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FLESH & BLOOD

SEX AND VIOLENCE IN RECENT FRENCH CINEMA



Opposite page: **Bruno Dumont**, *Twentynine Palms*, 2003, still from a color film in 35 mm, 130 minutes. Katia (Katia Golubeva) and David (David Wissak). This page: **Claire Denis**, *Trouble Every Day*, 2001, still from a color film in 35 mm, 101 minutes. Coré (Béatrice Dalle).

JAMES QUANDT THE CONVULSIVE VIOLENCE OF BRUNO DUMONT'S NEW FILM

Twentynine Palms (2003)—a truck ramming and a savage male rape, a descent into madness followed by a frenzied knifing and suicide, all crammed into the movie's last half hour after a long, somnolent buildup—has dismayed many, particularly those who greeted Dumont's first two features, *Life of Jesus* (1997) and *L'Humanité* (1999), as the work of a true heir to Bresson. Whether *Palms*' paroxysm of violation and death signals that Dumont is borrowing the codes of Hollywood horror films to further his exploration of body and landscape or whether it merely marks a natural intensification of the raw, dauntless corporeality of his previous films, it nevertheless elicits an unintentional anxiety: that Dumont, once imperiously impervious to fashion, has succumbed to the growing vogue for shock tactics in French cinema over the past decade.

The critic truffle-snuffing for trends might call it the New French Extremity, this recent tendency to the willfully transgressive by directors like François Ozon, Gaspar Noé, Catherine Breillat, Philippe Grandrieux—and now, alas, Dumont. Bava as much as Bataille, *Salò* no less than Sade seem the determinants of a cinema suddenly determined to break every taboo, to wade in rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and subject it to all manner of penetration, mutilation,

and defilement. Images and subjects once the provenance of splatter films, exploitation flicks, and porn—gang rapes, bashings and slashings and blindings, hard-ons and vulvas, cannibalism, sadomasochism and incest, fucking and fisting, sluices of cum and gore—proliferate in the high-art environs of a national cinema whose provocations have historically been formal, political, or philosophical (Godard, Clouzot, Debord) or, at their most immoderate (Franju, Buñuel, Walerian Borowczyk, Andrzej Zulawski), at least assimilable as emanations of an artistic movement (Surrealism mostly). Does a kind of irredentist spirit of incitement and confrontation, reviving the hallowed Gallic traditions of the film *maudit*, of *épater les bourgeois* and *amour fou*, account for the shock tactics employed in recent French cinema? Or do they bespeak a cultural crisis, forcing French filmmakers to respond to the death of the ineluctable (French identity, language, ideology, aesthetic forms) with desperate measures?

An outrider of French extremity, Ozon's first feature, the suspense thriller *See the Sea* (1997), alternates oblique terror with shock shots—of a toothbrush dipped in a shit-filled toilet or the subliminal suggestion of a sutured vagina. Ozon defended it and the outré nature of his *Criminal Lovers* (1999), a cross between *Natural Born Killers* and “Hansel and Gretel,” steeped in sexual pathology and cannibalism, this way: “What I am interested in is violence and sex, because there is a real challenge in rendering the strong and powerful, as opposed to the weak and trivial. I like something that asks moral questions.” Ozon has since matured—e.g., the classical, contained *Under the Sand* (2000), starring an exquisitely anguished Charlotte Rampling—but to the nascent enfant terrible whose every kink was calculated (especially in the screeching satire of *Sitcom* [1998]), morality seemed a canard, a pretext for provocation. Certainly, his films never approach the unsettling vision of his hero, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who could traumatize audiences simply by confronting them with uncomfortable truths.

Fassbinder's painful verities about race and abasement also inspired Claire Denis, whose *Chocolat* (1988) and *No Fear, No Die* (1990) are distinguished by clear-eyed empathy and sociological insight. Denis

in Paris is both cursory and ludicrous. Denis's superb cinematographer Agnès Godard, responsible for the ravishing images of *Beau Travail* (1999), here trains her camera on landscapes of flayed flesh, on Dalle's tumid lips and hungry tongue aswim in crimson, and on walls artfully splattered with blood. (The Pat Steir-like sprays of incarnadine remind us that the French can never abandon their tendency to aestheticize even when aiming to appall; the paintings of Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud are invoked in Patrice Chéreau's *Intimacy* [2001] and Philippe Grandrieux's *La Vie nouvelle* [2002], and an eleven-second cum shot in Bertrand Bonello's *The Pornographer* [2001] is proudly described as having been inspired by “Rothko at the Grand Palais.”)

