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Explorations in Identity and Pleasure

By ERIC HYNES

A century and a half after Gustave Flaubert wrote “Madame Bovary,” and 50 years after the advent of the sexual revolution, popular art still shrinks from truly reckoning with female desire. After a flurry of 1960s art-house erotica (“I Am Curious (Yellow)”) and quasi-feminist camp (“[Barbarella](#)”), women-centric movies in the main have returned to status quo-bolstering narratives of marriage, melodrama and moral guilt. Which makes the near-simultaneous arrival of two new films that explore varieties of female sexual experience suggest the stirring of a newly liberated cinema.

In “[Blue Is the Warmest Color](#),” which won the Palme d’Or at the [Cannes Film Festival](#) in May, a French teenage girl discovers love, passion and heartbreak in the arms of another woman. And in “[Concussion](#),” which had its premiere at the [Sundance Film Festival](#) in January, a gay suburban housewife’s midlife frustrations lead her to work as a lesbian belle de jour. Although the films’ directors, [Abdellatif Kechiche](#) with “Blue” and [Stacie Passon](#) with “Concussion,” chronicle characters of divergent ages and cultures, and ultimately pursue themes that transcend matters of sex (class in Mr. Kechiche’s film; marriage and mortality in Ms. Passon’s), together their films function as a counterpoint to a culture mired — with slapstick comedies and superhero fantasias — in the adolescent impulses of dudes and bros.

In Ms. Passon’s view, women are often encouraged to harbor consumerist cravings but rarely sexual ones. “We don’t judge women for wanting heels or lipstick, so why judge them for wanting sex?” she said over coffee at a West Chelsea cafe. Ms. Passon applies no such judgment to her protagonist, Abby (played by the stealthily seductive Robin Weigert), even after the woman, a New Jersey mother, takes to servicing paying strangers at the Manhattan studio apartment she’s been renovating. The issue is never that Abby is an unfit mother or unloving wife, but that there’s something legitimately missing from her life.

What starts as an impulsive flight from the daily grind turns into a full-fledged midlife reawakening, which Ms. Passon sees as all the more disorienting for same-sex spouses who have sought out domestic contentment and fought for political legitimacy but still need to discover their own passions, wherever they may lie. Abby’s solution is to engage in a rather extreme form of compartmentalization.

“In your marriage vows, you might want to make some contingency plans for this,” Ms. Passon said, wryly smiling. “You buy life insurance — maybe you should buy sex insurance or something.”

Contrary to the familiar narrative of a whore degrading herself with a series of seedy customers, “[Concussion](#),” which opens Friday, presents encounters that are as tender and poignant as they are erotic — from an overweight virgin who brings out Abby’s maternal side, to a fellow P.T.A. mom whose private unrest summons a torrent of mutual passion. In the theater of a room that Abby has created for herself, she’s performing an act of liberation that would make Virginia Woolf proud.

Like her protagonist, Ms. Passon is a married mother of two who lives in northeast New Jersey, and who went through a crisis of purpose after turning 40. But rather than pursue a secret life in the city, she made this movie.

“For me, accessing the room was finding a way to express myself artistically,” she said, which meant, despite her cultivation of a successful and stabilizing career in commercial media, starting a new life as an independent filmmaker. “It’s about freedom. It’s about identity. It’s about feeling your own weight.”

Free is where Mr. Kechiche wanted his protagonist to start in “[Blue Is the Warmest Color](#),” screening Oct. 11 in the [New York Film Festival](#) and due in American theaters Oct. 25. For Adèle (the newcomer Adèle Exarchopoulos), the issue isn’t learning how to feel but rather living through the intensity of those feelings, from ecstasy to heartache to everything in between.

“I wanted to give Adèle the personality of a very courageous and free woman,” he said during an interview at the [Toronto International Film Festival](#) this month. “She’s hungry for life. She’s open to let her desires play out.”

Those desires lead her to Emma (Léa Seydoux), an azure-haired artist with whom she begins a torrid and enduring affair. (The film is freely adapted from a graphic novel by Julie Maroh.)

Mr. Kechiche trains his camera tightly on both actresses, using countless varieties of close-ups to track every flicker of feeling on their faces. He continues this approach in several prolonged and — thanks to first responders in Cannes — notorious sex scenes, dwelling unabashedly on the women’s intertwined ecstasy.

In a later scene, a boisterous male gallery owner opines at a party about the perennial mystery of female pleasure. While the male orgasm is unremarkably straightforward, he says, a woman’s ecstasy is “mystical” and “an out-of-body experience.” Such overpowering intensity, he says, has motivated centuries of art in which “men try desperately to depict” that pleasure. To which a female party guest offers: “It could be their fantasy.”

For Mr. Kechiche, the scene serves as both a thesis statement and a self-critique. It reveals some of what he’s up to with his three-hour portrait of a young lady’s Sapphic awakening.

“It’s almost a feeling of anguish, a feeling of desolation, in not being able to really grasp what it is that a woman feels,” he said, closely echoing the sentiments of his fictional character. “When I perceive things that I can’t explain, I try to picture them through images, through an interaction or an encounter. Cinema is an amazing tool for expressing these perceptions.”

But the scene also anticipates how some viewers might find his male vision of female passion problematic. Manohla Dargis of *The Times* said that while the characters were sympathetic, “Mr. Kechiche registers as [oblivious to real women](#).”

Unlike Ms. Passon, whose film serves to express something ineffable about her own experience, Mr. Kechiche is using cinema to try to access sensations beyond his comprehension. “I’m not trying to explain a woman by showing how she feels pleasure,” he said. “I’m just trying to understand.”

His approach calls to mind works of expressive portraiture, in which the subjective hand of an artist is present in the painting — except this work involves living, breathing, force-of-nature subjects who complicate notions of authorship. (The Cannes jury took the exceptional step of naming Ms. Exarchopoulos and Ms. Seydoux alongside Mr. Kechiche for the top filmmaking prize.)

“Is it illegitimate to show a perception? Mr. Kechiche said. “Is it that only a woman can express how a woman feels, and maybe that only a man can express how a man feels? This brings me to the subject of the essence of being itself. Can you explain exactly how a woman feels? The truth is that there’s not one answer. If I ask 1,000 women how they felt, they will all have a different answer.”

Besides those offered up by Mr. Kechiche’s actresses, such variety of feelings is also borne out in “[Concussion](#),” with the spectrum of clients’ proclivities and the polyamorous Abby’s disconnect from a wife who admits, “I don’t want anybody.”

Whether Mr. Kechiche is entitled to articulate women’s desires (a question asked of Flaubert, too), his drama and Ms. Passon’s offer respites from the Mars-Venus, virgin-whore dichotomies that dominate so many relationship narratives — and from obligatory images of women staring disaffectedly at the ceiling during sex.

That may be the experience of many women, but films have the power to provoke and question our desires, not just replay how they’re thwarted. The longest sex scene in “[Blue Is the Warmest Color](#)” takes seven minutes of screen time, but some reports out of Cannes had it over 20 minutes. Within such hyperbole lay both titillation and condemnation, and the possibility that pleasure, with all of its complications, might be worthy again of both show and tell.



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