

HORS SATAN

a film by

Bruno Dumont

with David Dewaele and Alexandra Lematre

Premiered at the Cannes Film Festival 2011



France 2011 / 109 minutes / Certificate: 15

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FOR ALL PRESS ENQUIRIES PLEASE CONTACT:

Sue Porter/Lizzie Frith – Porter Frith Ltd

Tel: 020 7833 8444 / E-Mail: porterfrith@hotmail.com

FOR ALL OTHER ENQUIRIES PLEASE CONTACT:

Robert Beeson – New Wave Films
10 Margaret St London W1W 8RL

Tel: 020 3178 7095 / E-Mail: robert@newwavefilms.co.uk



10 Margaret Street
London W1W 8RL
Tel: 020 3178 7095

www.newwavefilms.co.uk

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Hors Satan

Director	Bruno Dumont
Screenplay	Bruno Dumont
Director of photography	Yves Cape
Sound	Philippe Lecoœur
Sound Mixing	Emmanuel Croset
Editors	Bruno Dumont, Basile Belkhiri
Costumes	Alexandra Charles
Make-up	Nathalie Rigaut
Executive Producers	Jean Bréhat Rachid Bouchareb Muriel Merlin
Production company	3B Productions
Co-production companies	CRRAV Nord-Pas de Calais Le Fresnoy
In association with	Cinimage 5
With the participation of	Canal + Cinecinema Contact Film CNC
With the contribution of	La Region Nord – Pas de Calais

France 2011 / 109 mins / 35mm Scope / Colour

CAST

The Guy	David Dewaele
The Girl	Alexandra Lematre
The Mother	Valerie Mestdagh
The Young Girl's Mother	Sonia Barthelemy
The Young Girl	Juliette Bacquet
Guard	Christophe Bon
Man with the dog	Dominique Caffier
Backpacker	Aurore Broutin

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SYNOPSIS

By the Channel, along the Côte d'Opale, near a hamlet with a river and a marshland, lives a unusual guy who struggles along, poaches, prays and builds fires.

A girl from a local farm takes care of him and feeds him. They spend time together in the wide scenery of dunes and woods, mysteriously engaging in private prayer at the edge of the ponds, where the devil is prowling...

Beautifully shot in a protected area on the coast of Northern France, *Hors Satan* engages in a unique way with the landscape to emphasize the inner life of the film's characters, a world of sand dunes, woods and marshes, where Bruno Dumont has been living for much of his life.

More information and images at www.newwavefilms.co.uk

Hors Satan

Bruno Dumont

Filmography

1997 La vie de Jésus (The Life of Jesus)

1999 L'Humanité

2003 Twentynine Palms

2006 Flandres (Flanders)

2009 Hadewijch

2011 Hors Satan

Short films

1993 Paris

1994 Marie et Freddy

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Interview with Bruno Dumont by Jean-Michel Frodon

How did *Hors Satan* come about?

In the first shot of *The Life of Jesus*, you could see a small hut made of corrugated iron, where a loner lived... I wanted to make a film about such a character. I started to write a story that took place there, in Bailleul, that is to say in Flanders.

I've been around a lot while shooting Flanders and *Hadewijch*, and eventually I felt I needed a change of scenery, I wanted to make a film that would be set in a single place. The character of a loner provided that stability, in a different territory, a place I am familiar with, given that I have been spending part of the year there since I was a child.

Where is that place?

On the Côte d'Opale, in the Pas de Calais, near Boulogne sur Mer. The script that I wrote is based on these landscapes, on that light, and on my wish to settle in that area. Landscapes really affect me. My films always start from a place, for its depiction. The landscapes that you see in the film are part of a protected land made of dunes and woods; theoretically public access is prohibited, which was quite complicated as far as the shooting process was concerned... Visually, that single place had a large and varied potential. I spent a lot of time walking in the area before I started writing. I chose the locations, and then I wrote the script. I need the power of nature to confer some intensity upon scenes in which very simple things are to happen.

This intensity results from the landscapes, but also from the filmmaking...

