banal/QUEER/spectacular: Reframing Blue is the Warmest Color

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“What interests me is the banalization of homosexuality,” cartoonist Jul’ Maroh\(^1\) writes in a blog post dated May 27, 2013.\(^2\) Maroh published this statement in order to contextualize their 2010 graphic novel, *Le bleu est une couleur chaude* (*Blue is the Warmest Color*), which illustrates the life of Clémentine, a high school sophomore, who falls in love with Emma, a blue-haired, bohemian art student and self-assured lesbian in her early twenties. The story unfolds in the 1990s in northern France, where Clémentine’s emerging lesbian identity is met with disdain from her classmates and her family. Aside from this prejudice, *Le bleu est une couleur chaude* is, in many ways, a typical tale of first love, found and lost. To use Maroh’s word, this story is banal.

Maroh’s project in creating this graphic novel, however, seems to rest on an antinomy: how can the story of a lesbian relationship—a story about queer people—also be banal? This tension is rooted in the ambiguity that often trails the word “queer,” which has long carried the meaning of “strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric,” as given by the Oxford English Dictionary. But this well-delineated definition begins to fall apart when “queer” is applied to matters of sexuality and gender, as Max Kirsch notes in *Queer Theory and Social Change*: “The principle of ‘queer,’ then, is the disassembling of common beliefs about gender and sexuality, from their representation in film, literature, and music to their placement in the social and physical

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\(^1\) *Le bleu est une couleur chaude* was published under the name Julie Maroh; the author now goes by Jul’ and uses they/them pronouns in English.
\(^2\) “Moi ce qui m’intéresse c’est la banalisation de l’homosexualité” (All English translations of Maroh will be mine).
Although Kirsch’s definition of queer remains bounded within the study of gender and sexuality, not all critics agree with so limited a scope. In fact, author David Halperin offers what is perhaps the most pointedly vague interpretation of this word: “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence” (62). Despite the linguistic imprecision of queer that these three definitions highlight, they all seem to agree on one thing: whether it relates to matters of gender and sexuality, queer refers to that which is non-normative.

And so, queer can certainly describe same-sex relationships like that of Maroh’s characters Clémentine and Emma. But for the purposes of clear terminology, I will avoid the nebulous definitions of this word by using “lesbian” to refer to the characters and plot of Blue is the Warmest Color (since Maroh offers no indication that either character does not identify as a woman). “Queer” will instead serve the meta discourse that will ultimately underpin this paper as it considers whether it is indeed possible for a work to be both queer and banal.

In order to explore this question, I turn to a comparative framework. The 2013 blog post in which Maroh introduces the concept of banalizing homosexuality was written in response to Abdellatif Kechiche’s 2013 film adaptation of Le bleu est une couleur chaude, titled La vie d’Adèle—Chapitres 1 & 2 (in the film, Kechiche renames Maroh’s character Clémentine “Adèle,” after Adèle Exarchopoulos, the actor he casts to play her; the movie was released under the title Blue is the Warmest Color in the Anglophone world). The three-hour long film received significant critical attention—it won the Palme d’Or at the Cannes film festival and earned many
positive reviews, but the acclaim turned to controversy when actors Léa Seydoux and Adèle Exarchopoulos spoke out against director Kechiche’s abusive filming conditions. In an interview with *The Daily Beast*, Seydoux reveals the circumstances surrounding the film’s seven-minute sex scene: “we had fake pussies that were molds of our real pussies…We spent 10 days on just that one scene. It wasn’t like, ‘OK, today we’re going to shoot the sex scene!’ It was 10 days.” As compared to Maroh’s graphic novel, which quietly documents a love story, the commotion surrounding Kechiche’s film is emblematic of its starkest departure from *Le bleu est une couleur chaude*: in depicting men who rhapsodize about female orgasm, fixating on Adèle’s mouth as she slurps spaghetti, and of course, displaying sex in such a gluttonous manner, it seems that this film might be described as anything but banal.

