

Style and Sensation in the Contemporary

French Cinema of the Body

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I expect an artist to show me the edge. And to show me that edge, they must go over a bit to the other side.

—Bruno Dumont

AS AN ART FORM AND A PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE, cinema thrives on its ability to induce forceful, vivid sensation—a tendency that in some cases is taken to extremes. Yet while the majority of world film engages its viewers to convey satisfaction or gratification, there occasionally emerges an opposite tendency, aggressive and abrasive forms of cinema that seek a more confrontational experience. It is in this context that we can begin to gauge the impact of a group of high profile French-language filmmakers, notably Claire Denis, Bruno Dumont, and Gaspar Noé. Polarizing recent films such as Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001), Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* (2003), and Noé's *Irreversible* (2002) have, in fact, already become icons of notoriety in international film culture. To some, this group and the related projects of certain French contemporaries embody filmmaking at the cutting edge: incisive, unflinching, uncompromising. To others, such cinema is as indefensible as it is grotesque, pushing screen depictions of physicality to unwelcome limits, raising basic issues of what is acceptable on-screen. Either way, forty years on from the New Wave, French cinema is once more in the global critical spotlight.

Unlike the movement embodied by Godard, Truffaut, and their *Cahiers du cinéma* contem-

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poraries (Neupert 299–304), however, this is a group connected more loosely, through commonalities of content and technique. The recent work of Denis, Dumont, and Noé, a trio best thought of as filmmaking figureheads or catalysts, offers incisive social critiques, portraying contemporary society as isolating, unpredictably horrific and threatening, a nightmarish series of encounters in which personal relationships—families, couples, friendships, partnerships—disintegrate and fail, often violently. But at the center of this cycle, a focal point most famously emblemized by *Trouble Every Day*, is an emphasis on human sexuality rendered in stark and graphic terms. The filmmaking agenda here is an increasingly explicit dissection of the body and its sexual behaviors: unmotivated or predatory sex, sexual conflicts, male and female rape, disaffected and emotionless sex, ambiguously consensual sexual encounters, arbitrary sex stripped of conventional or even nominal gestures of romance. Forcible and transgressive, this is a cinema of brutal intimacy.

But there is more to this cycle than the sheer depiction of sexual and social dysfunction. As we will see, although considerable critical energy has been focused on evaluating this new French cinema, few have recognized its collective ambitions for the medium itself, as the means to generate profound, often challenging sensory experiences. In the age of the jaded spectator, the cynical cinéophile, this brutal intimacy model is a test case for film's continued potential to inspire shock and bewilderment—raw, unmediated reaction. For these narratives of the flesh, the projects of Denis, Dumont, Noé

and their peers, are rendered via a radical, innovative use of film style, an ingeniously crafted barrage of visual and aural techniques. Besides their undeniably inflammatory subjects, it is this startlingly experimental stylistic treatment that makes these films so affecting in conception and execution. The art-house thrillers that result, insidious yet arresting to the point of shock in their design, engage forcefully at both an intellectual and visceral level. In fact, this stylized representation of filmed bodies within agitational visual art recalls a discernible avant-garde trajectory. Important precursors in this light are taboo-breaking *films maudits* such as Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien andalou* (1928), Stan Brakhage's *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), Barbara Rubin's *Christmas on Earth* (1963), Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963), and Carolee Schneeman's *Fuses* (1967).¹

This article discusses the art and contexts of this contemporary French cinema of the body, outlining the grounds for its reappraisal, and importance, as an unconventional development in world film. First, the essay offers an account of the recent emergence and tendencies of this filmmaking phenomenon, exploring its major figures, projects, and professional motifs. Second, it surveys the contours of its critical reception, resituating the films within the often heated scholarly, trade, and popular debates they have instigated. Third, it concludes with a close analysis of *Trouble Every Day*, *Twenty-nine Palms*, and *Irreversible*, a pivotal trio of films whose medium-specific manipulations of the viewer show clearly the potential of this mode of cinema to invoke a sensory experience at times threateningly, violently attuned to corporeal processes, the visceral interactions of bodies on-screen.

