



MOVE REVIEW

## The Agony of an Artist's Commitment

'Camille Claudel 1915' Stars Juliette Binoche



Kino Lorber

Juliette Binoche as Camille Claudel, a sculptor and former mistress of Rodin's, who spent years in a mental institution.  
 By STEPHEN HOLDEN  
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The brutally austere films of the French director **Bruno Dumont** scrutinize human behavior with a chilly, quasi-scientific detachment that borders on misanthropy. His characters are pitiable creatures whose baser instincts are in conflict with their spiritual aspirations. The sexual couplings in his movies are anti-romantic; his lovers rut like farm animals.

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When Mr. Dumont fixes his gaze on [Juliette Binoche](#) in his newest feature, "[Camille Claudel 1915](#)," the disparity between his dispassion and her overflowing humanity generates warmth, a rare quality in his films. One way to describe the movie is as a passionate dialogue between science (Mr. Dumont) and art (Ms. Binoche), in which art comes out ahead.

The story takes place over three days in 1915, two years after Camille, a brilliant sculptor and the former protégée and mistress of Auguste Rodin, was confined to a church-run mental hospital by her younger brother, the Christian mystic poet Paul Claudel. The cast includes real patients and their caretakers. The other patients' twisted postures, garbled speech and blank expressions make a painful contrast to Camille's hypervigilant anguish. What could be lonelier than to be imprisoned in a madhouse with people who can't communicate?

The film, much of whose dialogue was adapted from letters exchanged by Camille and Paul, as well as medical records, couldn't be more different from Bruno Nuytten's turbulent 1989 melodrama, "[Camille Claudel](#)." Isabelle Adjani was nominated for an Oscar for her work in that film. Mr. Dumont's movie picks up more or less where the earlier one left off.

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A romantic comedy for adults

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The film raises questions, which it never answers, about Camille's mental state. She is around 50, and although her relationship with Rodin ended two decades earlier, she still believes he instigated a plot to kill her. She may be paranoid and possibly schizophrenic, but she is fiercely intelligent and articulate. The severity of her illness isn't comparable to that of the disorders of the other patients, who clearly couldn't function in the outside world.

Ms. Binoche's portrayal of Camille is one of the most wrenching performances she has given. Without makeup, tears streaming down her face, ambling around the hillside property with nothing to do and nowhere to go, she is a woman desperately trying to maintain a grip. The loneliness and boredom of being forced to live in such an environment, I imagine, would be enough to drive anyone mad.

The movie suggests that Camille, however unstable, was a brilliant artist punished for not knowing her place. Camille claims that Rodin was jealous of her talent. In a revealing remark, her doctor pompously declares, "There is no worse trade than art." That observation sends a shiver of dread through a film that asks age-old questions about the relation between art and madness.

The story revolves around a rare visit to the hospital by the stiff, unsmiling Paul (Jean-Luc Vincent), who Camille hopes will rescue her from hell. He seems much less stable than his sister, especially when he goes on at length about his spiritual revelations, inspired by the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud, and describes his smugly self-punishing interpretation of Christian belief. He hypothesizes that Camille's illness may be "a case of genuine possession."

"Camille Claudel 1915" brings to mind the cases of Vivienne Eliot, Zelda Fitzgerald, Frances Farmer and other women from more restrictive times who flamed too brightly for comfort. Some have theorized that they were locked away as punishment by men.

The movie's saddest words are voiced by the anguished Camille amid a flood of tears: "I'm no longer a human being."

She remained hospitalized until her death, at 78, in 1943.

### Camille Claudel 1915

*Opens on Wednesday in Manhattan.*

Written and directed by Bruno Dumont; director of photography, Guillaume Deffontaines; edited by Mr. Dumont and Basile Belkhir; art direction by Riton Dupire-Clement; costumes by Alexandra Charles and Brigitte Massay-Sersour; produced by Jean Brehat, Rachid Bouchareb and Muriel Merlin; released by Kino Lorber. At Film Forum, 209 West Houston Street, west of Avenue of the Americas, South Village. In French, with English subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 37 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Juliette Binoche (Camille Claudel), Jean-Luc Vincent (Paul Claudel), Robert Leroy (Doctor), Emmanuel Kauffman (Priest), Marion Keller (Miss Blanc), Armelle Leroy-Rolland (Young Novitiate), Myriam Allain (Patient in Restraints), Regine Gayte (Sister Regine) and Nicole Faurite (Sister Nicole).

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