

Artists and Muses: Identity and Self-Recognition in Portrait of a Lady on Fire and Blue is the Warmest Color

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ABSTRACT

Portrait of a Lady on Fire and Blue is the Warmest Color are two modern French queer films related to lesbian love. The relationships in both films share identical identities between lovers, in which one is an artist and the other is the Muse. The female muse has lain in wait over the last three centuries of art to be made intriguing under the strokes of the great male artist. The term of "male gaze", thus, has often been used in the relationship between the artist and the muse. Based on this cognition, this paper discusses the special identity and their self-recognition in two lesbian relationships between an artist and her muse. The results show that Portrait stresses the equality and dissolves of the artist-muse relationship whereas Blue demonstrates the unequal artist-muse relationship and split identity of the muse under the gaze of the artist.

Keywords: Film, Gaze, Lesbian, Artist-Muse, Self-recognition, Symbolism

1. INTRODUCTION

Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Portrait de la jeune fille en feu, 2019) and Blue is the Warmest Color (La vie d'Adèle, 2013) are two modern French queer films related to lesbian love. Separate articles have been published that analyze these two films in terms of feminism theories, film production philosophical contexts, and much more. The relationships in both films share identical identities between lovers, in which one is the artist and the other one is the Muse. This similarity is clearly worth analyzing. Thus, the purpose of this article is to establish a bond between the two films, focusing on an innovative angle of comparing the artist-muse relationship, in which to compare the distinct paths of developing identity and self-recognition between two pairs of lesbian couples. Based on the film context, the main methods are narrative analysis and symbolic analysis, combined with Mise-en-scène study and Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism.

The female muse has has lain in wait over the last three centuries of art to be made intriguing under the strokes of the great male artist [1]. The term of "male gaze", thus, has often been used in the relationship between the artist and the muse. Because of this masculinity and patriarchy, in the men-dominated artistic field, artist is the subject and the muse is the object. Base on this cognition, this paper is discussing the special identity and their self-recognition in two lesbian relationships between an artist and her muse. This paper mainly focuses on narrative and symbolic analysis to fill in the blank of establishing bonds between *Portrait* and *Blue* from an innovative point of view on analyzing the artist-muse relationship.

2. PORTRAIT OF A LADY ON FIRE— EQUALITY AND THE DISSOLVE OF ARTIST-MUSE RELATIONSHIP

2.1. Narrative Meaning

In 1760, France, female artist Marianne(Noémie Merlant) was commissioned to go to an isolated island and paint the wedding portrait of Héloïse(Adèle Haenel), a young woman who had just left the convent. Because she is a reluctant bride-to-be, Marianne arrives under the guise of companionship, observing Héloïse by day and secretly painting her by firelight at night. As the two women orbit each other, attraction and intimacy grow as they share Héloïse's first moment of freedom. Héloïse's



portrait soon becomes a collaborative act and a testament to their love [2].

2.1.1. Initial Phase: Marianne's Male Gaze

For Shiamma, the traditional artist-muse relationship in contemporary conversation contains unequal power. Schiamma mentioned, "The fact that you could be inspiring just by being there, beautiful and silent, there's definitely domination." [3] However, the art-muse relationship between Marianne and Héloïse grew intenser along with their conversations and interactions, which eventually became equal, achieving a mutual and balanced gazing from both sides. They "see" each other.

The movie is characterized by the extremely few visible but always existing male elements. The on-boat scene pictures Marianne falling into the water when traveling with a boat of men. She was frozen with no one caring. After she arrived at the island, the maid, Sophie(Luàna Bajrami) led her to the destroyed portrait left by the former artist. Marianne discovered the destroyed portrait painted by the former artist, with the facial part effaced. On the second day Marianne was introduced to Héloïse's mother La Comtesse (Valeria Golino). The portrait of La Comtesse, created by Marianne's father, was also served to please her fiancé back then. But what does she really look like as a living person? We can only speculate about her inner world through a few words. Marianne said Héloïse was not sad but just angry. Héloïse's mother replied, "You think I don't know her anger? I know it well." "Yes, I know it too.", Marianne replied. They both use Italian here as La Comtesse married to a Milanese and Marianne once lived there; it was also the city where Héloïse planned to marry. In such a conversation, Milan and the portrait in favor of marriage represent the patriarchal society and the male gaze.

