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Title
Gazing at Medusa: Adaptation as Phallocentric Appropriation in Blue is the Warmest Color

Abstract
Cixous’s ‘The Laugh of Medusa’ calls for a challenge of traditional representations of femininity and prompts women to inscribe their hitherto concealed femininity into the world. Depicting the love and loss experienced by two female characters, Maroh’s Blue is the warmest color provides a narrative sustained by a matrixial Gaze which challenges patriarchal definitions of women. Whereas the original comic book acts in concert with Cixous’, the 2013 film adaptation by Kechiche presents a different economy and could be read as promoting heteronormative leitmotivs and clichés.

Key words
Maroh – Kechiche - Bleu is the Warmest Color – The Laugh of Medusa - Feminine Subjectivity – Heteronormativity – Scopophilia

Chapter
In 1975, Helene Cixous writes:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies — for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text — as into the world and into history — by her own movement.¹


‘The Laugh of Medusa’ calls for women to inscribe their own meaning into the world and define themselves against patriarchal conventions. Cixous’ call is about making women’s hitherto concealed femininity and bodies visible and unveiling ‘the infinite richness of their individual constitutions’.² She challenges traditional representations of Medusa as a dreaded gorgon who turned her onlookers into stone and claims: ‘You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing’.³ This idea of affirming new models of femininity is resumed by feminist visual studies critiques concerned

² Cixous, 1976.
³ Cixous, 1976.
with the negative impact of male-oriented representations of women. Laura Mulvey coins the term ‘male Gaze’ to describe a representation influenced by a patriarchal and binary standpoint. In Mulvey’s view, by assuming heterosexual men as the default audience films recreate an environment where women are passive objects defined through a masculine perspective. Later criticized for failing to acknowledge female audiences, Mulvey clarifies that female spectators are just as prone to endorse a patriarchal stance hence that passive models of femininity are even more so harmful. Teresa de Lauretis later confirms that, because narrative structures are inscribed in social and cultural codes, they inevitably produce ideals that belong to male desire; by seducing women into becoming ‘non-subjects’, these become obstacles to their self-fulfilment.

Although developed over three decades ago, this chapter shows how these ideas are still pertinent in the examination of gender in visual adaptations. Taking *Blue is the warmest color* as an example, we explore how auctorial choices in adaptations can lead to radical shifts in female representations and thoroughly alter statements on womanhood. While Maroh’s comic book (2010) acts in concert with Cixous’ call by promoting positive models of femininity and female sexuality, Kechiche’s widely acclaimed film adaptation (2013) contains a variety of disturbing elements that can be read as endorsing a patriarchal economy.

Set in Lille, the comic book *Blue is the Warmest Color* by Julie Maroh relates the tragic relationship of two young women. The narrative opens as Emma arrives at Clémentine’s parents’ to read the diary left by her late girlfriend. The story unfolds via Emma’s reading, flash-backs, recollections and present-day emotions. Commenting on her objectives, Maroh says:

> What I am interested in, is the trivialisation of homosexuality (…) to express how an encounter happens, how a love story materialises and disintegrates, and what remains of the love awoken together, after a break up, bereavement, a death.

The term ‘trivialisation’ asserts a wish for homosexuality to be recognised like any other form of sexuality. Maroh is clear in her choice to tell the story of a lesbian encounter and assert feminine desires, emotions and subjectivity against widespread heteronormative and male-oriented productions. The cover is the first element in a long series to challenge the male Gaze by asserting a ‘matrixial Gaze’; that is, a representation that does not derive from a patriarchal opposition of the masculine and the feminine. On the front cover, Emma’s imposing figure, strong naked back and short blue hair stand out against a grey background. Her penetrating blue eye and her elusive yet confident smile introduce her as presents her as subject of the look and as a mysterious and self-assured woman. This androgynous depiction goes against representations of female features traditionally associated with rounder shapes and eroticism. The back cover portrays a different type of femininity with Clémentine who appears much smaller, in black and white, on the left-hand side: her face slightly turned away.

