Tinting the senses, adjusting the gaze: colouring versus close-up as a means to draw viewers into visual works

Doro Wiese

Published online: 01 Jun 2016.

Submit your article to this journal ⬈

Article views: 354

View related articles ⬈

View Crossmark data ⬈

Tinting the senses, adjusting the gaze: colouring versus close-up as a means to draw viewers into visual works

Doro Wiese*

Comparative Literature Department, Utrecht University, Utrecht, the Netherlands

This essay discusses the effects of two stylistic devices used in a graphic novel and a film, both entitled *Blue is the Warmest Color*. In the case of the graphic novel, written by the French comic-book writer Julie Maroh, her use of the colour blue will be focused upon. Since large parts of the graphic novel are drawn in sepia tones, certain blue items are highlighted and stand out. This highlighting will be analysed by connecting it to insights established by the French philosopher Luce Irigaray. Irigaray links the use of colour in painting – literally and metaphorically understood as a way to create space and temporality – to the establishment of a singular and subjective perspective. Since the graphic novel *Blue is the Warmest Color* is simultaneously a romance, a coming-of-age story, and a coming out story, Irigaray's call for a unique perspective is connected to Maroh's aim to make lesbian desire available as a choice. Maroh's use of colour will subsequently be contrasted with French film-director Abdellatif Kechiche's prominent use of close-ups in his feature film of the same name. To analyse the use of the close-up, this essay will make use of Mary Ann Doane's analysis of the disconcerting effects it produces. In her view, the close-up is an image that is severed from its context, from time, from place, and from narrative. This research will show that the viewers' alignment with the camera will bring embodied social hierarchies back into the viewing process when seeing Kechiche's film.

Keywords: colour; close-up; Abdellatif Kechiche; Julie Maroh

Colouring versus close-up

Prominently displayed on the cover of Julie Maroh's graphic novel *Blue is the Warmest Color* ([2010] 2013) is the text, 'Now a major motion picture, Cannes Film Festival: Palme d'Or Winner'. Clearly, the publisher wanted to take advantage of the buzz created by Abdellatif Kechiche's 2013 film that is loosely based on Maroh's work and on Pierre Charlet de Marivoux's social novel *La Vie de Marianne* ([1728–1742] 1982). Both the film and the graphic novel follow the love story of the schoolgirl Clementine (Adèle in the film) and the art student Emma. The film has retained the distinctive blue hair of Emma, and some of the graphic novel's additional characters, such as Clementine/Adèle's best friend Valentin, who as a gay man understands the difficulties of coming out in a world where homosexuality is not accepted. Aside from these similarities in characters and plot line, the graphic novel and the film stylistically bear little resemblance to one another.

In line with text-oriented theorists such as structuralists, reader-response theorists, and gaze theorists, this essay argues that the stylistic differences between Kechiche's and Maroh's works are of seminal importance, since the way in which events are stylistically

*Email: D.Wiese@uu.nl

and narratologically represented can greatly affect reader response (see Bal 1997; Iser 1974, 1978; Mayne 1993; Silverman 1983, 1996; Wiese 2014). The question raised is if and how the stylistic devices employed in the graphic novel and in the film allow their audience to relate to female homosexuality, a major topic in both works. Through close-reading, this essay shows that the stylistic devices used in the graphic novel allow for an identification with its protagonists, while those used in the film invite viewers to identify with the gaze of the camera. Where Kechiche aims to highlight the effects of class differences in the protagonist's lives, the aim of Maroh is to present a lesbian love story in such a humanly complex way that readers of all genders and sexualities can identify with it. Although both the film and the graphic novel contain recognisable thematic elements that audiences beyond LGBTTIQ communities can relate to, the storytelling techniques, stylistic elements used, and perhaps even the intentions of the authors are distinct. Maroh's graphic novel, although it contains some specifically lesbian and transgressive elements, echoes many themes of the Bildungsroman that will be familiar to most audiences – mismatching social contexts, attraction, coming of age, falling in love, heartbreak, nostalgia, family pressures. Because Maroh uses a narrative genre that readers are familiar with, and which lends itself to the viewer's self-identification with the storyline, she encourages readers to sympathise with the protagonists and to situate the lesbian experience within universally recognisable frameworks. Kechiche, on the other hand, places himself within artistic traditions that scrutinise the female body in the hope that it reveals the secret of its erotic pleasure. Because pleasure is performative and not discursive, the enigma of women's bodily passions can, however, never be revealed. Paradoxically, it is the inability to attain pleasure's depths that becomes the driving force of representation in both the history of erotic art and Kechiche's film. In other words, no matter how closely the body is depicted, it will never betray its interiority. Erotic art, like the film *Blue is the Warmest Color*, lives on a promise that it cannot keep. The viewers, confronted with the closeness of the body, are left with a riddle that cannot be solved, pleasure's enigma. Further, Mary Ann Doane's (2003) analysis of the close-up, Kechiche's primary stylistic device for catching the body's actions and passions, shows us how visuality's lack of knowledge is threatened with exposure. When the mastery of the eye fails, viewers need to be provided with possible ways of coping with visuality's failure to reveal the truth of the body. Kechiche's representational dilemma arising from sight's failure to master its objects is absent in the work of Maroh. When the stylistic particularities of graphic novels are examined through the theoretical lens of Luce Irigaray and Hillary Chute, we see how they force Maroh to employ a subjective perspective.