"They've had more flourishing moments, like that time in the mid-18th century when there were a lot of women painters. That's why we set [the film] in that period, of course, but mostly women were in the workshop as models or companions. That was their part in artistry, so that's how they're told [in cultural narratives]. The true role they played in creation is not revealed."[3] Shiamma once said in the interview. A woman's duty in the mid-18th century and before was to be a good-looking and peaceful object, a muse in the painting. They couldn't speak and "have no choice" just like Héloïse. The artist would make them pick up a perfect smile to welcome the male gaze from outside the picture frame.

In the initial phase, Marianne's identity was the agent of the male gaze. Her job is to stare at Héloïse, to depict her as a qualified wife. Marianne is the subject, the gazer, and Héloïse is the object, the gazed-upon one. Their relationship is not harmonious at this time. Marianne was

always anxious about being identified by Héloïse and Héloïse wore dark clothes and wrapped herself in them, and she never showed the fixed peaceful smile that the person in the picture should have —she uses these ways to avoid staring. The clear turning point in Héloïse's attitude happened when she came back from mass.

2.1.2. Turning Point: Confession

"In solitude, I felt the liberty you spoke of. But I also felt your absence." Héloïse said. Before this moment, Marianne had nearly finished the portrait, with the absence of Héloïse who should sit opposite the painter. Facing a green dress with no real object present, Marianne could not depict a vivid figure after all. No matter how beautiful the clothes are, no matter how many paintings are drawn, they are not the real Héloïse. At night, when again closely observing the previous portrait, Marianne set it on fire by accident, which provided the first time realization of the title in the story's time sequence: a portrait of a lady on fire. Marian's first edition was not fundamentally different from the previous artist's: exquisite pleats and lace, but no face. Marianne's sense of guilt and the growing fondness led her to confess her real intention of gazing at Héloïse and show the portrait to Héloïse.

2.1.3. Core Phase: Dissolve of Art-Muse Relationship and the Emergence of Mutual Seeing

Héloïse questioned Marianne discontentedly and explicitly,

H: "Is that me?"

M: "Yes."

H: "Is that how you see me?"

M: "It's not only me."

The unequal artist-muse relationship resulted in Héloïse's anger when first seeing the secretly painted portrait. Héloïse accused accused of having no similarity with herself and being a poor imitation under the gaze of men. Marianne's defense seemed quite self-centered and superior, defending the complicated "rules, conventions, and ideas", which is also a portrayal of the art field at that time: Men built high walls to keep women out, believing that women could not create great works like men. When Héloïse accused the portrait of a lack of liveliness and presence, Marianne defended herself by saying, "Your presence is made up of fleeting moments that may lack truth." However, Héloïse said, "Not everything is fleeting. Some feelings are deep. The fact that it isn't close to me I can understand. But I find it sad that it isn't close to you." The muse, the object in the painting, would never evaluate whether the artist's description was vivid or not. Therefore, Héloïse's sentence alone here is



enough to set the fixed and dominated relationship between the gazer and the gazed to begin to dissolve.

After Héloïse's mother left the island, three young women—Héloïse, Marianne, and maid Sophie—finally shared some moments alone. There are no male characters in this story. At the bonfire party, it was women who sang and danced, who put out the fire, who sold stuff, and who gave people abortions secretly. After Héloïse's mother left, the world suddenly became a utopia with no male power or male gaze. The three girls are no longer the solid and mournful objects in the portraits. They could even calmly help the maid, Sophie, go through an abortion and depict the scene of the operation. Women should have lived like this. In this ideal world, the relationship between the gazer, the artist, and the gazed, the muse, was further dissolved.

