Gay Comixs:

Their History and Their Importance, Analyzed Through *Blue Is the Warmest Color*

Deacon Lipsmeyer

French 3005

Dr. Don Joseph

December 15, 2025

Abstract:

Jul Maroh's graphic novel, *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2010), seamlessly blends stylized illustrations with a captivating, queer, coming of age story set in France. Using techniques like splash paneling, characters with distinctive speech ballooning, and a mainstream expressionist style, Maroh is able to immerse readers in a world defined by its negative space. These images are only furthered by the novel's themes of emotional isolation and social nonconformism, which when paired with Maroh's scarce coloring, both create a work that is intensely stylized and instantly recognizable while also pushing the entire genre of comics forward as a whole. By incorporating this graphic novel in conversation with other works such as *How Comics Work* by Candida Rifkind and Brandon Christopher (2019) as well as *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art by Scott McCloud* (1993) I will establish why the medium chosen by Maroh is vital to how this story is delivered and argue that a change in this decision takes away from the impact of the original story. To do this I will first be establish the history of the medium and lay the groundwork for techniques which have become essential to comic design. After that, I'll break down the style techniques used to create the world of *Blue is the Warmest Color* and determine how they come together to form a full standalone work. Then I'll directly comparing both the graphic novel and it's 2013 film adaptation to explore how the medium. I argue that when film techniques such as color editing and forced perspective are used to replace an iconic style and moment to moment sketching the work is left feeling cheapened and hollow instead of brought to life.

Body:

For as long as human beings have been living in shelters and walking on two feet, they've also been creating comics. While the earliest of these "comics" might not look much like their modern counterparts, their intention and the stories they tell reflect the same reasons they are still created today. Defined by Scott McCloud in his book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art,* comics are any, "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence,

intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer."[1] By this definition even the earliest cave paintings, like the ones found in Indonesia's Maros-Pangkep Karst caves which depicts a pack of hunters fighting pigs, are comics.[2] It wouldn't be until the 14th century, however, that the comic began to take on some of its more recognizable characteristics.[3] The piece, titled *Codex Zouche-Nuttall*, or *Eight Deer Tiger's Claw,* uses pictures to tell the story of Eight Deer, the ruler of Oaxaca, a powerful Mixtec empire at the time. Across the comics 47 sections of accordion folded animal skin readers see Eight Deer kidnap a prince, fight to the death, and kill his enemies.[4] Likely created to depict Eight Deer's successful conquest of the region, the comic shares many characteristics with other modern propaganda based comics, such as the CIA's comic from the 80s', *Grenada: Rescued from Rape and Slavery.*[5] Both are historical comics which depict powerful empires liberating citizens from oppressive rulers as a tool to create loyalty, through a bold rough line style.

A standardized form would not begin to immerge in comics until 1825 with the publication of William Heath's strip, *The Glasgow Looking Glass*. While the comic only lasted a year, it's innovations continue to ripple throughout the world of comics today. In addition to being the first ever mass-produced comic strip, it was also the first comic to use speech bubbles.[6] This created an image which today could be best compared to a Far Side comic with its single

---

[1] McCloud, Scott. *"Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art."* Internet Archive, January 1, 1993. https://archive.org/details/understanding-comics/page/n1/mode/2up.

[2] "Cave Painting." Wikipedia, November 15, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cave_painting.

[3] "Codex Zouche-Nuttall." Wikipedia, July 27, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex_Zouche-Nuttall.

[4] McCloud. *"Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art."*

[5] "United States Propaganda Comics." Wikipedia, November 18, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_propaganda_comics.

[6] "Glasgow/Northern Looking Glass." University of Glasgow, June 2005. https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/library/files/special/exhibns/month/june2005.html.

panel nature and satire of urban living. There is simply no understating, though, how important the addition of text to comics was, and following the death of the Glasgow Looking Glass several other serialized comic strips appeared to take its place. Europe had *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* from 1884 to 1916, which was the first comic to implement a reoccurring character.[7] More important for the scope of this paper, however, is France, who had *The Adventures of Tintin,* a clear line style comic which ran from 1929-1976. The story revolves around a young Belgian reporter named Tintin who alongside his crew of faithful companions work together to navigate strange lands and save the day.[8] Nevertheless more important than the story was its ability to become a cultural powerhouse introducing millions of children and adults alike to the possibilities held within comics. For many French authors during the time, seeing comic become as popular as Tintin was inspirational and likely paramount in their decision to create comics.[9]

