

# Blue is the Warmest Color

## No Such Thing as Chance

As early as 1924, an opera (*The Cunning Little Vixen*) had been derived from a comic strip. Today, it should no longer be remarkable when a film is freely adapted from a graphic novel, in this case one by Julie Maroh. This film was awarded the *Palme d'Or* at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival unanimously.

In the very first shot, Adèle (played by Adèle Exarchopoulos) makes a wardrobe adjustment that subtly indicates the posterior preoccupation of director Abdellatif Kechiche. Though not specified in the film, Adèle leaves home at 15 Rue Clovis in Liévin, walks toward the intersection at Rue des Francs and eventually boards a train, possibly in Lens (Maroh's birthplace). She then exits the clearly labeled train station in Lille and crosses Place de la Gare a few blocks south of the school that she will later identify as hers (Lycée Louis Pasteur), at which she then arrives, having covered an actual geographical distance of about 20 miles, whether or not this is meant to be the case in the film.

Adèle's name derives from that of the actress so that the director could use material recorded when she was ostensibly out of character, and because he liked the name's meaning, to be dealt with in due course. A dozen or so other characters also carry the name of their portrayer. An interesting lapse occurs at 0:02:28 when Maelys Cabezon, portraying Laetitia (according to the credits), is addressed by her teacher as "Maëlisse." (Time references and subtitle quotations are based on the Criterion Collection Blu-Ray issued in February of 2014. Netflix streaming customers must endure such translated expressions as "outer-body experience.")

Conveniently, the classroom discussion of Marivaux's *The Life of Marianne*, involving crossing paths, exchanging glances, love at first sight (*coup de foudre*, meaning "thunderbolt," or, more appropriately, "bolt from the blue") and predestination, predisposes Adèle to discover Emma, just as a later classroom discussion of *Antigone*, about refusing to remain powerless, will prepare her to do something about it. The Marivaux work also provides the basis for the film's alternative title: *The Life of Adèle: Chapters 1 & 2*. A reference to Truffaut's *L'Histoire d'Adèle H.* is also implied.

When Adèle converses with Thomas on the bus, he speaks of wanting to discover musical artists. His portrayer, Jérémie Laheurte, is said to have been responsible for bringing Klaïm (the musician featured in the following scene) to the attention of the director. This is similar to the discovery of Anton Karas and his subsequent musical work in Carol Reed's *The Third Man*, another echo of which will occur at this film's end.

Unlike Gregory Peck in *Topaz*, Adèle delivers a realistically subtle double take involving only her eyes when she first beholds Emma, played by Léa Seydoux. In the earlier classroom scene, the specificity of Adèle's preparation for this moment extends to her teacher calling attention to the novel *La Princesse de Clèves*. In the 2008 film *La Belle Personne*, which is based

on that novel, Seydoux plays Junie de Chartes, who is based on that novel's title character. That same year, Exarchopoulos appeared in the film *Les Enfants de Timpelbach* as a character named Marianne. It is perhaps significant that their paths cross in the middle of Boulevard de la Liberté in Lille. (Adèle has the statue of Général Faidherbe behind her as Emma crosses from the Place de la République, possibly coming from the Palais des Beaux Arts.) The potential importance of such an event occurring in the middle of the road is discussed in the essays on *The Crying Game*, *Heavenly Creatures* and *Whale Rider*.

Rather than having Emma arrive as the solution to an existing problem in Adèle's love life, Emma provides a standard against which Adèle can evaluate her problem all along the way. Their relationship develops so gradually that following this first encounter, not counting a peck on the cheek, more than an hour will elapse before it will be sealed with a proper kiss. At such a pace, and given that Adèle will later say, "You can't tell from one meeting," one hesitates to call it love at first sight, though it certainly is *something* at first sight. Again, reminiscent of the internal logic of *The Hours*, Adèle has essentially been programmed to have this reaction when experiencing this situation with this actress. Similarly, in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon engineers it such that Titania falls in love with Bottom because he is the first thing she sees upon awakening. (Just as Adèle is unable to resist Emma, this writer finds it equally hard to resist the pun of Adèle's Titania falling in love with Emma's Bottom.) Hypothetically, Emma might never have been noticed had it not been for what was said in that first classroom scene. (And when revisiting this scene, attentive viewers may notice Emma even before Adèle does, as Emma and Sabine form an out-of-focus couple for just a few frames at 0:12:35.) Another concept invoked in that classroom scene is that of "regret." The only word spoken during this first encounter with Emma is when Adèle says to a motorist, "Sorry." The situation that prompts this apology echoes Marivaux's Marianne stepping into the path of a moving carriage when similarly distracted.

Adèle then meets with Thomas, blaming her tardiness on the train. Geographically, even if not diegetically, she meets him in the Grand Place (or Place du Général de Gaulle). If this is Adèle's intended destination when she encounters Emma, she is only about half a mile away but walking in the wrong direction, perhaps indicating that she intends to get there via public transportation (as on Metro Line 1 from the République Beaux Arts station to that at Rihour).

Thomas sows additional seeds of Adèle's breakup with him when he endorses the potential benefits of attending to a teacher's literary analysis, Adèle's teacher having already discussed the applicable themes cited above, including love at first sight. Soon after demonstrating that instructions from her teacher had focused her attention nonrandomly on Emma, Adèle speaks of not liking it when her imagination is closed off by a teacher. Like it or not, she seems powerless to avoid it.

After viewing the 2009 film *Enter the Void* (or at least the trailer) with Thomas, Adèle is questioned by her friends and confronted by Thomas. She then consummates her relationship with Thomas, but soon breaks up with him after confessing her feelings to Valentine.

So as to offer her left-wing political credentials, Adèle joins in a march during which is heard the official song of the French communist party. It can be painful to watch this scene, knowing what comes later. Adèle considers herself to be among friends. But it is not until push comes to shove that one discovers who one's real friends are. The CGT banners represent the

General Confederation of Labor. Volunteers from this labor union built the Cannes Film Festival's Palais de la Croisette in 1946.

