

Nothing Is True. Everything Is Permissible.

By John Bradburn



Sombre,

Few films have a physical affect. Few films genuinely touch the body as much as the mind. Few films really struggle with the physicality of existence or the purity of senses as they reach the mind. Maybe it is because cinema is just so much light and sound, so necessarily intangible that it can easily lean towards the meta physical. The films of Philippe Grandrieux, comprising of 1998's *Sombre* and 2002's *La Vie Nouvelle*, do just that. They are films primarily for the body, they are films of sensation. What we should remember here is that the brain too is part of the body – a fleshy pulpy organ inside these deep offal bags (to borrow a term from Francis Bacon). Grandrieux's films work as affect. They work past the conscious levels of communication towards something deeper. Bill Viola discusses this in terms of 'knowing' descended from a Zen tradition. A form of understanding deep and primordial and continually outside of language or discourse. The primacy of these two remarkable features work on the most haunting and basic of levels – that of early experience, the experience of a new born trying to understand the world where all is sensation yet to be separated, codified and understood. It is with these tactics that Grandrieux can be seen to be doing is to be reassessing the power of the image as image. A device that is not designed as an illustration to language but as an article within itself. A forceful sensorial communication outside of fashions, compositions or any of the representational mess that grows like mould on the meaning of everything.

Frequent parallels are drawn between Grandrieux's work and that of David Lynch but what Grandrieux offers is an altogether more real, visceral horror. Not the horror of the surreal but of the real itself - a horror of subconscious drives and desires that over run so much so that the logical constraints of the world are destroyed. While they do share certain surface similarities - an obsession with sex as a primal force, the use of heightened sound design throughout – the comparison does not delve deeper into the concerns of Grandrieux's work. While Lynch may be over concerned with certain Freudian dream symbolism his films his films rarely seem to belong to an observably 'real' world – they are frequently the stuff of filmic dreams. They are stylised art performance pieces that play as much with genre conventions as they do with the notions of the human subconscious. *Blue Velvet* and *Mulholland Drive* are especially explicit in their demarcating of reality and surreality whereas Grandrieux's experiences are blurred altered states at the boarder lines of consciousness.

One could argue that Grandrieux's work most closely relates to the more observational realist films of the Dardenne brothers (who also worked heavily in documentary before their fiction features). Both

are obsessed with observance and physicality both in performance and in camera. Rosetta carrying a laden gas canister or the Olivier in *Le Fils* catching the young Francis are both moments of raw experience similar to Grandrieux's heavily physical bodies. Bodies are grappled with, held, examined, damaged, destroyed, dressed up, shaved, contorted, controlled, the constant discourse between the notion of the physical and the psychic. Grandrieux presents these contorted bodies within contorted physical frames. The camera is almost continually hand held. Grandrieux's films observe the bodies, experience with the bodies. The camera dances with them, runs with them, breathes with the beings in front of it almost. It is an almost divine device for communicating basic human experience outside of language. Outside of the problem of ideas or ideology of language.



La Vie Nouvelle, 2002

There is not only a body being observed but a body observing, actively engaged in viewing. This is not the cold voyeurism of the peeping tom but the implication of the bystander who observed closely and does nothing. Where Lynch seems obsessed with a codified leaking of the subconscious – most notably in *Lost Highway*'s transformation scene – Grandrieux seems to be less interested in the affects of reverting to subconscious desires as the characters reverting to basic human desires. The subconscious has some irrational sense to it in the notion that its outpouring in dreams can lead to rational and helpful diagnosis of conscious problems. Grandrieux works at a far more primal level. These are urges for sex, violence, food warmth and movement. They subsume the character and pull them out of meaningful society. Lynch works on the edge of madness while Grandrieux observes whilst being immersed deep within.

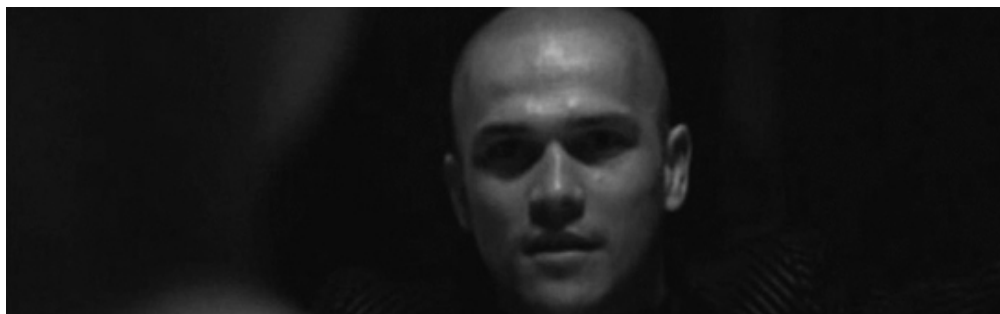
Grandrieux's first film, the serial killer thriller *Sombre* deals with the day to day experience of a serial killer (Marc Barbe) and his eventual slow romance of a young woman. I use the word experience here because what the film does specifically is let us experience the world through the main characters subjectivity. The whole film is shot with a jittery nervous hand held energy that is also under exposed and frequently out of focus. This is a perfect device for the construction of the killers' world – a blurry, dark hazy mess of sensations and stimulus that as an audience we have little understanding of outside of the killers actions. These actions - the murder of several women – soon become another event within the narrative that seems to coalesce into the sulphurous *mise-en-scène* until the audience seem to follow the same twisted logic as he protagonist.

