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PRESENT



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
UN CERTAIN REGARD
2023 OFFICIAL SELECTION

THE NATURE OF LOVE

A FILM BY MONIA CHOKRI

2023 – CANADA, FRANCE – ROMANTIC COMEDY – FRENCH – 111’

mk2
FILMS

SYNOPSIS

Sophia, a 40-year-old philosophy professor, is in a stable if somewhat socially-conforming relationship with Xavier. From gallery openings to endless dinner parties, ten years have already flown by.

Sylvain is a craftsman, renovating Sophia and Xavier's new country house. When Sophia and Sylvain meet, Sophia's world is turned upside down. Opposites attract, but can they last?

INTERVIEW WITH MONIA CHOKRI - Director

In *The Nature of Love* (French: *Simple comme Sylvain*) you chose to film romantic love as a social reality. What prompted you to explore romance from this angle?

It was an obvious choice. Romantic encounters tend to be idealised in film. Social environments are rarely taken into account. Yet, background has a direct bearing on how couples evolve. I have experienced several kinds of relationships myself, which have made me aware of the many factors, beyond the individuals, that can affect a couple. At a certain point, the surroundings prevail over the relationship itself. Your friends, family, work, the neighbourhood – it all starts to weigh on it.

Did these considerations inspire you to make the film?

I was interested more than anything in filming a love story. There is a rather obsessive theme in my work up to now: the impossible journey to love, the obstacles. In *A Brother's Love* (French: *La Femme de mon frère*) it was a brother-sister relationship, but the subject was already present. I wanted to take it farther – it's incredibly vast – but I also wanted to capture an encounter between two different worlds. What happens when two people with very different backgrounds become romantically involved?

What was the writing process like?

It started coming together in my mind nearly five years ago. At the time, I was finishing my début feature film, *A Brother's Love*, and doing occasional acting jobs. After I made *Babysitter*, then took some time off. I started to write the actual script about two and a half years ago. With *The Nature of Love*, time has definitely been on my side.

The film's heroine, Sophia, explores love and desire both in practice – with her lover, Sylvain – and in theory, as a philosophy teacher. Were her thoughts on romantic love shaped by her interest in the writings of Plato, Spinoza, Jankélévitch and bell hooks?

The idea was, to show how philosophers have thought about ideals of love across various eras. To my surprise, I discovered that very little work has been done on the subject in philosophy. It's been scorned even, perceived perhaps as futile or unworthy. I read tons of books, everything I could get my hands on! It helped me to envision Sophia's journey. bell hooks came much later. The editing phase was already underway. But I was delighted to add her thoughts to the voiceover, since, until that point, practically all the thinkers I had come across who had written about romantic love had been men. Of course, there is Hanna Arendt, but she approaches it from a very metaphysical perspective. She talks about love according to Saint Augustine, so her ideas are rather cryptic. This got me thinking: we are conditioned, so to speak, by male theories of love – and the way we even imagine romantic love in our minds. When I came across *All About Love* by bell hooks, I found it incredibly insightful and deep. It is actually a book that teaches us how to love better. hooks says love is a verb and, as such, we can actively choose, we can decide to love. This means our happiness does not depend on our significant other. Those words changed my life. We are each, as individuals, in charge of our own feelings.

Though you take love very seriously in your film, at face value, there are genuine moments of comedy, too. Can you tell me about the tone you were going for?

We live in an era marked by cynicism, a cynicism oftentimes reflected in cinema. To me, it is an extremely comfortable stance for artists – they don't have to emotionally engage with their lines. It gives them a certain distance. It is much more difficult to express yourself, to expose your feelings. Suddenly, I realised how interesting it all is. Perhaps because I'm getting older, because I've faced romantic challenges, been through personal experiences that have led me to better understand myself. To take a mellower stance. My life experiences over the past three years have led me to shed this cynicism. It was much more present in *A Brother's Love*. Not that I disavow it in the least: it is normal for young people to be more ironic and confrontational. I had a much more slapstick approach to comedy at the time. When people read the screenplay of *The Nature of Love*, many of them told me they really laughed. But ultimately, I'd say, it's different when you watch the film. There are funny moments, but I thought it was important to take a more humane view of class issues. Things like that can be tricky. I didn't want to pass judgement. If I'd gone for a more comedic effect, the characters wouldn't have been so endearing. Especially Sophia. She would have come across as too cynical. I decided to stress empathy instead of just going for laughs. It's a deliberate choice, one that I am proud of.