Thus, studying Maroh’s graphic novel and Kechiche’s movie alongside one another will reveal an answer to the question: how might one story, told through two different media, offer varying portraits of queer? If Maroh’s graphic novel does, indeed, offer a banal queer (which I will prove throughout this paper), what sort of queer exists in Kechiche’s movie? These questions will best be answered through a *formal* analysis, as opposed to a plot-based analysis. A focus on form and genre will allow this study to avoid the critical debate over fidelity—or the extent to which Kechiche’s film is “faithful” to Maroh’s comic—that often overshadows the study of adaptation. And, a formal analysis will avoid the potential tautological pitfall of arguing that Maroh’s text is banal when they are the one who originally invoked this term. Instead of taking their concept of “banalization” at face value, I will demonstrate its relevance to the reader or viewer’s relationship to and engagement with *Blue is the Warmest Color*, a strategy that diverges from Maroh’s original usage of the word.
In order to structure this reading, I will narrow in on two elements that are emblematic of the reader-text engagement that underpins *Blue is the Warmest Color*—the role of inference and interpretation, and Maroh and Kechiche’s particular approaches to narrative focalization. And I will also linger briefly on the detail that has so captured critics’ attention: the portrayal of lesbian sexuality. Overall, this formal analysis will reveal that the active reader-text relationship in *Le bleu est une couleur chaude* urges the homosexuality in its pages to become normalized and eventually *banal*. Conversely, the passive viewer-text relationship in *La vie d’Adèle* turns the characters and their relationship into a *spectacle*. Therefore, though they tell two versions of the same story, it would seem that these texts offer divergent manifestations of queer.

The most obvious opening into this argument is the concept of banal, a word which the OED defines as “commonplace, common, trite; trivial, petty.” In other words, banal describes something that is unextraordinary in its ubiquity. It is an antonym to the non-normative or unusual, concepts often associated with queer. The concept of banal, of course, comes from Maroh’s blog post. Spectacular, however, I have selected myself, for its twin definitions. Described as both “of the nature of a spectacle or show” and “that which appeals to the eye,” the word spectacular is inherently connected to both the performative and the visual—concepts that underpin Kechiche’s film, and the medium more broadly—and these tandem definitions work well to describe the way in which queer manifests itself in *La vie d’Adèle*, as I will demonstrate in what follows. Since the spectacular is rooted in the act of watching, it evokes a certain passivity: the spectacular magnetizes the eyes of the viewer, urging her to settle into the ease of a steady regard.4

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4 The theory of the passive film spectator, which draws heavily on psychoanalysis, is a concept that was widely explored in cinematic criticism of the 1960s and 1970s. Although more recent authors have largely moved past it (see Judith Mayne’s *Cinema and Spectatorship*), I take this trend as evidence that there is indeed an argument to be made about a viewer having a largely passive relationship to a film.
Roland Barthes offers a useful structure for this argument at the beginning of *S/Z*. Barthes exposed the relationship between reader and text as one that ought to be active: “the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of text” (4). He clarifies that some texts lend themselves well to a reader taking on this role of production—these texts, therefore, can be considered writerly. Others, though, deny the reader this “pleasure,” and thus must be classified as readerly (4). This readerly/writerly distinction is one that, although written about prose fiction, is readily applicable to other forms of storytelling, including those that are rooted in the visual. Barthes’s framework will serve as a guiding structure to help understand *Blue is the Warmest Color*, since this paper will categorize *Le bleu est une couleur chaude* as a writerly work—the reader of Maroh’s graphic novel takes on an active role as “a producer of text.” Conversely, my study of *La vie d’Adèle* reveals the viewer’s passive, or readerly, relationship to the film.  

For the sake of utmost clarity, here is a visual distillation of the ways that these core concepts align in this paper:

\[ Le \ bleu \ est \ une \ couleur \ chaude \rightarrow \ \text{writerly} \rightarrow \ \text{banal} \]

\[ La \ vie \ d’Adèle \rightarrow \ \text{readerly} \rightarrow \ \text{spectacular} \]

After viewing the above diagram, my reader may immediately wonder at the connection between Barthes’s writerly—a concept that represents an active engagement with the text—and the banal: the normal, everyday, non-descript. In order to establish this affinity as a foundation for the rest of this paper, I will begin with a reading of one page of Maroh’s graphic novel that will offer a strong case for aligning the writerly with the banal. The association between the

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5 Marion Krauthaker and Roy Connolly apply Barthes’s theory of readerly texts to *La vie d’Adèle* in their article “Gazing at Medusa: Adaptation as Phallocentric Appropriation in *Blue is the Warmest Color*.” I am indebted to them for drawing my attention to Barthes’s text and its applicability to Kechiche’s film.
writerly and the banal can be located in a concept that is known, in comics studies, as *closure*. In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Scott McCloud notices that a reader of comics must sort out how each of the individual panels is connected to the ones that come before and after in order to read the comic as a cohesive narrative. This phenomenon, which he calls closure, he describes as: “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (63). Closure is an inherently writerly phenomenon: the reader is called upon to infer what is happening between one panel and the next, which requires an active engagement with the text.

