

The Portrayal of Women from the Female Perspective in Julie Maroh's Graphic Novel *Blue Is the Warmest Color*

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Abstract

This paper takes Julie Maroh's graphic novel *Blue is the warmest color* as the object of study and analyzes the portrayal of women based on the female perspective in her work. Unlike the male gaze of the film *La vie d'Adèle*, the original graphic novel possesses an aesthetic expression from the female perspective, centering on the two female protagonists, setting up a dual narrative space in which real time and past time intersect and linear narrative and non-linear narrative intermingle; and focuses on the identity dilemma of the female sexual minority group represented by Clémentine, from the first stage of self-denial and rebellion against identity, to the second stage of temporary self-acceptance but then being hit again, and finally to the third stage of embracing the kindred spirits and getting out of the dilemma, showing the current situation of the female sexual minority group struggling to move forward under pressure, calling on society to pay more attention to the survival of the female sexual minority group, and also providing a reference for the adaptation and creation of films with female themes.

Keywords

Graphic Novel, *Blue Is the Warmest Color*, *La vie d'Adèle*, Identity Dilemma, Women

1. Introduction

Compared with Marvel and DC's films based on superhero comics, most of the European comic book adaptations focus on reality, because the original comic book's subject matter is more serious and profound, realistic content and high literary and artistic determine its target audience for adults rather than young

people. Instead of comic book, it is more accurate to call it graphic novel. A novel in the general sense consists only of words. When readers read the content of a novel, they develop visual imaginations of characters, story scenes, etc. in their minds, thus forming a complete reading experience. Graphic novel emphasizes visual elements and is a multi-modal discourse in which pictorial symbols and textual symbols coexist. The two static modal symbols—pictorial symbols such as split-screen, close-up, and color, and textual symbols such as dialogue and psychological description—jointly complete the image shaping and meaning construction in graphic novels, providing the source and blueprint for the creation of film adaptations composed of dynamic audiovisual symbols, and providing audiences with diverse ways to experience them. The film *La vie d'Adèle*, based on the graphic novel *Le bleu est une couleur chaude* (Maroh, 2013) by French writer Julie Maroh, won the Palme d'Or at the 66th Cannes International Film Festival, and was nominated for many European and international film awards, making it an exceptionally successful adaptation in terms of artistic achievement. The success of the film cannot be separated from the excellent original novel. Julie Maroh's graphic novel provides intuitive textual and pictorial symbols for the film adaptation. From the perspective of a female writer, this graphic novel *Blue is the warmest color* develops a dual narrative centering on the two female protagonists, and portrays the survival of female sexual minorities with the aesthetic expression unique to female creators, showing the struggle of female sexual minorities in the dilemma of self-identity and the hardship of groping forward on the road to self-acceptance, full of an empathetic understanding of the difficulties women are experiencing.

Studies on the film *La vie d'Adèle* in China mainly focus on the theme of homosexuality and the discussion of the difference between the class and status of the two female protagonists, while there are fewer studies on Julie Maroh's original work *Blue is the warmest color*. A search at CNKI with the keywords of the movie title reveals more than 30 research papers related to the movie *La vie d'Adèle*, while a search with the keywords of the original book title reveals only one post-reading essay, and the topic still revolves around the content of the movie rather than the original work. To a certain extent, this paper fills the gap in the study of the graphic novel of Julie Maroh in China.

2. Dual Narrative Based on Female Perspective

Compared with the traditional linear narrative in the film *La vie d'Adèle*, the original Julie Maroh's graphic novel *Le bleu est une couleur chaude* (translated as *Blue is the warmest color* in English), on the one hand, takes the content of Clémentine's diary written during her life as the main line, and carries out a linear narrative in the past time according to the time of the diary; on the other hand, takes Emma's life with Clémentine's parents who suffered the loss of their daughter as the secondary line, and uses Emma's psychological dynamics of reading the diary as a flashback to carry out a non-linear narrative in the real

time, forming a dual narrative space in which the real time and the past time intersect, and the linear narrative and the non-linear narrative intermingle.