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8 We respect Maroh’s blog terminology: “comic book”.
her eyes and lips in a perplexed mood, her long hair and left-hand reaching for an unattainable goal suggest a somewhat dislocated character in search of herself. As Clémentine is the object of another woman’s look, the displacement of the ‘Male Gaze’ opens the way to the recognition of female subjectivity.\(^{11}\) Both contrasting types of femininity are linked with womanhood and set the tone of a narrative which defies phallicentric, fixed and unilateral representations in order to embrace the multiple facets of femininity.

When Kechiche releases La Vie d’Adèle (2013), Maroh writes:

this adaptation is another version / vision / reality of the same story (...) What came out of Kechiche’s film reminds me of those small pebbles that mutilate your flesh when you fall and scratch your knee on the tarmac (...) I published an article on my blog in December 2001 (here) and then in May 2013 (there), I have nothing else to declare. Please do not contact me about this topic’.\(^{12}\)

Although she states that the film is a ‘masterstroke’, this new ‘vision’ evidently feels like an open scar. In contrast, Kechiche is passionate when he talks about his feminine characters and his interest in showing ‘what makes one feel a woman’.\(^{13}\) He explains how telling a lesbian love story is ‘exciting’ for him.\(^{14}\) This last statement could demonstrate his enthusiasm towards women as subject matters if the interview was not carried out in another language; indeed, the word ‘excitant’ rings an alarm bell due to its unavoidable sexual connotation in French. As such, Kechiche’s motivation to adapt a lesbian love story could be questioned. If La Vie d’Adèle has the merit of bringing a lesbian relationship to the big screen, some of its formal and narrative elements can be read as complying with a repertory of images in line with the predominantly white heterosexual male perceptive of mainstream cinema detected by Mulvey; a pleasure in looking ‘split between active/male and passive/female’.\(^{15}\)

Narrative Voices and Perspective

In her Key Writings, Luce Irigaray writes about subjectivity:

Sounds, voices are not divided from bodies (...) Sound waves reach us without any mediation. They are not only what allows us to exist (...) they make us vibrant, they talk to us without the necessary mediation of an object, or a representation external to what they are (...) Nothing reaches us more directly than the tonality of the other’s voice (...) marked by the singularity, in particular the sexuate singularity, of the one who speaks.\(^{16}\)

The projection of one’s corporeal singularity is especially important for women who need to assert their sexuate individuality and definition without mediation. In Blue is the Warmest Color, a mix of perspectives and narrative modes overlap, but the main consistent voice is precisely that of a woman. Although Clémentine is dead, her voice accompanies the unfolding of the present time — in the lightly coloured pages — and narrates the past — in the grey and sepia pages. On the opening page, as Emma is travelling by bus, Clémentine’s voice as first person narrator is superimposed in the captions and fills the present like a background music. As Emma reads her last letter, Clémentine’s first words are also the first words of the narrative: ‘My love, when you


\(^{12}\) Maroh, 2013.

\(^{13}\) Interview at Festival International du Film Indépendant de Bordeaux (2013).

\(^{14}\) Kechiche’s Interview in the Collector Edition of La Vie d’Adèle, chapitres 1 et 2 (2014).

\(^{15}\) Mulvey, 1976

\(^{16}\) Luce Irigaray, Key Writings (London: Continuum, 2004), 139.
read these words, I will have left this world’. The feminine diaristic voice is the first to be introduced and controls the switches between present and past which makes the narrative an assertion of female subjectivity without mediation.