One particular page, near the end of *Le bleu est une couleur chaude*, offers the key to understanding the banalizing function of closure. This page serves as the transition between the two parts of the narrative: Clémentine’s high school years, illustrated in black and white with occasional washes of blue, and her adulthood, illustrated in a muted but full color palette. In the foreground, Maroh illustrates an adult Clémentine whose naked body curls into a fetal position. This image, rendered in more detail than the rest of the illustrations in the graphic novel, draws the eye in right away, but it is the thirteen panels that sit behind her on an entirely different plane that will serve as the link between the banal and closure.

In these thirteen panels, Maroh illustrates a series of everyday happenings—taking the train, sitting in a lecture hall, eating with friends, etc.—which, when taken together, form a montage-like window into the life that Clémentine and Emma share. Although Maroh does not spell it out explicitly, the careful reader will notice the sheer amount of time that is passing in between these snapshots. The most obvious clue to the acceleration of the narrative pace is Clémentine’s hair: in the first panel, it just grazes her jaw, but by the end of the page, a long braid reaches halfway down her back. The specific events depicted here also suggest that at least four years—but likely more—speed by on this one page. Clémentine finishes high school,
J'ai rencontré les parents d'Emma plus vite que prévu.

Ça s’est vite fait.

C'est évidemment une réalité loin de mes rêves de jeune fille.
spends three-to-five years in university (we see her in a lecture hall), and then becomes a full-time teacher. And interspersed between these markers of her career progression, scenes with Emma round out her day-to-day existence. These snapshots do not tell a story when viewed as individual stills on their own, like all comics panels taken out of context. It is the phenomenon of closure, or the act of reading the panels all together and imagining the story that connects them, that leads to a cohesive sense of what takes place during these four-plus years of story time.

The question remains: how might closure, and a writerly engagement with the text, facilitate the banalization of queer? By way of an answer to this question, I return to Maroh’s May 27, 2013 blog post in which they elaborate on their activist project in writing *Le bleu est une couleur chaude*: “I didn’t make this book to preach to the choir, I didn’t make a book only for lesbians. My wish from the very beginning was to capture the attention of those who: –didn’t question their own beliefs –came up with false ideas without knowing –hated me/us.” For Maroh’s doubting reader, the experience of actively engaging with this story through closure means an exercise in imagining the details of quotidian lesbian life. In animating images of Emma and Clémentine packing up boxes to move in together, going out for drinks with friends, or even kissing, naked, in bed, the reader is forced to engage with—or even enable—this portrait of queer. By actively interpreting this page of the graphic novel, the reader is forced to accept it as banal.

It would seem, then, that at the heart of the questions under consideration in this paper is the issue of interpretation. Interpretation can refer both to the act of achieving comprehension, like the example of closure above indicates, and also to the exploration of the deeper significance

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6 “Je n’ai pas fait un livre pour prêcher des convaincu-e-s, je n’ai pas fait un livre uniquement pour les lesbiennes. Mon vœu était dès le départ d’attirer l’attention de celles et ceux qui: –ne se doutaient pas –se faisaient de fausses idées sans connaître –me/nous détestaient.”
of an image or phrase, like the process Susan Sontag critiques in *Against Interpretation*. For film theorist David Bordwell, both modes of interpretation are critical to understanding cinema; though they both “involve the *construction* of meaning out of textual clues,” he clarifies that “the activity of comprehension constructs referential and explicit meanings, while the process of interpretation constructs implicit and symptomatic meanings” (3, 10). The dual nature of interpretation that Bordwell describes is just as relevant to the medium of comics as it is to the medium of film, since they both require the reader (or viewer) to make meaning of non-verbal storytelling in the same way.

A study of interpretation in these two works would be incomplete without considering the question of whether Kechiche’s movie is not simply his interpretation of Maroh’s graphic novel. This question broaches a central issue in the theory of adaptation, which author Anne Furlong sums up in her critique of the oft-cited metric of fidelity:

> [I]n the source text, the writer presents evidence from the interpretation she intends her audience to recognize through the private act of reading. Adaptations, on the other hand, are public presentations of the director’s non-spontaneous interpretation of the work.