Cannibalism and mutilation turn autoerotic in Marina de Van's debut film, *In My Skin* (*Dans ma peau*, 2002). De Van coscripted *See the Sea* and starred as its dead-eyed monster, a domestic intruder whose psychosis, according to director Ozon, “confounds the anus and the vagina.” In *Peau*, de Van's ashen, impassive features become a Noh mask in her rendering of Esther, a young research analyst who accidentally slices her leg during a party and becomes increasingly obsessed with the pleasure she finds in her suppurating wounds. Compulsively cutting herself with knife or razor, Esther delects in her own flesh, mutilating and hungrily tasting an arm or tanning a swatch of epidermis in her quest to test the boundaries between self and world.

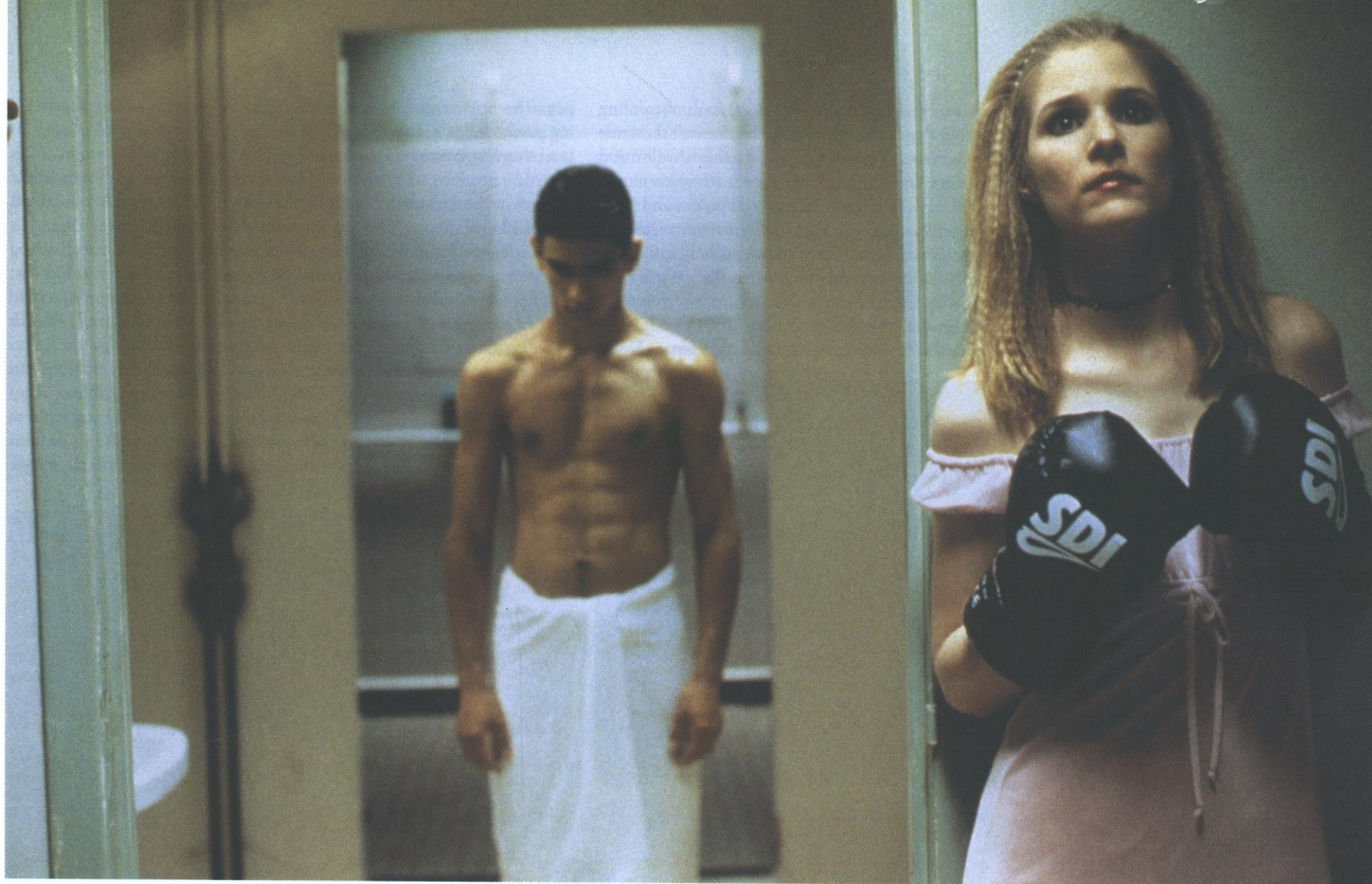
De Van's occasionally gruesome and unbearably intense work owes an obvious debt to both *Repulsion* and *Crash*, but it also stands with such recent French films as Catherine Breillat's *Romance* (1999) and



