the forefront in the industry, but that does not entail that we cannot also view those stories through a critical lens. The feminine body, as mentioned previously, has had a presence in art that has repeatedly been created under the covetous eye of the man. Films that center a feminine gaze, moreso a lesbian one, explore an act of looking that has historically been an exiguous one. Bringing it forth opens the door for an entirely new understanding of desire.

Chapter I: Is It Porn or Are You Just a Prude (And Does It Really Matter)?

Blue is the Warmest Color is notorious for its depiction of sexual intimacy between the two women. It was what gripped viewers when it was first released and discussion of the film is still mired in debates about whether the portrayal of sex in the film is pornographic or arranged for the male gaze. This is a pity because the sex scenes are only ten to twelve minutes of a three-hour film that is complex in many other ways. In this chapter, I will engage in those debates and then use them to consider what they may have overshadowed in the rest of the film.

Prior to “the film’s sex scene (for it is repeatedly reduced to just one),”¹⁵ Kechiche plunges us into a conversation between Adèle and Emma that pinpoints the very thing that will drive these characters both inside and outside of the bedroom: appetite. Adèle confesses to Emma that she’ll eat anything, going so far as to say, “I could eat nonstop all day. It’s scary. Even when I’m full.” While this in itself is not inherently sexual, it explores what it means to be satisfied, especially for these two. Adèle’s constant hunger, at this point in the film, is not new to the audience; we have seen her quell numerous times throughout the film’s running. Clearly, “[s]he’s a teenager with strong appetites — she keeps sweets stashed under her bed — whose hunger has a distinctly carnal aspect and invokes an association between literal and sexual appetite . . . Adèle stuffs her mouth with food, even as she remains unnourished by her high school boyfriend.”¹⁶ Not only that, but Adèle’s “open mouth is a feature that figures her voluptuousness, sexiness and hunger throughout the film,”¹⁷ a reminder, at times, of her desire to

¹⁵ Clara Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory*, p. 119.

¹⁶ Manohla Dargis, *Seeing You Seeing Me*. Thomas, her high school boyfriend, deeply cared for her and yet, she remained passive, distressed by her lack of connection and satisfaction with him.

¹⁷ Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory*, p. 101.

be fulfilled. Kechiche sets up Adèle as a character who is vigorously trying to satiate her cravings, both sexual and non-sexual.

The sex scene at the heart of the debate has consistently been described as pornographic. Since the film's release, there have been numerous discussions of Kechiche's portrayal of sex, specifically in the filming of Adèle and Emma's naked, entangled bodies. Film scholar Linda Williams argues that two main issues are present: "[t]he first issue is whether these new levels of sexual 'explicitness' constitute pornography. The second issue is the perpetual tendency of Americans to be shocked by the greater sexual 'explicitness' of European cinema."¹⁸ Williams' argument stems from the idea that an American audience, who appear to be at the forefront of this debate, is simply too delicate for what we see in *Blue*. Perhaps the issue is not the sex but rather us. As author Clara Bradbury-Rance points out, "[p]art of what is striking about *Blue is the Warmest Colour's* sex scenes is that, unlike the close-ups of the film's remainder, they are frequently filmed using medium shots" and that in doing this, Kechiche "force[s] us to reckon with the explicitness of sex."¹⁹ The times when Kechiche does bring us in closer, it is often to show either of the women's faces as they contort in pleasure or to focus in on skin touching skin. Williams, when writing about the explicitness of this scene, expresses that "[t]hough these sex scenes are indeed long, and clearly suggest genital fingering, cunnilingus, and anilingus as well as the much-maligned scissoring and 'reverse cowgirl,' these positions are only *relatively* explicit vis-a-vis R-rated norms, and not in relation to hard-core pornography whose perpetual purpose is to reveal all."²⁰ So, the question arises, what exactly is porn? What does or does not qualify an image as pornographic? Is the intention of pornography not merely to provide a series

¹⁸ Linda Williams, *Cinema's Sex Acts*, p. 9.

¹⁹ Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory*, p. 115.

²⁰ Williams, *Cinema's Sex Acts*, p. 14.

of sexual images intended to derive some sort of sexual response from the viewer? In film critic Manohla Dargis' opinion, porn "has one blissfully obvious objective: to turn viewers on," which differs from what Williams seems to believe qualifies as truly pornographic.²¹ In her novel *Screening Sex*, Williams does acknowledge that "it also distances us from the immediate, proximate experience of touching and feeling with our own bodies, while at the same time bringing us back to feelings in these same bodies."²² The image, then, asks us to tap into the physicality of our body; the viewing experience of sex becomes heightened, as it pulls not just on our understanding of the characters (and their desires) but on our relation to these images. Due to this, and the personal understanding of what it means to be "turned on," there is a suggestion that there may be no one clear definition of what porn is.

Returning to the discomfort that Williams focuses on when speaking about the American audience, she argues that "Americans especially have a hard time separating *relatively* explicit sex in movies from what seems to be the *totally* explicit sex of pornography."²³ We return, here, to the differentiation between explicit sex and pornographic sex, a line that Williams argues has been blurred by the American audience. *Blue* may be explicit, but it is not necessarily pornographic; Americans are simply prudish, shocked by the surface-level images of what is labeled as "lesbian sex." However, I would argue that the critique around the sex in *Blue* is not inherently around whether it qualifies as porn (although it is relevant), but rather around the way it depicts the two women. Dargis writes:

Mr. Kechiche employs a selective aesthetic that shows Adèle slurping her food ('You're voracious,' Emma says) but, importantly, does not permit her a similarly sloppy appetite in bed, where the movie's carefully constructed realism is jettisoned along with bodily excesses and excretions

²¹ Dargis, *Seeing You Seeing Me*. This definition in its simplicity can complicate the debate for, if an image does indeed turn on a viewer, does it immediately qualify as pornographic even though it might not have intended to be?

²² Williams, *Screening Sex*, p. 1-2.

²³ Williams, *Cinema's Sex Acts*, p. 9.

in favor of tasteful, decorous poses. This may be what Ms. [Julie] Maroh meant when she said the sex scenes were missing lesbians; I'd go further and say they're missing women of any kind. Adèle's hunger is contained, prettified, aestheticized.²⁴

However, the scene's filming feels less controlled and more jumbled. Kechiche jumps between the medium-distance shots of the two women together to bring us in closer as the camera occasionally roams one of the women's bodies or focuses on a particular body part. Williams emphasizes that "[m]ost of the film's sex scenes are shot to reveal vast expanses of intertwined flesh and not particular parts."²⁵ Adèle and Emma's kisses are messy and sloppy; as Kechiche manipulates our perspective, we see the two women grasping at each other, pulling at hair or skin. Their entangled limbs may act as a prettified version of the sex, but I would argue that the various poses Kechiche presents to us explore the conversation around hunger. While the two women consistently switch positions, attempting to derive pleasure in each, Kechiche asks us to recognize that restlessness (see Figures 1).



Figures 1. Excerpts from the sex scene; switching of positions along with close-up images of action.

²⁴ Dargis, *Seeing You Seeing Me*. Julie Maroh, the original writer of *Blue is the Warmest Color*, a graphic novel, openly “expressed unhappiness with the sex scenes with Adèle and Emma. ‘It appears to me that this was what was missing on the set: lesbians.’” She also openly stated: “this is all that it brings to mind: a brutal and surgical display, exuberant and cold, of so-called lesbian sex, which turned into porn, and made me feel very ill at ease” as written and quoted by Dargis in *Seeing You Seeing Me*.

²⁵ Williams, *Cinema's Sex Acts*, p. 14.

Our integration into the scene is messily orchestrated, a diversified sequence of tongues, gripping hands, and dèrrières where the contrasting full-body shots seem to be what concerns Dargis.

Williams puts it bluntly by stating,

Dargis can't help but worry that someone else—the heterosexual male audience, the director himself, someone *other than* a woman—might be vicariously enjoying the pleasures the women enjoy in the early days of their love. In return, I can't help but ask: what is wrong with appreciating derrières, especially in a film that foregrounds its women characters' own appreciation of them, as when one of Adèle's friends notes that another (girl)friend has a 'cute ass,' or in a scene in which the two lovers visit an art museum filled with lovely derrières and they are clearly the ones doing the looking! I further wonder if the presence of any man, not just a director, who 'gets off' on depicted sex disqualifies that sex from art status?²⁶

Her argument here is that if this scene exists for the pleasure of the man and, perhaps, was produced by the male gaze, it does not devalue the sex itself. There is nothing particularly wrong with appreciating a derrière, as Williams puts it, but rather the issue comes from this: queer women have consistently been overly sexualized by men, had their identities de-valued and questioned, and had their bodies viewed as objects to be used for personal gratification. The way their sex is filmed matters in the context of queer individuals in the audience, who become represented in its depiction. I would argue against Williams to say that the conversation does not necessarily center around whether the sex is pornographic or whether men watching *are* taking this scene to explore their fantasies of two women sleeping together, but whether the intent is to sexualize Adèle and Emma. In doing so, Kechiche would take away their power and intimacy, stripping it down for *our* appetite. Williams elaborates further, wondering, “is it possible that critics like Dargis cannot see female visual pleasure when it is staring them in the face?”²⁷

Withholding any non-diegetic sound, Kechiche immerses us entirely into the scene; Adèle and Emma's noisy grunts and moans repeatedly emphasize their enjoyment. Perhaps the use of the camera and how it meanders emphasizes the physicality of this experience. We are immersed

²⁶ Williams, *Cinema's Sex Acts*, p. 11.

²⁷ Williams, *Cinema's Sex Acts*, p. 12.

into the scene as a way of understanding, to the degree to which we can, the physical experience of exploring the body. Kechiche then plays with how the audience receives and perceives pleasure: both at a distance and actively integrated. In doing so, perhaps the image toes the line between its existence for our entertainment—or consumption—and the simple presentation of feminine, hungry pleasure.

Bradbury-Rance argues that the film is read as “*the* paradox of lesbian representability in an age of extreme visibility: as either unable to represent lesbian experience because it is pornographic (and thus cannot be real), or as being the very thing that makes *Blue is the Warmest Colour* a lesbian film more than anything else (because the sex comes to stand in for lesbian experience *par excellence*).”²⁸ Through these debates, the film now exists (to a broader audience) in only these two categories; the sex and its apparent explicitness becomes the only citing of whether this is a “real” depiction of sapphic love. What is missed when exclusively focusing on this is what *Blue* does offer us: a look at a wlw relationship *over time*. Unlike *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and *Rafiki*, which will be explored in the following two chapters, *Blue is the Warmest Color* shows Adèle and Emma’s relationship over the course of an undetermined extended period (at least a few years). As previously stated, at the film's core is an unrelenting appetite and “[i]t is through their mouths and eyes, to the exclusion of the rest of their bodies, that they first exhibit desirability. This is not only a sexual lesson: throughout the film, it is through taste that the young women try out each other’s social and cultural differences.”²⁹ Suppose we remain focused only on the sex. In that case, we miss the rest of what surrounds Adèle and Emma’s relationship: a fundamental difference in worldview and an unsureness that has nothing to do with what

²⁸ Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory*, p. 119-20.

²⁹ Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory*, p. 105.

happens in the bedroom. *Blue*'s advantage is the way it situates us with these characters throughout Adèle's life. As we delve further into the complexities of this film, it will be revealed that the intense focus on this one sex scene prevents further discussion of how Kechiche handles Adèle's unrelenting appetite and the lengths she will go to satisfy herself.

Adèle's initial love interest, Thomas, is chosen less by her than by her friend group. His initial looks at Adèle are sneaky and shy, the gaze repetitive and waiting for a returned glance. Kechiche presents it as a game where the rules are not established by Adèle herself, but instead by her friends: don't look now, look now. The shaky camera accentuates the chaotic mix of voices as Kechiche shifts between the various women huddled together around a table, panning back and forth between cuts. In doing this, Kechiche allows us to feel the overwhelming presence of this group; while the camera does not take on Adèle's point of view, we associate ourselves with her scanning gaze as we try to keep up with the conversation. She barely gets more than a few words in and when she does say something that is even slightly contradictory to the group consensus, the scene becomes overwhelmed with a slurry of voices and fast-paced cuts to the different faces.

When we later see Adèle alone on her way to a date with Thomas, she is given the space to challenge the information we've been given. At a crosswalk, the camera pulls in close on Adèle's face as her eyes land on someone off-screen and focus in. Kechiche, not forcing us to wait for long, then cuts to show two young women with their arms around one another. While both are centered in the frame, the woman with the blue hair immediately sticks out. In doing so, Blue becomes Emma, "signifying not only youthful rebellion but also the standout feature of her

erotic appeal.”³⁰ The handheld camera frames Adèle closely while Emma is shown at a distance. This differentiation urges us to return to Adèle and associate ourselves with her; her curious eye incites a desire in us to see beyond the screen (see Figures 2).



Figures 2. Distance vs. closeness. Adèle’s gaze incentivizes us to look as she does, and to wish to return to the image of Emma.

Whereas before, we were thrust into the social complexities of desire, we are now left to study Adèle with intentionality and without the slurry of voices. In situating us in public, Kechiche allows for a private moment—that of looking—to become overwhelmed by the presence of others.

The watcher, Adèle, becomes the watched as the two women cross paths: the camera, steady this time, tracks Emma as she passes Adèle, her head turning to follow her. Not only is this an imitation of Adèle’s own prying gaze, but Kechiche plays with our perspective. First tracking Emma, as Adèle turns over her shoulder to meet Emma’s gaze, the camera swings back to follow Adèle. This change establishes both the fleetingness, yet intentionality of the look. To look, *really* look in the way these two do, is to allow for vulnerability. This realization, of having been noticed (whether with interest or curiosity), quite literally stops Adèle in her tracks. As the camera once again shifts to being handheld, its lack of steadiness emphasizes Adèle’s disorientation. As she gets turned around, the camera swivels as Kechiche rapidly switches our perspective of her. Her world has, in a way, been turned upside down and she must now attempt

³⁰ Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory*, p. 102.

to reorient herself among the normality of things. There is Adèle before she notices Emma and there is her after; the inevitable is that she will never be the same following the latter.

Adèle's sexuality and desire come to the forefront when she has a sex dream about Emma. In this "masturbation scene, Adèle's own hands become Emma's through fantasy's articulation in the visual field. Adèle's gaze makes her both object and subject, her reflection replicating Emma's desire through the cinematic image."³¹ This play of object and subject establishes a particular power imbalance before Emma is truly known by either Adèle or us. While in her dream, the camera focuses on up-close shots of Emma's face, in "reality," Kechiche gives us a medium shot of Adèle's arching body combined with images of her own wandering hands (see Figures 3).



Figures 3. Adèle's writhing body and gripping hands.

Dargis openly wonders, as the camera "roves over her body" whether Adèle is indeed "dreaming of her own hot body?"³² These early inclusions of Adèle's body begin the exploration of desire. Whether or not Adèle dreams of her body feels minimized by the inclusion of Emma in this scene; her masturbation does not come from her own fascination with her body, but rather from what she imagines Emma is doing to her. Ann Rosalind Jones, reflecting on the work of French philosopher Luce Irigaray and French writer Hélène Cixous, writes that they "emphasize that women, historically limited to being sexual objects for men. . . , have been prevented from

³¹ Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory*, p. 112.

³² Dargis, *Seeing You Seeing Me*.

expressing their sexuality in itself or for themselves.”³³ In giving us these images of Adèle, Kechiche might be asking us to grapple with the way we see sexuality when it is not associated with a masculine gaze. Adèle’s fantasy about Emma and the way the camera explores it reveals to us a desire that is separate from both the construction of Adèle’s sexuality as told by her friends, as well as the presence of Thomas. However, Kechiche manipulates our perception of who is truly in control: Adèle or Emma? This powerplay foreshadows the function of their relationship while also incorporating us into the “newness” of this experience. When Adèle jolts awake, she breathes heavily, looking panicked around the room. An up-close shot of her face after she has laid back down shows tears at the corner of her eyes; we recognize that Emma has shifted something in Adèle’s understanding of herself. It is an elaboration on the crosswalk scene, an evolution of Adèle’s own awareness of sexuality.