Marianne "saw" the real Héloïse, and she gradually described her subtle habits and movements. She saw Héloïse's smile, which was different from the peaceful and gentle smile of the object in the portrait. Her smile was bright and aggressive. Héloïse also "saw" the real Marianne. Gradually, this shot pictured a two-way observing and staring. In an ideal world, the gaze of a lover should be so, equal and mutual. They see themselves from their lover's eyes which they have not yet firmly accepted as part of themselves. The day before Héloïse's mother came back, Marianne drew a portrait of Héloïse using a small piece of canvas to carry along with her, and she sketched herself in a mirror placed over Héloïse's nether regions. She painted a woman with disheveled hair, crimson cheeks, and firm eyes. These two pieces are of so much difference, especially with the portrait of La Comtesse hanging in the living room, lively and passionate. Marianne and Héloïse, no longer object and subject, no more one-direct gazing, but lovers in an equal relationship, lovers that long for each other as real and vivid persons.

2.2. Circumscribed Lovers' Relationship

But such love can only be maintained in a utopia without patriarchy. After her mother came back, the first male character in the film appeared - the messenger responsible for sending the portrait of Héloïse to Milan. He nailed the picture of Héloïse tightly with two thick boards. The emergence of men is a metaphor for shackles and the end of freedom. In the end, Marianne was still a female artist who could only use her father's name for Salon, and Héloïse was still an upper-class lady who had to marry and have children. The Utopia on an isolated island with no male gaze emerged collapsed. Two lovers could only wave to the past in the way Orpheus and Eurydice did.

3. BLUE IS THE WARMEST COLOR— SPLIT IDENTITY UNDER THE GAZE OF THE ARTIST

On the verge of adulthood, the wide-eyed and reserved fifteen-year-old schoolgirl, Adèle (Adele Exarchopoulos), can only imagine the delicate touch, the odd, yet lingeringly fervid feeling of desire. Increasingly indifferent to her male classmates after a fumbled sexual experience, instead, Adèle finds herself infatuated with the alluring and intriguingly mysterious blue-haired woman she encounters in the street. Undoubtedly, growing up can be hard, and, just like in life, love can hurt. Is blue, indeed, the warmest color?[4]

In this lovers' relationship, Emma and Adèle are, respectively, the artist and the muse. Compared with Emma, Adèle had less experience, young, and naive. At the age of 18, age of dreaming, her love for Emma was full of romantic fantasies. In the first chapter, one-third of the part was devoted to describing Adele that she lived by instinct: instinctive eating and instinctive love. A large number of close-up features highlight her very lifeoriented details. Although Abdellatif Kechiche (the director) establishes Adèle's narrative position as protagonist in the opening of the film, the camera is relentless in its objectification of Adèle. From the first scene when Adèle adjusts her pants, various shots draw attention to Adèle's sumptuous lips and curved behind. As she eats dinner with her family, the camera frames her lips and the bizarre way that she eats, presenting a closeup of Adèle's face and highlighting her parted lips covered in spaghetti sauce that are rarely completely closed as she chews. Adèle fell in love at the first sight of Emma's hair when she saw that bright blue. Her natural and primitive desire drove her to masturbation with her fantasy of Emma. The encounter of the two in the bar clearly showed that Emma was attracted to Adèle too. Adèle's appearance was full of lovely and natural wildness, which in Emma's eyes was of exquisite art, deeply arousing her artistic inspiration.

The second meeting happened in a park. Emma painted Adèle a portrait and talked about philosophy. Jean-Paul Sartre is Emma's role model. Adele believed that Sartre and Bob Marley had no essential difference in the revolutionary sense of society. They are both prophets and human liberators. Bob Marley was the ancestor of Jamaican reggae music. He successfully introduced Jamaican reggae music into the West and had a great impact on western pop music. As a music fighter against racism, he had been committed to the Jamaican social movement for a long time, and was regarded by the people as the national hero of Jamaica. In the slogan of Adèle's participation in the parade, the director hinted at Adèle's class. Just as the emphasis on the meaning of Adèle's name "justice", the emergence of Bob Marley's name once again emphasizes the value of "justice" to Adele. For the lower-middle class, justice is more



important than whether existence precedes essence. The casual dialogue showed the great differences in their educational background and life class and the greater difference in their understanding of life. This doomed the inequality in the relationship from the beginning and was the final tragedy of the relationship between the two [5].