It would be impossible to discuss the history and styling of comics without mentioning Art Spiegelman's 1986 masterpiece, *Maus.* Based off Spiegelman's parent's own experience surviving the holocaust, the graphic novel revolutionized how comics are discussed and introduced the world to comic genres outside of superhero or science fiction.[10] The novel also helped to legitimize the art form, winning a Pulitzer Prize in 1992 for his ground breaking work.[11] While the "underground comix" movement was already flourishing in places like Chicago and New York throughout much the '60s and '70s, Spiegelman's work helped to make it

---

[7] Alosson, Tor. "Ally Sloper's Half Holiday (1884): The Pioneering Comic Magazine." Toons Mag, October 17, 2023. https://www.toonsmag.com/ally-slopers-half-holiday/.

[8] "The Adventures of Tintin." Wikipedia, November 10, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Adventures_of_Tintin.

[9] "The Adventures of Tintin"

[10] Rifkind, Candida and Brandon Christopher. *How Comics Work.* Illustrated by Alice RL. Winnipeg: University of Winnipeg, 2019, https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/1b19/docs/how-comics-work-web-cc-by-nc-nd.pdf

[11] "1992 Pulitzer Prize." Wikipedia, November 2, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1992_Pulitzer_Prize.

classy and mainstream, essentially bringing an end to the censorship of the Comics Code Authority.[12] This protection allowed for other graphic novels centered around themes of feminism and LGBTQ issues to emerge. Series like Denis Kitchen's, *Gay Comix* were among the first on the scene to reassure queer readers that their sexuality was not something to be ashamed of.[13] Works such as these would go on to inspire queer writers such as Alison Bechdel, who published her graphic novel *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* in 2006. Using a rough, quasi-realistic style to tell the story of Bechdel's childhood experience with a closeted queer father, the book was praised far and wide for its genre pushing storytelling.[14]

All this background leads to 2010, when French writer and illustrator Jul Maroh released her landmark graphic novel, *Blue is the Warmest Color.* The novel focuses on the life of Clementine, a queer teenager growing up in France during the 1990s. Readers would be surprised to find out that the comics opening has little to do with the stories main character, however. See, under the surface of this coming-of-age story is a tale about coping with loss and learning to accept the decisions that cannot be changed.[15] It tells both stories in parallel, shifting back and forth between the world that Clementine has created in her diaries, which provides history for the relationship viewers are seeing, and the modern day, which sees Emma going through Clementine's belongings at her parents' house following her death. To accomplish this feat Maroh uses several different comic techniques, but the most important of these is how Maroh uses color to separate these two spaces in time. The world of Clementine's diary is defined by its use of beiges, blacks, and whites, with the only other color seen in these flashbacks

---

[12] Kero, River H. "The History of the Underground Comix Movement." BOOK RIOT, February 17, 2022. https://bookriot.com/underground-comix/.

[13] Clews, Colin. "1980. Gay Comix. ." Gay in the 80s, October 12, 2012. https://www.gayinthe80s.com/2012/11/1980-gay-comix/.

[14] Gustines , George Gene. "'Fun Home': A Bittersweet Tale of Father and Daughter." The New York Times, June 26, 2006. https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/26/books/26gust.html.

[15] Maroh, Jul. *Blue is the Warmest Color*. Vancouver, Canada: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2013.

being the blue of Emma's hair. This creates an effect which makes the drawing look unfinished in its expressionist design, not in the traditional sense, like something is missing, but that only the most important details of the panel have been filled in.[16] The rest have simply been forgotten to time. This artistic decision only furthers the idea that it is a diary telling all these stories to Emma, not Clementine, so logically some pieces are bound to be missing.

These decisions are sharply contrasted by the way Emma's modern-day world is designed. Since readers are now seeing the story told through her eyes, the color has suddenly reappeared, although it is certainly muted from the shades of blue present throughout the rest of the story. The choice to have her portion of the story take place in the winter is a brilliant one, as it only furthers the themes of death and isolation which she comes to terms with throughout her arc. That decision also allows for the way blue is represented throughout the story to change. Now, instead of blue acting like a lighthouse pointing towards love and safety, it feels cold and lifeless. It is no longer as bright as it once was, a fact which could also be said for the way Emma is portrayed throughout these sections. She's no longer the cocky, rule-breaking, neon haired woman she once was. This version of her is calmer, more reserved, but also incredibly scared, filled with a depression which manifests itself in rage, and lots of regret.[17] Pieces of this new identity begin to form near the end of the novel when the whole comic suddenly turns to color, representing the shared memories that Clementine and Emma now both have. Readers see a now blonde-haired Emma struggling to connect Clementine as politics and infidelity begin to push a wedge between the couple.[18] Clementine's sudden death from a heart attack following the couples reunion all but certifies the switch in how the color is used, moving from the calm blue ocean on page 142 to a sterile blueish green in the hospital room on page 146.[19]

