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Visibility displaced: lesbian aurality and disruptive self-naming in *Sukkar banat/Caramel* and *Three Centimetres*

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The power granted to the process of listening in *Sukkar banat/Caramel* (Nadine Labaki, 2007) and *Three Centimetres* (Lara Zeidan, 2018), two female-directed Lebanese co-productions, tends to pass unnoticed by critics, despite the important role it plays in the depiction and reception of the lesbian character, and in the production and expression of lesbian desire. *Caramel* is set predominantly in a Beirut hair and beauty salon called *Si Belle* – So Beautiful – run by its head stylist, Layale (played by Labaki). The narrative centres on the lives of five women (Layale, Nisrine, Rima, Jamale and Rose), all facing dilemmas that relate to social taboos, including illicit romance, premarital sex, lesbian desire, divorce, the menopause and disability. The film was included in Samar Habib's list of Arab films that feature Arab lesbian, gay, and bisexual characters, and its inclusion rests on one character alone, the salon shampooist, Rima.¹ Whilst the focus of critics tends to be on the visual representation of the lesbian character, my proposition is that her overlooked role as a *listener* determines the film's staging of lesbian experience and complicates wider discussions of lesbian (in)visibility in cinema. Indeed, Rima's sexuality is performed most strikingly through her listening, through her agency (both active and passive) as a listening-desiring subject.

My analysis examines the auditory expressions of lesbian desire in *Caramel* and the audibility of lesbian difference in *Three Centimetres*, arguing that it is the cinematic soundscape of each film, more than its

1 Samar Habib, 'Filmmakers who feature Arab gay, lesbian and bisexual characters', *Samar Habib*, 25 July 2015, <<https://www.samarhabib.net/single-post/2016/08/03/filmmakers-who-feature-arab-gay-lesbian-and-bisexual-characters>> accessed 25 March 2024.

- 2 The film was selected for the Cannes Film Festival's prestigious independent selection, Directors' Fortnight (*Quinzaine des Réalisateurs*) and was the recipient of the Youth Jury Award, the Audience Award and the Sebastiane Award at the San Sebastián Film Festival in Spain. In 2008 Labaki was honoured with the Insignia of Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Ministry of Culture and Communication. See 'Nadine Labaki', *American University of Beirut*, <<https://www.aub.edu.lb/doctorates/recipients/Pages/labaki.aspx>> accessed 25 March 2024. See also Patricia White, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 123.
- 3 In 2018, *Three Centimetres* was screened in Berlin alongside Lebanese filmmaker Corine Shawi's documentary *E muet* (2013) as part of a programme called 'Hidden Life, Hidden Love: Self-determination and Discrimination in the Arab World'. The film also featured for two weeks on Aflamuna's free online queer Arab film programme, 'Love and Identity in Arab Cinema' (2020). It has featured in more than 120 festival programmes around the world to date, receiving special mentions and winning several awards. When I spoke with Zeidan in June 2020, there had been three screenings in the Arab world, two of them in Beirut. One attracted a small audience that included international filmmakers, Zeidan and her family, while the other took place at an underground LGBTQ+ film festival.
- 4 Juan A. Suárez, 'The sound of queer experimental film', in Holly Rogers and Jeremy Barham (eds), *The Music and Sound of Experimental Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 233.

verbal content or visual imagery, that enables the queerness of its representation of lesbianism to be conveyed. I claim that in Labaki's feature, the queerness of the film's depiction of 'the lesbian' arises from its fashioning of an alternative mode of engaging with her image (via listening) that challenges assumptions about her closetedness. In Zeidan's nine-minute short film, shot on location in May 2017 at the Beirut Luna Park, queerness is expressed through two main disorienting shifts in emphasis: the first from the speaking subject to the listening subject; the second from speech and movement to stasis and non-verbal sound. *Three Centimetres* could be described as the antithesis of *Caramel* (its younger, more rebellious sibling) in that Manal, one of the four protagonists, tells her friends Suzie, Joanna and Tamara that she is 'gay' in the open-air space of a Ferris wheel booth, whereas Rima never refers to her sexuality or discusses it with her friends. Rima's same-sex attraction to her client, Siham, remains 'unspoken', confined to the dimly-lit backroom/'closet' of the salon; her sexuality is hinted at visually but never verbally confirmed.

These two disparate films, made a decade apart, appear to fall either side of a set of dichotomies, making them ripe for comparison: mainstream/marginal, conformist/transgressive, closeted/out. *Caramel*, Labaki's first feature-length film and the first Lebanese film to be granted a theatrical release in the USA,² is associated with a popular genre (comedy/drama/romance), and the style is a mix of sophisticated arthouse cinema and light-hearted entertainment. *Three Centimetres* is an experimental short made by an emerging director that has been screened mostly at festivals and received sparse critical attention by comparison.³ Where one film deploys verbal language in a direct fashion to affirm a clearly delineated identity, the other uses non-verbal cues and visual codes to generate more questions than answers. If Zeidan's film is direct, assertive and open in its apt *outdoor* portrayal of the lesbian character, Labaki's *indoor* portrayal could be described as inhibited, connotative and secretive. Rather than reinforce these binaries, however, my analysis will work to undo their legitimacy, revealing how a more intricate understanding of the sound design and the role of the listener complicates our understanding of the representation of lesbian desire, identity, and its reception in each case.

As Juan A. Suárez affirms, historically 'the rhetoric of sexual liberation has more frequently invoked visibility rather than audibility'. Moreover, 'because of its inherent abstraction and ephemerality, sound, in isolation from language, has seldom been studied as a channel for queer expressiveness'.⁴ Despite the marked lack of critical dialogue between film sound studies and gender and sexuality studies, particularly in the context of lesbian cinema, scholars working in these fields have more in common than one might think. As Scott Paulin observes, they are both concerned with questions of absence (the 'invisibility' of the lesbian figure; the 'unheard' status of the film soundtrack) and 'music often participates directly in constructing on-screen representations of

- 5 Scott D. Paulin, 'Unheard sexualities? Queer theory and the soundtrack', in Roxanne Samer and William Whittington (eds), *Spectatorship: Shifting Theories of Gender, Sexuality and Media* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2017), p. 77. Catherine Haworth shares this view, noting 'the soundtrack impacts directly upon issues of gendered and sexual identity, both in its engagement with the narrative and its characters, and in our own engagement with it as active and individual subjects'. Haworth, 'Introduction: gender, sexuality, and the soundtrack', *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2012), p. 130. Developing this further, James Buhler affirms that a queer reading of the film soundtrack would therefore be 'concerned with the "articulation of power and sexuality" [...] how desire is made audible on it, from whom, by whom, and to what purpose'. Buhler, 'Gender, sexuality and the soundtrack', in David Neumeyer (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 370–71.
- 6 Luma Balaa, 'Framed: the door swings both ways in the Lebanese movie *Caramel*', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 20, no. 7 (2019), p. 443.
- 7 Maria Abdel Karim, 'Queer representation in Arab and Middle Eastern films: a case study of women in *Caramel* (2007), *Circumstance* (2011) and *In Between* (2016)', *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 20 (2020), pp. 74–77.
- 8 White, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema*, pp. 125–27.
- 9 See Sofian Merabet, *Queer Beirut* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014), p. 251. See also Nick Dawson, 'Nadine Labaki, *Caramel*', *Filmmaker Magazine*, 1 February 2008, <<https://filmmakermagazine.com/1301-nadine-labaki-caramel/>>; "'Caramel" director Nadine Labaki on remaking the chick flick', *New York*, January 2008, <https://www.vulture.com/2008/01/caramel_director_nadine_labaki.html> both accessed 25 March 2024.

