

An Undergraduate Dissertation submitted to the University of Nottingham

**Touch, Look and Listen: comparing the portrayal of
intimacy through the presentation of the senses in the films
Blue is the Warmest Colour and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire***



Blue is the Warmest Colour



Portrait of a Lady on Fire

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Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to compare the portrayal of intimacy through the presentation of the senses in Abdellatif Kechiche's 2013 romantic drama *Blue is the Warmest Colour* and Céline Sciamma's 2019 period romantic drama *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. In doing this, I analyse the use of the senses and establish whether the films are representative of authentic lesbian relationships. The analysis in this dissertation is divided into three chapters representing three senses: 'Touch', 'Look', and 'Listen'. This is done in order to investigate whether the two lesbian-centred films use a multisensorial approach to explore the intimate relationships between the characters. Furthermore, this dissertation places the two films within the context of wider feminist film history and considers relevant scholarly research.

This dissertation uses textual analysis to demonstrate that the two films explore and portray the senses in different ways using different cinematic techniques. The analysis of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* explores the way that the cinematic rendering of the senses is central to the love between the two main characters, Marianne and Héloïse, whereas the director of *Blue is the Warmest Colour* more explicitly objectifies the main character, Adèle, through a heteronormative use of the 'look', as well as a more forceful version of 'touch', as perpetrated by Emma. I argue that *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* shows a more dynamic and authentic portrayal of the central lesbian relationship due to its careful and integrated portrayal of the three main senses 'Touch', 'Look' and 'Listen'.

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Introduction

Released in 2013, *Blue is the Warmest Colour*¹ (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013: France) quickly became a popular LGBTQ+ film, bringing in over two million dollars in its first weekend in France (Box Office, 2013). It was considered an “outstanding film” by *The Guardian* critic Peter Bradshaw (2013) and won the Palme d’Or at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival (Festival de Cannes, 2013). Based on a graphic novel by Julie Maroh (2010), the film explores the relationship between two young women, Adèle (Adèle Exarchopoulos) and Emma (Léa Seydoux), as Adèle finishes high school and navigates the beginning of adulthood whilst discovering her sexuality.

*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*² (Céline Sciamma, 2019: France) is a period romantic drama set in Brittany, France in the late eighteenth century. It tells the story of Marianne (Noémie Merlant), a painter commissioned to paint the portrait of aristocrat Héloïse (Adèle Haenel), with whom she eventually falls in love. The film gained critical acclaim and is rated positively at 97% by critics on film critique website *Rotten Tomatoes* (2019), placing second on ‘The Best Movies of 2019,’ (*Metacritic*, 2020).

In this dissertation, I explore the portrayal of intimacy through the cinematic presentation of the senses and sensual interaction between the characters in *Blue* and *Portrait* (as the films will be referred to in this dissertation). In doing this, I explore the contrast between the two sets of relationships, from the over-sexualisation of the ‘hard’ intimacy in *Blue* to the aesthetic depiction of the ‘soft’ intimacy in *Portrait*. I argue that *Blue* fails to

¹ French original title: *La Vie d'Adèle - Chapitres 1 & 2*

² French original title: *Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu*

present a multi-layered portrayal of intimacy, because of a reduced focus on ‘listening’ and non-sexualised ‘touch’, concentrating instead on one-dimensional sexual ‘look’ and ‘touch’, whereas *Portrait* utilises a subtle layering of all three senses, thereby presenting a more multisensorial intimacy.

I have chosen the films *Blue* and *Portrait* to explore critically because they typify the range of intimate relationships depicted between lesbians in modern cinema. Although there is an abundance of research discussing intimacy in lesbian and feminist cinema, there is a gap in research considering intimacy specifically within and between these two films, and a lack of research that has considered intimacy by exploring its depiction through the lens of the senses. It is important to address this area to illuminate the impact of multisensorial intimacy in lesbian relations rather than focusing solely on sexual intimacy. Throughout this dissertation, I also note the male and female directorial differences and how this affects the depiction of intimacy.

Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener (2009) state that, for audiences, “there are additional ways the body engages with [film] besides the senses of vision, tactility and sound: philosophical issues of perception and temporality, of agency and consciousness are also central to the cinema, as they are to the spectator,” (p.5). I have chosen to use the senses as a lens in order to uncover the underlying factors of “agency and consciousness” that go into portraying intimacy in these films. I argue that by utilising multiple layers of intimacy, *Portrait* is able to convey an authentic, believable, and consensual portrayal of lesbianism, whilst *Blue*’s simplistic focus on the senses ‘look’ and sexual ‘touch’ create an uncomfortable, over-sexualised, and potentially problematic depiction of a lesbian relationship.

The five main senses are touch, sight, hearing, taste, and smell. In this dissertation, I will be focusing on touch, look, and listen, using the terminology ‘look’ rather than ‘sight’, and ‘listen’ rather than ‘hearing’ as this study considers an analysis of the presentation of the *acts of doing* the looking and listening rather than simply seeing and hearing. I will not be analysing the senses of smell or taste in this study as they are less prominent in the depiction of intimacy within these two films.

I will be using intimacy to reference the emotional, intellectual, and physical connection between characters in the two films. I do this to avoid fixating on the sexual differences between the films, as this has been focused on in other scholars’ work. It is imperative to my argument that we look further than the sexual relationships and into the full range of intimate connections. I also use the word ‘intimate’ to include platonic relationships as well as sexual ones, as seen in the platonic relationships in *Portrait*, which I look at in Chapter Three.

The copious academic research surrounding queer and feminist film studies allows me to explore the ways in which intimacy has been studied in the past. Within the Literature Review, I discuss ideas posed by theorists of the twentieth century including Laura Mulvey (1989), Kaja Silverman (1988 and 1990), and Luce Irigaray (1985) and evaluate to what extent this research supports or detracts from my analysis and conclusions.

The analysis of the senses in this dissertation is split into three chapters. Chapter One focuses on ‘Look’, centring on Mulvey’s ‘male gaze’ theory. The concept of the ‘male gaze’ is the idea that women are positioned as passive objects for the pleasure of male desire and,

within film, are presented and viewed from the perspective of a heterosexual man. I argue that Emma in *Blue* is positioned as the ‘man’ in her relationship and therefore consistently looks at and treats Adèle with disdain, adhering to the stereotypical male gaze. In *Portrait*, where there are almost no men around, a ‘female gaze’ is developed, with Héloïse and Marianne shown as equal agents in their relationship. This chapter positions both Héloïse and Adèle as the muses of their respective artist partners and addresses their agency or lack thereof as artistic inspiration.

The second chapter tackles ‘Listen’, through consideration of both the diegetic and non-diegetic sound in the films. By focusing both on the language and conversation between the women, and the music applied to the films in post-production, I argue that sound is intrinsically linked with intimacy, especially through its relation to emotional connection in the relationships. I discuss the use of sound and soundtrack in the films and how this affects the portrayal of intimacy. This is especially important to note as there is a clear contrast between the two films, with *Blue* having little added soundtrack, and *Portrait* using Antonio Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons*³: ‘Summer in G Minor’ (1718-1720) as a musical motif to create atmosphere in the climax of the film.

In the third chapter, I look at ‘Touch’ and its importance to the intimacy shared in the relationships. I look at the sexual, romantic, and platonic touch in the two films and conclude that they are given equal weight in the intimacy portrayed in *Portrait*, but that the touch in *Blue* relies heavily on sex. In *Blue*, physicality is the foundation of Adèle and Emma’s relationship, but the lack of representation of other sensual interactions creates a less authentic presentation of the relationship.

³ Italian original title: *Le Quattro Stagioni*

This dissertation uses textual analysis as the main methodology of study. Described by Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell (2012), textual analysis is used “to expose underlying, and possibly conflicting or contradictory, meanings in films, laying the groundwork for symptomatic readings and readings ‘against the grain’ of mainstream and canonical films,” (p.425). Using textual analysis, I will study the “subtextual and unconscious meanings” (Kuhn and Westwell, 2012, p.425) of my chosen texts and expose what I believe can be understood about the differences in the multisensorial and authentic portrayal of intimacies in the two films. This method of analysis is vital to this research as it allows me to study how meaning is made in reference to intimacy and lesbianism when looking at the language, subtexts, symbolism, and patterns in *Blue* and *Portrait*.

This method of analysis allows me to undertake a close reading of my chosen texts in order to inform my argument. Keri-Lynn Wheeler (2017) used textual analysis when looking at *Blue* in order to examine the ways in which male directors are able to portray sexual lesbian relationships. She states that “textual analysis of each film... will illuminate the authorial choices and cinematic effects of male-oriented framing of queer female desire,” (p.51). Using this analysis allowed her to argue her opinion effectively, and I will use the same analysis method to highlight my reasoning within my chosen texts.