For Adèle, her encounter with Béatrice on the stairs is “a pivotal point in her destiny,” according to the director. Dante's Beatrice in *La Vita Nuova* is a herald of “the new life.” Though a primary occupation of a mythical hero is to thwart threshold guardians, it may be helpful to receive some reassuring, positive feedback, what Kechiche calls “a smile from destiny.” Béatrice now clearly displays her blue jewelry and fingernails, having appeared in a chromatically remote orange top in her first scenes. (Referring to the color symbolism employed in this scene, a friend of this writer characterized the message as, “Blue means go.”) However, Adèle does not recognize Béatrice as a mere messenger who is neither to be killed nor, in this case, amorously pursued. In other words, Adèle applies an interpretation that is Mosaic rather than Hermetic, taking literally and idolatrously, in the person of Béatrice, a metaphor whose referent is Emma. Béatrice proves to be a false start, just as Thomas is a dead end.

Adèle is brought to a gay bar by Valentin but is drawn outside by the sight of a group of women, recalling the motif of adventure entered by following an animal, as with Alice and the rabbit hole. She apparently exits Le Privilège at 2 Rue Royale, crosses that street and proceeds along Rue de la Barre. As she walks down the street, she looks up presumably to see the name of the bar she is about to enter. Had this film been made in America, a reverse shot might be expected to reveal a cutesy, comical name, perhaps based on a *double entendre* pun.

Adèle is not stupid, but she has not been conditioned to this environment. So even if this represents a kind of homecoming and she is in some sense finding her proper milieu, there remains a bit of the fish-out-of-water element. This would explain why so much kissing is seen. It may be subjective amplification based on Adèle's hypersensitivity. Cherry picking of this sort may also be at work later during the gay pride parade. This voyage of exploration may indeed require a bit of courage, but destiny is about to reward her initiative.

“I'm meeting a friend,” says Adèle, merely to avoid an awkward situation. But this may be more than inadvertent foresight. A teacher's words were taken to heart such that in hindsight they became prophetic. However unintentionally, Adèle now progresses to self-declared destiny. But she will not have earned her reward on this chthonic, abyssal, underworld adventure by making it past only this initial threshold guardian. In order to prove her sincerity, she must run the entire gauntlet. She does this by traversing the full extent of the establishment so that she must then turn around and retrace her steps, at which point her reward immediately begins to be granted.

Emma is seen emerging from the “Water Closet,” the initials of which harmonize with *Warmest Color*. The woman seen next to Emma at 0:45:08 might be Lucie. It is only after seeing Emma that Adèle removes her jacket, indicating that she is getting warm, at least amorously if not thermally. The fact that the spaghetti that she eats so often is straight until heated could apply metaphorically to Adèle, though she later similarly discards outerwear as a prelude to heterosexual activity. The last time Adèle looks upward, she registers extra surprise. The audience is not given an explanatory reverse shot. But when Emma then arrives at Adèle's side, it is realized that the surprise would have been at not seeing Emma because she had already begun her walk down to Adèle. Retrospectively, it seems that Adèle's feelings may have progressed to despair and resignation in those few seconds before again seeing Emma, who has come to rescue Adèle from an unwelcome suitor.

In James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus, while getting the priesthood recruitment spiel, is reminded, "No king or emperor on this earth has the power of the priest of God." A priest has "the power, the authority, to make the great God of Heaven come down upon the altar and take the form of bread and wine. What an awful power, Stephen!" Showing no appreciable effort, Adèle demonstrates the power to summon Emma down from her perch as if from heaven to earth (*ex machina*, as it were). As Emma places her order with Sophie, Adèle exhibits astonishment, at least in her luck and perhaps also in this power of which she was previously unaware. It is as if destiny has responded obediently to her for saying, "I'm meeting a friend," and as if Adèle does not know her own strength with regard to wish fulfillment.

The aphrodisiacal power of laughter is demonstrated at the very start and will continue in subsequent scenes, though this power will eventually wane. "No such thing as chance," observes Emma, whether or not Adèle is prepared to admit it. It is revealed that *Adèle* (or at least its masculine Arabic homophone) means *justice*, though at this point it remains to be seen whether this will be an example of euonymy. It is for the *Salon des Refusés* that Adèle suggests an alternative name. An example is given of the 20-point academic grading scale used in France, in which the top several numbers are seldom awarded. (Accommodation is made in the Italian translation by lowering the numerical value of Adèle's grades to fit the local scale.) Emma's self-deprecation about her command of English may be an ironic inside joke based on Seydoux's more extensive experience in English-language cinema. After Emma touches her chin, Adèle does the same at 0:51:26, indicating that the two are already in accord.

The woman who now barges in, moderating the pace of progress, is presumably Sabine, who is to be mentioned in the sketching scene. She also appears to be the one who is with Emma when the latter is first seen. A second woman appears to be Lise, who will not be formally introduced until the garden party scene. Going clubbing in Belgium is indeed no big deal. Filming took place in cities including Roubaix and Lille, which lie only about 1 and 5 miles, respectively, from the Belgian border. From here it is only a short distance to the major cities of Brussels, Ghent and Bruges. By recoiling from Sabine, Adèle reinforces the idea that her attraction to Emma is based less on *eros* than *amor*. (A similar regard for Beatrice might charitably be attributed to Adèle.)

Adèle asks how much she owes and is told, "It's paid for," at least in monetary terms. She will eventually repay Emma in other ways, just as she will later offer to pay for a painting "in flesh and blood." Near the end of the film, in an example of symmetry to be explained momentarily, Adèle seems to pay for Emma's coffee in the cafe. Before leaving, Emma obtains the information that will allow her to find Adèle in the future. However, when Adèle learns that she owes nothing, it might suggest that Emma is running a tab onto which all the charges have gone. It could then be further inferred that Emma is a regular who could probably be found there again. This could function as a red herring that, coming after Emma's exit, would benefit from retroactive inhibition in the minds of viewers and allow for at least a little more surprise than would otherwise occur when Emma is next seen.

The film can be taken to have a three-act structure, especially given the musical punctuation noted below. Accordingly, Adèle signals the end of the first act with her exit, having demonstrated her prophetic, heroic and priestly powers in a single remarkable scene.