(177).

By noticing the “non-spontaneous” nature of an adaptive project, Furlong offers an important intervention, as applied to *Le bleu est une couleur chaude*: the kind of interpretation that Kechiche-as-director offers of Maroh’s text is different from the kind of interpretation that Kechiche-as-reader might make (i.e. the construction of meaning through closure), because of both the time and space he has taken to painstakingly analyze the work before converting it into a three-hour film, and the fact that he has reframed the story with public consumption in mind.
Furlong goes on to apply adaptation theory to graphic novels in a move that offers important context to the interpretive relationship between *Le bleu est une couleur chaude* and *La vie d’Adèle*. Since the reader of a graphic novel constructs her own personal interpretation of the story through closure, every reader will walk away with a slightly different experience of the source material. This poses an issue for adapters who are trying to rework the original comic, Furlong writes:

Since the reader’s interpretation is based to a significant degree on non-verbal and non-propositional evidence he is far more sensitive to change and thus more likely to reject any departure from the original, even (or perhaps especially) when the ‘original’ is largely of his own creation. (180)

Interpretation, therefore, destabilizes a graphic novel to such an extent that when the text is used as source material for an adaptation, one can never offer a blanket assessment of the success of the adaptation.

Since the concepts of reader/viewer inference and interpretation are so critical to understanding an adaptive project like *Blue is the Warmest Color*, they offer a useful starting point from which to begin a close study of both the graphic novel and the film. An in-depth examination of the page in *Le bleu est une couleur chaude* where Clémentine and Emma first cross paths will reveal the writerly way that Maroh urges their reader to decode emotional and psychological portraits of both characters. The upper-right section of this page depicts a close-up of Emma, but a gutter slices her face horizontally in two, separating her eyes and the upper half of her face from her nose and the bottom half of her face. Her blue hair jumps across the gutter, flowing from the top panel to the bottom. By splitting Emma’s face in two, Maroh simultaneously centers and decenters it—the importance of this image, seen through
Les questions des ados sont familiales aux yeux des autres. Mais quand on se sent seul à pieds joint, dedans, comment sourit sur lequel danse?
Clémentine’s eyes, is undeniable, but its fractured nature suggests a repulsion: despite Emma’s inviting smile, the reader, like Clémentine, is only able to experience a ruptured version of Emma. The way Maroh frames this image suggests that although Clémentine is clearly attracted to Emma, she is also repulsed by her own attraction.

When followed like lasers across the page, Emma’s and Clémentine’s gazes carry the reader’s eye along the path of a sweeping X, from the top left of the page to the bottom right—as we follow Clémentine’s movement—and from the top right to the bottom left—as we follow Emma. The center of this X shape emphasizes the importance of the moment when the two women cross paths. As Clémentine and Emma both turn back to linger on each other’s faces, the torque of their twisted heads suggests the magnetic pull of the gaze that connects them, while also betraying the ephemerality of this moment—neither woman can keep her head turned forever; in row four, panels one and two, Emma turns her back and walks away, and we watch her do so, through Clémentine’s eyes. The split nature of this page reinforces the final panel, in which Clémentine—off kilter, leaning backwards, reeling from the eye contact she has just locked into and broken out of—is alone in a square frame that contains no background, no shadow of other people, just her.

Overall, by offering panels that allow us to see the scene from an omniscient point of view alongside panels that depict Emma through Clémentine’s eyes, Maroh demonstrates the importance of this moment for both women, while also allowing the reader the affective experience, through Clémentine’s point of view, of looking onto another person with such strong identification and desire. They accomplish all this without any written explanation of the mutual attraction that is exchanged on this page (although there is a caption, it does not describe the events illustrated here); instead, the formal composition of the scene, as well as the emotion that
Maroh imbues in their characters’ faces, is enough for the reader to infer the meaning behind this shared look.

Movies, like graphic novels, also demand readers to infer information primarily through the interpretation of visual elements. Seymour Chatman offers an important analysis of viewer inference, as applied to cinema, in his book *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. He recalls that “[f]ilms prefer to rely on the audience’s ability to infer things that a literary narrator might put explicitly into words” (163). This remark is especially pertinent to *La vie d’Adèle*, since so much of the film passes by without dialogue as the viewer closely observes the character of Adèle (Maroh’s Clémentine, renamed).

