Compare and contrast the cinematic representation of desire in *Le Mépris* and *La Vie d'Adèle*.

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Contempt, or in French *Le Mépris*, was released in 1963 and is a film directed by Jean-Luc Godard that concerns itself with heartbreak and distintegration of a relationship, based around a failing film director within the film itself. *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, or in French *La Vie d'Adèle: Chapitres 1 et 2*, is, in contrast, a modern film released in 2013 and directed by Abdellatif Kechiche. It touches on the subjects of teenage coming-of-age, sexuality and romance. In this essay, I will investigate the cinematic representation of desire. Desire is an interesting word here because these two films seem to involve it from two different standpoints—one from loss of affection and a stunted relationship, and the other from a journey of desperate teenage self-discovery which is very emotionally raw and which every teenager can relate to in some way.

To be able to fully analyse desire as it is portrayed in both films, its connotations and how it might have affected viewers—both us and the public—at the time it was released and now, upon first or second watching, it is important to understand the social context of the times in which the films were made and released. In the 1960s, France was rebuilding itself after the War, whereas in 2013 it was modern and generally progressive. It could be said that the breaking down of the relationship *Le Mépris* is symbolic of French society's loss of so many figures, or people changing beyond recognition, relying not on emotions but physical manifestations ("I like your hair; I like your breasts.") because they were easier than thinking about your own or others' inner feelings and thereby causing fractures. The rebuilding of the relationship in *Blue is the Warmest Colour* could be said not just to represent mindless teenage desire, but France's progression and liberty—the admission of same-sex relationships in themselves—but society's hatred of anything different (Adèle's school friends' reactions to her going to a gay bar, for example), and that deteriorating relationship symbolic of France struggling to stay quite so liberal in these modern times with fresh issues not thought about before, such as immigration and terrorism.

The titles of both of the films, particularly the second, do not seem at first to be particularly related to desire. *Contempt*, for example, does not at all seem "desireable" as it were, as "contempt" is most certainly not desire—one would not desire to be seen with contempt by another person, least of all one they had relations with in the past or currently, the latter of which the film portrays. The title of *Blue is the Warmest Colour* does not scream desire at the reader either, but intrigue, especially if you do not see the trailer or poster for the film or read anything about it beforehand. In French, the title could be interpreted to be even more dull: Adèle's life, but one could not so much as wonder what about it is so special, and decline to watch the film.

Desire can take many forms: desire of objects, desire for strength, desire for wealth, desire for tolerance (Schroeder, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2015). Here, in

both films, we discuss desire to be normal, desire to have a relationship, and the desire to be understood and accepted however we are as people. Desire of a person can in many cases lead to a sexual relationship (Buss, 1994), and we see this particularly in the second film with the girls' ravishing of each other. Conversely, the breaking down of the relationship between Camille and Paul in *Contempt* means that they hardly touch each other, and this lack of desire portrayed by the lack of sex is also mirrored at the end of *Blue is the Warmest Colour* when Adèle suspects—correctly—that Emma is pulling away from her after she makes advances but is pushed away with an excuse that she knows not to be true because of the timing: "I'm on my period". Both of the films could be said to be channelling or anticipating the viewer's desires, though, with their teasing and in the second film's case the prolific sex scenes, the longest of which is ten minutes long and not something that people are normally used to seeing portrayed so graphically even in recent years. The portrayal of Camille in *Contempt* is very understated as she tempts Paul, but then there is a naked scene where we see Camille—played by the French sex symbol of the 1960s Brigitte Bardot—fully naked for a long period talking to Paul. Some may deem this excessive, and there is evidence (British Film Institute, 2013, and in an interview on the DVD) to suggest that it was added at a later date to appease the director who was worried about making the general public likely to watch the film because they sexualised the main character.