desire and sexuality'.⁵ In the first part of this essay I argue that *Caramel* makes use of the historically marginal, 'unheard' status of the film soundtrack to give form to the figure of the lesbian in all her ambiguity and singularity, without commodifying her image or subsuming her identity into a more visually reassuring and acceptable form. Guided by the key visual signifier of Rima's headphones, which she is seen wearing throughout the film, and inspired by the theoretical notions of a 'lesbian musicality' and a 'haptic aurality', I propose that the film's aural expressions of lesbian desire produce what I call a transient lesbian aurality – a dynamic space of sensuous listening and desiring that is shaped more by rhythm, touch, non-verbal sound and quiet than by the pleasures of looking. This sound space is fostered by the peripheral presentation of the lesbian character's musically infused relationship with her female client, an encounter that comes alive 'backstage' in the salon, and also by her intimate relationship with music, and through music with the audience.

Luma Balaa's review of *Caramel* explores the film's 'covert' portrayal of lesbianism, describing Rima as a shy woman who is forced to express her sexuality in subtle connotative ways, primarily via her dress code and self-presentation: her short hairstyle, her refusal to wear dresses and her resistance to having her leg hair removed. Balaa argues that the contrast between light and darkness during the shampooing scenes becomes 'a symbol of released and hidden lesbian sexual desires'.⁶ For her part, Maria Abdel Karim singles out 'darkness' as a key motif that expresses the taboo nature of lesbian love in Lebanon, whereby relations between women can only take place in secret, thus inferring, by contrast, that light is associated with notions of openness, honesty and sexual freedom.⁷ I contend that Rima does not operate solely as 'a stand-in for closeted Lebanese lesbians',⁸ despite Labaki's own assertions to the contrary, nor can she be understood as a straightforward reflection of the culture of shame and public intolerance that envelops lesbianism in the country. The ambivalence surrounding Rima's non-disclosed identity could be perceived as reflecting the nuances involved in negotiating gender and sexual nonconformity in a country where all 'sexual activity contrary to nature' is still considered a punishable offence under Article 534 of the 1943 Penal Code, and where the inclusion of sexual content on screen is banned by the censor.⁹ However, by focusing on 'listening' we are better equipped to recognize how the treatment of music, diegetic sound, and the construction of a listening subject (embodied by Rima and the audience) actively produces and enacts lesbian desire with a mediated immediacy and a boldness that exceeds the constraints of visual representation.

In the second part of this essay, my analysis demonstrates how the figurative unmasking of Manal in *Three Centimetres*, thanks to her verbal act of self-naming, is less a dramatic disclosure of her 'true self' than it is of her friends' paralyzing antipathy to her non-normative identity. Their failure to listen expansively, beyond the familiar and the

- 10 Clara Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema After Queer Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), p. 13.
- 11 One example is the highly stylised lesbian sex scene in Chantal Akerman's *Je tu il elle/ I ... You ... He ... She* (1974), which includes unusually loud diegetic sound. Another is the initial car ride sequence in Todd Haynes's *Carol* (2015) where the dialogue is quieter than the non-diegetic score. This sonic imbalance has a disorienting effect on the listener since we can hear the sibilant 's' at the end of Carol's words more so than the words themselves, as if semantic meaning and all sense of equilibrium is being overwhelmed by the expanse of their erotic connection.
- 12 For example, in Karin Albou's *Le chant des mariées/The Wedding Song* (2008), it is through the principal theme of faith (Muslim–Jewish 'interfaith intimacies') that the sub-theme of lesbian intimacy is explored. See Maria Stehle and Beverly Weber, *Precarious Intimacies: The Politics of Touch in Contemporary Western European Cinema* (Chicago, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020), p. 89.
- 13 During an unpublished Skype conversation Zeidan and I had in June 2020, she revealed that the core theme of female homosexuality in *Three Centimetres* dissuaded a number of actors from taking on the role of Manal, for fear of a backlash or future problems in their career. Moreover, her film was reviewed by censors in Lebanon before it was shown there, and it passed without having to undergo restrictions. Zeidan believes it passed the censor smoothly due to the contentious subject of female homosexuality being articulated only via the dialogue.
- 14 Suárez, 'The sound of queer experimental film', p. 233.

socially sanctioned, reveals uncomfortable heterosexist truths about Manal's auditors – her immediate friendship group – who serve as a microcosm of the audience, standing in turn for wider majoritarian social attitudes. Throughout the analysis of both films, I regard moments of relative silence, stillness and darkness as active listening spaces, which in *Caramel* enable an interior site of secrecy and uncertainty to be reimagined as one of exciting possibility. In *Three Centimetres*, the listening space works in a transformational manner by amplifying the homophobic response to the public 'coming-out' moment instead of the other way around.

It is important to point out that it is still the case in contemporary cinema that 'Sexual specificity determines lesbian legibility; sex becomes the visual evidence through which sexuality registers', as Clara Bradbury-Rance stresses.¹⁰ If explicit sex acts are required to legitimize representations of lesbian sexuality, directors have sought to circumvent this expectation in different ways, especially via their manipulation of sound.¹¹ Just as a director may choose to reimagine the possibilities of making lesbianism visible on screen in an act of political and aesthetic resistance (through minimalism, audiovisual excess, or decentring strategies), they may also be obliged, owing to censorship regulations, to rely on indirect forms of representation by channelling sensuality through colour, texture, sound or music. Alternatively, the director may wish to foreground those regularly side-lined markers of identity, such as religion, race or disability, that relate but are not secondary to sexuality.¹²

Labaki and Zeidan both complied with the censor when making their respective films, purposefully avoiding scenes of explicit sexual activity, especially those that might be seen to promote female homosexuality.¹³ In an effort to prevent total erasure, they trod a complex and paradoxical path between political resistance (against an exploitative and controlling voyeuristic gaze; against the disembodiment of commodification) and censorial necessity. Their films shift the power dynamics from the visual to the aural register – from the 'look' to the (non-verbal) 'sound' of lesbian experience – in a way that still challenges the audience to engage with the image of lesbianism within a particular cultural context, but from a more expansive and multifaceted perspective that resists normative conceptualizations of lesbian visibility based on western cultural assumptions. I show how both films capitalize on the mobile, amorphous qualities of sound, and the bodily pleasures and discomforts involved in acts of listening, to render audible a lesbian perspective specific to the local context of Beirut, but one that remains muted when 'the visual representation of queer bodies, desires and worlds' takes precedence.¹⁴

On the surface, the ambivalent representation of lesbian desire in *Caramel* is frustratingly predictable (discreet and socially palatable),

