

Teaching Women's Filmmaking
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Department of Film and Television, Istanbul Bilgi University

Video Essay Title: FILM AS SOUND ART: embracing love through extra-diegetic sound in Nadine Labaki's *Caramel*

Video Essay Link: <https://vimeo.com/470078914>

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Module for which it was produced: 'Introduction to Film Language, History and Theory' at SOAS, University of London.

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Abstract

Teaching film often involves un-learning previously taught stories of cinema, and instead offer a set of frameworks, theories and examples informed not just by histories of cinema, but rather *herstories* (Dovey, 2018) and *theirstories* of cinema. When designing and teaching the undergraduate module Introduction to Film Language, History and Theory at SOAS, University of London, other than devoting a week to women filmmakers, there was an explicit intention from the very beginning to highlight their remarkable contributions throughout the whole module, fostering a more critical and intersectional discussion of gender. The video essay 'FILM AS SOUND ART: embracing love through extra-diegetic sound in Nadine Labaki's *Caramel*' constitutes an illustrative example of this practice. Lebanese woman-led film *Caramel* (2007) is the main case study of the second week in the module, devoted to the introduction and importance of sound in cinema, or as Michel Chion (2009) puts it, 'film as sound art'. The early inclusion of this film in the syllabus has proven to foster a high degree of enthusiasm and complex readings among class members. First, it emphasises the crucial role of sound in the narrative (Walker, 2015), often disregarded in film studies. Second, it contributes to rethinking the film canon, by bringing to the centre of the discussion a non-Western example. Finally, it encourages critical reflection about the idea of the gaze, supported by and building on existing written scholarship (Balaa, 2019, White, 2015). This is precisely what this video essay is about. It selects and creatively compiles clips from the four encounters between two characters in the film, Rima and her customer in the hair salon. The clips show two women gazing at each other in a multi-sensory way, evoking a romantic relationship, even if this stays in the hair salon. While there is barely any dialogue, the use of extra-diegetic music forges an intimate atmosphere, just lived by the two of them. The decoding of these moments is shaped by the viewer's background and lived experiences. In this video essay, I analyse this within the context of censorship in Lebanon, where explicit representations of same-sex relationships could still be punished by law. I suggest sound plays a significant role in the representation of a queer gaze between the two characters, as a form of being subversive to the heteronormativity and patriarchal society. In so doing, it further queers the audience's gaze, as this is invited to join such safe space for women, the hair salon. *Caramel* then both serves as an excellent example of the possibilities of sound in film, and of film as sound art. It also allows an insightful discussion about the female gaze from an intersectional perspective.

List of References

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Biography

Estrella Sendra is a scholar, teacher, filmmaker, journalist and festival organiser, currently working as Senior Teaching Fellow in Film and Screen Studies at SOAS, University of London; and as Teaching Fellow in Global Media Industries, at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton. She engages with creative and innovative teaching methods, such as assessment through video essays, informed by her research and practical experience in the cultural industries. This is the co-author of the [Introductory Guide to Video Essays](#) published in *Learning on Screen*, and the author of the journal article '[Video Essays: Curating and Transforming Film Education through Artistic Research](#)' (2020). In 2018, she completed her PhD in African Languages and Cultures at SOAS. Her research interests include film festivals and creative industries, global screen media, African cinema, audiovisual representations of migration, transnational communities, and gender. Since 2011, when she directed *Témoignages de l'autre côté / Testimonials from the other side* (2011), an awarded documentary film about migration, she has been developing a regional expertise in Senegal. She was the director of the Cambridge African Film Festival from 2014 to 2016, and has been involved in several film festivals as an organiser, curator, jury member and media officer in the United Kingdom, South Africa, Senegal and Spain.