The scene in the movie in which Adèle first sees Emma mirrors the comic closely; Kechiche even reproduces the detail of the stray hairs floating across Adèle’s face. Instead of offering equal insight into both women, however, his camera lingers very closely on Adèle in a way that invites the reader to make inferences about her experience of this moment while offering little insight into the thoughts or feelings of Emma’s character, which departs from Maroh’s portrayal of both women’s interiority.

While this scene plays out on screen, the music that swells in the background helps to inflate its tension: as Adèle is walking to the intersection where she will pass Emma, she strolls past a man playing the hang, a musical instrument like a steel drum, and the light, vibrating song becomes the background to their encounter. The song reaches a crescendo in the moment when the two women pass by one another, and they each twist backwards for one more look.

Most of the scene unfolds in either a closeup or an extreme closeup of Adèle’s face or the back of her head, interspersed with point of view shots that reveal Emma through Adèle’s eyes. By trailing Adèle so closely, Kechiche follows the visual norms he has set for his film: Adèle is
not just at the center of every shot, but she is the center of every shot. However, he also mimics the visual vocabulary of the graphic novel in that we never see through Emma’s eyes, only through Adèle’s or from an omniscient point of view. The extreme close-ups and quick cuts help to build some of the same torqued tension that Maroh creates in the graphic novel, but since the viewer’s attention is drawn exclusively towards Adèle, Kechiche ultimately offers a one-sided portrayal of this moment.

It is clear that Maroh and Kechiche are both counting on their reader or viewer’s ability to infer that the looks exchanged in this moment are indicative of an emotional turning point in the story; what begs more explanation is how this concept relates to whether the story becomes banal. My analysis has shown that Maroh’s portrayal of this encounter demands a more active, or writerly, engagement with this scene; in lingering on both characters, the reader is able to make a more balanced interpretation of this moment’s significance for both Clémentine and Emma. Kechiche’s approach, on the other hand, only offers insight into Adèle’s character and thus limits the scope of what the film’s viewer is asked to infer. Since the camera trails Adèle so closely, the viewer is deprived of the pleasure of understanding Emma’s experience of this encounter.

As my analysis of this important turning point in both versions of Blue is the Warmest Color has shown, the points of view from which Maroh and Kechiche deliver the story can fundamentally shape the inferences a reader or viewer makes. The question of who is telling a story can be obscure enough when it comes to prose or poetry, but the additional visual element of comics and film often complicates the narrative study of these genres. Gérard Genette’s 1972 text Discours du récit still serves as a touchstone for analyzing a text’s diegesis, or the relationship between story and storytelling, and there has been some interest in the last ten years regarding the study of narrative focalization and comics. Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri begin
a conversation about narratology in comics in their 2011 article “Focalization in Graphic Narrative,” which argues that the medium of comics deserves its own intervention in narratology, more specifically focalization, because of the particular “even blending of semiotic modes to convey meaning” that is inherent to this medium (331). Thierry Groensteen responds to Horstkotte and Pedri’s call to bring focalization to the study of graphic narrative in his book *Bande dessinée et narration*. He offers several phrases to describe narratological mechanisms in comics, some of which will prove useful for this paper. Groensteen notes that similar to how a narrator is *speaking* the words of a prose narrative, there must be some being—whether omniscient or a character in the story—that is *seeing* the images in a graphic narrative; he borrows André Gaudreault’s term “monstration” to describe this phenomenon (84). Groensteen applies the same framework to the reciter, or the narrative voice offering captions in a comic; like a prose narrator, its level of focalization can vary from text to text.

Maroh often shifts the type of focalization that they use in *Le bleu est une couleur chaude*, sometimes drawing on more than one type of focalization on a spread. From the opening page, Maroh refuses to let the reader get comfortable with any single mode of monstration. The first page of the graphic novel offers a progression of four panels, stacked one on top of the next, each stretching across the entire width of the page. Panel one shows a landscape of a busy urban street in the rain; pedestrians move in the foreground and the background, cars crisscross the street, and a public bus sits across the center of the panel: an illustration that clearly borrows from the cinematic technique of establishing shot. This image could either be delivered through an homodiegetic monstrator—through the eyes of a character in the story—or a heterodiegetic monstrator—from a point of view external to the narrative. Maroh clears up this ambiguity in the second panel, which leaps to a position right outside of the bus through which the monstrator is
Mon amour,