The last words written by Clémentine consequently also close the narrative: ‘Beyond our death, the love that we shared continues to live.’ However, the extinguishing of her voice is far from signalling closure and is presented as a call for the perpetuation of her subjectivity. This is reiterated by the concluding full-page panel representing the sea; the water element being intrinsically linked with femininity and selfhood since the myth of Narcissus in Ovid’s Metamorphoses. In love with Narcissus, the nymph Echo is condemned to repeat his words and is never fully able to express herself. However, when Narcissus sees his reflection in the water, falls in love and unites with himself in a deadly fall, Echo is freed from male control and is able to roam free again. Like Echo, on the last page of the comic, Clémentine ‘is nowhere to be seen but, as a result, she is everywhere’. A geo-historical reading of the water element adds another dimension to the mythological perspective: ‘not only does water unite, and therefore lead to commerce and civilisation, the Sea signifies progress, and even freedom, the very telos of history’. In this sense, water symbolises the liberation of feminine subjectivity and links it to a predominant position in the modern world. As Clémentine’s voice disappears into the sea, the aquatic end of the narrative provides the optimistic symbol of feminine fulfilment.

The adaptation fosters however a completely different perspective. Kechiche’s primary focus is the actress Adèle Exarchopoulos, so much so that Clémentine’s name is changed to Adèle and the title becomes ‘La Vie d’Adèle’. However, her body is the main object of attention. Throughout the film, Adèle is shot from all angles and is the object of a multitude of lengthy close ups, extreme close ups and vertical or horizontal swivels. The relentless and detailed filming of her body makes some of the scenes uneasy to watch, notably when she is sleeping or eating and as the camera remains obsessively fixed on her. Bringing the spectator out of his comfort may be Kechiche’s intention and has to do with his signature style made of a compulsive attention to details and repetitions. However, this quasi-fetishist focus on the female body and the fact that Adèle rarely speaks suggest her objectification. The fully heterodiegetic perspective make Kechiche’s lens the sole active bearer of the look, which further traps the female character in a patriarchal logic. Whether the director is male or female has little importance here as the feminine subjectivity is constantly mediated and are therefore stifled: Adèle’s body becomes a refracted passive object of contemplation rather than a subject who develops her own voice.

17 Maroh, 5.
18 Maroh, 155.
20 Although the focus is not the myth of Narcissus itself, Emma Wilson links the water to the sensory dimension of representations of femininity in her article ‘‘The Sea nymphs tested this miracle’: Water Lilies (2007) and the origins of coral’, in C. Brown and P. Hirsch (eds), The Cinema of the Swimming Pool (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), 203-213.
21 Wick, 48.
22 Wick, 2013.
23 For instance in ‘La Graine et le Mullet’ with endless shots and zooms of the Beiji family eating couscous.
Following a ten-year ellipse, the comic book proposes a development of Clémentine intertwined with a feminine stance: although she is ill, the once fragile Clémentine finds her own voice and articulates a very mature philosophy of life: she has attained a visible contentment, accepted her imminent death and urges Emma to continue her life peacefully. The last images of the film prolong however the image of a dislocated and insecure woman. The ending presents her as healthy but isolated character who is struggling with her emotions. As Samir asks her if she finds it difficult to see Emma now that they are separated, she gives an unconvincing answer. Still unable to formulate complete sentences, Adèle is overwhelmed and escapes from the gallery where she had been invited for the launch of Emma’s exhibition. She disappears in a side alley, unable to face the crowd, the situation and even herself. The last image of a teary and distressed Adèle is followed by a fixed shot showing her turning her back to the camera and vanishing. Where the comic ends on the representation of a controlled and assertive female character, the film reiterates clichés of fragility traditionally associated with femininity.

Lesbian Desire and Choices of Representation

Talking about modes of representation in The Pleasure of the Text, Barthes defines as ‘readerly’ texts that provide a detailed narrative to the readers for them to reach meaning easily. In opposition, he describes as ‘writerly’ narratives that adopt a more open perspective and require commitment on the reader’s part. Barthes’ terminology is a particularly useful starting point to examine the representation of female sexuality and raises key questions: how much should be shown? What is the impact of a detailed representation? In This Sex that is not One, Irigaray claims that the detailed orchestration of women’s pleasure does not lead to realistic or fulfilling representations of their eroticism:

(The male) even incites women to enjoy each other sexually – under his watchful eye, of course. He must not allow any possibility of sexual staging to escape him. (...) The question remains: in what way does he see what goes on between women?