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disdains these traditional virtues in *Trouble Every Day* (2001), a horror show in which Béatrice Dalle is cast for her ravenous mouth as Coré, a cannibal sated only when she consumes the bodies of her hapless lovers. An enervated Denis barely musters a hint of narrative to contain or explain the orgiastic bloodletting; a shadow plot involving Vincent Gallo as an American doctor struggling with his own bloodlust while on honeymoon

Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi's *Baise-moi* (2000) as an extreme vision of women driven to limits of compulsion, sexuality, or violence in their rejection of a world that attempts to constrain or degrade them. *Romance* chronicles a grimly narcissistic voyage into sexual oblivion by a schoolteacher who undergoes rape, sodomy, orgies, bondage, and childbirth in her pursuit of self-discovery. In this joyless



update of *Belle de Jour* and *Mademoiselle*, even a gynecological examination becomes a kind of debauch, a group of interns each taking a turn to thrust a hand into the supine *institutrice*. Breillat, who played the un-Bressonian Mouchette in *Last Tango in Paris*, has made a career of erotic provocation, her specialty being adolescent female sexuality (*A Real Young Girl* [1976], *36 Fillette* [1988], *Fat Girl* [2001]). She has just premiered *Anatomy of Hell*, starring Chanel model Amira Casar as a woman who meets her ambisexual lover by cutting her wrists. Set in what Breillat calls a “pornocratie”—“this fantastical and hideous realm of obscenity [that] obsesses me”—and intended to make *Romance* look like a *fête galante*, *Anatomy* films “forbidden images, hackneyed from their overuse in the porn industry, as a reconsideration of the reality of those images as such.”

As bare and blunt as its title, *Baise-moi* (literally, *Fuck Me*, though known as *Rape Me*) explores the lower depths of the comparatively safe, bourgeois terrain of *Romance*; both films use actual porn stars—director Trinh Thi among them—and feature real penetration and “money shots” for an extra frisson of erotic authenticity. Where *Romance*’s every image of abasement is lovingly lit and photographed by Yorgos Arvanitis, the long-take master of Angelopoulos’s cinema, *Baise-moi* is grottoily shot in handheld digital video, ideally raw for this tale of two women who go on

a screwing and shooting rampage across France, taking their revenge for rape by blowing out the brains (or the assholes) of the men who don’t satisfy them. Breillat mitigates her graphic sequences with pearly light and faux-profound philosophy—“physical love is triviality dancing with the divine,” she proffers in mock-Durasian mode—but the pair of wantons who romp through the punk rock-propelled, blood- and sperm-smearred *Baise-moi* don’t have much time for poetry: “I leave nothing precious in my cunt for those jerks,” one of them declares after she is raped. Initially banned in France (and elsewhere, including Ontario), *Baise-moi* was, like *Romance*, championed by many feminists who found in its crude, violent vision an allegory of “female empowerment.”