- 15 Abdel Karim remarks that *Caramel* offers a more socially acceptable representation of lesbianism than many other Middle Eastern films with lesbian characters, such as Maryam Keshavarz's *Circumstance* (2011) and Maysaloun Hamoud's *Bar Bahar/In Between* (2016), avoiding the perils of state censorship and death threats thanks to its understated depiction of a lesbian character. See Abdel Karim, 'Queer representation in Arab and Middle Eastern films', p. 80.
- 16 White, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema*, pp. 126–27.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 125–26, 131.
- 18 White makes this point in her discussion of the film, arguing that it takes up the comfortable position of thematizing lesbian identity, 'while not having to be on the line itself as a lesbian film'. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- 19 Anat Pick, 'New queer cinema and lesbian films', in Michele Aaron (ed.), *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 107.

appealing to mainstream audiences by reflecting tolerance and diversity but shying away from offering a more disruptive and uncompromising counter-cultural vision.¹⁵ Whilst Patricia White refrains from describing Rima as a lesbian in the closet, she highlights her constrained sexual expression, her non-disclosure, and the seductive ambiguity surrounding her 'cryptic identity'.¹⁶ The character does enough to signify difference, White suggests, and just enough to signify lesbianism to lesbian and queer audiences. White argues that the representation of lesbianism in *Caramel* is not so much expressive of a sexual identity or sexual practice per se, but serves as a vehicle to thematize issues facing modern Lebanese women, shining as 'an emblem of Lebanon's modernity', its tolerance and 'liberal inclusiveness'.¹⁷ Labaki's rather idealistic, risk-averse portrayal of Rima could certainly be charged with appeasing audiences' conservative expectations, and thereby doing a disservice to Beirut lesbian communities by creating a simplistic picture of their daily lives.¹⁸ Consequently one could conclude that it fails to offer what Anat Pick terms, in her discussion of the commodification of lesbian 'marginality' in films of the new queer age, 'a radically lesbian position *vis-à-vis* mainstream culture'.¹⁹ Yet the aural dimension of *Caramel*, in its interaction with the visuals, enables a slightly different interpretation to enter the frame.

The 'caramel' of the title refers to the syrupy, edible paste used in the ancient hair-removal technique of sugaring. Devoid of familiar reference points, the film begins not with an establishing shot to introduce us to the setting and characters but with a culturally specific beauty ritual: how to make, enjoy, and make use of the eponymous caramel. A slow tracking shot moves over the swirling substance, as if caressing a body, and is followed by shots of the sugar being heated, caramelized, and lovingly prepared for consumption. Attention is given to the indulgent process of making and consuming the caramel, with its taste, smell, and viscous materiality accentuated. The diegetic sounds of the cooking process – the ignition of gas, the rustling of poured sugar, the stirring of caramel, the loud hisses of simmering liquid – are heightened and infused with an aura of passion and danger thanks to Khaled Mouzanar's enigmatic Tango music. We see close-ups of hands kneading the caramel, and shots of Layale, Rima, and the stylist Nisrine feeding it to each other and laughing.

This unnarrated scene of transient pleasure then cuts to a clinical scene of work: behind the salon curtain, Layale performs a sugaring treatment on a client, but we are denied visual access to the spectacle of this procedure. Whilst the curtain acts as a visual barrier, resisting our prying eyes, aural proximity is permitted via the client's breathy gasps and screams from behind the curtain as the camera tracks towards them. Thus from the very start of the film, both the cultural setting (Middle Eastern rituals linked to sugaring) and the construction of a specifically feminine space are privileged and protected, while the mingling of senses trains us to 'see', non-intrusively, beyond the demarcations of the visible sphere,

serving as a blueprint for what is to come. Significantly, in this opening section, our scopis desire to see behind the opaque screen (like a metaphorical mask) is refused, forcing a different mode of engagement to open up through listening and imagining. Later, during Rima's three interactions with Siham in the salon, this strategy of forming a decentred visual experience through sound and aurality is repeated and developed further, but this time in a non-clinical, subjective and sensual way.

Whilst nothing explicitly sexual is ever shown to us visually in this film, the heightened diegetic sound, the soft music, and the fleeting utterances between Rima and Siham gently eroticize the aural ambience. Throughout, our desire to listen is made to align with Rima's: we want to listen to what she listens to through her headphones, just as we want the relationship with her female client, Siham, to flourish. Our role as a listener (not a viewer) is imbued with both a personal and an ethical dimension because, as we shall discover, it is through her agency as a listener that Rima teaches the audience how to move towards unassimilable otherness in a non-possessive manner. In effect, through her listening she instructs us how to listen, and thus how to face what is difficult to see. In this early part of the film, then, a cultural ritual is shared with us and we are invited to partake in the fun and frivolity of making and consuming the caramel. Yet as our vision is ultimately blocked, our outsider status is magnified and we are asked to find an alternative means of 'seeing' and making sense of the other behind the screen. It is precisely the distance and the unknowability that Rima maintains between self and other through her immersion in aural experience that enables her, and her audience, to do this.

Within the first 15 minutes of the film we are introduced to Rima in some detail, beginning with a brief establishing shot of her shampooing Siham's hair, a flash-forward to their later meetings. Rima's headphones are almost always over her ears, affording her some peace from the hubbub of the salon and the gender norms that are perpetuated therein. During the first extended sequence of Rima, we see her taking an evening bus home after work and then a young woman sitting down beside her. For a few seconds, Rima gazes at the woman. There is no dialogue, no voiceover, and no diegetic sound for the duration of the sequence; nothing is explained. This moment, filmed in four discrete shots, exists in a bubble of its own. Slightly dislocated from the main narrative, it becomes incorporated into the film thanks to the common thread of the musical theme that returns during the shampooing scenes. Indeed, Rima is wearing headphones and is listening to what we might assume to be the lilting, instrumental waltz-like music, in a minor key, that we too can hear, suitably entitled *Révélation mineurs* (Minor revelations) in the soundtrack album playlist. Whilst Rima's headphones might function variously as a protective barrier between herself and the outside world, as a sonic space of safety, fantasy and imaginative escape, I contend that they represent not a space of hidden or repressed desire but one of cool detachment from the surrounding dominant culture – an

Fig. 1. Creating an aural counterspace: listening with Rima as she listens, in *Sukkar banat/Caramel* (Nadine Labaki, 2007).



unfazed vulnerability and a necessary impenetrability that enables her to navigate her everyday surroundings (see figure 1).

The status of the music that plays during the bus-ride sequence – a spell-binding melody, filled with fleeting suspensions and dissonant harmonies – is deliberately ambiguous. The audience is positioned on the unstable aural border between Rima’s private headspace and the public non-diegetic sphere. Are we listening to what Rima can hear, or is this the non-diegetic score, and Rima listening to something else altogether? When the music returns during the later shampooing scenes, the sound is softer, potentially more distant, and the diegetic sounds are more pronounced: could the music be coming from speakers in the salon or from Rima’s headphones hanging around her neck?