In her chapter “The Lesbian,” French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir writes, “[w]oman is an existent who is called upon to make herself object; as subject she has an aggressive element in her sensuality which is not satisfied on the male body: hence the conflicts that her eroticism must somehow overcome.”³⁴ Adèle’s lack of connection with Thomas, with whom she has a brief relationship, stems from the struggle between object and subject. As subject with Thomas, Adèle is expected to have her appetite satiated, but the reality shows an inconsistency. In the aftermath of a sexual experience with him, we see Adèle’s disengaged face as he buries his face in her neck. Her eyes have a faraway look in them, as if she is simply waiting it out. It mirrors, in a way, the aftermath of Adèle’s dream about Emma, although the emotions present are distinctly different (see Figures 4).

³³ Ann Rosalind Jones, *Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of “L’Ecriture Feminine,”* p. 248.

³⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 397.



Figures 4. The aftermath of the sex with Thomas (left) vs. the sex dream about Emma (right).

Her reaction to the dream stems from shock, the sudden realization of something, whereas this reaction stems from a lack of fulfillment. In the scene that immediately follows, Kechiche once again focuses on Adèle's face as she expresses to a friend, "I'm missing something." Tears flow as we see her distress, her lack of solidity. Through the sequence of events that Kechiche has taken us through, we know what Adèle is missing. Adrienne Rich writes, "heterosexuality is presumed as a 'sexual preference' of 'most women,' either implicitly or explicitly."³⁵ Adèle, surrounded by a group that bonds over heterosexuality, is now forced to grapple with these feelings. The consistent up-close framing of her face encourages our study of her; we pick up on disinterest, uncertainty, and what piques her interest. Her intense gaze on Emma when she first laid eyes on her vs. her preoccupied gaze when with Thomas reveals *why* this is not working. Her appetite, which she so desperately wants to quench with Thomas, continues to gnaw at her.

Adèle does, ultimately, end things with Thomas. On a night out to distract herself, Adèle wanders off and eventually finds herself at a lesbian bar. Upon entering, it is discernible that Adèle is easily the youngest one there, garnering the attention of those around her. Kechiche, at first, keeps us behind her as she enters the space, traversing the new with her. When she is stopped by a woman who asks what she's doing here, clearly interested, Adèle claims she's meeting a friend. It's a lie, but not fully. Whether consciously or not, Kechiche has already

³⁵ Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, p. 633.

planted the implication of Adèle's being here: Emma. Subconsciously looking for Emma ourselves, Kechiche encourages our awareness of the space by positioning us, now, in front of Adèle as she moves forward; when her eyes look to something, the camera moves with her. This not only keeps us engaged in the act of looking (and allows us to gain a better sense of the space) but also grants us an intimate view of a queer space; nonetheless, a queer space without men. The images of women kissing one another or dancing together show the comfort they find with each other. Adèle's hesitant movement through this crowd acknowledges the new experience of this openly queer gaze. Desire, previously spoken about merely in heterosexual contexts, now clearly presents itself not only through Adèle, but through all these other characters; there is safety in numbers and yet, that makes Adèle so vulnerable—she is the newest addition.

When Adèle reaches the very end of the hallway, Kechiche cuts to bring the viewer to a medium-distance shot of her. As she turns around, doing one final scan, Emma walks out of the door behind her. The arrival inevitable, Adèle moves forward and past us as Kechiche focuses on Emma's lingering gaze after her, before moving upstairs. Unclear of whether or not Adèle has spotted her, she seats herself at the bar, still scanning the room before her eye catches. Kechiche cuts quickly between the two women, establishing a connection (see Figures 5).



Figures 5. An establishment of clear gaze, especially on Emma's side who's look remains unfaltering throughout the interaction.

It is now, however, until Adèle is approached by another woman that Emma makes a move. Physically intervening between Adèle and this woman, Emma takes on an immediate position: she's mine. This first proper interaction lays the foundation for their relationship: Emma in the lead, Adèle following. The camera jumps back and forth as they begin to talk, the conversation easy. Emma confidently voices that which we have already picked up on: Adèle's inexperience, her age, her precarious nature. Whereas Emma is relaxed, leaning casually against the bar counter, Adèle sits straight, rigid in her composure. From this early meeting, two things are made clear: the educated way Emma sees herself and the unguided way she sees Adèle. Emma is at ease in this space, comfortable among this crowd while Adèle is curious, yet intimidated. To have their first real interaction take place at a lesbian bar, Kechiche does two things: introduces us to what is a safe, communal space for queer women/non-men (so often neglected in film) and grants us a view into someone who is just discovering it, tentatively, for the first time.

Adèle, for Emma, becomes a sort of muse. She sees Adèle, in some capacity, as an object for her art. Emma takes pride in her knowledge of art and philosophy, whereas Adèle, considered less knowledgeable on these subjects, challenges Emma with her passivity. They do not view the world the same way—Emma wishes to be a successful artist and Adèle wants to be a teacher, which Emma looks down upon. Their first actual date, which takes place at a museum, shows the two wandering the halls filled with images of nude women. At one point, “[t]he camera pauses on Adèle gazing at Emma gazing at one woman in a painting gazing at another. Adèle and Emma simultaneously create the framing to the nude painting beyond and become framed within it.”³⁶ Through these layers of looking, “women are the agents of the look as well as the objects of it.

³⁶ Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory*, p. 111.

Positioned against the figures in the paintings behind them, Adèle and Emma are revealed to us as figures whom we will be asked to look at, in later scenes, as nudes.³⁷ As this date occurs prior to the sex scene between Adèle and Emma, perhaps Kechiche preps us to see the nude as art (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Multiple-layered looking: the women in the painting looking at each other; Adèle and Emma looking at them together; us, looking at it all.

Even more, as this is Emma's world, Kechiche preps us for her view of Adèle, which we have already gotten a taste of. The art world, in many ways, is Emma's world, one that Adèle cannot quite fit into. In this moment of multiple viewing, Kechiche not only plays with our view of the nude figure, but also of how we will see Adèle in Emma's own work. Her ability to draw and see Adèle, whether accurately or not, stems from an assuredness in herself that Adèle does not yet possess. In this case, the artist and her muse do not stand as equals. We begin, therefore, on unsteady ground. The power imbalance of age, knowledge, and self-security shows us that even at the start of this relationship, wandering the halls of this museum, they are not entirely on the same page.

An unspecified time skip launches us into new territory. In manipulating time like this, Kechiche briefly disorients the audience, asking them to situate themselves in an entirely new

³⁷ Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory*, p. 112.

phase of the relationship. Emma's hair, now blonde, looks older and more mature while Adèle still has a relatively youthful appearance to her. Unlike the two films I will look at in Chapter II and III, Adèle and Emma's relationship is shown to us outside of simply one moment in time. Giving us an insight into the life they have built together, *Kechiche* focuses on the relationship's longevity, even if we do not see everything that got them to this point. Where portrayals of queer relationships are often limited to an impermanent experience, *Kechiche* allows us a look into what it means for a queer couple to live and build a life together. While we are not shown the details that lead to this, it shows that long-term love is possible between two women, as it is so often cut short.

In this new period, *Kechiche* transitions us by cutting from Adèle and Emma's entangled bodies to a panning shot of Adèle's lounging, naked body. In showing us Emma, who is sketching Adèle, *Kechiche* presents us with a triangular layering of gaze: Emma's, our view of her capturing Adèle's figure, and our own (see Figures 7).



Figures 7. The sequence of capturing Adèle's naked figure to a visual, tangible form of art.

In doing this, Kechiche asks us to view Adèle's nude form outside of a sexual context; thus far, we have consistently seen nakedness as a way of physical connection. Emma and Adèle's bodies constantly come together, but now one remains clothed while the other is not. As Emma uses charcoal and her fingers to sketch the contours of Adèle's body, Kechiche thrusts us into a new sort of intimacy: to explore without actually touching. The art becomes a tool for physical exploration on Emma's part and vulnerability on Adèle's. It reminds the viewer of the connection between artist and muse and how that may influence the work produced.

Adèle's body, and its presence in Emma's art, does become a sort of commodity. Her pictures decorating the halls of their shared home, it appears as if she were presented to be devoured and savored by the audience—us or whoever enters the house (see Figure 8).

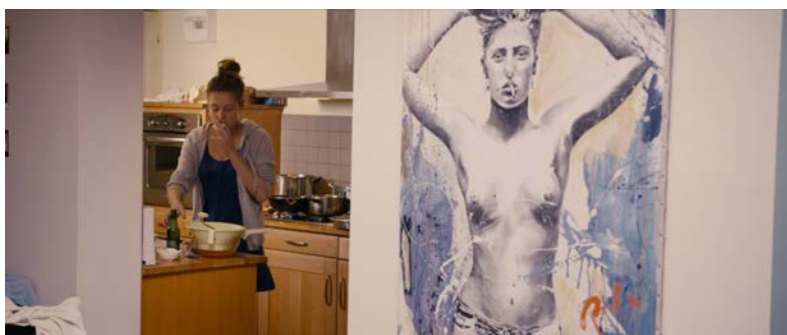


Figure 8. Adèle, in the flesh, alongside her bare chest in Emma's art.

While the paintings could be a way for Emma to show her devotion and love for Adèle, they feel more like a way to show off her artistic skills. At a dinner party that Adèle hosts for Emma and her friends, we begin to see the distance between the two lovers and how Adèle's presence in Emma's life has been stripped down to her posed, naked body. Before the guests even arrive, Adèle, alone in the house, frets around, preparing the food and organizing the space outside. When they do arrive, the camera lingers on her as she hesitantly navigates through the crowd; they all know each other and she is quite literally left to the side. Emma, while she does

introduce Adèle, is lost in her familiar world. Surrounded again by queer individuals, this time, Adèle is less at ease. In contrast to the lesbian bar, she is consistently on the move, as if trying to prove herself. Finally asked to sit down and join them, Adèle sits opposite two women who ask her about her profession. When she reveals she is a teacher, they say nothing, simply nodding and scoffing sarcastically. However, when Adèle returns the question, the conversation flows easily. Adèle is not seen as part of their community due not only to her lack of education, but her lack of interest. Queer solidarity, in this case, is almost nonexistent as Emma's pretentiousness and belief in her artistic superiority overshadows the connections that Adèle could be making. Kechiche not only presents a close-knit community among queer women, but then shows us one that appears to have specific requirements for entry. The gaze among these individuals is complex, loaded with scrutiny and a calculating eye; unity and acceptance come with a checklist.

Later, when the two lie naked together in bed, Emma questions Adèle's career choice. This is not a new discussion; we saw hints at it at the party. She tells Adèle that she should do something she really likes, bringing up Adèle's writing. Emma cannot fathom why Adèle has chosen to be a teacher and it is clear that she sees this profession as a waste of Adèle's time and apparent talent. Simone de Beauvoir writes, "[b]etween women love is contemplative; caresses are intended less to gain possession of the other than gradually to re-create the self through her; separateness is abolished, there is no struggle, no victory, no defeat; in exact reciprocity each is at once subject and object."³⁸ This is possibly an idealized way of viewing wlw love, whereas, between Adèle and Emma, we see the intention to gain possession of the other. Through her art, Emma attempts to trap Adèle in her world, "whose paintings cast Adele in the role of erotic muse

³⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 406.

and which are, in fact, terrible if measured by their ability to ‘get’ Adèle.”³⁹ Fundamentally, her understanding of Adèle comes from her desire to fit her into something she is not. It brings about the question: when Emma paints Adèle, is she painting her in the hopes of portraying her idealized lover? Most of Emma’s friends at the party knew Adèle from her presence in Emma’s paintings, so when they met her, they met her through Emma’s eyes. Unlike us, those who surround Adèle and Emma have preconceived notions of Adèle’s person. Adèle constantly jumps between object and subject, her presence in Emma’s life questioned in her suitability as a partner. In doing this, Kechiche takes on, arguably, a more progressive stance, allowing for a representation of wlw that does not have to be ideal in the way that Beauvoir describes it. It shows the audience that love can be complex and, at times, unhealthy between two women. Beauvoir’s perspective certainly *can* be true—there is no doubt that there are wlw relationships that exist where there is indeed no (or perhaps limited) struggle. However, that does not mean that *all* wlw relationships present this way; just because it is a love story between two women, and there is the absence of an abusive, overbearing man, does not mean it cannot be convoluted. Emma’s knowledge of the community puts her in a position of power, even now, after however many years.

Adèle’s affair with a coworker brings it all to an end. Her appetite, which struggles to be fulfilled by a distant and proud Emma, finds someone who feels familiar. During a night out, the camera swirls around Adèle and this young man as they dance, occasionally dipping down to show Adèle’s swaying hips. They start far apart, the handheld camera and sporadic cuts helping shape the spontaneity of this. The man moves almost exclusively around Adèle, causing her to be

³⁹ Williams, *Cinema’s Sex Acts*, p. 12.

at the center of his and our gaze. This is a separate act of seeing from what we have come to expect: Emma, whether consciously or not, looks at Adèle as someone to be captured. Her gaze is that of the artist and by establishing Adèle as her muse, Adèle's presence means that she will be studied under that watchful eye. Here, we return to a yearning gaze, one that may not truly see Adèle, but that watches her for who she is in that moment. While Emma has openly labeled herself a lesbian throughout the film, Adèle never takes on such a title. It is, however, compelling that Adèle would choose to pursue a relationship with a man to find the security that no longer exists with Emma. Her return to the man brings forth conversations around the existence of wlw relationships as separate from what is labeled as "polite society." Adrienne Rich explores this herself, writing that "the enforcement of heterosexuality [exists] for women as a means of assuring male right of physical, economical, and emotional access. One of many means of enforcement is, of course, the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility, an engulfed continent which rises fragmentedly to view from time to time only to become submerged again."⁴⁰

Compulsory heterosexuality sees man as the basis for woman's desire and her deviation from him does not necessarily mean anything as, inevitably, she will return to him. Of course, this is not accurate to lesbian or queer women's experiences and "[t]o take the step of questioning heterosexuality as a 'preference' or 'choice' for women—and to do the intellectual and emotional work that follows—will call for a special quality of courage in heterosexually identified feminists"⁴¹ who see heterosexuality as the norm. Adèle's affair with this man, which continues for an unprecedented amount of time before Emma realizes, could, for some, bring about the argument for the truth of heterosexuality as the basis for women's desire. When Adèle

⁴⁰ Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, p. 647.

⁴¹ Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, p. 648.

first searched for Emma, it stemmed from her appetite and curiosity. This could be viewed, by someone, as her desire to “revert” and be filled by a man.

Arguably, “because the dominant culture springs from the male body’s surfaces, the female body will always be viewed and judged on the basis of its fit, or lack of fit, as projected onto the male ‘bodomorph’. The male bodymorph is a cultural surface which is incapable of reflecting female specificity truthfully.”⁴² The male, as the social basis, has led to the unquestioned authority on the feminine body. When it strays, the understanding goes awry as “[l]esbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women.”⁴³ This unquestioned access possibly leads this man to pursue Adèle, to dance with her and kiss her. Adèle’s reciprocation of those actions, however, does not seem to have much to do with reverting to heterosexuality. It feels much more correlated to her wish to feel accepted for who she is. In continuing her relationship with Emma, Adèle, desperately craving attention, latches on to the first person to give it to her; he just happens to be there. Adèle’s own lack of community and support, having her body captured in order to contribute to Emma’s success, leaves her external in her own relationship. Kechiche presents the idea that she now tries to take back her autonomy, using her body not to fulfill Emma’s desires (i.e. artistic), but her own.

When Emma finds out about the affair, the confrontation is heated and ugly. The scene begins as Adèle is dropped off by the man she is seeing and after they embrace, she feigns walking into an apartment complex that is not hers, revealing that she is not only hiding the affair from Emma, but hiding her real life from him. Once Adèle returns to her home with Emma, she

⁴² Dave Boothroyd, *Sexing the Ethical Subject*, p. 56.