A: "It's strange, because it's me and it isn't."

E: "It's a sketch, it needs some work."

The short conversation about the first portrait Emma painted for Adèle was a prophecy. Adèle became Emma's muse. A gorgeous body is not only a representation of cheerful sex, but also endless inspiration for the artist. Adèle was plump and unadorned, with the same primitive instinctive mind she had in high school, which distinguished her from those "philistines" and imposters. Adèle was the trigger of Emma's career. Emma claimed in the first chapter that she would never do portraits, but eventually all of her works were portraits, and she became famous for her art, initially inspired by Adèle. "It's strange, because it's me and it isn't." Adèle said. Adèle was turned into the muse, an object that was stylized by the artist. Since then, Adèle had been trapped in Emma's picture frame. Along with Emma's career in the second chapter, Adèle appeared to be farther from herself in real life.



Figure 1 The scene of Adèle preparing food in Blue is the Warmest Color

In this scene, two-thirds of the screen is dominated by the painted Adèle, who raises her arm above her head and proudly stands naked to the waist, a bold, erratic, and loving character. The rest one-third is the real Adèle preparing food in the kitchen for the coming exhibition, who was casual and a bit corpulent, fatigued, with no sharp contour. Another obscure hint of the split between the real Adèle and the muse Adèle in Emma's works.

A conversation among Joachim, a gallery owner, Adèle and Emmas at the exhibition was analyzed. Emma defended Adèle by announcing that Adèle was more than a model, more than a pictured muse, but someone talented in literature. But clearly, Adèle was still not used to displaying herself; her body was only displayed in public in Emma's paintings. Seemingly, Emma was trying to shape Adèle into an upper-middle-class style in which Adèle cared no more about "justice" and the homemade pasta she had kept eating, her nursery job, and something related to surviving. but, to care about Sartre

and the oysters that Emma favored, writing and philosophy, about something that was far beyond Adèle's recognition. Emma guided Adèle by improving her profile and leading her to approach that ideal character that lived only in Emma's paintings. Under the gaze of Emma, Adèle became the object being appreciated by the audience.

The artist insisted that her muse should experience her own joyful life by ignoring her true devotion and passion. Adèle said, "I work", or in other words, "I'm doing what I love". But she also doubted herself, with the shame of not being the ideal muse for the artist. Even the doubt led her nowhere, because pure as Adèle, as she always is, she is living her happiness, with Emma, of Emma, of her primitive desire.

Echoing the first chapter, when Emma brought up with Sartre, Sartre claimed that people always have to maintain their subjectivity. Getting along with others is a process of turning others into objects, so as to safeguard their subjectivity and freedom [6]. Emma felt the resistance of achieving freedom for Adèle. Living in a world where others exist, everyone is free, but we can't realize the ideal of common freedom, because everyone has to realize their own subjectivity. In this sense, it's impossible to realize freedom mutually within a relationship. Adèle was led to sacrifice her subjectivity, immersing herself in the identity of muse Adèle and doubting her own self as Adèle. The dilemma of Emma aroused by her firm belief in Sartre's philosophy where she could never achieve freedom with Adèle's flocking admiration, gaze, and attachment. Meanwhile, Emma denied Adèle's inclination towards job choice or simply being fulfilled around Emma, and insisted that Adèle should have gone for what Emma conceived was the proper career. Emma couldn't stand Adèle's attachment, which turned their love relationship into a materialized ownership. Adèle's performance in the nursery was visibly worsening with less patience and passion, trapping her in a pendulous self-identify issue. Emma and Adèle broke up after Adèle's physical cheating, though it was Emma who chose emotional infidelity in the first place. Three years later, the pair met in a cafe.