The anxiety bound up with our uncertainty as to the music’s location echoes the lack of verbal or visual conclusiveness about Rima’s lesbian identity. This state of unease is captured perfectly in sonic terms by Robynn J. Stilwell’s theoretical concept of the ‘fantastical gap’, which invokes a fluctuating space of magic and danger, of fantasy, dream and possibility. This is the indefinable ‘border region’ between diegetic and non-diegetic music, a ‘place of destabilization and ambiguity’ that points to a productive ‘gap in our understanding’.²⁰ It is also a ‘transformative space’ because when the boundary is crossed between one ‘stable state’ and the other (when we realize the ‘exterior’ non-diegetic score might in fact be emanating from the ‘interior’ diegetic space of Rima’s headphones), our perception shifts.²¹ We realize that our point of audition, to use Michel Chion’s terminology, may be aligned with Rima’s: she is the character through whom we hear. Chion clarifies that the notion of a point of audition has two meanings: a spatial meaning – ‘from where do I hear?’ – and a subjective meaning – ‘which character, at a given moment of the story, is (apparently) hearing what I hear?’²² The listening experience of Rima’s bus journey, which sees her situated in transit, queers the space she inhabits through the slippage it generates between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, between foreground and background, and

20 Robynn J. Stilwell, ‘The fantastical gap between diegetic and nondiegetic’, in Daniel Ira Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer and Richard Leppert (eds), *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 186–87.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 200.

22 Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, 2nd edn, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 89. See also Anahid Kassabian, ‘Rethinking point of audition in *The Cell*’, in Jay Beck and Tony Grajeda (eds), *Lowering the Boom: Critical Studies in Film Sound* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), p. 302.

through its intensification of the liminal qualities of strangeness and open-endedness that become associated with female same-sex desire.

Our perception of the theme music is forever adrift between private and public, between diegetic and non-diegetic, and it is no coincidence that this state of aural liminality, operating in excess of any clear-cut category, is linked to the fluidity of lesbian desire. The porous nature of Rima's experiential world is shown to extend beyond her individual subjectivity, and beyond any simple dichotomous split between inside/outside and, by extension, between a closeted or out lesbian character. It calls attention to the listener's active role in the construction of an alternative intersubjective space of listening, looking and tactile experience, namely, a transient lesbian aurality that intermittently disrupts the female homosocial space of the salon. Her evening bus ride through the city constitutes an unnameable, ephemeral in-between space, distinguished by the digressive flux of desire, possibility and auditory pleasure. It acts as a fragile site of potential belonging between more prescriptive and limiting stable identities such as those imposed by 'work' and 'home'.

The positioning of the last cut in the bus-ride sequence confirms, finally, that the music is ultimately non-diegetic and is not the music in which Rima is immersed as she travels home. Yet the return of the same music during the later shampooing scenes reminds us of the musical relation being forged between Rima's headspace, filled with musical pleasure and desire, and that of the audience. If the bus sequence appears to function as a marginal aside to the central narrative – as a minor side-story to be registered and forgotten – the music, and the lesbian listening experience it kindles, cumulatively becomes a powerful queer refrain that does not signal closetedness but constitutes an errant aural counterspace in the diegesis.

On occasion, film scholars have introduced notions of 'haptic listening' and 'haptic aurality' in their analyses of both fiction and non-fiction film. These concepts refer to the tactile and corporeal nature of sound and hearing, and the musical, embodied, and non-semantic aspects of spoken language ('the surfaces of sound').²³ Working in the field of documentary sound studies and documentary listening, Irina Leimbacher fleshes out her concept of 'haptic listening' by drawing on Laura Marks's theorizing of the distinction between 'optical visibility', related to perspectival representation, and 'haptic visibility', related to the textural surface and material presence of the image. She likens the contrast between optical and haptic visibility to the aural contrast between 'verbal- or referent-oriented listening', which concerns the extraction of knowledge, and non-referent-oriented listening, which concerns the 'embodied and nonverbal aspects of spoken language'.²⁴ During Rima's first encounter with Siham, the layering of diegetic sounds with the musical theme creates a shimmering effect, starting with the quiet clicks of Rima fixing Siham's towel that mingle with the tinkling percussive sounds in the musical score. The metallic creaking of

23 See Lisa Coulthard, 'Haptic aurality: listening to the films of Michael Haneke', *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2012), pp. 16–29; Irina Leimbacher, 'Hearing voice(s): experiments with documentary listening', *Discourse*, vol. 39, no. 3 (2017), pp. 298–99.

24 Leimbacher, 'Hearing voice(s)', p. 298.

taps, the clinking shower hose, the ‘pshhh’ of rushing water, the crinkly sound of soap bubbles, and the snippets of soft dialogue all mix with a rippling string accompaniment, tarnishing its musical purity. This augmented sonic surface produces a pervasive haptic aurality that contrasts with the unambiguous acoustics of the narrative’s other heteronormative spaces (the locatable beeps of a car horn, the precise sound of a phone’s ringtone, a conventional dialogue scene, the absence of music when Rima is forced to have her leg hair removed in preparation for Nisrine’s wedding).

From a personal and musicological standpoint, Suzanne Cusick has examined the potential cross-over between one’s musicality and one’s sexuality – judging them to be ‘psychically right next door’ – as she considers what ‘a lesbian relationship with music’ might entail.²⁵

Reflecting on her own sexuality and her experiences as a musician and musicologist, Cusick notes that all relationships are concerned with the distribution of power, and sexuality ‘is a practice that allows movement within a field defined by power, intimacy, and pleasure’.²⁶ ‘Lesbian sexuality’ and its neighbour, ‘lesbian musicality’, involve organizing the power, pleasure and intimacy triad outside the forces of compulsory (reproductive) heterosexuality, outside the male/female binary, and beyond the symbolic order of the ‘phallic economy’, allowing one to experience the joy of ‘living in a world free of fixed categories’.²⁷ My notion of a ‘lesbian aurality’ retains the haptic dimension noted above, and shifts the focus of Cusick’s discussion from the musician to the listener, and from music-making to the entwined acts of listening and desiring. Following Cusick, if ‘lesbian’ is less an identity than a means of organizing one’s ‘relationship to the world in a power/pleasure/intimacy triad’, it can also be located in one’s *musical* relationship to the world. Rima’s sexuality is not stated outright as a static identity, but it is reflected in her relationship with music and the sonorous world, constituting a transient lesbian aurality, which describes a listening space and an ambience conducive to a lesbian listening experience. Through her activity as a listener, Rima invites us into a space where a quiet, rhythmic and largely non-verbal expression of intimacy between women thrives, transgressing professional boundaries and queering the regularizing rhythms of the surrounding workplace environment.

Pervading the encounters between Rima and Siham, the mildly disorienting qualities of distant music, sonic closeness, and the posture of receptivity, symbolized visually via Rima’s headphones, selectively enact an aural language of lesbian desire that exceeds the parameters of the visual and verbal and asks us to engage with it differently. The composition of diffuse sounds envelop the listener’s body in a way that decentres the usual sites of erotic pleasure and their visualization. Rather than perceiving the music, the darkness and the relative silence produced by the hushed diegetic sounds as indicative of an impossible, hidden desire, the shampooing scenes could be read in a more affirmative manner as an undaunted aural fashioning of ‘their space’. The qualities

25 Suzanne G. Cusick, ‘On a lesbian relationship with music: a serious effort not to think straight’, in Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (eds), *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, 2nd edn (New York, NY: Taylor and Francis, 2006), p. 71.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*, p. 73.