Professional Provocation

In today's film marketplace, a transgressive cinema carries obvious commercial risks, yet it also offers the prospect of a raised artistic profile, as well as, more pragmatically, an increased visibility in the crowded schedules of art-house cinemas and international film fes-

tivals. Corporeal cinema offers the prospect of widespread attention and intensive public engagement. In fact, such filmmaking and its concomitant scandal at the Cannes film festival has proved beneficial, even foundational, to the fledgling careers of both Dumont and Noé: the former derived from the interest and backlash inspired by *L'Humanité*, in 1999, and the latter provoked by *Irreversible*, in 2002. Little surprise, perhaps, that this has motivated a spate of projects from a diverse range of filmmakers, male and female, and, of late, both French and international. Alongside Denis, Dumont, and Noé, this group includes both dynamically reinvented veterans as well as less-well-known, younger iconoclasts, whose careers have been lent shape and purpose. Despite the ongoing financial uncertainty in the contemporary French filmmaking industry—which in its structure, funding, and organization is constantly faced, in the words of Laurent Creton and Anne Jäckel, with “the danger of collapsing the aesthetic into the economic and commercial” (qtd. in Temple and Witt 219)—its uneven progress into the twenty-first century has in part been buoyed, it could be claimed, by an ongoing dialogue between a radical minority of provocative filmmakers whose work has attracted a (disproportionate) degree of scrutiny and success, both in France and abroad.²

A contemporary survey reveals a core of films and filmmakers that can be identified as artistic representatives, cultural ambassadors, and industrial influences within this new French cinema of the body. Seminal in this context is Catherine Breillat, known since the 1970s for her “audacious studies in female sexuality” (Bordwell and Thompson 617). Her career having become relatively marginal, Breillat enjoyed a sudden cultural renaissance in 1999 with her picaresque parable of a young woman's harsh sexual awakening, and the fundamental incompatibility between the sexes, in the bitterly titled *Romance*. In the wake of this breakthrough, which has since become perhaps the most widely discussed French film of the 1990s, a feminist landmark, Breillat has pursued variations on the same theme. Reworking her

customarily severe filmmaking palette—drab and muted color schemes, exacting long takes, deliberately awkward or uneven performances often given by nonprofessional actors—Breillat continued her analysis of cynical sexual liaisons in *Romance*'s counterparts: *Brief Crossing* (2001), *Fat Girl* (2001), *Sex is Comedy* (2002), and *Anatomy of Hell* (2003).

Besides Breillat, similar brutal intimacy motifs have underlined the rise to global celebrity of François Ozon, whose work is typically—uncomfortably—poised between farce and horror, incorporating graphic representations of hetero- and homosexual desire. After shorts made as a nonprofessional, Ozon paid homage to *Persona* (1966) with the minifeature *See the Sea* (1997), in which a young female drifter's fixation upon a sexually repressed mother climaxes in bursts of psychological and physical violence. Following this, Ozon was invited to the 1998 Cannes film festival as part of its official selection—again a site of recognition for this vein of filmmaking—with his blackly comic satire of pent-up bourgeois (sexual) energies, and an unraveling “ideal” family, *Sitcom* (1998). Ozon next progressed to a savagely explicit lovers-on-the-run thriller, *Criminal Lovers* (1999), before scrutinizing, again, the psychological-sexual conflicts between a mismatched female duo in the international hit *Swimming Pool* (2002). Indeed, Ozon's sympathetic reception by both audiences and critics has done much to raise the profile of French cinema itself, and more specifically its contemporary emphasis on dissections of sexual and bodily functions.

Textually related to Ozon, and sometimes his collaborator, Marina de Van is another vital figure in this professional context. Both filmmakers are, moreover, graduates of la Fémis, a major national French film school and an important cultural background for many corporeal cinéastes. La Fémis is a training institution, in fact, that has recently encouraged more provocative filmmaking methods, in particular an emphasis upon a stark treatment of the body on-screen, in its filmmaking exercises (de Van). As a writer, actress, and director in her own right, de Van's career has derived from studies

of feminine psychology traced to physical and sexual pathology, often literal or metaphorical self-mutilation. This motif is clear in de Van's fascinating short *Alias* (1999) and her debut feature, *In My Skin* (2002), which culminates with its desperate protagonist slashing her body with a knife while the image itself abruptly divides into two, a disorientating split-screen effect. In de Van's own analysis—an approach that epitomizes the experience of this brand of filmmaking—the effect is designed to assault the screen, to injure the image itself, in effect rendering the stimulus directly from diegetic character to actual viewer (Rouyer 30).