⁴³ Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, p. 649.

is waiting and the questions begin. In a shot/counter-shot exchange, Kechiche frames the women together but consistently cuts to give us their expressions as the argument picks up. When asking about the false address, Emma asks if Adèle is ashamed to be with a girl, the underlying question being: are you ashamed of me, of us? Adèle denies it, but the accusation lingers as Emma's anger rises. She clearly has some awareness of what transpired, despite Adèle's consistent denial.

When the conversation shifts to the topic of Adèle's colleague, Kechiche brings us in closer, heightening the tension. We can see how Emma's gaze, her view of Adèle, has already become displaced. Her eyes are empty, her anger just on the cusp of overwhelming the scene. The truth eventually escapes Adèle as she pleads: "I felt so alone" and that "there was no other reason."

What was once a gaze of desire now ultimately succumbs to betrayal. Adèle must now recognize the impact of her actions, despite how her security in the relationship ended before the affair began. Emma's anger now, rightfully, takes over the scene; in an instant, the connection between artist and muse is severed.

Time once more passes before we see them together again; unspecified as before, Kechiche shows us Adèle as she continues her career and builds a life for herself, still wrecked with sorrow. When Adèle and Emma reunite in a café, Emma smiles unexpectedly, pleased to see her. A camera positioned over the shoulder of each of the women allows for a newfound gaze in the aftermath of everything that has transpired. We discover that Emma is now in a relationship with Lise, a young woman introduced at the dinner party. During a lull in the conversation, Adèle asks about Emma's sexual satisfaction. Emma, hesitant to respond, eventually confesses: "it's not like with you." Kechiche, in this moment, brings us right back to that first sex scene, returning to the appetite that cannot be quelled—the idea that no one else can satisfy the other in

quite the same way. There is a reminder of what has been lost and the way lust has always ruled their relationship. In a last, strange sexual encounter, Adèle brings Emma's hand to her lips and sucks on her fingers, almost devouring her hands. As it unfolds, the shots "shift between various close-ups: of Adèle's open mouth, her teary eyes, her desperate and almost ugly kissing of Emma's lips and her grasp of Emma's hand at her crotch"⁴⁴ (see Figures 9).



Figures 9. Sloppy, handheld close-ups and Adèle's grasp on Emma's hand.

It is erotic and uncomfortable, an invasive moment where our feeling as a spectator is amplified. They kiss erratically and sloppily, their appetite almost literal, as if physically digging into one another with their teeth or fingers is the only way to be satiated. Bradbury-Rance notes that "[t]he presence here of the abject – alongside its absence in the media discourse that contrives the film's potential for controversy – reveals a prevalent inclination towards smoothing over such ambiguous framings of desire."⁴⁵ Unmentioned, it is arguably one of the most, if not the most, unsettling scenes that we witness—the camera actively involving us so that we become a part of the frenzy. Adèle resorts to using the very thing that Emma has spent so much time studying: her body. The gaze is abandoned for action, for the physicality of flesh meeting flesh. It is the way that they initially got to know each other, and how we got to know them; it has always been the easiest way for them to communicate. This reversal springs us back to the beginning of their relationship, reminding us of the passage of time.

⁴⁴ Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory*, p. 117.

⁴⁵ Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory*, p. 117-18.

Author Patricia White in her chapter “Female Spectator, Lesbian Specter” reflects, “[I]ove between women is considered unspeakable. It is inaudible and invisible.”⁴⁶ Kechiche not only makes it audible and visible, but does so over time. With this final time jump, he rewinds the clock to give them a fresh start. They have history, an excess of it, something that most queer couples in film are not awarded. Moreover, Kechiche allows a look into a flawed and unidealized version of sapphic love. Not only are Adèle and Emma messy in bed, but their behavior translates into how they treat each other in their relationship overall. The ability to posit them alongside time, and not against it, allows the viewer to better understand their relationship and *why* it cannot work. Unlike many other films that center queer love, the decision to remain separated is an active choice, even if it is not one Adèle wishes for. They are not forced apart by outside forces, but instead, are brought apart by the carelessness they showed in their relationship.

As Bradbury-Rance sums it up, “[i]n the case of *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, sex is asked by its critics not only to be a satisfactory image of ‘the act itself’, but also of lesbian identity more broadly: of the film’s legibility as lesbian.”⁴⁷ The sex, through its continuous presence in debates, *is* their relationship. However, when one looks past the conversations around the sex and delves deeper into this presentation of a wlw relationship, the whole picture is more complex. Given the length of time we spend with these characters, not just in hours but in years, Kechiche allows us a deeper insight into sapphic love. Whether that portrayal is accurate can be debated just as well, but when focusing merely on the sex, we miss out on the conversations around

⁴⁶ White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability*, p. 86.

⁴⁷ Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory*, p. 117.

desire, social difference, and complex choice: that which grounds the relationship in a semblance of materiality.

Chapter II: Paint Me Like One of Your French Girls

Céline Sciamma, in an interview that covered *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, stated, “it’s always fun when people ask me, ‘How do you do female gaze?’ I’m like, you know, it’s not like you have to scratch your head, like for hours thinking, ‘How am I not going to objectify women?’ It’s not that difficult.”⁴⁸ Openly a lesbian, Sciamma has been a pioneering voice for the sapphic community in recent years. With the rise in the representation of the queer community, wlw stories are still left on the outskirts. At the heart of this film lies Marianne’s ability to depict Héloïse in a portrait, where by the end of the film, the audience has seen a total of three pieces: one destroyed, one discarded, and the final portrayal. These three portraits act as a signifier of their relationship progression as Sciamma takes us through an exploration of the gaze, the body, and what quiet intimacy can look like.

The opening of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* establishes the central concerns of the film. After a series of shots of interchanging hands before a canvas, the sound of pencil against paper soft in the background, we are positioned in front of one of their owners. Her gaze is intentional, flickering. Off-screen, we hear a woman, Marianne, who narrates the intention of the sketch, and we are brought further into the space, shown a number of artists, all young women. By initially keeping Marianne off-screen, Sciamma brings out an innate curiosity in the viewer—she pushes us to want to see and plays with our patience. She does so, possibly, to make sure that when we do see her, we do not simply watch, but explore. We become part of the sketchers, ready to look carefully, with purpose. When she is revealed, Marianne is poised, her eyes roaming the room when her gaze shifts ever so subtly; something has caught her attention. Her reaction is nuanced:

⁴⁸ “Céline Sciamma Screen Talk with Tricia Tuttle | BFI London Film Festival 2019,” YouTube Interview.

she tenses up, her breathing accelerates, and all the while, her gaze remains fixed on that which we cannot see. The question comes fast: “who brought that painting out?” Marianne’s hands are clutching at her dress. There is a cut to the girls, the camera peering down the row of them, as each turns to look at the piece off-screen (see Figure 10).



Figure 10. The camera’s position aligns us with the students, wishing to see the area they are looking to in search of answers.

One of the girls, toward the back, hesitantly raises a finger, admitting to the action. The situation is tense, yes, but the reason for it being so is not disclosed to either the girls or the viewer. We, thereby, become one of those aligned with the group—the camera even positioning us as if we could be one of the sketchers in the row, simply looking over—unsure of what has transpired.

Thus far, Marianne has put herself in the position of an object, an individual to be examined and studied. In this one moment, she shifts to being a subject, defined by emotion. It is as if she has been sucked into her own head, ever so briefly, allowing her disposition to falter. The source of this shift is finally revealed: a blurred and darkened painting. It is not a grand introduction, not even a proper divulgence of what has caused all of this ruckus, and yet, there it is. It not only looms physically in the background but in the back of our minds as well, tempting us to take just a few steps forward to get a better look. Finally, with the turn of the girls’ heads,

the painting is brought into focus for us as well. The camera slowly moves in, as if we were gliding forth by some unnatural pull, desperate for it to be the only thing in frame. It shows a woman positioned ever so slightly off-center, and she's on fire. Once it is the only thing we can see, Sciamma brings us back directly to Marianne, closer to her now as well, as she gasps out the name of the piece: *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. We linger on her, her eyes red around the edges, still breathing hard as an unknown, unplaceable sound slowly pushes itself into the space.

This opening sequence, mundane and forgotten as it may seem, especially by the end of the film, is crucial to the establishment of Marianne, of her character and, especially, of her reflection on these memories. Marianne becomes known quickly, not in a grand act of emotion, but in a subtle one, a series of breaths and gazes that tells us that whatever we are about to learn has profoundly impacted her character. Sciamma, by initially withholding the full story, forces us to abandon our expectations of what it is we are encountering. Cleverly, she places us alongside Marianne's students, a pupil anxiously awaiting answers.

The plunge into this memory is clumsy—Marianne arrives at an island drenched, slightly bewildered, and hefting her luggage alone. For almost the entire rest of the film, we will remain on this island. Arriving at a dark house, Marianne is polite and poised with the maid, settling herself in the space. It is not until the maid has left and there is the definite clunk of the door closing behind her that Marianne's composure drops. This mirrors, in a way, what we saw from Marianne's first introduction: her exterior presentation and then the faltering, the moment where she is revealed. By the fire and candlelight, Sciamma allows a deeply intimate view of Marianne as she undresses. It is not necessarily her nudity that causes this—although it could be for some—but the way the camera takes its position alongside her. There is something intimate

about how Marianne handles the pages that have become soaked, sitting nude and still damp herself. It is such a private moment and so early into the film; we barely know Marianne as a character, and yet, she becomes known to us in ways that often occur much later in a narrative. Positioned in the center of the fireplace, two large canvases drying on either side of her, Marianne is likened to art (see Figure 11).



Figure 11. Marianne dries herself and her canvases, her body illuminated by the light of the fire.

She teeters the line between object and subject. Mulvey explores: “[t]raditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen.”⁴⁹ Yet, in this moment, Marianne is alone and her nudity, instead of presented as inherently sexual, recalls the long history of female nudes in Western art. Sciamma’s positioning of Marianne in this way is paradoxical: Marianne does not seem to sit in front of the fireplace for an external gaze, much less for the audience. Yet, the way she is displayed between these two canvases encourages us to view in relation to the pictorial tradition. While the intention may be to allow us a look into a private, quiet moment, our absorption of the feminine form stems from our conception of nude art. Nonetheless, Marianne’s character

⁴⁹ Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, p. 809.

develops here through her subtle movements and looks in the care she takes not only with her body, but with her canvases. By equating Marianne so closely with art, Sciamma allows her to be viewed comparably: thoroughly and with intent.

The following morning, the reason for Marianne's arrival is disclosed: she must paint "the mistress." There was another before her who couldn't manage it. His painting, which he left discarded, is of this presumed mistress, H elo ise, dressed elegantly in a green gown, but her face has been removed (see Figure 12).



Figure 12. H elo ise's initial faceless form; this first viewing of her will be crucial in the evolution of Marianne and H elo ise's relationship.

The new object at the center of this film, the literal reason for Marianne's being here, is elusive. In an earlier conversation with Sophie, the maid, we learn that it was initially H elo ise's sister who was to be wed, but that she killed herself on one of her daily walks, forcing H elo ise into her position. Having refused to pose for the first painter, H elo ise does not know the truth of Marianne's being here, instead fed the lie that Marianne is there to accompany her on her daily walks. H elo ise exists, thus far, only as a faceless figure in a green dress. She has, as we later learn, no wish to be painted for a man she does not know. She is portrayed as fleeting, never quite able to be captured.

Their first meeting initially keeps Héloïse faceless, hiding her behind a cloaked hood as the camera seems to take on a semblance of Marianne’s point of view, following Héloïse outside for the first accompanied walk. Sciamma frames the back of Héloïse closely, almost an up-close shot, while Marianne is filmed from further away. Jumping between the two of them, this could be to establish a distinction of viewership for the audience: Héloïse is seen with a calculated, studying gaze, while the return to Marianne is for our benefit. Desire to see overwhelms this initial interaction, curiosity gripping both the spectator and Marianne. Héloïse, when she reveals herself, allows Marianne, and thereby us, to study her through a painter’s eye. This is similar, in some respects, to Emma’s view of Adèle: pointed and roaming. Unlike Emma, however, Marianne does not have the luxury of a posed Héloïse, instead hinging on her ability to see her fleetingly. Forced into studying Héloïse in passing, but with vigor, Sciamma begins to play with intimacy. As New York Times writer Ren Jender puts it, “[t]his initial deception is conveyed through the intent, searching looks Marianne casts toward Héloïse and the curious, wary glances Héloïse returns to her — exchanges that reveal a mutual attraction and cement a powerful bond over time.”⁵⁰ For now, these looks are a way of getting to know each other, Marianne more than Héloïse, and for us to witness a connection built upon minimal words. Much of our knowledge of Héloïse, in the beginning, comes from what we see created by Marianne’s hand and the extended shots of Héloïse on their walks. In establishing these two in this way, Sciamma thrusts us into a viewing experience that is quite personal. Yet, Marianne’s job lingers in the background: Héloïse is the object of Marianne’s desire because she must capture her, and yet, as time passes, it becomes much more complex than that. In truth, “[t]he relation between what we see and what

⁵⁰ Jender, *‘Portrait of a Lady on Fire’ Understands Queer Desire*.

we know is never settled.”⁵¹ The two are in a constant battle against one another as Sciamma asks us to question what becomes the driving force behind Marianne’s gaze.

Sciamma’s presentation of them together begins to shift. They are often framed in conjunction with each other, sitting side by side, whereas before, we saw them through a series of shot/counter-shot exchanges. Instead of being part of the exchange, we are now detached from it, witnessing it as the third party. By not bringing us into their interactions, Sciamma allows for a level of privateness between them, one that we’re not privy to. There is a beautiful scene where Héloïse confesses that she has never seen an orchestra, and Marianne, unsure of how to describe the enormity of what it means to hear music in such a way, goes to the small piano in the corner to play. Héloïse joins her, standing beside the bench, staring down at Marianne (see Figure 13).



Figure 13. Héloïse’s intense and unapologetic stare. By hiding Marianne’s face from us, Sciamma forces us to focus exclusively on Héloïse. She is, in this moment, still the person who draws our eye.

It is a rare moment in which Marianne is the one who is on the receiving end of the gaze; the one observed and studied. Héloïse is typically put in this vulnerable position, as Marianne painstakingly tries to be subtle and easygoing with her glances. Here, the roles have been reversed and there is nothing subtle, nor delicate, about the way Héloïse studies Marianne. Her eyes are intense, traveling over Marianne with determination. Berger states, “[t]o look is an act

⁵¹ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 7.

of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach – though not necessarily within arm’s reach. To touch something is to situate oneself in relation to it.”⁵² In this moment, Marianne is situating herself alongside Héloïse and the choice to look, and for Héloïse to look back, has nothing to do with the portrait. Jender writes that, “to flirt as a queer person is to immerse one’s self in the act of looking and being looked at, sometimes in secret.”⁵³ The looks in this film become a way of communicating, and while Héloïse is still in the dark, it remains slightly ambiguous about what exactly is transpiring between them. The ending of this scene is immediately followed by the image of the green dress being painted, Sciamma plunging us back into Marianne’s obligation—Marianne the watcher, Héloïse the watched. There is a moment of hope, of curiosity: has Marianne revealed the truth to Héloïse? But alas, it is the maid, Sophie, who sits for her. The gaze, which should lead us directly to the subject Sciamma has consistently drawn us to, is not there.

When Marianne has completed her portrait, there comes the demolition of another. Distressed at the fact that she must now reveal herself, and the portrait, to Héloïse, Marianne returns once more to the faceless painting. Bringing a single lit candle to it, the flame hovers over the figure, tracing the silhouette around in a circle until the camera pauses over her breasts and the spot ignites (see Figures 14).

⁵² Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 8.

⁵³ Jender, ‘Portrait of a Lady on Fire’ Understands Queer Desire.



Figures 14. The catching of the flame and Marianne's immediate reaction. Note her expression of surprise.