---

[16] Rifkind, Candida and Brandon Christopher. *How Comics Work.* 11

[17] Maroh, Jul. *Blue is the Warmest Color.* 26-28

[18] Maroh, Jul. *Blue is the Warmest Color.* 131-136

[19] Maroh, Jul. *Blue is the Warmest Color.* 141-154

It would also be impossible to discus the stylistic choices of this graphic novel without mentioning the way text is used throughout the story to distinguish characters in their speech balloons and narrative boxes. Clementine uses a cursive script in her narrative boxes because she's writing all this information in her diary, however, the script used for her speech bubbles is a handwritten sans-serif font which is important because it gives her interaction in between characters a calmer and friendlier tone.[20] This calm creates more impact for the onomatopes, which are scrawled boldly in pen and typically transcend the panels, creating a feeling that these sounds are happening across the whole scene instead of centered in one specific moment. This, in addition to how each panel shapes it speech ballons, using sharp tails and the occasional jagged shaping, creates genuine emotion which carries across panels and turns pages into scenes instead of just collections of images. The novels use of moment-to-moment animation also helps to further this feeling, since that style of illustration requires the least amount of work from the reader to fill in the blanks of the scene.[21] Rounding out this trio of substitutes for motion is just how many emanatas are used throughout the story, specifically in scenes with a heavy emotional weight such as when Clementine meets Emma at the gay bar for the first time.[22] These little touches take the work from a static collection of images, to something that is almost flowing, moving in front of readers.

The novel was received well by critics and audiences alike following its original French publication in 2010. Critics adored the novels use of storytelling and applauded how the material tacked lingering effects stemming from Frances's homophobia throughout the '90s and 2000s. It

---

[20] Tenekedjieva, Stefanija. "Serif vs sans Serif: What's The Difference & Which to Use?" Serif vs Sans Serif: What's the Difference & Which to Use? November 19, 2025. https://www.manypixels.co/blog/brand-design/serif-vs-sans serif#:~:text=Sans%20serifs%20for%20construction%2C%20plumbing,lose%20a%20sense%20of%20professionalism.

[21] Rifkind, Candida and Brandon Christopher. *How Comics Work.* 15

[22] Maroh, Jul. *Blue is the Warmest Color.* 47

also won several awards following it release, the most important of these being the Audience Prize at the Angoulême International Comics Festival, which is Europe's largest.[23] Reception for the graphic novel was so good in fact, that in late 2011 the search began for actors to star in a film adaptation. Directed by Tunisian-French filmmaker Abdellatif Kechiche, with a budget of just over 4 million euros, shooting was set to last only two and a half months but ended up taking nearly five due to an amateur production team.[24] French actress Léa Seydoux was cast to play Emma with relative newcomer Adèle Ecarchopoulos playing Adèle, the films substitute for Clementine. The film would go on to premier at the 66th Cannes Film Festival on May 23, 2013, where it would go on to win the Palme d'Or, and later make its North American premier at the 2013 Telluride Film Festival.[25] Despite the films commercial success however, audiences were still split about whether or not the film successful adapted the graphic novel it was based on. That debate starts with the film's original title, which in French is *La Vie d'Adèle* or *The Life of Adèle.*

Even from the film's opening scene, it becomes clear that this work is not striving to tell the same story as the graphic novel it's based on. There's no parallel storytelling with Emma going to Clementine's (or Adèle in this version) home to collect her things, because, spoiler, in this version she never dies. Instead, it opens with her running to catch a bus because she's late for high school. This change, though minor, completely changes the messaging of the entire movie

---

[23] "Blue Is the Warmest Color." Arsenal Pulp Press. Accessed December 7, 2025. https://arsenalpulp.com/Books/B/Blue-Is-the-Warmest-Color#:~:text=Vividly%20illustrated%20and%20beautifully%20told,Los%20Angeles%20Film%20Critics%20Circle.

[24] Fabre, Clarisse. "Des Techniciens Racontent Le Tournage Difficile de 'La Vie d'Adèle.'" Le Monde, May 24, 2013. https://www.lemonde.fr/festival-de-cannes/article/2013/05/24/des-techniciens-racontent-le-tournage-de-la-vie-d-adele_3417150_766360.html.