Baise-moi includes a clip from *I Stand Alone* (*Seul contre tous*, 1998) by the directors’ friend Gaspar Noé, whose Lynch-like *Carne* (1991), a studiously repugnant short film about a horse butcher who takes revenge on a man he suspects of raping his autistic daughter, is perhaps the ur-text of the New French Extremity. The butcher reappears as the jobless and embittered protagonist of *I Stand Alone*, spewing hatred against immigrants, homosexuals, women, and blacks. Safely displaced as the rant of a mad meatman—Noé has the courage of few convictions—his harangues are subsumed by an aggressive style of abrupt cuts, extreme close-ups, and preposterous intertitles, of seismic sounds and hard-driving music

Opposite page: **Gaspar Noé**, *Irreversible*, 2002, still from a color film in 35 mm, 95 minutes. Le Tenia (Jo Prestia) and Alex (Monica Bellucci). This page: **François Ozon**, *Criminal Lovers*, 1999, still from a color film in 35 mm, 90 minutes. Luc (Jérémy Rénier) and Alice (Natacha Régnier).

whose effect Noé compared to an epileptic seizure. (No doubt young Alexandre Aja had Noé's hulking butcher in mind when he cast the same actor as a psycho killer in *Haute Tension* [2003], a grisly thriller that revels in human forms of steak tartare.) Noé merrily described his film as anti-French, suggesting that a waning sense of national power and identity informs its baleful vision. Ironically, his world-as-abattoir metaphor reminds one of a far more devastating film—Franju's epochal *Le Sang des bêtes*—proving perhaps that *I Stand Alone* incarnates the very decline Noé thinks he is critiquing.

Of the two kinds of film *maudit*—those that set out to scandalize and the guileless ones that sadly chance upon their disrepute—Noé's



The New French Extremity may recall the *hussards*, those right-wing anarchists of the '50s determined to rock the pieties of bourgeois culture; but the recent provocateurs are too disparate in vision to be classified as a movement.

Irreversible (2002) is most flagrantly the former. The director suddenly finds philosophy (J.W. Dunne's 1927 treatise *An Experiment with Time*); "time destroys all things," his film announces, posturing as fearless vision of hell. A Bergson *de la boue*, Noé inverts his narrative, back to front, as the title suggests, so that we are forced to experience the tragic tow, and toll, of time. The film, shot in a series of faked long takes, begins in a squalid hotel room (with a brief appearance by the still-yelping butcher) and then woozily makes its way to a strobe-lit inferno—a gay fisting and fuck club delicately called the Rectum. Traveling backward to the moment when the film's heroine (Monica Bellucci) discovers she is pregnant by her boyfriend (Vincent Cassel), the film reveals in reverse order her departure for a party and (in a relentless, "real-time" sequence lasting many minutes) her anal rape in an underpass by a gay pimp who then smashes her head in, leaving her comatose. Her boyfriend and his brainy pal search the city for her assailant, finally bashing the wrong man's brains to a pulp with a fire extinguisher amid a crowd of gawking gays, too insensate from *poings* and poppers to do anything but thrill to the kill. Hip nihilist Noé comes on as our Céline of the Monoprix, making sure it is the sensitive intellectual and not the

primitive boyfriend who wields the weapon, proving, as the caterwauling press kit has it, that "man is an animal, and the desire for vengeance is a natural impulse."

Noé's noxious style and his primal theme of man as id or animal get a philosophical gloss in the work of Philippe Grandrieux. Serial killers, much like abattoirs, are pretty well exhausted as metaphor, but Grandrieux's *Sombre* (1998) attempts something new: a disorienting plunge into the consciousness of a compulsive rapist/murderer. The first half hour of *Sombre* is taken up by a vertiginous transcription of a road tour of carnage, as the killer casually dispatches women in the French countryside. Underlit, indeterminate images, flickering, unfocused, and flash cut, summon a sense of menace and illegible dread, exaggerated by abrasive sound effects and roiling music by Alan Vega, of the proto-punk band Suicide. Once the killer hooks up with a pair of sisters whose car has broken down, Grandrieux's attempt at a tour de force of Thanatos flattens into generic familiarity, and no amount of eerily liminal images and fetid sex can disguise his tired themes.

