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The French review.
Volume: 83 Issue: 5
Month/Year: April 2010
Pages: 96-103

Article Author:
Article Title: Tim Palmer; "Don't Look Back; An Interview with Marina de Van

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Don't Look Back: 
An Interview with Marina de Van

by Tim Palmer

In her career as writer, director, and actress, Marina de Van has become a prominent part of contemporary French cinema. A graduate of La Fémis, France’s most prestigious national film school, de Van’s early work included short films that brought her to the attention of François Ozon, who became her close artistic collaborator. She initially starred in Ozon’s mini-feature Regarde la mer (1997), and Sitcom (1998), then co-wrote with him the acclaimed films Sous le sable (2000) and 8 femmes (2002), the latter of which won her a César nomination. In 2002 de Van wrote, directed, and starred in her own feature, Dans ma peau, which received limited distribution but has since attracted much critical attention, and cult popularity, in Europe and North America. Dans ma peau concerns the psychological and corporeal plight of Esther (de Van), a young market researcher who gashes her leg open in an accident at a party. Perhaps in response to the banality of her personal and professional lives—although the film offers few obvious narrative motivations—Esther becomes increasingly withdrawn and obsessed with her injuries, which she begins to intensify through self-mutilation. A graphic but oftentimes lyrical text, Dans ma peau has been linked to a recent French cinéma du corps of stylistically provocative and narratively attenuated filmmaking that foregrounds sensorial encounters with the body, a tendency that includes Regarde la mer, Claire Denis’s Trouble Every Day (2001), Patrick-Mario Bernard and Xavier Brilat’s Dancing (2003), Bruno Dumont’s Twentynine Palms (2004), Gaspar Noé’s Irréversible (2004), and Jean Paul Civeyrac’s A travers le forêt (2005), among others. Following her notorious debut, de Van went on to co-write and star in Pascal Bonitzer’s jet black farce je pense à vous (2006), in which her character, Anne, heavily narcotized, unravels sexually, physically, and emotionally after a disastrous reunion with her ex-lover and his new partner. More recently, La Promenade (2007) was de Van’s César-nominated return to short filmmaking, about an increasingly senile father’s request, made to his estranged son on his wedding day, that he desires one last sexual encounter: “I want a woman!” De Van’s latest project is her second feature, the high profile Don’t Look Back, starring iconic European stars Monica Bellucci and Sophie Marceau.

I interviewed Marina de Van in July 2008, in Paris, to talk about her formative experiences in film, her responses to analyses of her work, and her rationales as actress, writer, and director. The conversation was conducted in French and English but is transcribed here in the latter, in keeping with de Van’s wishes, to become her first full-length English-language interview.

Q: You once said, a few years ago, that before you went to La Fémis you knew nothing about cinema. Is that true? And, if so, what led you to La Fémis and why did you want to study film?

R: I was studying philosophy, but I didn’t want to go where that was taking me—meaning teaching, I didn’t want to teach, or do research either. I wanted to continue studying fine arts, but I was already five years past my baccalauréat, and I didn’t want to go back to being with people who were eighteen, much younger than me. So I was wondering what to do, and I’d always been aware, since childhood, of wanting to work in the plastic arts. I had tried drawing, and, to a lesser extent, sculpture also. But I wanted to work in a medium that allowed motion, and moving. I had also begun, just as a hobby, to write short stories. None of these, though, helped me envisage a future where I could earn a living. At this time I had a boyfriend I was living with, who was interested in becoming a director. Both of us often went to the cinema, while we never seemed to go to see arts exhibitions. So I said to myself, If I keep painting or making sculptures, who will ever see them? Only specialists. I also felt that people in museums so often see things with a guide, as if they couldn’t judge the works by themselves, as if they couldn’t be touched directly. But on the contrary with cinema the audience can be touched, affected in a very strong way. People participate, especially because filming is so anonymous. So I felt that filmmaking was a way of touching people emotionally in a stronger way. Even if there is less freedom in cinema, that was always my feeling.

Q: And from that you began considering film school and La Fémis?