More generally, as the visual medium itself has developed in contemporary trade practices, digital-video and low-budget cinema have become in many cases fertile ground for figures attuned to this cinematic tendency. Minimizing production costs by relying on DV has, in fact, proved one way of realizing extremely confrontational, risky projects by directors who are new to the cultural mainstream and are therefore untried prospects as far as financiers are concerned. The actor-turned-director Jean-Marc Barr, for example, shot his Franco-American “Free Trilogy”—a group of sexually frank romantic parables, *Lovers* (1998), *Too Much Flesh* (2000), and *Being Light* (2000)—for just eighteen million francs, at that time the cost of a single average French feature (Prédal 66–67). Elsewhere, the opportunities of DV as a cheap and accessible filmmaking method led to unprecedented, albeit controversial, recognition for Coralie Trinh Thi and Virginie Despentes, whose *Baise-moi* (2000) revived the 1970s rape-revenge format. Their film, on its release threatened with censure and defended by many, including Breillat, used the DV format to derive new shock value and claustrophobia from its sexually explicit imagery and actors from the porn industry, while replicating the grimy, free-form, black-and-white cinematography of a low budget, impromptu documentary. Noé is a filmmaker similarly alive to the possibilities of digital imagery, an efficient method logistically and artistically. Thus he shot *Irreversible* on Super 16, then transferred it to

high-definition video for digital postproduction manipulation, before finally converting it to 35mm in a 2.35:1 widescreen ratio for its theatrical release.

Above all, however, this new French cinema of the body has facilitated bold stylistic experimentation, a fundamental lack of compromise in its engagement with the viewer. Many filmmakers have deployed visual designs and imagery to create decisively original, unsettling aesthetic encounters. Philippe Grandrieux, a documentarian and multimedia artist whose work is still not widely known or distributed outside France, is a clear example of the fusing of mainstream plot elements with genuinely avant-garde cinematic motifs. Grandrieux's serial-killer road movie, *Sombre* (1998), and his even more graphically obscure tale of carnal obsession, *A New Life* (2002), at times approach a level of visual abstraction most famously associated with Brakhage, conveying piecemeal narratives of murder and brutality through lyrical flashes of unfocused colors, dense visual textures, handheld camerawork, and barely perceptible figure movements. Equally formalist but at another aesthetic extreme is Jacques Nolot's *Porn Theatre* (2002), a much less confrontational drama set entirely in and around its eponymous venue. Nolot's project is in part to juxtapose ironically the sordid, emphatically sexual setting with a beatific, even meditative visual logic. Thus, *Porn Theatre* depicts the pornographic habits of his characters via a suite of meticulous and elegant long takes, showing the impersonal sexual interactions of the theater's community within serene, extended tracking shots that highlight multilayered compositions in depth. In Grandrieux and Nolot's filmmaking, beauty coexists uneasily with brutality.

More broadly, as film festivals and indigenous film cultures have become increasingly globalized, a trend towards internationalization has also informed the careers of key practitioners of the new French cinema of the body. Another recent phenomenon is well-established French filmmakers using equally explicit imagery—occasionally including that most enduring of artistic-cultural taboos, un-

simulated sex—and oblique narrative designs in international coproductions shot partially or entirely in English. Important in this regard is Patrice Chéreau's *Intimacy* (2001), which was financed by companies from England, France, Germany, and Spain. Shot with English actors and set amidst dingy London suburbs, *Intimacy* offers a naturalistic depiction of an adulterous sexual relationship, motivated by neither love nor friendship, between a bitter divorcé and an alienated wife. Olivier Assayas followed suit in 2002 with a transcultural conspiracy thriller about Internet pornography, corporate espionage, and sexual consumption in his elliptically structured *Demonlover*, an English-French-Japanese coproduction with a multinational cast. In 2003, Dumont for the first time moved his predominantly French crew to America to make *Twentynine Palms*, a meandering Californian narrative of a couple's sexual and physical demise, which marked an abrupt departure from his typical production protocols of shooting with nonprofessional actors in the rural Bailleul region of northern France. More recently still, though, the methodologies of this new French cinema have informed a number of projects made by filmmakers of different nationalities. In this framework have appeared candid and explicit sexual dramas such as Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* (2003), David Mackenzie's *Young Adam* (2003), and two contemporary sensations at Cannes: Vincent Gallo's *The Brown Bunny* (2003) and Michael Winterbottom's *9 Songs* (2004). All of these films foreground scenes of graphic copulation that arrestingly structure their narratives. Overall, then, this form of contemporary French cinema has proven influential within both indigenous and international filmmaking—a successful formula for notoriety. But it is also a cultural development that has been widely, hotly challenged on an international scale.

Transgression and the Critics

What to make of such a deliberately contentious type of cinema? The tentative efforts made by critics and scholars to characterize

this new French cinema of the body have revived a cluster of discourses central to film study and cultural debate: whether it is appropriate for widely circulated films (and later DVDs) to incorporate such extreme forms of aesthetic, sexual, and social provocation; or, conversely, whether even high film art should be limited to more sanctioned forms of physical desire and social interaction. While dealing with these films, critics and scholars have built entrenched positions around the notion that cinema should either infuriate or placate.

