



HOLLYWOOD REPORTER
BERLIN

Camille Claudel 1915: Berlin Review

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The Bottom Line

An unsettling portrait of the artist as a mad woman, anchored by a riveting lead performance.

Venue

Berlin Film Festival (Competition)

Director-Screenwriter

Bruno Dumont

Cast

Juliette Binoche, Jean-Luc Vincent, Robert Leroy

Juliette Binoche stars in Bruno Dumont's disturbing portrayal of the French sculptress' days of confinement and quest for a normal life.

BERLIN -- Those familiar with **Bruno Dumont**'s work can walk into his movies expecting horrific violence, exquisite landscapes, lengthy existential silences, and plenty of grunting sex between French townies in serious need of dental care. So it was all the more intriguing when

he took on a project called *Camille Claudel 1915*, about the tragically gifted turn-of-the-century sculptress, whose long affair with **Auguste Rodin** eventually drove her to the madhouse, where she would remain until dying from malnutrition-related causes at the height of the Second World War.

Despite the notable lack of sex and violence, this latest effort from the Gallic doom-and-gloom minimalist is very much in line with his oeuvre, offering up a condensed portrait of Claudel's internment that's at once grueling and meditative, as well as deeply disturbing in its use of actual handicapped people as supporting cast members. It's also Dumont's first film to feature a major star, and **Juliette Binoche**'s portrayal of the ill-fated artist is a study of restraint peppered with brief outbursts of emotion -- a riveting performance in an imposing, at times off-putting micro-biopic that's unlikely to augment the auteur's dedicated fan base.

If it weren't for the very Dumont-ian decision -- via his typically concentrated use of close-ups -- to focus on the other asylum patients in detail, the movie could have perhaps traveled further than the filmmaker's recent *Outside Satan* or *Hadewijch*, which have found less favor in art houses compared with early works like *Humanite* or *The Life of Jesus*.

After all, D.P.-turned-director **Bruno Nuytten**'s 1988 costumer, *Camille Claudel*, was an international sensation, sealing **Isabelle Adjani**'s reputation (she was nominated for an Oscar) and resurrecting the career of a woman whose life was unjustly cut short at the age of 50, when she was confined to the Montdevergues institution in southern France, remaining there until her death 30 years later.

Yet it's precisely Dumont's insistence on the most unsettling side of his heroine's predicament that makes it all the more harrowing. "I can't stand the sight of these creatures," Claudel yells at one point, as if echoing the knee-jerk reaction of anyone in the audience witnessing the use of severely disabled individuals on screen, especially when they're rubbing shoulders with an A-list actress whose beauty has only deepened with the years.

And while many may wonder whether Dumont has crossed the line from art to exploitation -- in his favor, the closing credits cite several mental health associations and professionals involved in the production -- the choice ultimately serves the narrative, underlining the chasm separating Claudel from the other patients, and the fact that she clearly never should have been interned at all, at least in such a facility.

Inspired by correspondence between the artist and her younger brother, Paul (theatre actor **Jean-Luc Vincent**), himself a famous poet and dramaturge, the story begins where Nuytten's version ended, picking up with Claudel after she's already been at the asylum for two years, and focusing on the short period leading up to Paul's visit -- one which carries with it the hope of family affection and, possibly, Camille's release.

The opening reels trail Mademoiselle Claudel, as she's referred to, throughout the medieval corridors and solemn grounds of the cloistered hospital, which cinematographer **Guillaume Deffontaines** (*Pirate TV*) captures in meticulously lit widescreen compositions, whose natural gray-blue color palette recalls the paintings of **Johannes Vermeer** -- an influence emphasized by the black-and-white tile floors and dark wood decors (courtesy of **Riton Dupire-Clement**), as well as the heavy robes (by **Alexandra Charles** and **Brigitte Massay-Sersour**) worn by the nursing staff.

Keeping to herself while observing the other inmates with a mix of curiosity, disgust and, at times, affection, Camille seems to be more or less in her right mind -- that is besides her fear of being poisoned by her former lover, Rodin. When his name is mentioned during an interview with the clinic's psychiatrist (**Robert Leroy**), it sets Claudel off on a mad rant which shows that, while she may not necessarily be insane, she's very, very pissed off at her ex, even if it's been 20 years since she broke off the affair (when the sculptor refused to leave his wife.)

Like many scenes in the movie, the camera remains glued to Binoche throughout her monologue -- this technique reaches its apotheosis in a late sequence where the lens pushes in so close to her face, it might as well be in 3D -- revealing Camille's constant struggle to contain feelings that are forever on the verge of destroying her. It's a strong feat of directing and acting, one which confirms Binoche's dedication to difficult and elaborate roles that tend to highlight her maturity, rather than hide it.

The second part of the narrative switches point-of-view to focus on Paul while he journeys to the asylum and waxes poetic about God, nature and his idol **Arthur Rimbaud** (several texts by Claudel *frere* were used in the script). If such scenes are less convincing as a whole, they allow Dumont to meditate on the poet's Catholic mysticism -- plus a really nifty vintage automobile -- taking us away from the hellish quotidian of Montdevergues toward more lofty reflections.

But Paul's metaphysical detour only serves to underscore Camille's physical captivity once the two come together in the film's final act. And while the closing sequences are in some ways inconclusive, even open-ended in a way that Dumont's films usually aren't, there's no second-guessing a fate that history has already sealed.

Production companies: 3B Productions

Cast: Juliette Binoche, Jean-Luc Vincent, Robert Leroy

Director: Bruno Dumont

Screenwriter: Bruno Dumont, freely inspired by correspondence between Camille and Paul Claudel

Producers: Jean Brehat, Rachid Bouchareb, Muriel Merlin

Director of photography: Guillaume Deffontaines

Production designer: Riton Dupire-Clement

Costume designers: Alexandra Charles, Brigitte Massay-Sersour

Editors: Bruno Dumont, Basile Belkhiri

Sales Agent: Wild Bunch

No rating, 95 minutes