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TWENTYNINE PALMS

Audiences Should Desert TWENTYNINE PALMS: A Film Review
by **Anna Phelan-Cox**



Unnervingly, the latest trend in au-courant French cinema seems to demand that filmmakers on the cutting-edge primarily concern themselves with finding ways to out-shock each other. One need only look to examples like Catherine Breillat's *FAT GIRL*, Coralie Despentes' *BAISE MOI*, or Gaspar Noé's *IRREVERSIBLE* for proof; incontrovertibly, these films are as unsettling and grotesque as no-holds-barred slasher films, if not even more uncomfortable for the viewer.

But we're talking about "art" here—not the sort of film that demands a happy ending.

Don't get me wrong—I'm as cynical and self-indulgently triste as the next person. Even though these films are not intended to be "enjoyable," I can nonetheless appreciate them for their audacity in attempting to depict the devastating consequences of overwhelming tedium and unhappiness. If nothing else, these films offer compelling, rare, brave, and, most importantly, nuanced depictions of raw disappointment, so overwhelming, they almost justify the repugnant, unpleasant and aggressive behaviour exhibited on-screen, by characters who react even more violently.

But this cannot be said of Bruno Dumont's film, *TWENTYNINE PALMS* (named after the California desert in which it takes place). Instead, it represents a reprehensible and irredeemable extreme of this controversial French shock-cinema.



Bruno Dumont on the set of *Twentynine Palms*.

In keeping with the requirements of the genre, Dumont's film is superb in alienating the audience by boring it to death with the dull dialogue between a truly loathsome couple. And because it's a dialogue-heavy film full of boring dialogue, there aren't any interesting narrative developments (you know, like plot twists...) to engage the viewer.

Of course, Dumont stubbornly uses the first five-sixths of the film to establish an exaggeratedly tedious precedent to contrast with the shocking sensationalism of his film's queasy final 15 minutes. Naughty-naughty me for ruining the film for those who haven't seen it, but I'll reveal that the movie finally culminates in an excruciating sequence of violence and abuse exerted on the male protagonist. But wait—as if that visual experience weren't traumatic enough, in a last-minute sensationalist twist, it turns out that the subsequent shame of his humiliation forces the victimized male protagonist to subject his female counterpart to an even more shocking act of irrational violence that literally had audience members screeching and even sent one woman flying out of her seat toward the exit!

It's not the visual realization of the film's disturbing events that upsets me so much as the unstated overall message of the film. In his primitive and inconsequential sequences depicting the relationship between the appropriately ambiguously named protagonists, "Katia" and "David," (also the actors' actual names), Dumont explores the notion that humans are no different than any other animal in the fundamental urges that motivate our behaviour. I'm all for evolutionary theory, but I'll never come to terms with the notion that humans are no more evolved than the primates that gave rise to us.

Try as we might, we're still incapable of explaining our shameful, no-no behaviour, whether it's determined biologically or psychologically. In all likelihood, we'd rather remain blissfully ignorant of the (various) cause(s) of our aggressive and destructive actions. But not Dumont; in his imagined *TWENTYNINE PALMS* universe, hate—and hateful acts—stem from the same impulse(s) that inspire(s) love and affection. We're all frightened of coming off as naïve or idealistic, but call me old-fashioned—I still can't accept that the new romance is one where love requires hatred, malice and/or violence towards each other.

This is a dangerous film. It teaches a dangerous lesson—that we are nothing more than animals in the end, no more evolved than wild things. I can't recommend this film, because it taught me nothing. There was not a single interesting insight into the human condition. That is, *TWENTYNINE PALMS*, and films of its ilk, are essentially about what can happen when people have completely lost their faith in the optimism of life. Had Dumont offered up a more complex, nuanced or sophisticated depiction of his characters' reaction to their broken faith, I would at least credit the film with having something redeemable about it. As it is, however, the reality of *TWENTYNINE PALMS* is much less interesting, making the film a complete waste of time—and an unpleasant one, at that. Put another way, I hated this film. I mean, I truly hated it (on a profound, not superficial, level). I assure you this is no exaggeration, because "hate" is not a word I use lightly (and it's rare that I can admit to hating a film). This hate is well-considered. Well, actually, it's considerable, too.

To read Dan Stefik's favorable review see, *Synoptique 2*, "Zabriskie Pointless or Bruno Dumont's Latest Masterpiece?": <http://www.synoptique.ca/archives/edition2/29palms.htm>

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ISSN 1715-7641

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