Grandrieux talks about the imminence of his work and wanting to return to a state of early years where all sensations are deep and primal. Where the world is understood fully through the senses, rather than as a world of decoded experience. Grandrieux's work seems to work at a semiotic antithesis where there are no signs or symbols to decode just febrile physical experiences to endure and experience. His images seem to come from within the audience but from their darkest psychic recesses. Sex, violence, wild spaces and alienating urban desolation. The images of descent into inner madness.



Sombre, 1998

Grandrieux's second feature was the beautifully fragmented *La Vie Nouvelle*. Describing the minimalist story structure of a young GI in Sofia falling for a local prostitute it concentrates instead on the involved sensations. Whereas *Sombre* placed the audience inside a character's altered consciousness and let us watch as the clouds drifted from his vision *La Vie Nouvelle* seemingly does the opposite. It opens in a fragmented but more narratively rational sense before slowly succumbing to a dangerous lust that drastically alters the GI's world view. What we as an audience are presented with are a storm of recollections, invocations, possible fantasies and imaginings around a theme. A kind of free exploration of variations upon the inner workings of a character on the brink of psychic chaos. The film can be considered not as the drawing of a straight line through the narrative but of diversions, recollections and reports from a mental war zone within the character. His use of film language is similarly antithetical to film semiosis. Here is a world of no reverse angle shots, no establishing shots and no cutaways. These images are records of time. Memories that are used to recall a half-remembered, half-feared previous existence. Images that haunt the viewer as much as they are remembered. Bodies and faces emerge from darkness in contorted forms. Landscapes hover as if in front of the mind's eye, buildings are unfocused and unclear. Grandrieux's use of focus is radical. Images shift, characters wander in and out of planes of focus and existence. They recall those long-submerged memories from childhood when the eyes could not focus past a short distance. The fear of existing, the newness of perception. Grandrieux commits a black magic ritual of buried sense memory. Similarly, the sound and music filters between score and sound. Drones, out-of-place music and mysterious off-kilter atmospheres all coalesce into a rich dark mass of sound. Again they bring to mind those very primal early stages of existence before anything is learned. What must it be like to hear for the first time? To sense music and sound as one primary input and not to be able to differentiate. In that child's unfocused world where nothing makes 'sense' and all is sense.



La Vie Nouvelle, 2002

Both the central characters in *Sombre* and *La Vie Nouvelle* are approaching some kind of rebirth. *Sombre*'s lonely serial killer's slow infatuation with a young woman and the similarly lonely GI in *La Vie Nouvelle* with his obsession with a local prostitute. They are both becoming, they are both awakening to a new world or a new life. Their senses are being moulded, deformed, changed, and rearranged. They are sensing these worlds anew.

A whole scene in *La Vie Nouvelle* becomes underscored by light on a white sparkling dress as it moves in and out of sun beams. The narrative sense is consumed by the experiential sense. Another character smokes. We know about the light, the body in the dress, the burning of the cigarette, the smoke that passes between their mouths, how their bodies are held. We hear the sound. The place becomes present to us. What Grandrieux provides us with is primal experience sketched out upon the cinema screen in a ferocious fever dream of images and sound. To approach it these works in an analytical sense maybe to come at them from the wrong direction and to capture their power in language even more fruitless. They need to be watched, experience and feared. Maybe these are not the perceptions of newborns but the perceptions of our primordial selves and their pure, instinctive relationship with the manifold of sense.

John Bradburn is a writer and filmmaker. He is based in Birmingham and lectures at Staffordshire University.

Vertigo Issue 18 | June 2008

CLOSE-UP FILM CENTRE

139 Brick Lane
London E1 6SB
United Kingdom
t: +44 (0)2 0 7739 3634
info@closeupfilmcentre.com
Opening hours: 12-10pm everyday

[About](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[T & C](#)
[Disclaimer](#)

Follow Us



Sign Up to our Newsletter

Email:

All rights reserved © CLOSE-UP 2011 - 2013