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## Berlin Review: Juliet Binoche Delivers Commanding Performance In Bruno Dumont's Powerful Crisis of Faith Drama 'Camille Claudel 1915'

As its name implies, Bruno Dumont's "Camille Claudel 1915" captures a moment in time for the woman in question with tremendous precision. In an incredibly contained performance that ranks among the best of her career, Juliette Binoche portrays a woman trapped by mental and physical constraints alike. As Claudel, she personifies tragedy: A sculptress born in the middle of the 19th century in France, once the mistress and disciple of Auguste Rodin and eventually confined by her family to a remote asylum in the south of France, Claudel inhabits a frozen life.



"Camille Claudel 1915."

The movie takes place two years into a stay at the asylum that lasted nearly three decades, but with its pregnant pauses and brooding exchanges, it feels much longer. Exclusively constructed out of scant letters exchanged by Claudel and her brother Paul, "Camille Claudel 1915" boils down the drama to its essence. Binoche's dialogue apparently filled no more than four pages; not one of them is wasted.

In one key scene, she confesses her sense of abandonment to a hapless doctor (Robert Leroy) and unleashes her fury when Paul (a subdued Jean-Luc Vincent) finally pays her a visit, but much of the story merely observes the slow passage of time that defines her despondent environment – and may have the power to destroy her. "I'm no longer a human being," she tells her doctor in the throes of a lengthy session in which he barely speaks, perhaps because she's beyond consolation.

The movie's concision displays an exactitude worthy of Robert Bresson; Dumont also uses amateur actors, but to a more explosive end because "Camille Claudel 1915" was shot at a real asylum and the cast includes inmates along with their caretakers in virtually all the supporting roles. The opposite of exploitation, the application of the inmates' tender faces, riddled with confusion and grief, deepen the bonafide humanity that distinguishes Dumont's approach. Rather than exploring a 19th century "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," his setting is a credible place marked by daily routines and undulating moods. Claudel is usually downbeat, but even she cracks a smile when several inmates attempt to rehearse a play. The humor arrives as naturally as the grim aura surrounding it.

*The movie's concision displays an*

Claudel only encounters a semblance of hope when she learns that Paul plans to visit her soon. It's not clear exactly why she's been confined or if Paul hopes to release her, but the very idea of contact with a relative from beyond her purgatorial surroundings creates a necessary element of anticipation. Having established the idea of Paul in Claudel's eyes, Dumont briefly shifts to a nearby villa where the brother plans his trip. Conflicted about the support he continues

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## exactitude worthy of Robert Bresson.

to provide for the sibling he seems to regard as a lost cause, Paul waxes poetic on his disdain for naive spirituality and discusses the bleaker forces that keep his beliefs intact. In both this sequence and the asylum exchanges, Dumont largely cedes control to his actors, deriving terrific power from their monologues while emphasizing their weary existentialist conceits through the stillness that surrounds them.

When Paul's visit finally happens, the confrontation brings each effective ingredient together into a satisfactory whole. Though Dumont's minimalist setting sometimes has the feel of a stage play, when the close-ups take hold during certain key moments, the actors' intensity become objects of extraordinary scrutiny, the camera so close to their faces one can practically feel their frantic breaths.

As a storyteller, Dumont tends to take his time, but with "Camille Claudel" he excels at it by capturing a succinct period that nevertheless feels like an eternity -- sometimes to a suffocating degree that threatens to turn tedious. Yet the icy quality of the narrative eventually emboldens its lasting impact. Dumont makes it clear that the nightmare will continue, explaining the fate of his star in a superimposed title card, while Binoche's furtive glances still dominate the screen.

Whether through multidimensional characters as in "Hadewijch" or the surreal abstractions of last year's "Outside Satan," Dumont's movies tend to scrutinize the tenuous boundary between the sacred and the profane, but none are quiet as focused in that rigorous quest as the incisive portrait here. With no time wasted on subplots, the pure misery of Claudel's situation defines the movie. But the fourth wall threatens to break in a telling moment when the doctor attempts to prescribe her malady. "There's no worse trade than art," he says, reflecting on Claudel's former profession. The movie's vigorous realization of its themes is the ultimate reprimand to that denouement.

*Criticwire grade: A-*

**HOW WILL IT PLAY?** Sure to garner acclaim for Binoche's performance in the wake of its Berlin International Film Festival premiere, the movie may attract decent returns in very limited release but will enjoy its greatest successes on the festival circuit.

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