

Promiscuous versus Romantic Lesbianism in Films: *The Killing of Sister George* and *Blue is the Warmest Color*

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Abstract

There is a lack of queer visibility in the mainstream Hollywood films because of the Production Code Administration in October 1961 that prohibited the presentation of "sexual perversion" on screen. However, the amendment of this code and gay liberation movements in 1970s, and the era of "new queer cinema" in the 1990s increased media representations of sexual minorities. Based on this context, the article critically analyzes the depiction of lesbian characters and their romance in the films *The Killing of Sister George* (1968) and *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013). *The Killing of Sister George* depicts the life story of June Buckridge who loses her career and her relationship due to her sexuality, and *Blue is the Warmest Color* is a story about Adele, who explores her sexuality as a teenager. Whereas the former film depicts lesbianism from a promiscuous lens, the latter approaches this topic from a realistic and contemporary perspective. Thus, the films represent lesbian sexuality in unique ways that allows us to investigate the progression of queer depiction in the mainstream cinema. The similarities and differences between the queer representation in the films, as well as the way the film portrayal of lesbian romance relate to the current research literature are discussed.

In October 1961, the Production Code Administration (PCA) that forbade the presentation of "sexual perversion" in films was modified, which led to the allowance of same-sex content, although with caution and discretion (Noriega, 1990). During this context, several Hollywood films such as *The Children's Hour* (1961), *The Killing of Sister George* (1968),

and *The Boys in the Band* (1970) explicitly depicted gay and lesbian characters with a persistent theme of distress and negative consequences of "homosexuality." Thus, films in the 1960s were homonegative, yet promoted queer visibility since no queer characters were seen in earlier films (Dhaenens, Biltereyst & Bauwel, 2011). The portrayal of

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queerness began to shift in a positive direction in the 1970s with the rise of gay pride movements, the Stonewall riots, and the Black Cat riots. Amidst this political landscape, the era of “new queer cinema” began in the 1990s when queer individuals created and acted in independent films that promoted an unabashed representation of queerness (Dean, 2007). This progression of queer visibility continued until the contemporary times when mainstream films began to portray gay and lesbian individuals as regular members of society.

Based on the premise of the evolution of sexual minority visibility, the purpose of this paper is to compare the depiction of lesbian characters and their romance in the films, *The Killing of Sister George* (1968) and *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013). In doing so, the aim of this paper is to examine how the representation of lesbianism in the mainstream cinema has progressed within the years. In the aforementioned sections, I will analyze the depiction of lesbian characters and their romance in both films. At the end, I will compare and contrast the portrayal of lesbianism in these films in order to explain the progress of lesbian representation in the mainstream cinema.

“Promiscuous” Lesbianism: *The Killing of Sister George* (1968)

Summary of the film

Robert Aldrich’s *The Killing of Sister George* (1968) is a drama-comedy film, based on a 1964 play written by Frank Marcus. The plot of the film focuses on the life of June Buckridge, an older lesbian lady who struggles both in her personal and professional life. June is also known as George, as she played the character of a cheerful nurse named Sister George in a BBC soap opera named *Applehaust*. As depicted in the play, she lives with her young lover, Alice McKnaught, whom she addresses as “Childie” during her time on *Applehaust*. However, her long-term relationship with Alice is negatively affected when June’s character is written off the television show. Mercy Croft, a character portrayed as the assistant head of BBC channel, shows an interest in Alice while visiting June. Later, she becomes sexually involved with Alice and convinces her to break her ties with June and move in to her apartment.

Depiction of lesbian characters

In the film, June is unapologetic about her lesbian sexuality because she does not hide from her colleagues that she shares her apartment with Alice. June does not care what anyone else thinks of her and expresses her opinions openly without worrying about the consequences. As a result, she often walks out of her rehearsals after some heated arguments with her coworkers and gets inebriated because of her frustration with her professional life. Moreover, in her

romantic relationship, she is depicted as an abusive partner. For example, she punishes Alice by forcing her to eat her cigars. Even though she is portrayed negatively, the filmmaker humanizes her character by making her flaws appear natural and relatable. For example, she makes funny faces while shooting her last scene that causes her coworkers to laugh. After an argument with Alice, June goes to her neighbour’s house and asks for a space to cry. At the end of the film, June walks to her set alone and moos in despair after losing both her career and relationship. This indicates that she is not completely depicted as an “evil” lesbian woman, but as someone who is dominating, yet also mischievous and emotional.

