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THE CINEMA OF **ORGASM**

Bruno Dumont on **TWENTYNINE PALMS**

Bruno Dumont's experimental horror film *Twentynine Palms* takes the codes of American cinema, of *Duel* (1971), *Deliverance* (1972), and countless shitty American midnight movies, drains them of suspense, and escapes: Dumont sees art, more than nature, as the last frontier in the American West. A cruel person would jump — as did the *Variety* reviewer — at the opportunity to compare *Twentynine Palms* to Vincent Gallo's *The Brown Bunny*, using the latter as a shorthand for incompetent, arty excess — and I must admit that had the two minimalist road movies screened back-to-back on the Croisette, not even a nuclear-fortified Maginot Line could have defended Dumont from the attacks. Instead, the Italian press in Venice was allowed first crack, and the phrase "Zabriskie Pointless" also sprang to the *Variety* pen, drawing the line between the 60s European arthouse directors' experiments with American landscape and radicalism; Dumont claims never to have seen Antonioni's film, and I believe him, though he relishes playing games with his viewers. In *Twentynine Palms*, he throws his two highly annoying characters, "protagonists of the imperious culture," to quote Dumont, into the two extremes of total violence and total pleasure, into a Hummer that becomes the locus for their confrontation with the Wild West. Fulfilling the conscious and subconscious desires created by American culture, by Hollywood, *Twentynine Palms* is perfect post-Schwarzenegger cinema.

An odd blend of James Benning picturesque, Warholian docu-realism, and Dumontian primal screams, *Twentynine Palms* is a film of repetition, banality, and frustration — but also intensity. In lengthy scene one, photographer David (David Wissack, a cross between Harry Dean Stanton and Vincent Gallo) and his French-speaking Russian girlfriend Katia (Katia Golubeva, best known for sleeping with her character's brother in Leos Carax's *POLA X* [1999]) drive out of Los Angeles eastwards, and Dumont begins to set out a mood and take that mood as far as he can. The couple traverse the 800,000 acres of Joshua Tree and the two square metres of their hotel room's bed, and Dumont contrasts the infinite and poetic vastness of the desert with the myopia of the human condition, finding the vacuity and power (again, his words) "within the staggering passing of time (car time, time on the road) and within the vital, almost mystic immensity of the setting (desert and motel)." Charting the couple's dysfunctional relationship, function of a language gap (David's Franglish pretty much consists of the language of love) and a personality clash, their interaction wavers from passionate lovemaking to bare-knuckle battling. It's an alteration reflected in the way they each take turns driving the Hummer, even though she keeps plowing into Joshua ▶

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Trees, and he soon enough hits a three-legged dog. There's a palpable sense of improvisation in their interaction – which surely springs from Dumont's direction – as there is a sense that anything, anything at all, can happen in this relationship. It's completely unpredictable; it is, as David says, in a moment of clarity, without logic.

What strikes me about *Twentynine Palms* is that, despite the stylization, it's almost as if it could be based on a true story; Dumont captures something about living. Most people who go to movies, however, like that *logic*, rationality, a clear sense of purpose. (They also like stars; *Twentynine Palms* reconfigures the actor-set relationship so that the real leading performance is given by the desert.) In the following interview, Dumont compares his ideal viewer's reaction to that of a reader of a novel – though in today's world a television viewer is a more appropriate comparison. He doesn't mind if they close the book, stop reading – i.e., walk out – but what really bothers him is when they laugh. (Compare this to David's reaction when Katia bursts into laughter after she hits one of the trees, and he responds, irately, "It's not funny...")

This attitude, I think, is a bit of a mistake on Dumont's part. For one, the interactions between David and Katia, at times, are, in fact, funny. But on a more intellectual note – despite Dumont's frequent protestations that film is no place for intellectual thought – as Bergson and later Freud convincingly argued, laughter is often an awkward response to defuse uncomfortable social situations, a purely cognitive response that serves the social purpose of easing discomfort over the unacceptible. And anyone who has (or will) sat through a public screening of *Twentynine Palms* will attest to the level of discomfort that Dumont creates. At one point in a viewing in Vancouver, the film's latent aggression spilled over into the audience, and a near-violent confrontation broke out between two viewers. This disorientation functions from slightly mismatched shots, a camera that moves only when the characters do, David's pool time stalkings of Katia that are Dumont's version of lurking *Jaws* sequences, suspenseless: we see the shark, but Bruno's got a few tricks up his sleeve yet. The film creates and sustains a tightly wrought tension that demands release.