Grandrieux compares *Sombre* to a Grimm fairy tale; his follow-up, *La Vie nouvelle*, derives from the Orpheus and Eurydice myth. Orpheus in this case is Seymour, a young American soldier adrift in "desolate, lawless Eastern Europe"—a handy signifier for existential chaos, much as Beirut once was for Volker Schlöndorff—who encounters a beautiful, defiled prostitute and follows her into an underworld of torture, sexual atrocity, and death. The performances veer between the catatonic and

the histrionic, and again Grandrieux evokes the abyss with stygian, indecipherable images, each one tinged with hints of genocide and holocaust, of Chechnya and Bosnia; like Noé, he relies on a grinding sound track to accompany scenes of menace and barbarity. The bleary voyeurism of Grandrieux's style is deadening, then abhorrent; it arrogates political, social, and historical horror for a fashionista vision of the apocalypse—*Salò* as infernal rave. (The prostitute's green kohl-ringed eyes and chic Seberg bob suggest not ethnic cleansing but a St. Honoré catwalk.) Noé and Ozon seem earnest in comparison with Grandrieux, who fancies himself a philosophe: "What do we seek, since the first traces of hands impressed in rock the long, hallucinated perambulation of man across time"—he once mused in the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma*—"what do we try to reach so feverishly, with such obstinacy and suffering, through representation, through images, if not to open the body's night, its opaque mass, the flesh with which we think—and present it to the light, to our faces, the enigma of our lives?"

Standing at a tangent to these avatars of extremity is Bruno Dumont, whose trilogy about the despoliation of innocents began with *Life of Jesus*, set in a bleak northern French village. The teenage protagonist of

Dumont's passion play is epileptic, inarticulate, and overwhelmed by the death of a friend's brother from AIDS. He searches for release from his dumb, monotonous life, first in animal sex with his bewildered girlfriend and then in a brutal attack on a young Arab. Dumont, influenced by the Bresson of *Au hasard Balthazar* and the Pialat of *Passe ton bac d'abord*, offhandedly shows us forbidden things—an old woman's mottled body as she bathes, the ruddy boy penetrating his girlfriend in a meadow, their numbly thrusting flesh blanched by barren light—thereby inverting the expectation of spectacle that the film's CinemaScope format typically offers. That same expansive frame centers on the bloody genitals of a raped and murdered eleven-year-old girl at the beginning of Dumont's next film, *L'Humanité*. The camera contemplates her violated corpse with painterly dispassion, invoking both Courbet's *Origin of the World* and Duchamp's *Etant Donnés*. The combination of carnality and Christianity, of Brueghel and Bresson found in *Life of Jesus* is both refined and expanded in *L'Humanité*. A film about the body in the landscape

and the landscape of the body, it stares with naturalistic detachment at the brutish bouts of sex between a rawboned factory worker and her boyfriend and endows a seemingly unmotivated Scope close-up of a man's swimsuit-clad crotch with potent, appalling mystery.

Dumont's treatment of the flat Flemish landscape—muddy and rucked, with an imprisoning horizon—reminds us that the natural world is sublimely indifferent to *humanité*. In *Twenty-nine Palms*, Dumont's unerring eye similarly transforms the desert around California's Joshua Tree territory into a craggy, postlapsarian Eden in which to disport his New World Adam and Eve: an unhinged neurotic called Katia and her photographer boyfriend David. Drive, she said, and drive they do, scouting locations for his latest project in a new Hummer. She is prone to paroxysms of grief, joy, and jealousy; he mostly wants sex in various positions and various locations—a motel pool, on top of a remote boulder, even on a bed—and in a parody of *amour fou*, they fuck and fight, fight and fuck until the difference between the two F's dissolves

Opposite page: **Bruno Dumont, *L'Humanité*, 1999**, still from a color film in 35 mm, 148 minutes. This page: **Marina de Van, *In My Skin*, 2002**, still from a color film in 35 mm, 93 minutes. Esther (Marina de Van).



into full-frontal sulking. (The actress, Katia Golubeva, should be used to the ambience, having starred as the incestuous half-sister in Leos Carax's mopily hard-core *Pola X* [1999].)