2.1. Aesthetic Expression from the Female Perspective

The portrayal of Clémentine's homophobic parents in the novel was removed from the film, and the focus was on "the concern for differences and inequalities between classes and races" (Wang & Wang, 2014). Although the film is not faithful to the original plot, both depict young women's love and desire in detail and "provide readers with a case study of sexuality" (Miller, 2017). In contrast to the slapdash sex scenes in the original novel, the film visually depicts multiple scenes of exaggerated length, with multiple close-ups of the body highlighting the desire and exploration of the female body, but without the eye contact between the protagonists, and the overly realistic camera style concealing the inevitable male gaze of the male director. The process of filming led the two actresses to criticize the director, and some critics also criticized the director's overly masculine adaptation, with Sophie Mayer stating that Kechiche's opening shot of Adèle's back set the tone for the film's traditional male gaze (Mayer, 2015).

Compared with the film adaptation from the male perspective, the original graphic novel *Blue is the warmest color* is more like a memoir from the female perspective written in the first person by a female writer. The whole story is 156 pages long, with only about four or five pages of images involving sex scenes, accounting for only three percent of the total content. Although short, it does not affect the author's portrayal of female characters. From the denial of her sexuality due to the disgust of her family and friends, to her eventual self-identification, Clémentine and Emma's naked meeting is not only physically appealing, but also psychologically open and honest. The original novel does not amplify erotic overtones, and the subplot does not overly exaggerate the depiction of body parts, not overly pursuing the realism of the sexual process, not overly rendering the erotic elements, but emphasizing the emotional communication between the two female protagonists.

When discussing the ethical nature of the language of images, Yuan Zhizhong pointed out that "the language of images dominated by male discourse tends to satisfy the voyeuristic desire of men" (Yuan & Tian, 2021). Unlike Kechiche's male perspective, Julie Maroh's graphic depictions are informed by her thoughts on love and sexuality as a female writer, and her sympathy for female sexual minorities as socially marginalized figures trapped in self-identity. Just as George Sand uses Madeleine, a typical female character representing the nineteenth-century French village women, to express her feminist proposition of fighting social conventions with humanity in a male-centered culture (Yu, 2019), Julie Maroh also uses Clémentine, an ordinary female character in France in the 1990s, as a representative of sexual minorities, to show the general situation of women's internal and external difficulties in the path of identity and the heavy pressure of

marginalization of female sexual minorities in a heterosexual-dominated society. *Blue is the warmest color* avoids the visual language of the male perspective from the very beginning of its creation, reflecting the euphemistic and subtle aesthetic tendency of female creators, and is full of tender empathy for the plight of women.

2.2. Intertwining of Linear and Non-Linear Narratives with Two Female Protagonists as the Core

The original story restores the background of the 1990s and takes the contents of the diary kept by Clémentine during her life as the main line, and unfolds a linear narrative in the past time according to the time of the diary and some landmark events. The story begins on October 12, 1994, when Clémentine receives a diary as a gift from her grandmother on her 15th birthday; On October 27, 1994, Clémentine, a sophomore in high school, meets Emma, a blue-haired girl, for the first time in the street; On May 1, 1995, Clémentine records for the first time her helpless feelings of confusion about her sexuality; In 1996, Clémentine meets Emma again in a bar; In February 1997, Clémentine and Emma start a serious relationship; In April 1997, her parents discover her homosexuality and thus kick her out of the house, and she moves in with Emma; In 2008, Clémentine cheated on her male colleague Antoine and was kicked out of her house by Emma, and finally Clémentine died of illness. Julie Maroh uses her diary as a first space, like a camera, to give a panoramic view of the short life of Clémentine, an ordinary French high school girl in the 1990s, from the glimpse she gets when she passes by Emma with blue hair to her final death from illness. The author portrays Clémentine's complex psychological uncertainty about her gender identity, as well as her helpless struggle and painful repressed emotions in the dilemma of identity.

At the same time, the author uses the real world after Clémentine's death as a second space, and Emma's relationship with Clémentine's parents, who have suffered the loss of their daughter, as a secondary line, and uses Emma's psychological dynamics of reading Clémentine's diary as a flashback, combining flashbacks and interludes to develop a non-linear narrative in real time and space. The story begins with an ending, in which Clémentine gives her diary to her mother before she dies, asking her to pass it on to Emma, and includes an interlude in which Emma comes to her home to read the diary after Clémentine's death, and there is a soulful exchange between them that transcends time and space. Several of the interludes bring the diary back to life. The first interlude is when Clémentine's mother knocks on the door and enters the room while Emma is reading her diary, and the dialogue between them shows that they have reconciled. The author has portrayed a homophobic father figure in a few strokes. Even though Clémentine has died, her ambiguous bisexuality is not fully accepted by her family, reflecting the helplessness and sadness of sexual minorities in the objective reality. As soon as the interlude ends, the author im-

mediately cuts back to the time in the diary to continue the linear narrative. In this way, the original work forms a dual narrative space in which real time intersects with past time and linear narrative intersects with non-linear narrative.