As Marianne watches it, perhaps she is coming to terms with what could come to pass now that she must tell Héloïse the truth. It is, in a way, the death of the initial faceless Héloïse as she is now someone close, someone Marianne cares for. Perhaps, Marianne tries to convince herself that the painting she has done is sufficient, that she is proud of it, that she is prepared to show it to Héloïse. To do so, she must get rid of the reminder of the last painter, of the one who failed before her. When Marianne discloses the truth, Héloïse is composed and calm, stating, “it explains all your looks.” As Marianne might have feared, the development between them is reduced to the gaze and *why* it was present. The long-held stares and sideways glances all come back to the painting. The trust, while perhaps not wholly broken, has faltered. Héloïse, having just begun to look back, is now thrust into questioning what was real and what was not. The relationship, already precarious for the audience, loses its stability for her. After the utterance of these words, Sciamma cuts to show us the face of the completed portrait. As we linger on it, it is utterly silent. A newfound vulnerability is brought about in this shot as we are left alone to contemplate the piece, Sciamma withholding Héloïse's reaction. When we are shown the two of them, it is through a shot/counter-shot exchange as Héloïse questions if the painting is really of her. Marianne goes on the defensive as Héloïse questions, “is this how you see me?” Launching the conversation into societal expectations, Marianne alludes to the recipient of this portrait.

Slowly, it becomes clear that Héloïse's discomfort stems from how her face holds "the expression of a woman responding with calculated charm to the man whom she imagines looking at her — although she doesn't know him. She is offering up her femininity as the surveyed."⁵⁴ To Héloïse, this reads as a painting with "no life" and "no presence," a delineation of her for the man. It is an accusation of presentation against Marianne directly; Héloïse questions the way that Marianne sees her, not as an artist but as a person—through the eyes of the man, or through the eyes of someone who she thought truly saw her. As "[t]he painter's way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas or paper," it influences "our perception or appreciation of an image [which] depends also upon our own way of seeing."⁵⁵ Marianne's version of Héloïse in this work is a reflection of how she views her and the reason it has caught Héloïse so off guard is its profound detachment, as if Marianne did not know Héloïse at all.

This scene is a turning point, confirming a level of care they have developed for one another that has now been diminished down to the inaccuracy of this portrait. The painting is a polished, refined version of Héloïse, poised suitably, but it is not actually her. Once Héloïse has left to fetch her mother, Marianne's composure drops. Openly distressed, we watch as she returns with force toward the painting, scrutinizing it. With the words still hanging in the air, Sciamma asks us to look at this portrait anew, to revisit our own perception of it (see Figures 15).

⁵⁴ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 55.

⁵⁵ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 10.



Figures 15. We reevaluate the portrait in the aftermath of the argument, taking on Marianne's analytical gaze.

And then, with a sudden thud, Marianne plunges her hand with a rag over the face, wiping it away. Another portrait of Héloïse succumbs to the depiction of a faceless figure. Unlike the painter before her, Marianne defaces Héloïse not out of frustration with her, but rather with herself. There is admiration in Héloïse's eyes when she sees what Marianne has done, as if destroying the portrait is an act of confession. We return to the flip between object and subject, as Héloïse herself realizes that despite Marianne's reason for coming here, her reason for staying is much different—for Marianne, facing the angered presence of Héloïse's mother, promises to start anew. Héloïse, unexpectedly, agrees to pose for the new portrait. In “[a]llowing herself to be an object, she is transformed into an idol proudly recognizing herself as such; but she spurns the implacable logic which makes her still the inessential. She would like to be a fascinating treasure, not a thing to be taken.”⁵⁶ Her resistance to sitting for the painting comes from the anger she harnesses at her current situation. She does not wish, as Beauvoir puts it, “to be taken,” and she certainly does not wish to contribute to that eventual outcome. Héloïse despises the idea of being seen as an object and so her agreement to sit for the painting has nothing to do with the man she will marry and everything to do with Marianne's view of her as subject. Given five days for its completion, the film itself is renewed, given a second chance. If the first third of the film

⁵⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 347.

was overwhelmed with the gaze, Sciamma now introduces the body. The two, inherently correlated, play off each other as Sophie, the maid, becomes an integral part of the narrative. The shift is enacted in the way Héloïse can now be seen: directly instead of through private and stolen glances. This is presented in an instance where Marianne sketches Héloïse, believing she is asleep. Her eyes move from the paper in her hand to Héloïse until, on one of her glances toward her, Marianne pauses and Sciamma cuts to show us Héloïse, looking back. After a brief shot/counter-shot exchange where no words are shared, Héloïse stretches herself out, her hands framing her face, physically opening herself up. It is both an invitation and permission: to allow Marianne to watch her while, in turn, returning the gaze.

As Héloïse sits for the new portrait, the two women begin to converse, when unexpectedly, Marianne begins to describe certain physical motions that Héloïse does and how they correlate to what she is feeling. Marianne catches her as her movements change, describing how they reveal embarrassment (when she bites her lips) or annoyance (when she stops blinking). This forces a quipped response out of Héloïse, “you know it all” and Marianne simply says, “forgive me, I’d hate to be in your place.” Initially presented to us as object, Marianne’s eye shifts Héloïse into the space of subject with what she has noticed. She sees not just Héloïse as she poses and looks, but as she moves, reacts, and explores. Sciamma, however, then flips the scene on its head. She directs the power over to Héloïse with the simplicity of a few words: “we’re in the same place. Exactly the same place.” Beckoning Marianne over and instructing her to stand beside her, Héloïse directs Marianne’s gaze to where Héloïse was looking. As the camera pulls in on them, bringing us closer—as if to make sure we understand the conveyance of this information as well—Héloïse asks simply, “if you look at me, who do I look at?” Marianne,

growing flustered, is now subjected to the same listing of traits: when she touches her forehead, she doesn't know what to say; when she's troubled, she breathes through her mouth. Just like Héloïse, Marianne does each of these movements before Héloïse lists them, caught in the same trap. There is something in the act of being seen, and the shift of power balance—from Marianne in control—clearly catches her off guard. She realizes that “[s]oon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen. The eye of the other combines within our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of the visible world.”⁵⁷ Héloïse, in a way, becomes an artist, not necessarily capturing Marianne physically, but learning her behavior just the same. To be known, intimately, is to be well and truly seen. Here, “she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman.”⁵⁸ Marianne, so used to her position as the surveyor, catches at the moment she realizes that she's also the surveyed. Her identity repositions itself with this new knowledge as she moves from subject to object. When Marianne returns to her position behind the easel, Sciamma frames her the way we have seen Héloïse, to see Marianne from Héloïse's perspective (see Figures 16). As Marianne once again begins to work, she breathes through her mouth.



Figures 16. Marianne's view of Héloïse vs. Héloïse's view of Marianne.

⁵⁷ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 9. While Berger is speaking about “we” as in the spectator, his point applies to Marianne's revelation.

⁵⁸ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 46.

As the act of painting continues, Sciamma plays with the two mediums to capture the body: painting and cinema. There is a scene where Marianne, having shifted from painting Héloïse's face, paints her chest. The camera stays focused on the area where she works, her brushstrokes light and concentrated, as Héloïse inquires about her past painting experience. We learn that the women who paint are not allowed to practice capturing the male form, Marianne explaining that "it's mostly to prevent us from doing great art. Without any notion of male autonomy, the major subjects escape us." Marianne confesses that she paints men in secret, a way of furthering her artistic abilities, of becoming one of those who do great art. It is curious for Sciamma to have a conversation dedicated to how salient the male body is while actively having us witness the painting of a female one. Sciamma, in doing so, brings our attention to the lack of men within this film; we actively study the women (Héloïse, Marianne, and slowly Sophie), surrounded by a presence (feminine) that deviates from what is known as the central form in art. In a way, Sciamma forces us to reflect on how the gaze has consistently been feminine and that, whether aware of it or not, the viewer has been brought into a space where the male form is inaccessible.

In having such a conversation take place while we view Marianne painting Héloïse, Sciamma explores how the cinema and painting differ from one another and how each lends itself best to telling a particular story. The physicality that comes along with painting allows, arguably, for a more intimate exploration of the body. As we see throughout the film, Marianne's attention to form, color, and flow all impact how she paints. Berger explains that "[w]hat distinguishes oil painting from any other form of painting is its special ability to render the tangibility, the texture, the lustre, the solidity of what it depicts. It defines the real as that which

you can put your hands on.”⁵⁹ Many artists spend more time looking at their subjects than they do at their work, conducting the process into a viewing experience that is quite intimate for both artist and their muse. The abundance of texture that comes along with painting adds to the perception and exploration of the body. In the shots that we get of Marianne working, there is a textural experience that cinema simply cannot capture: the feel of the canvas, the thickness or thinness of the paint, the scratch of the paintbrush.⁶⁰ Painting forces one to have a profound level of attentiveness and cognizance of the figure they are capturing. This, in part, contributed to the poor resemblance of Héloïse in Marianne’s first painting; the ability to revisit the reference as one works is at the core of this type of work. The way the body is presented through paint is almost unmatched in any other medium. Especially when able to see a piece of work for oneself, a relationship is established between the viewer and the painting that relies heavily on materiality.

Cinema, on the other hand, gives us a more detached view of the body while allowing us into the personal. It is a different sort of intimacy, allowing the viewer an insight into the relationship that may be formed between the artist and the subject of their work. We have seen this between Marianne and Héloïse, cinema functioning as the medium to showcase their relationship to the viewer, something that painting could never do. Elaborating on this, Berger writes, “[i]n a film the way one image follows another, their succession, constructs an argument which becomes irreversible. In a painting all its elements are there to be seen simultaneously. The spectator may need time to examine each element of the painting but whenever he reaches a conclusion, the simultaneity of the whole painting is there to reverse or qualify his conclusion.

⁵⁹ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 88.

⁶⁰ This complicates Berger’s quote as the portrait is not tangible for us. We are barred from the physical experience, subjected to explore only with what the camera will allow.

The painting maintains its own authority.”⁶¹ While the painting, in Berger’s view, might lose its authority in our witnessing its creation, it is through cinema’s insight that we can witness the entire process: the creation of the first painting, the reason for its lack of connection to Héloïse, and why Marianne ultimately destroys it. The complexities of painting and capturing Héloïse are shown through the camera and Sciamma’s ability to bring us into that process. Painting may show intimacy, but it may never tell the whole story; the spectator may examine the painting in its entirety and come to a conclusion, but so much of what makes this version of it significant would be lost.⁶² It leaves something to be desired, a curiosity that is never fulfilled. Cinema allows us to delve deeper. It may not situate us alongside the physicality of painting, but it may tell the story behind it; whereas painting is haptic, cinema is universally visual, although acting as a textural barrier. This second portrait of Héloïse and the knowledge of the care taken in its creation, the tenderness shared between Marianne and her, is only given to us through cinema.

In comparison, Emma’s depictions of Adèle in *Blue is the Warmest Color* fall flat because we do not get the same level of attention to the work, despite our knowledge of their history. It lingers in the background and there are only a few scenes in which we see Emma actively sketch Adèle. As I argued in that chapter, Emma’s capture of Adèle is not entirely accurate or realistic; her desire to sketch Adèle has less to do with portraying her accurately and more to do with Emma’s wish to capture her own subjective lesbian experience. While Marianne’s initial objective was to capture Héloïse in likeness and not necessarily in personhood, that has now shifted. Emma and Marianne are both artists and, in a way, their muses take on a similar position. Traditionally, we have seen the artist and their muse exist as a gendered relationship: the artist

⁶¹ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 26.

⁶² The man set to marry Héloïse will see this painting, but will the painting truly maintain its authority in his eyes? Is not the story of Marianne and Héloïse crucial to its creation?

masculine, the muse feminine. Think of works such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* or Édouard Monet's *Olympia*—as well as countless others—who consistently have the view of the artist be that of a male gaze.⁶³ As Marianne noted, men are the ones who do great art. In both of these films, while the role of the muse remains unaltered, the shift of the artists to women showcases a gaze that often goes ignored as it is not prioritized. To see the women take on an artist's role and paint their lovers is quite provocative. However, the execution of the artist/muse relationship are profoundly different in each film, with Sciamma's attention to art and its function in the film essential. Kechiche stresses Emma's identity as an artist, but does not stress what Adèle means in her art. For Marianne, Héloïse now means everything.

Earlier in the film, the audience and Marianne learned of Sophie's unwanted pregnancy. This reveal has led all three women on a journey to terminate it, and late one night, they venture out to a communal bonfire. For the first time, we encounter a group of individuals outside the house: all women. Thus far, Marianne and Héloïse have existed in a sort of seclusion; even when they venture out, they are alone. The presence of so many people in one space reminds the viewer of the world outside the house. We are thrust back into reality, pushed out of the comfortable confines we have grown accustomed to. Sophie is shown interacting closely with an older woman who presses her hands to her stomach. Meanwhile, Sciamma brings us back to Marianne who diverts her gaze to Héloïse, who seems out of place. Her posture is taut and she looks around irresolutely; it is not just we who are unused to this excess of presence. Sophie tells Marianne that she is still pregnant and must return in two days. Slowly, the other women

⁶³ An added note: the relationships between any artist and their muse (or simply their subject) requires a certain level of vulnerability. However, the fact that the artist/muse relationships we see in this film, as well as in *Blue*, are between lovers certainly could influence the gaze. Cinema allows us to understand the context around the works of art while a painting on its own only allows for an interpretation of the relationship between artist and subject.

collectively gather and begin a low sort of humming, which turns into a collective song. Something about it seems almost ritualistic, although it feels more like a connection. As the music washes over the scene, Sciamma brings us into an intense shot/counter-shot exchange where Marianne and Héloïse stare at each other over the effulgent flames of the fire. Their gazes are emotive, a somber feeling washing over the scene. We watch as Héloïse, showcased through the large flames that dance between her and Marianne, begins to walk to the side, the camera tracking her. Her gaze is locked on the camera as we watch her through Marianne's eyes, drawn directly into the scene. When Héloïse's full silhouette emerges, we see that she herself is on fire. She stands, encircled by darkness, her gaze stuck on Marianne and us, as her dress burns. When she takes notice of what is happening, she simply looks back up, her expression undisturbed. We return, in this instant, to the work that plunged us into this narrative. By this point, it is no surprise that it was Héloïse in the initial painting. This moment functions less as an act of confirmation rather than a return to the gaze and the body.⁶⁴ To paint specifically this moment of Héloïse tells us not of the dramatics of her being on fire, but rather the connection between the two of them that makes the fire irrelevant. Caught up in their own experience of looking, painting Héloïse on fire becomes about the desire to be uninterrupted. She is not a figure alone in a field; instead, she is a figure accompanied by the invisible presence of her lover.

Sophie's abortion is a painful and intimate experience entirely different from what we have seen thus far. Sciamma certainly does not stray away from showing us the grueling and painful process of ridding oneself of an unwanted pregnancy. During the scene, the camera focuses almost solely on Sophie's face as she squirms, her expression pained. Marianne and

⁶⁴ We do, I would argue, return to our initial position as pupil, anxiously awaiting Marianne's answers to our questions. Sciamma returns us, however briefly, to the classroom where we sit among the young women who cannot quite understand Marianne's emotional distress. Now, we do.

Héloïse are positioned beside each other once more, this time to the side as onlookers. Instead of gazing at one another, they stare together at Sophie, joining us in the act of watching. Sophie becomes the object of every gaze in the space: we, the viewer, Marianne and Héloïse, and even the small child that lays beside her head. In choosing to capture this moment, Sciamma pushes the audience to, consciously or not, evaluate their presuppositions of the feminine body. Pushing this viewership one step further, Sciamma recreates the scene; the three women, unable to sleep or rest, are gathered together when Héloïse rouses Sophie. We watch as she becomes a woman on a mission, bringing the mattress onto the floor of Marianne’s room, in front of the fire, and instructing Marianne to get her paints. Without any revelation of her plans, Héloïse takes over the space, instructing Sophie how to situate herself as we watch Marianne gather her supplies. Marianne, as she returns to join them, catches, awestruck. When Sciamma cuts, Héloïse is positioned before Sophie, a mirrored image of the abortion we saw earlier. She has taken the liberty of arranging Sophie just so, but it is Marianne who instructs them into their final, sketch-ready display (see Figures 17). The double capture of this experience, first by cinema and then by art, pushes us to an image that stands entirely on its own.



