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## 'Film as Sound Art: Embracing Love through Extra-diegetic Sound in Nadine Labaki's *Caramel*'

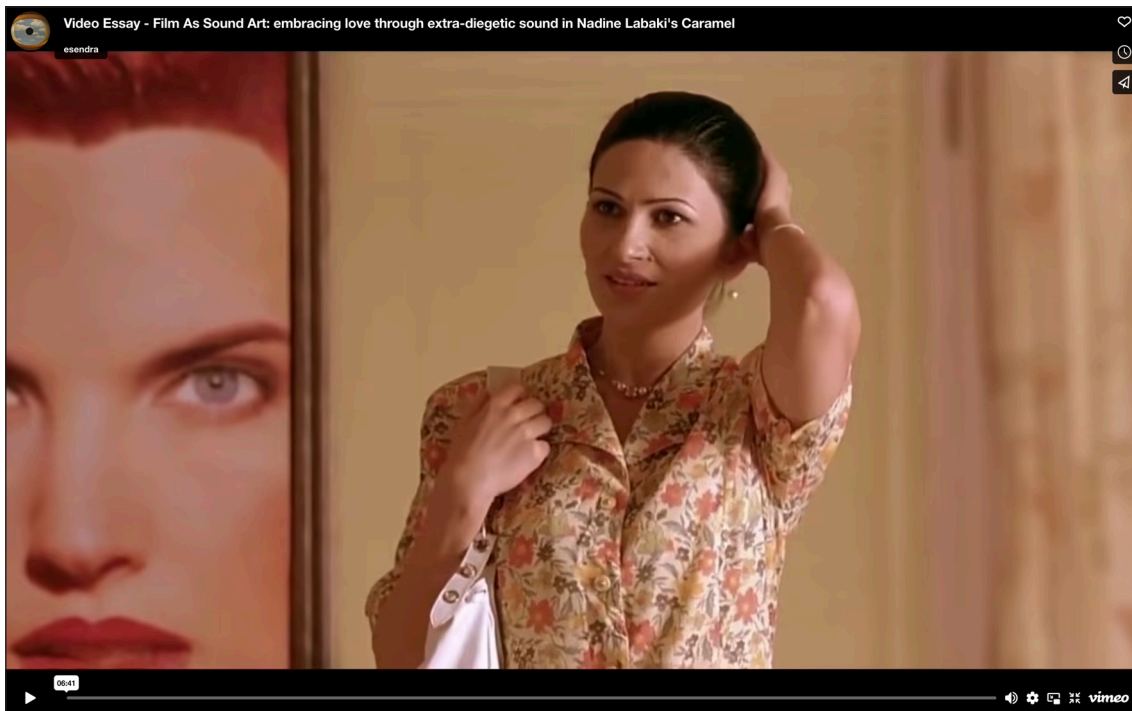
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Teaching film often involves un-learning previously taught histories of cinema to find instead 'herstories' (Dovey, 2018) and *theirstories* of cinema. This video essay constitutes an illustrative example of this practice, showing how Lebanese woman-led film *Sukkar Banat / Caramel* (Nadine Labaki 2007) has been taught at SOAS, University of London to emphasise the crucial role of sound in narrative while rethinking the film canon and encouraging critical reflection on the gaze. By creatively compiling encounters between two characters in the film, the video essay shows two women gazing at each other in ways that evoke a romantic relationship, even if their contact stays in the hair salon. While there is barely any dialogue, the extra-diegetic music forges an intimate atmosphere. The decoding of these moments is shaped by the context of censorship in Lebanon, where explicit representations of same-sex relationships could be punished by law. In this video essay, I suggest that sound helps represent a queer gaze between the two characters, subverting both heteronormativity and patriarchal society, and in so doing, it also queers the audience's gaze. *Caramel* thus serves as an excellent case study of the possibilities of sound in film, and of film as sound art.

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## Research Statement

### *Teaching Theirstories of Cinema*

Teaching film often involves un-learning previously taught stories of cinema, acknowledging both the colonial and imperialist context of the early days of cinema, often ignored in film history (Stam 2000: 19) and the crucial role played by women in the industry, also silenced significantly throughout film history (Liddy 2020). This video essay responds intersectionally to this gender aspect, focusing on a case study beyond the dominant Western film canon. Despite the academic attention to women in film (Kaplan 1983; Kannan 2000; Kuhn and Radstone 1990; Liddy 2020), the filmmakers most often studied tend to emerge from similar geographical and production contexts, unless the work proposes a specifically regional focus. This long-established bias compels many educators to seek strategies to ensure the equality, diversity and inclusion in the curriculum. In a recent special issue on 'Decolonising Film Education', guest editors Jyoti Mistry and Lizelle Bisschoff discuss the way in which 'studying similarities and divergences in how certain themes and techniques are represented across a range of films from different perspectives, of resisting the perpetuation of canonisation ... are all pedagogical techniques that are crucial to consider within a decolonial perspective' (Mistry and Bisschoff 2022: 3), with the examples of Senegalese film *Black Girl* (Ousmane Sembène 1966) alongside French film *Chocolat* (Claire Denis 1988). Similarly, the case study examined here advocates for a polycentric approach to film studies by moving

beyond Eurocentric thinking, which is ‘fundamentally unrepresentative of a world which has long been multicultural’ (Shohat and Stam 1994: 4). Instead, it offers a set of frameworks, theories and examples informed not just by *histories* of cinema, but rather *herstories* (Dovey 2018) and *theirstories* of cinema.