Mythologically, Adèle's teacher has perhaps helped create dissatisfaction with the ordinary world. Emma has issued the call to adventure, reinforced by Béatrice. Valentin, whose name is associated with love and who has acted as a confidant and perhaps mentor, sets the stage for Adèle to be lured to the second bar, where she crosses the threshold of adventure and finds

Emma. In Jungian terms, this may be for Adèle a confrontation with her shadow: the rejected, suppressed aspect of her psyche that is to be assimilated.

Outside her school, Adèle discovers Emma. There is a moment in which Adèle, surrounded by friends, is perhaps considering that it might be prudent to ignore Emma. When the two walk off together, Béatrice is among those looking on, though not as poignantly as she will in her next appearance. The actual location is the Lycée Louis Pasteur, just as Adèle had claimed in the bar. Adèle and Emma walk to the west on Rue des Urbanistes on a route of less than a mile that will take them past the cathedral (Notre-Dame de la Treille) and, if they take the southerly route, past the bar where their first conversation was filmed (Fifi's wine bar at 13 Rue de la Barre) to a bench facing Façade de l'Esplanade on a path leading to Allée des Marronniers in the background and with La Peniche behind them. Once on the park bench, Adèle's first four lines could be interpreted as expressing a submissive attitude. At the end of the scene, after allowing themselves a "standing eight count" during which tension mounts, Emma restricts herself to a kiss on Adèle's cheek to defuse the situation. As Emma exits, two objects (possibly stones) lie opposite each on either side of the path, with the larger one on the left. These may be her "mark" because it is at their location that she plants her foot and turns to wave.

Before proceeding, an architectural matter should be noted. As with several other films discussed in these essays, this film often reveals a rhyming structure, with many scenes and events occurring in pairs, some of which will now be considered.

Adèle marches in the street with her friends and later with Emma in a gay pride parade. Adèle and Emma first exchange words in a bar and later meet in a cafe at the other end of their relationship. In both the bar and cafe scenes, Emma searches for adjectives and Adèle offers such options as *ugly*, *lousy* and *boring*. Piombin's *Baila Mi Hermano* song gets two hearings that could be thought of as marking the beginning and end of the second act (the first of these being more of an entr'acte), and a third as the credits roll, thus appearing at or near the end of each of the film's three acts. At 1:00:07, speaking to Adèle, Emma says of a sketch, "I'll give it to you." At 2:34:54, speaking of her paintings, Emma says to Adèle, "I'll give you one." Adèle undergoes interrogation by her friends and fights with one, and is later interrogated by Emma during their breakup, which gets ugly. The women attend family dinners, first with Emma's parents and then with Adèle's. According to this internal logic, it could be said that popping corks are heard at the garden party *because* one had been heard at Adèle's birthday party. Later at the garden party, Adèle removes a bug from the vicinity of Samir's left eye at 1:57:32 *because* she had removed a dandelion seed from her hair near her own left eye when Emma was sketching her at 0:57:55. (Emma performs a similar act of grooming on Adèle at 0:59:35.) Some scenes employ internally repetitive binary choreography that groups events into couplets. For example, twice during the garden party Adèle is invited to sit, first by Lucie and then Samir.

All of this is actually an elaboration of an artistic principle that Emma has chosen for herself. While sketching Adèle at 0:57:11, and speaking on behalf of the director, she says, "I pick a detail. And I use it again after. Differently." This device, writ large, forms part of the underlying skeleton of this film.

Adèle will later say that certain foods are not her thing. Following the exchange of conspiratorial glances among her friends, we learn that the same can be said of interrogation. Soon after Adèle engages in a conventional double-kiss greeting with her friends, she and Emma

are accused of talking while being suspiciously close, which highlights the extreme context dependence of such proximity. Adèle engages in jaw clenching when anxious, revealed, as at 1:05:11 (and even as early as 0:06:31), by a periodic parotidomasseteric dimple. After the confrontation comes to a head, Béatrice looks on with a unique perspective on the plausibility of the accusation. The action again appears to be set on Rue des Urbanistes.

In the art museum (Musée de la Piscine in Roubaix), the camera observes the art in a way that both reflects the director's anatomical preoccupation and also involves a setup in the form of an art history lesson that will pay off in the very next scene. The film may not have any totally nondiegetic music, but music is sometimes heard outside its diegetically proper scene, as when Mozart's clarinet concerto lingers after the museum is left behind.

The picnic scene begins as a sort of homage to the "snails and oysters" scene from *Spartacus*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, whom Adèle has already named as one of her favorite directors. But when a metaphor threatens to become concrete, Adèle momentarily pauses the conversation. She is curious and inquisitive, but, being tentative by nature (and as if to accommodate sensitive viewers), she seeks to maintain control of the slope of her learning curve in order to avoid "TMI." To that end, twice in this scene she asserts her self-imposed need-to-know status. Early in the conversation, Adèle claims to eat "everything but except shellfish," having told Thomas that her taste in music includes "[e]verything" except "hard rock."

Emma has been involved with a woman named Sabine and now speaks of her experience with Louise. By this time, Seydoux had already played Sabine Moreau in *Mission: Impossible - Ghost Protocol* and Louise in *Sister*.

For most people, sexual orientation involves decisions that have been made for them by nature, with no need for experimentation. But confusion and indecision are considered more dramaturgically interesting, such that Emma, too, has tried it both ways (as has Joachim). The same will be true of Adèle. Consequently, later, in the cafe, Emma asks Adèle about any boyfriend or girlfriend she may have. Related to this is the fact that it is not known whether the pregnant Lise will have a boy or a girl, and that at the start of the breakup scene, Adèle claims to have been dropped off by a woman before admitting that it was a man.