In terms of the cinematic features rather than the cultural ones, there are many interesting moments throughout both films, in relation to shot types and language used. *Le Mépris* is particular in that it contains shots of another film which the protagonist Paul is in the process of directing as part of the story. For the first time, Godard had the chance and budget to use the CinemaScope and Technicolor technology and hire good actors, as the French cinema business was booming in the wake of people returning from war and wanting to distract themselves from their nightmares, and wartime bans on specfic types of films having been lifted. This made the film very experimental: Godard tends to use tracking shots which follow the speaking character around the room, and some could say he overuses the technique of panning—hardly ever showing the two characters in the same room in the same shot. An example of this is when Camille shouts from the bathroom that Paul does not love him anymore, and they converse shouting at each other instead of entering the same room, while Paul tries to read a book. When they do enter the same room—the bathroom—she quickly covers herself up and leaves, perpetuating the feeling of disconnection between them and leaving the viewer very perplexed as to what is happening between the two central characters and whether they are going to last much longer.

In *La Vie d'Adèle*, the camerawork is very efficient. From almost the first moment, the viewer does not know what he or she even expects from the film as we see Adèle walking aimlessly and of course smoking, perpetuating a French stereotype. We see that she is quite young—supposedly sixteen at the time—and we wonder what she will do with her life. Throughout the film, there is a predominance of close-up shots, whether they be on Adèle masturbating over a fantasy of Emma, eating, smoking, drinking or more often than not, crying or seeming in the depths of thought or despair. Other than that, the film portrays the girls very closely, with all of the rifts between Adèle and her friends in the playground seeming very realistic—just what teenagers would say about

their friends when they discover they are not what they thought they were and do not fit in with social norms. Adèle protests her innocence as it were, somewhat falsely, and then her best male friend lets her down and she storms out to Emma who is waiting for her. They walk off hand in hand and that is quite a pivotal moment in Adèle's journey of self-discovery. After that, there is a scene where Emma draws Adèle and class divides rear their head, but are overshadowed by how young and vulnerable Adèle looks in the sketch. They laugh it off as Emma's inexperience at sketching people—"I'm not used to sketching faces"—but when Emma leaves there is a close shot of Adèle appearing to look puzzled and seeming to wonder if she is just dreaming about ever feeling secure in her own skin. It is not all about lesbianism, though, as Adèle dances with someone from work later on in the film, when she has moved on from school to become a teacher and is in fact living with Emma. This dance is very sensual, and music becomes a big part as well as the camera watching through the window at Adèle as she removes clothes, as if the viewer is watching something forbidden, and ends up kissing the male colleague. This segues nicely but unexpectedly into the hectic and horrific fight scene which shows them both on the edge of despair, no feelings on Emma's part. Emma appears very short and emotionless, not really crying, mostly wanting to never see Adèle again. One wonders why Emma would banish Adèle with no explanation if she herself had not wanted to end the relationship and was just looking for an excuse. This, although unsaid, seems to transpire to be the case. Interestingly, the removed nature of the Adèle's dancing scene contrasts heavily with the very intense and intimate nature of the sex scenes, with nothing left to the imagination, despite the actresses use of prosthetic genitalia. Most damningly, the author of the original graphic novel, Julie Maroh, said that 2013 the film was missing "real lesbians" after attacking its portrayal of her story by it being shot from a man's perspective and Kenniche teasing audiences with gratuitous sex. She also compared these scenes to pornography (Guardian News and Media, 2013), especially with the perfectly formed prosthetics.

Blue is the Warmest Colour was very highly acclaimed, narrowly missing out on a Golden Globe award having been nominated for 'best foreign language film' in 2014. Instead, the film, its director and main actresses were famed at the Cannes film festival, where they won the 2013 Palme d'Or. Nevertheless, the film was shrouded in controversy as some claimed it wasn't a true portrayal and that the actresses were mistreated, having to shoot scenes tens of times to get the perfect shots (Hattenstone, 2013). In some cases, however, this made the scenes all the more real because the actresses were physically exhausted and/or emotionally drained by the end—in the fight scene for example, where Emma kicks Adèle out because she cheated on her, Adèle was really crying (also Hattenstone, 2013).

In conclusion, desire is portrayed very differently in both *Contempt* and *Blue is the Warmest Colour*. The one the viewer prefers is down to personal preference—the romantic tragedy, or the almost-pornographic lesbian coming-of-age love story that eventually ends in a journey of self-discovery far beyond the relationship itself. Desire is not all about sex, it is about enrichment, love, and loss, which both films portray very convincingly and which is very relateable by everyone, whoever you are, as it is a central tenet of society.

References

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