

REVIEW: Twentynine Palms "Zabriskie Pointless" or Bruno Dumont's Latest Masterpiece?

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So few great films are around these days or at least it seems that way. Where have all the challenging, provocative films gone? Of course, we do have our fair share of contrived, plot-driven features that impress us with their complex chain-of-events and their clever play with time and space. Something to serve-up for some stimulating conversation upon exiting the cinema. David Lynch has become a master of this. Lynch's films (i.e. *Eraserhead*, *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive*) are great conversation pieces, like a provocative museum exhibition that causes a momentary stir but doesn't change the world or its audience. Personally, I am an ambivalent fan of Lynch's work but, more than anything, he reminds me that there is creative potential outside the machine that is the North American film production, exhibition, and distribution industry.

Lynch's characterizations are so radical and illusory – which is obviously part of his ploy and appeal – that there are few moral considerations in his work. In *Eraserhead*, for instance, the seductress across the hall is exactly that: a deceitful manipulator with no moral conscience. In turn, this makes it easy to view his films (save for his infrequent non-surrealist features such as 1980's *The Elephant Man*) without personally challenging his moral stance. It's safe to assume that when Lynch fans converge in the lobby after a typically Lynchian experience, they are discussing the multiple levels of narrativity that make his approach so invigorating. Whereas we tend to think of Lynch as provocative and marginal, he is, in fact, rather predictable. He has been compared to Buñuel, though I'd argue that the latter's work is more stimulating.

Surrealism often uses the codes of psychoanalysis in subversive ways, probably as a result of the lack of critical debate (especially in terms of sexuality) in social circles. But the imagery rarely secures a middle-ground for criticism in the realm of morality. Conversely, Hollywood's rather insulting "take me by the hand and show me how to feel" approach allows little space for moral awareness or development.

Enter Bruno Dumont.

I stand by this man and his peculiar visions. And this review, although a preview for most of you, is admittedly an act of critical resuscitation.

I fear that most readers will never see *Twentynine Palms* (which played at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts on November 8th, 2003) in its true scope, on the silver screen. Local programmers have chastised the film and deemed it (not unlike Vincent Gallo's *The Brown Bunny*) unworthy of the public's attention. Dumont's previous effort, *L'humanité*, made headlines at Cannes and garnered the Grand Prix du Jury, while his first and arguably most modest film, *La Vie De Jesus*, offers proof that his later recognition was entirely justified.

But his *Twentynine Palms* is a different story altogether. Save for Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible*, I can think of no more provocative film in recent years. Whereas Noé's film makes the transition from inferno to paradise, Dumont's works the other way around. A slow and steady tension is developed throughout the film, from reality to impending nightmare, as the libidinal release of both principle characters shrouds any possibility

of redemption. This aspect is what many spectators struggle with: the idea that David and Katia's pleasure-seeking reality could take a nasty, unforeseen turn. And none of this should be taken literally (after all, where's your sense of adventure?).

So here's the premise: David, a freelance photographer, takes Katia out into the desert to scout locations for a shoot. For the first half of the film the couple engages in a great deal of sex. Eventually the sex gets more aggressive and they have a rather telling argument which manifests in assault. She tries to leave but he's got the Hummer. Their Hummer, not as secure as they'd like to think, gets overtaken by a four-by-four. Three guys get out, assault them both, then force Katia to watch as David is sodomized by one of the men. If that's not enough, upon returning to their hotel, Katia can do little to console David, who is unrecognizable on one side of his face from the beating. He retires to the bathroom and, in a moment of terror...

Dumont shows remarkable restraint. Like Buñuel, his craft appears effortless when, in fact, he is constructing a deeply affecting, subtle relationship between the spectator and the characters. While employing a flaccid acting style that is the trademark of Robert Bresson, Dumont's characters erupt in moments of transcendence. There is no doubt that some critics will dismiss this film as superficial and trite due to its excessive scenes of sex that eventually translate into violence. But history will prove (in my opinion, this is a rather prophetic film) that Dumont's film is dead-on. Whether or not spectators will be willing to submit to what is in actuality a challenge by Dumont, only time will tell. As strange and facile as it may appear (and we all know that appearances can be rather deceiving), this film is deeply affecting, maybe offensively so: these images will nestle in your psyche for days, weeks, even months.

It is worth noting that several years ago a U.S. Marine was convicted of the brutal rape and murder of two girls in the town of 29 Palms where the film is situated, just outside Joshua Tree National Park. The town is heavily populated by both Marines and young families looking to start anew, away from the big cities and their contaminating realities. The one scene where a Marine can be seen sitting outside an ice cream parlour is particularly representative of the nuances that make Dumont's work so compelling. Katia can be seen, in one of those beautiful female POV shots, eyeing the Marine while she and David share a conversation over an ice cream cone. What could she be thinking as she

glances at him so unobtrusively? Let's face a simple fact together, one that you can bring into your screening of the film. Women's point of view shots are rare. Period. And usually they offer very little other than the reciprocation of any given male POV (think of countless beer advertisements, though the same holds true for most popular films). But Dumont is interested in the female gaze, and one could say he actually empowers it, if only temporarily, until this woman succumbs to the will and power of her other's gaze. In fact, I'd argue that the film culminates in one of the most powerful female point of views ever registered on film. You'll know what I mean when you see it.

When David looks at Katia it is, more often than not, a desiring gaze, but perhaps filtered through something else. Adulation? Contempt? Dumont is offering us a glimpse into the lives of a couple for whom sexuality is a base pleasure, whether Katia is willing to accept it or not. Do you believe sexuality to be sacred? Chances are you don't. Sex is everywhere, but its meaning depends on how you read it. We tend to overlook a great deal and become less critical as a result. Sex has been woven into the fabric of our daily routines, from television to Hollywood, the internet to your local night club. We all want it but we don't want to think about it or, at least, discuss it. It's taken a long while but we've managed to divorce morality from sexuality. Dumont is trying to re-stitch the discourses of sexuality and morality, which seem highly oppositional and confrontational at this moment. If I told you that we, as typically ahistorical Westerners, were veering much closer to a state of pathology and even further sowing the seeds that might give rise to a marked increase in psychopathic behaviour, would you believe me? See Dumont's film; he might convince you.