Despite all of the sex found in *Twentynine Palms* – it is exceedingly awkward to watch, and, punctuated by David's guttural screams, generally repellent – Dumont's film can be seen as the latest post-narrative entry in a recently flourishing cinema of orgasm, where very little of dramatic importance happens for the bulk of the film, and then there's a massive explosion intended to fry the mind of the viewer, to shake things up and jar him or her out of complacency (see also Manoel de Oliveira's *A Talking Picture* and the first cut of *The Brown Bunny*). Very rarely completely successful in recent years, this is, in essence, indicative of a shift in filmmaking from the 70s to the present. Today, such filmmaking often drifts into self-absorption and, thus refuses to take a broader

look at social causes for the dissatisfaction contributing to such a malaise, while, historically, more successful examples are Fassbinder's *Why Does Herr R. Run Amok* (1970) or the grandmother of them all, Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* (1976). (Indeed, more than *The Brown Bunny*, *Twentynine Palms* most resembles Akerman's film structurally; it is the *Jeanne Dielman* of road movies.)

A vision of humanity missing from *Twentynine Palms*, as exemplifying the contrast between the 60s and the post-millennial world, is even clearer when the film is directly contrasted to *Zabriskie Point* (1970), despite Dumont's protests. In the back-to-the-garden scene in *Twentynine Palms*, the two figures, naked, climb on the rocks and become two pieces of a landscape painting: in Antonioni's film, of course, we are treated to hippie transcendence, as other couples magically appear in the dirt alongside them, and the famous orgy ensues. There was still a potential for a community in America; now it's just two people, isolated, fucking. More at home in *Artforum* than the multiplex, *Twentynine Palms* is a defeatist film, but it proffers up lessons when viewed in its generic context. This is a horror film that's less about being punished for adolescent promiscuity than about the dangers of pure freedom. Whether or not Dumont's ending works, it certainly shocks: my nightmares had nightmares. If that's all that it does, then the film has more value than the Hollywood filmmaking it opposes.

CINEMA SCOPE: I've heard reports about how your film was received in Venice – namely, not very well – and I know that this reaction bothered you. But before we start discussing the film, I just wanted to tell you that your film disturbed me very much.

BRUNO DUMONT: I know.

SCOPE: Why do you want to disturb people?

DUMONT: Because people are way too set in their ways, they are asleep. They have to be woken up. What I expect – my expectation from a film, a book, a painting, of any work of art – is to be awakened. I don't want to fall asleep, I want to be awakened. You can never definitely say you are human; you have to regularly be confronted by something, to remind you that you still have a lot to do as a human being. You have to be awakened.

SCOPE: The rhythm of the film almost dulls people, and then at the end there is an awakening, because of the banality of most of the film. Would you agree?

DUMONT: It's not really somnolent, or sleepiness as such, it's more that you are zoned out as a viewer. If you've been driving for a long time, you sort of tune out. I really wanted to do a movie that was about atmosphere, I wanted to create this kind of atmosphere.

SCOPE: Is this an atmosphere that you yourself have »

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Bruno Dumont

experienced when driving? Does it come from that sensation?

DUMONT: Yes, I start with my own personal experience. I had no experience of the desert and driving in the desert before I came to California, and I was transfixed. This feel of the desert is exactly what I wanted in the film.

SCOPE: The genesis of this project is an odd one, as I understand it. You were planning on making a film in Los Angeles that dealt with all of the genres of American cinema, called *The End*, and when you were scouting locations, that was the first time that you went to the desert, is that correct?

DUMONT: Yes.

SCOPE: And that's when you changed your idea from making a movie set in the city to another film set in the desert, near Joshua Tree. Is there anything in *Twentynine Palms* that was in the script for *The End*?

DUMONT: No, actually I wanted to do a feature, which was to be very complicated and involved, which would have been *The End*, but I had the sensation when I arrived, and I really wanted to show it in the film this way. It was the way it happened. I wanted to do something that was in fact an essay. It happened very quickly, I wrote this very quickly: my idea was to make a movie without actors. It just came out, and I wanted to do it fast and quick. And so I chose the actors very quickly. They were secondary, they were not really important, they would be just there. I wanted people that wouldn't show off too much.

SCOPE: Were there any problems with the actors when they were shooting the movie? Did they try to act at all?

DUMONT: Yes. They were bad. I didn't want them to act,

and I very quickly stopped them from acting. And then after that I took my lead from them.

SCOPE: Did they see the screenplay for the film, or did you just direct them on the spot?