Conversely, Alice is portrayed as a feminized “young child”, as she dresses glamorously and has a large collection of Victorian dolls. She is also shown as a submissive person who continues to remain in her relationship despite being often physically and verbally abused by June. Her decision to break ties with June after Mercy’s insistence indicates that she cannot visualize herself individually and thus, showing she needs constant support from a romantic partner. Although she is thirty-two years old, she continues to allow June to treat her like a dependent child, which suggests that she likes to be infantilized by her romantic partner. This is evident when she signals June to not reveal her age in front of Mercy in the film’s climax.

In addition to the characters of June and Alice, Mercy Croft is portrayed as a closeted lesbian woman. She is overly sympathetic toward Alice, and thus, convinces her to leave June and pursue a career in writing poetry. Additionally, she reacts homonegatively because when she arrives at a lesbian club to meet June, she stares at the lesbian women intimately dancing. Her reaction after being sexually intimate with Alice implies her realization of being a lesbian and her guilt of letting her sexual arousal overpower herself. Conclusively, Mercy symbolizes the lesbian woman who does not “come out” to fit into the heteronormative society.

Portrayal of lesbian romance

The dynamics of lesbian romance in the film *The Killing of Sister George* (1968) is portrayed from a heteronormative perspective. June is the masculine or dominant partner in her relationship with Alice, whom she verbally and physically abuses in a fit of anger. When Alice argues with her after being accused of having “fancies” for her boss, June punishes her by forcing her to eat the ends of her cigars. Consequently, June’s ego is hurt to observe that Alice derives sexual gratification when she punishes her. On the other hand, Alice tolerates June’s accusations and tortures, and continues to remain in a relationship with her because she claims that she has nowhere to go. June apologizes to Alice after punishing her, and the two women have sex. Hence, their relationship is seemingly sadomasochistic.

Alice's submissiveness in her relationship with June is because she prefers to be infantilized by her romantic partner. Similarly, she reciprocates to Mercy's advances and makes love with her in the film's climax because Mercy infantilizes her by addressing her as "little girl." Overall, the lesbian romance in this film is presented paternalistically, with the younger partner being dependent and oppressed, and the older lesbian partner being her guardian. June's failed relationship with Alice is due to her work-life frustrations that may stem from her openness of her lesbian sexuality. Thus, the film reflects homonegativity by portraying lesbianism as promiscuous and showing that June's failure in her relationship and her career is because of her unashamed depiction of her sexuality.

“First Love” Lesbianism: *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013)

Summary of the film

Abdellatif Kechiche's film *Blue is the Warmest Color*, was released 45 years later in 2013. The film's genres are drama and romance, and it is based on Julie Maroh's comic book entitled *La Bleu Est Une Couleur Chaude*. The plot traces the journey of Adele from adolescence until emerging adulthood, and narrates how she explores her sexuality as a teenager and accomplishes her career goal as a young woman. Adele is a high-school student who enjoys literature. She likes to write, but chooses to pursue a career in teaching to make a livelihood. Influenced by her peer's comments on Thomas, a senior male student at her school, who has fondness of Adele, she gets into a romantic relationship with him. However, her relationship with Thomas is interrupted when she is attracted to Emma, a blue-haired woman and a fourth-year art student. Emma desires to make a career as an artist as she has a passion for art and is not interested in just making money. Adele masturbates as she dreams of having sex with Emma, and this makes her doubt her own sexuality. Eventually, she realizes that she is pretending to be someone that she is not and breaks her relationship with Thomas. To cheer herself, she goes out with her best friend where she sees Emma, follows her, and interacts with her in a lesbian club. Adele and Emma form a passionate love relationship, despite the unique differences in their lifestyles, backgrounds, and cultures.

Depiction of lesbian characters

In the film, Adele is a closeted lesbian woman who is living in a heteronormative French society. Two instances in the film reveal that her culture is homonegative and idealizes heterosexuality: a) the beginning of the film when Adele's high-school literature class teacher discusses on predestination and heterosexual love; and b) the scene where Adele's peer suspects her of being a lesbian and calls her

names. Her attempt to romantically engage with Thomas symbolizes her desperation to conform to the heterosexual norms of society. Adele's determination to be involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship is evident when she kisses Thomas after masturbating while dreaming of Emma. Although she realizes that she is faking to be someone she is not, she denies being sexually minoritized. For example, when Emma asks Adele why she is in the lesbian club, Adele responds that she arrived there coincidentally, when in reality she had actually followed Emma to the bar. This suggests that she is unconsciously guilty for her inability to stand up to the heteronormative expectations of society. It might be assumed that Adele overinvested in her relationship with Emma because she recently discovered her sexuality about which she cannot share with anyone due to anxiety of stigmatization. Furthermore, she is an emotional person, as she dedicates all her time to Emma but feels devoid of love and attention in Emma's artistic lifestyle. It is possible that Adele is a stereotypical character who internalizes the homonegativity, therefore, hides her sexuality from the people she interacts with.