Although Irigaray thinks specifically about men staging female sexuality, other critiques stress that any detailed representation of female sexuality is bound to preclude potential, openness and multiplicity. Cixous spells out why:

You can’t talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes—any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women’s imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible.

To refer to Barthes, only ‘writerly’ modes of expression would then satisfactorily represent female pleasure in its ungraspable flow. Overly detailed representations would trap women’s sexuality in a bounded system, force it back into the realms of patriarchy and serve the eroticism of the male subject. While aware that we are dealing with two different media that convey meaning in different ways, we will now see how Kechiche’s adaptation provides a more ‘readerly’ and therefore restrictive account of female desire

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25 Luce Irigaray, This sex which is not One (Ihaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 200.
26 Cixous, 1976.
27 Irigaray, 122.
and by doing so that it loses the comic’s non-prescriptive representation of lesbian desire.

Maroh’s ‘Matrixial Gaze’ is important in her representation of sex scenes as it challenges traditional opposites. Looking, as a key element introduced by the cover, is recalled by recurrent images of Emma contemplating Clémentine. Their first encounter prompts a focalisation on Emma’s eyes through a panel depicting her face and eyes turned towards Clémentine. It is immediately followed by a panel split vertically which provides a closer zoom on her eyes (top) and her mouth (bottom). The same image resurfaces during Clémentine’s dream on a full-width horizontal panel which slows down the narrative and creates a focal point on Emma’s pupil where a reflection of Clémentine can be seen. The narrative then introduces interesting homodiegetic perspectives: when the two women have sex for instance, some panels represent Clémentine from Emma’s point of view. This is also the case in Clémentine’s dream where she is seen lying down from Emma’s perspective as the latter is holding her between her arms. Again, homodiegetic perspectives can be found when they have sex for the first time: one of the panels provides a close up on Clémentine’s breast being held on each side by Emma’s hands. The angle comes from in-between Emma’s two hands as she is lying on top of her. The comic thus reclaims the gaze from a feminine perspective and represents female sexuality from this perspective.

Maroh’s rendering of lesbian sexuality can also be deemed powerfully feminine in that it follows a sensory flow. The suggestive nature of the comic genre allows Maroh to grasp moments of the sexual encounters without dictating their details from start to end. The dream is for instance cut short as Clémentine wakes up with a start when Emma’s hand is sliding under her trousers. The panels representing sexual intimacy are certainly graphic, but the strategic use of graded colours fosters a feeling of warmth and growing affection. When they first meet Emma’s bleu hair stands out against the dark background and signals attraction. During Clémentine’s dream, Emma’s hands become bleu which suggests increasing desire. During the sex scenes, the overarching grey tones are infiltrated by vivid blue details beckoning sexual pleasure. Although Clémentine asserts ‘I want to do everything with you’, Maroh does not provide every single detail of their sexual intercourses and uses ellipses to open the representation. Meaningfully, the first sex scene does not end with a panel depicting orgasm. A succession of panels interrupted represents the two women talking, having sex, kissing and ends with two images suggesting intimacy, friendship and comfort: a close up on their clasped hands and a music player. The sensory and tactile images endorse an eroticism that cannot be fully captured and remains outside the tradition of patriarchal codes.