Figs 2 and 3. Sensuous listening and desiring: Rima and Siham's first and third encounter in the backroom of the salon, in *Caramel*.

of darkness and quietness, indicative of a space of shame, secrecy and uncertainty, come to be associated with a relational space of listening, desiring and intimate communication in which the lesbian character(s) can flourish.

In the first and second shampooing scenes, Rima wears her headphones around her neck, but in the third scene she wears them fully over her ears, prompting Siham to take on a more active role in re-anchoring Rima in the pleasurable circuit of their exchange by asking, 'What are you listening to?' (figures 2 and 3). When Rima takes them off, Siham changes the subject completely, stating 'Your hair is beautiful'. I read this gap in understanding as a respect for the irreducible otherness within the lesbian encounter, despite Siham (and the audience) wanting to share in the drifting opacity of Rima's semi-private/semi-public musical pleasure. This moment also exemplifies how Rima's active 'tomboy' persona is occasionally permitted to dissolve into the 'passive' feminine softness embodied by Siham, destabilizing the delineation of active/passive roles. This hybrid fluidity speaks to Cusick's description of the 'scrambling and shifting of roles' in the

power/pleasure/intimacy triad that constitutes a lesbian musicality. This form of subtle role-swapping thwarts the stereotypical reproduction of a binary heterosexual model of relationality; for Rima, the active doer (the shampooist, the assistant who takes deliveries, the one who restarts the electrical generator, the driver, the singer at the wedding), is also the receptive listener.

Rima is positioned throughout the film as a listening subject who is always linked to a female love interest. The cyclical pattern of her encounters, the diffuse layering of diegetic sonic detail during her first encounter with Siham, and the disruptive glitches discussed below that are associated with them, endow her relations with women with a lesbian musicality, generative of a lesbian aurality. Following Cusick, a sexual identity is understood as ‘a person’s position vis-à-vis the means of expressing and/or enacting relationships of intimacy through physical pleasure’, which could be through their ‘musical activity’ – for my purposes, this includes their ‘listening activity’. Thus, for Cusick, ‘our “sexual identity” might be “musician” – or ‘listener’ – more than it is “lesbian,” “gay,” or “straight”’.²⁸ Whilst the word ‘lesbian’ is left unuttered in *Caramel*, and no sex acts are shown, lesbian as an identity is most strikingly voiced through Rima’s aurality – her corporeal activity as a listener. Lesbianism is most ‘visibly’ and openly *performed* aurally, away from prying eyes, which is, paradoxically, a powerful political act of resistance in one sense, and a survival tactic in another.

Like a form of ‘selective disclosure’, lesbian desire is selectively *enacted* through Rima’s listening, and in turn it comes to be recognized and ‘seen’ through the audience’s participatory acts of listening. Ghassan Moussawi explains that the queer strategy of selective disclosure, deployed by some LGBTQ+ Beirut citizens, is ‘a relational process in which individuals disclose a nonnormative aspect of their life that may or may not directly relate to sexuality’, and that ‘concealment and disclosure play a central role in reproducing and resisting normative understandings of queer visibility’.²⁹ Moussawi is careful to always link such strategies to the region’s precarious political and economic situation, and its historical past of violent conflict, referring to everyday disruptions in the Lebanese capital such as power outages, a lack of clean water, the threat of violence, a permanent sense of unease and a fear of the unknown.³⁰ He describes how some of his interlocutors’ deliberate choice *not* to identify as LGBTQ+ serves as a form of resistance, specifically related to the post-civil war context, and how the fact that ‘last names are still used to determine people’s religious sect’ and even their political affiliation, leads to a general sense of unease and powerlessness about situating oneself in “boxed” categories’. Therefore, rather than signalling closetedness, he suggests that in modern-day Beirut, a refusal to align oneself with a sexual identity category can be a means of reclaiming power and ‘opening up possibilities’.³¹

It is significant that moments of fleeting interruption or breakdown are associated with Rima and her appointments with Siham, and that they

28 Ibid., p. 70.

29 Ghassan Moussawi, *Disruptive Situations: Fractal Orientalism and Queer Strategies in Beirut* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2020), pp. 91–92.

30 Ibid., pp. 5–10.

31 Ibid., p. 89.

32 Electricity blackouts are common in Beirut, a result of fuel shortages, economic crises and government corruption. These moments when the power fails remind us of the geopolitical context outside the bubble of the salon and the film's diegesis.

33 In one scene, Rima is perversely forced by her own co-workers, Layale and Nisrine, to comply with a torturous pre-marital feminine ritual, involving sugaring, nail filing and makeup. In contrast to her encounters with Siham, Rima has a great deal of dialogue as she protests their actions, and the musical theme is conspicuously absent. Nisrine utters, 'I'd like to see you in a skirt, like a real girl. You're always complaining. You can't come to my wedding looking like this!' Unfortunately Labaki risks reinforcing harmful stereotypes in her portrayal of Nisrine, the only woman of colour from a religious Muslim family, by giving her some of the most scathing and pejorative lines in the film.

34 Other reminders of external socio-economic instability and geopolitical fragility include the down-at-heel look of the crooked 'B' in the salon's storefront sign, which provides visible evidence of urban dilapidation while hinting, more optimistically, at future possibilities for female agency: the meaning hovers between 'So Beautiful' (*Si Belle*) and 'If she ...' (*Si elle ...*). The filming was completed in Beirut in July 2006, just a week prior to the outbreak of the 2006 Lebanon war between Israel and Hezbollah, comprising 34 days of rockets, bombing and death.

always occur mid-shampooing – the electricity cuts out and they are plunged into darkness, or they use up all the hot water.³² The mutual desire between Rima and Siham – a sultry but shy woman who, as she says of herself, happened to be just passing by, with 'nothing to do', whose queerness is signalled via her self-proclaimed non-productive status – produces a temporary glitch in workplace operations, before Rima is tasked with restarting the generator and its mechanized din. The salon, like the body, constitutes a gendered site of economic exchange, shaped by consumer capitalism and heteronormative expectations. There is a subtle parallel expressed in *Caramel* between the destabilization caused by the everyday blip of an electrical power failure, which throws Rima's co-workers off-balance, and the disruptive queerness of the lesbian character's personal 'failure' to perform heteronormative femininity.³³ Despite its light-hearted mood, and the absence of any direct reference to the legacies of the Lebanese civil war (1975–90) or indeed to more recent violence, the film's questioning of the place of lesbianism in a heteropatriarchal society binds it significantly if indirectly, via the threat of instability it poses, to the wider geopolitical context.³⁴

In the final few minutes of the film, after the wedding of Nisrine, we return to the central location of the salon where co-workers Nisrine and Rima can be seen blow-drying their clients' hair. Then, as in previous scenes, the doorbell rings and Siham appears at the door. Her sleek dark hair is for the first time hanging loose. We see a shot of Siham from behind as she sits in a chair facing a mirror. She is about to have her hair cut short, despite the likely disapproval of her family, in a symbolic gesture of transformation and transgression. During this episode, a haunting song plays on the soundtrack: 'Mreyte Ya Mreyte' (Mirror, Mirror on the Wall) by Mouzanar, with lyrics by the Lebanese singer-songwriter Tania Saleh and performed by the Syrian singer Racha Rizk. A close-up of the wet strands of Siham's hair falling to the floor visually extends the caressing touch of Rizk's voice as she sings 'Listen to my story / Tell me who I am ...'. With these lyrics, Labaki teases the spectator by implicitly referencing the Orientalist stereotype of the mysterious, silent Arab woman, while simultaneously denying the spectator any satisfying resolution to Siham's reticence and anonymity. Alongside its commitment to open-endedness rather than closure, and in step with its refusal to explicitly name and potentially contain the lesbian subject, the film finally addresses the spectator directly as a listening subject, using the imperative: 'Listen'. Developing the film's ethical positioning of the spectator both as an outsider and as a receptive listener, we are ultimately asked to recognize our powerlessness to establish a set of visual-verbal parameters that determine the legibility of an 'authentic' Arab lesbian identity, and instead are urged to recognize our role and responsibility as a listener-participant in the production and performance of lesbian desire.

