

Flanders (*Flandres*)
(France)

A Tadrart Films release (in France) of a 3b Prods. Production with Arte France Cinema, CRRAV Nord-Pays de Calais, Le Fresnoy. (International sales: Films Distribution, Paris.) Produced by Jean Brehat, Rachid Bouchareb. Executive producer, Muriel Merlin. Directed, written by Bruno Dumont.

Barbe - Adelaide Leroux
Demester - Samuel Boidin
Blondel - Henri Cretel
Briche - Jean-Marie Bruveart
Leclercq - David Poulain
Mordac - Patrice Venant
Lieutenant - David Legay
France - Inge Decaestecker



War is hell for Adelaide Leroux and on-off boyfriend Samuel Boidin in helmer-scribe Bruno Dumont's 'Flanders.'

By [DEBORAH YOUNG](#)

Putting the embarrassment of "Twenty nine Palms" behind him, Bruno Dumont returns to the form his admirers love in "Flanders," a somber, beautifully acted reflection on the barbarity of war and the bestiality of man, which only enormous compassion can redeem. Having staked out his moral ground in "The Life of Jesus" and "Humanity," Dumont continues to divide critics and the public with his unorthodox stringing of provocative, highly charged scenes together until they climax in a critical mass. Art film distribs will have to take a leap of faith with this, counting on critical support to persuade audiences that the film's rewards are worth the effort of penetrating its abrasive strangeness.

Here the sexual couplings, a standard Dumont come-on for some auds, are rawly immodest but not nearly as confrontational as they were in its predecessor.

Mirroring the angst-ridden cop in "Humanity" who can't bear to contemplate the world's evil, pretty teenage Barbe (Adelaide Leroux) is a hyper-sensitive farm girl in love with the brutish-looking, inarticulate young farmer Andre Demester (Samuel Boidin). His inability to acknowledge any human feelings in their relationship beyond their swift, wordless couplings in the woods leads the equally non-verbal Barbe into the arms of other men.

Though she's been told people view her as a slut -- and her cow-like readiness for emotionless sex may persuade many viewers it's true -- Barbe is the opposite of thick-skinned. In a key pub scene, on the eve of being called up for a foreign war, Andre refuses to admit to their friends that they are a couple. Barbe instantly picks up the handsome youth Blondel (Henri Cretel) to punish him. Andre's hurt eyes reveal she's hit the mark.

Underlying film's first half hour is the tension of the distant war into which the poor young men in the bleak-looking Flanders farmlands have been drafted. Barbe says farewell to her lovers Andre and Blondel together, like Catherine saluting Jules and Jim as they march off to WWI. The set-up is so classic it comes as a shock to find the boys have been drafted to fight in a modern high-tech desert war.

Suddenly switching to a Middle Eastern locale, which is never identified as any specific country, the film marches into war movie territory. Uninterested in spectacular action sequences or lacking the budget to stage them, Dumont writes in some familiar-looking scenes that connote war is hell.

A small nucleus of armed soldiers in desert fatigues, including Andre, Blondel and their friend Mordac, exchange fire with enemy Arab combatants holed up in remote buildings. One of their number is blown up by a bomb; the soldiers then kill two young boys, and brutally gang rape a woman guerilla. Later, captured by the enemy, the tables are turned.

Though effective in conveying a sense of horror, these scenes feel more like imitations of other war movies than direct experience, and Dumont is less confident directing them than the Flanders material. Wisely he intercuts between the unreal desert, which was such an unproductive locale in "Twentynine Palms," and the earthy French farmland, where the story finds an impressively rock-solid anchor.

Back home, Barbe has discovered she's pregnant by Blondel and decides to have an abortion. Out of the blue, she is taken away to a mental hospital for violent hysterical outbursts, perhaps the film's biggest narrative leap. Only when the war is over will this be tied to her prescient knowledge of the horrors that befell her lovers in the desert.

Closely linked to the concerns of "Humanity," which won the Grand Jury and acting prizes at Cannes in 1999, "Flanders" was shot in the same gray farmland region in the north of France which became a dark symbol for the killing fields of World War I. By transferring the war to the Middle East, where neither side is allocated any moral superiority, Dumont broadens the theater of atrocity. (Combat scenes were shot in Tunisia.)

At the same time, the protags' animal-like mating on the farm, shot with an unarousing matter-of-factness, reduce brutish behavior to its most basic level, that of one-on-one human relations.

The wonderfully directed performances of leads Boidin as the silent, brooding Andre and Leroux as the easy country girl are fresh and raw. Their lack of conversation, especially preceding and following their woodland amours, is laughable, but Dumont has proven over time he will always choose intensity over realism. In any case, when these simple country folk open the emotional floodgates in the end, the impact is exponentially greater.

Punctuated with intense close-ups, Yves Cape's sensitive cinematography has an elegant sparseness even in dreariest barnyard coupling, then swings wide in dazzling desert panoramas and sweeping Flanders landscapes.

Camera (color), Yves Cape; editor, Guy Lecorne; costume designers, Cedric Grenapin, Alexandra Charles; sound (Dolby Digital), Philippe Lecoer, Emmanuel Crozet; line producers, Michele Grimaud, Abdellaziz Ben Mlouka (Tunisia); casting, Claude Debonnet. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (competing), May 22, 2006. Running time: 91 MIN