Like Noé and Grandrieux, Dumont has succumbed to the elemental—and to the elementary. He treats as big news that man is an animal, reducing his characters to inarticulateness: The Eastern European Katia speaks hesitant, accented French, David a sort of guttural LA Esperanto. Blessed bouts of silence are punctuated by exchanges like this, as the two survey a field of wind machines:

“It’s great.”

“It’s fantastic.”

“It’s perfect.”

Katia often collapses into mad laughter or tears; David shrieks when he comes, his Iggy Pop features screwed into a feral, teeth-baring squall of agony. Their every atavistic grunt and howl is exaggerated by a sound

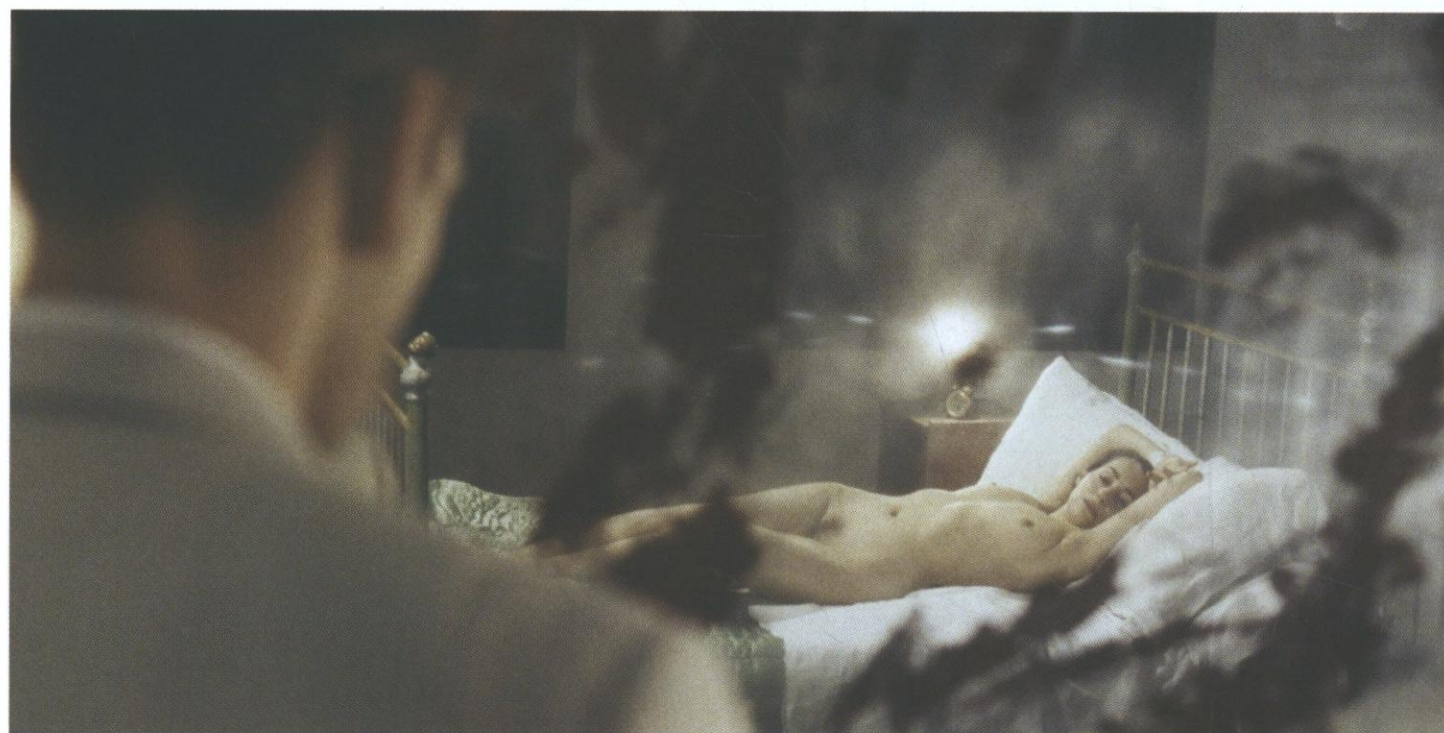
themselves. He has called his approach equal parts “truth and poetry.” Absurd, false, and self-important, *Twentynine Palms* manifests instead a failure of both imagination and morality.