You made a point of not caricaturing Sophia's and Sylvain's different backgrounds.

Exaggeration would have been grotesque. It would have undermined the romantic encounter. No one would believe that an oafish lout could attract a highbrow woman. He would not have been interested in her in the first place. There had to be areas of convergence. Some kind of common ground. It's extremely moving to me, to hear a character say, "I'm interested in you, so I read Guillaume Apollinaire", and another reply, "I'm interested in you, so I read a book about hunting".

Sophia is 40 and teaches people who are older than her. The subject of aging is present throughout the film. Does this have to do with your own relationship to time?

Time is always an issue when you fall in love, when living a passion is what matters to you. There are numerous references in the film to my own childhood and teenage years, though they are invisible to everyone except me. In the second scene, we see Sophia putting petrol in her car and staring at a couple of teenagers kissing the way only young people and very young adults do. Sophia's nostalgia is palpable. It's possible to feel a similar passion later in life, but it happens much more rarely. So, when we fall hard for someone, we revert to our teenage years in a way. Sophia's encounter with Sylvain is sparked by something inside, some final surge of youth before settling into a less agitated age. Another thing, though I do not explicitly mention it in the film, is her confrontation with preconceived ideas about maternity. She brings up the subject twice. First, in her car, when she says: "to have children in this day and age, what a nightmare!" And again, when she tells Sylvain, "I never wanted to have children, but with you I might have liked it."

Sophia is surrounded by mother figures, for that matter. Is her character a reflection on motherhood today?

She wonders, the way everyone does, about whether she should have children or not. I don't have children because, for one thing, I was hesitant, and for another, the social and economic reality of having children is still, for women, tantamount to a form of enslavement. Women are constantly asked whether they want to have children. I was in a relationship with a guy for ten years, and no one ever asked him that! Men need to understand the bind it represents for us. And the only way for them to do this, is for women to write their own stories, to be given the right to tell and share them.

The fact that Sophia questions the idea of motherhood, isn't that a class issue, too? Wouldn't it have been another story if she were from the same class as Sylvain?

I didn't think about that specifically. But it is true that deciding whether to have children or not is a luxury of the privileged classes. Take the United States, for example. Who is going to suffer the most from the abortion bans [in 2022, the Supreme Court revoked Roe VS Wade, granting abortion rights to be legislated on the state level, editor's note]? People from the poorest classes, the African American communities. The question of motherhood is definitely a rich person's question. At the same time, it is a defining issue of our era. We see it in the declining growth rates in the West, in atheist and less religious circles. Of course, I am also portraying a world that I know, that I am a part of.

One of the protagonist's brother's partners chooses the pronoun "they". What does this say about young people today?

I'm not sure what it says about young people, but personally, I think young people are intelligent and strong, curious and tolerant. According to a study I read, roughly 20% of the 18- to 30-year-olds in France identify as gender neutral. People my age who say they don't understand what's going on are completely out of touch if you ask me. They are dinosaurs... What is so great about human beings is our capacity to evolve, to alter our moral attitudes and values. The young generation is challenging notions of gender, not to dispute the idea of biological gender, but rather to condemn systems of domination. They are calling for a more humane world, for a world where everyone is treated with respect. They are refusing to accept what it means to be a "boy" (strong and emotionally impassive) or a "girl" (gentle, well-behaved and maternal). The fact that there is a character in the film who identifies with the pronoun "they", is simply a reflection of the world we live in, whether we like it or not.

In the first scene of the film, Sophia talks about the idea of destroying the past to start over. How does she picture her future?

Subconsciously, she is trying to escape the conventions that have moulded her identity. Xavier asks her, "are you unhappy with me", and she answers "no, I'm fine, I'm not unhappy, in any case". She could have done nothing for another 10, 15, or 20 years... But she knows the model isn't right for her, and that if she does decide to explore the unknown, perhaps to no purpose, at least she will have experienced something real.

She had no qualms about giving in to her desire for Sylvain. She didn't put up a fight. Were you trying to break with preconceived ideas about adultery?

At first, she tells herself it's just a one-night stand. She'd had a few drinks, he's sexy enough, it won't mean anything. Half the people in relationships I know have had at least one fling. To quote Sophia: "I don't know any faithful couples". It happens all the time, but we never talk about it. The subject is taboo. The word "faithfulness" is still a Judeo-Christian norm. A heavy burden. I think we should talk about "loyalty" instead. My mother said that, for her, cheating was not about having sex with someone else. It was when you start to feel close to the person in question. I thought this was a fair assessment... But after a certain age, sex and intimacy are intrinsically tied.