One of the earliest attempts to engage with the brutal intimacy model came in the 25 November 1999 issue of *Libération*, which published an anonymous essay berating the grim nature of much recent French film. The article, reprinted in *Le Monde Diplomatique* the following February and attributed belatedly to “journalist-cinéaste” Carlos Pardo, took to task both rising and established French auteurs by critiquing their artistic goals. Very much in the vein of François Truffaut’s infamous polemic “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema,” (Truffaut 15–29), Pardo undertook a national film-making diagnostic, rooting out a deep-seated cultural malaise while offering his contemporaries scathing rebukes. Pulling no punches, Pardo accused Breillat, Dumont, Grandrieux, Mathieu Kassovitz, Noé, Ozon, and Erick Zonca (a veritable who’s who of French cinema, then and now) of embodying in their work “despair and defeatism . . . [a] fascination with the abject and the sordid” (28). Attacking the content of contemporary French cinema, Pardo nonetheless conceded its directors’ stylistic ambition, positioned “between naturalism at its most bleak, its most hopeless, and the mannerisms of the most affected formalism.” But, for his overarching conclusion, Pardo objected categorically to France’s ubiquitous on-screen sexual misanthropy. To him it represented nothing less than a taste for “crime, pornography, and contempt of people” (28).

In retrospect, Pardo’s main insight was to observe fruitfully the emergence of a new and previously overlooked trend in French filmmaking on the brink of the twenty-first century. To

most eyes, however, his broadly dismissive analysis did the films scant justice, and a number of stimulated writers offered direct or indirect rejoinders. Given the controversial nature of the films themselves, the commentaries tended toward extremes, with critics and scholars alike fiercely divided about films labeled by some debased and (in pejorative terms) pornographic, and, by others, pioneering and genuinely bravura. The films have also produced political debate about freedom of speech and artistic expression.

A tone of fascination underlines most accounts—curiosity laced with either suspicion or solidarity. In the former group is a piece by James Quandt, who takes pains to outline what he sees as a “new French Extremity” but then goes on rather perversely to cite the films of Dumont, Grandrieux, Ozon, and others merely to castigate their graphic content, dismiss their artistic agendas as disingenuous, and deride their alleged pretentiousness (24–7). Equally combative but from the opposite perspective is René Prédal. At one point in his *Le Jeune cinéma français*, an exhaustive survey of contemporary French filmmaking, Prédal makes acerbic reference to a vocal critical minority, such as Pardo, who attract disproportionate attention by making glib dismissals of more adventurous, upcoming directors. Such a position, Prédal contends, embodies the classic logic of censorship: to generalize hazily using brief examples of filmic excess stripped of any context. This intolerance for extreme forms of cinema, sexual or violent in content, to Prédal reflects nothing less than a “systematic hatred for culture, intelligence and all freedom of artistic expression” (34).

Among other film scholars, the notion of a reinvigorated French cinema has been widely and often sympathetically debated. A number of writers, often upholding the premise that current French filmmakers display an affinity for the squalid and disreputable, have nuanced Pardo’s model by assessing more particularly the focus on starker depictions of sexuality. In what is already a seminal essay, “Cinema and the Sex Act,” Linda Williams argues convincingly that through their more open use of sex

in high-profile narrative filmmaking, the French are indeed at the cutting edge of world cinema. Williams devotes most of her essay to *Romance* and *Fat Girl*, which, along with *Intimacy* and *Baise-moi*, “defy the soft-focus erotic prettiness, the contained lyrical musical interlude, that has marked the ‘sex scene’ of mainstream Hollywood” (21). Neither gratuitous in the pornographic tradition, nor watered down in the censored Hollywood mode, this unhindered portrayal of sex, Williams suggests, allows “an unprecedented emotional and physical honesty” from which derives a cinema concerned with sexual identity, personal control, and youthful character psychology (23). The template is also, as Kelley Conway observes, an aspect of screen representation that has become fundamental to the signature style and themes of many important young French filmmakers (Conway). More broadly, to Michelle Scatton-Tessier this preoccupation with sexuality underpins a vital strand of contemporary French cinema, visible in such seemingly disparate films as *L’Humanité* and *Amélie* (2000), and its overarching concern with social alienation and the widespread fragmentation of communal life in France (197–207).