Edward Branigan (1992) defines narrative analysis as “a distinctive strategy for recognising, isolating and articulating our responses to the world as a whole,” (p.I). For the purpose of this dissertation, I will be focusing on textual analysis, however, I will use narrative analysis, when necessary, in order to illuminate my argument. I will be using these research methods in order to analyse the ways in which the intimacy is constructed in *Blue*

and *Portrait* through the lenses of ‘Touch’, ‘Look’, ‘Listen’, and argue that using techniques that present a multisensorial intimacy produce a more authentic presentation of a lesbian relationship.

Literature Review

There has been considerable research undertaken within feminist and queer cinema studies in recent decades. I will use this Literature Review to evaluate the theories that apply most directly to this dissertation. These include both leading feminist film theories and the way those theories are echoed in *Portrait* and *Blue*. In this review, I will look at research that explores relevant queer film history and specific concepts relevant to each of my chapters.

Heteronormativity is the notion that the world is built for heterosexual people and benefits them above those who fall into the queer bracket of sexuality. This includes the underlying assumption that everyone is heterosexual and those who are not are 'Other'. In film, heteronormativity generally refers to sex scenes and relationship dynamics. The concept was first theorised in 1991 by Michael Warner in *Fear of a Queer Planet*. An understanding of heteronormativity has been important in this research, as it underlies much of the context of *Blue*, particularly.

'New Queer Cinema' as a movement was defined in the early 1990s. Brought to attention by B. Ruby Rich, the genre comprises a grouping of queer films that aimed to deploy similar cultural tones and effects: Rich states that they are "united by a common style," (2004, p.54). One expectation of New Queer Cinema was that other queer films were not legitimate if they followed heteronormative concepts such as fulfilling the 'man' and 'woman' gender roles in a relationship. Such expectations are problematic, as they exclude a huge collection of queer films, including *Blue*. However, New Queer Cinema inspired many of the queer films of the 2010s including *Portrait*, which follows the principles of the genre.

Within both *Blue* and *Portrait*, intimacy relies heavily on exploring power dynamics and deepening affection between the protagonists through the sense of ‘looking’. In *Blue*, this focuses largely on physical sexuality. In *Portrait*, the idea of the ‘look’ is more sensual and delicate, allowing for less objectification of the person looked at. My research considers the ideas of the male and female gaze, and the use of the muse, which are discussed in detail in Chapter One.

Laura Mulvey first coined the term the ‘male gaze’ in 1975 and expanded upon it in her work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* in 1989. The term describes the idea that women are positioned as passive objects for the pleasure and desire of men and are viewed from the heterosexual male perspective. Mulvey states that “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly,” (1989, p.19). Raenn Ritland (2018) states that “[Mulvey] argued that mainstream Hollywood forwarded the dominant (heterosexual male), phallogentric, and unconscious perspective of a patriarchal society wherein the male (or masculine) is subject, and female (or feminine) is object or spectacle.” (p.1283). Mulvey’s theory is critical to my argument, however, I am applying it to the masculine/feminine relationship in *Blue* and comparing it with the feminine/feminine relationship in *Portrait*. Exploring this theory by comparing the two films sheds light on the way in which the film directors’ manipulation of the sense of looking affects the intimacy in the relationships of the women. The theory depends heavily on Sigmund Freud’s (1977) idea of scopophilia: taking pleasure from looking at others. As Mulvey describes, “[Freud] associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze,” (1975, p.8). By

analysing the voyeuristic features of characters, directors, and audience, we are able to understand the 'look' and its association with intimacy.

Although important to note Mulvey's male gaze theory when analysing the intimacy in the two films, it is now seen as somewhat an obsolete term, as noted by Lorraine Gammen and Margaret Marshment (1988) who suggest that grouping the 'looked-at' and the 'looker' into strictly heterosexual and binary genders is an archaic concept. This criticism is helpful as Mulvey's idea does not consider the masculinity of women, or any type of masculinised female desire, for example women taking pleasure in looking at men, however as examples of the gaze being used in scenarios where the feminine woman is the 'looked-at' and the masculine woman is the 'looker' such as in *Blue*, the theory still stands.

Ritland (2018) states that the current discourse "recognizes problems associated with accepting the male gaze as ubiquitous and instead holds that a heterosexual male perspective remains dominant across several forms of media, but individuals and media alike have the freedom to alter and disrupt the gaze," (p.1284). The directors of both *Blue* and *Portrait* have constructed their own form of 'gaze' which allows an in-depth look at both the masculine (rather than strictly 'male') gaze which is evident in *Blue*, and in comparison, the more feminine gaze that appears in *Portrait*.

By utilising the theories focusing on 'look', it has been possible to construct an argument that posits that by using a masculine gaze in *Blue*, the audience sees only the objectified sexualised factors of the relationship and are only shown one perspective. In *Portrait*, however, the 'looking' is shared more equally, and is supplemented by aesthetic shots, which add to the feminine gaze atmosphere that is presented in the 'look' intimacy.

Although previous critics have considered how the sense of looking is used when discussing intimacy within these two films, there has yet to be a detailed study into how the 'look' complements and works with other senses involved in the representation of lesbian intimacies in film. In Chapter Two, it is argued that the female gaze techniques that are described beginning with the 'look' in Chapter One, are multiplied by the eroticism in sound, voice, and listening. Historically, the female voice in cinema has been muffled by male on-screen counterparts, and so in these two films which feature few men and instead promote lesbian love stories, the voice, soundscapes and listening play a vital role in the construction of not only the relationships but the characters too.

Kaja Silverman (1990) has done significant research into the female voice and its use in cinema. In her work 'Dis-embodiment of the Female Voice', she considers off-screen female voice-overs and the lack of agency they possess. Patricia Erens (1990) describes: "Despite women's access to language in the real world, in film male characters have linguistic as well as specular authority, which is enhanced by their function as off-screen narrators, granting them additional control as the possessors of superior knowledge," (p.220). Men have control over female characters in and out of film through the script and direction and, because of this, we are seeing female characters through a male lens. This can be seen in all elements of the senses in *Blue*. Silverman's *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988) explores the idea of the female voice and whether this can be separated from the male. She discusses the ways in which women are heard in classic cinema, suggesting that although they are constantly making noise in their screams, cries, and gasps, they are not saying anything of value. Shohini Chaudhuri (2006) explains this act of subjection of women as "[marrying] the voice with the image," (p.45). The idea that the sounds a woman produces are valuable to the production of the film but

have “little or no authoritative voice in the narrative,” (Chaudhuri, 2006, p.45) equates the idea that women should be seen and not heard, or that their presence is entirely for sound effects. This theory can be seen played out in *Blue* as is argued in Chapter Two: ‘Listen’.

In order to explore the way listening and sound are used to conjure intimate emotions, we have to also consider the soundtracks of the films. Going back as far as Darwin, music has conjured emotions to drive feeling. In *Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin (1909) states that “music arouses in us various emotions, but not the more terrible ones of horror, fear, rage, etc. It awakens the gentler feelings of tenderness and love, which readily pass into devotion,” (as cited in Kivy, 1959, p.44). *Portrait* uses music in great effect to conjure intimacy in both the characters and audience.

In *Portrait*, we see multiple types of intimate contact between the different women. In Chapter Three, I look at how the sense of ‘touch’ is used to show not only sexual intimacy, but also the platonic friendships between the female characters. In *Blue*, the act of touch is overtly sexual, with graphic sex scenes and an almost-constant ‘groping’ of each other throughout the film.

Steven Connor (2004), in *The Book of Skin*, states that “if the mind can mute the cacophony of other sensations that ordinarily compete with and complete the sense of touch, we may seem to be able to sense, not the object of sensation, but our sensing itself,” (p.261). Connor’s words are a necessary interpretation of how touch is used to avert the other senses and become a powerful guide of desire and intimacy in its own right. Due to the sense of touch being second-hand for the audience, directors must use every multi-layering technique

available to them to depict 'touch' intimacy effectively, otherwise it can get lost amidst other such strongly presented senses.

Another theorist focusing on 'touch' intimacy that provides a background to the argument in Chapter Three is Luce Irigaray in her 1985 work *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Here, it is suggested that female pleasure has always been looked at through the eyes of man, and therefore for the purpose of being 'reproductive'. When taking 'man' away from the screen (in *Portrait*) we see a world based around women and feminine ideals: romance, friendship, and equality. When the male director makes the decisions about female sex (in *Blue*) we see a heteronormative view of the sexual behaviour being asked of the women in the film. Irigaray implies that female 'pleasure' is constructed for the gratification of the male, as is explored in this research.