Kechiche’s adaptation of lesbian sexuality in a ‘readerly’ mode could however be deemed more problematic. The media is of course relevant and, for some critics, mainstream cinema is simply unable to fully provide adequate representations of ‘alternative’ sexualities. For Patricia White, minor cinema is a more adequate media as

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28 Maroh, 13.
29 Maroh, 18.
30 Maroh, 95.
31 A sensuality similar that described by Wilson her analysis of feminine representation.
32 Maroh, 18.
33 Maroh, 97.
34 Maroh, 97.
it reformulates questions of authorship and identity, form and circulation, aesthetics and audience. White argues that

any attempt to use the idiom and resources of cinematic production is to engage the ‘major’. This means confronting dominant narrative and visual codes as well as entering into the technology and commercial apparatus of production/distribution/exhibition, and it also means engaging the populist aspirations that will always animate screen cultures.35

White cites Akerman as an example of filmmakers whose ‘work foregrounds the formal innovation that queer cinema advocates’.36 The impossibility to negotiate a representation of the ‘alternative’ within the codes and requirements of mainstream industry may be what makes Kechiche’s adaptation of the sex scenes rather clumsy. For instance, the deliberate masking of the two actresses’ genitals resolved by the constant manipulation of their positions in relation to the angle of the camera produces a fake impression. It is difficult not to picture Kechiche’s intervention in re-arranging and manipulating the actresses’ limbs and positions. Many more elements in the sex scenes cast doubts on whether the adaptation provides (or even tries to) the best possible representation of female desire. Maroh herself condemns these scenes:

It is clear what was lacking during the shooting: lesbians (…) Maybe someone was there doing some kind of rough miming for them, acting out the possible positions with their hands, and/or showing them a so-called lesbian porn (unfortunately, they are rarely made for lesbians) (…) This is what it is to me: a heartless, surgical, demonstrative and cold display of supposed lesbian sex, which turns into porn, and made me very uneasy. Especially when, you are in a cinema, and everybody is sniggering. The heteronormals (male and female) because they do not understand and find the scene ridiculous. The homosexuals and other transient identities because it is not credible and that they find the scene just as ridiculous. The only ones who do not hear are the potential guys who are too busy getting an eyeful in front of the incarnation of one of their fantasies.37

Maroh highlights important ideas here: the lack of authenticity of the sex scenes and their voyeuristic and heteronormative propensity. On the one hand, Kechiche’s mise en scene of explicit Sapphic sexuality could be a transgressive posture against their invisibility in mainstream cinema. As Barbara Mennel puts it, ‘by representing defamed desires and allowing audiences to an effective engagement with them, queer film is inherently political’.38 This interpretation would imply that the film is ‘queer’ and therefore attempts to assert positive models of alternative sexuality. However, the film obviously fails to do so at many levels.

According to a recent review of a film depicting romance between two women in mainstream cinema,39 while we are past conservativeness in depictions of LGBTQI characters, ‘we continue to package queer slanting stories in a repetitive and bland way to appease today’s timid mainstream’.40 If most plots adapted by larger studios

35 White, 425
36 White, 416
37 Maroh, 2013.
40 BWBTC, 2015.
involve a coming out story in which tragic issues come exclusively from the character’s sexuality, it is because ‘the mainstream portrayal of life as a homosexual is still tinged with the implication that this “perversion” is still punishable’. The review names positive queer films such as that of Ruth Alice Bennett which offer a ‘refreshing perspective of lesbians in film by telling stories about complex homosexual women with bigger concerns than their sexuality’. The latter point is pertinent in the case of Kechiche whose obsessive focus on detailed lesbian sex is far removed from the ‘collective implications’ deemed necessary for far-reaching lesbian models. In Kechiche’s first sex scene for instance, the series of eleven positions filmed over seven minutes from a multitude of angles accompanied by heavy breathing as only soundtrack reads as an uneasy spectacle. The length of the scene and the juxtaposition of angles relate it closely to the imagery produced by pornographic films:

The pornographic scene is indefinitely repetitive. It never stops. It always has to start over. One more time. And another. The alibi of pleasure covers the need for endless reiteration (…) For physical exhaustion alone determines the stopping-point of the scene, not the attainment of a more exhaustive pleasure (…) Pornography is the reign of the series. Graphic imagery and juxtaposition of images of the two women having sex in a variety of unlikely positions may not be an issue for all. However, it is difficult to imagine that, while shooting, Kechiche was unaware of the fantasised use of lesbian sex that traditionally suits the heterosexual male imagination. Despite the scopic propensity of cinema, there is no doubt that he had opportunities to make different and less objectifying choices. Some of the options available were actually to be found in the comic he adapted. The successful introduction of homodiegetic perspectives in the comic which subtly allows sexuality to be reclaimed by a female perspective completely disappears in the film which offers an unfortunate scopophilic representation.