Figures 17. The abortion scene and its recreation; both function as paintings.

Throughout the film, there is no “real” sex scene, as it is typically considered. But truly, “[w]hat defines lesbian sex—genital contact, ‘bosom sex,’ or an even more amorphous ‘erotic in

female terms'? And, indeed, might sexual practice be less determinative of lesbianism than *desire* for women, *primary love* for women (as in 'women-identified women')?"⁶⁵ As sex has historically been defined via man and woman, what can sex mean when we step outside those binaries? Marianne and Héloïse are together in Marianne's bed, Héloïse's chest exposed while Marianne is slightly covered. This, in a way, reminisces Marianne's nudity alongside her canvases at the beginning of the painting: a depiction of the body at ease. Berger writes that "[t]o be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude."⁶⁶ In this instance, under Berger's definition, neither woman functions as a nude. They see each other, yes, although not as objects but as subjects, as themselves in each other's presence. Héloïse pulls out a balm, one that is undoubtedly laced with some drug by the way she describes it. After some giggling and uncertainty, Sciamma then cuts to two fingers moving in and out of one of an armpit (see Figure 18).

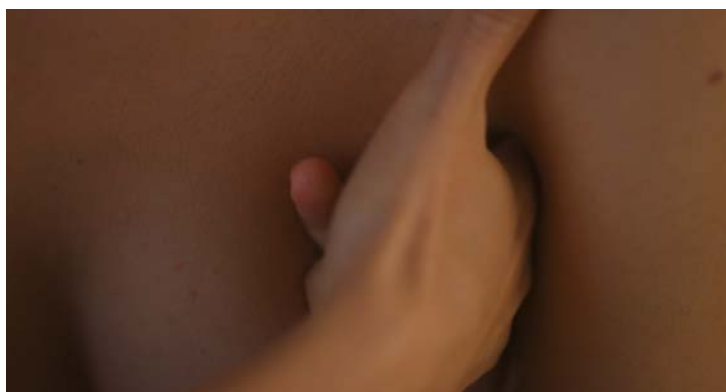


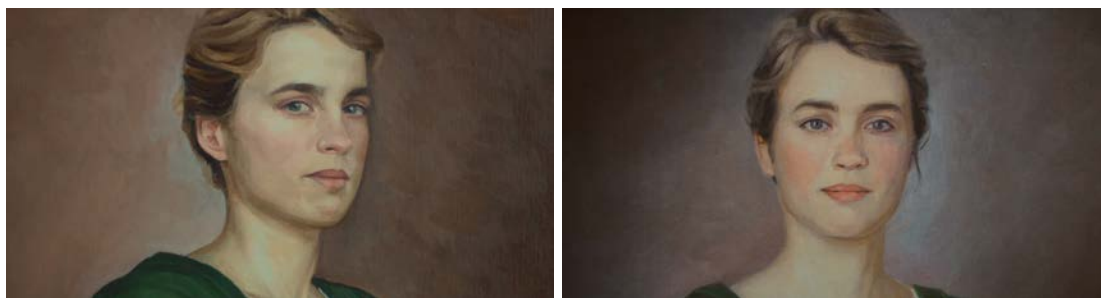
Figure 18. The hand entering a hole is undeniably ambiguous, especially in the first moments of the scene's unfolding.

⁶⁵ Bennett, "*Lesbian-Like*" and the Social History of Lesbianisms, p. 10.

⁶⁶ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 54.

The shot is so close that, at first, what we are looking at is speculative; the confirmation of the body part only comes when Sciamma pans across Marianne’s chest. This is the closest thing that Sciamma gives us to a sexual act: the fingering of Marianne’s armpit. Sciamma, reflecting on this scene, explains that “[s]ex scenes are always simulated in films, you know? I wanted to do a sex scene that wasn’t simulated.”⁶⁷ This is a stark contrast from the sex that we see in *Blue is the Warmest Color*. The way Sciamma positions the camera and alludes to sex without actually giving us that image is memorable. Whereas Adèle and Emma are ravenous, exploring to get as much out of the other as possible, Marianne and Héloïse take their time. Their attention to one another is more deliberate, slow, as if treasuring every moment. It is almost ironic: Adèle and Emma, who seem to have all the time in the world, act hastily, while Marianne and Héloïse, who are running out of it, act in the exact opposite manner.

The portrait is practically finished. Héloïse is not necessarily smiling in it, but a clear presence comes through, a radiance that was not present in the initial work. More importantly, she looks like the woman both we and Marianne have come to know (see Figures 19).



Figures 19. The completed portrait (left) compared with the initial one (right).

The closeness of the finality, however, turns both Marianne and Héloïse’s moods sour; the painting brings forth the very thing they have tried desperately to ignore: they cannot be together.

⁶⁷ “Céline Sciamma Screen Talk with Tricia Tuttle | BFI London Film Festival 2019,” YouTube Interview.

Their anger stems from a loss of hope, the knowledge that what has been set in stone from the beginning will now come to pass. Marianne and Héloïse's irritability with one another is useless but inevitable, and in presenting it, Sciamma allows us to feel those similar emotions of frustration. We feel the desperation of these characters, and the resignation that follows, wishing to spend their last night together. Back in Marianne's bed, Héloïse watches as Marianne works a mini-version of the portrait that she has painted of Héloïse, confessing it a personal keepsake. Héloïse expresses how she will not have the same, no access to a physical image of Marianne and so, Marianne offers to make one. On page 28 of Héloïse's book, Marianne produces a sketch of herself. A small mirror is placed against Héloïse's vagina as we see Marianne study herself in it. Like so many others, this moment is deeply personal, possibly the most intimate one they have shared. Héloïse watches Marianne, still naked and exposed, as Marianne watches herself. There is a trust that comes through in this moment, an ability to be seen at her most vulnerable. Crucially, it is a capturing of Marianne as her most authentic self. It is a more intimate sketch than the one Marianne has of Héloïse as it was done in a moment of complete comfortability. For "[n]akedness was created in the mind of the beholder,"⁶⁸ and in this moment and forevermore, that beholder is Héloïse. In capturing her own nudity for her, Marianne entrusts her with the image of herself in Héloïse's mind. Page 28 will exist like a time capsule, a reminder of it all.

Sciamma, throughout the film, does a wonderful job of keeping the viewer distracted from the narrative as a memory until ambiguous sequences of Héloïse begin. The first appears in the aftermath of their first kiss, a presentation of Héloïse dressed in a glowing white gown in the dark of the hallway. She is unmoving, looking almost ghostly and when Marianne takes a step

⁶⁸ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 48.

forward, she disappears. It goes relatively ignored until it happens again in the aftermath of their almost-sex scene. It is not revealed until Marianne's departure where this image comes from: Marianne in her wedding dress at the moment of separation. With the insertion of these images of Héloïse, Sciamma counts down to the end: three, two, one; like a warning. Prior to matching up in real-time, the unmoving images of Héloïse function as a painting, a still image that we are shown in full with no context. Whatever conclusion we might come to from these brief interruptions, they are answered in Héloïse's last fleeting image—one, the last moment. Marianne, rushing down the stairs after a hurried and unsatisfying goodbye, swings the front door open when we hear Héloïse call, "turn around." Marianne obeys and there Héloïse stands, the gown flowing around her, bright and white, as she is just as quickly cast into shadow with the slam of the door. Sciamma allows us the "aha" moment just when it all crumbles.

Marianne's voice, after we are returned to the empty art classroom, says, "I saw her again a first time." We are plunged into a bustling art museum, following Marianne as she works her way through the crowd. When she leafs through the pamphlet, something noticeably catches her attention. Determined, she weaves between the mass of men until she reaches it, and there she is: Héloïse. Much time has passed, as shown by the addition of the young boy in the painting, who stands beside a refined version of Héloïse, so reminiscent to how Marianne initially depicted her. In her hands lies a book, her finger lifting the corner of the page to reveal the number 28. As the camera lingers on Héloïse's painted face, Marianne's voice once more: "I saw her one last time."

⁶⁹ We are brought into a theater. Marianne scans the room, taking it all in, and then her gaze

⁶⁹ This contrast in what Marianne says "I saw her again a first time" and "I saw her again a last time" relates to the images of Héloïse that we are given. A first time, in this instance, refers to Héloïse before Marianne truly knew her as she is painted in the work that hangs in the museum; it is as if seeing her again anew. The last time refers to Héloïse as Marianne knew and loved her, the woman in the flesh.

lands. Sciamma cuts, and there she is once more: Héloïse, in person, shuffling her way to her seat. As we return to an up-close shot of Marianne, her eyes still locked on Héloïse, her non-diegetic voice clarifies for us, “she didn’t see me.” When the music begins, it is the same piece that Marianne played for Héloïse in a scene that now feels like lifetimes ago. Sciamma cuts and pulls us in on Héloïse until she is right at the center of the frame. Breathing heavily, Héloïse begins to cry, practically gasping for air. In these final two scenes of viewing, Sciamma revisits what it means to see someone in a painting vs. in real life—a mediated and unmediated experience. Whereas in painting our relation to the work will always be mediated by the confines of artist perspective, cinema allows for an unmediated encounter. It is curious that we go from looking at Héloïse in a painting, a depiction of her constructed by another artist, to another act of framing. Bringing us to a theatre, where everyone is intended to be looking in one direction, to the spectacle, we are instead locked in on Héloïse’s face; Sciamma creates a multi-layered act of framing. For Marianne and us, she becomes the spectacle, framed within this artistic experience to be seen through longing eyes. Unknowingly, Héloïse re-experiences the memories of Marianne in the very same room as her. It ends just as it began: Héloïse the watched, Marianne the watcher.

Chapter III: Trying to Love You in Secret

The “lesbian experience” is frequently presented to audiences through stories about two white women falling in love with each other—*Blue is the Warmest Color* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* both examples of them. *Rafiki*, a film based on the short story *Jambula Tree*, written by Monica Arac de Nyeko,⁷⁰ explores a tender relationship between two Black women as they navigate the complexities of loving each other. Wanuri Kahiu, the film’s director, reflects: “Well, more than anything, I just wanted to tell a love story.”⁷¹ Expressing her frustrations with the lack of African love stories, Kahiu’s choice to center a queer Black love story certainly did not go unnoticed, for better or for worse—in 2018 the film made the official selection in the ‘Un Certain Regard’ category at the Cannes film festival. As filmmaker Beti Ellerson put it, though, “the historic event was dampened by the banning of the film by the Kenyan government because of its lesbian-focused theme.”⁷² Navigating what it means to ground a queer relationship in a space with a strong opposition to it, Kahiu encourages the audience to watch with caution, feeling the intensity of the gaze between the two characters while looking around them to see who else might be watching.

Kena and Ziki, our protagonist and her love interest, are introduced as opposites not only in the way they physically present themselves, but the way they inhabit public space. Kena, who is tomboyish in appearance, is easily seen as “one of the guys,” whereas Ziki is initially characterized as quite feminine, seen exclusively alongside her two female friends. Not only are they socially in separate positions, but Ziki’s father, Mr. Okemi, is running against Kena’s father

⁷⁰ Wanuri Kahiu reveals in an interview with Build Series: “Wanuri Kahiu Speaks on Her Film: ‘Rafiki,’” YouTube.

⁷¹ Kahiu, Build Series, “Wanuri Kahiu Speaks on Her Film: ‘Rafiki,’” YouTube Interview.

⁷² Ellerson, *African Women of the Screen as Cultural Producers: An Overview by Country*, p. 266.

for a seat in the County Assembly. One of the first scenes Kahiú plunges us into establishes the way queer desire is seen locally. Kena is seated between two of her male friends, Blacksta and another unnamed man, as they joke easily, the camera moving between them. The camera, as it settles on Blacksta, shows his wavering attention as something or someone off-screen captures it. As he jokes, the camera cuts to show us this unnamed friend as an individual walks by in the background. We come to find out that this is Waireri, an openly gay man who is actively targeted. By introducing him as a passing figure in the background, as someone who quietly ignores the homophobic slurs thrown at him, Kahiú shows us the painful quietness that comes along with being queer. The increased agitation prompts Kena to question his anger: “how is he hurting you?” This sequence portrays the queer as someone fundamentally unsafe when they are out, thereby planting the seed of awareness. As he storms off, Kena announces to Blacksta that she must also go and, after she gets up, the camera follows her as she walks closer as if to meet us, her eyes focusing on something off-screen. Her soft and curious gaze immediately pulls at the viewer’s awareness of space. When Kahiú cuts, she shows us three women standing together, but it is the woman on the right, Ziki, who looks up and stares back. Our senses already heightened, Kahiú creates a multi-layered experience of the gaze. Given the tension the viewer was just subjected to, there is a caution that Kahiú has already begun to instill in us; to desire as a queer person in this space is to make oneself a target. However, looking, as explored in the two previous chapters, is often the first way queer individuals are able to express their desire—or rather, to evaluate the other’s looks as a confirmation or denial of romantic expression. Mulvey writes that “[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between

active/male and passive/female.”⁷³ This imbalance is presented in the context of compulsory heterosexuality, an understanding of the desired gaze as a constant shift between man and woman. *Kahiu*, in this instance, asks us to explore what the gaze means between two women who, as far as we’re aware, have never interacted before (or at least only minimally). Their gaze does not find itself drenched in the convoluted thread of power play, but rather, exists in a moment where *Kahiu* plays with our view of safety.

Despite the newness of these characters and the physical distance that *Kahiu* imposes upon them, *Kahiu* pulls at an invisible string. In positioning us adjacent to Kena as she gazes at Ziki, *Kahiu* encourages us to be just as caught up in the moment as Kena is. Mulvey writes that “[t]here are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at.”⁷⁴ We have seen this both in *Blue* and *Portrait*, the exploration of the gaze and the riveting realization that the gaze has been returned. However, in those films, the ability to look and be viewed in return came from a certain comfortability in the space that the characters found themselves in. Waireri and his cautious navigation of the space linger in the back of our minds even as we wish to discover more. In such a brief amount of time, *Kahiu* floods the audience with nuanced layers of what the gaze will mean for Kena and Ziki. What does it mean to look even when the threat of hatred, or worse, looms around the corner? What, even more, does it mean to develop a relationship in such a space?

Unlike the initial interactions between Marianne and Héloïse in *Portrait*, *Kahiu* does not give us a narrative reason for what draws these characters together. They actively seek each other out, scanning public places for the figure—in associating us with Kena’s playful smile whenever

⁷³ Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, p. 808.

⁷⁴ Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, p. 806.

she sees Ziki, Kahiū subconsciously has us looking for her just as often, waiting for the next appearance, the next shift in perspective. Whereas Marianne surveyed Héloïse for the portrait, Kena and Ziki appear to study each other with a mutual desire to evaluate the other's looks. This connects back to the presence of the social space around them; they must both make sure that the other's looks are that of desire. To get it wrong could have dire consequences; the steadiness of Ziki's gaze is not just to give us the impression that she is interested, but for her desire to be unquestionable—by Kena and by us. The camera and how it travels between the two—most often in up-close shot/counter-shot exchanges—becomes vital in how we associate them as a pair. Whereas Kena often seeks Ziki out, she will not actually make the first move, instead positioning herself as available, but not as the figure to initiate. Unlike the moments where we see them at a distance from each other, their presence together, with the camera brought in close, allows for a sense of privateness amidst the awareness of the exterior gaze. Throughout the film, the close-up shot/counter-shot sequences act as a brief interlude to the ever-present homophobic eye. The initial introduction of Waireri threads itself into the space that Kena and Ziki occupy together. Yet, when we are brought closer to them, Kahiū reminds us of the way they become enveloped in the gaze; the private functions only so far as the characters' own recognition of what is at stake.