In a beautiful example of reciprocal amatory telegraphy, both women signal their intentions by assuming a traditional raised-arm odalisque posture, such as is on display in such works as *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* by Pablo Picasso (the one artist Adèle has admitted knowing), *Odalisque à l'esclave* by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Nu à la Chaise Longue* by Henri Matisse, *Odalisque* by Jean Baptista Camille Corot, *Odalisque* by Pierre Olivier Joseph Coomans and *Odalisque au bouquet de roses et comptoir* by Leon de Smet. At least four examples of similar poses were witnessed by Adèle moments earlier in the art museum, as if Emma had been training her in this canonical iconography. So pedagogically successful is this strategy that Adèle is the first to strike said pose. As the two women silently scream this visual signal at each other, the element of surprise is obliterated. In contrast with the subtly submissive attitude that she had exhibited when Emma sketched her on the park bench ("Can I move?" "Really?" "Seriously?" "Thanks."), and thanks perhaps to the earlier lesson of *Antigone*, about maturing out of childhood and asserting autonomy and sovereignty, Adèle makes the first move and kisses Emma. This lesson may also be what propelled her into the bar where the two first spoke. (In what may be another echo of art history, Adèle will later pose for Emma as if trying to exceed the audacity of Manet's *Olympia*.)

It is reported that 10 days were devoted to the filming of what is probably the most infamous of the film's sex scenes. On the one hand, a full week was said to have been devoted to the picnic scene, and in total there were approximately as many days of filming as there are minutes in the finished product. On the other hand, one can easily imagine the actresses already on the second day of filming this sex scene saying, "Really?" More important than this quantitative observation is the qualitative one regarding the humiliation that the actresses reportedly experienced. In practical terms, dealing with these matters will be delegated to the French criminal justice system. But a degree of solace may be taken in the fact that in just a few months Adèle had recovered to the point where she could (at least appear to) enjoy the director's company in a YouTube video titled "Adele Exarchopoulos & Kechiche in Moscow." In a YouTube video titled "Best Actress Round Table Full Interview - Variety Awards Edition 2013," Exarchopoulos claims that the scenes involving food were the most difficult for her. By comparison, "Sex scenes are easy," she says, adding that "we were laughing a lot" during one of them. (See also the article by Tristram Fane Saunders for *The Telegraph*, 12/29/16, titled "Bleeding feet and Gene Kelly's tongue: how *Singin' in the Rain* nearly broke Debbie Reynolds.")

In a deleted scene, Valentin gets an account of Adèle's recent sexual exploits. Ramakrishna is credited with saying that, given a choice between going to heaven and hearing a lecture about it, people would choose the lecture. (Alfred Stieglitz later applied this observation more narrowly to Americans.) In the editing of this film, it was decided to go straight to heaven and leave the lecture on the cutting room floor. In addition to the other qualities that won Adèle Exarchopoulos this part, the director was pleased with how voraciously she ate a lemon tart. A bit of just such behavior is on display in this scene. The subtitles here represent an incompletely polished first draft of a translation.

At the LGBT event, it takes Adèle quite a bit longer to generate the same level of enthusiasm that she exhibited during the earlier street demonstration. A woman seen at 1:21:57 looks as if she could be Myrième. Emma can be seen in the background as early as 1:22:01, then more obviously at 1:22:13. At 1:22:35, the Belgian author Saskia De Coster and her partner make the briefest of cameos. Seeing a Belgian author and given that [imdb.com](http://imdb.com) lists Brussels among the filming locations, this scene could be occurring in Belgium, which might allow Adèle to feel less inhibited than if she were closer to home. (A YouTube video titled "Lea Seydoux in Velvet Brussel's [sic] crowd at the Pride. 2012" seems to confirm this.) Although Adèle may now be, at least in some technical sense, "out," there will still be times when discretion will be considered the better part of valor.

Adèle has presumably been assured that Emma's parents are onboard, but she still exercises caution, which, of course, she comes by honestly. The differences between the women's families are important but should not be absolute. Accordingly, Adèle says, "My dad's the same." Adèle offers a knowing smile as Emma regards the oysters. When Emma realizes the problem, Adèle gives her a look as if to try to forestall Emma's revelation. (At this moment, Adèle is silent in the original, but she whispers something on the Russian soundtrack.) Adèle's enjoyment of oysters metaphorically signals her acquisition of a taste for what they symbolize. Unspoken here, though dealt with after the party scene, is that Emma thinks that Adèle's career

choice is potentially a waste of her talents. When the issue arises in the conversation, Emma is not smiling and Adèle shoots her a self-conscious glance at 1:29:24.

Adèle's parents espouse the values of the working class, such that her father is "the king" only in culinary terms. Emma's claim that she dyes her hair herself may be an inside joke because it has been reported (tvtropes.org) that the director would do this job himself each day. Because this is not a mainstream, American film, there is no need for a spit take when Emma is asked about her boyfriend. Whatever potential Emma may have for confrontational effrontery, it is sweet of her to play along, and without missing a beat. Adèle reacts with a smile of gratitude.

As discussed in earlier essays, Adèle's intermittent but repeated denial of the true nature of her relationship with Emma constitutes the sin of Tristan, just as her relationship with Thomas would exemplify the sin of Isolde had she realized her mistake prospectively.

Following their lovemaking, Emma gives Adèle a grade of 14 ("Just fourteen?"), which is understood to be out of 15. Subsequently, in *The Lobster*, Léa Seydoux's Loner Leader has a character (Hotel Manager's Partner) quantify his love for another (Hotel Manager), and elicits a score of 14 on a scale of 15.

A scene was filmed that would have shown Adèle's parents discovering the true nature of Adèle's relationship with Emma, prompting Adèle's father to banish her from the house. Thus when Adèle subsequently uses the excuse of a family dinner when responding to an invitation, the audience would have recognized this as a lie because she would have been known to be estranged from them. The nursery school scenes were filmed at the Ecole Marternelle Lamartine at the corner of Rue Phecle Carpentier and Rue Voltaire in Liévin, about a quarter of a mile from the house used for her parents' home, a house, by the way, that has the logistical advantage for a film crew of having a parking lot nearby.

The party scene begins with Adèle in the kitchen. She smokes as a painting is seen in the foreground depicting her with a cigarette in her mouth. This begins to establish a strategy that will be fully exploited at the end of the scene, thus bookending it. In this scene (and others), one sees the Piper champagne label, which is retrospectively appropriate, they being an official supplier to the Cannes Film Festival.