Moreover, the film tends to prevent female stances on feminine sexuality to be taken. Although, discussed at various points in the film, only male characters describe female sexuality while women remain mute. In the first Lycée scene, when the class is studying romance in La Vie de Marianne by Marivaux, it is striking that, when the teacher asks to describe the feelings of the female character, it is a boy who answers and formulates female emotions. This happens again during the party thrown at Emma and Adèle’s house: as a philosophical conversation leads to the discussion of female orgasm, Joaquim — a man — launches into a long description of female pleasure. Although in the home of a lesbian couple and in front many female and lesbian artists, Joaquim takes ownership of the description of female sexuality while the women sit in silence. Even more disappointingly, he concludes that artistic representations of female orgasm by men have no equivalent by women artists. His argument materialises minutes later when Samir asks Adèle if sex with a woman is different from with a man. She gets confused, hesitates and attempts to explain that maybe ‘a little’ but she is unsure because ‘it depends’ but she really ‘couldn’t explain’. This scene confirms again

41 BWBTC, 2015.
42 BWBTC, 2015.
44 Irigaray, 201-202.
that determining male definition and Gaze are prevalent in the film and project their fantasy onto female experiences, thus reasserting heteronormative definitions.

An Overall ‘Heteronormalising’ Dynamic

In the case of *Bleu is the warmest color*, the adaptation process seems stimulated by heteronormative movements. Homophobia is one of the main themes developed throughout the comic book and it actually leads to Adèle and Emma’s temporary break-up. Clémentine’s parents are clearly homophobic and throw the couple out of their house when they discover their relationship. Family and social homophobia leading to self-censorship could have given Kechiche the opportunity to develop an interesting reflection on coming out in different backgrounds. However, the adaptation oversimplifies the context of their separation. Whereas Adèle’s family is working class, culturally unsophisticated and preoccupied with television at meals time, Emma’s family are upper middle class, liberal and connoisseurs of art, wine and food. From a privileged social background, Emma grows as a respected painter and thrives in an artistic milieu. Adèle becomes a school teacher with little ambition, no cultural awareness and is unable to find the resources to relate to her partner. Kechiche seems to forget that, when the film was shot, French society was far from being inclusive: weekly conservative demonstrations divided the country and basic family and adoptive rights were and still are refused to all LGBTIQI individuals. Shots of the demonstrations are shown but the representation of Emma in her oblivious bubble does ignore the fact that any member of the gay community would have had personal and social concerns at the time.

Moreover, the choice of a dull future for Adèle denies agency beyond social context and constructs a weak and passive female model. The negativity of the female representation is further reinforced by the violent break up scenes, the various instances when Adèle bursts uncontrollably into tears and screams and even more so by the final encounter of the two women in a bar. This last scene, in particular, reiterates traditional sexist tropes: we are indeed left rather bemused as the estranged women meet one last time, start kissing after a short conversation and proceed with licking each other’s faces and fingers, breathing loudly, masturbating and eventually burst into tears at a table just beside the counter. This puzzling display of two women unable to control themselves, their emotions or their sexual urges unfortunately relates them to hysteria, yet another patriarchal cliché on femininity.