Kena and Ziki, as they grow aware of being watched, attempt to traverse the public with the ease of two individuals who initially feel untouchable. In forcing us to be another pair of eyes on them, Kahiū asks us to question what it means for us to observe. After initiating the conversation, Kena and Ziki go to get a soda together. The two women sit in the foreground as Mama Atim and her daughter, Nduta, linger in the back. There is not only a play on perspective,

but an establishment of triangulation: each pair's relationship to the other and our connection to both. When Kahiu cuts to bring us in closer, Mama Atim is seen as a blurry figure in the space between Kena and Ziki (see Figure 20).



Figure 20. Mama Atim lingering in the space between them, creating a mirror image of us looking from the other side.

She not only physically separates them, but her presence and nosy looks create a sort of encasing of Kena and Ziki. They are at the center of two gazes that both desire to indulge in their curiosity. While Mama Atim's intention may be to gossip, are we not just as complicit in wanting to get to know more about these two? Kahiu mirrors us with Mama Atim; we subconsciously take on the position of the outsider, even if we have an alternative intention. It is reminiscent of Blacksta's wandering gaze when he first noticed Waireri in this very space; the question arises: will we go against the examples of observation we have been given?

To escape the prying eyes (ours or Mama Atim's), Ziki leads Kena to a secluded area where various patterned blankets, hung to dry, blow in the wind. Everything has an overcast pink hue, complimenting Ziki's hair. In the momentary peace of this reclusive space, Kahiu permits us to take a breath. With the neverending presence of others, our gaze is relentlessly shifting in its relation to these two characters. What would typically be private becomes public as Kahiu reinforces a level of apprehension. In this moment of serenity, Kahiu not only allows us to see

Kena and Ziki alone for the first time, but she also allows them to truly see each other. As Ziki lays down one of the blankets between the billowing laundry, they are practically cocooned, as if by a security blanket. Kahiū once again closes in on their faces as they begin to speak, their speculative glances traversing into curious questions. So little has been shared between the two of them; the gaze, thus far, has functioned as the only mode of communication. Halfway through their conversation, the sound becomes non-diegetic as we get images of them talking and laughing. By allowing us to listen to one strain of conversation but refraining from sharing it all—and entrusting us with the happy images of these two—Kahiū reserves something just for them. Only a brief interlude, its inclusion is evocative of the private moments Sciamma kept just for Marianne and Héloïse. While the camera still invades, this manipulation of sound and image keeps us at a newfound distance. It is one of the first instances where our gaze does not feel orchestrated to view as someone.

Kena, unlike Ziki and her friends, clearly presents as more masculine. Kahiū, when speaking about the casting process for the film, revealed that she did not realize how Kena would physically look until meeting Samantha Mugatsia, the woman who portrays her. Kahiū reveals that “[a]n introvert, tomboy-like character was really interesting to me.”⁷⁵ As the film progresses, it becomes more evident that Kena is readily accepted among the men she hangs out with in a way that the other women are not.⁷⁶ In one scene, we see Kena play soccer with a group of men while Ziki and her friends watch from the sidelines. The camera does not exclusively center on Kena as she plays, allowing our gaze to travel and then try to find its way back. Dressed in a similar manner to the rest of the men, Kahiū associates her with them. As Jack Halberstam

⁷⁵ Kahiū, Build Series, “Wanuri Kahiū Speaks on Her Film: ‘Rafiki,’” YouTube Interview.

⁷⁶ Arguably, we saw this in that first scene where Kena is shown alongside Blacksta and the unnamed male friend, while Ziki is shown alongside women.

writes, “[t]omboyism tends to be associated with a ‘natural’ desire for the greater freedoms and mobilities enjoyed by boys. Very often it is read as a sign of independence and self-motivation.”

⁷⁷ Initially, Kena’s tomboyish expression gives her an “in” not awarded to the other women, as we see when Ziki asks to play. Kena, Blacksta, and another man stand opposite of Ziki and immediately shut her down. When Kahiu frames Kena, part of Ziki’s hair remains on the right-hand side, creating an inherent diagonal relation between the two women. In just the framing of Kena’s calculating gaze, Ziki’s hair lingering as a reminder in the corner, Kahiu acknowledges the disconnected experience of the two women. A distanced shot emphasizes this further: Kena and her two friends on the left, looking rather boyish and Ziki and hers on the right, dressed in pink (see Figure 21).



Figure 21. A shot that almost feels like a gendered separation, despite Kena’s identity as a woman.

When Ziki questions why Kena is allowed to play, the answer from the boys is simply, “she plays like a guy” and that “you girls will distract us.” These lines, combined with how the men draw Kena towards them physically, create an inherent binary separation between the groups: the girls and the guys. The camera actively shows us this differentiation, constantly jumping between Kena and Ziki as Ziki’s friends squirm at the idea of getting sweaty. Beauvoir writes that “[t]he lesbian plays first at being a man; then even being a lesbian becomes a game; masculine

⁷⁷ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 6.

clothing, at first a disguise, becomes a uniform; and under the pretext of escaping male oppression, woman becomes enslaved to the character she plays; wishing not to be confined in woman's situation, she is imprisoned in that of the lesbian."⁷⁸ In her inclusion with "the boys," Kena is safe from the sexual comments that Blacksta makes towards Ziki's friends; he does not see her in the same manner.⁷⁹ In grouping them together, Kahi creates a physical rift between Kena and Ziki: Kena as trusted for her less-feminine expression and Ziki as doubted with her makeup, flowy dress, and love of the color pink.

While Ziki expresses an acceptance for Kena's physical presentation, there are moments where she appears to push Kena to explore traditional femininity. While out on their first date, the camera focuses on the two women as Ziki holds up a pink dress with flowers to Kena, encouraging Kena to try it on. Kena shakes her head in disbelief, the dress so clearly out of her comfort zone. Kahi brings us in closer, to the side of Kena's head to see Ziki's face as she enthusiastically declares, "it's perfect!" As we find out later, the dress is bought, but this scene is a noteworthy example of the difference in personal expression. Kena's backward cap and blazer contrasted with Ziki's dangling earrings and flowy attire bring to mind the construction of butch/femme expression.⁸⁰ I want to tread carefully with this exploration. Halberstam writes:

The image of the black or Latina butch may all too easily resonate with racial stereotyping in which white forms of femininity occupy a cultural norm and nonwhite femininities are measured as excessive or inadequate in relation to that norm; however, the butch of color may also be an image with the power to defamiliarize white masculinity and make visible a potent fusion of alternative masculinity and

⁷⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 413.

⁷⁹ Throughout the film, Blacksta's desire to be with Kena does become clear. He is certainly interested and often makes comments about why she won't open her eyes and choose him. His lack of sexual comments toward Kena stem perhaps not from his inability to see her as a woman, but rather in the respect he has for her as someone non-feminine. He devalues femininity as silly and aloof, something to be sexualized where Kena is "not like other girls."

⁸⁰ Briefly, as a basic definition of these terms, Michelle Gibson and Deborah Meem write in *Teaching, Typecasting, Butch-Femme Identity*, "Femme describes lesbian behavior and appearance that fit heterosexual stereotypes associated with women; butch describes lesbian behavior and appearance that fit heterosexual stereotypes associated with men," p. 12.

alternative sexuality. Because black female sexuality, in particular, has historically been measured through and against a fantasy of white womanhood, this history should warn us to be careful in discussions of black female masculinities; conversely, because white manhood has been identified as an unmarked location of power and privilege, black or Latina female masculinity may be a site within which dominant modes of power can be resignified with subversive and even potentially revolutionary results.⁸¹

Halberstam does clarify that “there is a difference between racist representations of supposedly failed femininity and a potentially queer or at least subcultural representation of a potent black butchness.”⁸² I do not wish to question Kena’s identity as a woman, as she does not actively fight against that label, but rather to explore her gender expression alongside Ziki’s feminine presentation. Alongside “butch,” the term “stud” has been used by Black queer individuals, meaning those “who are seen as ‘harder’ in their heightened masculinity and attitude.”⁸³ The term “butch” can only be used and claimed when referring to a masculine-presenting individual who likes women and non-men. Furthermore, “[w]hen a butch woman *does* appear in mainstream culture, it is usually alongside her other: the femme lesbian.”⁸⁴ Without the femme, there is no butch, and vice versa; the terms are dialectical in relation.

However, the butch/femme relationship is *not* a recreation of the heterosexual relationship; Kena and Ziki are not trying to mimic heterosexuality. American historian Lillian Faderman reflects that some women (those “who came to lesbianism through feminism”) “refused to believe that butch or femme roles came naturally to any women and explained their prevalence in some lesbian communities as resulting from socialization: lesbians had been well brainwashed by the parent culture so that they acquiesced into making their subculture a carbon copy of heterosexuality.”⁸⁵ However, Kena, whether the term butch fully applies to her or not, is

⁸¹ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 180-81.

⁸² Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 181.

⁸³ Kerry Manders, *The Renegades*. While recognizing the term “stud” and its importance to Black queer individuals, I will be using the word “butch” in order to allow continuity and fluidity with the works I am referencing.

⁸⁴ Manders, *The Renegades*.

⁸⁵ Faderman, *The Return of Butch and Femme: A Phenomenon in Lesbian Sexuality of the 1980s and 1990s*, p. 580.

not a man. She cannot take over the man's position in a heterosexual relationship as her view of the world has been shaped by her existence as a woman, even if she does situate herself alongside the men in her life. The belief that the butch/femme exists only as a copy of heterosexuality comes from "[t]he faulty assumption that the female spectator does not have the ability to invest the look with desire,"⁸⁶ returning to the active/male and passive/female act of looking. While Patricia White uses the term "spectator" to refer to us, the audience, it applies to Kena's gaze just the same. The gaze of the spectator, so typically presented as male, must adjust and be viewed anew under the guise of queerness.

In comparison to *Blue* and *Portrait*, *Rafiki* allows for a gendered exploration that is not quite as present in the other two films. We have seen, in *Blue*, Emma's desire for Adèle to change due to her own idiosyncratic belief of artistic superiority. In *Portrait*, it is an attempt to explore and capture the feminine, both through painting and cinema. Compellingly, while Kena and Ziki physically take on potential butch/femme stereotypes, what we have seen of their relationship tells a different story. Typically, Ziki takes the first step; she is frequently the one moving toward the camera, toward Kena. There is a constant power balance at play between them: Kena's physical presence in society vs. Ziki's daringness, the external not always reflecting the internal.

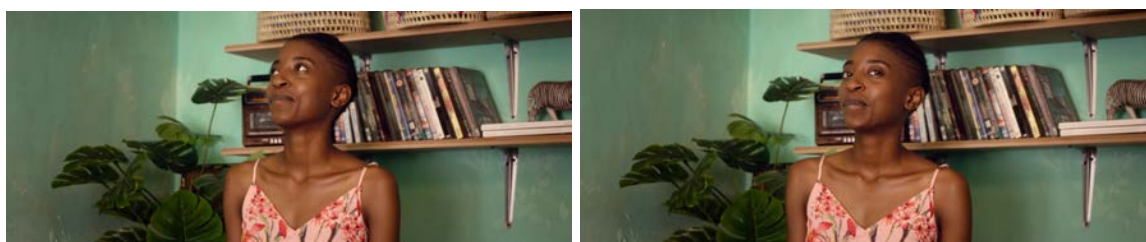
In the scene where the dress reappears, Kahiū arranges Kena and Ziki's silhouettes behind a pale, see-through curtain. On either side of them is yet another layer, a red curtain dotted with yellow flowers, another added frame. Functioning as a veil, the initial checkered curtain keeps us at a distance while the red pulls us back in (see Figure 22).

⁸⁶ White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability*, p. xxi.



Figure 22. Layers of fabric as both a barrier to truly see, as well as a way of framing.

Confined to such a small space, our desire to pry back the layers is only encouraged by Kena's exasperated, "I told you my body's allergic to dresses." As Ziki steps out of the enclosed space, the voice of Kena's mother, Mercy, brings us back into a medium-distance shot. She is seated in the center of the couch, Ziki leaning on the back of it, as Kena slowly emerges from the blocked-off space. As Kena passes by the couch, Kahiu cuts once more to bring us in close to her face, following her as Mercy gushes. The camera tracks Kena until she has appropriately positioned herself in front of her mother and Ziki, looking squirmish under their watchful gazes (see Figures 23).



Figures 23. Kena presented for her mother and Ziki. Her framing almost acts as if she were a painting.

Halberstam writes that "the butch stereotype, furthermore, both makes lesbianism visible and yet seems to make it visible in nonlesbian terms: that is to say, the butch makes lesbianism readable in the register of masculinity, and it actually collaborates with the mainstream notion that lesbians cannot be feminine."⁸⁷ Kahiu, in this scene, challenges the notion that someone who

⁸⁷ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 177.

presents as butch cannot be feminine but rather, simply chooses not to be. Furthermore, Ziki's very presence in the film, in this very scene, works against what Halberstam refers to as "the mainstream." She is easily and openly feminine—her long pink hair alongside her brightly colored dresses an effortless expression of herself. In portraying these two characters as opposites physically, Kahiu plays with the possible preconceived notions of what lesbianism might look like. Juxtaposed against Marianne and Héloïse, as well as Adèle and Emma, we have three vastly different presentations of "the lesbian." Marianne and Héloïse are two very feminine-presenting individuals, though their love story also takes place during a time when such a display was expected. Adèle, too, presents rather feminine, whereas Emma could possibly fall into the category of "futch."⁸⁸ Nonetheless, these films diverge from the social expectations of a butch/femme wlw relationship. While *Rafiki* might "play into" that portrayal, it also encourages the audience's expansion of knowledge when it comes to what is associated with the butch and what is associated with the femme.

Returning to Kena in a dress, Ziki and Mercy are predominantly framed together when looking at her. In doing this, with their pleased faces, Kena exists momentarily as a work of art. We are asked to see her not only through their eyes, but as a still image to be studied. Her emergence from the curtain is as if she were created anew by Ziki's dress; we see the Kena we have come to know peak through her demeanor, but Kahiu also asks us to view Kena, in this moment, as someone to be presented for the other. Berger writes that "[w]omen are depicted in a quite different way from men – not because the feminine is different from the masculine –but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is

⁸⁸ Meaning feminine butch.

designed to flatter him.”⁸⁹ After Kena has emerged, her mother declares that “all we need is a nice, rich doctor, and all my prayers will have been answered today.” To have the gazes of her mother, her lover, and the nonexistent male doctor thrown onto Kena, Kahiu asks us to ponder who exactly she is flattering: her mother? Ziki? We must recognize that “[f]ailure to assimilate to the demands of femininity, of course, spells out trouble for the tomboy by imagining a queer future for her butch body.”⁹⁰ Her mother’s reiteration of heterosexuality while Kena stands in more traditionally feminine clothing is a reminder to all three of us (Kena, Ziki, and we, the viewer): Kena’s tomboyish appearance may eventually other her, even if it does not already do so now.

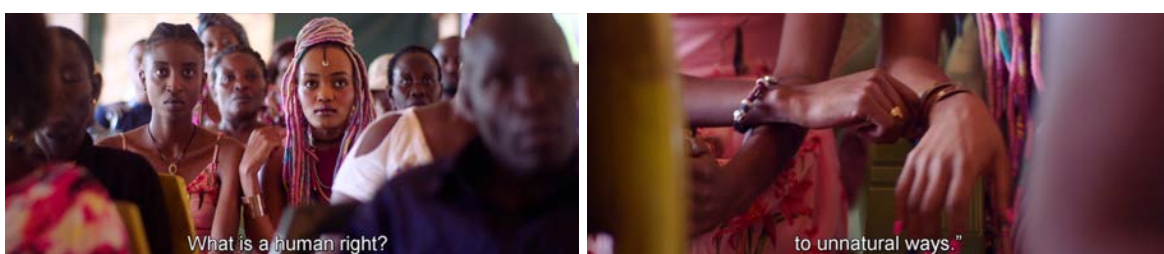
This interaction transitions us to church, where Kahiu revisits the homophobia we’ve seen sprinkled throughout the film. The priest begins to speak about his opposition to same-sex marriage and individuals; Kahiu brings us to a medium-distance shot of Kena and Ziki seated beside each other. Writer M. Jacqui Alexander writes that “[l]egislative gestures fix conjugal heterosexuality in several ways. Generally, they collapse identities into sexual bodies which, in the particular case of lesbian and gay people, serves to reinforce a fiction about promiscuity: that sex is all of what we do and consequently the slippage, it is all of who we are.”⁹¹ As the priest reflects on his distaste for homosexuality, the implications of what it is he distastes—people of the same gender having sex together—lingers in the air. His words do not come from a recognition of same-sex relationships as relationships at all but rather as sex-driven sinners. In his view, and in the view of many of the townspeople, love does not exist in these connections.