Just as Picasso's blue period was temporary, the same is now shown to be true of Emma's blue hair. Only now is Lise formally introduced, though she may have appeared earlier in the bar scene. Adèle takes notice from a distance as she reacts to Emma's celebratory howl. As if timed to be an ominous omen, the entrance of Lise is quickly followed by the popping of a cork that startles Adèle. The statement "In two months I've gotten big" seems as if it should refer to Lise's pregnancy. It is, however, Emma who is saying it, perhaps referring to popularity, which could be what is providing the occasion for the celebration. Lise says, "I don't want to know," which is something Adèle had said to Emma at the start of their relationship. Adèle may be unconsciously making that association and fearing that Lise is positioning herself as her substitute. (During an earlier parting, Emma says, "See you soon," and Adèle responds, "Deal." In the final scene, Lise will conversationally substitute not for Adèle but for Emma when she says, "See you later," and Adèle responds, "Sure thing.") Adèle's glance at 1:47:38 shows that she is already concerned about the chemistry between Emma and Lise, and also perhaps about the motherhood issues that will arise in the conversation with Samir. As if being foreshadowed by all this, Exarchopoulos

would go on to appear in a film titled *Insecure*. Although Joachim is later referred to as a genius, his explanation for why Adèle's writing "must be wonderful" is a bit of a non sequitur.

Reminiscent of other traditional dichotomies (Elvis or The Beatles? Ginger or Mary Ann?), the question now arises: Schiele or Klimt? The two artists have in common portraits of women named Adele, Adele Bloch-Bauer in the case of Gustav Klimt and Adele Harms in the case of Egon Schiele. (In *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, Adrien Brody's Dmitri walks by a painting that is at least in the style of Klimt. Less than a minute later, Léa Seydoux's Clotilde says, "I believe it was removed by *Monsieur Gustave*," referring to a painting that was replaced by one done in the style of Schiele.) At 1:51:12, Adèle momentarily seems less than fully engaged.

Adèle's pasta makes its entrance, prompting the thought, "Like father, like daughter." Another cinematic echo now occurs as circumstances recall Woody Allen's *Manhattan*, which features a party, outdoors, at night, where Michael O'Donoghue's Dennis discusses orgasms. Joachim's discourse harmonizes with the earlier classroom discussion of Antigone when he invokes Tiresias, who appears as a character in the Sophocles play *Antigone*. The title that Lise cites is that of a semi-gynecological painting by Gustave Courbet.

If Samir seems nosy (he is), he might be cut a little slack because of his profession, which involves the study of human nature and behavior, and because of his narrative function as proxy for a curious audience. When he asks Adèle if she wants kids, all she needs to do in order to speak volumes is to wait a little too long to answer. As to Samir's potential as a future partner, of interest to Adèle may be his participation in American cinema, which she claims to love, and his approval of her cooking.

Throughout this film, realism is dominant and yet manipulated. In this scene, G.W. Pabst's *Pandora's Box* (at least) is being displayed on a screen in the background. A connection is established when people in the projected film are seen dancing as the real-life partiers are doing the same. Adèle dances with Samir and at 1:57:48 a figure on the screen mimics Adèle's arms-up dancing posture. (This is not unlike how Palantine assumes the raised-arm posture of the statue behind him in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*.) Adèle periodically observes Emma and Lise enjoying each other's company, and at one point, the camera racks focus between Adèle and the projection screen as it displays Louise Brooks's Lulu looking very distressed. When Emma attempts levity at 1:58:48, Lise is amused but Adèle and Lulu are not. Is this to be taken as accidental or expressionistic? In Emma's words, "No such thing as chance." Additionally, Adèle's dance partner Samir speaks Arabic, while Brooks's Lulu is shown at a point when she is troubled by the prospect of being sold to an Egyptian. Also, the actress's name recalls that of the girl who was the first to be kissed by Emma. (Emma's age when this occurred was fourteen, a number that recurs as a grade given by Emma to Adèle.) Further, one character featured in *Pandora's Box* is Countess Geschwitz, whom Vito Russo describes as "probably the first explicitly drawn lesbian character" to appear in a feature film. Her appearance in Alban Berg's *Lulu* gives her what may be a similar status in the realm of opera. She is portrayed in Pabst's film by the Belgian actress Alice Roberts, and as observed earlier, Belgium is in Adèle's immediate vicinity.

Adèle will later offer the excuse that she felt alone. Here she dances to a song with lyrics that include, prophetically, "If you're all alone, you might need some help someday." In accordance with Emma's method of reusing a detail differently, Adèle dances with less enthusiasm than during her birthday party. At 1:58:20, Samir turns in response to Adèle's concern in order to learn its cause. Earlier, at 1:54:43 and possibly as early as 1:53:30, Emma seems to take note of Samir's interaction with Adèle. (As if sensing Emma's suspicion, and

wanting to deny any “pass” she might want to make at Samir, Adèle “looks off the safety” at 1:54:47.) Adèle and Emma may now be harboring mutual worries.

In the aftermath of the party, Emma echoes the picnic scene by again adopting a version of the odalisque pose. As in that earlier scene, this one ends with a kiss, though far less romantically.

Whether or not suspicion is aroused by Emma’s don’t-wait-up call (a stock device of stereotypical adulterers), Adèle, feeling neglected, goes dancing and removes her sweater as she had in the lesbian bar.

The YouTube review by Lauren Jackson expresses the view that the sex scenes, though challenging for many in the audience, may not be as hard to watch as the moments of heartbreak, such as the breakup. At such times, spectators must deal with emotional as opposed to physical nudity of the actors. (In this scene, whatever the validity of Emma’s stance, this writer is instinctively inclined to empathize with Adèle because he once similarly found himself in the role of the overly needy dumpee.) For reference, Le Maglione, seen in the exterior shot in which Adèle exits the car (though now apparently closed), stands at the corner of Rue Barthélémy Delespaul and Rue d’Artois, and the door that Adèle enters as the car drives away seems to be at 79 Rue Barthélémy Delespaul.