### ***Intersectionality: Moving beyond the Label of Women Filmmakers***

When designing and teaching the undergraduate module ‘Introduction to Film Language, History and Theory’ at SOAS, University of London, in addition to devoting a week to women filmmakers, throughout the whole module there was an explicit intention from the very beginning to highlight women’s remarkable contributions, fostering a critical and intersectional discussion of gender. The video essay ‘Film as Sound Art: Embracing Love through Extra-diegetic Sound in Nadine Labaki’s *Caramel*’ constitutes an illustrative example of this practice. It does not label the film solely as a woman-led film, directed and performed by Lebanese filmmaker and actress Nadine Labaki. Rather, this video essay illustrates the innovative use of sound in cinema through a focus on a film by and about women, through a focus on another key film topic, the gaze, historically ‘implicated in subject/object power relations’ (Mistry and Bisschoff 2022: 3).

### ***Caramel as a Case Study to Understand Film as Sound Art***

Lebanese woman-led film *Sukkar Banat / Caramel* (Nadine Labaki 2007) is the main case study of the second week in the module, devoted to the introduction and importance of sound in cinema, or as Michel Chion (2009) puts it, ‘film as sound art’. The early inclusion of this film in the syllabus has generated a high degree of enthusiasm and complex readings among class members. First, it emphasises the crucial role of sound in the narrative (Walker 2015) and the way ‘sound can actively shape how we interpret the image’ (Bordwell and Thompson 2016: 244). Through examples from different time periods, namely, *Singin’ in the Rain* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen 1952, USA) and *Caramel*, we counterbalance the historic relative lack of attention to sound in film studies by looking specifically at its contribution to moving images. In so doing, we engage with recent attention to film sound within the practice of audiovisual essay-making, specifically, the 2015 special issue of *The Cine-Files* on film sound, curated and edited by Catherine Grant, and the later two-part special issue on sound and music in the audiovisual essay, guest edited by Liz Greene for NECSUS (2020a and 2022), ‘invit[ing] the audioviewer to listen closely to what has been crafted by the filmmakers, but also by the video essayist themselves’ (Greene 2020a). Second, looking at sound in this film promotes understanding of specialist film language, namely the difference between intra-diegetic sound (from within the space of the story) and extra-diegetic sound (added in post-production for narrative purposes). Third, including this film, alongside

*Singin' in the Rain*, contributes to rethinking the film canon, by bringing to the centre of the discussion a non-Western example. It thus engages both with a decolonial and 'curatorial turn' (Jyoti and Bisschoff 2022; Dovey 2018), where film courses are organised thematically, 'around how film-makers have approached film practices with similar historical and political content but from different perspectives, and often with divergent points of view based on characters and the sociocultural positions they occupy' (Jyoti and Bisschoff 2022: 2). Finally, it encourages critical reflection about the idea of the gaze, supported by and building on existing written scholarship (Balaa 2019; White 2015).

### ***Teaching Methods: The Pedagogic Value of Video Essays***

The module design of 'Introduction to Film Language, History and Theory' in September 2019 included an innovative creative assessment method, inviting class members to produce video essays instead of oral presentations, to be shared with the rest of class members in a festival-format session on the last day of the module. By then, despite my experience as a filmmaker and my interest in audiovisual criticism, I had not yet made a video essay. I have already reflected about how enriching this pedagogic experience was, suggesting that video essays can contribute to decolonising research and education, in that students become co-curators of the module (Sendra 2020). When the global pandemic of Covid-19 encouraged us to rethink our pedagogical approach, I was keen to apply the knowledge acquired from my previous students, which had also motivated me to publish an open access Introductory Guide to Video Essays along with Bartolomeo Meletti, a copyright law expert, for *Learning on Screen* (2020). This synthesis of classroom experience led to the production of this video essay as well as a diverse range of audiovisual teaching materials that were offered to class members prior to the synchronous and interactive seminar time. The idea was to illustrate how academic arguments could be performed audiovisually (Grant 2011; Keathley 2012), rather than communicated through the written or oral word.