In the following, Irigaray's (1987) understanding of colour and Doane's insights into the close-up will be discussed before situating their theories within broader discussions about the corporeal and identificatory potential of visual media that can be found in newer approaches within film phenomenology, and the emerging field of studies on graphic narratives (see Chute 2008; Chute and DeKoven 2006; Marks 2000, 2002; Sobchack 2004). These insights will then be applied to the graphic novel and the film *Blue is the Warmest Color* to discuss what is evoked by their specific use of stylistic devices. A final question is whether the possibilities opened up through the use of stylistic devices in the film and graphic novel can be seen as exemplary for generic differences between those two media.

The colour of the flesh

What are the visual and narrative strategies that allow Maroh, unlike Kechiche, to establish her story as a point of reference for all genders and sexualities? In Maroh's

work, it is the striking use of colour which allows the readers of her graphic novel to identify with a lesbian point-of-view. In contrast, Kechiche's prominent use of the close-up as a filmic device aligns the viewer with the camera. As Kaja Silverman (1996, 4) has shown, the camera mostly works along representational practices that 'confirm dominant values' that are possibly heteronormative. This essay investigates whether Kechiche's use of the close-up indeed supports socially ratified points of view, and how Maroh offers a broader range of possibilities for audience identification through her use of colour. By comparing two seemingly unrelated stylistic devices, the close-up and use of colouring, it is possible to show the effects of Maroh's and Kechiche's most prominently used representational techniques. This comparison is most productive when considering the corporeal effects of visual media, since Kechiche uses the close-up, and not colour, to provoke synaesthetic effects.

Kechiche uses colour inconspicuously, simulating human vision to create a reality-effect. It is exactly this reality-effect that the close-up supersedes, and it is the close-up and not Kechiche's unobtrusive use of colour that parallels Maroh's colouring of specific objects. Furthermore, a closer examination of both techniques, the close-up and colouring, shows that they are used in the film and in the graphic novel to produce the same effect, namely to provoke an interplay of different senses when addressing audiences. One of the first moments that the primary stylistic devices are used in the graphic novel and film is when depicting a scene where Clementine/Adèle is shown pleasuring herself while fantasizing about Emma, the woman she will soon fall in love with. In Kechiche's film, the camera focuses on Adèle's face, zooming in on her moaning mouth while she is kissed by Emma. Following pornographic conventions, the open, moaning mouth stands in for the pleasure the woman is receiving. Maroh's graphic novel, on the other hand, shows a torso drawn in sepia colours that is touched by hands tinted in blue. The unnaturalness of the colour and the visible brush strokes in the image announce the presence of the graphic novelist when drawing her work. The drawing activity of the graphic novelist's hand and the sexual pleasure of Adèle, enhanced in the film by the close-up of her mouth and by her moans, are thus evoked by specific stylistic devices that play with several senses at once. These synaesthetic sensual experiences have become a prominent focal point in theoretical examinations of a so-called 'cinema of the senses', a theoretical approach that understands vision as embodied and inseparably connected to the other senses, especially touch and aurality. It thereby inaugurates an approach that addresses 'the cinema's sensual address and the viewer's "corporeal-material being"' (Sobchack 2004, 55).

The work of Luce Irigaray in her text 'Flesh Colors' (1987) provides insight on the subject matter of colour while Mary Ann Doane's (2003) findings help us to understand the specific identificatory possibilities that the close-up evokes. Both texts make it possible to address the specific corporeal approach that is engendered through the use of colour in graphic narratives and the close-up in cinematic representations. Through Irigaray we are able to reflect on the graspable, material presence of a perception that the use of colour in graphic narratives evokes. Doane shows us that the close-up gives rise to a haptic image that frees itself from the constraints of linear time, allowing us to reflect on the specific atemporality of the close-up and its address to the senses.

In the graphic novel *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013), Clementine's narrative perspective is prominently rendered in sepia tones. Only occasionally are objects tinted in blue. This sparseness in the use of colour ensures that the tinted objects stand out. What is expressed through this highlighting by colour?

