

## Blue Valentine (2010)

“How do you trust your feelings when they can just disappear like that?”

### Major Credits:

Director: Derek Cianfrance

Screenplay: Derek Cianfrance, Joey Curtis, Cami Delavigne

Cinematographer: Andrij Parekh

Cast: Ryan Gosling (Dean), Michelle Williams (Cindy), Faith Wladyka (Frankie)

### Background

Derek Cianfrance's first film to receive wide distribution took twelve years in the making from script to release, Initial shooting was delayed for nearly two years to allow Michelle Williams time to recover from the death of Heath Ledger, her former boyfriend and father of her child. Perhaps her lingering grief has been etched into her performance. The youthful courtship scenes were shot first; the actors then lived in a rented house in Pennsylvania to familiarize themselves with the setting while deliberately aging themselves (Gosling put on fifteen pounds). Williams was nominated for an Academy Award. The MPAA originally rated the film NC-17 but agreed after several appeals to a R rating. In its use of hand-held cameras and improvised dialogue to depict domestic conflict, *Blue Valentine* reflects the influence of John Cassavetes' great films (*Faces*, *Husbands*, *A Woman Under the Influence*); its realistic depiction of first love and a complex marriage shares the design of Richard Linklater's *Sunrise* trilogy.

### Cinematic Aspects:

1. Nonlinear structure: The narrative frequently shifts the time frame without intertitles announcing, say, “6 Years Earlier,” which at first causes some disorientation for the audience (as when Dean goes to work for the moving van company) but ultimately corresponds to the characters' pertinent memories. Does this structure also serve a thematic purpose? That is, does it suggest anything about how everyone lives their lives?
2. Music: Cianfrance effectively uses both diegetic (Gosling's rendition of “You Always Hurt the One You Love”; Perry and The Quarters' recording of “You and Me”) and non-diegetic music (the Platters singing “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”).
3. Hand-held camera: the jittery frame suggests the latent tension or intense emotions of nearly every scene as well as conveying a documentary effect. Note that even the 90-second long take in front of the dress store—the film's “cinematic moment” of first love—employs a slightly unsteady camera.
4. Acting: This is essentially a “two-hander,” although the supporting performance of the child Faith Wladyka is also noteworthy. Gosling has been occasionally criticized for his mannered acting, while Williams received universal praise. In what scenes is each actor particularly compelling?

### Questions for Discussion:

1. Compare this film's treatment of how "love fades" with Woody Allen's masterpiece on the same theme, *Annie Hall*. In particular, how is the *tone* different? The pleasures of *Annie Hall* can be rather easily appreciated. Why might anyone want to watch—not to mention *study*—a movie as sad as *Blue Valentine*?
2. Following up on the *Annie Hall* comparison, we might ask, "Where did the screw-up come?" Since Cianfrance, unlike Allen, does not depict the *middle* of the relationship, he must try to suggest the *seeds* of trouble in the earlier scenes and the *symptoms* of their current estrangement that the couple cannot clearly articulate. For example, what is the antecedent of "this" when Cindy declares, "*I can't do this anymore*"? And what does the film have to say about Dean's faith in "love at first sight" and the sanctity of the marriage vow? Reviewing *Blue Valentine* in *The Globe and Mail*, Rick Groen has said, "Everyone is flawed, but no one is culpable." Do you agree with his moral assessment?
3. How does the opening scene raise certain generic expectations and introduce key qualities in the married couple?
4. How does the "back story" revealed about both Cindy and (much later) Dean contribute to our understanding of the relationship?