

God Exists in Cinema, and Nowhere Else

By John Bradburn



Hadewijch, 2009

Bruno Dumont is one of only two filmmakers to be awarded the Grand Prix at Cannes twice. The other is Andrei Tarkovsky. Dumont's attention in cinema is influenced by his background in Greek and Western Philosophy. In common with Tarkovsky his attentions have moved closer to spiritual, mystic and religious notions within his cinema – both at a narrative and a formalist level.

John Bradburn: What ideas did you want to explore with *Hadewijch*?

Bruno Dumont: The feeling of love. In a non human way, as I understand it in a human way obviously. I wanted to explore it outside of its human zones. To see at the same time where it is coming from and where it's going, and as luck would have it the love of God has become a poetical expression of this human love.

JB: Throughout the film characters discuss "making the invisible visible." How well do you think cinema works as a tool for that?

BD: I think theology explains rather clearly how cinema works. With that you get access to the invisible through the visible. What is astonishing is to read theologians who talk about God and their knowledge of God and for me it has very astonishing repercussions on my understanding of cinema. So there is a role that is at the same time visionary that happens in the images which is also a means of passage to reach zones of experience and knowledge, which is the mystique of cinema.

JB: Do you therefore conceive of your cinema first as images and then text or vice versa?

BD: The origins are my own feelings, of love and my life, the sensibility for the film. So with this sensibility I have I am naturally carried, naturally moved, by certain subjects like *Hadewijch* of Antwerp who I discovered. She was so in love (with God) for a man she would be perfect. So she became for me a means of expression for this love. But since I had no intention of making a biographical film I transported her soul from this mystic nun in the 12th century to a young woman today and to place her in a modern world. To place her in a modern world, to think of love in the modern-ness of everyday life, and that is what happens in my film. She is originally in a cloistered convent and then she goes into a modern world.

JB: Are these things that you discuss with your actors? Do they then become involved in the ideas?

BD: It is a bit more complicated than that. They are not accomplices. They are at the same time ignorant, and that ignorance is necessary for their work but at the same time you have contact, you

see each other, you speak to each other and I chose her (Julie Solokowski) because she had an ignorance of God. And as you know the only way to be with God is not to know of God. I did not understand that originally when I first met young nuns, when I was first casting, young believers, and I realised there was nothing there - nothing to be done. My work is to show this awakening because I am fabricating what is extraordinary in this meeting with Julie, she was really ill at ease which is fantastic and so you are with her, you are rooting for her.

JB: We are used to considering casting as looking for actors to perform roles so are you actively looking for elements of the person to utilise within the film?

BD: There needs to be both, things that go and things that stay. And the sewing involved, putting in threads that she hasn't got over threads that she has. So she can bring comparisons for example with the absence of God (for Hadewijch) with the absence for the person she loved at that time. She was in a relationship, a love relationship, that made her suffer a lot – you understand the comparison. At the same time she was reading Hadewijch of Antwerp, and she did this on her own, and very quickly she reaches a certain spirituality. And she wrote me letters when she was in New York – when she was having visions!

JB: So what was this experience like?

Julie Solokowski: The first implication for me was reading Hadewijch. Initially I did not really get them and then I read them over and over and I was transposing my experiences with my lover and Hadewijch's experience with God. And Bruno was writing to me and he was helping to elevate me up with questions. So we had the first experience in front of the camera in February, and after that I went back to New York and it was at that moment that my own spiritual elevation happened until July when we finished the shoot.



Hadewijch, 2009

JB: With this process there seems to be an active element of debate, of free thought, as opposed to a didactic script. Similarly when you present the film to an audience do you want to ask questions? Do you want to provide answers or give them a space to think?

BD: I think of it as questions and answers. What I am interested in is a sensibility to attract and touch someone's sensitivity afterwards I know it is going to go up to someone's brain but the intellectual side and the questions and answers I am not interested in. I know it brings out questions but I do find myself leaning to a more mystical form of cinema and I am insisting the mystique because it means no logic and not to be rational. This event that happens is not explained by reason, so the idea of the explosion cannot be reasoned, it is beyond reason, and if you give it a reason it diminishes the film. I cannot stop the spectator. What I really like is that people who really like the film do not speak as it is obvious and those who have reservations have intellection reservations.

JB: I really admired the space the film gave me to have my own thoughts...

BD: Yes, I make the space and allow you the thinking. That is the relationship I have as a spectator that makes me grow. Work should be the trigger that makes you start and what I expect from cinema is meditation and reflection, that I am going to do as a spectator. But I do not need the author to do the thinking for the spectator.

JB: So the opposite of this would be a very closed written text...

BD: Yes their needs to be lots of entry points for the spectator and the story is very simple it is not

complex. I showed it to my 12 year old son and he understood it. Obscurity is a mistake really – you have to be simple. Depth comes through simplicity.