Sophia says being with Sylvain somehow connected her to what matters most in life. Does this idea of authenticity and simplicity strike you as being particularly contemporary?

For me – and I've repeatedly tried to get off social media – it's the ultimate fantasy: to meet a guy who is 35, who lives alone in the middle of nowhere, who doesn't use social media, who grows his own vegetables. It's something I discovered with age. I used to hate the country.

You cast Pierre-Yves Cardinal as Sylvain. In France, he is known for his role in Xavier Dolan's *Tom at the Farm*. Does he represent a particular kind of masculinity?

Manliness and sensitivity are less at odds in Quebec than they are in many other parts of the world. I was interested in portraying a guy from a rural background, who works with his hands, as being extremely sensitive. This was very important. We hear so many stories about toxic romance. Solal, in Albert Cohen's *Belle du Seigneur*, is the most loathsome character imaginable, yet he inspired generations of men and women who saw him as a romantic figure. The fact is, the relationship was toxic, and Solal was a manipulative narcissist. To film a relationship from a woman's perspective, that had none of that toxicity, was what mattered to me.

The film takes an intellectual look at romantic love, but it is also highly sensual. How did you approach filming the sex scenes?

It was quite a challenge ! There are so many sex scenes in cinema... They never really interest me. They are always mere graphic representations. For me, sex scenes are only good if they move the narrative forward. We hear about the female gaze, but it's not that simple. Everyone's perspective is shaped by the male gaze, by what men consider erotic and sensual. The message – that a woman's body is sensual and that a man's body isn't sexy – is everywhere. As women, we are subjected to the injunction of exposing our bodies. The challenge for me was how not to show the actress' body. I wanted to show the scene from her perspective. So, the shots of Sylvain's body are extremely tight. The cunnilingus scene is also from the female perspective. It's my way of saying to women, "you are free to express your sexuality, to say whatever you want." So, I treated the sex scenes like dialogue scenes. To help the story move forward.

How did you direct Magalie Lépine Blondeau?

Magalie is my best friend in real life. She is also the first person who reads of all my scripts. I had already directed her in *A Brother's Love*. I tend to be a little pushy. I tell the actors I'm going for a certain tone. We do a lot of rehearsing during the shoots. But working with Magalie is easy. We have the same sensibilities. I wanted to allow her a certain degree of freedom. In Quebec, she is a very famous actor. She has done a lot of great performances for cinema, television and stage. She is exceptionally talented, and she trusted me. She genuinely believed in the project, in her role and the story.

You've never worked with André Turpin before, the director of photography best known for his work with Xavier Dolan...

André is a friend, too. I was in his film *Endorphine* (2015). Our collaboration was unusual. He had very little free time during the preparation phase, so I had to get the shot list ready by myself. At first, it was somewhat daunting. But afterward, I loved it. I had only myself to rely on. A dizzying reality, but that taught me to work on my own. I thought a lot about Robert Altman during the filming. The zooming in and out, the telephoto lenses...

There is a sensual aspect to the film – the grainy texture, the repeated zoom shots – that comes across as very seventies. What effect were you going for?

Various things. The film explores questions of romantic love and reproduction, so I wanted to give it an animal documentary look and feel. I used long focal lengths to create a feeling of being on a safari.

It's as if we were nature watching, waiting for the animals to show up. It is also a question of taste: I really like using zoom effects. I had already experimented with it a little in *A Brother's Love*. The American dramas of the 1970s and 80s were an influence, as well. *Kramer vs Kramer*, *Love Story*...

The dinner scenes are extremely animated. Everyone keeps talking over each other... What does this say about how the characters communicate?

I do the same thing all the time. The overlapping dialogues were written into the script so the actors could rehearse them. The actors really have to be on their toes to get the scenes just right. They have to be able to listen to each other and, at the same time, to concentrate on their timing. It's a question of getting the music right. Couples often talk over each other: they are able to hear what their partner is saying while continuing their stream of thought.

The film's big question is whether romantic love is possible between two very different people. Have you decided one way or the other?

I think two individuals can love each other despite their many differences. But it's a huge challenge. It requires determination. The choice to love, as bell hooks would say, "is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other."