In contrast, Emma is an unapologetic lesbian woman who dresses more masculine. She is a struggling painter and a philosophy mentor for Adele. Emma has a large group of friends, and lives with her mother and her stepdad, who are accepting of her lesbian sexuality. Emma is ambitious to become an artist because of her passion for arts, which suggests that she is an individualistic woman and values the idea of following own dreams. Hence, Emma does not internalize the homonegativity of the society. This is apparent when she comes to meet Adele at her school without being anxious about negative judgements. Although she loves Adele, she does not overcommit to her, but continues to spend time painting and being with her friends. It might be argued that Emma is a modern and relatable character, who has her own hardships in making a career and immense support from family and friends.

Portrayal of lesbian romance

There is a contemporary form of representation of lesbian romance in the film *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013). Adele is the submissive partner in her relationship with Emma. In the scene when Emma motivates her to fruitfully use her talent of writing, Adele refuses, and exclaims that she is happy with her. As well, she cooks for Emma and becomes a model for her paintings. This indicates that she is too emotional and sensitive about her love for Emma, and amidst this extreme devotion, she ignores to perceive herself as an individual person. Thus, Adele's characterization is consistent with the stereotypical image of a female partner in heterosexual relationships. On other hand, Emma is the dominant partner who lectures Adele on philosophy and the value of culture. She encourages Adele to write and pursue

her interests of French literature. She also gives Adele her own space to communicate with others during the parties. Adele and Emma have unique interests, lifestyles, and cultures. When they meet each other's parents, the difference in their backgrounds is prominent. Emma's parents warmly accept Adele as her lesbian partner, teach her to eat oysters, and discuss art and culture. Conversely, Adele introduces Emma to her parents as her philosophy tutor. They talk about making a career for survival and question Emma about her "boyfriend." Hence, the artistic expression of Emma's culture collides with the practicality and heteronormative ideologies of Adele's household. Their relationship breaks due to the sheer contrast between Adele's collectivistic and Emma's individualistic approaches to their relationship. When Adele and Emma meet years later in a restaurant and express their fondness toward each other, the viewers can emotionally connect to their characters because they might be reminded of their own first love. Collectively, the film depicts lesbian romance in the most humanized manner by showing that the failure of the relationship is not because of being sexually minoritized but because of cultural differences.

Lesbian Representation in Films: A Comparative Analysis

Similarities

In both films, a number of similarities can be observed in the depiction of lesbianism. First, the director of the films are heterosexual men, which might be the reason for the younger lesbian characters being sexualized. In *The Killing of the Sister George* (1968), Alice symbolizes the stereotypical female nurturing her dolls. At the end of the film, Mercy derives sexual gratification by making love to Alice's breasts. As a result, Alice is treated as an object of sexual pleasure. Additionally, in *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013), Adele's and Emma's explicit sex scenes display their nudity, resulting in the process of sexualizing them. Second, June's and Emma's characters are older than their respective partners and dress masculine. Furthermore, both films portray the younger partner as submissive, who does most of the household chores. In *The Killing of Sister George* (1968), Alice is seen cleaning the house and bringing tea when Mercy visits June. Similarly, in *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013), Adele cooks for Emma and her friends. Considering that there is a 45 years gap between the release of these films, it is interesting how lesbian relationships are portrayed from the lens of hegemonic gender stereotypes, indicating that the older partner is masculine and dominant, and the younger partner is feminine and submissive.

Differences

The films portray the romantic relationships between the lesbian characters in different ways. June dominates Alice and disparages her talent of writing poetry and her love for her dolls. For instance, when Mercy Croft visits June but takes an interest in Alice's poems, June is angry and shouts at Alice in front of Mercy. As well, when Alice goes out in the middle of the night to meet her friends, June asks her to stay and later accuses her of talking to other men when she does not listen. This suggests that June does not provide Alice the necessary space that a person may need in a romantic relationship. As well, June often threatens Alice of breaking her dolls, indicating that she likes to force her own perspectives on Alice, and does not care about her feeling. In regard to June's and Alice's relationship, Klemm (2009) states in a film review that they share a bonding that resembles the butch-femme and the master-slave. Contradictorily, Emma appraises Adele's talent of writing, talks about it with her friends, and constantly motivates Adele to write. Emma also allows Adele to be socially active in her own parties, instead of being insecure or jealous. Also, Emma supports Adele in hiding their sexuality from Adele's parents, suggesting that she is ready to give time and space to Adele to sort things out in her life. This suggests that Emma respects Adele's individuality, which is relatable and a modern approach to lesbian romance, unlike June who abuses Alice and becomes insecure when she socializes with others. In the New York Times's review, Scott (2013) discussed the film's realistic and modern-day approach to lesbian romance, stating, "The film's focus is nonetheless resolutely contemporary and its achievement decidedly cinematic. Immersing us in the everyday facts of 21st-century French life – including school, politics, food, wine and sex" (p. 2).