Many irruptions of heteronormative leitmotifs can also be found in the adaptation. The fact that Adèle’s first sexual experience takes place with a man is for instance telling of a heteronormative dynamics. This is not the case in the comic book in which Adèle is attracted to Thomas but leaves his room suddenly before they can have sex, therefore resisting heterosexual norms. Furthermore, whereas Clémentine and Emma are separated by the death of the former in the original, the adaptation recasts the break up through heteronormative desires. When Emma becomes so engrossed in the work for her first exhibition and neglects Adèle, the latter ends up being unfaithful with a male colleague. While plausible, it is regrettable that Kechiche recounts the end of their relationship through unnecessary clichés which side with the patriarchal vision of compulsory heterosexuality. In Kechiche’s film, Emma herself becomes a heteronormalised lesbian as she takes on the role of a stereotypical patriarchal male: she goes to work, socialises and fulfills her professional ambitions while leaving Adèle at home with the cooking and cleaning. A series of even more predictable phallocentric themes then ensues.

The topics of pregnancy and motherhood, altogether absent in the comic, are incorporated in the film. Adèle’s devotion and motherly attachment to her pupils once she becomes a school teacher suggest an irrepressible and underlying urge to become a mother.
The temptation to give up her lesbian desires to become a mother is also visually suggested by cunning camera angles. For instance, during the party, as the guests are sitting in small groups in the garden, a particular camera angle creates a noteworthy visual link between Adèle and Samir at the front and their heavily pregnant friend Liz positioned in-between them in the background. This synoptic triangular link is recapped soon after when Samir asks Adèle if she ever wants to have children. This time, the angle changes and Emma replaces Liz in the background. At the same time, as Adèle answers with a hardly noticeable nod, Emma’s slightly blurred figure behind her suggests an obstacle to her potential motherhood.

Violence against young women

A further striking insight into the nature of Kechiche’s adaptation can be provided by referring to the film’s production process. This has been the source of considerable controversy with Kechiche’s practice as an auteur receiving criticism for ‘manipulation’ and being characterised by long hours and ‘brutal working conditions’ — reportedly extending to sixteen hour a day, one hundred takes for some scenes and ten days of shooting for the film’s principal sex scene. The actresses portraying Adèle and Emma describe working conditions infused with an unmistakeably patriarchal power dynamic with Kechiche exercising ex-cathedra power over the two up-and-coming young women.

The nature of this auteur/actress relationship was established pre-production. As Exarchopolous recalls, her first casting meeting with the director already put into play the voyeuristic, subject-object relations that would thereafter characterise the working process: ‘He didn’t speak, he just watched and observed me. We remained in silence just watching in each other’.

During the filming process, she notes how Kechiche demanded complete submission to his will and control over the minds and bodies of the actresses, to the point of even shooting her while asleep:

He warned us that we had to trust him — blind trust — and give a lot of ourselves. He was making a movie about passion, so he wanted to have sex scenes, but without choreography—more like special sex scenes. He told us he didn’t want to hide the character’s sexuality because it’s an important part of every relationship. So he asked me if I was ready to make it, and I said, ‘Yeah, of course!’ because I’m young and pretty new to cinema. But once we were on the shoot, I realized that he really wanted us to give him everything. Most people don’t even dare to ask the things that he did, and they’re more respectful — you get reassured during sex scenes, and they’re choreographed, which desexualizes the act.

Seydoux, a more experienced actress, similarly outlines the unequal distribution of power in operation that fostered the dynamic of privilege and oppression:


47 Smith, 2013.

The thing is, in France, it’s not like in the States. The director has all the power. When you’re an actor on a film in France and you sign the contract, you have to give yourself, and in a way you’re trapped. 49

Seydoux describes how the actresses were ‘terrorized’ by Kechiche on set; how he once threw his viewing monitor because he was not satisfied with a scene; how he required constant retakes of scenes including one in which she was compelled to hit the other actress and during which the other actress was injured. The sense of humiliation is described as commonplace. Overall, Seydoux characterises her experience of working with Kechiche as of one of abjection – ‘being made to feel like a prostitute’, — and she notes that having escaped this overwhelmingly negative experience, she would never work with Kechiche again.