Anneke Smelik (1995) notes that when films consider that women can desire other women, we see a deeper format of intimacy. She notes that "when difference [in desire] is no longer reduced to sexual difference but is also understood as difference among women, representation of an active female desire becomes possible," (p.75). This concept is vital to my argument as it suggests that when looking at lesbian desire, it does not have to revolve around heteronormative structures of desire.

By looking closely at some of the main theories in feminist film studies surrounding the notions of 'touch', 'look', and 'listen', and using them when analysing the two films chosen for study, it is possible to explore how intimacy between women is presented.

Chapter One: 'Look', and the Agency of the Muse

“If you look at me, who do I look at?”

– Héloïse (*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, 2019, 01:05:50)

The 'Look' is arguably the most recognised form of intimacy when excluding the act of sex itself. Hans Jonas in 'The Notability of Sight' (1954) states that “the mind has gone where vision pointed,” (p.19), suggesting that by attuning our mind to our sight, the act of looking intentionally directs our thoughts and creates meaning. In many ways, there are parallels with the way that the two films under consideration here use the idea of 'looking': each story utilises 'gaze' as a main factor of intimacy; each story includes an artist and a muse; each story features a young woman discerning what love costs; and each story ends unhappily for the respective couples. In this chapter, I look in detail at the comparison of male and female gazes, the use of the 'muse', and how directorial choices factor into the differences in depictions of intimacy.

The term 'muse' comes from the Ancient Greek mythology of the nine muses, born from Zeus and Mnemosyne, each one responsible for separate art forms (Sprengnether, 2018, p.393). It describes a person or object which models for and inspires an artist. However, the way in which the muse manifests in *Blue* and *Portrait* is remarkably in tune with the 'gazes' and how the muse either looks or is looked at.

Blue focuses on 'look' as the main sensory agent of intimacy, especially when considering the way Emma *looks at* Adèle. As noted in the Literature Review, the male gaze was developed as a theory by Laura Mulvey in 1975. The categories Mulvey describes of

'looker' and 'looked-at' are traditionally linked to male and female. However, in the case of this film, the descriptions of 'masculine' and 'feminine' are better suited to represent these female characters. Emma and Adèle are presented as having opposing characteristics of dominant/submissive and assertive/compliant. As E. Ann Kaplan (1990) attests, "the gaze is not necessarily male (literally) but rather masculine, due to the "persistent presentation of the masculine..., the unconscious of patriarchy..., [and] male based language and discourse," (p.30). Emma's masculinised gaze at Adèle is heavily influenced by male director Abdellatif Kechiche. It is very one-sided, concentrating on Emma's 'looking onto' Adèle, and receiving little to no masculinised 'looks' in return. The male gaze in *Blue* is positioned as Emma's approach to loving Adèle, but, of course, constructed via Kechiche's comprehension of a lesbian relationship. Male assumptions about lesbian relationships are often overly sexual, predatory, or heteronormative, and in this case, all three, resulting in an inauthentic portrayal on screen and problematic use of gaze in reference to 'looking'.

Tim Palmer (2018) praises Kechiche for his commitment to "a graphically corporeal cinema, a coming-of-age text... defined by the ardent behaviours, sexual or otherwise, of bodies on-screen, but also, concomitantly, to the counterparts of such bodily tableaux, with vantage points of keen ambivalence, dispassionate reflective irony," (p.4). Kechiche utilises long panning shots over the women's bodies, especially Adèle's whilst she sleeps, cries, and eats. Zoe Dirse (2013) indicates that "techniques that are normally used to depict women in films essentially produce a secularity in relation to the character in a way that places her role in the film as "iconic" (image) rather than as "diegetic" (storyteller)," (p.18). Kechiche's use of angles and general direction places Adèle as an 'object' at the hands of both Emma and the audience.

Mulvey (1989) describes ‘the look’ as “pleasurable in form... threatening in content,” (p.19). The focus on ‘look’ in this film is undeniably the strongest sense used in reference to intimacy. From their first meeting, Emma is unable to take her eyes off Adèle. They walk past each other at a crossing, and both turn back to one another. Emma’s gaze is instantly stronger, more dominant, and focuses on Adèle’s body. Adèle, in contrast, is much more delicate with her gaze, timidly watching Emma, and seemingly confused when Emma, much older and wiser than she, seems interested in her too. This moment in *Blue* sets up the central relationship and indicates how it will pan out for the rest of the film: Adèle being alone, timid, and flattered by Emma’s interest continues as such throughout, and Emma continues to be unfalteringly arrogant and superior. The ‘looks’ they share are mirrored in their characters through the entire film which spans at least seven years (although some critics argue it lasts over a decade). Adèle, fifteen at the beginning against Emma’s twenty-two years, remains stuck in the reticent and submissive persona until the end of the film when she is in her twenties. The age difference and predatory gaze from Emma might suggest this relationship could be understood as containing ‘grooming’ ideologies, however this was not the intention of the director. Nevertheless, the rapacious tendencies shown by Emma are still uncomfortable for the audience.

Jane Augustine (1992) states that “patriarchy perpetuates a false dichotomy between body and mind, equating “man” with “mind” and “woman” with “body,” (p.11). In *Blue*, Adèle is bound with her body and sexuality. So much of the film is focused on her body that it becomes almost impossible to separate her persona from it. From the beginning, her youthfulness is equated with her sexual inexperience, and it is impressed on the audience that she is ‘taught’ how to be a woman through her relationship with Emma. Augustine also discusses the “patriarchal absolutism of the body” (p.11), referring to the unyielding control

the male gaze has over the female form. Adèle presents as the epitome of the submissive female viewed by the male gaze: her mouth always agape, her eyes constantly drawn upward, playing with her hair relentlessly, eating messily, and having to be taken care of. This leads to her inevitable downfall in the film after their separation: Emma is able to move on easily from Adèle, but Adèle is still stuck in their past relationship, reliant on the love she received from Emma.

Portrait includes the ‘look’ as dominantly as *Blue* does, but the stark difference is that it is carried out with equal participation from both parties. In *Portrait*, ‘look’ is used as a way of setting up the narrative within the story: Marianne has been commissioned to paint Héloïse’s portrait without her knowing. Marianne must study her in detail on their daily walks, and then paint her in secret when they return home. This notion is a helpful hook into the story, as it explains why Marianne initially looks at Héloïse with such a romantic eye. However, the audience is surprised when Héloïse stares back with the same urge and fierceness. Héloïse is being married off to a wealthy Milanese man, never having met him; she is forced into this fate by her sister who committed suicide in order to escape it. Héloïse’s very existence is one where agency is not permitted, and yet through her looks we see her holding onto the governance of her own life. When Héloïse chooses to love and be with Marianne, it is not only an act of love, but also one of defiance against the system and society in which she lives. This defiance against the system continues throughout the film, culminating in the decision where Héloïse ultimately chooses to marry, which I will touch on later.

Céline Sciamma, the director of *Portrait*, referred to the film as a “manifesto about the female gaze” (Vox, 2020). In *Portrait*, the female gaze encompasses the romanticism of

the relationship, the visuals of the spaces, and the soundscape that accompanies it, which I will explore in Chapter Two. *Portrait* embodies this concept in its presentation of ‘look’: soft gazes, adoration, and genuine affection, rather than just objectification and sexualisation that the male gaze traditionally aligns with.

The Greek legend of Eurydice and Orpheus appears frequently as a motif and metaphor in *Portrait*, describing how Orpheus decided to turn back to see his lover even though he knew she would have to stay in Hell forever. After Héloïse reads the story to Marianne and Sophie, the maid, Marianne comments that Orpheus “doesn’t make the lovers’ choice but the poet’s” (01:14:26), suggesting he chose the memory of her over their unclear future. This motif appears at the end of the film, when Marianne must leave Héloïse and accept her marriage to the Milanese gentleman. As Marianne runs out of the house in tears at leaving her lover, Héloïse, perhaps a figment of her imagination at this point, says “turn around,” (01:51:42) and when Marianne does - she disappears. This is key to the story: Marianne must let Héloïse go in order for them both to fulfil their roles in life. For Héloïse to claim some of the agency which has been stripped from her for her whole life, she makes the ultimate decision: to comply and marry. Although this may seem like an evasion of her rights, it is the opposite: she’s made her own autonomous decision to fulfil the role. It is this agency that sets her apart from Adèle, who wants nothing but control from Emma.

It is apparent within both films how passionate and fervent the relationships are. The concept of the muse is prominent in both films: in *Portrait*, Marianne, the artist, is appointed to paint a portrait of Héloïse on the orders of her mother, the Duchess. In *Blue*, Emma, the artist, refers to Adèle as her ‘muse’, and effectively ‘keeps’ her like a housewife, asking her to cook, clean, and look pretty in order for Emma to show her off in front of her friends.