For Irigaray, colour serves an important function that she wishes to integrate into psychoanalytic theory and practice. Irigaray (1987, 153) discerns that there is a privileging

of 'sound articulation' and sees this preference for the spoken word as limiting. She stresses that Freud saw 'the building of image' in dreams as the 'royal road to the unconscious' (Irigaray 1987, 153). In her text, Irigaray takes this 'building of the image' literally. In the study of dreams it is pivotal to focus not only on the repetition of symbols or topics, but to establish perspectives. For Irigaray, these perspectives are the point from which perceptions can be articulated and hence analysed. The function of perspective is therefore twofold. First, it connects to the aim of psychoanalysis insofar as perspective is a focal point from which singularity and uniqueness arise and which thereby enables subjects to become aware of their unique history and standpoint in the world. Secondly, according to Irigaray, perspective is the locus from which communicability arises. In Irigaray's text, colour comes into play because it is part and parcel of any truly unique and singular perspective of a subject, as described above. If subjects were to have 'a vivid sensual universe' (Irigaray 1987, 154) in which phenomena are sharply perceived in detail, then they also perceive colour. To establish this universe, psychoanalysis is meant to offer a space in which perceptions can be translated. For Irigaray, one important step towards this translation is achieved if subjects 'paint' in a literal and figurative way, that is, when they give colour and contour to their perceptions. Taking over a definition by Klee, she defines painting as the process through which one 'spatialize[s] perception and make[s] time simultaneous' (Irigaray 1987, 155). To paint means to re-present to oneself and to others one's unique perspective, thereby making one's perceptions analysable and communicable. In my understanding, this translation also needs to be understood as a transfer of perspective from one medium to the next; for example, from corporeality (perception) to representation (painting) to communication (to the analyst in the psychoanalytic setting, to another person, to the reader), a transfer that finally allows for an analysis, that is, a becoming conscious about the specificity of a subject's perceptions, representations, communications, and the connections that all of these have with the subject's unique history and place in the world.

Colouring, if translated into a series of media expressions – from a sensory perception (flesh) to the painting of a perception (representation) to the interpretation of the representation of a perception (analysis) – can thus disclose a subjective viewpoint that is expressive of a history of that subject, while simultaneously establishing her or his presence in that history. The main achievement of the use of colour in Maroh's graphic novel is thus a linking of three different and distinct perspectives, namely the sensory perception of the graphic novelist, the representation of Clementine's point of view, and the reader's interpretation of image and narrative. In 'Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narratives,' Hilary Chute points out that the presence of the subjective standpoint of the author is constituted by the non-transparency of graphic narratives: 'the presence of the body, through the hand, as a mark in the text – lends a subjective register to the narrative surfaces of comic works' (Chute 2008, 457). It is impossible to read drawn images without being constantly reminded of the material conditions of their production. Graphic narratives challenge 'the transparency of realism' (Chute and DeKoven 2006, 770) by displaying the indisputable fact that they are presenting a unique, subjective perception expressed by drawing and colouring.

The contrary effect is ascribed to the use of the close-up in film, which directs the viewer's attention to the represented object itself and not to the producer of the images. Kechiche predominantly uses close-ups in the film version of *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013) with nearly 80% of all shots focusing on facial expression. But cinematic vision, in contrast to graphic novels, is constructed around a primary identification with the camera's point-of-view, giving viewers the illusion that the images they see are unmediated'.

Thus, Kechiche's quasi-pornographic images are not understood as showing his fantasy or desire but rather the viewers are voyeurs and witness to an unfolding story. It is only when the camera's activity is thematised that viewers become aware of their primary identification with it. The close-up is no exception, although it presents the danger of revealing images as a representation (of the point of view captured by the camera). Mary Ann Doane, for example, sees the close-up as a device that threatens the semiotic unity and coherency of the filmic discourse. She writes:

> The most heavily used close-up, that of the face, fragments the body, decapitating it (bringing to mind the perhaps apocryphal story in which Griffith's producer, confronted with the close-up, complains 'We pay for the whole actor, Mr. Griffith. We want to see all of him', [qtd. in Heath 1976, 36]). The close-up in general is disengaged from the mise-en-scène, freighted with an inherent separability or isolation, a 'for-itself' that inevitably escapes, to some degree, the tactics of continuity editing that strive to make it 'whole' again. Space is 'used-up' by the face or object, and the time of the moment … is expanded at the expense of the linear time of narrative. The close-up embodies the pure fact of presentation, of manifestation, of showing – a 'here it is.'… The image becomes, once more, an image rather than a threshold onto a world. Or rather, the world is reduced to this face, this object. (Doane 2003, 90–91)