Adèle went through three years of identity reconstruction. Her messy hair stood for her original and primitive desire. This change of hairdo, therefore, somehow represents Adèle's self-reflection, but mixed up with indelible obscure and confusion brought by her own nature and being Emma's muse. Three years after breaking up with Emma, Adèle still conceived the wreck of their romance was her fault. The break-up became Adèle's eternal regret, representing her predicament of walking out of the shadow cast by Emma. However, she chose to request Emma to acknowledge the end of love. Eventually, Emma's answer noted the end of their relationship, the end of Adèle's regret and shadow. This moment pushed Adèle closer to the outer world of



Emma's picture frame. Adele was invited to visit Emma's exhibition, the most successful moment as an artist. Adèle carefully bathed and dressed up in a blue dress, bathing off the remnants of the past three years. At the exhibition, the dazzling artworks hanging on the wall again placed Adèle in a detached role. She felt lost, but no longer for being unable to join Emma's social circle, but for realizing the split between the muse Adèle in the painting and the real Adèle.

4. THE STRONGEST FIRE& THE WARMEST BLUE

The two contemporary French films featured an intense symbolic atmosphere. In this section, the author chooses the most significant ones in each to further analyze the meanings delivered in the two films.

4.1. Fire in Portrait

Fire emerges four times in the plot as part of an important symbol.

The first time:

In Marianne's studio, a student brought out the teacher's drawing. The teacher, Marianne, said that it was drawn a long time ago, and called Portrait of a Lady on Fire. The bright fire is realistic, burning a striking way out of the canvas into our eyes. The viewers can perceive a very powerful painting and a fire that imply an intense story behind it.

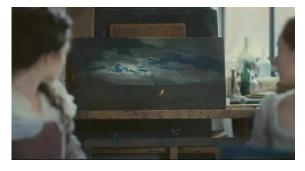


Figure 2 The scene of zooming in Marianne's painting in the studio in Portrait of a Lady on Fire

The second time:

Marianne took off her clothes and sat on the floor by the fireplace to make a fire on her first night on the island. In the dimly lit room, the fire burned behind her, sketching her silhouette, outline, and born lines like a work of art. The fire warmed her. It symbolized the not-yet-appeared lady, Héloïse, who could warm her if Marianne controlled the fire in an appropriate way. The fire would enlighten and warm her, as the strong spirit against patriarchal marriage and the loving relationship would do.



Figure 3 The scene of Marianne sitting in front of fireplace in Portrait of a Lady on Fire

The third time:

"Portrait of a lady on fire" can be interpreted as a portrait which depicts a burning lady, to regard "burning" as an action. The fiancé, the painter, and the countess of Milan all wanted to frame Héloïse in the portrait frame and in the patriarchal marriage. In this context, portraits become the carriers of the objectification of women and the shackles of patriarchal society, imprisoning and suppressing Héloïse's subjectivity, and women become objects in patriarchal society. Marianne used candlelight to ignite the previous portrait whose face was erased, burning the tangible portrait to resist the invisible oppression, a metaphor for the women in the film's endless yearning for freedom. Considering the developing love between them, the fire can also be interpreted as a fire in Héloïse's heart that becomes the love of her life.



Figure 4 The scene of Héloïse's buring portrait in Portrait of a Lady on Fire

The fourth time:

Of course, this is the "lady on fire" scene. Its status as a central turning-point is powerfully emphasized by its being one of only three scenes that include music. Sciamma described the scene as one of the film's clear turning points. The transition from putting out the fire on Héloïse's dress is a fluid match cut to the lovers leading each other to their hidden spot on the beach where they will finally kiss[7]. In addition to mirroring the rising emotions that propel the transition, "burning" represents Héloïse's resistance in the same way as "indulging in the sea" in the early stages of the film does[8]. "Drowning" or "burning" can be regarded as a ritual for the awakening of Héloïse's spiritual consciousness. Héloïse was willing to pursue independent choice through



drowning death, and she was more willing to resist the oppression of patriarchy with fiery love. At the climax of the film, in the burning flame, the affection of the two heroines was transformed into a lofty pursuit of breaking through the roles of "object" and patriarchal society, breaking through the secular barriers to express desire and love.