Emma's treatment of her muse is as far from Marianne's as is possible: regarding Adèle as a body and an object. This is a defining feature of the male gaze in Emma's 'looking' at Adèle. When she paints her, it is always naked, spread out, and focusing on her sexuality and body. Marianne's treatment of her muse is loving, detailed, and regarding Héloïse as a work of art rather than an object to be painted. She focuses on accurately and lovingly honouring Héloïse in the painting of her. Marianne is romantic: her art is motivated by loss and struggle compared to Emma's motivations of sex, nudity, purity, and youth.

Robert Hafner (2014) states that muses' contributions to their respective artist's work have "never been adequately acknowledged" and that they have often "passed into obscurity" (p.1). Emma treats Adèle as a muse, a model, and a trophy, rather than a partner on the same level. By committing her to art in the way she does, she condemns her to the state of an object. Linda Williams (2017) notes that "[Emma's] art words seem to want to reduce Adèle – even to freeze her – into the role of muse," (p.465). Although Adèle is commended for her beautiful body and looks by Emma and Emma's friends during parties and exhibitions, she is never acknowledged as being important as her own self in Emma's eyes – proven by the fact that as soon as they break up Emma moves onto her next lover, Lise, and paints her instead. Adèle, in actuality, was never as important as we, the audience, originally thought.

At a pivotal moment in *Portrait*, Héloïse steps up to the easel to paint, asking Marianne to take her place in the 'muse' position, on the chair. She says, "if you look at me, who do I look at?" (01:05:50) signalling to Marianne that she has been 'looking' at her too, and that their affection is mutual. This equality of the gaze – and the mutual female desire – is something unique to this film, which we do not see in *Blue*. *Blue* and *Portrait* create a dichotomy in their respective presentation of gazes. The female gaze in cinema includes

romantic notions of idealistic setting visuals, rather than simply sexual visuals of bodies. We see this in *Portrait* as the panning shots of the French coast, strong association with the sea, and the three-minute-long final shot of Héloïse crying before the credits roll. We also never openly see the women having sex: the only explicit shot is in reference to a menstrual cycle rather than sexual acts, therefore releasing the bind that women's naked bodies on screen must be perceived in a sexual context. In *Blue*, on the other hand, the panning shots are of the couple's bodies, their intercourse, and close-ups of Adèle's behind and lips. The directorial differences create a clear separation between the gendered gazes and show clearly the difference in male and female directorial decisions when it comes to the presentation of intimacy.

In studying the 'look' in *Portrait* and *Blue*, it can be determined that the main proprietor of 'looking' in *Blue* is Emma's ever-controlling masculine gaze. Through this, she condemns Adèle to being her 'muse' and takes away any agency that Adèle may have had. In comparison, in *Portrait*, 'looking' is equal between the women, and when Marianne does paint Héloïse it is done with adoration and consideration. The inclusion of multi-layered 'look' intimacy in the atmospheric setting of *Portrait* adds to the multisensorial intimacy presented. It is the difference in 'looks' that creates such a vast range of visual intimacies in the two films. The 'look' gives the audience different perspectives of the women as individuals and as couples and exemplifies the opposition of executive judgements from the female and male directors who, ultimately, control the narrative of the 'look'.

Chapter Two: 'Listen', and the Role of Sound and Speech

“You’ll hear the rest. Milan is a city of music.” – Marianne

“Then I can’t wait for Milan.” – Héloïse

(Portrait of a Lady on Fire, 2019, 00:40:15)

In this chapter, I analyse the use of the sense of hearing sound, or what I shall refer to as ‘listening’, and its effect on the portrayal of intimacy in *Portrait* and *Blue*. There are many instances where the sense of sound is explored and manipulated to contribute to the overall narrative in the films: listening to and hearing the human voice in conversation; voice-over narration; verbally produced sound effects; and a creation of soundscape via background noise or music. Neil Lerner (2009) writes that “we can’t cover our ears with the same certainty of muting the unwanted sounds as we can avert our gaze to stop seeing something,” (p.ix). Sound has been so inherently embedded in cinema, since the introduction of ‘talkies’, that we are unable to detach from it in the same way we can with sight. In both *Blue* and *Portrait*, ‘listen’ is intrinsically linked with the development of the intimacy shown in the two sets of relationships.

The sense of listening is accredited with being an important aspect of developing deep ties in a relationship. Karen Prager and Duane Buhrmester (1998) found that “data revealed three dimensions of verbally intimate interaction: positive affective tone, daily self-disclosure, and listening and understanding,” (p.435). I will be analysing the ‘listening’ in the portrayal of intimacy and communication between the characters, and the use of sound to create an atmosphere of intimacy in the soundscape of the two films. By looking both at diegetic sound (that originates within the world of the film) and non-diegetic sound (that is

added into the film in post-production and generally serves a purpose to the story) it can be established that the sense of listening within intimacy is important for the characters' connection to one another but also for the audience's connection to the characters.

Although listening is apparent in the presentation of intimacy in both films, there is more aural connection and communication depicted in Héloïse and Marianne's relationship in *Portrait*. The basis of their relationship begins in conversation, as Héloïse believes Marianne has been hired to be a companion on her daily walks. Because they both wear wind-covers over their faces thus shielding their beauty, and Marianne must infrequently glance covertly at Héloïse in order to be able to paint her in secret, their relationship truly does begin in conversation. Albertine Fox (2020) states that "it is the sound of the female voice, and not an exchange of looks, that activates a space of intimacy – a sort of connective tissue – between them," (p.2). It is this conversation that sets their connection alight, something we see very little of in *Blue*.

Communication is the foundation of partnership, as established by Steve Duck (1994) in *Meaningful Relationships: Talking, Sense, and Relating*. What is being offered to the audience as love in *Blue* is merely lust: lacking genuine communication of any kind, opting instead for what is presented as a deeper, rawer, and more animalistic association that revolves around sex. However, this focus on non-verbal communication triggers the ultimate end of their relationship by avoiding a connection to one another on a deeper level and by evading the intimacy they might have found through listening. The communication of their needs fails, and they end up separating for good.

Linda Williams (2017) argues that critics have been unfairly harsh on *Blue*, stating that it should not be discredited as a ‘good’ lesbian film just because it is overtly and explicitly sexual. I agree that the film should not be discredited as ‘good’ queer cinema just because of its sensualities and overt eroticism, however it *can* be criticised for its significant lack of communication and credible bonding between the central characters. The fact that Emma and Adèle are presented as staying together for nearly a decade during the film is, therefore, ultimately unconvincing. Audiences are not left with any sense that they enjoy each other’s company, other than when they are engaging in sexual relations: their connection is almost entirely physical. It is because of this lack of multisensorial intimacy that the relationship comes across as inauthentic and performative.

As aforementioned in the Literature Review, Kaja Silverman’s writing about the speech of women in cinema is beneficial to this argument. In *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988), she writes that women’s language in film is generally comprised of “prattle”, “bitchiness”, or “sweet murmurings” (p.309), fundamentally equating women’s language with background ‘noise’. Silverman discusses the ways in which women are heard in classic cinema, suggesting that although they are constantly making noise in their screams, cries, and gasps, they are not saying anything of value. This is shown clearly in *Blue*, where Adèle’s lack of agency within the film is curated through her lack of speech. She never defends herself and her own feelings and her opinions are left unsaid and stunted, whilst Emma’s one-sided sentiments are voiced openly throughout. Adèle’s verbal contributions throughout the film are largely made up of her gasps, moans, and sobs. Almost comically, Williams (2017) relates the hysterical noises Adèle produces to “the sounds now coming from women’s tennis,” (p.469). Because of Adèle’s lack of verbalisation, and Emma’s lack of affectionate

communication, we are rarely witness to an exchange of conversation that would indicate any depth of intimacy between them.

In ‘Dis-embodiment of the Female Voice’, Silverman (1990) states that “the female voice plays an important part in classical cinema, serving as the means by which she is established as occupying the positions of mother, siren, patient, innocent, etc.” (p.313). The idea that a woman serves as an object, fulfilling a role, carries into modern cinema and into *Blue*, where Adèle performs the role of an innocent girl, needing to be saved, and Emma the heroine who bewitches her. This contrasts deeply with the equality portrayed in the ‘listening’ in *Portrait*, where, by Silverman’s logic, Héloïse is first established as a ‘damsel-in-distress’, but then quickly takes control of her situation during the iconic moment when she tells Marianne of her decision to marry the Milanese gentleman. She says: “now you possess me a little, you bear me a grudge,” (01:36:58), and later: “imagine me happy or unhappy if that reassures you. But do not imagine me guilty,” (01:38:04). Fox (2020) notes how “the act of listening... confirms Héloïse’s active role as co-creator of her own image,” (p.2). It is this dichotomy of both vulnerability and self-determination in her character that intensifies the intimacy between the characters and with the audience.

