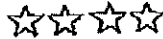


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Twentynine Palms

Cast: Katia Golubeva and David Wissak

Directed by: Bruno Dumont

Screenplay by: Bruno Dumont

Distributor: Wellspring

Runtime: 130 min

Rating: R

Year: 2003

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Twentynine Palms is precisely the reason why Bruno Dumont is the only living director that could have made *The Passion of the Christ* work not as a torture mechanism of unaddressed brutality but as a provocative examination of the relationship between violence and the divine. Dumont's latest gem will surely draw endless comparisons to other lost-in-translation desert romances, from Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriski Point* to Sue Brooks's *Japanese Story* and Gus Van Sant's *Gerry*, but this existential story of a couple who love, fight and fuck their way through California's Twentynine Palms also has God on its side. If you're looking to seriously understand the purity of what Dumont is after here, it's probably best to approach the story as an allegorical study of original sin.

Dumont

is clearly fascinated by America's wide-open spaces, and much of *Twentynine Palms* is a love poem to the way we look at the world. No matter how tedious the film can get (and it can!), it's difficult to turn your head away from it. When asked by an interviewer about his relationship to the film's desert landscape, Dumont stated in part: "Matisse said that the most important thing in a painting isn't the subject but the positioning of the different objects." Dumont is a great painter (surely his gorgeous images tell us that), but he's also a great philosopher, because he uses the space under, over and around people and objects to question the way we absorb images while simultaneously calling attention to the fine line between love and hate, the rational and the irrational, pain and joy, and so on.

David Wissak is the Adam to Katia Golubeva's Eve. He talks to her mostly in English and she speaks to him in a French that he appears to understand. There is an obvious language barrier here, but it's one that they're able to transcend because they communicate easier via the body-politic. No one else exists, and their isolation not only alludes to Adam and Eve and their original sin, but it intensifies the threat of the outside world. All David and Katia do is fight and fuck, and though their verbal exchanges seem trivial and nonsensical, the logic



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here is logic itself. When the naked couple stare into the vast desert horizon, you get a sense that their journey is the beginning of something (or is it the beginning of the end?) and that their loopy exchanges are attempts to deconstruct the laws of communication and the nature of the world itself.

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When Katia is hungry, she asks David for ice cream. She says it tastes good, but then says it doesn't. He's confused. Naturally. She thinks Marines are sexy but doesn't think David should shave his head. (This baldness symbolizes a form of emotional nakedness that is very important if you wish to understand what David does to Katia and himself during the film's final moments.) He's even more confused now, and he predictably flies into a tizzy. Logic has failed him, and if it seems as if she's trying not to make things clearer for him, that's probably because she understands that this is a journey he needs to make on his own. (Certainly this is a journey Dumont wants us to take with him.) The ice cream may not taste good, but by virtue of satiating her hunger, it qualifies as a different kind of "good." David may look sexy with a Marine's haircut, but he's still not a Marine.



Dumont has said that he's intrigued by the way people in Europe are attracted to American films, and he uses the sex and violence in *Twentynine Palms* as a pretext—not only to address the "nature" of American violence but to dissect the way audiences intellectually and emotionally respond to it. In the film, David is seen pleasuring himself while watching an episode of "Jerry Springer" where a man confesses to his wife about raping their daughter. (The word "confesses" is crucial here, because every reaction in Dumont's films serves as some kind of ritual of enlightenment.) When Katia asks David if he would ever do something like that to his own daughter, he naturally responds with disgust. David ignores or forgets that he was pleasuring himself, and Dumont daringly correlates the vulgarity, attraction and relevance of an episode of "Jerry Springer" to a seemingly irrational art film: the one the plays earlier on the same television and the one that is Dumont's *Twentynine Palms*.

Jerry Springer exploits and distorts pain for big ratings, and Dumont uses this immoral spectacle to tap into the nature of our emotional and physical relationship to graphic images. The sex in *Twentynine Palms* is very explicit, and it won't come as a surprise to anyone who's seen the director's brilliant *Life of Jesus* and *Humanité*. You can call it pornography—it's okay, Dumont almost wants you to. David and Katia obviously love each other, and it shows in their fucking. When David reaches orgasm, he unleashes a primordial wail, a physical and emotional purge of his feelings for this woman. Dumont dares us to laugh, though, because he's out to question the way filmmakers have forced audiences to watch material like this in the past and the way many of us choose to reject this confrontation. *Twentynine Palms* questions the link between sex and violence and how we react to each differently.

Sex, like violence, can be vulgar, pretty, fantastical and emotional—it can also be political. More times than not, though, it's a private exchange and *Twentynine Palms* poses many interesting questions to people who violently react to its images.

Pornography, typically, is a solo pleasure, so watching *Twentynine Palms* in a theater with a roomful of strangers obviously tests our comfort levels. Since David's orgasm is so clearly born out of his supreme love for Katia, why is it that so many people have laughed at it? Is it because they don't recognize the love in his wail or because they haven't experienced that kind of love-that-sounds-like-hurt before? If you walk out of *Twentynine Palms*, not only are you failing the film and the people around you, but denying yourself an aesthetic and emotional release.

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Because the film's final rhetorical shift is reminiscent of the political act of resistance that closes Catherine Breillat's similarly confrontational *Fat Girl*, *Twentynine Palms* has naturally attracted controversy. David and Katia are re-
 ended before, well, I won't spoil the surprise. For those who laughed at David's raw, emotional orgasm, what will they do now when confronted with this fascinating distortion of sexual release? This is a different kind of orgasm, because not only does it look like pain, but it also sounds like it. It's a perverse moment, but it's also a humanist one, because Dumont suggests that there is a fine line between love and pain, and it's a line that we must not only recognize but negotiate as well. Just as David and Katia expose themselves to nature, Dumont asks us to emotionally expose ourselves to the world around us.

Ed Gonzalez
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