⁸⁹ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 64.

⁹⁰ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 190.

⁹¹ Alexander, *Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality, and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas*, p. 9.

Alexander writes that “*some* bodies have been marked by the state as non-procreative, in pursuit of sex only for pleasure, a sex that is non-productive of babies and of no economic gain.”⁹² In the priest's words, Kena and Ziki's love is diminished to an act sorely for unruly desire. The community encircles the women as Kahiu positions us among the crowd as we attempt to gauge their reactions. Kena sits very still, her eyes straight ahead, while Ziki is more at ease. Repeatedly, Ziki's arm purposefully grazes Kena's as Kena attempts to shift away uncomfortably. When Kahiu brings us to an up-close shot of their hands, we once again see Ziki try to touch Kena, who forcefully pushes her off (see Figures 24).



Figures 24. The act of touching at a time when it is unsuitable.

After a third instance, Kena's discomfort wins and she gets up and leaves, Kahiu bringing us back into the crowd as she does. Ziki is not far behind and we see the puzzled faces of those around them; it is certainly not an ideal time to exit. Outside, Kahiu shows us the two women as they begin to argue. Ziki dismissively tells Kena that she was “just having fun,” as Kahiu brings us into a shot/counter-shot exchange. Ziki repeatedly expresses that no one was watching and Kahiu focuses on Kena's face as Ziki asks, “is it wrong for me to show you how I feel?” In bringing us so close to them, we can feel the frustration of both characters. Kena emphasizes that Ziki cannot do something like this here, which only heightens Ziki's anger as she exclaims, “no one gives a shit! Like, they don't care! When are you ever going to do stuff without thinking of

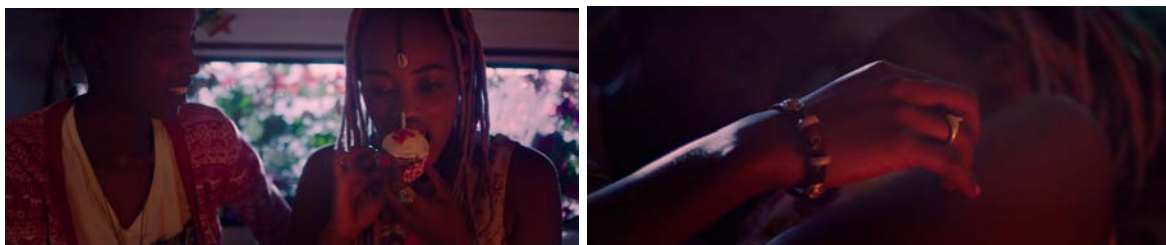
⁹² Alexander, *Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen*, p. 6.

who will see or what they'll say or what's going to happen after?" Kahiu initially focuses on Ziki as she speaks, but then brings us back to Kena when Ziki questions her. The women take two distinctive stances here: Ziki, the optimistic and Kena, the cautious. Ziki seems almost naively hopeful of their position, but Kena, as we saw in the previous scene, is already somewhat othered. Her concern with being seen during the sermon comes from the genuine awareness she already has of the treatment of Waireri. She knows what it means to be seen, something that has not quite registered for Ziki. Gaze and touch are openly recognized, at least by Kena, as actions that could harm them both. The cautious and the free spirit, Kahiu notes the diverging ways these two view their relationship.

The personal vs. the public leads the two women to find a safe haven: the overgrown white van just a little ways away from the area where we saw Kena play soccer. The van appears three times throughout the film: as an initial hiding place, as a place of privacy and finally, as an invaded space. Ziki, when it begins to rain during the soccer game, follows Kena to this area, seeking refuge. As the camera frames them together, we see their unsureness. Bringing us in closer, Kahiu emphasizes the newness of this privacy. The rain is soft in the background as the camera lingers on each woman in turn, their eyes focused and questioning. Kena ends the spell by leaving, although we are shown the aftermath of Ziki's giddy reaction. By lingering between the two women, Kahiu foreshadows the use of this space, allowing us to settle in the solitude it offers. The next time we are brought back here, it is in the aftermath of another homophobic expression that one of Kena's friends has directed toward Waireri. Ziki, left alone after Kena storms off, eventually finds her by the white van. Having set up a romantic candlelit area, Ziki's previous anger at being left dissipates as she climbs in. The two once again sit side by side,

mirroring the initial presence in the van—Kena on the left, Ziki on the right. Whereas the previous scene only hinted at intimacy with its close-up shots of the two women’s lingering gazes, Kahiu now actually delves into it.

As Ziki takes up a cupcake that Kena has laid out for her, the image of her biting into it is interrupted by a shot of Kena’s hand traveling over Ziki’s body (see Figures 25).



Figures 25. Act of eating contrasted/interchanged with the act of touching.

In doing this, Kahiu correlates the action of eating with the act of exploring. This is reminiscent of Adèle’s appetite in *Blue*, although in a more direct manner. The presence of food, and its consumption, alongside shots that disorient us in time, Kahiu creates an ambiguity of which touch came first. By showcasing these fragmented moments in up-close shots, Kahiu allows a look into intimacy that is more of a hint at sex than an actual showing of it. As Ziki encourages Kena to bite into a cupcake, Kahiu brings us to an image of Ziki kissing Kena; we go from slightly removed to involved. The act of eating becomes synonymous with savoring each other’s touches. Like in *Portrait*, what we see is slow and calculated. Kahiu, even more so than Sciamma, merely alludes to sex: we get a relatively up-close shot of Kena and Ziki as they lay beside each other, Kena’s arm along Ziki’s body that gets lost off-screen, implying possible fingering (see Figure 26).



Figure 26. The camera merely suggests a sexual act.

Halberstam clarifies that “we should not expect to find [the butch] in pornographic films, if only because the pornographic imagination tends to imagine lesbian sex as the spectacle of two feminine women engaged in sex play for a male gaze.”⁹³ This is distinctly redolent of the debate around *Blue*’s sex scenes, and could even allude to *Portrait*, despite its lack of depicting sex. As Kahiu keeps the camera trained on Kena and Ziki’s faces, she presents intimacy in their expressions rather than in the portrayal of explicit actions. Williams writes that sex “is a constructed, mediated, performed act and every revelation is also a concealment that leaves something to the imagination.”⁹⁴ Kahiu’s concealment of the potential physical act still influences our viewing experience; it leaves it up to the viewer’s individual interpretation. Unlike *Blue* and *Portrait*, we never see Kena and Ziki naked together. As Kahiu fades the scene to black, there is an act of withholding, not only in the sexual intimacy between the characters, but also in the portrayal of their bodies. Whereas we, alongside those around them, have been invited to observe, Kahiu is careful to leave this untouched.

The third and final time we find ourselves in the van, it is the result of numerous events. After getting into an altercation with Ziki’s friend Elizabeth, Kena is brought back to Ziki’s house with a split lip. Once again using an up-close shot/counter-shot exchange, we watch as

⁹³ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 204.

⁹⁴ Williams, *Screening Sex*, p. 2.

Kena stares adoringly at Ziki until she simply tells her she loves her. Out of all the films I've spoken about, this is the first one where the words are actually said aloud. White writes that "feminist film theory has been unable to envision women who looked at women with desire,"⁹⁵ Kahiu not only has presented desire, but has her characters articulate it. The affection between the women quite literally lingers in the air. The gaze, while moving, as we've seen throughout all three films, cannot always be the replacement for words. In verbalizing her love, Kena informs us of the new lengths she will go to in order to protect what they have. As quickly as hope bubbles to the surface, the scene is interrupted when Ziki's mother walks in on them kissing. She is seemingly unfazed, simply ordering Kena to leave, but Ziki resists. After a shot/counter-shot exchange where Ziki and her mother begin to argue, Kahiu gives us a medium-distance shot of the three of them together: Kena and Ziki on the left, Ziki's mother on the right. In this triangulation, we remain at a distance, forced to watch from the sidelines. It is a tension-filled pause where Kahiu allows us a separation in the moments before destruction. By presenting Kena and Ziki as a pair in opposition to Ziki's mother, Kahiu visually preps us for the unfolding of secrecy. Threatening to call Kena's mother launches back into the action, the raised voices echoing as Kena and Ziki beg her not to. As Ziki throws herself at her mother to prevent the call, we are thrown into a chaos of images: Mrs. Okemi on the bed, the back of their heads as they run through the doors of the house, Ziki's mother as she falls against the front door. This fast sequence, in contrast with that moment of pause we just had, confirms the unfolding; we are now shifting into the after.

⁹⁵ White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability*, p. 72.

As Kena and Ziki rush to the only secluded spot now available to them—the van—their hectic pace attracts the attention of Nduta and Ziki’s two friends. In the van, Kena and Ziki switch their usual positions, giddy with adrenaline. Kahiu brings us in close, as if to incorporate us into the discussions of next steps, as Ziki offers up the possibility of running away together. Her enthusiasm radiates through the screen as Kahiu repeatedly returns to Kena in the expectation of a response; while we so often have taken on Kena’s point of view, Kahiu now relates us to Ziki. We feel her desire to escape, her belief in the success of this idea. When Kena agrees, the joy on Ziki’s face is immeasurable. Just when it feels like they’ve figured it out, the door is ripped open by Mama Atim and Nduta. We sense, easily, that the interruption is one with the intent of intrusion and exposure. As Mama Atim calls over a group of people who must have been waiting, this safe haven collapses. The van, the last and only place of security for these two, becomes enveloped in the chaotic pounding of hands against the doors. As Ziki and Kena are forcibly pulled out of the van, any hope that we or the characters had in the possibility of an easy escape collapses. As we leave the van behind, Kahiu switches to handheld as we follow the crowd. The darkness allows us to see the outline of the figures as they surround the women, pushing and pulling at them. Voices overlap as the men encourage each other, Kahiu occasionally showing us the frightened faces of Kena and Ziki. As things become more chaotic, Kahiu disorients us: lingering for a few seconds on a piece of clothing or one of the women’s faces before bringing us to something less recognizable (see Figures 27).



Figures 27. Examples of the interspersed images amidst the chaos.

The loud noise is constant, the swarm of voices overpowering the senses. In this relation of image and sound, Kahiu relates us directly to Kena and Ziki. Despite the lack of a point-of-view shot, we become just as involved in the action as they are. As one of the men pushes Ziki to the ground, things slow down. The image becomes hazy and we hear Ziki's harsh breathing, her fear-stricken face peeking through the tangle of limbs. We are at a complete loss of stability, unsure of where exactly our gaze should land or what the following image will be. By bringing us directly into the altercation, we must also grapple with our position among the perpetrators. Recurringly associated with the larger community, but especially Mama Atim, we now almost become complicit in the violence. We traverse between victim and abuser.

Just when it might finally be over and we are given a distanced shot of the group walking away, Kahiu plunges us back in. This momentary pause provides us the liberty to catch our breath, to realize the gravity of the situation. We are perhaps subconsciously aware that there is more to come, but Kahiu allows us a few seconds to hope. The sound becomes more muffled and less intense in this shot, and we are thrown back into the action with its increase. Ziki tries desperately to get to Kena and is unable to do so, constantly held back and thrown around. Ceaselessly manipulating our viewpoint, the haze of flying arms, the bright colors of Ziki's hair/clothes, and Kena's pink shirt orient us to some degree among the characters. Kahiu allows us to find snippets of them, to remain somewhat aware amid the chaos and uncertainty. Kena's

desperate cries are tragic; repeating Ziki's name, her voice sticks out among the rest as she tries to fight her way to her. Ziki, at this point, lays in a crumbled yellow mass in the dirt, the men occasionally hitting her with whatever objects they can find. Desiree Lewis writes that "[h]istorically, black women's bodies have often been the subject of voyeuristic consumption, the consumption not only of black women's sexuality, but also of black women's trauma and pain."⁹⁶ While we may be asked to consume in this way through the traumatic experience that Kena and Ziki endure, Kahiu does not sensationalize what we see. Rather, the camera deviates from demonstrating the abuse directly, often giving us an image of hair flying, the sound of clothes ripping, a flash of one of the women's panicked faces.

It is notable that out of the two women, Ziki seems to endure more active violence while Kena is withheld. It is as if she is suffering an increased punishment for her belief that everything would turn out alright; unlike Kena, Ziki has, up until this point, dismissed the notion that anyone was paying attention to them; it is clear now that they were, and that there was suspicion. The excessive beating is an assurance that she learns her lesson. Towards the end of the scene, Kahiu transitions us into Kena's point of view as she calls out to Waireri, who stands at a distance. We look up at him, the various perpetrators still moving around us, as he shakes his head to turn around and flee. Kena's call to help stems from the wish to find solidarity in the one other person who understands their fear. His rejection is simply a mirror image of the moments when Kena ignored what was happening to him; at least he can protect himself from this fate.

This sequence is a turning point not only for Kena and Ziki, but for the audience, launching us into uncertain territory. We feel their fear and pain, and most importantly, the loss

⁹⁶ Lewis, *Against the Grain: Black Women and Sexuality*, p. 15.

of fight. In the scene that directly follows, Kahiu keeps us at a distance as we see the aftermath of this beating: Kena and Ziki sit on a green bench—ridiculously colorful compared to the dark setting we were just in—next to each other, but not together. They are framed by two officers, one on either side of the screen; they eventually intervened. Ziki has been badly beaten: her clothes are ripped and blood covers her face and chest. She appears completely dissociated, the fear still lingering on her face. In presenting the two of them through the shoulders of outside individuals who joke about who is the “man” in the relationship, Kahiu reminds us of the complexities of our gaze (see Figure 28).



Figure 28. Act of framing acts like a re-enforcement of the violence they’ve just experienced. Both the officers and we are looming over them.

Halberstam quotes author Valerie Traub in her essay “The Ambiguities of ‘Lesbian’ Viewing Pleasure,” stating that, “we identify ‘lesbian’ as ‘less a person than an activity, less an activity than a modality of pleasure, a position taken in relation to desire.’”⁹⁷ In the aftermath of the assault, their relationship is once again subjected to the implication that being queer is to be ever-involved in the heterosexual understanding of desire. It echoes the words of the priest, situating the two women not as lovers, but as pleasure-seeking anomalies. In centering us in between the officers, Kahiu reminds us not only of the invasive gaze of the community, but of our own. Kahiu shows as Kena reaches over the space between her and Ziki, trying to connect.

⁹⁷ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 178.

Ziki gives perhaps the slightest shrug of the shoulder; it is clear that she has no desire for this. Whereas we have so often been brought into the space, Kahiu separates us in the same manner that Kena and Ziki now are. We feel Kena's longing for a returned look, for reassurance of Ziki's love and hope. When Ziki's parents arrive, her face is hopeful and anticipating, until her father slaps her violently. Her cry rings out, sharp. As she is whisked away, Kahiu brings us close to Kena, her jaw set tight. After a moment's hesitation, she follows them to the car and once more tries to gain Ziki's attention. Positioning us inside the car, we see Ziki physically turning away from the window, where Kena's pressed hands can be seen. It is once again an act of reaching out, of trying to find security in the other, but something has fractured between them.