3. Moving Forward in the Midst of Stress: Portrayal of the Identity Dilemma of Female Sexual Minorities

Julie Maroh's portrayal of Clémentine's struggle with the dilemma of self-identity is basically divided into three stages. The 1st stage: Clémentine first discovers her true sexuality, does not want to believe it and cannot believe it, so she falls into self-loathing, self-denial, and rebels against her identity. The 2nd stage: Clémentine gradually accepts herself and wants to find her "own kind", but suffers two heavy shocks and falls back into self-loathing and self-denial. The 3rd stage: Clémentine finds Emma, her "kindred spirit", and with her encouragement, she gradually gets out of the dilemma of identity.

3.1. Self-Denial and Resistance to Identity

Clémentine makes her debut in the book as a heterosexual. In her sophomore year of high school she dates Thomas, a senior boy, and falls in love at first sight with Emma, a blue-haired woman, when she first walks past her on the street. After ending her date with her boyfriend, Clémentine came home at night and actually dreamed of Emma kissing her and touching her body. She is awakened by this desire for the same sex that she has never had before, "What's wrong with me?" "How could I have had that dream?" After realizing that her sexuality was different from other girls, Clémentine, a 15-year-old high school girl, chose to disguise herself in an effort to continue her relationship with her boyfriend Thomas. "I'm a girl, and girls are supposed to date boys," Clémentine says, confused about her possible sexual orientation and doubting her self-perception of what she has known for over a decade, but forcing herself to turn a blind eye and act against her heart only exacerbates her pain.

In her diary, Clémentine recorded her feelings of helplessness: "I was helpless, alone, at rock bottom, I didn't know what to do". At this time, she was trapped in her own world, surrounded by no one "like her" who could understand her, and she felt that she was an alien. She used the term "not fitting in" to describe her life. She even used such extreme words as "it is not normal, it is against the rules of nature" to deny herself. Unable to achieve self-identity, she began to rebel against it, "I became more and more annoyed with myself", not as a normal high school girl, but as a possible lesbian or bisexual. Clémentine was caught up in "the confusion of individual gender identity and the enormous pressure of the single gender mechanism on the individual" (Li, 2014), and her self-denial and self-loathing caused her to stop writing in her diary for six months. "Always staring at the wall and constantly asking herself questions during these months" shows that she was still confused and lost about her true sexual orientation. At this point, she was deeply in an identity dilemma, and judging from her psycho-

logical condition, she may even have had precursors of depression. Studies have also shown that bisexuals exhibit higher levels of depression and anxiety symptoms than lesbians and gay men (Chan et al., 2020) and are more likely to have mental health problems. Clémentine's wavering about her gender identity exacerbates the willingness to conceal her sexual orientation, and in the absence of psychological interventions, the development of mental health problems is inevitable.

3.2. Temporary Self-Acceptance Facing Another Setback

Clémentine has tried to control her dream of making out with Emma, but as she turns 16, she doesn't want to repress herself anymore. The original story gives several close-ups of Clémentine in her dream, and it is clear from her satisfied expression that she submits to the ideas in her dream. From repression to obedience, she no longer confines herself. Even though she is still unable to complete her identity in real life, Clémentine no longer resists in the virtual dream world, but readily accepts it. Compared to the earlier days, Clémentine has taken a step forward in her identity. In her diary, she writes, "I want to tell people how I really feel," showing her initiative to open up. Although she still cares about what other people think and "gets so nervous that I can't breathe just thinking about their reactions," she now wants to show her true self and not hide it like she did before. "There must be other girls like me, right?" From denying herself and hating herself, to looking for her own "kind", Clémentine seems to be slowly getting out of the identity dilemma.