The narration in the film is done by Marianne, under the guise of her instructing a class of all-female art students to paint their own portraits. Karen Hollinger (1992) notes that when we hear a woman but do not see her on screen, the “divorce of word from image also breaks the unity of [the] scopophilic investigation of the female image,” (p.36), also illustrated in ‘Dis-embodiment of the Female Voice’ (Silverman, 1990). This point is vital to consider in the case of *Portrait*, where Marianne’s narration appears both as if it is her thoughts, and in retrospect as instructions to her students. Her directive narration, which is

about Héloïse's body for the most part, is not subjecting her body to 'object' status to be looked at, but instead honours her in a portrait, and focuses on the softest and most delicate parts of her, such as hair, hands, and ears, noting that "one must show the ear. Study its cartilage closely, even if it's covered with hair. It must be of warm and transparent hue, except for the hole, which is always strong," (00:21:49). It is defiance against the historic cinematic misogyny which would tie together the narration to the objective of suppressing the women; instead, the narration is used as another factor in the representation of the intimacy between Marianne and Héloïse.

The climax of the 'listen' intimacy in *Portrait* happens with the use of Antonio Vivaldi's 'Summer in G Minor' concerto from *The Four Seasons*, which Marianne plays for Héloïse on the harpsichord. As she plays, she tells Héloïse the story of the piece. They sit together, listening and talking. The film ends with Marianne saying, "I saw her one last time," (01:54:45). Vivaldi's 'Summer' begins again and plays for the last three minutes of the film as the camera zooms in on Héloïse's weeping face. This moment of intimacy between Marianne and Héloïse is created by the music. They are at a concert, making the music diegetic, however as the camera pans onto Héloïse's crying face the audience watching the film sees it as a non-diegetic moment of memory. The audience *becomes* Marianne watching Héloïse. Luce Irigaray (2004) states that "sounds, voices are not divided from bodies and it is possible to touch, or be touched by, the other through the voice. Sound waves reach us without any mediation," (p.139). It is the music itself that causes Héloïse to have such a visceral reaction to the memory of Marianne and their relationship, and by tethering together both the image and sound, a moment is created of multisensorial intimacy.

Theodor Reik (1953) noted in *The Haunting Melody* the way that music is able to express narratives and emotions in a way that words cannot. Vivaldi's 'Summer' connects the audience to Marianne and Héloïse's relationship in *Portrait*. Through the inclusion of the sense of listening, we have an insight into the intimacy they share. This relates to Claudia Gorbman's 1987 work *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, where she discusses the way that the inclusion of music within film is what uncovers the subtext of the story. In this case, the use of 'Summer' both at the beginning of Marianne and Héloïse's relationship, and years after they separate, creates a powerful echo over time. The lack of a similar music narrative in *Blue* means that the audience does not share any indication of their true passion and desire to be with one another. There is no reassurance from auditory inputs that would suggest their mutual love, other than their own words.

The sound in *Blue* is used in such a way that the audience does not feel the same level of intimacy and connection to the characters as in *Portrait*. Instead, the viewer is held at arm's length: discovering that Adèle had intercourse with someone else at the same time as Emma does. This distance is reinforced by the lack of soundtrack in the film, the viewer has no sound motifs to draw on when visualising their love, and therefore there is no device for the filmmakers to use to retrieve and conjure emotions in the audience when their relationship breaks down, in the way that *Portrait* does with Vivaldi's 'Summer'. Writing about the practice of listening in social media, Kate Crawford (2009) states that "listening has not been given sufficient consideration as a significant practice of intimacy... instead, it has often been considered as contributing little value," (p.527). Crawford's point applies in the case of general media but *Blue* in particular.

During Adèle and Emma's first encounter, a busker plays a metal handpan drum throughout the scene. Although still diegetic, this is the most intimate use of soundtrack in the whole film: the music, although lively and filled with hope, is hesitant, and mirrors Adèle's fear of what the future holds. The lack of soundtrack in the rest of the film is, in itself, notable. The silence associated with Adèle and as part of the lack of soundtrack in the background is metaphorically poignant. Adèle feels forever silenced and stunted by her classmates, her parents, and Emma. Director Abdellatif Kechiche uses silence in the film to impress upon the audience Adèle's worries about making the wrong decision even into adulthood. As the story is told from her perspective, the silence reflects these anxieties. When it is Emma's turn to be in charge of the narrative, for example when she hosts the party, the screen is suddenly filled with noise and laughter. Adèle cannot keep up with Emma's friends or her lifestyle, and their differences in both personality and aspirations are what draw them apart as they grow older.

The most hysterical and vocal Adèle becomes are when things occur that are out of her control, such as during the breakup, and later when Emma tells her they can never be together. Adèle screams out "I don't love him! It's you that I love. I can't go! What will I do? What do I do? I'm begging you!" (02:20:28). She breaks down and we see a side to her that is usually kept quiet. Her sudden hysteria contrasts with the bleak silence in the background, that has occurred throughout the sex scenes, dinner scenes, breakup scenes, and final moments. By using silence as the measure of 'listen' intimacy, Kechiche shows a raw connection between the women. However, by not utilising any type of complex soundscape, *Blue* fails to curate emotions within the audience, and therefore loses a range of intimacy in the partnership and fails to engage the audience as *Portrait* does.

The use of sound in *Portrait* draws the audience in whereas the lack of it in *Blue* pushes the audience away. Director Céline Sciamma utilises the sense of listening in multiple ways in *Portrait*: through conversation, soundscape, and music. Although there are moments when Kechiche uses music in *Blue*, by and large sound is not deployed as a technique to present an intimate relationship. Both films avoid utilising non-diegetic sound for the most part. However, *Portrait* manages to include auditory motifs that bond the characters and audience together. As noted by Fox, “[*Portrait*’s] sound design asks us to lean in and listen to the queerness of the female bonding,” (p.4). The soundscape in *Portrait* is like another character, adding as much to the film as the visuals do. *Blue*’s lack of soundscape adds a blanket of sadness to the film, making Adèle’s loneliness doubly heavy, and when the women separate the loss of closeness is exemplified by the lack of auditory love motifs. By analysing the way both films use ‘listen’ to develop and explore intimacy we can see that *Portrait* gives the audience multiple layered textures of emotion whilst the poignant use of purposeful silence and ‘listening’ in *Blue* creates a rather one-dimensional and bleak cinematic experience.

Chapter Three: 'Touch', Sex, and Friendship

“I miss you. I miss not touching each other. Not seeing each other, not breathing in each other. I want you. All the time. No one else.”

– Adèle (*Blue is the Warmest Colour*, 2013, 02:38:36)

‘Touch’ is perhaps the most utilised sense in the portrayal of love and intimacy within *Blue* and *Portrait*, and in wider media. Susan Kozel (2005) states that “human interaction [is] reduced to its simplest essence; touch, trust, [and] vulnerability,” (p.440). The notion that vulnerability holds as much power as touch does weaves these concepts together and creates the formulation of ‘touch’ intimacy. The challenge for film directors is to present touch between protagonists convincingly so that the audience can fully identify and empathise with them: unlike ‘looking’ and ‘listening’, the audience cannot use their own sense of touch to interact with the characters. The viewer is unable to receive the sense of touch first-hand, and therefore the intimacy must be constructed through presentation in order to be experienced by both characters and audience.

In the two films, the central characters are physically affectionate toward one another, however in *Blue* the use of the sense of ‘touch’ focuses more on depicting actualised sex, whereas in *Portrait* it centres around non-sexual romance, support and care. *Blue*’s portrayal of love is limited to the two central characters, and, given Adèle’s problematic attachment to Emma that has been explored in previous chapters, we are asked to believe that this love is real for her, even when it is not reciprocated. In *Portrait*, the ‘touch’ is much more multi-layered and slow-moving: the relationship is developed through other senses before the women have any physical contact.

In this chapter, I argue that by having a male director, Abdellatif Kechiche, constructing a lesbian sex scene in *Blue*, the audience is left with an uncomfortable view of a heteronormative and possessive depiction of sex. In contrast, I argue that in *Portrait*, by avoiding showing physical sex scenes, director Céline Sciamma alludes to the idea that lesbian sex does not have to be over-sexualised in order to present ‘touch’ desire, and that by incorporating notions of friendship we see a broader view of the women as people, rather than as models of desire.

Constance Classen (2005) states that “touch is not just a private act. It is a fundamental medium for the expression, experience and contestation of social values and hierarchies. The culture of touch involves all of culture,” (p. 1). In this chapter, I will be exploring the way ‘touch’ encompasses not only physical and tactile expression, both sexual and non-sexual, but also how ‘touch’ is used to define the relationships between the romantic couples in *Blue* and *Portrait*, as well as the platonic relationships with secondary characters in *Portrait*. By considering other relationships, we see how minor characters, particularly Sophie in *Portrait*, serve as a medium for the portrayal of ‘touch’ intimacy, I argue that the presentation of ‘touch’ intimacy needs to effectively portray both the sexual and non-sexual physical relationships in order to make them credible and engaging to the audience. This is achieved with varying success in the two films.