DUMONT: No. Of course I had a script, but I gave them instructions on a scene-by-scene basis, and they had to accept playing those scenes, the sex scenes, and everything, but I was in control of the whole thing. I basically chose two psychological profiles: she is neurotic, and he is an introvert, a nice guy, maybe, but a bit pathetic. They are opposites. I had no specific idea or intention to start out with. I didn't have any characters as such on my side.

SCOPE: When you were writing or before you started shooting?

DUMONT: Before the shoot.

SCOPE: So you wrote the screenplay and weren't thinking of types, but once you saw the actors you made this decision...

DUMONT: I don't believe in composition. I can't say to an actor this and that, I don't believe in that. I very quickly sketch when I'm doing my script, and when I'm working with the actor, the actor becomes the character, that is how it evolves. I adapt myself to the situation.

SCOPE: Would you say that concept is more like a painter than the typical view of the director?

DUMONT: She was a pain in the ass, I have to say. And I had to adapt. In the script to start with, I wanted the relationship between the two of them to be more passionate, but I had to adapt, as I was stuck with her. She is actually a strange person, and I just had to do what I had to do, and, yes, like a painter »

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I just evolved with the situation. It doesn't really bother me because I just go with the flow, and if I really, really wanted something to be done any other way, I could have hired a real actress. But it doesn't bother me at all. Since I didn't have any intentions to start with, it didn't bother me.

SCOPE: So the way that David and Katia interact, this whole idea of a completely uncommunicative and dysfunctional relationship, was that something that arose because she was difficult, and she didn't want to be more passionate with him?

DUMONT: That was in the script, the situations were in the script. She was very good for all the fights and arguments, of course! But, basically, no, in the script itself to start with there were all these confrontational situations, and she was very good for that, as it was part of her. She certainly accentuated the autistic aspect of the character, but that too was already in the script, in the casting, that is why I chose her. There are some things that actors can't do, and in her case there were some things she couldn't do, so I had to play on her level, either toning down what she was doing, or giving up on some other things. It's like modulating the characters.

SCOPE: Do you see the actors as important as the landscape? Are they pieces of the landscape for most of the film?

DUMONT: It's very much similar to what happened to painting. We went from the pictorial to the abstract, and that's what I'm interested in. I'm interested in the exact essence as opposed to the form.

SCOPE: Would you say this is a more extreme attempt to do what you were doing before, or is this a break from the system that you were working with before in your other films?

DUMONT: What I am really worried about is repeating the same type of things, so I tried this type of filmmaking now. My next film, on the other hand, will have a more written script, it will be in a sense more classical. It will be a war film about the war that has not yet happened. So as painters like Bracque and Nicolas de Stael have done, I want to go to the abstract then back to the figurative. I want to go back and forth. I want to do video installations, I want to do things with a storyline, but at the same time I want to do things that are different. But in cinema, of course, you also have to be careful, you cannot go too far either!

SCOPE: You can't go too far? What would be too far?

DUMONT: I'm talking about the industry . . . because if you draw out of the lines, you're really going to get bashed. In order not to disappear, I have to work within certain lines, and, of course, the project *The End* was very interesting, it was going to be done with good means. For this film, I did not have stars as such, but I have also to remember that if I want to be a filmmaker, I have to work with stars, with what the industry offers. Otherwise you're going to be considered a total flake, and you won't get the audience, and you won't get the money to do your films.

SCOPE: With a film like *L'humanité* (1999), you didn't have any stars . . .

DUMONT: The next project, there will be nonprofessionals as well. I need to experience different things. I love to experience different things or I'm bored to death.

SCOPE: So you want to experience working with stars.

DUMONT: Yes, I'm very interested in working with stars.

SCOPE: But would you direct them in a style they are used to working with, or would you make them work your way? And what would happen when they wanted to do something against your desires?

DUMONT: I want to work with them because it's them, and because it's me. It's the mix, that's what interests me. I want to reach the public, so never mind the stars, they're just a way to get the public into the film. You can't go against the audience if you want your film to succeed.

SCOPE: But how do you think the audience will react to *Twenty-nine Palms* then?

DUMONT: Very noisily, very violently, and why not?

SCOPE: But you just said you wanted to reach out to the audience . . .

DUMONT: I want to explore different avenues, and this time it was this type of film, but I certainly don't want to be labelled a nut. This time I wanted to have this type of experience. I've already met with stars, they come and see the movie because they want to see the desert, even though they might leave. That's how you get George Clooney to come. It doesn't bother me if they leave, or close the book, I'm not insulted. What's insulting is if someone stays, watches the movie, and is laughing. That's an insult.