R: My boyfriend was about to enter the concours for La Fémis, and while I knew nothing about that, I wanted very much to seduce him [laughs]. So I did the same thing, thinking that my background in visual arts, and my love of storytelling, would help me reach a good compromise, and also help me integrate my work into society. So I applied for both the beaux arts and La Fémis concours and said to myself, I’ll do which one works out, and it was La Fémis.
interview with Marina de Van

write other films with him: Sous le sable and 8 Femmes. We’re still close, but we don’t work together any more.

Q: Your films together, and even some of your own projects later, are quite satirical, often about the French family, often using black comedy. Why do you think you worked so well together artistically?

R: Well, we don’t have so much in common thematically, but the way we create characters, and our sense of humor, are rather similar. François knows very well what he wants, and I was very flexible with that. It wasn’t so much that we worked together as I was able to offer him my personality, my imagination, under his direction. We didn’t mix our sensibilities; it was always his own. I may not love the idea of the family, I may have my doubts about the French family, these may be satires, but it wasn’t especially my intention. People often try to assimilate filmmaking collaborators, to make links, but I don’t like to think of myself this way.

Q: Dans ma peau was your debut feature, and it’s something I screen regularly in my contemporary French cinema class.

R: I know, and I’m very honored. It’s a pleasure to know that it’s something that gets taught each year.

Q: As you said about the visceral reaction to films versus painting or sculptures in museums, my students respond to it with a lot of energy, they always talk about it after the class is over. It would seem, though, that self-mutilation, and Esther’s bodily and psychological disjunctions, are very challenging subject materials to take on for a first feature.

R: Right, there was the obvious visual problem in showing, or not showing, or deciding how much to show of her actions. But I can’t get excited about something which doesn’t present some kind of great difficulty. I’m not excited unless I’m really afraid to fail. I need this stimulation, otherwise I get lazy, I can’t maintain my own attention. I was drawn to the subject because of the feeling that the body could become a stranger, that there might be a distance between consciousness and the life of the body. And there was the idea that the main character, this girl, could try to investigate these sensations. So the challenging aspect was one of my main motivations, the key. But even in my short films there is always this problem: How to explore something that I don’t know how to represent cinematically, how to convey these feelings, with always the constant threat of failure. I need this, otherwise I’m bored. And I’m drawn to do this with images, using cinema—as opposed to, for example, theater, which I don’t like. I need something spectacular, which excites my eyes, which I can’t just see in the street.

Q: In a recent article I linked Dans ma peau to a cinéma du corps of contemporary filmmaking represented by Claire Denis, Catherine Breillat, Bruno
Dumont, Jean Paul Civeyrac, and others. The essay suggested that your film depicts a state of “brutal intimacy... dwelling on the body in and of itself, probing its nature as material substance, a sometimes compromised organic vessel or container... the source of peculiarly remote sensibility, or else complete dissociation and passive disconnect” (Palmer, “Under Your Skin” 175). Do you agree?

R: Yes, I agree; this question was the subject. As I said before, I really wanted the audience to be affected strongly, but with Esther I didn’t want them to feel violence, to be frightened or uncomfortable. What was most important for me was the emotion of her curiosity, of the anguish you can feel at your body’s disconnection from you. It’s a very human emotion. In the first scenes of Esther’s wounds, and her first impulses to explore them, this was the most important thing for me to get across. Even if it was very difficult, I tried to make her instincts seem innocent, tender not violent, yet because my subject was in the material of the body I couldn’t hide the blood, I couldn’t hide the gestures. But even in scenes of incision or cutting, I systematically avoided filming the knife plunging down, evoking violence that way. On the contrary, in scenes like the one where Esther licks at her cuts, I aimed for a kind of sensuality. I wanted these to be loving gestures, because for me while there was something very desperate in Esther’s condition, there was also something very childish and childlike, especially in how she uses her mouth. At many of the screenings I attended, I did feel the audience was moved, but not in a negative or aggressive way. They seemed to like the character, they had sympathy for her not as a sick person, but because they identified with her, her curiosity, her sweetness. This was also why I played the role myself, because I wanted to make Esther’s actions not seem violent or just about self-hatred, and that her nature was neither hysterical nor destructive.

Q: Would you consider yourself to be an experimental filmmaker?
R: No, it’s not really how I think of my work. In Dans ma peau there are several sequences in which I try to do something more stylistically ambitious or surprising, like the split-screen sequence. But globally the film is rather classical, and a lack of money and time made me focus more on the actors. From time to time there is a more visual or abstract idea, so in that sense I do always need to experiment with something. Even in my short films, I always need to have at least one design element that is out of the ordinary. But the way I want to practice cinema is quite traditional, it’s designed to convey emotion and tell stories.