Blue’s presentation of ‘touch’ is mainly of a sexual nature, continuing the pattern illustrated in the discussion of the other two senses. As noted in previous chapters, Emma’s obsession with Adèle’s body follows Mulvey’s 1975 ‘male gaze’ theory: the masculine looker (Emma) is the proprietor of the gaze, and the feminine ‘looked-at’ (Adèle) is the

subject, and this hierarchy continues in the portrayal of the physical sex scenes.

Heteronormativity is favoured in the depiction of sex: through the use of drawn-out panning shots of the women's bodies and extended uncut portrayal of lesbian sex in graphic detail, the scene lasts seven minutes in total. Keri-Lynn Wheeler (2017) notes that "this sex scene is coded almost entirely for erotic impact, with its use of lingering close-ups and prosthetic genitalia" (p.52). It would appear that Kechiche intended this scene for audience gratification rather than in support of the characters' passion for one another: it, therefore, becomes uncomfortably voyeuristic to watch.

Wheeler uses the term "spectacle" (p.52) in reference to the way that sex is presented to the viewer, in *Blue*, and I would agree that it is very much a performance for the audience, and perhaps even for the director's own voyeuristic approach. It cannot be forgotten that Kechiche is a heterosexual male presenting a film about a lesbian relationship, and in the intimate sex scenes the audience is put in the position of sharing Kechiche's own, heteronormative perspective on that intimacy. This is shown in the way that Emma dominates Adèle in the role of 'man' both in the sex scenes and in their relationship more widely. The 'touch' intimacy in this scene is coded for the enjoyment of others, rather than to further the story or provide information about the characters or their relationship. But because of the lack of subtlety in the presentation of 'touch', the audience is left distanced from the characters and their relationship.

The most powerful portrayal of an extension of 'touch' intimacy in *Portrait* is seen in the friendship that Marianne and Héloïse forge with Sophie, the maid, over the duration of the film. After Sophie confesses to Marianne that she is pregnant, the three women attempt to trigger a miscarriage by instructing Sophie to run on the beach and drink a leaf tea that they

forage for. When this fails to work, they visit a female herbalist who performs an abortion while Sophie lies on a soft bed, in front of a warming fire, holding the hand of a small baby. This radical vision of touching, femininity, and fertility is almost Biblical, conjuring images of Mary and the infant Jesus. In sharing such an exclusively female task, the relationship between the three women becomes egalitarian, equalising them in their womanhood though they are of very different social classes. When stripped back to what makes them women, such as dealing with an unplanned pregnancy, they are united by their gender, and the weight of class disappears in this moment. Héloïse as a noblewoman, Marianne as a painter, and Sophie as a maid: they are all equal as 'women'. Where they have little agency in their own lives as women in eighteenth century France, one thing they can do (even if unlawfully) is make decisions about their own bodies. Without the Duchess to police them and keep the class structure in place, they fall into a natural and almost egalitarian arrangement. There is a deep sadness when the Duchess returns home and the class structure is reimposed, with Sophie serving them once again, where they lose the familial 'touches' of one another and return to their distant relationship.

Maroh, who wrote the original graphic novel that *Blue* was adapted from, referred to the film's scene as a "brutal, surgical display, [ostentatious] and cold, of so-called lesbian sex" (2013), on her online blog. Maroh later condemns the exclusion of 'real' lesbians on set. By not including any queer perspective in the film, what we are presented with is a heterosexual male's angle on what he perceives to be lesbian pleasure, which results in a hypersexualised and stereotyped account. Marion Krauthaker and Roy Connelly (2017) state that "Kechiche's adaptation provides a more 'readerly' and therefore restrictive account of female desire and how by doing so it loses the comic's non-prescriptive representation of lesbian desire," (p.30). By removing the intimacy and leaving the characters with only desire,

we lose what might have been a well-written sex scene. This concept is mirrored in Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985), where it is stated that "[the author] even incites women to enjoy each other sexually- under his watchful eye, of course. He must not allow any possibility of sexual staging to escape him. So long as he is the organizer, anything goes," (p.200). In the context of *Blue*, the scene is clearly a performative, inauthentic, and over-sexualised view of lesbian intercourse, made primarily for the enjoyment of Kechiche and the perceived audience.

Critics are divided on whether the sex scenes in *Blue* are positive or problematic representations of lesbianism. Clara Bradbury-Rance (2016) notes that "[the scene] is part of a political movement for some and just another misogynistic appropriation of the female body for others," (p.176). Considering the timeframe in which *Blue* was released: the same week as same-sex marriage became legal in France, and the take on classism that the film endeavours to tackle, the scene could be read as a brave and valiant attempt on Kechiche's part to depict a pure love story. Kechiche himself indicated that the film was not specifically written for lesbians: stating "ultimately what the film is about, is their class differences...not at all their homosexuality," (2014). However, this cannot be enough of an explanation to clarify why he chose to use lesbians in place of heterosexual people because the two cannot simply be interchanged. By doing this, Kechiche is offering not only a presumptuous view on lesbianism, but also an incorrect and problematic one – as it places Emma as the 'man' and creates a domineering and predatory disposition in her, as I have noted in Chapter One. Therefore, I argue that the use of 'touch' in this moment, is a wasteful and unnecessary scopophilic action from Kechiche.

Blue also pushes the boundaries of what is appropriate tactile intimacy in a public space. Late on in the film, Adèle and Emma meet in a restaurant to talk about their broken relationship. This scene begins calmly, explodes into an uproar of overt sexual behaviour, and ends in Adèle sobbing. The inclusion of what, to many viewers, would be inappropriate touching of one another in a restaurant, raises the question of what is ‘allowed’ in a public setting in relation to public and private ‘touch’ intimacy. Kechiche is both humiliating the characters and exaggerating the perception of over-sexualisation of lesbians.

Portrait also lacks some elements of a multi-layered consideration of intimate ‘touch’. However, in this case, it is due to the ‘touch’ intimacy focus being heavily on platonic love rather than sexual love. In keeping with the norms of the historic period, Sciamma avoids the characters being openly affectionate toward one another up until they confess their love. Because of the context in which the characters are situated, it would be unrealistic for the director to portray ‘touch’ with the same sexualisation that we see in *Blue*. It would seem entirely out of place in such a romantic and atmospheric setting. One of the most intimate non-sexual moments of physical touch in the film is when the Duchess, Héloïse’s mother, asks her to “say goodbye like when you were little” (00:53:12) and Héloïse kisses her hands and flies them to her mother’s cheeks like a butterfly. This small moment of affection shows the audience why Héloïse would sacrifice her life and freedom for her mother. Moments like this can represent so much and add so much depth to the story, and it is this that *Blue* lacks. By only utilising forceful and ‘hard’ touch intimacy, the story becomes one-dimensional and bland.

Classen (2005) notes that, “we live in a society of the image, a markedly visual culture, in which, while there may be many representations of touch, there is often nothing

actually there to feel,” (p.2). *Blue*’s lengthy and graphic portrayal of touch may explain its huge appeal and why it was so well-received by critics at the time of release. It was new, modern, and contained themes and portrayals of young love in a way that had not been done before. However, because the sex is so overly *performed*, with excessive ‘noises’ as mentioned in Chapter Two, the reaction from the audience watching is discomfort or perhaps even ridicule.

Williams (2017) disagrees that *Blue*’s depiction of touch was over-sexualised, stating that there “is a problem that has to do with a dominant American imagination of sex which can see only two poles: an artless, explicit pornography (all body and created for men) and a more concealed artful sex which avoids any prolonged exposure of ‘sex itself,’” (p.470). I agree that *Blue* should not be regarded as misrepresenting the ‘lesbian experience’ *because of* the nature of its sex scenes, however, by *only* focusing on sexual touch and avoiding almost any depiction of non-sexual touch, *Blue* fails to present a convincingly multi-layered depiction of intimacy, and therefore the audience only gets to see a selection of ‘touch’ that is “all body and created for men”.

Although the audience is made aware of the physical nature of Marianne and Héloïse’s relationship in the scene where they lie unclothed in bed together, we are never witness to them engaging in intercourse. As mentioned in Chapter One, the only time the audience views Marianne naked is when she begins her period, a conscious choice from Sciamma to align bodies with fertility and menstruation, rather than with sexuality, as Adèle’s in *Blue* is. By shifting the perspective from sexuality and sex to natural feminine associations, we are seeing factors of the female gaze rather than the male gaze. This moment

in the film also very much associates Marianne with autonomy over her own body, whereas throughout *Blue* we are given the impression that Adèle's body belongs to Emma.