quand tu liras ces mots

j'aurai quitté ce monde.
showing us a pensive, short-haired woman (Emma) through the window; this impossible jump suggests that the narrator is, indeed, omniscient. And the third panel shifts to a point of view inside the bus in order to offer a close-up of this woman’s face. The diegesis of these first three panels is consistent: the omniscient monstrator delivers three panels from an outsider’s point of view (external focalization, to use Genette’s term). But the fourth and final panel on this opening page radically disrupts the narrative rhythm that Maroh was just starting to establish. The perspective of the fourth panel shifts such that we can only be seeing through the woman’s own eyes. The panel depicts her lap—two legs sitting on a bus seat—with her hands on her left thigh. Her left hand rests flat, and her right hand caresses the ring sitting on her left ring finger (the typical position of a wedding ring in France). The monstrator of this panel, one would assume, is the woman herself. So, we are no longer seeing external focalization through the eyes of a heterodiegetic monstrator; here, the narrative shifts to internal focalization through the eyes of a homodiegetic monstrator—we see the scene through Emma’s own eyes. Just when the reader is starting to get her bearings and orient herself to the visual laws of the graphic novel, Maroh uproots the focalization and compels the reader to rethink the patterns that were starting to develop.

The written narration poses a similar issue: its diegesis on the first page is opaque, making it difficult for a reader to immediately identify who the reciter is. Text begins in the third panel with a caption that reads “My love,” (5). And in the fourth panel, two additional captions complete the sentence: first, “when you read these words” and second, “I will have departed from this world” (5). Not only is this caption written in the first person, but the font in which Maroh pens it on the page evokes the neat handwriting that French children master in primary

7 “Mon amour, quand tu liras ces mots, j’aurai quitté ce monde”
school; for both of these reasons, it seems that this first-person narration is delivered by what Groensteen calls an “actorialized narrator,” or a character who “appears in the story of which s/he is (or pretends to be) the enunciator” (97). We have only been introduced to one character thus far who could potentially be this enunciator—the short-haired woman whom we will come to know as Emma—but it seems impossible that she could be the reciter, given that the person speaking these words is dead, and Emma is very much alive. In the next few pages, it becomes clear that the caption is in fact a quote from Clémentine’s childhood diary, which her mother gifts to Emma after Clémentine’s death. But at this early point in the story, given that Maroh refuses to establish any clear guidelines as to the standard of narration—either visual or verbal—the reader is forced to remain on her toes, ready to actively work to make sense of each new page of the book in the same way that the reader is required to blend panels together through closure.

Kechiche takes a different approach to the film’s opening. Instead of leaving ambiguous the question of how the narrative is focalized, he establishes right away that the film’s diegesis closely trails the character of Adèle. Seymour Chatman comments on cinematic diegesis and, more specifically, on the role of the cinematic establishing shot: “[w]e are encouraged by the codes of film narrative to understand that a camera’s movement is plot directed, not merely contemplative or establishing, and that the appropriate diegetic object will appear at the end of the shot: in other words, that the camera is moving resolutely toward that object” (51). In the case of La vie d’Adèle, the viewer does not wait long for the diegetic object to appear. The first shot of the movie shows the opaque glass front door of a house, with a wooden gate several meters in front of it. Right away, a shadow appears inside the door, the doorknob twists open, and Adèle strides confidently across the threshold, leaving the house on her way to school. During the several steps it takes to cross her front yard, she zips up her coat and puts on a knit
hat, and then swings open the front gate. She closes the gate behind her and then, framed in a
medium shot, walks around the camera and starts away from the house; the camera swivels, in
sync with her movement, to follow her as she recedes down the street. This pan simultaneously
reveals a hilly residential neighborhood with a church steeple in the background. Adèle continues
to walk at a clip away from the camera; she stops to hitch up her pants; and then she takes off
running towards the public bus that pulls up at the corner. Here, Kechiche employs what might
be thought of as a reverse establishing shot: instead of beginning with the setting and narrowing
in on the diegetic object, to use Chatman’s phrase, Kechiche starts with the diegetic object, and
then pans to reveal the suburban neighborhood where Adèle lives. From the very beginning, she
is marked as the most important narrative object, which she remains for the duration of the
movie. In fact, there is not a single scene in the film that does not include the character of Adèle:
a stark departure from Maroh’s book, which includes an entire section that takes place after
Clémente’s death.