Q: Your short film La Promenade (2007) was nominated for a 2007 César award. Why did you go back to the shorter form after Dans ma peau, and what were your aims for this project?

Q: Patrick Sobelman has a reputation for working with younger directors, often on riskier projects. He produced Lucile Hadzihalilovic’s Innocence (2004), for example, and the recent films of Lucas Belvaux. Is that where your new collaboration came from?

R: He was someone I liked very much. He’s very honest, and I like his tastes, especially as he doesn’t take the easy route professionally. I didn’t know him at all, but my agent did, and we sent him my first draft of Don’t Look Back. He liked it very much, so he paid me to finish it, which I did at first alone, then with Jacques Achat [a professional screenwriter who also teaches at La Fémis], who is my idol! But my whole experience of La Promenade was very refreshing and unpretentious. There was some continuity with Dans ma peau, its focus on the body, as I can’t change all my obsessions, but for me it wasn’t so serious, so challenging. As a director I like to show physical things—I get bored with constant dialogue: blah, blah, blah—and so the film opens with dancing, and kissing, which continues through the wedding scene. But the important relationship was between the father [Natan Cogan] and David, his son [Gilbert Melki], the compassion the son feels for his father’s physical needs. But we don’t ever get a sense of the love between father and son in words.

Q: You co-wrote Je pense à vous (2006) with its director, Pascal Bonitzer, and also played the lead role of Anne. The film would seem to connect to your other work, especially in Anne’s psychological breakdown, her graphic physical and sexual compulsions which eventually consume her. The film is both funny and sad, often simultaneously, but Anne is a quite tragic character.

R: Right, and yet the character of Anne was the only one I didn’t write. I knew Pascal wanted to give me this part, so I didn’t write a single line for her; I didn’t want to privilege myself as an actor. It was a complicated position, as Pascal obviously wrote the role to use aspects of me, as a response to my work, but this character was already in his mind, he wrote all her dialogue. So my feelings were for the other characters as a
writer, and for Anne as an actor. I do think I have the capacity, the facility as a performer to project strangeness, or physical malaise, to frighten people rather than make them feel secure. I have some violence in me, and Pascal knew how to tap into that, to distil it. It was like with François in Regarde la mer—he brought out something that exists in me, a kind of violent, heightened feeling. I would eventually like to play sweeter, more comedic roles as an actress, but people don’t think of me for these. I do refuse roles that bore me, as I don’t want to play the crazy woman, anything completely ridiculous or hysterical—the shouting, screaming, nude, vomiting girl, you know? But when you’re an actress you’re dependent on the desires of others, how others see you. And you can’t change that. But this wasn’t the case for je pense à tous because I found Anne to be such a beautiful character, someone often seen in solitude yet also a lover, even as she becomes desperate. She felt like a real woman to me, very interesting and complex.

Q: In the last shot of Anne she descends into the Métro, swallowed up by darkness, and she seems resigned to, or accepting of, her fate. In fact that long shot feels like the ending of the film, even if there are two more sequences to come.
R: Yes, that final walk. And you do feel so attached to her.

Q: One of the most exciting aspects of French cinema today is the increasing number of women who are active in the field. Recently, the number of films with female directors has risen as high as one third of all productions made in France. Is this something that you feel relates to your career? Is it a context that motivates you?
R: No, I always think of myself as an individual, as different from another woman as another man. Maybe in real life I have more links with women, but as an artist I don’t feel a connection, especially. I don’t identify with the term “women’s cinema” or “feminine cinema.” It can be a way of treating certain artists as a minority, or of marginalizing them.

Q: To bring us to the present moment, you’re currently in post-production on Don’t Look Back. This is a much larger production for you, with stars and a higher budget.
R: Yes, the pitch for this film is that Sophie Marceau becomes Monica Bellucci, her identity shifts, it’s a film about metamorphosis. It ended up taking more than two years to get production started, because it was expensive—the budget was about ten million Euros—even though we ended up doing it with a much smaller budget than it could have used, really. It has a lot of special effects and a very long post-production period, which will last more than a year.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, WILMINGTON

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