

LESBIAN IMAGES AND THE COLOR (ED) LOVE IN THE COLOR PURPLE

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RESUMO: Este estudo tem por objetivo analisar, sob a perspectiva dos estudos de gênero e feministas, as representações de identidade e de sexualidade da personagem Celie do filme *A Cor Púrpura* (1985), dirigido por Steven Spielberg. Na análise estão também incluídas as representações dos relacionamentos homoeróticos entre as personagens Celie e Shug. Tais relações são investigadas em cenas selecionadas deste filme, no sentido de mostrar como os elementos cinematográficos (edição, luz, cenários, cores, movimentos de câmera, ângulos símbolos, etc.) estão organizados a fim de retratar associações lésbicas tendenciosas. As conclusões deste estudo mostram que as ligações femininas, entre as personagens citadas, parecem possuir um marca ambígua no sentido de que o desejo lésbico é explicado como consequência de maus tratos masculinos.

PAVARAS-CHAVE: Sexualidade; Representação; *A Cor Púrpura*; Elo feminino; Heterossexualidade compulsória.

ABSTRACT: This study aims at analyzing, in light of gender and feminist theories, the representations of identity and sexuality of the character Celie from the movie *The Color Purple* (1985), directed by Steven Spielberg. In the analysis, the homoerotic relationship between the characters Celie and Shug is also considered. These associations are investigated, in selected scenes from the films, to show how cinematic elements (editing, lighting, setting, colors, camera movements, angles, props, etc.) are configured in order to portray biased lesbian associations. The conclusions show how the female bonding between these women seem to have an ambiguous mark in the sense that lesbian desire is explained as a causal effect of male mistreatment.

KEYWORDS: Sexuality; Representation; *The Color Purple*; Female bonding; Compulsory heterosexuality.

In Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* (1985), the main character Celie has always perceived men as a negative model. She grew up in a home with a very strict father who ended up raping her, and as result, she gave birth to two children. The father justifies his psychological and sexual harassment on the grounds that his marital life is

unfulfilling. This is obviously a very traumatic experience for Celie, but it is not the end. In fact, it is just the beginning of a long period of suffering in the hands of a cruel husband in a racist and male dominated environment. The turning point in Celie's life begins with the arrival of her husband's mistress, Shug Avery. Contrary to her husband and father, Shug helps Celie to develop self-esteem and confidence by praising her qualities and beauty. The two women eventually begin a homoerotic relationship that triggers Celie's liberation and empowerment.

Since Hollywood is a film industry that tends to entertain a predominantly heterosexual conservative mass audience, it usually presents biased gay/lesbian representations. In Hollywood films, gay and lesbian characters have usually representations of deviants (*Basic Instinct*, 1992); monsters/vampires (*The Hunger*, 1983); brutal killers (*Cruising*), 1980; (*The Silence of the Lambs*, 1991); the ones who make people laugh (*Birdcage*, 1996) or the ones who receive pseudo gay/lesbian images (*Fried Green Tomatoes*, 1991). According to Chris Jones,

Representation is a social process which occurs in the interactions between a reader or viewer in a text. It produces signs which reflect underlying sets of ideas and attitudes. An integral part of the process of reading a film is the use of stereotyping, the depiction of characters according to their perceived membership of a certain social group such as Asians, mothers in law, businessman, lesbians. This is a form of shorthand; a few visual or sound cues give the audience a view of a certain type of person which is widely accepted the nature of this view is generally shaped by the dominant groups in a society. (Nelmes, 258)

For Jones, representation is a process of interaction between the film and the audience which constructs meanings due to its identification according to values, social

class and gender positioning. Since, as aforementioned cited, most Hollywood films tend to consider a heterosexual audience, the construction of biased portrayals and perhaps negative models of gays and lesbians in cinema perpetuate and reinforce compulsory heterosexuality in society. In this subject of biased representations and homoerotic images, I shall investigate the pivotal importance of the kiss scene between the two main characters, Celie and Shug, of the cinematic version of *The Color Purple* (1985). Although the importance of the female bonding in women's lives in the movie is essential, introducing a sense of sisterhood, I would like to explore, in this article, the sequence which conveys the homoerotic love between Shug and Celie.