Beyond these debates about the cultural legitimacy of films such as *Romance*, *Baise-moi*, and *Intimacy*, it seems that the stakes among critics continue to rise. Particularly in the wake of the international arrival of *Trouble Every Day*, *Irreversible*, and *Twentynine Palms*, the furor surrounding French cinema and its engagement with filmed sex has become, if possible, even more pronounced. As a group, these films continue but rework the trajectory of Breillat, Chéreau, and the others mentioned above by depicting sex not just graphically but also more emphatically and in a framework of horror and criminal depravity. In *Trouble Every Day*, carnal appetites now literally consume others; in all three films, sexual consummation is depicted as wanton and animalistic, inherently destructive. But the renewed intensity of the brutal intimacy agenda—stylized but unromantic sex acts, encounters often devoid of any emotional context except berserk aggression and rage—has nonetheless still advanced the

careers of these directors, its leading practitioners, developing their credentials as auteurs and differentiating their films from the more pallid and censored American cinema.

The violence in these films has certainly been reflected in their reception in the popular and trade press. *Trouble Every Day* and *Irreversible* received their world premieres, in successive years, at the Cannes Film Festivals of 2001 and 2002, where they were greeted with at best bemusement and at worst strident disbelief. There, and at festivals around the world, screenings of both those films and *Twentynine Palms* led to mass walk-outs and lurid dismissals from journalists. The example of *Irreversible* is representative. At Cannes, newspaper reports claimed that over 10 percent of the 2400 people in the film’s opening-night audience stormed out, and that many of those who remained did so only to jeer and catcall. The crossfire continued at other film festivals, such as London, Toronto, and New York. Once in limited release, all three films continued to receive emphatically polarized reviews, with vitriol dominating. Isolated voices offered support for the embattled trio of filmmakers, but frequently in the case of *Irreversible*—certainly the least-liked of the group—such defenses were, in a series of unusual editorial decisions, often published alongside, or cancelled out by, a more damning account. Thus in journals as diverse as *Sight and Sound*, in England, and *Positif*, in France, critics such as Mark Kermode, Nick James, Philippe Rouyer, and Grégory Valens literally sparred in print, damning or acclaiming the qualities of Noé’s feature (Kermode and James 20–24; Valens 111–12; Rouyer 2002: 113–14). One faction demanded censure for an amoral treatment of sexual violence; the opposing group called for artistic freedom for an uncompromising portrait of social and sexual dysfunction. Compromise was neither asked for nor given.

A Cinema of Sensation

If we jettison the pejorative approaches to these films, however, possibilities arise. A fundamental question remains unanswered: what

is it about these works as *films* that renders the experience of them so memorable, so vivid? While there is clearly a textual relationship, a discernable conversation in progress among Denis, Dumont, Noé, and their peers, these films have been scrutinized for their subject material but essentially ignored for the specifically cinematic means through which brutal intimacy is actually conveyed. A crucial oversight, for there is evident both collectively and individually a remarkable, powerful exploitation of the medium by this trio—echoes of which reverberate through the rejuvenated art cinema of contemporary France and beyond.

To analyze these films closely is to discover an array of devices designed to engross, bewilder, shock, but not to entertain in any conventional sense. Contrary to the unstated assumptions of most contemporary film criticism, even that which deals with film festivals, not all filmmakers seek to charm, beguile, and engage the audience in regulated, upbeat terms. Cinema need neither please nor conventionally amuse. The structures endemic nowadays to the majority of both international mainstream and art cinema—sympathetic characters that develop, talking us through their problems in order to solve them; carefully plotted scenarios with inevitably positive resolutions; underlying social problems that are tidily surveyed and usually surmounted—can be undermined or else abandoned entirely. Further, the techniques of film style routinely used to gratify—attractive settings and appealing *mise-en-scène*; a lively yet reassuring soundtrack; smooth, logical editing and elegantly omniscient cinematography—can

also be rejected. But what then? As *Trouble Every Day*, *Irreversible*, and *Twentynine Palms* demonstrate, the systematic pursuit of an opposite objective, the craft of agitation, sensation, and provocation, gives rise to an artful cinema indeed. Indeed, the subversive practices that European art cinema of the 1950s and 1960s once deployed against classical film norms are, in certain sectors of twenty-first-century French filmmaking, being meticulously revived.

The tactics used for such studied disorientation, in both narrative design³ and film style, are varied, and often bravura. *Trouble Every Day* uses parallel editing to depict the sexual and psychological decay of Coré (Béatrice Dalle, whose casting recalls her iconically carnal role in *Betty Blue* [1986]) and Shane (Vincent Gallo), who suffer, we surmise, from a horrific medical disorder that induces them to cannibalistic urges during sexual arousal. Shane, ostensibly on his honeymoon, travels to Paris in search of a cure, but his enquiries fail. Instead, in an unsettling, open ending, he is left apparently embracing his condition, having carried out a series of murders. *Irreversible* is even more emphatically disorienting in its narrative structure, consisting of twelve segments that defy the film's own title by unfolding in reverse chronological order. On-screen events begin with a gory killing in a gay nightclub, carried out by Pierre (Albert Dupontel) in frenzied but misdirected retribution for the rape and apparent murder of Alex (Monica Bellucci). Later (earlier) scenes, by contrast, are beatific: Alex sleeping with her lover, Marcus (Vincent Cassel), the father of her unborn and presumably lost