By acknowledging my vulnerability as a 'debut' video essayist, I was thus hoping to break hierarchical boundaries between tutors and students. Imperfection, was thus a key and unavoidable dimension, as noted by fellow creative scholars (Grant 2012; Chanan 2012). By the end of his article, Michael Chanan evokes the Manifesto 'For an Imperfect Cinema', written by Cuban cineaste Julio García Espinosa, where imperfect cinema is considered as a liberating tool from a class-defined culture, enabling spectators to become agents, co-authors, co-curators. This understanding of imperfect cinema resonates with the term 'mégotage', a combination of *montage* and *bricolage*, used by Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène, whose film career started in the late 1960s, as a weapon for decolonisation (Adesokan 2011: 22). When publishing this video essay, aware of its imperfection, it has thus been ideologically coherent to respect its form as

it was conceived for teaching purposes. This is how it was presented to the students, as a first attempt to engage with this medium. I have always been inspired by Paulo Freire's view of both teachers and students as equal, that is, as class members (Freire 2018), which is, in Dovey's and Awachie's words, indispensable to decolonising pedagogy (Dovey and Awachie 2019). Through their video essay production, students become co-curators of the module, bringing in their own lived experiences and interests to the classroom, engaging creatively, emotionally and intellectually with critical theory. Like Liz Greene, 'I want to enable students to feel they can be part of a community of videographic scholarship, which includes practitioners, teachers and students' (Greene 2020b). My imperfect video essay operated then as a tool to establish a supportive learning environment, where I become the facilitator, rather than the tutor, 'being taught', teaching and learning nearby students (Dovey 2020; Greene 2020b).

#### ***Experimenting with artistic research: recursive methodologies and affect***

I have always been fascinated by recursion, also known as *mise-en-abîme*, where screen and performative framed spaces become intra-diegetic spectator spaces showcasing art. Video essays are recursive in that they explore film through the film medium. And what moves me even more, as I work with *moving* images, is immersing myself in their tissue, through the manipulation of the film in the editing timeline. Aware of the high degree of exposition in video essays (Keathley 2012), I was keen on attempting to perform my argument through poetic language. As I moved and cropped sound visual-scapes around, I found myself out of breath, *affected* by the slow and careful engagement with a specific aspect of the film. Whilst I had an idea of what I wanted to argue, it was this affective and creative response what led to the wording of the various inter-texts that appear in the video essay.

In addition to sound, the visual track of the video essay revolves around the gaze, which serves both as thematic focus and structuring device. I selected and creatively compiled several clips from the four encounters between two characters, Rima and her customer in the hair salon. These compiled scenes are not simply reproduced from the film, but manipulated for critical purposes. Aside from shortening their length, the first form of manipulation is reframing through cropping the shots to make closer ones, directing the viewers' attention to aspects of the gaze. In the video essay, there is thus an initial gaze from the video essayist to the film, where the situated positionality is not erased, and this is made explicit by leaving the rest of the shot black but on-screen. Adding to the frame cropping, there is also a split screen that aims to emphasise through visual repetition. The clips show two women gazing at each other in a multi-sensory way, evoking a romantic relationship, even if their contact stays in the hair salon. While there is barely any dialogue, the use of extra-diegetic music forges

an intimate atmosphere between the two of them. The decoding of these moments is shaped by the viewer's background and lived experiences. In this video essay, I analyse this within the context of censorship in Lebanon, where explicit representations of same-sex relationships could still be punished by law. Intertitles are included in order to further articulate the main argument and integrate film theory, thus illustrating how our responses and argument are to be situated within existing film debates. I suggest that sound plays a significant role in the representation of a queer gaze between the two characters, as a way to subvert heteronormativity and patriarchal society. In so doing, it further queers the audience's gaze while inviting them to be present in this safe space for women, the hair salon.

### ***Assessing the Results of this Teaching Practice***

The video essay was enthusiastically received by class members, both in the undergraduate and postgraduate modules. Both in the student module evaluations and the School of Arts Audiovisual Awards at SOAS, students stressed not just its ability to introduce film specialist language and theory, but also its illustration of how to make video essays and the ways broader themes could be narrowed down. An overwhelming number of video essays were submitted to the modules, with a strong gender focus, as well as attention to queer cinemas from across the globe. One of the video essays submitted for class was then published in the seventh issue of *Tecmerin. Journal of Audiovisual Essays* (2021) and featured in the *Sound and Sight* list of Best Video Essays 2021. This submission was precisely dealing with the idea of the gaze, bringing non-anglophone scholarship and original case studies beyond the ones covered in the module. Produced by Lucie Emch, it was entitled 'The Representation of Rape on Screen: How the Gaze Influences our (Mis) Conceptions of Sexual Assaults'. While it would not be fair to credit such achievement to the implementation of such creative teaching and learning methods, this example became a source of pride for our class members, and confirmed that such technical and pedagogical innovation can contribute to rethinking film stories with a strong awareness of power dynamics, equality, diversity and inclusion.

### **Conclusion**

One of the key challenges as teachers and (un)learners is to move beyond the label of women as the sole defining feature of filmmakers, audiences, and/or critics, and embrace instead an intersectional perspective. Teaching women's filmmaking involves a degree of ideological disruption that can be enhanced aesthetically, through artistic and practice-led research. Video essays can foster inclusive learning spaces, where the proximity to the film medium and its texture offers an intersectional dimension



to film studies, abling us to emphasise gender among other points of identity and identification. As a woman researcher and practitioner, the practice of remixing the film for criticism purposes offers us the possibility of inserting our bodies in the filmmaking process, becoming active and empathetic viewers who are aware of the innovative role of women in film. *Caramel* then serves as an excellent example of the possibilities of sound in film, and of film as sound art, while inspiring intersectional discussions of the gaze that ultimately shape film theirstories, queering them.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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#### Filmography

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