Because of how linked Emma and Adèle's relationship is with their sexuality, it becomes the thing that Adèle yearns for when she is lonely, rather than their emotional connection. Anik Debrot, Dominik Schoebi, Meinrad Perrez, and Andrea Horn (2013) found that "touch is positively related to the health of the touch receiver, a linkage that could be established via moderating physiological stress response." (p.1373). At the beginning of Adèle and Emma's relationship, they are all but consumed with touching one another. This becomes catastrophic for Adèle at the end of the relationship where she is forbidden from touching Emma again. It is heart-breaking to watch Adèle visiting Emma's art gallery in the last scene when she sees Emma being affectionate with her new partner, Lise. It is this pure contrast of 'touch' intimacy that hurts Adèle the most and the audience is invited to feel it with her.

The sense of touch informs both intimacy and desire. Throughout *Portrait*, touch is shown as a representation of the intimacy of friendship more effectively than as a representation of a sexual relationship. The linking of the women through their femininity, rather than their sexuality, is a conscious choice from Sciamma to create a 'touch' intimacy that is non-sexualised and therefore representative of a side of lesbianism that is rarely shown in modern media. In *Blue*, the sense of touch is used as a forceful representation of desire between the central characters, creating a hierarchical sexual intimacy from which the audience is held at a rather uncomfortable distance.

The contrast between Sciamma and Kechiche's approach to portraying 'touch' is where we find the greatest difference between the methods in the two films. The intentions of the directors drive the portrayal of 'touch' in both films in a way that is distinctive from the presentations of the 'look' and 'listen' senses. In one film, the audience witnesses a relationship destroyed by a particular presentation of 'touch' intimacy, and in the other, a relationship is built on a bond and foundation of a multi-layered 'touch'.

Conclusion

Through an examination of the portrayal of intimacy in the films *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Sciamma, 2019: France) and *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (Kechiche, 2013: France), it can be reasonably concluded that *Portrait* is more effective when representing an authentic lesbian relationship because of the skilful cinematic portrayal of multisensorial intimacy between the women. As established in this dissertation, sensory expression is integral to the presentation of a credible relationship, and it is the director's task to explore those senses effectively through film. The most challenging of the senses to represent cinematically is that of touch because the audience will always perceive it second-hand unlike 'look' and 'listen' – the visual and the auditory. Through a harsher exploration of the senses, directors are susceptible to losing out on multi-layering the sensuality whilst exploring intimacy which the audience then perceives as a less genuine consideration of a relationship, as is seen in *Blue*.

Stories in film about queer people and queer relationships cannot be told in the same way as heterosexual ones, and this is sometimes overlooked in favour of over-sexualising the *idea* of a lesbian relationship. As stated by Natasha Distiller (2005): "Lesbian desire is simultaneously formulated within patriarchy and is outside the ken of traditional western and psychoanalytic models", (p.55). Through an examination of the way in which the senses are used to create portrayals of intimacy in the films *Portrait* and *Blue*, it can be demonstrated that the three key senses: 'look', 'listen' and 'touch' are used by the directors in quite different ways. *Blue* leans toward rawer, 'harder', and masculine gaze-led intimacy, whereas *Portrait* follows a 'softer', gentler, more emotionally broad intimacy, with more focus on the feminine gaze.

In Chapter One, 'Look', it is established that in *Blue*, the primary proprietor of the 'look' is Emma, with her sex-oriented masculine gaze, shown in the way she assesses Adèle as though she is something to be conquered and consumed. By utilising this form of predatory 'look', Abdellatif Kechiche, the director, imparts his own masculine and heteronormative focus onto the women, distorting the perception of their intimacy. In exploring this sense, 'looking' has been shown to be one-sided solely from Emma's perspective, and this is developed further by her treating Adèle as an opinionless muse. There is little practical representation of a multi-layered sensuality. Adèle is, by and large, simply in the film as Emma's muse; she is unable to gain her own autonomy or agency even though the story is told from her perspective.

The 'looking' in *Portrait* is presented more evenly and with more depth. Whilst Marianne is painting Héloïse, and therefore the 'look' might have been entirely focused on her, we are witness to the women gazing at one another equally. Céline Sciamma, the director, keeps a more egalitarian gaze between the women through the film, and this is done in order to sustain Héloïse's agency as the muse even when every other part of her life is seemingly decided for her. This focus on the two women is shared by the audience who are given equal time to 'look' at the two women as their relationship develops.

In the analysis of the sense of 'Listen' in Chapter Two, it is noted that patterns of the masculine and feminine focus are apparent in the language, soundscapes, and musical motifs in the elements of intimacy in the two films. In *Blue*, for example, the majority of the intimate 'noise' comes from Adèle's 'sound-effects' in the sex scenes, with very little connection or in-depth conversation between her and Emma. Adèle is presented as an 'object' rather than person, by reducing her to the noises she makes. By not delving into the emotional and

conversational intimacy between the two, the audience is presented with a very shallow and apparently insincere affection.

In *Portrait*, 'listen' intimacy is portrayed by creating a multi-dimensional and multi-layered soundscape which incorporates language, an aesthetic soundscape of the Brittany coast, and Antonio Vivaldi's composition 'Summer' as a musical love motif. The audience is effectively invited to witness and engage with the emotional connection between the characters. The use of sound as a sense in *Portrait* is a key factor in the success of the film as an authentic portrayal of a lesbian relationship. The various dimensions of spoken word, musical motif, and authentic background noise contribute to the creation of a fully developed romantic affection between the characters. As Jiayi Shi (2021) affirms, "[Sciamma] tries to express a new imaginary... eroticism and build a dialogue of love based on equality, without gender domination," (p.127).

In Chapter Three, 'Touch', it has been demonstrated that the intense focus, by the director, on sexualised forms of touch in *Blue* acts to distance the audience, whereas the more nuanced affection explored in *Portrait* keeps the audience close to the characters and storyline. Sciamma extends the exploration of 'touch' beyond physical 'touching' into wider connections and relationships, particularly a consideration of how women of different classes behave in the society in which they live. 'Touch' has not been presented as multi-dimensionally in *Portrait* as the other two senses have due to the somewhat downplayed physical attraction between the women, however, by progressively layering subtle physical contact the film still manages to produce a well-rounded presentation of 'touch' intimacy.

Blue's exploration of 'touch', as is with 'look' and 'listen', is focused on sex, depicting an attraction based on tactile physicality between the women rather than the more gentle and intimate affection seen in *Portrait*. By pushing a heteronormative presentation of 'touch' intimacy, Kechiche fails to depict more multi-layered uses of 'touch' and therefore reduces the women to their sexuality alone.

Through close analysis of the directors' use of the three senses to present developing relationships between the protagonists in both films, it has been shown in this research that *Blue* focuses on sex and sexual engagement as the key element in the portrayal of intimacy in all three senses analysed. In comparison, *Portrait* explores a layered presentation of the senses, each bringing out another tier of intimacy. Through a close evaluation of the two films, it is shown that a lesbian romance/drama does not have to revolve solely around the sexualisation of the women and the intense attraction between them in order to present an authentic exploration of a relationship.

There is an evident difference in approach between the female and the male directors. In *Portrait*, notions of the 'female gaze' transcend all three senses: equal 'looking'; strong use of romantic love language and musical motifs; and intensely bonded relationships. In *Blue* the 'gaze' is one-way: the woman's 'noise' is used as a sound effect and the touch is purely sexual. This dissertation argues that it is important for directors to exploit and explore effective depictions of multiple senses in filmmaking in order to present believable relationships. The soundscapes used and the cinematic skills deployed can contribute to multi-sensorial intimacy across the breadth of a whole film. By doing this, the films and the stories they tell become more authentic for the audience. In comparing one film, *Portrait*, which does utilise a multi-sensorial and multi-layered format to explore intimacy, with *Blue*,

a film that fails to employ multi-sensorial intimacy in favour of preferring one perspective, we see clear differences.

By looking critically at two lesbian films as well as wider scholarly discourse on feminist film theory, I have been able to come to my own conclusions about the effectiveness of the films. In doing this I have analysed and explored my hypothesis which is that in order to present positive and authentic lesbian relationships on screen, filmmakers must utilise all sensorial intimacy techniques available to them.

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Appendix: Research Diary

May 2021

I have started my dissertation research by exploring films related to lesbian characters and how they are viewed in audiences. I have found that some films, for example *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, explored their stories using the male gaze, due to the male director.

I have begun my research by reading *Feminist Film Theories* by Shohini Chaudhuri which allows me to learn the basics of theories by Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa di Lauretis, and Barbara Creed.

