

REVIEW

Review of Martin Bourboulon's biopic *Eiffel*

2021, Pathé Films/VVZ Production, 108 min

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An alluring project that often proves exceptionally difficult to pull off, the biopic remains an elusive feat in cinema. How do filmmakers make it work? In the most recent case of unmitigated biopic success, Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* (2023) benefited from the nonlinear narrative he had developed since *Memento* (2000), the backdrop of war that had worked in *Dunkirk* (2017) and a star-studded cast, which came together for a near Oscars sweep. Also treating a brilliant scientist, whose creation has largely overshadowed his personal fame, *Eiffel* found itself in the position of needing to find a "hook" in order to allow the narrative to flow. For Martin Bourboulon, with a fraction of Nolan's budget, let alone accolades, it was the chemistry of his two remarkable leads, French stalwart Romain Duris (*The Beat That My Heart Skipped*; Klapisch's *Spanish Apartment* trilogy and *Paris*; *Mood Indigo*) and Franco-English newcomer Emma Mackey (*Sex Education*, *Emily*, *Death on the Nile*), that made *Eiffel* a success.

Playing off of the disputed theory that a younger Gustave Eiffel was madly in love with an aristocratic Adrienne Bourgès from the Bordeaux region, whom he would ultimately, secretly immortalize with the form of the Eiffel Tower resembling the letter "A" of her first name, the flashback-flashforward narrative allows Bourboulon to show Eiffel's early successes in the 1860s in designing the skeletal framework of Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty and creating a 500m iron railway bridge in Bordeaux (using the same air caisson technology that would allow him to build the famous tower) by couching it all in a love story. In fact, flashing forward a quarter century, a widowed Eiffel would reject his employees' plan to develop the Paris metro, when a chance encounter with a married Adrienne drives him to dare to build an unthinkable 300m tower on the banks of the Seine for the 1889 World's Fair in Paris. While this romantic drama is likely largely embellished, it does allow the filmmaker to lay out a meaningful biopic, detailing the real-life professional and personal relationships of the engineer, as well as the many innovative techniques, frustrations, money issues, labor strikes and momentous flights of genius that led to the creation of one of the most recognizable monuments in the world.

What makes a biopic work? Real human interest and impeccable casting that keep the audience riveted (pun intended), as the filmmaker draws on events that are entirely relatable, as well as those that establish the subject as a singular figure in human history. For these reasons, *Eiffel* succeeds in bringing to life and humanizing what for most was previously little more than an antonomastic surname.