However, this short period of self-acceptance was followed by two hard knocks. A girl at school kissed Clémentine while she was talking to her and Clémentine felt she had found her "kindred spirit". The next day Clémentine hugs her from behind and tries to kiss her, but she is rejected and Clémentine is so ashamed that "I will never set foot outside my house again". The author uses several close-ups to show the shock and sadness of Clémentine's heart.

After Clémentine meets Emma again at the bar, the next day Emma comes to wait for Clémentine in front of her school and is spotted by her classmates. Because of her maverick blue hair, and after asking her classmate Valentin about the gay bar they went to together last night, her classmates are sure that Clémentine is "different" and "perverted", even her former best friends began to alienate her, using words like "abnormal", "disgusting" and "I want to vomit" to conceal their disgust for gay people. "What if they're right?" Clémentine blames the reality of her isolation from her friends on her association with homosexuality, which she sees as abnormal and distorted. Once again, she descends into a new wave of self-loathing.

3.3. Embracing Kindred Spirits and Getting Out of the Dilemma

In an open and honest conversation with Emma, Clémentine learns that she once had the same confusion as herself. Clémentine found her own kind, and the

heavy pressure was relieved, and she gradually stopped minding what others thought. Since then, she often calls and meets with Emma to talk about her life and thoughts, and at the age of 17, she takes the initiative to confess her love to Emma and they start a formal relationship. The once confused 15-year-old girl seems to be free from loneliness and helplessness, no longer in total denial of her true desires, slowly accepting her true self and gradually getting out of the dilemma of identity. Even after the breakup after thirteen years of living together, Clémentine in her hospital bed still used her last strength to write a note to Emma, thanking her for saving herself, “You saved me from a life full of foolish moral prejudices and allowed me to grow”, “The life you gave me is one of complete and total happiness”.

Looking back at Clémentine’s struggle with her identity dilemma, the reader can deeply understand the pressure she is under and the difficulties she is going through. At first, after realizing that her sexual orientation was different from others, Clémentine chose to hide and avoid it for fear of the reaction of her conservative family and classmates. Under the pressure of self-imposed trap, disgust and denial kept Clémentine from realizing her self-identity, instead, she kept rebelling against her identity. As time goes by, Clémentine gradually wants to open up, but because of a little misunderstanding, her initiative is doused again. Seeing that she is about to get out of the identity dilemma, she ends up back at square one again. The encounter with Emma at the gay bar makes Clémentine take a step towards embracing her own kind, but Emma’s visit to the school makes her passively reveal her identity, and Clémentine is always afraid that her classmates will isolate and reject her if they know her true sexuality, but what she fears really happens. As a result, Clémentine retreats again and falls into a new round of self-loathing and self-denial, once again falling into the dilemma of identity. Clémentine, as a representative of the female sexual minority, is constantly under pressure from her family and social environment in the process of getting into and out of the identity dilemma, but has no channel to relieve it. In the end, it’s Emma, a “kindred spirit”, who saves her.

4. Conclusion

Julie Maroh’s graphic novel is not simply a teen book. Its value in being adapted into a film and winning the Palme d’Or at Cannes lies in the fact that its deeper connotation does not just stop at the level of a love story, but uses this love story to portray the representative image of female sexual minorities from a female perspective and seriously discusses the identity dilemma faced by female sexual minorities today. The graphic novel provides rich symbols of images and words for the film adaptation, and provides material reference for the screenplay and cinematography. *La vie d’Adèle* is a benchmark for movies about women, and the success of the film cannot be achieved without the support of the excellent original graphic novel *Blue is the warmest color*. However, the film and television works on female themes in China are still stuck in trivial matters in mar-

riage or family or the so-called “literature about the pain of youth” in school. This paper is an attempt to call on China’s film and television companies and online video platforms to raise their aesthetic awareness when screening original “IP” for adaptation into women-themed film and television works, which should reflect reality and explore human nature; our numerous audiovisual industry practitioners should call on society to devote more attention to the survival of women, including female sexual minorities; our universities and colleges should also add some courses on contemporary literature and film criticism at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and these courses should be offered not only for foreign language majors, but also to students of all majors as public elective courses. Through the appreciation and translation of world literature, film and television, students can improve their appreciation skills of literature and film, enhance their ability to use foreign languages and their mother tongue, and cultivate more high-level composite talents for the translation and introduction of foreign film and television in China and the promotion of Chinese film and television to the world.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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