

Kerri-Lyn Wheeler

Examining Sex and Climaxes in *Blue is the Warmest Colour* and *Carol*



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EXAMINING SEX AND CLIMAXES IN *BLUE IS THE WARMEST COLOUR* AND *CAROL*

Abstract

This essay uses the films *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (Kechiche, 2013), and *Carol* (Haynes, 2015) to examine the challenges and questions which arise when a male filmmaker directs a film with a queer female relationship at its centre. Whenever a male creator has authorial power over queer female subjects their authenticity comes into question. This is especially notable in the critical response to *Blue is the Warmest Colour*'s explicit sex scenes. *Carol*, however, was seen as a more authentic representation as it does not eroticise its characters to the same extent. This essay uses textual analysis of the films' climaxes and sex scenes to contrast the way in which the two relationships are represented. It also draws on feminist film scholarship. Through this, it becomes clear that it is possible for a male filmmaker to represent queer female relationships in a way which can be perceived as authentic. However, a film's sex scene will inevitably be read in the context of the filmmaker's gender and sexuality.

The films *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (2013), directed by Abdellatif Kechiche, and *Carol* (2015), directed by Todd Haynes, are films that centralise queer female relationships. In addition, both films are adaptations of other source material: *Carol* of Patricia Highsmith's 1952 novel *The Price of Salt*, and *Blue is the Warmest Colour* derived from the graphic novel of the same name by Julie Maroh, which was originally published in 2010. These films saw great critical success, with *Carol* nominated for six Academy Awards and winning the Queer Palm at the Cannes Film Festival, and *Blue is the Warmest Colour* winning the Palme d'Or at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival. In other words, these are two of the most widely acclaimed films with a lesbian relationship at their forefront and were both directed by men. In this essay, I wish to question what happens when a man is the one telling the story of two women in love, and what happens when this story is being adapted from source material that was originally written by a queer woman. I draw on the work of Ann M. Ciasullo, Karen Hollinger, Natasha Distiller and Laura Mulvey to connect these films' representation of sex to feminist film theory. Textual analysis of each film, including the differences from the source material, will illuminate the authorial choices and cinematic effects of male-oriented framing of queer female desire, how this plays into how each film changing or maintaining its original ending, and the difference in how sex scenes are portrayed in each film.

Blue is the Warmest Colour is a coming-of-age film set in modern-day France, which portrays the romance between two girls, Adele (Adèle Exarchopoulos) and Emma (Léa Seydoux). Beginning in Adele's last year of high school, *Blue is the Warmest Colour* deals with Adele coming to terms with her sexuality after she sees Emma on the street and becomes infatuated with her. The film then follows their relationship from its inception to the resolution of their break up. *Carol* follows the story of Therese (Rooney Mara), a young shop clerk who wishes to become a photographer, and her relationship with Carol (Cate Blanchett), an older woman going through a divorce from her husband and struggling to maintain custody of her daughter. The film predominantly deals with Carol and Therese's relationship and Carol's divorce. *Carol* also showcases the struggles of being a queer woman in 1950s America. Both films deal with a younger female character who becomes infatuated with an older woman who has come to accept her desire for other women. Prior to *The Price of Salt*'s publication, happy endings to lesbian narratives were all but unheard of; *Carol* maintains the relatively happy ending which the novel it was based on became known for. On the other hand, *Blue is the Warmest Colour* changes the sad ending of the graphic novel for one which presents Adele with having a more hopeful outcome. These endings provide insight into the questioned purity of adaptations, which will be later discussed.

Sex scenes

When looking into how a film represents sexuality, analysing how the sex scenes between characters are articulated is crucial. Haynes and Kechiche approached the

onscreen portrayal of lesbian sex from different angles. *Carol* places far less emphasis on eroticising the female body in its single sex scene. While both characters are nude in the scene, no close-up shots linger on their form, and the majority of the scene is shot in a medium framing. Haynes uses this scene as an opportunity to show the romantic feelings of these characters finally being expressed, having had taken one hour and twenty minutes of the film's run time to build to this climatic scene. The scene also serves a narrative purpose, and is therefore less gratuitous than the sex scenes in *Blue is the Warmest Colour*. At this point in the film, a private investigator, who was hired by Harge, Carol's husband, is following Carol and Therese to find proof of Carol's lesbianism, which will lead to Harge gaining full custody of their daughter. The private investigator records the two of them having sex and sends the audio tape to Carol's husband. The scene ensures that the audience does not have to rely on subtext to be able to clearly read why Carol becomes so upset when she finds out that they have been recorded. Through this scene Haynes is able to advance the plot, ensuring that it serves a clear purpose to the film. Additionally, it is because the sex scene does not overly eroticise the two characters that it does not feel gratuitous.