Photo 1: David (David Wissak) and Katia (Katia Golubeva) in *Twentynine Palms* (2003).

child; and finally, for the film's hugely incongruous climax, a scene of her alone, content, in a sunny park surrounded by joyful families. *Twenty-nine Palms*, which in its deliberate pace and compositions outdoes Antonioni's art cinema of the 1960s—a cited influence on Dumont—recounts the picaresque journey of Katia (Katia Golubeva) and David (David Wissak), the latter of whom, it is implied, is married to someone else (he has a tattooed band on his wedding finger). In extended sequences bracketed by fades, the couple drive his increasingly battered red Hummer through California scrublands. They wander, intermittently having sex, arguing heatedly, and then falling victim, in the film's final segment, to a series of sudden attacks: David is savagely beaten and raped, and in inarticulate rage he kills both Katia and himself. The final shot, a distantly framed long take, shows his body lying face down in the desert next to the abandoned Hummer, while a frustrated cop calls for backup. Uncompromising conclusions all.

A defining feature of these films is their systematic distortion of the diegetic space, the confused worlds on-screen. While the actual acts of violence and sex are represented as intrusive and alarming, even nondescript events and settings manifest a brooding, unspecified malaise. In part this builds from measured narrative pacing, an insidious form of storytelling, with plots pared down to the point of simplicity, attenuated to relentlessness. The most shocking and unflinching of sexual interactions are situated, in effect, within narratives that oscillate between experiential extremes: drawn-out sequences of passive meditation, inscrutable character interactions, even, at times, an abiding sense of boredom, and contrasting bursts of sudden, overwhelmingly abrupt movement and action. Graphic and/or violent sexual encounters are repeatedly prefaced, connected, and even sometimes intercut with banalities: Shane in a café sipping gently from a coffee mug (in *Trouble Every Day*), a long take of a deserted main street (*Twenty-nine Palms*), Alex's lengthy attempts to find a cab (*Irreversible*). The everyday and ordinary, by consequence, is

increasingly imbued with a sense of threat. The strategy is underlined by Dumont himself, who has asserted that in films like these, “nothing happens, and this nothingness creates suspense” (qtd. in Arpajour).

Elements of style, furthermore, grate on our comprehension of these desolate events. One daring aspect of what becomes an assault on our senses is these filmmakers' oppressive use of sound. For if soundtracks can be used to situate, to accompany, and to familiarize, they can also be used to disturb. Most strikingly, *Irreversible* uses, for sixty minutes of its running time, a barely perceptible but aggravating bass rumble that was recorded for Noé's purposes at 27 hertz, the frequency used by riot police to quell mobs by inducing unease and, after prolonged exposure, physical nausea. Noé also hired Thomas Bangalter, a member of the electronic band Daft Punk, to dub-in sound designs—beats, drones, riffs, and pitch slides—many of which were performed live on DJ decks as the shoot went on. Throughout the film there is often slippage in acoustic fidelity, a wavering connection between image and sound. Alongside, under, and over scenes—as the density, mix, and volume of the soundtrack abruptly shifts—a subterranean barrage of off-screen and nondiegetic sound peaks and ebbs in aural waves, an arresting but dislocated clamor that interrogates the events we see. The total effect, as Robin Wood argues, is an ingeniously crafted soundscape of pure noise, registered by the audience as “ominous, ugly, threatening” (5), a queasy range of pulsing textures that intensify our malaise over events on the imagetrack. Especially in the opening scenes set in and around a tenement building and outside the Rectum nightclub, where the opening murder takes place, we approach sensory overload, sheer aural chaos.

In different but related ways, Denis and Dumont also use the soundtrack as the means for challenging viewers, making them acutely conscious that they are also listeners. In both *Trouble Every Day* and *Twenty-nine Palms*, dialogue is removed for extended stretches, some as long as twenty minutes. Silence often pre-

vails, which in and of itself makes audiences restless. Particularly in places where the convention is for exposition and backstory, as, for example, during the opening sections of a narrative, these films are startlingly unforthcoming. Coré herself, played by Dalle, whose acting usually depends on volubility, is given just two lines to say, or rather, whisper. She murmurs, "I don't want to wait any more . . . I want to die." The minimal spoken exchanges between Katia and David in *Twenty-nine Palms*, barely comprehensible in her halting English and his broken French—Dumont's casting cultivates the absurdity of a couple that cannot communicate—become even more muted through the actors' uncertain, mumbled delivery. French cinema, historically noted for its dense, witty, scripted dialogue, here takes a disconcertingly different turn.