Thus, I aim at showing how the homoerotic kiss in the film plays an important role as a basis for Celie's quest for her identity as a whole. As I will present later, the film erases the possibility of a more intense homoaffectivity between the two characters, whereas in the book of same name, written by Alice Walker, the lesbian bonding is a prime mark for the narrative. According to Walker, the film *The Color Purple* does not portray a convincing lesbian kiss since "In the movie almost all the women kiss each other, making the kiss between Celie and Shug less significant." (Walker, 168). At this point, my analysis is divided into three parts: the sequence in which Shug sings to Celie in Harpo's bar; the kiss scene between the two women; and finally, the sequence which shows Shug visiting her father in the church.

My intention when analyzing these sequences is to show how cinematic elements (editing, *mise-en-scène*, camera movements, angles, etc) operate in order to depict the homoerotic love between Celie and Shug as a biased lesbian relationship in the sense that their love is considered to be fraternal, and as a consequence of male mistreatment. Besides that, Shug is a sinner mainly in the view of her father, a preacher, who perceives her as a sinner woman as she has a lover and does not follow the rules

imposed by society, which also connotes mainly a male point of view in the narrative. Also, at the same time, she is the woman who “teaches” Celie how to discover love through a mouth kiss.

Although all the props and motifs in this scene convey the idea of female sensuality and lesbian desire, the homoerotic relationship between Shug and Celie is, at the end, never consummated. Due to this fact, the female bonding between these women on the one hand promotes Celie’s liberation; on the other, it becomes a means to erase lesbian existence since Shug’s and Celie’s relationship is silenced in the movie. The scene in question has received much criticism by feminist and gay theorists due to the fact that the lesbian environment between Celie and Shug was downplayed both by the screenwriter and the movie director in order to please a mainstream audience who, according to Steven Spielberg, “was not prepared to understand the scene” (Steven Spielberg DVD’s interview).

In the scene that precedes this sequence, Shug is the woman who mostly triggers men’s attention and sexual desire, while she is in Harpo’s bar dancing and singing in a vivid red dress: “Oh sugar dumpling, let me taste some” and “You can catch a fish without a hook”, says a man to Shug. (figure 1)



The editing conveys the idea of a predominant male point of view (Figures 1-2-3)

In the sequence, the scene cross-cuts to Shug's father preaching in a church (figure 2) by saying: "Babylon ain't no far-off place in the desert. It's right here! Just a few hundred yards from this holy place" and then cuts to Shug's face again (figure 3). This shot conveys the idea that Shug, wearing a vivid red dress and sensually dancing, metaphorically represents lust and sin and, due to this fact, Shug will not be worthy of her father's forgiveness. According to Alice Walker, Shug is seen in the film as an "outlaw, renegade, rebel, and pagan" (Walker 35). Walker's words about Shug's character, in the movie, imply the idea that Shug is a woman who does not follow the standards imposed by religion and society and also challenges male dominance. Shug's father does not accept the fact of having an unmarried daughter who does not follow social norms. Since he is a preacher, a man of God, he sees Shug as an outsider, a prostitute and, consequently, a person who does not fit into the moral and sexist society she lives in. This scenario also implies the question of patriarchy and male dominance in which the woman is judged by men based on sexist and moral values, which frame her as a sinner, an outlaw, a woman who refuses to accept the norms of a male dominant and sexist society.

Contrary to this male power, in the next shot, Shug is no longer playing the role of pleasing men and being the object of their male gaze, but dedicating to the weak Celie a song called Miss Celie's Blues (Sister) that conveys the power of the female bonding between the two women as it is illustrated in the following lyrics

Woh wohUhm uhmUhm uhmSister,
you've been on my mind

Sister, we're two of a kind

So sister,

I'm keepin' my eyes on you

I betcha think
I don't know nothin' But singin' the blues
Oh sister, have I got news for you
I'm somethin'
I hope you think
that you're somethin' too
Oh, Scufflin',
I been up that lonesome road
And I seen a lot of suns goin' down
Oh, but trust me
No low life's gonna run me around So let me tell you somethin'
sister Remember your name
No twister,
gonna steal your stuff away
My sister
Sho' ain't got a whole lot of time
So shake your shimmy, Sister
'Cause honey this 'shug
is feelin' fine, (Quincy Jones, 1985)