A close-up is thus a disruption of a narrative, one that highlights its status as a presentation – a representation only available in the present with which it must disappear. A close-up is an image that shows only a part of the body, while being severed from the rest of it. It becomes independent from the space that surrounds it, and from the temporal succession of the story – the close-up is 'atemporal', it stands outside of time. A close-up stands in for an observable part of a living body, it is an indexical sign that stands in only and precisely for itself. When the camera in Kechiche's film frequently focuses on Adèle's open, moaning mouth, it creates first and foremost an image of precisely itself, an open, moaning mouth. Simultaneously, the close-up demands to be read. As Doane points out:

> The close-up transforms whatever it films into a quasi-tangible thing, producing an intense phenomenological experience of presence, and yet, simultaneously, that deeply experienced entity becomes a sign, a text, a surface that demands to be read. (Doane 2003, 94)

In this description, the close-up becomes an object that is experienced through the senses, haptically. It is not the optical depth that establishes meaning by showing us a contextualised setting where an action occurs. On the contrary, the image takes up the whole screen – it becomes its skin, a skin that viewers can touch when running their eyes across the surface (see Marks 2000, 2002). The close-up can consequently be defined as a haptic image that is experienced through the senses. Because the close-up transfers the experiences of images from one sense to the other, it can also ward off the danger to reveal the failure of vision. Vision does not betray the secret of the body; for instance, the laws of attraction that draws Adèle to Emma in Kechiche's film. Instead of revealing the view of the camera, the close-up relates images back to the haptic experiences of viewers. This also means that in contrast to graphic narratives that thematise the subjective and affective quality of the images presented, the filmic close-up cannot escape the condition that it is nevertheless an object experienced through the alignment with the camera. What (or who) is seeing and what is given to be seen are separated from each other. Simultaneously, what is given to be seen needs to be interpreted in a quasi-phenomenological sense, since the close-up is an image that is excepted from any social, historical, biographical information that the narrative has established – as explained

earlier, the close-up is atemporal. It is this atemporality that graphic novels cannot express, since there is no image in graphic novels that does not stress its material condition of having been drawn in a past present that differs from the present time of the readers. And while viewers of films can align their gaze with the camera, forgetting that they are seeing the point of view of someone else, drawing enhances constantly the fact that readers are exposed to the perception of an other.

Contrasting stylistic choices

Maroh's graphic novel connects to Irigaray's points – that a subject needs to translate a coloured perspective by representing it, and that this representation is the starting point for sharing unique standpoints with others – in more than one way. As previously stated, colour in Maroh's graphic novel serves an important function, since it articulates a lesbian's perspective and allows readers to identify with it. In this case, certain coloured items, especially those coloured in blue, are highlighted in the graphic novel, as they are usually drawn against a sepia-toned background. Blue therefore signals the noteworthiness of an object that becomes extraordinarily eye-catching and charged with the intensity of an immediateness that is breathtaking. Transferred to the reader, therefore, is a perception that focuses on specific objects, bestowing a uniqueness and an immediateness upon them that continues to be present over time. Instead of 'sinking down and seeing everything go *gray*' (Irigaray 1987, 154), Maroh's *Blue is the Warmest Color* indeed establishes a perspective that links past-present-future by using blue as the thread that binds them together when signalling the exceptional and outstanding that was, is, and will always be remembered.

What is articulated through colour is thus twofold: first, colour establishes a perspective from which the story is told, one that bestows extraordinary qualities on some of the objects depicted; second, colour shows what precisely is seen as outstanding. And while perception and the perceived circulate around a notion of love that they help to articulate, both signify shared and multiplicable viewpoints. This is the case because the narrative is basically split between three different narrators. There are two intradiegetical narrators: Emma, who narrates events that take place in the present, and Clementine, who wrote down her past experiences in a diary that Emma reads and visualises. Their narrative perspectives are the ones that readers can potentially identify with, thereby making a lesbian love story into a point of identification. However, I want to posit that there is also an extradiegetical narrative viewpoint that announces itself in the stylistic choices displayed in the graphic novel. Rather than depicting objects or pertaining to the narrative, these stylistic choices indicate *how* objects are shown: in what kind of typography or handwriting is (reported) speech, authorial intervention, commentary rendered? How are contours drawn, colours chosen, panels organised? It is the alignment of these three different viewpoints that facilitates an identification with a sexual identity that is often discriminated against and which brings us closer to answering the question of how *Blue is the Warmest Color* allows readers from all walks of life to identify with its lesbian storyline.