All three filmmakers, in fact, use an inverted sound hierarchy to dissipate the impact of speech. As orchestrated by Denis, Dumont, Noé, and their postproduction technicians, beautifully designed sound mixes deaden or excise human voices and disproportionately privilege denser, ambient textures. The soundtracks build from auditory claustrophobia rather than structured, vocal interactions. Alone, silent, and (we infer only much later) on the hunt for victims, Coré's nocturnal prowls in *Trouble Every Day* are set to sweeping gusts of wind and nonspecific rumbles, as are the repeated establishing shots of industrial and city skylines. Throughout *Twenty-nine Palms*, Dumont heightens the clamor of distant towns, passing police sirens, clattering traffic moving at speed, scraps of noise from passersby, and ubiquitous blasts of wind. For most of *Irreversible*—in and outside two nightclubs, on Paris streets—fragments of voices collide and compete with a cacophony of sound fragments both diegetic and nondiegetic: shouts, footsteps, cries, urban and abstract noise. The audience is left struggling to relate what is heard to what is seen, reconciling the two only intermittently into a meaningful, coherent whole.

Visual style also intervenes to amplify the disorienting experience offered, or rather

insisted upon, by these films. As with the soundtrack, any comfortable grasp of events is blocked; raw or symbolic sensation is routinely preferred to narrative synthesis. For *Trouble Every Day*, Denis and her long-term director of photography, Agnès Godard, chose to shoot pivotal sequences either at dusk, at night, with virtually no illumination, or, conversely, in garish, blood-red and orange pools of light. Characters come and go, move and interact in gloom or complete obscurity. The motif is highlighted in the film's extended opening scene of a couple kissing in darkness, images that are nearly illegible even when freeze-framed on DVD. In their cinematography, moreover, both Denis and Dumont (who began his directorial career as an industrial documentarian) often favor framings that show transitory spaces, details, props, or abstract symmetrical patterns rather than the actors themselves. *Twenty-nine Palms* endlessly, obsessively cuts away to extreme long shots of desert landscapes and the modern minutiae that litters them: wind turbines, distant roads, crumbling buildings, railway tracks. Both films and both filmmakers often eschew figures and figure movement altogether, focusing repeatedly instead on physical aspects of the setting, directing us to contemplate opaque or (increasingly) vaguely menacing objects of contemporary urban scenery, such as blank walls, hotel fixtures, electricity pylons, or piles of garbage and city detritus.

While aesthetic design can make us strain to catch meaningful glimpses, it can also make us avert our eyes. Originally trained as a cinematographer at the Institut Lumière in Paris, and a self-described "image fetishist" (Willis and Villand 7), Noé shot much of *Irreversible* himself. His crucial technical decision was to use predominantly a tiny, lightweight Minima camera to capture 360-degree regions of space around his characters, in vertiginous swoops, whirls, and gyroscopic spins. The effect recalls Michael Snow's *Back and Forth* (1969), a pioneering experiment in mapping zones of filmed space. It also upsets, sometimes violently, viewers used to analytical editing and stable compositions. Alert always to newer technologies, Noé used

a lengthy postproduction period and digital editing facilities to merge seamlessly disparate visual chunks, raw footage, into extended kaleidoscopic arcs of jarring motion. By consequence, the visual design of scenes already disturbing, such as when the unconscious Marcus, beaten and apparently close to death, is driven off in an ambulance, is conveyed via a radical cinematography that, like the soundtrack, asserts its stylistic presence independent of the events being shown. Vital sequences—some shot upside down, most unbalanced or arbitrary in their framing, many canted drastically—segue into episodes in which the camera is propelled through space in extravagant loops and twirls. Melding digital and celluloid technologies, Noé's aesthetic design invokes avant-garde pioneer Brakhage's efforts to create a cinema of raw and unmediated perceptual intuitions. At times the impression is of free-form experiential data, wild and wandering visual patterns of light and darkness. In every sense of the phrase, *Irreversible* is hard to watch.