The website tvtropes.org outlines how Kechiche drove his actors until their real emotions emerged. For example, after filming this scene all night without a break, Adèle’s tears were real. Similarly, Adèle Exarchopoulos has said that before shooting this scene, she knew the potential was there for this to be a rough day at the office. But when she walked into the scene and saw Léa Seydoux’s face, acting was unnecessary because she was genuinely scared, as may be inferred from her momentary deer-in-the-headlights look as she shuts the door at 2:14:54. This look having been preceded by infidelity recalls Adèle saying to a classmate, “You cheated. You were caught red-handed, . . .” just before making eye contact with Emma outside the school. (In this first interior shot, notice that the painting in the background is far from blue.) Events then echo the fight scene, down to the reappearance of Adèle’s jaw-clenching dimple at 2:16:36. Despite Adèle’s height advantage, her contrition makes her no match for the redoubtable, adrenalized Emma. Once outside the door and seen through colored glass, Adèle is chromatically alienated when she comes to be framed by adjacent blue panes but stays mostly confined to complementary (in additive color) yellow.

A dip in the ocean could be taken as an attempted act of symbolic purgation. Instead, in accordance with her propensity for self-torture, Adèle wallows in allusively blue water. Adèle’s right pinky finger on the windowsill at 2:31:12 as she pines for Emma recalls her right thumb on the bench at 27:10 after breaking up with Thomas.

After a period of seemingly irremediable languishment, Adèle sits in a cafe and Emma joins her. Her intentions are not yet clear, but, retrospectively, Adèle may be telegraphing them with her little hair flip at 2:32:38. Emma watches Adèle order coffee just as Adèle had watched Emma order strawberry milk, reminding us that, sometimes, the decline of the relationship is a mirror image of its rise, though perhaps not in the precise reverse order found in *An Alpine Symphony* by Richard Strauss. For example, the second encounter between the women is in a bar

and then Emma kisses Adèle on the cheek after sketching her. Later, Adèle kisses Emma on the cheek just before they break up and their penultimate meeting is in this cafe. Before the former kiss, Emma asks Adèle if she is embarrassed. After the latter kiss, Emma asks Adèle if she is ashamed.

Adèle is said to have maintained her youthful appearance, which, Matt Goldberg observes, reflects her arrested emotional development. The sound design underscores Adèle's statement about "flesh and blood" (a phrase also used earlier in the film, both times associated with Emma's paintings) not with dramatic music but by dropping the ambient sound to silence at 2:35:05. Vieux-Lille, to which Adèle refers, is the local "Old Town." (Given the last name of the actress, one of her ancestors may have come from such a place.) In the lesbian bar, Emma and Adèle were on the same wavelength, such that when the former touched her chin, the latter did likewise. Now that the topic of conversation is Lise, Adèle offers no such reciprocal gesture when Emma again engages in chin-touching behavior. In that earlier scene, Adèle did not realize her own strength and succeeded beyond her expectations without even trying. Now, in her deliberate effort to regain Emma, she holds what she thinks might be the trump card. Having lured Emma away from Sabine, Adèle may now be overly confident, underestimating the difference made by the baggage that she now brings to the situation. Undeterred by claims of domestic satisfaction, she tests the waters by asking Emma about her love life. When Emma says, "It's not like with you," it is all Adèle needs to hear. Thinking, "Go big or go home," and playing to her strengths, she seizes the opportunity to remind Emma what she is missing. With the tables turned, Emma momentarily adopts Adèle's jaw-clenching behavior at 2:39:31. Emma has given Adèle a proverbial inch and has thus created a monster who is willing to bring her A-game and give it the old college try, hence the switch from an inboard to an outboard camera angle at 2:39:54, making Adèle's effort explicit. (Their first conversation in the lesbian bar is initially observed predominantly from behind them and then switches to a predominantly frontal perspective. In both scenes, Emma is first shown mostly on the left and finally mostly on the right.) The extent of Adèle's development may fall short of that of Polly Peachum, but she has again taken to heart the lesson of Antigone given in her literature class about maturing from powerless childhood to assertive, proactive adulthood.

In this scene, the Criterion Blu-ray features the following subtitles: "I miss you. I miss touching each other, seeing each other, breathing in each other's scent." Netflix alters the second sentence to say that Adèle misses *not* experiencing these things. She has no cause to miss *not* experiencing them because she has already been not experiencing them. She misses these experiences because she *regrets* not having them. And if a negative were proper in the second sentence, then it would be equally proper in the first. Netflix cannot even manage to deploy its error consistently.

The film could be seen as now arriving at a fork in the road. Adèle maintains just enough control to avoid having the story veer off into the murderous-psycho-jilted-lover horror genre. Adèle's facial expressions at 2:43:32 would adequately provide such a jumping-off point to a plot in the manner of *Fatal Attraction*, as Emma's talk of "an infinite tenderness" seems only to bring Adèle's frustration to unprecedented heights (having given a similar look to Béatrice at 0:38:26). Ultimately, cooler heads prevail. In a faint echo of their breakup, it is now Adèle who tells Emma to "beat it." As at the end of the lesbian bar scene, Adèle remains in a solipsistic mode for a few moments after Emma's exit before she again becomes fully aware of her environment. And both these scenes feature women exclusively.

As Adèle prepares herself for the final scene, she checks out her own backside. Perhaps, as in the manner of Condwiramurs, she is dressing for war. Some have found it noteworthy that by the time she reaches Emma's exhibition (or at least *vernissage*), her fingernails are no longer red, as if women are incapable of changing their minds and the French have yet to discover acetone.