Asked why he set out to disturb his audience in *Twentynine Palms*, Dumont responded: “Because people are way too set in their ways, they are asleep. They have to be woken up. . . . You can never definitely say you are human, you have to regularly be confronted by something, to remind you that you still have a lot to do as a human being, you have to be awakened.” Awakened, though, to what? What new or important truth does Dumont proffer that his audience needs to be slapped and slammed out of its sleepwalk into apprehending? In his sophistry, Dumont may place himself in the tradition of provocation, from Sade to Rimbaud to Pasolini, but *Twentynine Palms* has none of the power to shock an audience into consciousness evident in the elliptic violence of Bresson’s *L’Argent*, the emotional evisceration of Eustache’s *The Mother and the Whore*, or the bitter sexuality of Pialat’s *A Nos Amours*.

The New French Extremity sometimes looks like a latter-day version of the *hussards*, those Céline-loving, right-wing anarchists of the '50s determined to rock the pieties of bourgeois culture; but for all their connections (shared actors, screenwriters, etc.), the recent provocateurs are too disparate in purpose and vision to be classified as a movement. Elsewhere, in the sclerotic shocks of Blier’s *Les Côtelettes* (2003) and Brisseau’s *Choses secrètes* (2002), the erotic fatigue of Bonello’s *The Pornographer* and the charming jadedness of Nolot’s old-fashioned *La Chatte à deux têtes* (aka *Porn Theater*, 2002), it appears to be the last gasp of Gallic libertinism. Some French commentators have dismissed the notion that there is any such trend; others have suggested that it marks a reconfiguration between aesthetics and the body in a dire, image-clotted culture; while still others that it is simply symptomatic of an international vogue for “porno

chic,” widely apparent in art-house films from Austria to Korea. More pragmatically, the drastic tactics of these directors could be an attempt to meet (and perchance defeat) Hollywood and Asian filmmaking on their own *Kill Bill* terms or to secure distributors and audiences in a market disinclined toward foreign films; and in fact many of these works have been bought in North America, while far worthier French films have gone wanting. But when Bruno Dumont, once championed as the standard-bearer of a revival of humanism—indeed, of classic neo-realism—in French cinema, capitulates to this inimical approach, one begins to suspect a deeper impulse at work: a narcissistic response to the collapse of ideology in a society traditionally defined by political polarity and theoretical certitude, perhaps. The authentic, liberating outrage—political, social, sexual—that fueled such apocalyptic visions as *Salò* and *Weekend* now seems impossible, replaced by an aggressiveness that is really a grandiose form of passivity. □

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Catherine Breillat, *Anatomy of Hell*, 2004, still from a color film in 35 mm, 80 minutes. The Man (Rocco Siffredi) and The Woman (Amira Casar).

track that makes the breaking of a Chinese cracker resound like a rupture in the San Andreas Fault.

Antonioni’s *Zabriskie Point* and *The Passenger* are unavoidable references in *Twentynine Palms*, but the violence of the film’s last half hour erupts with signifiers from such American movies as *Deliverance* and *Psycho*, as if to emphasize that the very terrain and culture are born of and imbued with maiming and death. An auteurist case can be made for Dumont’s foray into buggery and Humvees, horror-movie mutilation and panting *Showgirls* pool sex; but where the extremity of Dumont’s previous films was incorporated into both a moral vision and a coherent mise-en-scène, in *Twentynine Palms* it is imposed and escalated, the product of Dumont’s slack, manufactured sense of American imbecility—Jerry Springer, artificial soft ice cream, oversize vehicles and ominous marines, rednecks snarling at strangers from their trucks, desert hillbillies with a taste for cornhole battery. Dumont surveys America as a toxic Tocqueville, deploying Hollywood methods, or so he thinks, against

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