The use of close-ups in Kechiche's film can be seen as having the opposite effect to the use of colour in Maroh's novel. In the graphic novel, colour is established as a device that announces the perception of the narrating/drawing subject. Since blue is used throughout the narrative, it links past and present perceptions to each other, thereby establishing what Irigaray has called for in psychoanalytical practice: a representation of perceptions and a forming of perceptions into a perspective in space-time (see Irigaray

1987, 155). Kechiche's film, on the other hand, does not represent perceptions, but rather gives rise to them through depicted objects that are, for the moment that they are shown in a close-up, potentially unbound by place and time. The perspective offered by the film is thus one that relies on the viewers' identification with the camera, and on the simultaneous interpretation and experience by the viewer of what is given to be seen. And what is given to be seen in Kechiche's film is, first and foremost, either faces, sometimes in extreme close-up, or body parts in close-up; body parts that should, according to Aumont, also be treated like a face because they have an operation in common 'which produces a surface that is sensible and legible at the same time' (Aumont 1992, 85, quoted in Doane 2003, 94). Doane, in her reading of Aumont, stresses that the intertwining of interiority and exteriority that is displayed in a close-up seemingly constitutes 'the very revelation of the soul', since it is nearly impossible to not ask 'what is she thinking, feeling, suffering' when seeing a close-up (Doane 2003, 96). And this revelation of the soul is also what has been envisioned as the aim of the film by Kechiche himself:

> Beyond the intimacy of a body lies the human being. This is how I look at human beings in general. This is how I express the obsessions that I carry around with me. What we are, beyond this living body that can be beautiful or almost monstrous. I hope we are not just holes and secretions, even if that is what we are, too. I try to film this question of what we are beyond this animality. It is a truism to say that we are made both of our bodies, of our mechanics, and of feelings of an inner life, but there is something else that goes beyond these two aspects of life. I cannot define it, I only know that it intrigues me. And it expresses itself in feelings as well as in what happens to the body. (Kechiche, quoted in Hagelstein and Janvier 2014, 39. Author's translation)

As Hagelstein and Javier have pointed out, the actress Adèle Exarchopoulos will later describe Kechiche's quest for something that lies beyond psychology and physiology as the desire to 'see people's souls' (Exarchopoulos, quoted in Hagelstein and Janvier 2014, 40, author's translation). Hence, Kechiche's extensive use of the close-up: it shows, beyond the expressive face and the actions and passions of the body, an image that is truly larger than life, and able to transcend the conditions of time and space established in the narrative. What Kechiche shows in his film, when seen through the lens of his style, is thus a vision of 'soul' as established through images rather than narratives, images that show the sensible surface of the body that lends itself to an interpretation through the readers.

In contrast to the stylistic devices used in Maroh's graphic novel *Blue is the Warmest Color*, Kechiche's use of stylistic devices in the medium of film are distinctly different, Kechiche has to express the narrative in an entirely different fashion. Colour, as used in Kechiche's film, precisely enhances its reality-effect since it establishes the illusion that viewers are looking through a window at a world as they know it. While there are plenty of examples of films that have employed colour to enhance their artificiality, Kechiche's use of colour is as unobtrusive as possible so as not to destroy the film's visual semblance with human vision. His technique of choice to render the story relies, in my interpretation, specifically on a single narrative device and a single filmic device: repetition and the close-up. The use of repetition can be easily aligned to the graphic novel version of *Blue is the Warmest Color*. Especially in the beginning of the film, there are a number of scenes that are repeated in a nearly identical fashion. These scenes depict daily routines such as sleeping, eating, and going to school, and establish the monotony of everyday life. This monotony can be linked to the monochrome use of sepia and grey in Maroh's graphic novel, although arguably Maroh rather aligns the absence of colour with a subjective

perspective of someone who is cut off from her own presence and history, since the imposed values and norms of society suppress her lesbian desires. One can understand the use of colour in Maroh's graphic novel as a means to point toward an embodied perception.