Perhaps, though, this opening is not a reverse establishing shot, but rather something that
is closer to a more traditional establishing shot—not because it clarifies the physical setting of
the story, but because in trailing Adèle, it asserts that her body is at the center of the film’s
diegesis. One critic who spoke out against this film started her New York Times review with the
line: “It was her derrière that first caught my eye” (Dargis). This is an especially salient comment
because just minutes later, we see the exact same shot sequence repeat itself; Adèle walks out of
her house wearing a flowy scarf instead of a winter hat, but other than the shift in seasons, it is
identical to the opening shot, even down to the hitching up of her pants (a second beginning to
the story, if you will, right before the scene in which she first sees Emma). Ultimately, the
opening of the film both establishes the diegesis of the story as being rooted in Adèle’s character and highlights the importance of looking at Adèle’s body.

The diegetic characteristics described thus far remain relatively consistent in both Maroh’s comic and Kechiche’s film: Maroh plays with the story’s diegesis such that it occasionally shifts and disorients the reader, forcing her to actively decode the story, while Kechiche trails Adèle so closely that all attention is magnetized towards her, and the viewer is able to take a more passive approach to consuming the film. Maroh requires the reader to weave together various narrative perspectives, taking on an active or writerly role; Kechiche offers the spectator a consistent narrative focalization that allows her to relax into a readerly perspective. And as I argued when analyzing the function of closure in the graphic novel, the experience of actively engaging with the text—of imagining what happens from one panel to the next, or from one diegetic point of view to the next—forces the reader to achieve a certain comfort with the queer content of the comic book.

One moment in which the spectacular focalization of La vie d’Adèle manifests itself most notably is during the famed seven-minute sex scene; a final study of Kechiche’s and Maroh’s portrayals of sexuality will address whether the explicit can be banal. Like the abundant film reviews and popular criticism that were published surrounding the film’s release, much of the academic criticism written about this work has focused on the sex scene (see Krauthaker & Connolly and Williams). My intervention will suggest that the ways in which sexuality is portrayed in both graphic novel and movie are largely aligned with the respective narrative and interpretive structures observed thus far. However, engaging with sexuality will allow a more nuanced interpretation of the readerly and writerly elements explored throughout this paper.
The first time Clémentine and Emma sleep together in *Le bleu est une couleur chaude*, Maroh illustrates their encounter through fragmented panels that, instead of delineating every detail, allude to the minutiae of this shared moment. Some panels offer explicit views of sex acts and sexual body parts, while others—a head tilted back, eyes closed, mouth open; a hand grasping at bedsheets—ask the reader to connect a physical gesture and the bodily pleasure that it represents. Two critics comment that “[t]he suggestive nature of the comics genre allows Maroh to grasp moments of the sexual encounters without dictating their details from start to end” (Krauthaker and Connolly 31). Thus, as is the norm throughout the graphic novel, the reader is left to infer what goes on in between the moments that Maroh explicitly illustrates.
Maroh also offers narration that complements this sexual imagery. Although the diegesis of this narration is never ambiguous—the caption is clearly quoting from Clémentine’s journal, as is the norm for the entire comic—Clémentine’s voice does switch back and forth between referring to Emma in the second person and in the third person. Sometimes she talks to Emma: “You you you. There is nothing but you” (94). And sometimes she talks about Emma: “My god, her vulva…her vulva naked against mine” (94). Just as Maroh does with the diegesis of the visual panels, they compel the reader to take a writerly stance in order to follow along as Maroh changes the orientation of the verbal narration.

Kechiche, however, leaves nothing for the reader to infer; he comes just short of full-frontal nudity as vast expanses of skin and a variety of sex acts scroll across the screen. Linda Williams, whose work revolves largely around pornography studies, raises an important counterpoint to the critiques of Kechiche’s portrayal of lesbian sex in this film. She argues that: the problem is not how the sex is performed or photographed or lit in Blue. Nor is it the deployment of any specific positions. Looked at closely, the sex scenes are actually rather chaste if considered only in terms of what is actually seen rather than what viewers (or critics) think they see. (13)

Williams raises an important distinction that is indicative of one of the larger issues at the heart of this paper: sometimes, there will be a dissonance between what is actually shown on screen (or on the page) and the viewer’s interpretation of this image. If we follow Williams’s argument that what is shown on the screen is not so pornographic (which may be the case when this movie is compared to dictionary-definition pornography, but it remains a fact that this movie is more explicit than a typical cinematic release in the US), does it matter what is actually shown on the

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8 “Toi toi toi. Il n’y a que toi”
9 “Mon dieu, son sexe…son sexe nu contre le mien”
screen or does it matter more what the audience thinks they see? Because that is, after all, at the heart of what the viewers use to make inferences about the story.