According to Walker: “The song Miss Celie Blues (Sister) which [she] immediately imagined as a signal of affirmation that women could hum to each other coast to coast, is an immeasurable gift to the bonding of women.” or that MmmmMmm,

MmmmMmm” could become the women’s national anthem” (Walker 31; 46). Thus, Walker’s words express the importance of music in this sequence and consequently for the film as whole, since women, through music, express their feelings and life experiences.

In this scene, at first, while Shug is dancing for men, Mr. is full of enthusiasm and the close-up of his face connotes his superior position over Celie on the screen. A low key light makes Celie appears as only a dark shadow behind Mr. (figure 4). Nonetheless, as Shug starts to sing for her, she immediately assumes a different position on the screen. Now, the focus is on Shug and Celie, and Mr. is merely placed in the background of the framing in an inferior position under the two women (figure 5). However, when this sequence is analyzed more carefully, one may perceive that this sequence’s editing (a cross-cutting connecting the male voice of Shug’s father followed by his moral and religious judgments, while Shug is singing to men, and especially, when the scene cuts to show Shug singing to Celie) not only conveys the idea aforementioned presenting Shug as sinner, but it also permeates Shug’s attitude toward Celie, and, consequently, the following kiss scene between the two women. In other words, due to the editing of this sequence, what seems to predominate is the male point of view of Shug’s father since he (through the narrative) sees her as a personification of the devil; a sinner.



Figure 4



Figure 5

After having analysed this sequence, I shall move on to the scene which is the core of my study in this article: the kiss scene between Celie and Shug. It starts right after a fight among some men at Harpo's bar.

This scene is composed of twenty one shots. The first shot begins with a close up of a record player playing diegetic music which seems to be a jazz song from the early twenties and then cuts to the second shot that shows Shug's hand holding a cigarette and a bottle of whisky. The third shot is a medium close up of Shug dressed up wearing a fancy red robe, jewelry and smoking a cigarette. The scene's setting is the room where Shug is staying in Albert (Mr_) and Celie's house. The bedroom is full of colored objects and clothes which seem to have come from a cabaret act. Shug's costumes and performance connote her position as an experienced and independent woman, but completely out of the standards imposed by society for a woman at that time: she smokes, does not dress like a married woman and also drinks alcohol. (figure 6).



Figure 6

In the fourth shot, contrarily to Shug, Celie looks shy and since she has never had many experiences in life but taking care of her cruel husband and her sons-in-law.

In this shot, Shug dresses Celie in the same red dress she wears in her performance at Harpo's bar (figure 5). Shug's act by lending her red dress to Celie is to make her feel beautiful and self-confident. Shug tries to encourage Celie to perceive herself as a woman and more than that, as a human being.



Figure 7

Thus Shug's red dress, besides connoting the idea of lust, also portrays female power in the sense that when Celie wears it, she feels beautiful for the first time in her life. However, the sentences that Shug says, (or the way of saying them) in order to stimulate Celie, seem to be sexist and male-oriented such as: "You can make a blind man see" or "You can catch a fish without a hook", both sentences are coincidentally the same used by men to express their desire for Shug while she sings at Harpo's bar.

In the fifth shot, Shug's attempt is to make Celie quest for her identity and consequently her sexuality. Since Celie has always been assaulted and told by her father and husband she was "ugly" and "spoiled", or as "the ugliest smile in this side of creation" she always covers up her smile and is afraid of looking at people. Contrary to this repressing situation, in the sixth shot, Shug says she wants to give Celie "a smiling lesson" by teaching her how to look/gaze at herself in the mirror, and then smile. In the seventh shot, Shug holds Celie's hand and turns her in front of the mirror so that she can

see her face without covering up her smile and consequently seeing herself. According to bell hooks in “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators” (1992), the gaze is political. The author comments on her childhood memories and on the power of looking:

[...] I remember being punished as a child for staring, for those hard intense direct looks children would give grown-ups, looks that were seen as confrontational, as gestures of resistance, challenges to authority. The “gaze” has always been political in my life. Imagine the terror felt by the child who has come to understand through repeated punishments that one’s gaze can be dangerous. The child who has learned so well to look the other way when necessary. Yet, when punished, the child is told by parents, “Look at me when I talk to you”. Only, the child is afraid to look. Afraid to look, but fascinated by the gaze. There is power in looking. (hooks 247)

On this reading, Celie is also seen as a child afraid of looking and mostly with no power at all. Due to the fact that men have always been in control of her life, Celie has never been allowed to look. In most of the sequences of the movie, when Celie is asked something, her head is in a downward position. Besides, Celie’s attitude towards men is entirely of subservience. In this sense, the gaze for Celie is also a matter of position of power. In the eight shot Shug asks Celie to stop covering up her smile (figure 8) and to look at herself in the mirror; at first she feels shy, but she gives in and releases a loud laugh (figure 9).



Figure 8



Figure 9

Once Celie can look at herself in the mirror and smile, she discovers who she really is: a wanting person who has never had the opportunity to see herself as a woman or simply as a human being. According to Foucault, “power is a system of domination which controls everything and which leaves no room for freedom” (apud in Hooks 248). However, when Celie sees her smile in the mirror it becomes a prop that portrays the beginning of an inner process of liberation against male power. This idea is reinforced by Digby who states that

[t]he mirror [is] a prevalent symbol of self in the film. It is the opposite of looking through a window, which is used many times figuratively, along with glasses of water and of lemonade, to convey the essence of Celie as a transparent female vessel who nevertheless has the power to see through deceptions to truth. (Digby 166).

Thus, for Digby, differently from other scenes in the movie in which Celie sees her image only reflecting her condition as a passive woman under the control of men, now Celie’s reflection in the mirror is a symbol of her transformation. However, Celie’s

identification with her own body is not present in this sequence of the movie. Unlike the movie, in one passage of the book, Shug asks Celie to look at her vagina in the mirror. Looking at her body, Celie becomes more capable to deal with her anxieties and with the fears she faces for living in a sexist and predominantly male society. The discovery of Celie's body according to Daniel Ross is

“One of the primary projects of modern feminism [which] has been to restore women's bodies. Because the female body is the most exploited target of male aggression, women have learned to fear or even hate their bodies. Consequently, women often think of their bodies as torn or fragmented, a pattern evident in Walker's Celie. To confront the body is to confront not only an individual's abuse but also the abuse of women's bodies throughout history; as the external symbol of women's enslavement, this abuse represents for women a reminder of her degradation and her consignment to an inferior status”. (70)

Along the issue of identity presented in this scene, the tenth shot introduces Celie's discovery of her sexuality. The atmosphere of happiness caused by Celie's liberation is interrupted when they start a conversation about Celie's husband at the same moment that Shug announces she is leaving the town. Celie's facial expression cannot hide her pain and sadness when she tells Shug that Mr. beats her for not being Shug.

Despite having sexual relationships with the same man, Shug and Celie have mixed opinions about it. In the fourteenth shot, we have a close-up of Shug's hand putting some music possibly to calm Celie down. The frame then cuts to the fifteenth shot to show in a medium close-up both talking, sitting on bed. In the talk, Shug admits having a passion for Mr_. “I know he a bully, but there's some things I love about him

[...] I got what you call a passion for him, If was ever going to have a husband he'd been it. But he weak". Besides that, she admits to love having sex with him. On the contrary, Celie claims that despite her sexual relations with her husband, she has never felt loved or desired by him. When asked by Shug about her sexual relations with Mr., Celie says:

Celie: "He don't even ask me how I feel, He never ask me about myself, He just climb on top of me and do his business"

