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Camille Claudel 1915: A Thorny Art House Portrayal of the Sculptor's Life

By Michael Atkinson Wednesday, Oct 16 2013

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Body-carving his own Dreyerian passage among modern French art-film provocateurs, [Bruno Dumont](#) now augments his catalogue of unstable heroines with [Camille Claudel](#), famed sculptress and rebellious lover of Rodin, who was committed to an asylum by her conservative family in 1913 and remained confined until she died 30 years later.

No stranger to strung-out feminist outrage, [Juliette Binoche](#) grips the edge-of-madness title role with bony white hands, and, at first, Dumont's movie seems to be no more than the actress's austere showcase, as Claudel is surrounded by nuns and fellow patients, and chafes at her hopeless imprisonment to the detriment of her weakening sanity. But the rebel-yell flourish here is Dumont's decision to populate the madhouse with authentic French psychotics and mentally disabled adults (their real-life nurses play the nuns), so nearly every scene is dictated or influenced by their unpredictable behavior.

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Binoche bulldozes through the melee in character, but of course the texture of the film falls between horrific realism and freak-show exploitation, a tension that can either double-down on the naturalistic impact of Claudel's plight or make you speculate queasily about life on the set between takes. Or both. In all cases, it's far more radical than [Bruno Nuytten's](#) celebrated 1988 version, and one of the year's thorniest releases.

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