Adèle walks along Rue Royale, turns left at Rue Voltaire and enters New Square Gallery at 40 Rue Voltaire. Not that a reminder is necessary, but Myrième (*Myriam* on Netflix, *Meryem* in the credits) calls attention to the color of Adèle's dress. Though contemplating a sequel for this film may not be wise, a possible basis for one is suggested by the fact that Myrième's nephew is Adèle's student. It is about to be revealed that Emma is still with Lise, whose daughter Aude could also eventually have Adèle as a teacher. In addition to Emma's paintings, actual works of Adé Bernard are also displayed, just as Emma asserts. Emma may have said, "It's done," but because of a kind of hysteresis, Adèle remains as a not unwelcome presence not only for Emma but even for Lise, who says to Adèle (with a smile, no less), "You're still here." Even if Adèle comes intending to fight, futility soon overwhelms her as Emma and Lise embrace happily, and in an even more public place than the cafe where Adèle had tried to win Emma back. Thus Adèle opts for flight, but her escape is postponed by her encounter with Samir. Valentine scratches his face across an edit in the fight scene at 1:03:30 and Samir does the same here at 2:55:10. "Traveling opens your mind," he reminds her, after what could be a self-referential allusion to "ball-busting directors." Accordingly, after considering the prospect of both Emma and Samir having someone else's arm around them (a simultaneous or coincident rhyme to accompany the film's asynchronous ones), Adèle begins her travels by walking out.

Samir has just claimed to be working in real estate, *immobiliers* in French, meaning "immovables." It should be clear to Adèle that neither he nor Emma is completely immovable emotionally in this scene. But Adèle seems not to desire him enough to wait for him, nor does Emma seem practically attainable. It is time to move on. Adèle's last words express gratitude, though not with as much sincerity as she may eventually come to have about the Emma chapter of her life. The last translated words are those of Samir, who asks, "C'est vrai?" Regarding the film's realism, to be discussed below, this final question (which can be translated as "Is it true?") might suggest an acknowledgement that the "truth" of the film may be taken as subjunctive rather than declarative.

As Samir vainly searches for Adèle, and with faint echoes of the end of *The Third Man*, the meaning of her name may now be considered. Has the plot constituted justice for her or for anyone else concerned? That will be left to the reader to ponder. As to what the future might hold for her, a clue is given by the music, which is that which accompanies her first sight of Emma (Klaïm's "A Que Bueno"). It may now be indicating another similarly critical transitional threshold, for which she seems poised. Adèle is again walking down a city street and is now the one who is emblematically blue. Unable to recapture Emma, she may now in some sense "pay it forward." The music may be indicating the definitive end of the "Emma" segment of Adèle's life, just as it marked the end of her pre-Emma era. These may be the two "chapters" referred to in the film's alternate title. Adèle ends the film not only by walking out on Emma and Samir but by turning her back on the audience, defiantly refusing to issue an invitation to witness chapter three.

Criticism of this film has sometimes inclined toward the "No True Scotsman" fallacy. In his online review of this film, Kenneth Starcher counters charges of unrealistic sex by claiming

that such sex would be recognized and appreciated by anyone who has ever experienced true passion. This may be true. But one need never have been in a passionate relationship in order to recognize psychological, mythological, dramaturgical utility. Starcher's review brings to mind Joseph Campbell's five magnitudes of love (slave for master, friend for friend, parent for child, spouse for spouse, and DAMN THE TORPEDOES!). Thinking about it in that way, realism is not necessarily an applicable standard.

As discussed elsewhere in these essays, the highest level of fictional passion is not demonstrated unless rules are broken. For example, Arthurian romances typically accomplish this via adultery. That said, standards change over time, such that *Jane Eyre* maintains continued popularity even though, from an Arthurian perspective, she wimps out by waiting for Bertha to die before hooking up with Rochester.

As to *Blue is the Warmest Color*, one could be satisfied if the only rules being broken by Adèle and Emma are those of sanitation, as expressed in Kevin Smith's *Clerks II*: "You *never* go ass-to-mouth!" (This also makes ironic the fact that Adèle attends a school named for Pasteur.) Woody Allen has said, "Is sex dirty? Only when it's being done right." Being disgusted by the sex scenes is an acknowledgement of deterrence, such that the threshold guardians win. This is acceptable for real people. However, it is the responsibility of fictional characters to succeed where we might fail, if they are to avoid mythological irrelevance. It may be that this particular film harbors no such aspirations. Nevertheless, "If you have wings, why not fly?"

Another rule-breaking option is to break the bounds of reality. The issue of realism arises in films such as this only because of the otherwise realistic cinematic treatment. The people who complain of unrealistic sex probably do not complain that *Star Wars* features anthropomorphic, English-speaking aliens because they automatically buy the premise and willingly suspend their disbelief. In *Blue is the Warmest Color*, the audience is lulled into thinking that there is no such premise to be bought. Nevertheless, expressionistic devices are occasionally employed, such as those in the party scene discussed earlier. Other practical cinematic matters can come into play. In the "first sight" scene, as Emma passes to Adèle's left, Adèle first turns to her left to watch Emma and then unrealistically turns to her right *because* that is where the camera is. Unless a film is offered as a documentary, realism can constitute redundancy. Fiction is useful to the extent that it offers something that the audience does not already have.

A.O. Scott writes that the director "bumps into the limits of the medium and lapses into voyeurism" in an otherwise worthy attempt "to push the boundaries of empathy, to communicate physical rapture by visual means." In the film, Joachim addresses the more general principle of which the sex scenes would be an example when he speaks of how male artists desperately try to depict female pleasure. Kechiche's venture beyond reality may be explained by just such desperation, such that, as suggested by others to Joachim, he depicts only his "fantasy" that he has "imagined" or "wished for." And such wishing is not confined to male artists. In the YouTube video titled *Lesbians React to Sex Scenes in "Blue is the Warmest Color,"* when asked, "Is that what lesbian sex is really like?" Heather replies, "Well, it's what we would *hope* it to be like." Most films are designed as wish fulfillment. Thus it should not be surprising if in this case it could not be avoided altogether. And it should not be overlooked that in spite of her critique, Heather also says, "Well, I love the movie, I have to say." Similarly, Julie Maroh, the author of the graphic novel from which the film was adapted, though disappointed by the sex scenes, still characterizes the film overall as "coherent, justified" and "a masterpiece."

Taking another cue from Joseph Campbell, Picasso's portraits can be enjoyed and appreciated even if "they certainly don't look like anybody you'd like to meet." Thus can a film

be regarded as a thing-in-itself, without undue distraction by extraneous, external references, such as “real” lesbian sex. And if such distractions are unavoidable, at least Adèle has the excuse of being new to this, Emma being the one with experience in these matters.