JB: So when you are conceiving the film do you not quite understand on a rational level what you are creating – do you feel your way through the idea?

BD: I think the natural work that happens, the time it takes to find Julie is a journey. A journey towards simplicity. So when I got access to her I got access to her simplicity, but I needed that journey and it really is a journey. The same thing for the sets, the cut it takes time it is a journey. It clarifies itself over time. I go to the sets and I spent a long time in the little orchard and at first I had no idea where to put the camera so I went home and I came back the next day and I decided where to start, and I am not afraid of this destabilisation, it is normal in spirituality. You mustn't rush.

JB: Is this then a similar process with crew?

BD: I do tend to work with people I know. I like to work with a team. This spiritual project that I was mentioning earlier goes through the mechanical and technical side of the production. This crucial question I need to speak with the grip and with every technical person.

JB: So on every level the spiritual comes through rather than an aesthetic? The aesthetic comes from the spiritual.

BD: Exactly. But they wish to talk to me about very concrete things such as the colour or what she is wearing or the light - it is not spiritual, it is very concrete, so I have to be ready to deal with their immediate visible needs. To choose a frame, the sight and sound, the 1:1.66 and the mono sounds - these are all very concrete that I must deal with.

JB: Is the sound a very deliberate decision for you?

BD: Sound has a very important aspect to the visual as that is what is going to penetrate you.

JB: So it is something very deliberately conceived?

BD: Well the whole film is very deliberately conceived. But you are right in that there are lots of accidents that come in that were not planned. When she cries at the beginning I did not ask her to cry, but she cried. She brought that in and I have to be ready to take what will happen and what is not necessarily planned. There are always new things that are going to happen that I have to be aware of and ready for.

JB: The happy accident or the gracious moment...

BD: Yes, I have got to be able to say that that event is right. To see that this crying is right, and not to ask for 20 takes. To see what is fragile and beautiful, but I did not write that in the script.



Hadewijch, 2009

JB: What artists or filmmakers do you feel share your sensibility?

BD: Not necessarily artists but certain works of art certainly. Works of art in nature interest me greatly. What really moves me is the eye, the look the way in which you observe something. It is all in the eye the way in which you look. It is not just looking at something, it is the way you look at something, the outlook, and so we need to learn to look at something. In the mystical path it is the voice of vision, the voice of agreement, and the whole of art of cinema is to hold the spectator through the cinema - a spiritual life. God exists in cinema, the only place he exists. He is there. Nowhere else.

JB: Do you have faith in cinema that it can teach an audience a new way to look?

BD: Not at all. I think you need to have a better standard of living to get in to cinema. Political men are responsible for the way people live and cinema is not going to change the world. But then cinema is the apotheosis of the eye. It reflects, it sends back what we are. There is an accomplishment in cinema but the real cause is in life – political life. Obviously all political decisions have aesthetic repercussions. There are a lot of spectators nowadays who are completely blind – they cannot see things so it is not worth getting them to read Marcel Proust or getting them to watch a film by Bergman or Dreyer as they are incapable of doing so. They can watch Dreyer 40 times and it is not going to change.

JB: *Flanders* and *Hadewijch* are both timely and somewhat political – is this therefore an area that interests you with its implications on the aesthetic life?

BD: Well, it's topical in the sense that it is contemporary, but there is always an event with ramifications. We have to be modern and elevate the spectator to the modernity of the situation. What I like in Julie is that she is young, modern and contemporary, and she carries in her persona no baggage.



Hadewijch, 2009

JB: It is interesting that you mention that some people are not ready for certain works of art. You were a teacher of philosophy before entering into film making and that tonight you are talking in a film school. What ideas would you bring to the establishment of a film school or for film education?

BD: I have quite precise idea on film teaching and I think one learns to make cinema without making it, and one of the most important things to get up at 5.30 in the morning and to look at dawn. The body of the filmmaker has to be impregnated with nature and life before asking yourself the questions to make the film. The filmmakers role is only to give, and many filmmakers produce works without having anything to say. To have a sense of things, a constitution of what things are made of – of what they are. Julie, for example, wants to make cinema, she does not want to be an actress. So I tell her to go study philosophy and not cinema, or even better read theology. All the essence of cinema is there. You have to approach cinema from as far away as possible to get to the centre of it. I really believe in that. So thank god I did not go to film school – I studied philosophy, and that colours my understanding cinema. The problem with film schools in that close set up of watching films in that closed environment and rehashing something – the technique of cinema is basic, it is not difficult. Obviously you need to learn to become a DOP there, it is a technique - but to be an auteur is to be a visionary. A vision of life, so sit yourself at the terrace of a café and watch people.

JB: This is very similar to Chris Doyle, who says that he is glad he came to cinematography late because he has been through life and he brings this to his images.

BD: Everybody can put a camera at the sky. The question is how do you see, how do you sense the sky, and to get it you need the bottle, the commitment.

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