Kena's return to her mother is a disastrous one. As Kena and her father enter the space, Mercy lies nearly lifeless on the couch as Kena and her father center her. In doing this, Kahiu lets us know that the focus now shifts to Mercy's feelings, which overwhelm the scene. Writer Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* writes that "[w]hen gay people in a homophobic society come out, on the other hand, perhaps especially to parents or spouses, it is with the consciousness of a potential for serious injury that is likely to go in both directions. The pathogenic secret itself, even, can circulate contagiously *as* a secret: a mother says that her adult child's coming out of the closet with her has plunged her, in turn, into the closet in her conservative community."⁹⁸ Kena, who disappears behind the curtain where she once emerged in the dress that made her mother so proud, now hears Mercy express her detestation. Kahiu positions us close to Mercy as she yells at Kena's father, "they will probably blame me for this just like they blamed me when you left me!" Kena, who lingers behind the curtain in the

⁹⁸ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 80.

background, quietly watches as her mother victimizes herself. Already isolated from her community, Mercy makes clear that she feels Kena deserved what happened to her. Crossing the threshold between her parents, Kena flees to cry outside as Mercy continues: “are you forgetting the demons that have possessed this child? You want me to accept these demons in this house?” The words are a much harsher formulation of what we have heard throughout the film; queer as wrong, as disgusting, as punishable. They land so much heavier in the aftermath of what we have seen happen to Kena; the only place left for her to go only rehashes the idea that she, as a person, is wrong.

A bit of time passes before Kena finds herself, once more, at the doorstep of the Okemi residency. Unexpectedly, Ziki’s mother lets Kena in. Given a shot of Ziki packing, Kahiui brings us to Kena as she stands behind the colorful beaded curtain, quietly, hesitantly waiting. We feel her nervousness, the unease about what comes next. Kahiui then brings us back to an up-close framing of Ziki’s face as Kena walks in behind her. In keeping us in a consistent relationship with Ziki, Kahiui directs our attention in gauging her reaction. When Kena seats herself behind Ziki, we get a medium-distance shot as they quietly sit together and a non-diegetic conversation takes place about Ziki’s departure. This instance mirrors their initial conversation, except this time, we must watch Ziki’s tense posture compared to Kena’s yearning. When the sound lines up, Kahiui cuts to bring us in on the two: Ziki in the foreground, Kena in the background. Kena remains in focus, confusion and hurt painted across her face as Ziki claims that this is what she always wanted: to travel, to leave. By keeping Ziki out of focus, Kahiui perhaps emphasizes how she has become unrecognizable to Kena, a blurred, distilled image of who she once was (see Figure 29).



Figure 29. The unreturned gaze. Ziki’s harshness comes through the screen as Kena tries desperately to connect.

Once again pulling us back to the medium-distance shot, Ziki asks in a condescending tone, “what did you expect was going to happen either way? Were you planning to marry me? Are we going to have this beautiful family?” Kena stands as she answers simply: yes. But the damage has been done, and the previously vibrant Ziki shows no sign of excitement at the prospect. The roles that each of them once occupied have now flipped: Kena is hopeful, trying to bring Ziki back to her while Ziki herself is bitter. Whereas Ziki once told Kena to stop constantly worrying about what other people think, it is now the only thing that drives her character. Where Kena once told Ziki “not here,” she now asks for everywhere. Each becomes what the other demanded at a certain moment throughout the film, only for it to be too late.

Yet, Kahiú does not end their story here. Jumping forward an unspecified amount of time, we see that Kena is now working at a hospital. Lo and behold, a patient of hers is Mama Atim and while she insists on Kena leaving her alone, she cannot help but gossip: Ziki is back. As Kena herself returns, it is clear things have changed: she and Blacksta no longer share the same closeness, and Kena has somewhat rekindled her relationship with Mercy. As she wanders the streets, Kena ends up in nature, the pink/purple hue a reminder of that first outing amongst the billowing laundry. Kahiú gives us a close shot of the back of Kena’s head when we hear her:

Ziki. Her voice is soft and as Kena turns her head, looking at her off-screen, she smiles brightly. Then, Kahiu pans down to Ziki's hand, resting on Kena's shoulder. One last close-up shot of Kena's eyes and then it's over. This ending sequence is undoubtedly ambiguous, Kahiu revealing that its hopeful tone is what got the film banned in the first place. They had told her that if she were to make the ending more remorseful, it would not be banned and, as Kahiu puts it, "[w]hen I refused to change the ending of the film, that's when they banned it."⁹⁹ She elaborates, explaining that "one thing that I wanted to do, given that so much queer cinema that I've watched has had remorseful endings. . . it was the one thing that I didn't want for my film. I was very, very clear on that. I truly believe that the right to love is the most basic human right. And at any point that we can support that and support a vision of the right to love, then we're on the side of good. So there was never a doubt in my mind that I would change the ending."¹⁰⁰

Rafiki, unlike *Blue* and *Portrait*, foregrounds the gaze in a space where there is significantly more at stake for the two women. Although we get moments of artistic framing of Kena and Ziki, these are different when compared to the other two films; *Rafiki* insists not on framing the relationship in isolation but embedding it in a sociopolitical context—they look at each other as works of art in a world that openly opposes this gaze. The composition of each woman into a painting is no longer a positive thing—arranging oneself to be an object of desire for the other—as it cannot exist without an internalized gaze, which now carries the undertones of hostile outsiders. Whereas the previous two films function as an escape for the viewer, Kahiu refuses the audience that same release. In that way, it could be considered more revolutionary as it acknowledges the social forces at play instead of allowing them to exist passively. Their

⁹⁹ Kahiu, Build Series, "Wanuri Kahiu Speaks on Her Film: 'Rafiki,'" YouTube Interview.

¹⁰⁰ Kahiu, Build Series, "Wanuri Kahiu Speaks on Her Film: 'Rafiki,'" YouTube Interview.

relationship has everything to do with how they are seen by those they are the closest to. Despite its realistic nature, *Rafiki*, compared to the other two, does bring about the question: why are queer black women's experiences often centered around their trauma? Are Black queer characters not also allotted the right to depictions of love stories that do not present consistent obstacles? This struggle between a progressive or conservative portrayal of wlw love situates the conversation around queer depiction in film as a nuanced one: aestheticized escape or cautiously aware.

Conclusion

Art critic Laura Cottingham writes, “[e]ven when lesbianism is consciously and obviously enunciated in textual and visual representation, readers and viewers and critics often remain determined to ignore it.”¹⁰¹ The lack of viewer acknowledgment of the representation of queer stories has undoubtedly been a widespread issue, in which an array of excuses simply sweep aside the actuality of the narratives depicted. The recent, more unquestionable representative films, such as the ones I have analyzed over the past three chapters, make it strenuous to ignore the love story. Thereby, with the uptick in unequivocal wlw films, the question becomes less about what it means to represent queer love (so as to have it recognized), but rather, how it can be done. Looking at *Blue*, *Portrait*, and *Rafiki* together, I pose the question(s): what does it mean that sapphic love is so often aestheticized? Are, perhaps, *Blue* and *Portrait* only continuing the idealized version of wlw love whereas *Rafiki* allows the film to delve into the complexities of sociopolitical forces, grounding it in reality? Why does lesbian love have to be beautiful?

All three films are all technically pleasing to the eye. While they certainly each have their own style and their own ways of dealing with messiness, they are inherently captivating. Critic B. Ruby Rich “[t]hese queer publics want films of validation and a culture of affirmation: work that can reinforce identity, visualize respectability, combat injustice, and bolster social status. They want a little something new, but not too new; sexy, sure, but with the emphasis on romance; stylish, but reliably realistic and not too demanding; nothing downbeat or too revelatory; and

¹⁰¹ Cottingham, *Notes on the Lesbian*, p. 73.

happy endings, of course.”¹⁰² While *Rafiki* is perhaps the only film that even alludes to a happy ending, none of the films check off every requirement listed here. There is not only a wish to see these stories on screen but a desire for them to act, conceivably, as an escape from reality. Queer history has not been kind to nor respected queer individuals, so why not have film, the best medium to tell those stories, allow it to be a bit more forgiving?

The body and its relation to sexuality are present in all three films, although most notably in *Blue*. Beauvoir argues that “[w]oman’s homosexuality is one attempt among others to reconcile her autonomy with the passivity of her flesh.”¹⁰³ Her body, repeatedly taken in as a form of lubricious consumption, struggles with how it is viewed. Mulvey writes that woman’s “visual presence tends to work against the development of a [narrative] story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation.”¹⁰⁴ This, in a way, is reminiscent of the discourse around *Blue*’s sex scene(s). Constantly existing within a space that sees the feminine figure as something to be consumed, finding the balance of what is or is not oversexualization proves arduous. This returns to the question of progressive vs. conservative representation. Williams writes, “the one-size-fits-all complaint for American feminists seems all too often to blame male visual pleasure as if it were a crime and to assume that any woman who shares it shares in the crime. The bigger crime, I suggest, is the distinctly American tendency to condemn pleasure itself, to suspect it if it manifests itself in women that they ‘objectify’ like men.”¹⁰⁵ If we reflect on Dargis’ critique in Chapter I on what she saw as aestheticized poses of Adèle and Emma, the focus was exclusively on the way a man would consume the media. The feminine

¹⁰² B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut*, p. 41.

¹⁰³ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 397.

¹⁰⁴ Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, p. 809.

¹⁰⁵ Williams, *Cinema’s Sex Acts*, p. 24.

gaze has been considered soft and unable to sexualize when, in Williams' view, that is not necessarily the case.

Across all three films, sex is either alluded to or openly discussed concerning queerness. Perhaps *Blue*, despite raising concern for oversexualization, is progressive in its willingness to cross a threshold many cannot, or will not. However, it could be argued that the longevity of the initial sex scene may transform from the showcasing of feminine pleasure to a desire to be controversial; in raising emotions, *Blue* certainly made a name for itself. When reflecting on Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Halberstam writes that she

was not *creating* the gendered dynamics of looking, she was simply describing the remarkably restricted ways in which spectators can access pleasure. And so, for example, conventional narratives cannot conceive of the pleasure of being the image, the fetish, or the object of the gaze. Nor can they allow for the ways in which thoroughly scrambled gender relations might impact the dynamics of looking, at least not for long. Within conventional cinema, Mulvey proposed that the only way for a female viewer to access voyeuristic pleasure was to cross-identify with the male gaze; through this complicated procedure, the female spectator of a conventional visual narrative could find a position on the screen that offered a little more than the pleasure of being fetishized.¹⁰⁶

Objectified by the male gaze throughout history, the female body has been in need of fresh representation. Stepping outside the bounds of traditional heterosexual depiction, the film attempts to restore to women the direct (not subversive) visual pleasure they had been deprived of. The depiction of sex, then, treads the line between progressive and conservative. Is there a right way to show sex? Is the armpit fingering in *Portrait* less erotic than *Blue*'s sex or more? What can we make of the lack of nudity in *Rafiki*? In stepping outside of the conventional portrayal of women and their pleasure which, as Mulvey argues, has been used for fetishization, cannot all three films constitute as progressive to some degree? *Portrait* takes it a step further in eliminating the gaze of the man, situating the majority of the film among only women. When men are introduced, they are as bystanders, not as active watchers. And despite the lack of nudity

¹⁰⁶ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, p. 85.

in *Rafiki*, “Rosalind Galt writes of the role of colour in art history that ‘purity has helped construct the white body as transparent, rational, and modern, linking fleshly corruption and racial otherness to excess colour.’”¹⁰⁷ The white body, which has continuously been centered in a majority of stories, is seen as the baseline. Despite what could be argued as a conservative presentation of sex between Kena and Ziki, perhaps the implication of a sexual act while refraining from showing the body is done to avoid the risk of the fetishization of the Black feminine body. Moreso, to keep the audience in limbo—will they, won’t they—and by fading to black, Kahiua makes her stance clear: you’re allowed to see, but only so much.

Ann Rosalind Jones asks, “is women’s sexuality so monolithic that a notion of a shared, typical femininity does justice to it? What about variations in class, in race, and in culture among women? What about changes over time in *one* woman’s sexuality (with men, with women, by herself)?”¹⁰⁸ If we stay within one form of storytelling, we lose the rich and diverse representation of the sapphic community. To have each queer narrative follow only the conditions B. Ruby Rich writes about plunges us into a representation that may be beautiful, yes, but not complete. There is a huis clos present between the three films. In permitting the love stories in *Portrait* and *Blue* to be a space carved out for something beautiful and evanescent, they are progressive in giving queer stories that rightfully earned time. The gaze leads while sociopolitical influences act as a passive overlay. While *Blue* and *Portrait* function as an aestheticized escape from everyday life, *Rafiki* has those influences at the film's heart. While “[t]he classical Hollywood film presents psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals,”¹⁰⁹ these films go beyond that baseline. In

¹⁰⁷ Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema After Queer Theory*, p. 112.

¹⁰⁸ Jones, *Writing the Body*, p. 255.

¹⁰⁹ Bordwell, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, p. 18.

presenting their stories (*Blue* and *Portrait*) as art, they create a standard that is arguably also centered around whiteness. To be able to situate the characters outside of a violent reality is to be able to, to some degree, hide behind a certain privilege. Non-white queer stories, while they *should* be allowed to exist as art, have a more difficult time doing so, given the complexities of minority identity.

Sociologist Elizabeth Freeman writes, “[f]ilm, then, creates a historically specific shared temporality, setting limits on how long the spectator can dwell on any one object or experience any one story, and thus socializing (or, may we say binding) the gaze. Thus, to pause on a given image, to repeat an image over and over, or to double an existing film in a remake or reshoot become productively queer ways to ‘desocialize’ that gaze and intervene on the historical condition of seeing itself.”¹¹⁰ To focus exclusively on the desired gaze, on the intimate and soft moments of wlw love is to do a disservice to the community as a whole. I am not suggesting that we begin to make more films that fall under the category of “trauma porn;” I desperately want to watch queer people thrive. But to completely ignore nuance and categorize the love between women as something sacred and impenetrable is simply to idealize the woman (and her lesbian lover) in a new way.

The act of seeing the woman as art, especially across all three films, becomes one of these repeated images that Freeman talks about. Berger, when speaking about the painting’s transcendence across the screen: “[t]he painting enters each viewer’s house. There it is surrounded by his wallpaper, his furniture, his mementoes. It enters the atmosphere of his family. It becomes their talking point. It lends its meaning to their meaning.”¹¹¹ When these stories enter

¹¹⁰ Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, p. xviii.

¹¹¹ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 19-20.

the homes of audiences, they can be influential. Whether the films are progressive or conservative, they have the ability to influence whoever is on the other side of the screen. Films like *Portrait* function like a painting throughout; the disorderly way of filming in *Blue*, and the closeness of the shots, thrust us constantly in relation to the body; situating *Rafiki* in an unsafe space hones our eye. In doing each, the films enhance our overview of sapphic relationships. *Rafiki*, however, truly engages in the discussion around queer hatred. Arguably, it is the most impactful as it does not allow either viewer—for or against queerness—to escape the conversation.

Indeed, “[i]f we’re scared of anything new or different, or made uneasy by films and videos that challenge our notions of the homonatural universe, we’ll be stuck with the status quo. If queer audiences stay away from controversial groundbreaking work, then the distributors and studios, those who watch the box office like a seismologist watches the Richter needle, will pull out completely. And the queer community will be abandoned, condemned to a static universe, comforted only by the sure knowledge that the earth, alas, won’t move under our feet.”¹¹² Making an impact means getting uncomfortable, at least some of the time. Queer people deserve happiness. They deserve stories about love and loss, and they also deserve comedies. There should be the dramatics, as well as the overcoming, or the failure, and the calm. It is clear, however, that there is a separation of which individuals are awarded what stories; given that American and European, that is to say white, stories are pushed to the forefront, they have the most influence not only on audiences, but on works at large. As more films are made, non-European cinemas should be brought forth into the conversation to sway what is seen most

¹¹² B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema*, p. 45.

widely. I acknowledge that much of the external work I brought into this thesis is centralized in Western discourse and is not as individualized as would be ideal. My hope is that as the filmography continues to grow, so will the representation we see both in and around them. To have more queer stories available, especially about lesbianism and non-men, is to allow more individuals to be seen. And that will never be a hindrance.

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