I have decided that I want to discuss how the male gaze is utilised in lesbian films and how they have been reclaimed by the lesbian community. I decided I wanted to look at this question through a variety of lesbian/sapphic films through history. Initial ideas for these films include *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, *Mädchen in Uniform*, *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, and *Jennifer's Body*.

October 9th, 2021 (17:33)

Today I submitted my research proposal for my dissertation. My working research question is: 'How does the internalised Male Gaze perpetuate over-sexualised Lesbian-centred cinema?' and my main methodologies include critical discourse analysis, paratexts, and history and archives.

I am going to further my wider reading into feminist film theories and how the male gaze appears in lesbian cinema by going to Hallward library and exploring the texts there.

October 29th, 2021 (09:31)

Today I was assigned my supervisor, Alejandra Castano-Echeverri, who will be on hand for meetings and emails during the time of writing the dissertation. I am looking forward to my first meeting with her to discuss my ideas for the project.

November 8th, 2021 (10:00)

I had my first meeting with Ale today on Teams. We discussed my ideas and talked about how I can narrow the dissertation down so that the topic is not only interesting but also beneficial to queer film studies. We also discussed how the topic is so broad that in order to explore it in depth I would have to undertake a much larger project than an 8000 to 12000-word dissertation. I knew I would have to find a clever angle in order to create a succinct and well researched dissertation.

We talked about how using three or four films would be too many therefore the research into each of them would be vague. Instead, Ale suggested that I choose only one film to use as a lens, or to use two films as a comparison of one another. She suggested, and I agreed, that using *Mädchen in Uniform* would create a whole other question and research topic and instead it would be best to focus on modern day cinema. Ale also noted that it would also be helpful to choose an angle that has not been looked into in depth and find a niche in the field that I want to explore.

We also spoke about how the use of critical discourse analysis as a research method is interesting but potentially not what I should be using, and instead I could look at narrative or textual analysis.

After I decided to narrow the dissertation down to either one or two films, I asked for advice on how I should lay out my chapters, as I felt that I was struggling with narrowing down how I wanted to discuss such a wide topic. I decided I wanted to look at the film/s through lenses within the male gaze theory: heteronormativity, queer theory, and woman as ‘other.’

We discussed potentially looking at a lesbian film that uses the male gaze more prominently and one which avoids using the male gaze. I mentioned how these examples could be *Blue is the Warmest Colour* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, as these films offer a difference in lesbian representation.

We also discussed looking at *But I'm a Cheerleader* as a satire representation of conversion therapy, and we also talked about looking at *Mädchen in Uniform* and comparing it with a more modern example.

Although I feel a little unsure about how to proceed, I think my meeting with Ale has clarified a lot of confusion I had about the dissertation process, and I am excited to start researching my topic and making a decision on an angle.

November and December 2021

Throughout November and December, I have been concentrating on reading and researching, both with materials provided by Ale and that I have found through my own research. I outlined the most prominent feminist film theories that will play a part in this research and began putting together sources for my Literature Review, which will outline the research already done and conclude whether it will benefit my argument.

Due to a family bereavement, I have not been able to achieve as much as I would have liked to before Christmas, so over the break and next term I will be focusing especially hard on getting my research in place.

January 7th, 2022 (11:15)

I have begun writing my introduction and I am finishing off my Literature Review in order to send this to Ale prior to our second meeting together. I feel more confident in my argument, and I am pleased with the progress I have made in my dissertation.

Ale's recommendation of Agnieszka Piotrowska's *The Nasty Woman and the Neo Femme Fatale in Contemporary Cinema* has allowed me to think more clearly about my chapters and how I can explore different topics in each section.

I have also decided on my three chapters: 'The Nasty Woman', and the absence of a male lead in lesbian cinema; how intimacy is depicted in the films; and heteronormativity and fulfilling the man in lesbian relationships onscreen.

January 11th, 2022 (12:56)

Ale has given me some very helpful feedback via email on the introduction that I sent her, including the fact that by putting Laura Mulvey in the title of my dissertation, I am centring her rather than the exploration of the films. Instead, I can just follow her male gaze argument.

My new working title is: An Examination of Intimacy in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and *Blue is the Warmest Colour*. I am happy with how my research is going and I think by looking at intimacy I will have a clearer path and argument in the dissertation.

January 30th, 2022 (16:30)

I have now finished looking at all the main theories for my Literature Review and I have begun looking at scholars whose work is specifically about my two films. I also found a really interesting chapter about the focus of hearing in *Portrait* and after reading it I had a breakthrough moment about how I could use 'looking' and 'listening' as a way of looking at the intimacy within the films.

By having the addition of 'listening' to my 'looking' research, I can introduce literature from Kaja Silverman, who I've read a lot about and who references the speech of women historically in cinema. By adding 'listen', I can provide a lot of depth and theory to my argument.

I am beginning to form my own argument and conclusions about how female and male gaze distinctions affect the portrayal of intimacy. Although it is a shame to not use the research on

‘the Nasty Woman’, I think I can write a more in-depth dissertation on intimacy through looking and listening.

February 11th, 2022 (12:30)

Since my breakthrough moment, I have written plans and notes on theories for my two chapters ‘look’ and ‘listen’. I am still a little stuck on my last chapter, as I want it to balance out the two earlier ones and add more depth. I had considered using it as a comparison chapter but as I am comparing the two films throughout the dissertation anyway I thought this might get a bit stale.

I met with Ale again on Teams today, and she suggested that I add ‘touch’ as my last chapter which will help round out the senses in my argument. By focusing each chapter on a sense I will be able to avoid working entirely around the theory of the male gaze and instead look at broader lenses of feminism. The chapter ideas I had chosen previously had gotten too broad and I was lacking clarity in what I was trying to say. By deciding on a new angle, the work I’ve been doing is collated so the senses inform the different versions of intimacy in the two films. Therefore, my new chapters will be ‘Look’, ‘Listen’ and ‘Touch’, and my new title will be: ‘comparing the portrayal of intimacy through the presentation of the senses in the films *Blue is the Warmest Colour* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*’.

I feel much more confident about how I will proceed with my dissertation now that I have a clearer path.

March 22nd, 2022 (13:30)

I met with my personal tutor, Isobel Elstob, for a catch up and, after explaining my dissertation to her she was able to direct me to some more readings about touch in the art history sector which will be really useful in looking at when I come to writing chapter three.

Isobel was able to direct me to the readings: Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense*; Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*; William A. Cohen, *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses*; Steven Connor. *The Book of Skin*; and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*.

After having a look at the readings, I think Marks, Classen, and Conner will be really beneficial for my 'touch' chapter. Connor, especially, provides a background to how scholars think about touch as a sense, which contextualises it as a sense within intimacy.

March 23rd, 2022 (10:00)

I met with Ale today over Teams, and it was beneficial in going through exactly what I would need in my introduction and methodology section. This allowed me to refine my methods so I can explain them better in the section. I am now the bulk of the way through my first draft, and I am trying to curate an argument throughout each section so the dissertation is focused and persuasive.

I am feeling confident and want to have the dissertation finished by mid-April so I can redraft it a few times.

March 25th, 2022 (18:16)

I emailed Ale about some revised analysis methods, and she noted that I was incorrectly stating my analysis method as narrative when, in fact, it was textual. This was vital, and I corrected my description of methodology in that section of my introduction.

April 1st, 2022 (11:57)

After speaking to Ale again via email, she noted my new methodology explanation paragraphs were much better suited to this dissertation. By using textual rather than narrative analysis, I can look at the underlying themes about the two films. I've found this works better to prove my argument than using narrative analysis.

April 8th, 2022 (09:31)

I have now finished drafts of my Introduction, Literature Review, Chapter 1, and Chapter 2. I am writing my Chapter 3 this week and then will finish with my Conclusion. I have really appreciated being able to contact Ale as it has given me upmost confidence and reassurance that what I'm doing is on the right track.

Via email, we have discussed content questions I had about my chapters. In chapter two, I was concerned that whether by looking at music and film sound would be too much for one chapter. Ale disagreed, saying that it builds a strong argument for the chapter. I also wondered whether my chapter three had less of an argument, so Ale noted that I should

narrow out the arguments I'm stating in order to make my own claims that hold worth in the dissertation.

After reworking the third chapter I'm much more pleased with the argument I've curated, and I think it now does not get lost amongst the other two chapters. I think by incorporating wider reading and my own ideas, I have managed to make claims about the use of touch in the two films.

May 1st, 2022 (10:00)

I have now finished all the content of my dissertation and put it all into one document. I have some time remaining to read it over and triple check it. I am really pleased with the content I have produced, and I am happy with how it has turned out! I am really grateful to my supervisor, Ale, for her guidance and support during the writing process. Although it has been a stressful time, overall, I have really enjoyed writing these essays and I'm very pleased that I have been able to finish my university experience with this dissertation.