Figure 5 The scene of Héloïse's burning dress in Portrait of a Lady on Fire

The burning fire lit up the dark, and attracted Marianne to gaze at, eventually to "look at" and to "look in". It was the fire in Héloïse that lit up the love fire between the artist and muse, erasing the unequal object-subject relationship, and leaving an unforgettably bright memory in Marianne's painting (one shown in Marianne's studio).

4.2. Blue in Blue

As the artist forms a work of art, so is the artist formed as a spectator, and the artist dictates future interactions between spectators and the image. A work of art becomes an areola around which gazes are conducted and assembled, a point of contact between different gazes, a subjectivizing point of encounter. This place of encounter and multiple gazes is what Kechiche has created in Blue, a point best illustrated through his use of the color blue throughout the film. The blue floral scarf Adèle wears when she sees Emma for the first time, the touches of blue throughout Emma's paintings, and Adèle's blue dress in the last scene of the film: all of these moments represent a joint gaze and illustrate the porous nature of Adèle as a subject and the object, a subject formed through her desire for "blue" and object represented in Emma's painting [9].



Figure 6 The scene of Adèle in her room in Blue is the Warmest

Blue represents Adèle's, or any human's, lust for food, sex, and warmth. Compared with Adèle's initial impulse of seeking sensual pleasure and a sense of security, which is symbolically expressed by immersing herself in the color blue, Emma pursued realistic thinking and spiritual enjoyment. Emma's bright blue hair and eyes attracted Adèle at first sight, but her hair turned blonde in the second chapter, which symbolized the existence of cracks in their love relationship.

This scene of floating on the sea demonstrates an overwhelmed and dazed mood after Adèle broke up with Emma. Adèle was wreathed in comforting blue water. Her hair was tinted blue. As mentioned in the previous part, Adèle went through three years of identity reconstruction. Blue was part of Adèle's pursuit as she would attach to anything blue. In the first chapter, Adèle's blue was Emma. In the second chapter, the blue gradually passed back to Adèle.



Figure 7 The scene of Emma noticing Adèle in Blue is the Warmest Color



Figure 8 The scene of Adèle floating on sea surface in Blue is the Warmest

At the end of the film, the theme color in Emma's artwork had shifted from blue to red, and Adèle's "warmest blue" landed back on herself, on her blue dress. Instead of saying Emma's "blue" was a temporary encounter for Adèle, it was Adèle's "blue" temporarily devoted to Emma and the muse Adèle in Emma's artworks. Adèle shifted from the object to the subject and eventually showed the openness and mobility of the subject to maintain her own identity, which also showed the possibility to fight for more space for individual development and individual value in the face of powerful gazing [10].

5. CONCLUSION

Portrait of a Lady on Fire and Blue is the Warmest Color are two outstanding contemporary French films



about lesbian love, with a focus on two distinct modes of artist-muse relationships between lovers. Both are thought-provoking and are perfect examples of illustrating art and love. Portrait emphasizes the equality and dissolution of the relationship between artists and muses, while Blue shows the inequality of the relationship between artists and Muses and the division of Muse identity under the gaze of artists. The paper mainly focuses on narrative and symbolic analysis, both of which are context-based and thus have limitations on further extended study on mentioned elements, such as the 18th century French historical environment, the development of feminism, and a clearer explanation of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism the how it developed into one of most effective philosophic thinking. Additionally, this paper leaves blank to the closer comparison between Portrait and Blue on more asides of films. Above all, it needs to be further demonstrated and combined with contextual study to complete the integral picture of this topic.

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