There is nothing fragmented about what the audience sees during the first (and longest) sex scene in *La Vie d’Adèle*; Kechiche leaves nothing up to the reader to infer. For seven minutes, Kechiche lingers on the two actors’ naked bodies, arranged in a variety of positions and displayed from forty-one different angles. The camera is often in motion, panning up or down their bodies, revealing new patches of skin or limbs woven together. The women never speak, but their breathy moans offer an unrelenting soundtrack to their highly choreographed dance. Not even a minute into this scene, I find myself thinking: enough already. This part of the film is so long, so unrelenting, and so repetitive that what is meant to be a scene of pleasure—both for the characters and, perhaps, for the viewer—denies the viewer the deeper pleasure, as Barthes puts it, of a writerly relationship to the text. As the minutes tick by, the surfeit of sex begins to feel overly familiar and mundane. In fact, over the course of the seven minutes that it takes up the screen and the story, one might even argue that the sex becomes banal.

Through this formal analysis of the reader-text or viewer-film relationships in *Le bleu est une couleur chaude* and *La vie d’Adèle*, I have demonstrated the divergent ways through which Maroh and Kechiche craft queer. Maroh’s text urges the active reader to fill in the narrative gaps and, in doing so, the reader implicitly condones the lesbian relationship on the page: this love story can indeed be read as both queer and banal. For the viewer of Kechiche’s film, however, the experience of passively trailing Adèle turns her relationship with Emma into something to be watched or observed. But if my reader agrees that the spectacular seven-minute sex scene begins to take on a banal nature, they might then wonder: must the conceptualization of queer in these texts be one-sided?
I return, as a closing move, to the framework of adaptation theory posited early on in this essay. In the introduction to her edited volume *Queer/Adaptation*, Pamela Demory sums up the issue that is at the core of this paper: “To queer something is to make it strange or odd, but also to turn or transform it. To queer, then, may be to adapt; to adapt is to queer” (1). This concept of the queer turn or transformation is clearly applicable to Kechiche’s film because of the liberties he takes in transforming the plot: though the first half of the movie follows Maroh’s graphic novel, the second half imagines a different future for Adèle.

In the final moments of Maroh’s graphic novel, Clémentine and Emma are reunited on the beach, post break-up, and Clémentine becomes so afflicted with anguish and passion that just as the women begin to undress each other, Clémentine suffers a heart attack and, several pages, later, dies in a hospital. *Le bleu est une couleur chaude* ends in death. And although *La vie d’Adèle* may not end in marriage, Kechiche does allow Adèle to live, thereby defying the literary trope that lesbians must die at the end of their stories. The final scene of *La vie d’Adèle* takes place many years into Adèle’s adulthood, when she attends Emma’s art show opening. Both women have moved on from their relationship, and Emma is with a new partner, but the gallery scene feels pregnant with their past, carrying the tension of the story that has just filled the screen. The movie ends with Adèle leaving the gallery, turning a corner, and walking away from the party. The same hang music that served as the soundtrack to the moment Adèle and Emma first pass each other on the street starts to play. But, unlike that first meeting, this time around, Adèle does not turn back. She strides away from the gallery, away from Emma, and away from the camera which remains, notably, still. Although the ending of *La vie d’Adèle* is certainly entrenched in the spectatorship that underpins the movie as a whole—the viewer *still* spends the final moments of the film looking at Exarchopoulos’s backside—this final scene nuances the
spectacular version of queer that Kechiche has offered throughout the movie. Because for Adèle, the act of walking away, unencumbered by the close eye of the camera, represents her shift towards the commonplace; towards the banal. Perhaps, like Demory suggests, it is the concept of adaptation itself that complicates the way in which Kechiche portrays queer in La vie d’Adèle. If his film is at its heart a metamorphosis of Le bleu est une couleur chaude, it may well be that although La vie d’Adèle posits a spectacular sort of queer, it also carries in it traces of the banal that drives the graphic novel.
Works Cited

"banal, adj." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2021,