Blue is the Warmest Colour's sex scenes are seemingly far more gratuitous. While Kechiche's choice of using no added soundtrack to these scenes calls to mind Chantal Ackerman's 1974 film *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, in which a lesbian sex scene is depicted with only diegetic sound, but that is where the similarities end. His camerawork shatters any realism that Kechiche hoped to gain via comparison to Ackerman's approach to screening lesbian sex. Where Ackerman places her camera theatre-like, stationary and at a distance from the action, Kechiche favours close-ups and shots that pan over the two actresses' bodies. The first sex scene between Adele and Emma fully exemplifies what Laura Mulvey deemed "The Male Gaze", illustrating Mulvey's argument that "in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact" (1989, p. 11). Indeed, this sex scene is coded almost entirely for erotic impact, with its use of lingering close-ups and prosthetic genitalia. The scene begins with a medium shot of Adele and Emma's naked bodies pressed together; the camera tilts up and down offering the viewer an eroticised view of both their forms. The rest of the scene relies on a series of close-ups of various sexual acts. The camera cuts frequently to show Adele and Emma in different positions, making the already long scene (around 7 seven minutes in length) feel even longer. Their bodies are given to the viewer as a form of spectacle, with the scene only providing slight narrative support to the development of their relationship. Maroh, after watching the film which was based on her graphic novel, wrote on her blog that the scene was, to her, "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" (Maroh, 2013, para. 7). While the original novel did have a few pages of more graphic sexual content, Maroh felt that the film portrayed lesbian sex in an unrealistic fashion, stating that what was missing on set were actual lesbians (Maroh, 2013). It is difficult to read this choreography of this scene without taking into account Kechiche's heterosexuality, which shines through in the way in which he uses the camera to linger voyeuristically on the naked forms of the

characters. This scene illustrates Distiller's claim that "female sexuality has always been theorised within masculine parameters" (2005, p. 47). The sex scenes in *Blue is the Warmest Colour* are shown through a male lens and showcase a masculine idea of what lesbian sex looks like.

It is also interesting to note that in both films the central relationship showcases women who are more 'femme' than 'butch' (Ciasullo). In both cases, this can be read as a way of making the relationship – and the sex scenes – more marketable to the viewer, as the average viewer might find watching two conventionally attractive women more pleasurable. As Ciasullo states, "...the femme body is nearly always a white, upper-middle class body" (2001, p. 578), femme in this case referring to a feminine lesbian. This preference for conventionally attractive lesbians indicates that directors find portraying a queer relationship risky enough without having to add other elements that challenge conventions of female representations.

The endings of relationships and the endings of films

Within *Carol* and *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, the romantic relationship at each film's centre deals with different challenges. Within *Carol*, the struggles are those of a queer relationship in the 1950s, with Carol trying to maintain custody of her daughter. In *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, the central struggles are related to Adele being scared that Emma will leave her, resulting in Adele entering a sexual relationship with one of her male co-workers while still dating Emma. At a point in each film, the relationship between the two central characters is severed: in *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, when Emma finds out about Adele's infidelity, and in *Carol*, when Carol's husband uses the tapes he has of her and Therese to threaten Carol with losing custody. Carol then ends her relationship with Therese to temporarily reconcile her relationship with her husband, so that she can keep having a relationship with her daughter.

Blue is the Warmest Colour culminates with Adele and Emma's relationship ending. Emma has fallen in love with another woman, and Adele – after failing to rekindle the relationship – is left single at the end of the film. However, in the final scenes of the film, she converses with a man (who earlier in the film kept her company at a party when Emma abandoned her to talk to people higher up in the art world) thus hinting towards a potential romantic relationship. As she walks out of the gallery and down the street, a reverse shot reveals him also walking out of the gallery looking for her. While Adele is positioned as a bisexual, the film strongly indicates her relationship with Emma was an anomaly. Though Adele is shown to be a bisexual woman, through her relationship with Emma and various men, Emma is the only female figure that Adele sleeps with. This ambiguous approach to Adele's sexuality links back to her categorisation as 'femme'; Ciasullo argues that "within mainstream culture, the femme is not really considered a lesbian" (2001, p. 599). While the trend of only portraying femme lesbians whose sexuality is deemed to be a phase is beginning to fade out, it is still evident in popular culture. Adele's 'femme-ness', when

coupled with her relationships with men, could cause viewers to read her sexuality as 'inauthentic'. As Ciasullo argues, "... in mainstream cultural representations of lesbianism, there is always a *but*, always the possibility ... that she who is lesbian ... can 'unbecome' lesbian" (2001, p. 592). In addition, the fact that Emma and Adele's relationship was broken apart due to Adele's affair with a man underscores the film's lack of commitment regarding lesbian sexuality. Here I do not wish to erase the validity of bisexuality, but to point out that within *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, Adele's bisexuality offers ample opportunity for the male viewer to fantasise, and these fantasies would conform to representational strategies historically aligned with heterosexuality. This is highlighted through Emma being the only female in the narrative who Adele has long-term feelings for. Adele's relationship with Emma, and brief kisses with her classmate, are shown as adolescent experiences which she – by the end of the film – has moved on from. Adele will always love Emma, but it is implied she is the only girl who she will ever love. The film leaves her to pursue more conventional heterosexual relationships.

