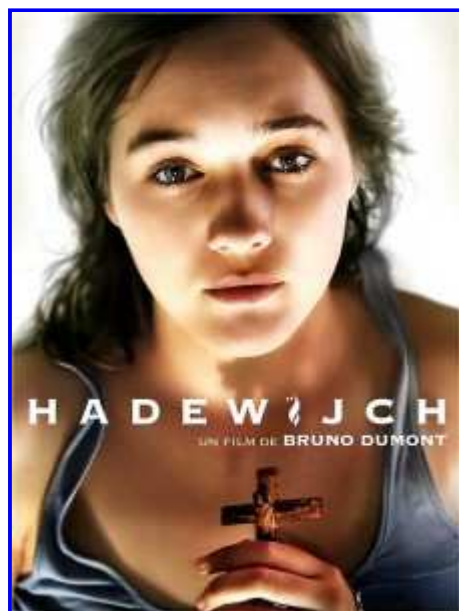


# Minority View: Hadewijch by Bruno Dumont

By [MK Raghvendra](#) | Tuesday, March 8th, 2011



If one contemplates the history of political cinema, it would appear that the greatest political films were made when a discursive framework – usually Marxist or liberal-democratic – was readily available. Rarely have political films not assumed ‘complete understanding’ of a political subject and this understanding has been provided by accepted ideological viewpoints. Instead of being tentative in their approach to their subjects, political films have been categorical – because of their confidence in their moral/ political positions. To illustrate, the anti-colonialism of Gilo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) which is post-Marxist and perhaps owes to Frantz Fanon, could not have been opposed. Costa

Gavras’ *Z* (1969), which is set in an unnamed country (perhaps Greece) under a military junta, is confident of the universality of liberal-democratic values. Political films made after the end of Communism, works like *The Lives of Others* (2006), plead for freedom from tyranny and uphold similar liberal-democratic values which, in that historical context, do not bear refuting. By and large, political films have been given to endorsing viewpoints which few people would regard as questionable. This has changed today and one is hard-pressed to find an incontrovertible discursive framework which might be applied usefully to contemporary issues. Political cinema, as it was once understood, no longer exists but arising out of its ashes is a new kind of ‘humanism’. With ‘comprehension’ rendered difficult because of the suspicion cast on all discursive frameworks, it would appear that human suffering can only be bemoaned. Lament appears the most common response in political cinema today and this is regardless of what the film is dealing with – from war in the Middle-East to child soldiers in Africa.

One particularly vexing political question in today’s world is the issue of religious faith and terror, but dealing with the subject is evidently fraught with hazards. One can neither be simply for democracy – because one knows what the Western democracies have been doing – nor for the religious groups – because one is aware of the coercive methods of the fundamentalists. One way out may be to proceed by admitting the impossibility of a comprehensive political understanding and this is perhaps the approach chosen by Bruno Dumont.

Bruno Dumont is a filmmaker whose methods can be compared to Robert Bresson’s but where Bresson’s films are hermetically sealed from politics and social issues,

Dumont engages with them boldly – although the results may not always appear seamless. His last film *Flanders* (2006), which was reviewed in this column, was about war in the Middle-East and it approached the subject from the viewpoint of white soldiers fighting it – not only as politically incomprehensible but also as an experience they would never be able to share. Despite some filmmaking awkwardness, *Flanders* suggested the deep divide between political decisions and the polity, the human costs of political decisions being so removed from the public. *Hadewijch* (2009) approaches the Middle-East from another side – religious faith and the inexorable processes that it has set in motion in the West. Dumont admits straightaway that he has no purchase on faith in Islam because he approaches the subject through Christian faith – about which he evidently knows something.

In *Hadewijch*, Celine (Julie Sokolowski) comes from a wealthy family and, when the film begins, she is in a convent from where she is sent away because her penances are becoming excessive. The name ‘Hadewijch’ that she is also known by is that of a 13<sup>th</sup> Century mystic who gave up earthly pleasures to follow Christ and she appears to be following in her footsteps. When Celine leaves the convent, she returns to Paris and, in a café, meets three young Arabs, among whom Yassine (Yassine Salime) becomes her friend. Yassine leads her to her brother Nassir (Karl Sarafidis), who is a religious teacher. Celine does not want Yassine as a boyfriend because she loves only Christ and this love overwhelms her. At the first religious talk which she attends, a young Arab keeps glancing at her and is roundly chastised by Nassir for not concentrating on the religious issues on hand. Where Yassine, although religious, has the usual human failings, Nassir has apparently steeled himself. Celine and Nassir meet several times thereafter and while the issue engaging Celine is ‘love’ the one engaging Nassir is apparently ‘action’. Celine sees no conflict between the Christian and the Islamic ways because what are in the balance are God, faith and love although she and Nassir may not understand these notions in the same way. When Celine expresses some doubts about violence, which Nassir thinks is unavoidable, he provides answers which she finds convincing or difficult to refute. When she asks him, for instance, whether the death of innocents should not matter, Nassir replies that when governments are elected democratically, no one can be truly ‘innocent’.

There is not much in terms of narration in *Hadewijch* and much of the film is given up to exploring Celine’s emotional condition – a concert in which Yassine tries to put his arms around her and she pushes him away, choir practice in a church to which she listens alone, Celine tearful after Nassir’s religious discourse when she tries to explain the kind of love she has for Christ. In fact, so intensely does Celine’s feelings emerge that Nassir’s faith even seems like dry rationalism. But, at the same time, it is not so much Celine’s spirituality which is emphasized as much as the physicality she is desperate to transcend. Her love of Christ, for instance, is even close to eroticism. Both she and Nassir, while invoking spiritual issues, are weighed down by the corporeal because the physical world is everything.

What is most conspicuous about *Hadewijch* is the candid way in which Dumont treads an ideological minefield and still emerges intact. While Celine eventually serves Nassir’s cause, Dumont neither makes an assertion that her faith is like

Nassir's, nor that her emotions have been misused in any discernible way. The strongest sense that one gets after reflecting on the film – which grows on you gradually – is of a realm so contaminated by disaffection that putting back the clock to more innocent times is impossible. Dumont also treats different parts of Paris – the wealthy French area opposite the Seine and the Arab quarters in the suburbs as territories which might be under the control of different warring factions.

Two of Bruno Dumont's films invoke religious emblems without themselves being religious. If Celine in *Hadewijch* becomes a terrorist, the male protagonist of *The Life of Jesus* (1997) is a thuggish member of a motorcycle gang. In both films, there is the sense of an icon of the spirit being used in a way that strips it of its exalted significance and brings it down to the street, as it were. Even *Flanders*, which has a title invoking the heroic battles of the past, deals with a military engagement which is without meaning, purpose, heroism or gallantry and more a killing field than a 'war', as it was once understood in history books. Perhaps it is appropriate that in an age in which the discursive frameworks which might have imparted meaning to human conflict have been rendered suspect, politics and history should be ultimately reduced to transactions of the flesh.

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