The films depict the failure of a lesbian relationship for unique reasons. Alice breaks up with June because she cannot bear June's physical and verbal abuses any longer. Conversely, Emma breaks up with Adele because she finds out about her infidelity, who then claims of doing so because of her loneliness. Thus, in *The Killing of Sister George* (1968), the lesbian relationship is portrayed from a heteronormative perspective, where the oppressed feminine partner leaves her abusive masculine partner. In contrast, in *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013), the lesbian relationship is presented from a realistic approach because the romantic partners drift apart due to their cultural and personality differences. This relates to the romantic relationships in the modern society where people may get over-involved in their romantic live-in relationships, which creates loneliness, dissatisfaction and seeking love somewhere else if their partners do not stand up to their expectations.

Even though both films conclude with the end of the romantic relationships between the protagonist, *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013) allows the audience to relate to Emma

and Adele. When they meet years later, they express affection and confess missing each other. In contrast, the intent of the film *The Killing of Sister George* (1968) is to let the audience sympathize with Alice's character, as she bears the brunt of June's anger. However, current viewers might not be able to emotionally connect to Alice because of the way the character is portrayed like a child, who interacts with her dolls and allows June to simultaneously infantilize and abuse her.

Discussion

The portrayal of lesbian relationships in the films is consistent with the existing scholarly work. In the research literature of personality and social psychology, Hazan and Shaver (1987) explained three attachment styles that might affect the emotional attachment and romantic love between adults. Secure individuals feel comfortable with intimacy or dependency with their romantic partners, whereas avoidant peoples may sense discomfort in getting close or depending on their others. In contrast, anxious-ambivalent persons strongly wish to get close to their partners due to a fear of loneliness or dejection. In *The Killing of Sister George* (1968), June shares an anxious-ambivalent attachment with Alice, because of which, she would physically and emotionally torture Alice due to her own insecurities and jealousy. Conversely, in *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013), Emma is securely attached to Adele because she unashamedly introduces Adele as her girlfriend, while being dependent on her for intimacy, support and comfort during her painting career. However, Adele experiences anxious-ambivalent attachment with Emma, in which she becomes too engaged with the latter that she begins to feel isolated (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Additionally, in developmental psychology research, Conger and colleagues (2000) have reported that familial interactions might impact the interpersonal skills of youths or early adults, which in turn affect their romantic relationships. In broad, they found that nurturing environment in the family of origin leads to the young adults to express warmth and support to their partners with less unkindness. In *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013), Adele appears to have a formal relationship with her parents who do not know about her same-sex sexual orientation, and to whom she introduced Emma as her friend and philosophy tutor. As a result of this distant bonding with her parents, Adele may have overinvested in her relationship with Emma to seek a sense of comfort and freedom. In contrast, Emma shares a friendly and warm relationship with her parents who are unbiasedly welcoming to her lesbian identity. Thus, Emma's parents influence her in being warm and loving to Adele, to whom she provided guidance and who becomes her inspiration of art (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000).

Overall, the films *The Killing of Sister George* (1968) and *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013) depict lesbian characters

and their romance from a patriarchal versus a realistic lens. Both the representations of lesbian romance align with the societal values of the specific time setting. Further, it is inevitable that the representation of lesbianism has evolved for the better. For instance, in *The Killing of Sister George* (1968), June losing both her career and her relationship because of her sexuality portrayed lesbianism as immoral and promiscuous from the societal perspective. Moreover, the relationship of June and Alice is portrayed from a stereotypical point of view because the time of release of this film was homonegative and did not allow for blatant positive representation of lesbianism. However, with the years, sexual minorities are more recognized and visible than they were in the past because of gay liberation events in the 1970s-80s. Currently, Canadian government has provided greater rights to gay and lesbian individuals with their traditions of tolerance and fair play (Mazur, 2002). The visibility of sexual minorities explains the human portrayal of lesbian characters and their romance in *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013), where the characters of Adele and Emma and their romance will remind the viewers of their first love. Thus, the visibility of queer individuals is increasing in the mainstream film industry, suggesting that the social attitudes toward sexual minorities are gradually becoming positive.

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