

Blue Is the Warmest Color/La vie d'Adèle: Chapitres 1 & 2 (2013)

“My heart was missing something, but I did not know what it was.”

Marivaux, *La vie de Marianne*

Major Credits:

Director: Abdellatif Kechiche

Screenplay: Abdellatif Kechiche and Ghalia Lacroix, based on a graphic novel by Julie Maroh

Cinematography: Sofian El Fani

Cast: Adèle Exarchopoulos (Adèle), Léa Seydoux (Emma)

Background:

Adapted from Julie Maroh's graphic novel of the same name but entitled *The Life of Adèle: Chapters 1 & 2* for its original release in France, the film caused an immediate sensation at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival, where it won the top prize, the Palme d'Or. The French title alludes to Marivaux's 18th century novel *La vie de Marianne*, referenced in two early scenes, and may also pay homage of François Truffaut's film, *The Story of Adele H* (1975), which concerns the obsessive love of the eponymous protagonist. The corresponding character in Maroh's text is named “Clementine,” but Kechiche changed it to the actress' real name because “Adele” means “justice” in Arabic, a detail briefly mentioned in the diegesis.

The film's release corresponded to a crucial debate in French society that resulted in passage of the “marriage for all” law that sanctioned gay marriages. Controversy immediately followed its debut at Cannes: critics argued about its portrayal of lesbian sex (including a 7-minute lovemaking scene), and both the crew and the lead actresses complained about demanding conditions on the set, leading a furious Kechiche to counter-attack Seydoux in particular and threaten to withdraw the film from circulation. Although the debates about its artistic merits continued in the United States (where it received an NC-17 rating and was banned in the state of Idaho), *Blue Is the Warmest Color* generally received positive reviews and remains a landmark event in mainstream cinema. Seydoux's feud with the director seems to have continued, but Exarchopoulos (unlike her co-star, virtually unknown at the time) spoke positively about her experiences with Kechiche in several American interviews.

For all the cultural sensation caused by its release, *Blue Is the Warmest Color* depicts a quite traditional coming-of-age (*bildungsroman*) love story. As such, it has many predecessors in French cinema, but in its emphasis on the conflict of social classes, the underappreciated beauty of the domestic arts, and the depression that overcomes a crushed soul, it may most closely reflect the vision of the Swiss director Claude Goretta's unforgettable *The Lacemaker/ La dentellière* (1977), which made Isabelle Huppert an international star.

Cinematic Aspects:

1. Cinematography: Kechiche employs long takes and extended close-ups using a hand-held camera to create a spontaneous, documentary effect. Nearly all of the scenes were accordingly improvised, requiring many takes (which undoubtedly led to the crew's complaints about working conditions). Regarding the close-ups, consider Emma's citation of Sartre on "the mysterious weakness of man's face."
2. Shallow focus: Note how frequently cinematographer El Fani eschews depth-of-field, preferring shallow focus to create the effect of isolating the protagonists within the frame, allowing Adèle and Emma to exist "in their own world," living for each other. By way of contrast, observe the use of shallow focus in the early scene of Adèle's heterosexual encounter with Thomas.
3. Color: Kechiche manages to employ the color blue both prominently and subtly throughout the narrative, particularly towards the end.
4. Time: The film covers a span of at least six years. Note how Kechiche conveys the passage of time and its corresponding effects on the main characters through such physical details as Emma's altered hair color and Adèle's eyeglasses.

Questions for Discussion:

1. *Blue is the Warmest Color* runs for three hours, a stretch for some viewers accustomed to CGI action films or squeamish about prolonged nude scenes. What is the function of the film's extended duration? Do you think Kechiche could have cut certain scenes?
2. For all the attention to the sex scenes, Adèle spends more screen time in the classroom than the bedroom. What purpose is served by these depictions of Adèle as a teacher?
3. Like *Blue Valentine* and *Jules and Jim*, this film explores the concept of love at first sight (*coup de foudre* in French). The early scene in which this term arises also includes mention of regret and predestination. How does the film develop these philosophical abstractions?
4. In addition to exploring sexual desire, the narrative seems intensely involved with issues of food (as in Kechiche's earlier film, *The Secret of the Grain* [2007]), class, and art. How do these concerns shape the relationship at the center of the story?
5. Does the plot have a turning point? Can you point to the precise moment—even a single shot—where the relationship shifts?
6. The film's original subtitle—"Chapters 1 & 2"—as well as the final shot encourage audiences to speculate about Adèle's future (and perhaps the possibility of Kechiche filming a sequel). Do you see the ending as primarily hopeful or despairing?