The graphic novel *Blue is the Warmest Color* employs three distinct narrative genres that are, according to Chris Straayer (1996, 25), 'familiar to lesbian and gay subcultural representation,' namely 'romance, coming out, and coming-of-age story'. The storyline intertwines each of these subgenres, since the love affair between Clementine and Emma unfolds when Clementine is still in high school, and Emma is an art student – that is, when both are shown to be at important stages of their identity formation. Their involvement with each other also forces Clementine to come out as a lesbian; that is, to acknowledge her sexual orientation to both herself and her surroundings. Clementine's process of coming out is depicted in the graphic novel as being confusing and extremely painful. In school, she has to face the hostility of her classmates, who feel threatened by her exploration of sexuality beyond the confines of heteronormativity. One of her female classmates, for example, becomes extremely hostile and aggressive after she learns that Clementine spent a Saturday night with her friend Valentin at gay bars. She calls Clementine 'twisted', believes that gay bars are places for 'perverts and sickos', and that Clementine is 'doing disgusting things' (Maroh [2010] 2013, 63). She feels sick by the thought that Clementine had spent nights at her house, and pushes her violently away (Maroh [2010] 2013, 63). Clementine's classmate displays here a behaviour that fits neatly into the definition that George Weinberg has given to anti-gay discrimination, namely homophobia understood as an 'antagonism toward a particular group of people [in this case: homosexuals]. Inevitably, it leads to disdain toward the people themselves, and to mistreatment of them. The phobia in operation is a prejudice' (Weinberg 1972, 8, quoted in; Herek 2004, 8). By choosing romance, coming-of-age and coming out as her subgenres, Maroh relies on classical lesbian and gay narratives. Maroh's focus on homophobia and its effects is urgently needed and considering harassment in US-American high schools point to problem zones that are far from overcome. For example, the 2013 GLSEN report on the national school climate shows that 71.4% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning youth (LGBTQ youth) often hear homophobic remarks in their schools; 74.1% LGBTQ youth report having been verbally and 16.5% physically assaulted, and a third of LGBTQ youth report that they skipped school because of being afraid to go (see Kosciw et al. 2013, xvi–xvii). LGBTQ youth often lack positive imagery of their sexual or gender orientation, which might result in feelings of isolation and loneliness. Maroh takes on these topics, showing the hardships of coming out as a lesbian teenager without letting her protagonists lose their integrity.

While Clementine is shown to first experience her desires as disconcerting, she slowly learns to accept them in all their variety. The stylistic choice to highlight some items with the colour blue establishes Clementine's desire as directed to different objects, a manifold desire that is nevertheless articulated through one narrative standpoint announced through the rendering of Clementine's diary entries in word and image. At the beginning, for instance, Clementine is undecided if she should fall or not fall for Thomas, a senior in her high school. Simultaneously, she is haunted by sexual dreams that involve Emma, whom she coincidentally encountered on the street. Blue is attributed to both Thomas and Emma by having some items connected to them stand out in blue against the sepia background. Thomas is shown to wear a blue pullover that lets him stand out against the grey monotony of the high school environment. Emma wears her hair dyed blue (see Maroh [2010] 2013, 5–20). However, as soon as Thomas is undressed, his unique blue quality

transitions to grey. When Clementine goes to bed with him for the first time, she feels frightened, and leaves his house without sleeping with him. The only item that stands out by being coloured blue is a condom lying next to the bed (Maroh [2010] 2013, 21). This small daub of blue indicates that Clementine's sexual interest, while being diminished, is nevertheless present. Later on, she reflects in her diary on that situation, and concludes that she did not want to sleep with Thomas. She feels pulled in two directions. On the one hand, she thinks that she should have had sex with Thomas since she goes out with him, and on the other hand she feels that 'everything I do is unnatural. Against my nature' (Maroh [2010] 2013, 25). In the imagery, Maroh juxtaposes Clementine's past reflections with images of Emma reading Clementine's diary. While at first Emma is shown as a blur, she becomes very visible in the next panel, wearing a blue pullover, in an environment tinted lightly in blue. Colour thereby announces that Clementine's feelings of confusion are evoked because she does not have any clear picture of lesbian possibilities of desire, as incorporated by Emma. Social norms tell her that she should fall for Thomas – 'this is supposed to happen' (Maroh [2010] 2013, 25) – yet the opacity of perception, the unnatural blur, lifts when directed at an object that fits her feelings. Maroh thereby inverts social values that see homosexuality as 'unnatural' – a common misperception against homosexuality – and instead posits, very similarly to Irigaray, 'an art of the sexual that respects the colours' (Irigaray 1987, 165), that honours the singularity of a perspective, and the embodied sensual universe from which this perspective arises. Clementine's coming-of-age could be seen as a process of accepting her lesbian desires as natural, since they belong to her – as bodily feelings and affections that are directed at other persons, in this case at persons of the same sex.

In the narrative, Clementine goes through several stages that allow her to accept her feelings. The first sign of self-acceptance is announced when Clementine writes in her diary that she does not want to suppress her sexual dreams of Emma any more (Maroh [2010] 2013, 32). The second is a process she has to undergo after being isolated at school because of rumours outing her as a lesbian (see Maroh [2010] 2013, 61–81). The third is her coming-of-age after her parents throw her out of her parental house (see Maroh [2010] 2013, 130–31). In a double page that shows some stepping-stones in Clementine's passage through adolescence (finding a home at Emma's parents' house, moving together with Emma to a flat of their own, working as a cashier in the supermarket to earn money, going to university, being together with Emma, seeing friends, becoming a teacher), we see the narrative slowly becoming colourful, despite the tensions it depicts between Clementine and Emma. Clementine is shown to have built herself a life attuned to her feelings, even if they are unpleasant. Her lesbian relationship is part and parcel of coming to terms with oneself.