MONIA CHOKRI

Monia Chokri trained at Montreal's Conservatory of Dramatic Arts. She is an actress, screenwriter and director. She has worked in both Canada and France, as a theatre and film actor. She made her directorial debut in 2013 with the short drama film, **An Extraordinary Person** (French: *Quelqu'un d'extraordinaire*), starring Anne-Élisabeth Bossé, Evelyne Brochu, and Magalie Lépine-Blondeau, and edited by Xavier Dolan. The film won numerous prizes, including Prix Jutra for Best Short Film in 2014 and the Grand Jury Prize of the South by Southwest Festival (2014). She wrote and directed **A Brother's Love**, her first feature film, which was released in 2019 and hailed in the Un Certain Regard section of the 2019 Cannes Film Festival. She has acted for a number of filmmakers, including Denys Arcand, Robin Aubert, Claire Simon and Katell Quillévéré. She earned public recognition for her role as Marie in **Heartbeats** (French: *Les amours imaginaires*), directed by Xavier Dolan, with whom she later worked in **Laurence Anyways**. Her second feature film, **Babysitter**, starring Nadia Terezkiewicz, Patrick Hivon and Steve Laplante, was shown at the 2022 Sundance Film Festival. Her new feature film, **The Nature of Love**, was selected for the Cannes Film Festival 2023 in the Un Certain regard section.

DIRECTOR

- 2023** **THE NATURE OF LOVE (Simple comme Sylvain)** / Cannes Film Festival 2023, Un Certain Regard
- 2022** **BABYSITTER** / Sundance Film Festival 2022, Official Selection
- 2018** **A BROTHER'S LOVE (La Femme de mon frère)** / Cannes Film Festival 2019, Un Certain Regard, Coup de Cœur

ACTRESS

- 2023** **THE NATURE OF LOVE (Simple comme Sylvain)** by Monia Chokri
- 2022** **FALCON LAKE** by Charlotte Le Bon
- 2022** **BABYSITTER** by Monia Chokri
- 2017** **BEFORE WE EXPLODE (Avant qu'on explose)** by Rémi St Michel
- 2017** **EMMA PEETERS** by Nicole Palo
- 2017** **WE ARE GOLD (Nous sommes Gold)** by Éric Morin

- 2017** ***PAUVRE GEORGE*** by Emma Mauvin
- 2016** ***RAVENOUS (Les Affamés)*** by Robin Aubert
- 2015** ***HEAL THE LIVING (Réparer les vivants)*** by Katell Quillévéré
- 2015** ***A TASTE OF INK (Compte tes blessures)*** by Morgan Simon
- 2014** ***ENDORPHINE*** by André Turpin
- 2012** ***GARE DU NORD*** by Claire Simon
- 2011** ***LAURENCE ANYWAYS*** by Xavier Dolan
- 2009** ***HEARTBEATS (Les Amours Imaginaires)*** by Xavier Dolan
- 2009** ***YESTERDAY, TODAY, YESTERDAY (Hier, aujourd'hui, hier)*** by Xavier
Beauchesne Rondeau
- 2009** ***DAYS OF DARKNESS (L'âge des Ténèbres)*** by Denys Arcand
- 2007** ***FREDERIQUE AU CENTRE*** by Anne Émond

CAST

Magalie LÉPINE-BLONDEAU	Sophia
Pierre-Yves CARDINAL	Sylvain
Monia CHOKRI	Françoise
Francis-William RHÉAUME	Xavier
Steve LAPLANTE	Philippe
Marie-Ginette GUAY	Sylvie
Micheline LANCTÔT	Madeleine
Guillaume LAURIN	Olivier
Linda SORGINI	Guyline
Mathieu BARON	Kevin
Christine BEAULIEU	Karine
Lubna PLAYOUST	Joséphine
Guy THAUVETTE	Pierre
Karelle TREMBLAY	Camélia

CREW

Director	Monia CHOKRI
Scriptwriter	Monia CHOKRI
Cinematography	André TURPIN
Production Design	Colombe RABY
First Assistant Director	Cédrick KLUYSKENS
Set Decoration	Kimberley THIBODEAU
Editing	Pauline GAILLARD
Sound Design	François GRENON, Julien ROIG, Olivier GUILLAUME
Original Score	Emile SORNIN
Script Supervisor	Nathalie PAQUETTE
Casting Director	Annie ST. PIERRE
Set Photographer	Fred GERVAIS
Executive producer	Philippe LOMBART
Line Producer	Marie-Claire LALONDE
Producers	Sylvain CORBEIL, Nancy GRANT, Nathanaël KARMITZ, Elisha KARMITZ
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Canadian Distribution	Immina Films

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