Meanwhile, the ending of *Carol* functions quite differently. While I cannot argue that the ending of *Blue is the Warmest Colour* does not offer a sense of hope for both Adele and Emma, it is a sense of hope which separates them. At the end of the film, they are both moving on from the relationship. *Carol*, however, ends with Therese and Carol looking at each other from across the room, and the promise that they will find a way to be with each other. At this point in the film, Carol has told her husband that she cannot stop herself from being who she is and relinquished custody of her daughter, with the condition that she has visitation rights. The ending of the film is, in the world of lesbian cinema, a relatively happy one in terms of their relationship. While there is no romantic speech and embrace where the couple promises to love each other forever, the glance between Carol and Therese is full of promise. *Carol*'s ending directly parallels *The Price of Salt*. By comparing these two endings, we can begin to understand Hollinger's argument that "to create a lesbian subject position in a film, clearly it takes more than simply replacing a heterosexual with a lesbian couple" (1998, p. 12). In a heterosexually-centred film, the ending of *Carol* would be considered disappointing by a mainstream audience. They would expect an ending that more clearly rewarded them for having followed this couple's story, but in the world of the 1950s, the ending of *Carol* is perhaps more accurate. Alternatively, the ending of *Blue is the Warmest Colour* repeats strategies of traditional heterosexual love stories, and would perhaps work better as such. If the ending was placed into a film that followed a heterosexual couple, the bittersweet feeling of hope which Kechiche aimed to portray would shine through. However, in this queer love story, we cannot escape the sexual politics that occur when a queer female protagonist spends the film in a relationship with another female character, only for the film's ending to foreshadow a (corrective) heterosexual romance.

Blue is the Warmest Colour's deviation from the original source material is even more problematic than its compromised ending. The graphic novel begins with the death of Clementine – who in the film was renamed Adele – who, after being kicked out by Emma, went to live with her friend Valentin. During this time Clementine becomes

addicted to pills, which leads to her death. Prior to her dying, though, she and Emma reconcile. Clementine leaves Emma her notebooks, which she wrote during their relationship; on the back she had written a note asking Emma to not linger on her relationship with Clementine and to move on. Kechiche's rewrite of the ending, while subverting the tired bury-your-gays trope, which queer scholarship has sufficiently analysed, also got rid of any political discourse that the film may have raised. While there may have been backlash to yet another queer character dying on film, Kechiche missed an opportunity to create conversation around the acceptance of LGBTQ youth and the struggles they face, such as being kicked out of their homes. This is not the only change in the adaptation which Kechiche made to tell a more conventional story. In the graphic novel, Clementine is kicked out of her house by her parents because of her sexuality; in the film they think Emma is just her philosophy tutor. While Kechiche's ending is more conventionally hopeful, the changes he made in the film have erased the adaptation's potential to call attention to issues, such as queer youth being disowned by their parents and the rising addiction statistics in LGBTQ youth, raised by the graphic novel.

Conclusion

This essay investigates multiple effects of a male filmmaker creating a film that is centred on a queer female love story. I complicated this issue by analysing two films which were based on source material written by queer females. Through this analysis I found that adaptations of queer women's stories by male directors are more successful – in terms of accuracy – when they follow the source material closely. My analysis of each film's sex scenes revealed that when the scene serves the plot, sex scenes are less gratuitous. Through a reading of both films' portrayals of the romantic relationships and their endings, Karen Hollinger's argument that one cannot just place a queer female couple into a heterosexual framework and expect it to be an accurate portrayal (1998) becomes pertinent. Maintaining the original source's approach leads to greater authenticity in the portrayal of lesbian sexuality than adapting it to suit conventions historically based in heterosexual tropes. In the end, *Carol*, which stayed close to the original source material, is the film that portrays the lesbian experience more accurately, most likely due to the original author's experiences and intentions remaining inscribed in the text. This essay's results would be interesting to contextualise in light of films directed by women or other queer filmmakers.

Maintaining the original source's approach leads to greater authenticity in the portrayal of lesbian sexuality than does adapting it to suit conventions historically based in heterosexual tropes.

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Kerri-Lyn Wheeler was born in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe and immigrated to New Zealand in 2003. She is currently a third-year student at Victoria University of Wellington working towards a double major in film and theatre. Kerri is going on to pursue an honours degree in 2018.

Course notes

This essay was submitted in June 2017 for FILM302: Cinema and Representation taught by Dr Missy Molloy at Victoria University of Wellington. This course examines how cinema represents issues such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and class in a critical manner. In 2017 the course focused on women's screen authorship and innovative approaches to gender, race and sexuality in global and world cinema. The course introduces theories of representation and spectatorship central to feminist film studies, surveys their applications to a wide range of films, and examines how queer and postcolonial theorists have adapted them to address provocative depictions of sexuality and social inequality onscreen.