A radically different effect is achieved through Kechiche's use of close-ups. Kechiche wants to capture, by way of style, a vision of the 'soul' as established through images rather than narratives, images that show the sensible surface of the body, which lends itself to an interpretation by the viewers. Kechiche's aim to search for the soul as it arises from the body is, however, aligned with a point of view that has, in modernity, become humanity's second nature: as Foucault reminds us, the body expresses the soul that inhabits it; the soul is 'the effect and instrument of a political anatomy' (Foucault 1977, 30) that functions since the start of modernity through the disciplining of the body. While close-ups seemingly stand outside of time and space, they bring as their heritage a point of view through which bodies are enounced as the display of an interiority, an interiority that is disclosed to the audience by social conventions. Therefore, while Maroh's graphic novel works along processes of translation that run from bodily perception to

representation to a possible analysis, the viewpoint made possible by close-ups works along an appropriation. What is announced in a close-up is not a subjective viewpoint, but rather an object that is read through the audience's interpretation of bodily features. It is the viewers that add interiority and depth to images, a mechanism that can resist the social value that is given to bodies and their practices, but that can potentially align itself to socially ratified hierarchies. This is because the (camera) gaze, as has been pointed out by numerous theorists, has been considered since the Renaissance to be 'the point from which the spectacle is rendered intelligible' and thereby points towards 'epistemological mastery' (Silverman 1996, 125–126). Relying on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Kaja Silverman stresses that the gaze is more than a machine in the cinematic apparatus: it is a transhistorical and transpersonal structure that is fundamental for subjectivity since it also announces 'the "unapprehensible" agency through which we are socially ratified or negated as spectacle' (Silverman 1996, 133). If we take it for granted that an identification with the camera allows viewers to feel powerful, vis-à-vis images whose value is negotiated when viewing, then it follows that Kechiche's extensive use of close-ups is an ambivalent tool to reveal that which transcends the body. According to Silverman, the viewers´ gaze is always enmeshed with knowledge about embodied social hierarchies that cannot be simply abandoned but only worked through by making preconceptions consciously available. Kechiche´s abundant use of close-ups of the young women's faces, of their breasts, buttocks, bellies, their half-open mouths, flying hair, restive hands, or desiring looks are not free from social value and meaning, even if the close-up itself seems to be lingering in an atemporal limbo detached from narrative demands of continuity or closure. The 'insistent, affective, urgent visualising of historical circumstances' (Chute 2008, 457) that graphic narratives establish through the undeniable presence of subjective viewpoints can therefore not be claimed by Kechiche´s film. The gaze invoked by Kechiche, through the extensive use of close-ups and the constant identification of viewers with the camera, pulls the viewers out of the storyline rather than bringing them in. Even though his stress of elements, such as mismatched class backgrounds leading to relationship tensions, is something that a broad audience could potentially relate to their own experiences, the viewer feels more like a voyeur than a participant in the narrative and therefore the film fails to achieve the personalised impact that the graphic novel accomplishes.

Medium specificity

This essay has been guided by the idea that medium specificity shapes the different statements displayed in a graphic novel and a film called *Blue is the Warmest Color*. Both the close-up in films and colour in graphic narratives give rise to a knowledge about corporeality that exceeds the visual registers. Kechiche´s film mostly draws on the filmic device of the close-up, whose characteristic has been described as being seemingly detached from time and space. Drawing on insights from Silverman's Lacan-inflected film theory, I suggest that this detachment is an illusion, since the activity of seeing is always informed by social values and meaning. These social values and meanings can be worked through once they are made available to a reflection – a reflection for which we need time and space, without being carried away by new information. Kechiche´s film thus works as a representation that does not make its starting point – a perception announced by a camera – available. In contrast, the graphic novel *Blue is the Warmest Color* consistently shows that its representations are linked to perceptions – perceptions that are transmitted through the choice to highlight items through the colour blue.

