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Food and Sexual Appetite: Dissecting Abtelltatif Kechiche's 'Blue is the Warmest Color' (2013)

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Santanu Das

Jadavpur University

Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

One of the least talked about parts of Kechiche's controversial, Palme d'Or winning 'Blue is the Warmest Color'(2013) was its treatment of food. In most of the scenes centred around socializing, food is an important element. As Adele (Adele Exarchopoulos) and Emma (Lea Seydoux) have a meal together at Emma's place that involves some pointed talk of oysters, countered by a more modest meal at Adele's family home, Kechiche draws in this difference to establish the markers of social class that his protagonists belong to.

Another aspect which instantly catches our attention is the voraciousness with which Adele consumes her food. This indulgence extends to her sex life as well as to the emotional dynamics of her relationship with Emma. Keeping both these rarified aspects of representation of consumption in mind, this paper will interrogate upon the significance of food which at once becomes a statement of French cultural hegemony and even goes above it, manifesting itself in the sexual appetite of its protagonist at the very core.

Introduction

Blue is the Warmest Color, released in 2013 with rapturous reviews at the Cannes Film Festival, walked away with the festival's highest honour- the Palme d'Or, given to the best amongst the lot in the competition section. The jury, led by Steven Spielberg took an unprecedented move and went on to award its two lead actresse Adele Exarchopoulos and Lea Seydoux, as well. In its sensuous, epic treatment of love between two individuals, Kechiche paints the three-hour long film with boldness and intimacy, providing explicit long sex scenes that have an athletic, non-sadistic violence that is entirely consistent with the concept of physical hunger that a relationship demands.

The French title of the movie is *La Vie d'Adele Chapitres 1 et 2* (The Life of Adele Chapters 1 and 2); the first chapter is that of Adele's days leading up to her meeting with Emma and the early time of their relationship; the second part leaps ahead, traversing many years - Adele is working as an elementary- school special-ed teacher and living with Emma, an artist with a modestly thriving career. But the gap between those two sections seems to hide volumes, astonishing considering the fact that Kechiche invests so much in his characters that a single step without proper positioning becomes a step taken without any adherence to its viewers. The sexual intimacy, the coming in and out of it, remains the core interest throughout. That other things do not matter as much, must also be considered as a triumph in Kechiche's art.

For most of the controversy that followed, it was mainly about the concern that Kechiche portrayed the sex scenes luridly and leeringly. But what is to be expressed here is the manner in which Kechiche philosophizes the lovers'

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bodies in the same way that he physicalizes their conversation. The dialectic of sex, with its tensions and parries, its comedy and fury, is as much a part of their being as is their discussion of art, food, or family. Odd, it might seem at first, but *Blue at the Warmest Color* feels at its most

gratuitous and graphic in the moments that Kechiche zooms in on Adele's mouth with an eye that can be called fetishous. It is as if the camera loves Adele's mouth, with long close-up shots attending the disordered lips.

Adele loves to eat and she chews with her mouth open, making a sound that makes it almost disgusting. The scenes of her slurping away at a plateful of spaghetti are almost as gross as the close-up of the actress mashing away on a gyro during Adele's date with Thomas. She devours her food with indulgence that is raw and severely unapologetic, a characteristic she continues to extend in her relationship as well. The scene where she picks up a candy under her bed of boxes and starts to devour them while crying over her sexual instability speaks volumes about her as a person. She uses food as an element that can fill the void, even if momentarily, but without any harm done. At random, Kechiche also portrays her asleep with her mouth open, with a kind of voyeurism- she's a mouth-breather, naturally- and the camera locks on that shot of her gaping lips. What do these images mean? Perhaps it symbolizes the inadequacy in her appetite she shares with Emma (Lea Seydoux) or the equivalence to the need for space, or most elusively, both at once.

Apart from sex then, is this treatment of food, through which Kechiche denotes a specific subjectivity, both personal and political, contesting the very idea of processing the thoughts of acceptance and hunger, indulgence and space etc. Kechiche boldly contests social markers of hospitality and acceptance with the subtle hint of sexual hunger at once, in the alternative scenes when Emma and Adele meet each other's parents. One of our first glimpses of the protagonist is at the dinner with her family; Adele and Emma have an interesting meal with Emma's mother and stepfather that involves some pointed talk about oysters, countered by a more modest meal at Adele's family home; Adele cooks for Emma's friends at their celebration of Emma's art.

Food represents different character or plot elements in many of these scenes. In the first two scenes listed above, our attention is drawn to the voraciousness with which Adele consumes her food. The voraciousness is a recurring theme, as the film progresses, and extends to her sex life and the emotional dynamics of her relationship with Emma. The "meeting the parents" dinner scenes highlight differences in class: Emma says something like "Simple, but delicious" as she slurps up the pasta Adele's father makes- a hearty, working-class dish that stands in contrast to the expensive shellfish the group consumes at Emma's family dinner, accompanied by talk of art and wine. In the dinner party scene, Adele makes the aforementioned pasta dish. It's a hit amongst Emma's cultured friends; the camera lingers on their enjoyment of the meal, but the scene also establishes the passive, servant-like role Adele has taken on in her relationship with Emma, a role that she relishes but Emma resents.

These nuances are not to be found in the depiction of food in American films, where food is a marker of privilege and leisure and comfort- those airy montages in Nancy Meyers movies come instantly to the mind. In those scenes, food is merely 'eaten', not 'consumed'. *Blue is the Warmest Color* takes place in France, where leisure is valued rather than stigmatized. Kechiche sees himself as a part of the working class that he lives in the 18th arrondissement of Paris near where the immigrants live. His approach is unconventional in the way he treats his own mixed cultural heritage of being a Tunisian-French filmmaker- at a conflict between cultural inheritance and group identification. Kechiche's appeal lies not in the marginalisation of a certain kind, but in their ability to exist. By focusing on the life of Adele, he details the confusion, happiness, hunger, desire, certainty, passion and sadness, with a minutiae that embalms the human existence where nothing happens and yet everything happens. There's a rawness to it, a general communion of sorts, where Adele's hunger merges with the discourse on cultural markings that mirrors reality without any borders of nation and stigma.

The controversy that stuck to Kechiche's depiction of sexuality might have caused a negative impact, but for the most unsexy parts involve food, and therein lies the film's beating heart. Kechiche chooses the body as his subject and as the conflict, deliberately leaving clues and markers of political correctness where its harsh physicality is a struggle for an impartial but well-defined civic space where people aren't threatened, literally or metaphorically, by religious, ethnic, or political-party bonds of exclusion.

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