Despite their differences, *Three Centimetres* and *Caramel* share one key formal strategy, namely, a shift in emphasis from the visual and verbal to the peculiarly tangible but invisible sphere of sound and aurality. In *Caramel* our attention is deflected back to the sonic surface and sensorial feeling of the lesbian encounter, and away from the optical visibility of its appearance. Zeidan's short, *Three Centimetres*, takes place entirely on a Ferris wheel, and consists of a single take of the wheel turning, with the camera positioned on the wheel itself. Inspired by an awkward conversation between Zeidan and a friend about sex (how to experience sexual pleasure without compromising one's virginity), the film appears at first to operate very differently from *Caramel* by prioritizing 'verbal- or referent-oriented listening', due to Manal's act of self-naming. Yet I argue that this verbal-oriented mode of listening, attuned to 'gleaning signification and knowledge from words',³⁵ is progressively de-emphasized, as the drama of Manal's sexuality becomes the drama of her friends' response, intensified by the drama of the city's 6pm power cut, as the focus is relocated from the verbal to the non-verbal, and from the individual to her surroundings.

The forced 'outing' of Manal is not the most significant event of the film; the most significant (albeit indirect) confessional moment is the unveiling of the homophobia lurking within her friendship group and, by proxy, within the wider institutional fabric of society. Instead of transporting us towards a brighter future of openness and acceptance, moving from the murky, dark underbelly of the wheel to the clarity of bright sunlight up high, the film plunges us into a listening space defined by fear, stasis and uncertainty. As if to echo and gently mock the audience's trepidation as to how the narrative 'journey' will unfold, the film starts with anticipation and a certain serenity, shifts to thrill-seeking fun as the friends joke around as they board the wheel, and ends in thwarted expectations and fracture following the breakdown in motion and friendship. Yet through the visual and verbal disarray, the soundtrack reigns victorious: through its creaks, rumbles, beeps and shrieks, it joyfully celebrates Manal's dissonant position within her friendship group, from the beginning to the end of the nine minutes.

At the start of the film, Suzie, the most uninhibited and confrontational of the four friends (aka 'the sexually active virgin'),³⁶ relishes the opportunity to quiz her friends on, in her words, 'bending the rules of virginity'. Her deviancy shows itself in her playful desire to seek out viable alternatives to heterosexual penetration (she mentions cycling, rock music, and dance as options). It is surprising, then, that rather than offering support to the more introverted Manal, who later retorts 'Ana gay' ('I'm gay'), Suzie is the most antagonistic in her response. Her disbelieving and viscerally hostile reaction to Manal's declaration reinforces the system she was provocatively attempting to bypass moments earlier, one of strict patriarchal control over female sexual autonomy. Her response exposes the rigidity and homophobia

35 Leimbacher, 'Hearing voice(s)', p. 298.

36 Alexander Farrow, 'Interview with Lara Zeidan – *Three Centimetres*', *AFMI*, <<https://arabfilmstitute.org/interview-with-lara-zeidan-director-of-three-centimetres/>> accessed 25 March 2024.

underpinning her ostensibly transgressive idea of sexual freedom, hinting at the possible denial of her own homosexual desires.

The increasingly cruel nature of Suzie's heterosexist banter becomes explosive when Manal is forced to declare her sexual identity in an act of self-protection and assertive resignification. Suzie suggests that for Joanna to get over her break-up with her ex-boyfriend, Marwan, she should 'imagine him gay' (her flawed logic being that this would repel Joanna, and she would no longer be attracted to him). This inadvertent insult forces Manal to stand up for herself, which she does by immediately reclaiming the word 'gay', using the monosyllabic English word rather than 'lesbian/*lesbienne*' to describe her sexual identity. Far from constituting a life-affirming journey from closetedness to sexual liberation, Manal's self-disclosure shines the spotlight on the indignant attitudes of her friends, Suzie and Joanna in particular, exposing their fear of, and resistance to, her stigmatized status as the homosexual 'other'. Manal's reuse of the word 'gay' disassociates it from Suzie's derogatory usage and reinscribes it with a more positive meaning. The uneasy climax of their conversation is marked by silence, discomfort and angry statements of denial from Suzie and Joanna ('You can't be gay. Your father's a deputy!'), tinged with homophobia ('Why hasn't she told us? Because it's complete bullshit', 'Look at her clothes. She can't be gay!'). Pejorative lesbian stereotypes are invoked when Suzie implies that Manal's clothes are too feminine for it to be true, or that lesbians are attracted to every woman in the vicinity.

What is distinctive about this moment of self-naming is that attention is given not to Manal's own angst, or her own heroic journey towards freedom, but to the receptiveness (or lack thereof) of her friends. Suzie's angry homophobic anxiety that her friends 'turned out gay', 'they're all gays', coincides with the halt of the ride due to the power failure, and the girls' uncomfortable entrapment at the top of the wheel. At this point, the gaps in dialogue grow and the erratic camera movement increases, making us hyperaware of the surrounding sensory environment, including every squeak, whirr, swerve, and gust of wind. Once the wheel stops turning completely, a longer period of near silence ensues, punctuated by traffic sounds, and the characters are forced to listen to the world beyond each other's words. Disorientation caused by the power cut, framed by the country's precarious economic situation, becomes confused with the queer disturbance or 'malfunction' apparently triggered by Manal's naming of her sexuality, which poses a threat to the heteronormative subject and the surrounding culture, encapsulated by the friendship group who are suddenly rendered powerless, frozen in time.