SCOPE: You have called the film an experimental horror film . . . were you inspired by any horror films?

DUMONT: I must have seen some really shitty ones. Really shitty American films that I must have seen on cable. I'm not joking. There are some really good ones, some good American ones. I wanted to have a certain style, maybe a gore type of film, but I was experimenting, yes.

SCOPE: I was just curious, because the American landscape, both the cities and the desert, has inspired foreign directors, especially French directors, who came to make films in America in the late 60s. Also Antonioni, of course. Do you see yourself following in that tradition, do you see yourself as a tourist coming to see America and experiencing it as an outsider?

DUMONT: No. I haven't seen Antonioni's film. I saw *Paris, Texas* (1984), and I look at America in certain ways. It's wishing, we're just giving back, as it's something we've received, this yearning for America. But I certainly didn't want to do the story of a European couple visiting the US. I wanted to play with the American genres, the American world.

SCOPE: The way you see America yourself, though, are you imposing your view as a foreigner on the country? On the landscape? Romanticizing it?

DUMONT: I'm not a sociologist, I don't have anything to say about America because I don't know anything about it. I certainly don't want to offer any opinion on the US. It's strictly »

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a mental exercise. I only use the atmosphere, the place, as the background to film. It's like my other two films: it's not true, it's not precise and exact, it's not a sociological film at all, it's totally anachronic in that sense. It's about sensations, that's what I'm doing in this film. I'm not an intellectual. I feel much more like a painter. It's not about thinking – that bores me. It's sensation, and it's poetry.

SCOPE: In the press kit you do talk about cultural imperialism, and you say, "I felt that it was interesting to use the perversion of American cinema, linked to the imperialism rooted in people's minds." We all understand America through American culture, through the imaginary world that creates, and I think it's clear in the film that what you're reacting to is this culture, and, in particular, Hollywood.

DUMONT: Yes, of course, I could talk about that, but that would be an intellectual thing . . . No, I do react to the American model as such, but I don't think a film is the proper place to do that, as that is an intellectual debate, and that would take much more time. It's not my point in making the movie. Political problems are way too complicated for the cinema, which is a personal experience. Cinema is for your own self, and it's quite modest. There was never a movie that changed the world. But, of course, a movie can shake things up a little bit.

SCOPE: You said there is no place for politics in cinema, would you say the same thing about art in general? Or is it that cinema, in particular, is a medium that doesn't lend itself to inspiring political change?

DUMONT: Cinema can change our sensibility, yes. Cinema is very small to me, a small piece of the puzzle of the world of politics, just a little nugget. It's part of culture, and, of course, politics is about organizing the world. But we have to remember one thing, we have to rule, we have dictatorships, and that's also politics. The most important thing is culture.

SCOPE: Would you characterize your films as humanist?

DUMONT: They might be quite wild, but they are made and done for humans, so yes. I hate civilized films. You can watch a good movie that's not going to make you a good person. Goodness is an awakening, an apprenticeship: people who come out of concentration camps, I guarantee to you they are good. But if you watch American movies – French movies too – that's not going to make you good. My experiences of good films is where I've been really moved as a spectator.