For all three filmmakers, however, the logic of such visual and aural schemes is highlighted during sexual encounters designed specifically to confront. Almost unbearable elements of proximity, scrutiny, and, above all, duration are fundamental to these films' more graphic moments of sex-as-violation. During the underpass rape scene in *Irreversible*, for example, Noé's kinetic camera becomes suddenly and cruelly static. Instead of roaming flamboyantly and arbitrarily, it observes the struggling bodies of Alex and her attacker without moving, or pausing, or intervening, for an excruciating, nearly nine-minute single shot—which may prove to be the most controversial long take in film history. And this motif of the extended take, typically framed in oppressively tight shot scales and set-ups without camera motion, is also the device of choice for Denis's sexual cannibalism scenes—such as when the imprisoned Coré wordlessly seduces and then slowly devours her would-be rescuer—as well as for Dumont's climactic depiction of sadistic male rape in a deserted desert gully.

Flesh, in all three films, is exposed to us within arresting, corporeal aesthetics. Compo-

sitions, typically extreme close-ups, dwell and linger on abstracted static shots or pans over goose bumps, writhing body parts, clumps of hair and naked skin. On one hand, we see bodies displayed in emphatically nonsexual ways, repeatedly in the context of cleaning and hygiene: under flat fluorescent lighting in bathrooms, vigorously scrubbed in bathtubs, bathed in sprays from showers, reflected in washroom mirrors. But conversely—once again these films exploit stylistic and narrative contrasts via unpredictable reversals—these same bodies are then abruptly and graphically rendered visceral, or unconventionally sexualized. Denis jars us visually throughout *Trouble Every Day*, cutting early on, for example, from a sterile aircraft-cabin interior to an abstract series of disjointed, wobbling handheld shots that seem to convey Shane's fantasy of a dying woman's corpse (his wife's?), caked in gore, with shallow focus blurring her smeared blood into a crimson haze. In the same way, from Katia and David's extended stroll down a street in *Twentynine Palms*, Dumont without preamble cuts suddenly to a close-up of their violent, frantic sex in a motel room. As such protracted sequences unfold, moreover, the mix of the soundtracks, in contrast with elsewhere, suddenly becomes sparse, stark, and emphatically attuned to intimate bodily functions. The physical brutality is jarringly underscored by exclamations from the actors' vocal cords, which we hear pushed to grotesque breaking point: in ragged gasps, harsh sobs, and broken shrieks of pain. Human copulation, aggrandized and made primal by the style of all three films, reaches a brutish and guttural crescendo, more a shattering release or explosion of energy than a sexual climax. The act of sex itself, in physical and cinematic form, is devoid of pleasure for both diegetic protagonists and their audience—an especially acute irony.

This new French brutal intimacy cinema is undoubtedly a vein of filmmaking that is difficult to appreciate objectively because it is so deliberately hard to watch, so deliberately hard to like. Far outside the mainstream, beyond the pale even of most art cinema made today,

the work of Denis, Dumont, and Noé acquires such force and emphasis that it can leave us stunned, affronted, and ultimately wary. The impact of such films, typically, is divisive. As Jean Bréhat, producer of *Twentynine Palms*, has observed: “When someone is drawn to the film, it’s in an excessive way—either people hate it and decry it, or they become fanatics. There’s something really strong about it, it’s never in between” (qtd. in Arpajour). We must, however, move beyond such polarizing evaluation to understand the efforts—and ambitions—of this confrontational filmmaking to engage us, both in style and subject material. A hybrid cinema, merging high-art intellectualism with low-art body horror, these films exploit the cinematic medium in dazzling, coherent, and often unprecedented ways. Exploring sexuality and physicality at fascinating extremes, this controversial strand of contemporary French cinema has a rigorous, committed intensity akin to the avant-garde at its most dynamic and compelling—troubling every day, indeed.

NOTES

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1. Denis, Dumont, and Noé, like most contemporary French art-house filmmakers, are very well versed in cinema history, and in interview routinely cite more esoteric or experimental directors whose work combines abstraction with narrative. See, for example, Dumont’s impromptu remarks about film art in Tance- lin, Ors, and Jouve 46.

2. The economic filmmaking climate in France remains relatively fraught in the wake of the ongoing financial fallout from the Vivendi/Canal + debacle. Though made in a country where not every film makes it onto DVD, brutal intimacy films have, it is worth noting, been consistently programmed at international film festivals, and many have gone on to receive distribution domestically and abroad to solid box office.

3. A key related point is that *Irreversible* was shot not from a completed script but from a treatment, which divided the shoot into its constituent sequences and summarized the gist of their content and dialogue. The scenes were expanded through improvisation and on-set rehearsal, but the structure remained the same. *Twentynine Palms*, similarly, was

written by Dumont (who never adheres to the conventional screenwriting format) as a forty-page outline, and expanded on location as the shoot went on. Only *Trouble Every Day* began life as a completed script, by Denis and Jean-Pol Borgeau.

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