This moment of literal and figurative stasis constitutes *the* queer moment of the film, which is precisely *not* Manal's declaration that she is gay, but it is the sudden onset of feelings of loss, weakness, insecurity and instability that spoil the anticipated thrill of the ride. The loss of electrical power symbolizes the temporary breakdown of friendship and the symbolic wilting of heteronormative expectations. This hiatus

simulates a break in the narrative flow through slowness and relative silence, without Zeidan resorting to a cut in the editing structure. By pausing the circular motion of the ride, causing a kink in the regularity of its movement, Zeidan amplifies the feelings of discomfort experienced by Manal's friends when confronted with the monstrous prospect of female homosexuality so close to home. Joanna remarks: 'What the hell is this ride?', as though the innocent fun and pleasure of the Ferris wheel has turned into a warped ghost train. The pause in motion also creates a moment of reflection, with what I term the 'wheel-protagonist' calling up cinematic memories of Jocelyne Saab's civil war documentary *Lettre de Beyrouth/Letter from Beirut* (1978). Saab's documentary, 40 years earlier, finishes with shots of the very same Ferris wheel. In her poetic voiceover speech, which ends the film, Saab likens the vast mechanical object to the oppressive economy of warfare. Earlier she has visited the studio of Aref el Rayess, a Lebanese painter and sculptor. He shows her one of his paintings that combines the beauty of Beirut's landscapes with the machinery of modernity and war. He likens 'the new machinery of war' to 'a monster reverberating through people's minds', before the camera cuts to a shot of Saab walking towards the Ferris wheel, staring up at its great height. She then repeats the words of the artist, referring to the ringing of war in people's minds 'like a monster'. We see a shot of the base of the wheel, with the carriages passing by, before the camera ascends and peers out at the city towards the sea. These shots stunningly foreshadow the early part of Zeidan's film (figures 4 and 5).³⁷

The mechanical structure of the wheel, associated in Saab's documentary with war, violence, blood and death, becomes in Zeidan's short a sort of magical yet disturbing object-witness of history. *Three Centimetres* captures the troubling permanence of the inhuman machinery of war and its beloved passenger, heteropatriarchal hegemony, while boldly feminizing and queering the very same structure. This reference to Saab's film raises the spectre of an association between the inhuman 'monstrosity' of war and the 'monstrosity' of female homosexuality with its threat to the patriarchal order.

Significantly, the film's soundtrack is composed solely of direct sound, and it is the raw quality and unpredictable nature of this that conveys the sense of fear and foreboding most effectively. In addition to the strange shift in emphasis from speaker to listener, and the unstable period of stasis, the film's queerness is also expressed through the unruly noisiness of the wheel and the wider urban soundscape. As Suárez has suggested in the context of queer experimental film, 'camp' (stylization and excess, especially via the recycling of pre-existing music), 'noisiness' (disturbance and interference) and 'dissonance' (disjunction and mismatch) can serve as expressions of aural queerness, with noise capable of signifying dissent, upheaval, impurity, and the transgression of moral norms.³⁸ The film begins in darkness, with the camera positioned at the base of the wheel, as though caught inside the

37 Asking Zeidan about this parallel during our Skype conversation, she revealed that, although accidental, one of the shots from Saab's film is almost identical to a view she captured in *Three Centimetres*. I am grateful to the Jocelyne Saab Association for allowing me to include a screenshot from the restored version (2019–22) of *Letter from Beirut*.

38 Suárez, 'The sound of queer experimental film', pp. 245–49.



Figs 4 and 5. The view from the wheel in *Lettre de Beyrouth/Letter from Beirut* (Jocelyne Saab, 1978), top, and *Three Centimetres* (Lara Zeidan, 2018).

machinery, accompanied by a loud ambient whirring sound, like an old movie projector being fired up. Gradually we ascend and are greeted with serene views of the sea, but also with menacing creaks and sporadic beeping from the traffic below. The raucous sounds fade away, allowing us to take in the breathtaking view in near silence, interrupted only by the faint return of dissonant grinding as the wheel turns, like the start of a modernist symphony. Louder creaks and screeches accompany the descent back to earth and back to the world of dialogue, as if a competitive struggle is about to ensue between the verbal and the non-verbal.

Only then do we finally catch sight of the protagonists, larking around as they excitedly wait to take their place on the ride. Once the wheel restarts its journey with the girls on board, the harsh sounds spontaneously and unnervingly re-emerge but are drowned out for long periods by the girls' animated chatter. The next period of quiet occurs immediately after Manal's abrupt statement about her sexuality, and the emotional dynamics that follow are carefully shaped by the background noise and the chaotic camerawork. Once the power is back on and the wheel restarts, the creaks and rumbles return to the sonic foreground, like a constant reminder of the disruptive effects of Manal's nonconformity.

Turning to *mise-en-scène*, the visible structure of the wheel, which frames and bisects the characters' interactions in their booth, symbolizes the omnipresence of social norms and structures that cause divisions between individuals and communities by controlling spaces and bodies. At several points the metal pole at the centre of the booth creates a clear demarcation line between Suzie and Manal, indicative of the acrimony at the heart of their friendship (figure 6).

The vulgar connection made at the start between penetration and the physical height of the wheel – Joanna: 'How high is this thing?' Tamara: 'You want it in metres or centimetres?' – inscribes the structure with a phallic significance and an assertion of virile masculinity that, signalled by the ease with which the wheel is halted, is revealed to be incredibly fragile. The construct of the wheel is gently queered by Manal's presence, with the disclosure of her sexuality disrupting the heterocentric space of the booth, catalyzing a process of destabilization among her friends at the same time as they are spatially derailed, hanging immobile, out of joint, in the air. The temporary shutdown of movement forces Manal's friends, and by extension the audience, to gain a more intimate insight into the feelings of strangeness and alterity that pervade Manal's everyday experiences as a young homosexual Arab Lebanese woman, surrounded by mostly antagonistic heterosexual friends (Tamara seems to be the only exception), who must negotiate her multiple identity positionings in an unstable daily situation.³⁹ This observation is inspired by Moussawi's exploration of the everyday queer tactics deployed by LGBTQ+ Beirut inhabitants, who are living in an 'already-disruptive or queer situation'.⁴⁰

Despite the decade that separates *Three Centimetres* and *Caramel*, in both films deviant female sexuality and desire appear to destabilize the smooth running of society, as well as the smooth functioning of the heterosexual friendship group surrounding the lesbian character. Power failures in *Caramel* constitute a distinguishing feature of Rima and Siham's burgeoning relationship that takes place 'out of sight', at a distance from the salon floor. They temporarily suspend the functioning

39 Manal (and the actress who plays her) is an Arab woman, and the details of her religious background are deliberately omitted by Zeidan, possibly to prevent questions of religious affiliation from overshadowing the social stigma attached to her sexual identity.

40 Moussawi, *Disruptive Situations*, p. 12.



Fig. 6. Suzie (left) and Manal (right) on the Ferris wheel in *Three Centimetres*.

of heterosexual hegemony that governs the dominant spaces within both films, and this cessation of activity is inseparable from the local context of Beirut and the prevalence of power outages in the country. Via contrasting strategies, each film's depiction of the lesbian character is linked to the precarious state of the region, which consequently magnifies their own vulnerable, marginal status in relation to other aspects of their identity: Arab woman, worker, listener.

Thanks to the dizzying intensity of the single-take form of *Three Centimetres*, the spectator is almost tricked into believing that the mechanical breakdown is the work of the homosexual saboteur. Indeed, the one invisible cut that does occur, the external power cut, seems to be prompted internally by the micro disruption of female homosexuality within a heteronormative context, whose presence in both films cannot be fully decoded, understood or defined through an outsider's gaze. The journey we are taken on proves uncomfortable due to the literal stoppage of the wheel and the tensions that follow, as well as to the lack of music, and the unpredictable swings from noise to quiet and back again. In many ways the film positions itself in stark contrast to the universal 'coming-out' narrative, typically embodied in mainstream cinema by the white, western, secular gay subject.