Shug: Do his business? Miss Celie you sound he going to the toilet on you

Celie: That's what it feel like

Shug: Then, Miss Celie, that mean you still a virgin

Celie: Yeah, because don't nobody love me

In this context of Celie's lack of desire and passion, Shug is amazed by Celie's revelations and concludes that since Celie has never felt pleasure in a sexual relationship, and consequently has never had an orgasm, she is still a virgin. Thus, Shug as an experienced woman, in the art of love, teaches Celie how to be loved by kissing her. However, the scene that would be a revelation for Celie, as it was with her smiling in front of the mirror, becomes a male focused conversation. Mr_. is the focus of their talk, thus relating lesbian desire to men and, then, opening room for two possible interpretations: first, it expresses the idea that Shug does not have a lesbian desire for Celie, namely she only wants to help Celie to discover her sexuality as she did by making Celie smile to the mirror; second, it indicates that Celie might not have a lesbian desire for Shug as well, due to the fact that men have always mistreated her. According to Adrienne Rich in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence": "She would

see in Shug a way to discard men and the lesbian[desire] is simply acting out of her bitterness toward men” (205); thus, to fall in love with a woman would be her only “choice”. According to Siegel,

The lesbian relationship that develops between Celie and Shug again reinforces the richness of female bonding. For Celie, such a relationship is her only choice. Men are brutal and oppressors, they are the enemy. With regard to Celie’s past, it would be illogical for her to choose sex with a man, and lesbianism can be a learned preference rather than a biological or genetic orientation (sic) (apud Dieke 61)

Since homosexuality is not a matter of choice or preference due to the fact that people do not choose to be lesbian or gay, it seems illogical to portray Celie and Shug’s desire as being simply a consequence of Celie’s dissatisfaction toward men. Once sexuality is a complex category and it is associated to the field of desire, it becomes problematic to try to look for explanations for Celie’s desire for Shug. Still in the subject of portraying lesbian existence as a cause of male mistreatment, Philip Royster states that

Celie’s homosexuality is clearly portrayed not as congenital but as a predilection or pathology that results from being the victim of not merely male but also father figure abusiveness. She is too afraid of her [step] father to look at boys; she expresses a desire for only one person; and she seems unaware of the sexuality of other women. (Royster apud Thielman 70)

Once Celie is not aware of her sexuality, it is not possible to affirm that either her disinterest in men or her interest in Shug has an explanation. The words used to

refer to a homosexual as not being “congenital” or as being as “a predilection” and “pathology” reveals the biased tone used by the author toward a homosexual desire. Such opinions are also, unfortunately, until today, widespread in the media (soap operas, magazines, advertisements, etc.).

Following the scene between Shug and Celie, the seventh shot begins in a medium plan showing Shug and Celie seated on the bed. A low key light and diegetic music (the instrumental jazz 1920’s song) is still playing in order to create a scenario of sensuality and intimacy between the two women. Besides that, the fire in the fireplace reinforces the idea of comfort and passion, contrary to what Celie is used to have in her daily life of hard work and suffering. In the eighteenth shot, Shug kisses Celie in the face and she immediately opens up a big smile (figure 10) like she did in the mirror. In this sense, Celie’s smile is again portraying her emancipation as a woman. Shug’s caresses culminate in a close-up of a kiss between the two women (figure 19).



Figure 10



Figure 11

In the nineteenth shot, the use of the hands also plays an important role in the development of the scene. While they kiss each other, the frame cuts to focus on Shug and Celie’s hands. Their hands are strategically used to express both the female bonding between the two women and the love correspondence between the two women as “Celie

recoils into herself, using her hands as a mask to hide her face until the love-scene with Shug when Celie’s hand is shown gingerly responding”(Digby 166). (figure 12)



Figure 12

However, in the last shot of this scene, instead of having a continuation of the homoerotic love between Celie and Shug, what we have is simply a diegetic sound and a close-up of an object twinkling suggesting a possible lesbian relationship between the women. As the scene ends, the idea is left open to the audience to construct their own meanings. (figure 13)