[25] The Associated Press. "Lesbian Romance 'Blue Is the Warmest Color: The Life of Adele' Wins Palme d'or, Cannes Film Festival's Top Honor." nydailynews.com, May 26, 2013. https://web.archive.org/web/20210419154111/https://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv-movies/graphic-lesbian-romance-takes-top-cannes-honor-article-1.1355197.

and leaves viewers with an ending that feels unsatisfactory at best and frustrating at worst, especially if their understanding of the story is based on the graphic novel. The decision also means that there is no diary segment of the story, which removes the core color identity of the film and grounds it in the present instead of the past. Without a stylized use of color to convey emotional significance, the film must resort to using forced perspective and blurred shots for moments where the rest of the world is supposed to fade away. These moments, however, fail to capture the same magic they did in the novel because they're still to cluttered and busy. Take the scene where Emma and Clementine first meet, in the novel the entire street fades away and panels center around just the two character.[26] It's a captivating moment that demonstrate perfectly her desires for Emma. In the movie, the shot is filmed wide, the street is filled with extras, cars honk at Adèle, the color adds unintentional life to the scene. Sure, one is more realistic, but that was never the point of the graphic novel.

The way the film coveys queer desire also leaves much to be desired. A large part of the original story centered around Emma wanting to leave an abusive relationship with her girlfriend Sabine, who is a masculine lesbian. The majority of the first half is spent giving Emma and Clementine a chance to grow closer as friends, with subtle touches serving as depictions of desires which can't be acted on, a love that can't be expressed due to other commitments.[27] The story is just as much about their time spent being afraid of growing closer to each other as it is their inevitable relationship. One of the most impactful scenes in the novel happens when Clementine finally enters Emma's apartment for the first time and she asks "Why have you never brought me here? WHY?" only for it to be revealed that it was because Emma felt deeply in love with Clementine.[28] Kechiche completely ignores this decision, choosing instead to allow the characters to get together immediately following the scene where they formally meet at the gay bar. There's no conversation to be had surrounding the fear of allowing someone else into your

---

[26] Maroh, Jul. *Blue is the Warmest Color.* 13
[27] Maroh, Jul. *Blue is the Warmest Color.* 91
[28] Maroh, Jul. *Blue is the Warmest Color.* 93

life, and there's no choice made by Emma to leave her relationship for Adèle. This removes so much of the emotional weight behind her decision, as well as weakens her ability for character development, and completely changes the implications during the third act when Adèle still cheats on her with a male coworker.

It would also be impossible to discuss this film without addressing its rampant and incredibly graphic sex scenes between the two characters. Broken down by scene nearly 1/6th of this film's 180-minute runtime contains nudity, and 60% of that nudity is found in scenes featuring vivid acts of lesbian sex.[29] One particularly egregious scene depicting the first time Emma and Adèle make love, goes on for 7 minutes and features no less than 6 different positions. In an interview following the films publication, author Jul Maroh said, "It appears to me this was what was missing on the set: lesbians… This is all that it brings to mind: a brutal and surgical display, exuberant and cold, of so-called lesbian sex, which turned into porn, and made me feel very ill. Especially when, in the middle of a movie theater, everyone was giggling."[30] It's not just all the lesbian sex scenes that feel out of place either, straight sex scenes, like the one with Thomas at the beginning of the movie, feel gross when taken with the context of the original scene in the novel, and reject the themes laid out by Maroh. This isn't because the graphic novel didn't feature any sex, it is because the way that sex was handle in the medium of comics is drastically different from how it is portrayed in the movie. Think of it this way, to film something you need actors. That means that real people, trained straight actors had to act out these sex scenes for the camera fully naked with no censorship from the makeup department. As

---

[29] There's no source for this, but I broke it down on my own while watching the movie. 30 minutes of the film's runtime feature nudity, and 20 of those minutes feature sex. This is in large part bolstered by a 7-minute-long sex scene.