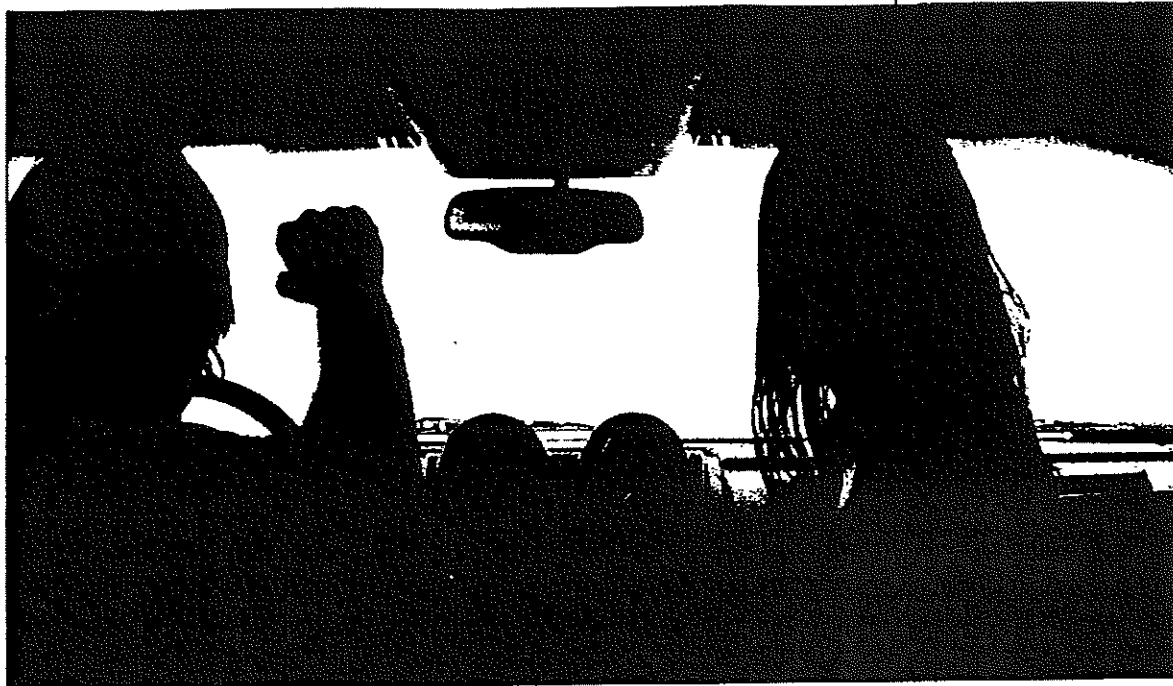
SCOPE: What films have moved you?

DUMONT: *Taxi Driver* (1976). Superb. Alain Resnais' *Provvidence* (1977). Pasolini, Bresson. Those are things that really moved me. Obviously I don't really share the consensual opinion of cinema right now, that's why people are leaving when they watch my movie. The problem is them. It seems that cinema the world over is creating a narrow sensitivity for people; it's a nice little package, they go to bed at night with no problems.

SCOPE: It's interesting to me that you make films in small towns, or the desert, but haven't made a film in a big city.

DUMONT: The city is too complicated for me for the time being. What I need is peace and quiet, especially for the sound. The desert is very nice and plain, you have one or two »

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David Wissack and Katia Golubeva

sounds, the car, it's very simple, quiet, and minimalist, and I know exactly where we're going. It's like the subway – you're used to the sound of the subway, it's something very familiar. I'm not interested in reproducing reality. I just take out everything that's unnecessary, I want a minimalist approach, something that's very basic. My *mise en scène* is very basic, I don't add, I just take out.

SCOPE: I did notice that in *Twentynine Palms* there are very few locations, you only have a hotel, a gas station, the supermarket, the desert. What did you take out that you didn't want to include?

DUMONT: I had to close the streets because there were lots of people there, it was too noisy.

SCOPE: But even before the shoot, when you were scouting for locations, were you looking for these basic elements?

DUMONT: Actually, I don't choose. For example, for the motel, if I had to figure out what it would look like, I would say white. Or when the set people would ask me what colour for the car, red, I would say, "I'll just take what you give me." It's just dealing with what you have, I don't have an imagination. There's a reason for that – I don't want any intentions behind any of this. I'm afraid of my intentions. I'm looking for objectivity. All the costumes are the actors' own clothes. If it says "Globe" on David's T-shirt, that's okay, I don't mind. I just love accidents, it just happens as it does.

SCOPE: What were some of your favourite accidents that happened while you were making the film?

DUMONT: The car accident, for one, that was not in the

script, and it cost a lot of money – it was an accident for real. And when David yells, all of that was accidental. When she cries. I didn't ask her to do that. And when she laughs, too, she laughs. I didn't ask her, she just did it.

SCOPE: The screaming during the sex scenes, and at the end, I find very curious and more than just a coincidence, as in your other films you also have primal screams. Had David seen your other films?

DUMONT: No, it's his own. I find that scream very strange at the end, but it's his own. It's harmonious, musically. It's the music of the film, not as music, per se, but musicality. He is like an instrument.

SCOPE: Where did you find the odd Japanese ballad that we hear over and over again in the film, and why do you repeat it so often in the film?

DUMONT: While I was driving, doing the locations, with an American producer, I heard it, it was on a CD in the car. It's of course really interesting as at the same time it is what America is, but it's also a completely delirious thing, the whole movie is like that. It's like the three-legged dog. That's what cinema is for me, a three-legged dog. I think it's a good way to describe it, every time I see the dog in the film, I say, "That's what cinema is, it's a three-legged dog."

SCOPE: What happened to the fourth leg?

DUMONT: I cut it off. ||

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