

The Secret of the Grain/La graine et le mulet (2008)

“When there's couscous, the world disappears for me.”

Major Credits:

Director: Abdellatif Kechiche

Screenplay: Abdellatif Kechiche

Cinematography: Lubomir Bakchev

Major Credits: Habib Boufares (Slimane), Bouraouïa Marzouk (Souad), Hatika Karaoui (Latifa), Hafsia Herzi (Rym), Farida Benkhetache (Karima), Abdelhamid Aktouche (Hamid), Alice Houria (Julia), Sami Zitouni (Majid), Sabrina Ouazani (Olfa)

Background:

Like the principal characters of his third feature, Kechiche was born in Tunis and raised in France. *The Secret of the Grain* is considered a central work of post-*beur* cinema, films that focus on the lives of immigrants from the former colonies of North Africa and the second generation, people who have retained an ethnic identity while integrating beyond Paris, here in the small, declining Mediterranean city of Sète. Kechiche employs non-professional and unknown actors portraying working class lives, exacting from them (especially in the case of newcomer Hafsia Herzi) extraordinary performances. Kechiche had intended to cast his father in the primary role and set the story in Nice, where his family had settled. His father's death in 2004 necessitated a change in casting and location; the closing credits begin with a dedication à *mon père*. Note how Habib Boufares as Slimane manages to command the screen while hardly saying a word. The film was widely acclaimed, winning top prize at the Venice Film Festival and four Césars, the French Oscars.

Cinematic Aspects:

1. Close-ups: Although long shots have been generally associated with realist cinema, Kechiche employs the hand-held camera for an exceptional number of close-ups of specific objects, food, faces, and bodies, thereby emphasizing a physical immediacy that conveys a sense of verisimilitude.
2. Length: Kechiche allows scenes to run on without consequences for the plot, resulting in a 150-minute film. Consider, for example, the two early scenes centered on toilet training. For audiences trained to appreciate action films, this extended narrative time risks boredom. What benefits ensue from a patient viewing of what could be called this “director's cut”?

Questions for Discussion:

1. In addition to being a film about family and, to a lesser extent, about economics and politics (note the extended scenes of seeking permits through the local bureaucracy and the subtle moment when the politician's wife utters a phrase in Arabic and is complimented for being “hip), *The Secret of the Grain* belongs to a distinguished group of films that center on food (*Babette's Feast* and *Big Night* come to mind). The narrative is framed by Souad's Sunday meal and opening night at the restaurant, providing the long, sprawling film with a sense of structure. What does this attention to food contribute to the film's ideas? Is there a “philosophy” (or a secret) that emerges from the preparation and consumption of these meals?
2. At her Sunday family brunch, Souad makes a distinction in her “*couscous d'amour*” speech between romantic love and *ichra*, which she defines as affection over time. “Love takes everyday maintenance. It's getting along.” How does the film develop this conception of a wise, enduring love?

3. The film's *climax* is surely the restaurant opening and, more specifically, Rym's belly dancing. The long takes of her performance alternate with cuts to the gradually mesmerized spectators, whose rapt gaze mirrors that of spectators in the movie audience. Is there any complexity to this prolonged exhibition of what Laura Mulvey has famously defined as the "male gaze"? Are we watching something more than Rym's cunning display of her own sexuality? Can we reconcile this objectified, fragmented image of an exotic dancer with Rym's prior position as an empowered agent of change? (Keep in mind the fact that Kechiche would direct *Blue Is the Warmest Color* six years later.)
4. The film's *denouement* depicts Slimane's desperate effort to reclaim his scooter. In keeping with the Dardenne brothers' style of naturalistic filmmaking, this scene ends inconclusively with a blackout. Cross-cutting links Slimane's private agony with Rym's triumphant public performance. How do these contrasting scenes serve to synthesize the film's rhetorical project?