[30] Jagernauth, Kevin. "'Blue Is the Warmest Color' Author Julie Maroh Not Pleased with Graphic Sex in Film, Calls It 'Porn.'" IndieWire, May 28, 2013. https://web.archive.org/web/20210920222118/https://www.indiewire.com/2013/05/blue-is-the-warmest-color-author-julie-maroh-not-pleased-with-graphic-sex-in-film-calls-it-porn-97557/.

opposed to the graphic novel which depicts people who aren't real in positions that empower lesbian sex, and only last for 4 pages at the most.[31]

When all is said and done, this film not only refuses to acknowledge the artistic choices made by Maroh in her graphic novel, but spits on the linage of nearly 50 years' worth of queer representation in comics. It removes the all the emotional struggle contained within the comic and instead chooses to fetishize the films lesbian relationship by treating what is glorified pornography as emotional development. It's failures in color editing and shot selection struggle to capture anything near as captivating as the drawings in the original comic. Most importantly, however, is the removal of text from the movie, or the diary mechanic as a whole. By doing this the movie loses something which is equivalent to another character. Sure, speech bubbles are still read as dialogue, but in the novel, they had personality, bleeding from panel to panel, hanging over the entire scene. It's just not possible to capture something like that in a movie and that piece is pivotal to how this story is told. Maroh's work builds on nearly a century of evolving comic techniques and honors that format with her work in a way that uplifts the struggles surrounding queer people even still to this day. It tells a story that can only be created in the medium of comics and uses each piece to further the identities of its characters and its story. This isn't to say that comics CAN'T be translated well into movies, the superhero movie genre is worth billions. They simply require a lot of love for the original source material and a desire to protect the stories that are being told, neither of which this movie would appear to have going for it. It's a shame too, because it's obvious that Maroh poured her soul into *Blue is the Warmest Color*, the level of attention to detail shows on every page, every panel, every speech bubble. The same just cannot be said for Kechiche who want to objectify the story and fetishize it for the masses. Maybe those cave painters from 30,000 years ago had it right staying away from movies.

Bibliography

[31] Maroh, Jul. *Blue is the Warmest Color.* 94-97

Alosson, Tor. “Ally Sloper’s Half Holiday (1884): The Pioneering Comic Magazine.” Toons Mag, October 17, 2023. https://www.toonsmag.com/ally-slopers-half-holiday/.

“Blue Is the Warmest Color.” Arsenal Pulp Press. Accessed December 7, 2025. https://arsenalpulp.com/Books/B/Blue-Is-the-Warmest-Color#:~:text=Vividly%20illustrated%20and%20beautifully%20told,Los%20Angeles%20Film%20Critics%20Circle.

“Cave Painting.” Wikipedia, November 15, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cave_painting.

Clews, Colin. “1980. Gay Comix. .” Gay in the 80s, October 12, 2012. https://www.gayinthe80s.com/2012/11/1980-gay-comix/.

“Codex Zouche-Nuttall.” Wikipedia, July 27, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex_Zouche-Nuttall.

Fabre, Clarisse. “Des Techniciens Racontent Le Tournage Difficile de ‘La Vie d’Adèle.’” Le Monde, May 24, 2013. https://www.lemonde.fr/festival-de-cannes/article/2013/05/24/des-techniciens-racontent-le-tournage-de-la-vie-d-adele_3417150_766360.html.

“Glasgow/Northern Looking Glass.” University of Glasgow, June 2005. https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/library/files/special/exhibns/month/june2005.html.

Kero, River H. “The History of the Underground Comix Movement.” BOOK RIOT, February 17, 2022. https://bookriot.com/underground-comix/.

Maroh, Jul. *Blue is the Warmest Color*. Vancouver, Canada: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2013.

McCloud, Scott. “*Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art.”* Internet Archive, January 1, 1993. https://archive.org/details/understanding-comics/page/n1/mode/2up.

Rifkind, Candida and Brandon Christopher. *How Comics Work.* Illustrated by Alice RL. Winnipeg: University of Winnipeg, 2019, https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/1b19/docs/how-comics-work-web-cc-by-nc-nd.pdf

"United States Propaganda Comics." Wikipedia, November 18, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_propaganda_comics.

Tenekedjieva, Stefanija. "Serif vs sans Serif: What's The Difference & Which to Use?" Serif vs Sans Serif: What's the Difference & Which to Use?, November 19, 2025. https://www.manypixels.co/blog/brand-design/serif-vs-sans-serif#:~:text=Sans%20serifs%20for%20construction%2C%20plumbing,lose%20a%20sense%20of%20professionalism.

"The Adventures of Tintin." Wikipedia, November 10, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Adventures_of_Tintin.

The Associated Press. "Lesbian Romance 'blue Is the Warmest Color: The Life of Adele' Wins Palme d'or, Cannes Film Festival's Top Honor." nydailynews.com, May 26, 2013. https://web.archive.org/web/20210419154111/https://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv-movies/graphic-lesbian-romance-takes-top-cannes-honor-article-1.1355197.