If, as discussed, Manal does not seem to subscribe openly to western LGBTQ+ culture, she deliberately deploys the English word 'gay' to name her sexual identity. However, the fragile sounding of this word just before the girls' unstable mid-air hiatus, and against the backdrop of the Lebanese capital, produces a juxtaposition that exposes the dissonance between the public expression of sexual identity and the difficult negotiation of western discourses on sexuality. In Lebanon, a country formerly under the French Mandate, consideration of language use is crucial, as the Lebanese feminist activist and founder of Meem (the Beirut-based queer activist support group), Nadine M., affirms in her 2010 case study of the organization.⁴¹ In a section called 'Reclaiming Our Own Voices', she links the difficulty of defining oneself as lesbian and Arab to the lack of inoffensive Arabic expressions and the ubiquity of positive terms in English and French:

The words for 'gay' and 'lesbian' are still commonly translated as 'pervert' in common everyday language, while the LGBTQI community is starting to get used to the more recently coined term for homosexuality – 'mithliyya'. But we still feel awkward with these new terminologies that denote queer identities, transsexuality, bisexuality, etc., as they are direct transliterations of the English words.⁴²

In *Three Centimetres*, the terms 'gay', 'orgasm', and 'masturbation' are uttered either in English or French but not in Arabic. According to Zeidan, this is because, in her experience, Arabic equivalents do not form part of everyday discourse when discussing sex and sexuality. Neutral terms for 'gay' and 'lesbian' do exist in Arabic (*mithli* and

41 An awareness of the local context demands recognition of the general ethos of the Beirut-based queer activist support group Meem, founded in 2007, especially its non-identitarian strategy of 'relative (but not complete) invisibility'. Meem sought to provide a safe space for women that was less visible than the other main LGBTQ+ social movement organization in Lebanon, Helem, an NGO founded in 2004. Meem was established by members of 'Helem Girls', a subgroup aimed at 'centralizing women's issues' within what they perceived to be a largely male-dominated organization. See Ghassan Moussaw, '(Un)critically queer organizing: towards a more complex analysis of LGBTQ organizing in Lebanon', *Sexualities*, vol. 18, nos 5/6 (2015), p. 602.

42 Nadine M. Meem, 'Arab queer women and transgenders confronting diverse religious fundamentalisms: the case of Meem in Lebanon' (Association for Women's Rights in Development, 2010), p. 17, <<https://www.oursplatform.org/resource/arab-queer-women-transgenders-confronting-diverse-religious-fundamentalisms/>> accessed 25 March 2024.

43 Unpublished Skype conversation between Zeidan and Fox, June 2020.

44 Moussawi, *Disruptive Situations*, p. 91.

45 Abdel Karim, 'Queer representation in Arab and Middle Eastern films', p. 82

46 Samar Habib, *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representations* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), pp. 132–33.

mithliyya), but they are still underused in everyday dialogue. It is more common to hear Arabic terms with pejorative connotations.⁴³

If Zeidan's short film disrupts any straightforward linear movement from closetedness to positive visibility, from darkness to light, from secrecy to truth, from inside to outside, or indeed from local to global, it enacts what Moussawi describes as a 'third mode' that queer Beirut people deploy to navigate 'dominant middle-class, white Euro-American concepts' such as the affirmative coming-out narrative, which they tend neither to reject completely, nor to actively support.⁴⁴ Zeidan's film must surely count among the 'more positive and overt representations' of sexual minorities in the Middle East; representations that, as Abdel Karim writes, 'can induce change and progress, enabling more Arab queers to become accepted within their communities'.⁴⁵ Yet, like *Caramel*, the film also deliberately adds nuance to the spectator's perception of convenient dichotomies, and underlines the complexity of the girls' hybrid cultural identities, straddling western and Arab cultures.

Rather than the focus being on Manal's personal confession, the true coming-out experience of this film lies with the listener. The cliché of a dramatic scene of revelation, whereby difference is resolved and contained through assimilation into heteronormative culture, is undermined, as attention shifts first to Manal's friends' hostile attitudes and then to those of wider society. For Suzie and Joanna, Manal's noisy, non-conforming sexual identity seems partly to constitute a betrayal of trust and friendship, perhaps harking back to the depiction of homosexuality as a 'betrayal of one's nation', a trait Samar Habib identifies in late 1970s Egyptian films in which homosexual characters are portrayed as naive victims of western influence, guilty of betraying their nation and disregarding their culture and its most important beliefs.⁴⁶

From the first to the ninth minute, Zeidan's film exploits the persistent presence of unwelcome, dissonant background sound to express, and in a way celebrate, lesbian difference in an act of unspoken, noisy defiance. Whilst these sounds intermittently disappear, their resolute reappearance communicates to the audience that lesbian identity is not a phase, an escape from the trials of heterosexuality or a monolithic identity, but is something dynamic, contingent and resilient, from which Manal's friends, and the audience, cannot escape. Moreover, the absence of music and the dynamics of stasis and relative silence produce a disorienting queasiness that lingers, stagnates and remains unresolved, denying the audience any promise of future stability. When compared to *Caramel's* subtler emphasis on the haptic site of a transient lesbian aurality, filled with warmth and indulgence, *Three Centimetres* immerses us in the discomfort produced by the queering of a heterocentric site of female friendship, offering no peace but generating a more profound transformative experience for the listeners involved.

In *Caramel*, through our listening we are encouraged to take pleasure in the mutable, the inaccessible, and the unfixed: we are immersed in a sensuous soundscape that Rima may or may not be immersed in too, and we desire access to her private auditory world. It is precisely the vibrational, non-ocularcentric activity of listening that both frees Rima to express her gendered and sexual otherness, in conflict with the feminine beauty ideals and sociocultural norms that surround her, and that allows her sexuality to retain its singularity in a predominantly heterosexual and appearance-obsessed environment. The discreet repetitions of the lesbian encounter, defined by circular gestures, soft sounds and hypnotic musical interludes, ambivalently hovering between the diegetic and the non-diegetic, create a non-teleological space of pleasure, fantasy and surprise that is ultimately more subversive than a nebulous form of contained homoeroticism.

If in *Caramel* it is Rima's performance of listening that renders lesbian desire intelligible to us by summoning the audience to participate in the construction of a space of sensuous listening and desiring (a transient lesbian aurality), in *Three Centimetres* it is the noisiness of the soundscape that compels us both to recognize Manal's difference and to reflect on the failure of others to listen expansively to all that is unfamiliar and unassimilably other. Both films make use of the unseen status of the soundtrack, and the silent activity of listening, to call into question the conditions of visibility for the lesbian subject in Lebanese cinema. Zeidan and Labaki turn to the soundtrack to tease out alternative ways of expressing lesbianism beyond the trials of censorship, beyond the trappings of objectification and commodification, and beyond the reductiveness of visual and verbal tropes. Each film relies expressly on the listener, not the viewer, to participate as political, ethical and sexual subjects, in acts of desiring and recognition, in order to co-create lesbian meaning in all its heterogeneity and specificity.

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