In the aforementioned YouTube video, Heather opines that Emma is too unattractive to deserve Adèle’s ardor. If so, then one need merely resort to a Beauty-and-the-Beast interpretation in which Adèle admirably sees beyond the superficial. (Of course, there also exist many commentators who find it implausible that anyone could resist Emma.)

An issue has been made of the film’s length, though it is shorter than any number of epic films such as *Hamlet* (Branagh’s), *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Ben Hur* (Wyler’s), *Gone with the Wind*, *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Exodus*, *Giant* and *Malcolm X*, not to mention many typical sporting events. It may be long by cinematic standards, but not on the Wagnerian time scale, and it takes longer to read a novel. (That said, it is admittedly longer than Wagner ever makes one go without an intermission. Applying a positive spin, Leonard Bernstein says of Wagnerian time, “It proceeds imperceptibly, as the Moon moves, or as leaves change their color.”) It is not so much a question of three hours but of three hours but of *what?* (The issue self-referentially arises in Adèle’s discussion with Thomas about the relative significance of literary quality and quantity.) Audiences are more accustomed to investing such quantities of time on grand, epic, heroic tales rather than on more quotidian, emotional, relationship issues. And regardless of the film’s overall length, at least the internal pacing is manipulated in interesting ways. In the unhurried first half of the film, more than a hour elapses between first sight and first kiss. In the latter half, years sometimes elapse unexpectedly between scenes.

The sex scenes have been similarly criticized, though the longest is shorter than the *Ben Hur* (1959) chariot race and all the sex scenes combined are not as long as the final ballet in *An American in Paris*, a film with a total running time of more than an hour less. They are not necessarily disproportionate within the overall span of the film. It has also been suggested that if viewers were not so preoccupied by the sex, it would be noticed that this film might almost qualify as a food movie, in the company of *Eat Drink Man Woman*, *Big Night*, *Babette’s Feast* or *Like Water for Chocolate*. Some viewers report being unable to tolerate the sight of Adèle chewing with her mouth open. Viewing such a thing should not be considered onerous, given the myriad examples of cinematic murder.

This film has also been criticized for being self-indulgent. As indulgence is something of which this writer would certainly avail himself if given the opportunity, he is thus loath to begrudge others their chance to do likewise. Emma’s telephone conversation about artistic freedom may be taken as a self-referential statement by the filmmakers on this matter.

Many viewers have expressed dissatisfaction with the film’s ending. Discussing *Film Stars Don’t Die in Liverpool* in the *Los Angeles Times* 12/29/17, Jamie Bell says, “I think the greatest love stories are ones where they don’t end up together. There’s an inevitability and a hopefulness, which is that that person [leaves] you with something with which you’ll live out your entire life. It’s beautifully tragic.” Recall that Adèle hears about tragedy and inevitability in one of the classroom scenes.

Although Adèle Exarchopoulos had already been acting professionally for several years when she made this film, it is still quite a remarkable performance under any circumstances for one who was just eighteen. (Wikipedia gives her date of birth as 11/22/93 and states that filming occurred from March to August of 2012.) Dana Stevens in *Slate* aptly characterizes the performance as “torrential.” According to Wikipedia, she received for this portrayal 19 acting awards and was nominated for 16 others. Adèle’s voice is deep enough to throw into high relief

those rare moments of stress when the pitch of her voice rises, whereas an actress with a high-pitched voice would have nowhere left to go and thus would be unable to exploit this device anywhere near as well. Similarly, her mouth remains open so consistently that simply closing it can be quite an expressive tool, as at 0:52:32.

Based on the age of the character in the source graphic novel, some describe Adèle as being 15 at the start of the film. The only time her age is specified is at the party that indicates when she turns 18. Prior to this, it does not seem as if more than a year has elapsed. And it is not until after this party that her mother claims to have been hearing about Emma “for months.” In principle, this could mean dozens of months. But this expression is normally used to denote a period of less than a year. Also note that Adèle seems to be enrolled in philosophy when she meets Emma, that she is still receiving grades in the class after she turns 18 and that the subject is said to be taught for only one year. Thus, there is little to contradict the notion that Adèle is 17 when the film begins. If not, then either she is not referring to school when first speaking of getting help with “philosophy” or is referring to a class that she will not take for perhaps 2 more years or the class is split so that she can be in it at both 15 and 18 or she flunks and repeats it.

As visually depicted in the original graphic novel, this character could initially pass for 12, accentuating the possible creepiness factor. The greater height and deeper voice of Adèle Exarchopoulos mitigate the age difference between the protagonists. When dubbed into Italian, however, this seems to have been ignored, with Adèle being assigned a higher voice based, apparently, solely on some notion of youth and innocence.

As to the issue of the male gaze, it is hoped that a scopophilic perspective imposed by a director will not necessarily be inconsistent with compassion that may be generated in the audience, nor be an insurmountable obstacle to the apprehension of beauty, which, whatever else may be going on, is always found when gazing with compassion and affection. In any case, for Céline Sciamma, the female gaze properly involves returning subjectivity to women, giving them a narrative based on equality and consent that produces tension and suspense but without conflict and domination. Such is the agenda in her film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*.

As touched on earlier, many like to use the director’s alleged behavior as an *argumentum ad hominem* to disparage the film itself, as if the Model A should be thought of as a bad car because Hitler admired Henry Ford’s anti-Semitism so much. The actresses may indeed have endured an ordeal and it may be that the director should consequently go to jail. Neither is being denied here. (The actresses may have gotten the worst of it, but they were not alone. There were said to be general complaints among the crew about unpaid overtime.) It is merely practical reality that is being acknowledged. When Notre Dame burned, this writer was on the other side of the world *and* he is not a fireman. Nor is he a member of the French criminal justice system, and thus he confines himself to film criticism and delegates to others the task of prosecuting and incarcerating Kechiche. (See also the discussion regarding conductor James Levine in episode 7 of the Netflix series *Pretend It’s a City*.) Likewise, as the issue of representation is not this writer’s department, he is in no position to dispute the many complaints about it (*Judicium a non suo iudice datum nullius est momenti*).