Though Seydoux’s comments raise serious points about ‘a society that encourages the sexual domination, objectification and exploitation of women’ 50 in his response Kechiche has failed to address her points and instead adopted a position of defensiveness. In an open letter published on the website Rue 89 he indeed manages to combine patriarchy with petulance, referring to her as ‘an arrogant spoiled child’, accusing Seydoux of disloyalty and slander, and threatening litigation:

Miss Seydoux, who after having repeatedly thanked me publicly and privately and having wept in my arms at Cannes for allowing her to take on this noble role (…) has, against all odds and all personal coherence, radically changed her attitude (…). Thus after having been celebrated and glorified thanks to the Palme d’Or won by Blue Is the Warmest Color, she started to drag me through the mud with lies and exaggerations. 51

Kechiche added that he speculated that it was an extended PR effort to secure her image as a ‘rebel’ and keep herself on magazine covers and in newspapers. It is notable that Kechiche’s engagement here is at the level of seeking to protect his reputation — male privilege — through a rhetoric of derision that casts Seydoux’s criticisms as a performative and self-conscious transgression of what he would expect of her approved gender role — crying and expressing thanks. Kechiche does not address Seydoux’s serious point about what she perceived as the degrading treatment of both her body and sexuality or how objectification, domination, violence and sexuality were inextricably bound up with one another in his film making process.

This debacle with the actresses could be seen as further underlining Kechiche’s complicity with patriarchal culture, its core value of control and domination and narrow definition of power in terms of ‘power over’ and designation of women as the ‘desirable and legitimate objects of male control’. 52 Disappointingly, Kechiche does not engage with the issue of how his practices and how his film might be said to collude with promoting patriarchy and heteronormativity. Under challenge from Seydoux, he responds with an appeal to the authority of the patriarchal establishment and the protection of male privilege that its legal systems provide rather than self-analysis and critical reflection which would have been more reassuring and constructive. Of course it is difficult to draw final conclusions on this story which has never been addressed through a dialogue or interview of all involved. It is

49 Marlow, 2013.
52 Johnson, 34.
however difficult not to mention this controversy in an analysis of the adaptation of female characters and “transgressive” gender and sexuality; especially as many elements contained in the film cast doubts on the claims and models conveyed.

Maroh’s *Bleu is the warmest color* breaks free from phallocentric discourses and challenges oppressive, unilateral and patriarchal definitions of femininity and female sexuality. It actively supports the inscription of a feminine subjectivity through successful strategies. The ellipses, a-chronological timeline and the strong feminine narrative voice all contribute to create a rich visual, textual and sensory narrative. Kechiche’s adaptation of the lesbian love story in mainstream cinema cannot be altogether dismissed. Indeed, ‘speaking out, or coming out, about different sexual desires and subjectivities (…) helps expose the gross oversimplifications that underlie theories of sexual normality’. However, many elements suggest that its adaptation of gender fail to provide positive lesbian characters and denies women the ownership of their own subjectivity and sexuality. As ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ states, authentic expressions of femininity are rarely supported and ‘smug-faced readers, managing editors, and big bosses don’t like the true texts of women-female-sexed texts. That kind of scares them’. It may therefore be disappointing yet unsurprising that an adaptation for mainstream cinema take a stance that obliterates the feminine and queer political stance. Moreover, as the scopic regime of cinema tends to lead to mechanisms of voyeurism and fetishism, representation of female love and intimacy may be difficult to handle. However, Kechiche had without a doubt the opportunity to make different choices. A variety of strategies to challenge oppressive patriarchal codes and perspectives were at hand and yet he chose to collude with them on many levels.

While Maroh’s work can be said to gaze at Medusa, Kechiche’s adaptation refracts her image through a phallocentric perspective. It is regrettable that the fate Cixous is writing about in ‘The Laugh of Medusa’ materialises through this adaptation. In the legend, the gorgon Medusa was defeated by Perseus who, with a mirrored shield, was able to reflect her image and neutralize her gaze to decapitate her. Disappointingly, Kechiche’s lens may well have had a similarly neutralizing and decapitating effect on Maroh’s work.

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54 Cixous, 1976.
55 Metz, 61.