Figure 13

In addition, in the next scene, what we have is Shug on her way to visit her father in the church he preaches. Contrary to her position as “femme fatale” in the last two analyzed scenes (in which she wears a red dress that conveys the idea of passion

and desire), she wears a long and discreet pink dress that portrays purity and chastity. In fact, Shug wants her father to forgive her for being a sinner, an outsider, a lesbian and this is confirmed, at the end of the movie, when she enters the church by singing a gospel song and imploring her father for forgiveness: “See Dad, sinners have soul too,” she says. According to Digby, “In the context of the film’s ending the scene defuses Shug’s restless quest for love and releases her from the spell of her own sexual self-image (Digby 164). Besides that, when Shug enters in the church, the position she is framed on the screen (Shug is on the door and what we see is her shadow and her voice while her father is seen in a high angle which makes him seem superior over Shug) places her in an inferior position in relation to her father. (figure 14)



Figure 14

In this context, it is pertinent to state that, in this scene, we have predominantly Shug’s father’s point of view (especially because of his position in the frame over Shug). Although he does not say a word while Shug is trying to resume their father/daughter relationship, Shug’s speech is full of regret which conveys her need to be accepted as a “good” woman who must be forgiven for her sinful acts including having kissed a woman. Thus, the editing plays an important role in the composition of the three analysed scenes: 1) The one in which Shug dedicates a song to Celie at the same time we have a cross-cutting again presenting Shug’s father point of view; 2) The

kiss scene and, 3) The scene which shows Shug and her father in the church. Summing up, in a circular motion, a male point of view permeates all the discussed scenes, a perspective that understates the love between the two women by making it less significant.

Contrary to the book, the movie deals with suggestions and ambiguity concerning lesbian images. In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), instead of symbols and props to convey lesbian desire between the two women, the lesbian scene between Shug and Celie is portrayed in a much more consistent manner. According to Walker, "[i]n the movie almost all the women kiss each other, making the kiss between Celie and Shug less significant" (Walker 168). However, the lesbian kiss scene, which is softened in the film, culminates in a sexual relationship as it is illustrated in the following passage from the book:

She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth. Um, she say, like she surprise. I kiss her back, say, um, too. Us kiss and kiss till us can't hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other. I don't know nothing bout it, I say to Shug. I don't know much, she say. Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth. Way after while, I act like a little lost baby too. Me and Snug [???] sound asleep. Her back to me, my arms round her waist. What it like? little like sleeping with mama, only I can't hardly remember ever sleeping with her. Little like sleeping with Nettie, only sleeping with Nettie never feel this good. It warm and cushiony, and I feel Shug's big tits sorta flop over my arms like suds. It feel like heaven is what it feel like, not like sleeping with Mr. at all. (118-119)

According to Ikenna Dieke, “their homosexual reunion is a first for both of them, but it is natural and freeing and a culmination of their love for each other. For Shug, it is an ultimate gift of love, and for Celie, love making and being loved complete her spiritual journey to selfhood” (Dieke 61).

In the movie, during all the narrative, the plot conveys the idea that Celie is in love with Shug: while she is having sex with her husband she thinks of Shug by staring at her picture and, when Shug arrives for the first time, she wants to feel beautiful to impress her. However, this desire is only suggested in the film. The relationship between Shug and Celie is merely grounded as being fraternal and supportive, but it is never portrayed as if they were lovers.

Shug’s representation in the film as a sinner plays an important role in the construction of a biased lesbian identity. Since she is a woman who has had many lovers and does not fit into the social norms, Shug is the only woman in the movie context who seems to have the authority to represent a lesbian. Thus, the image of Shug is biased in the sense that she is seen only as teacher who, as an act of compassion, helps Celie to discover her sexuality.

Thus, since *The Color Purple* is a Hollywood movie, it portrays Shug as a sinner, as a prostitute and eventually a lesbian. Summing up, although the female bonding between Shug and Celie has promoted agency in her discovery as a woman, the homoerotic atmosphere presented in the analyzed scene is biased in the sense that it portrays Shug as merely the teacher who helps Celie to discover her sexuality since men in her life have never fulfilled her desires; on the contrary, they have only mistreated and assaulted her. In opposition, Shug’s passion for men is confirmed all through the movie. Besides that, the society’s mentality, at that time which, without all gay and

lesbian advances conquered through the years, was not open to perceive homosexual relationships as natural among people. On the contrary, most of the people, in the movie, are part of a sexist and racist society which still today has strong power in our daily lives.

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