The graphic novel´s title, *Blue is the Warmest Color*, seems contradictory, as blue has been considered to be the coldest colour since colours were first ranked from cold to warm in the nineteenth century. The title comes from a letter to Emma in which Clementine leaves her the blue dairy she has kept since her teenage years. As Emma reads Clementine's adolescent diary, she revisits the memories of their love story. This story is drawn in sepia, with specific elements highlighted in blue, in stark contrast to the rest of the scene. Because the blue is sparingly used and set in contrast to the hazy sepia shade, the blue items are infused with intensity and significance. Blue becomes a key to understanding the story. It is used as a visual metaphor for self-determination, about finding one's own way, deciding for oneself what is interesting or beautiful, and deciding who one considers attractive. There is an obvious identification of blue with Emma, because it is the colour of her hair. In this sense it also reflects Clementine´s image of Emma as someone that stands out against a flat background (as the blue does in the drawings themselves). Even with the passage of time, Clementine seems to preserve this idea, and therefore blue is also a metaphor for enduring love. Using these stylistic devices, Maroh asks readers to identify with the story of a young woman who falls in love with another woman and who lives that love story in a hostile social environment. The stylistic devices used in the graphic novel are commonly used to allow readers to feel identification with the perspective of the lesbian protagonist in a way that the major stylistic devices used in the film do not. Maroh aims to bring the homosexual experience to a broader audience, to create a commonality with the audience, and to allow readers to identify with the universal themes portrayed in the story. Works such as Maroh's, which offer points of identification to readers, listeners or viewers, create a greater possibility for acceptance of homosexuality beyond a LGBTTIQ audience. This is no small feat given that homosexuality is currently criminalised in 76 countries and still highly stigmatised in many others (see ilga. org). In 2013, there were massive protests in Julie Maroh's homeland, France, against proposed laws for equal rights for marriage and adoption. As evidence of her success to speak to a variety of readers, in a recent interview with Salon.com's Rachel Kramer Bussel on 21 September 2013, Maroh says that she has heard from a wide variety of people in response to her book. In *Blue is the Warmest Color*, Maroh uses visual elements to create a story that is literally tinted by love, using the coldest colour to express the warmest sentiments. Because readers of all genders and sexualities may have experienced, or can identify with, the singularity of love, they are able to enter this story and, likewise, be coloured by it. In this way, Maroh is tinting perception, and not just in blue, but into an entire rainbow.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

Aumont, J. 1992. *Du visage au cinéma*. Paris: Éditions de l'Etoile/Cahiers du cinéma.
Bal, M. 1997. *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
Chute, H. 2008. "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative." *PMLA* 123 (2): 452–465. doi:10.1632/pmla.2008.123.issue-2.
Chute, H. L., and M. DeKoven. 2006. "Introduction: Graphic Narrative." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (4): 767–782. doi:10.1353/mfs.2007.0002.
de Marivoux, P. C. 1982 [1728–1742]. *La Vie de Marianne, ou, Les aventures de Madame la Comtesse de ****. Edited by Frédéric Deloffre. Paris: Garnier frères.

Doane, M. A. 2003. "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 14 (3): 89–111. doi:10.1215/10407391-14-3-89.

Foucault, M. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage.

Hagelstein, M., and A. Janvier. 2014. "Le problème de la vie dans le cinéma d'Abdellatif Kechiche." *Cahier de GRM* 5 (2014): 1–62. Accessed December 30, 2014. http://grm.revues.org/416

Heath, S. 1976. "Screen Images, Film Memory." *Edinburgh '76 Magazine* 1: 33–42.

Herek, G. M. 2004. "Beyond 'Homophobia': Thinking About Sexual Prejudice and Stigma in the Twenty-First Century." *Sexuality Research & Social Policy* 1 (2): 6–24. doi:10.1525/srsp.2004.1.2.6.

Irigaray, L. ed. 1987. "Flesh Colors, Ancona, April 5, 1986." In *Sexes and Genealogies*, 151–167. New York: Columbia University Press.

Iser, W. 1974. *The Implied Reader. Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.

Iser, W. 1978. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Kechiche, A. 2013. *Blue Is the Warmest Color*. London: Wild Bunch.

Kosciw, J. G., E. A. Greytak, N. A. Palmer, and M. J. Boesen. 2013. *The 2013 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth in Our Nation's Schools*. New York: GLSEN.

Marks, L. 2000. *The Skin of Film. Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Marks, L. 2002. *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Maroh, J. 2013 [2010]. *Blue Is the Warmest Color*. Translated by Ivanka Hahnenberger. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.

Mayne, J. 1993. *Cinema and Spectatorship*. London: Routledge.

Silverman, K. 1983. *The Subject of Semiotics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Silverman, K. 1996. *The Threshold of the Visible World*. London: Routledge.

Sobchack, V. 2004. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley, CA: University of California.

Straayer, C. 1996. *Deviant Bodies, Deviant Eyes*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Tessé, J.-P. 2013. "'Tomber le masque.' Entretien avec Abdellatif Kechiche." Les cahiers du cinéma 683.10. Accessed December 30 2014. http://www.cahiersducinema.com/Octobre-2013-no693.html

Tessé, J.-P. 2014. "'Épuisée.' Entretien avec Adèle Exarchopoulos." *Les cahiers du cinéma* 683.10. Accessed December 30 2014. http://www.cahiersducinema.com/Octobre-2013-no693.html

Weinberg, G. 1972. *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*. New York: St. Martins.

Wiese, D. 2014. *The Powers of the False. Reading, Writing, Thinking Beyond Truth and Fiction*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.