Indeed, the directing aims at exposing the strength that comes out of characters and situations which are often ordinary in themselves, or that could seem so if they were filmed differently ... This balance of power probably constitutes the very art of directing.

One of the essential dimensions of directing as an intensifying force lies in a particular use of sound, in a film where there is hardly any dialogue and no music at all.

We recorded only live and "mono" sounds. What you hear in the film are the actual sounds recorded during the shooting, I didn't alter or re-record them. I wish some noises weren't there, but I kept them anyway, stoically. Sometimes you can even hear the tracks of the camera dolly, or the lens focusing. I no longer work with a sound editor, and there was no post-synchronisation whatsoever. The sound material is very rich and untamed. Therefore, when there is a moment of silence, you can feel it loud and clear.

You make very few takes, you make do with what happened in front of the camera, is that right?

Not at all, I look for something that is quite precise, and we do the scene as many times as it takes. But it mostly has to do with the actors, barely with the technical aspects.

Who are the actors? Did you know them when you wrote the script?

I knew David Dewaele, I had already shot two films with him - he had a small part in *Flanders* and *Hadewijch*. I wanted to give him a leading role. I know how he behaves in front of the camera, I wrote the part with him in mind. But I didn't know Alexandra Lematre, I met her by chance in a café in Bailleul. We made a few screen tests, she was perfectly fine. I liked her sense of propriety, the way she has difficulty sharing her feelings.

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Did she meet with your expectations for the part?

No, it doesn't work that way. I don't shape my characters once and for all, I am open to whatever may happen and of course to the input of the person who is going to play the part, to the transformations his or her presence and way of being are to bring about. Thus I also have to reconsider my own approach along the way.

But you are also quite demanding on the set?

Yes, I am determined to obtain something specific that corresponds to the film as a whole. But my demands are always congruent with what the actors give me, what comes from them. For the sake of comparison, the actor is the colour, but I choose the intensity of this colour. Before the shooting we talk and agree on what we are going to do together. Then, the actors discover each morning what they are going to play exactly, but it always remains within the framework of what we have settled for, within the broad lines they are familiar with. I don't take them by surprise.

In this film, you have radicalized your directing. Even more so than your previous films, Hors Satan is almost made entirely of very wide angle shots showing landscapes, and of close-ups.

Indeed, my approach to filmmaking has changed, it is more composed. I used to think that the storyline and the characters prevailed, that the shooting crew had to follow. I don't do this anymore. It was detrimental to the quality of shots. Good acting calls for good filming. This time, the definition of what you would get to watch in the end was much more precise before each take – for instance, there were many marks on the ground to guide the actors' movements. It changes the way they act, and they are "properly filmed", that is to say the angles, the viewpoints are more complex. This way of shooting contributes to instilling power into shots where something very trite may be happening.

Did you decide on a particular visual idiom for this film?

Yes, I do that for all my films. The composition work is crucial, it must be felt by the audience and be part of the project in its own right. For Hors Satan, in addition to the alternating very wide angle shots / close-ups, I wanted to use lots of high-angle and low-angle shots. For the high-angle shots, we had four camera heights, 2 metres, 4 metres, 6 metres, 8 metres and that's all. Emotion must come out of camera positions at least as much as from what is said or done. The composition of frames - for instance the setting of the horizon - gives character to the subject. This stylistic approach was already that of Zola's novels or impressionist paintings: the idea that the subject must be simple, ordinary, that it is not what it is really about anyway. If something is happening, it is in the painting or writing (or indeed directing) performance.

This intensification results from your directing, but also from some excessive, disproportionate actions.

It is essential. If you show ordinary actions in a natural way, nothing happens. There must be some disproportion in the actions and in the acting of the actors, provided that this lack of balance means something, that it makes the viewers perceive something more than what they see at first sight. There must be some representation!

The film uses a strange stylistic device: you show several times a character looking at something, then you show what is in front of him or her, but that thing isn't what triggered the character's gaze...

Absolutely. It is an ellipse, not in the storyline but in the psychology of the characters. I think that today, the audience is able to fill in the blanks. If the movie shows everything, explains everything, describes all the ins and outs, it loses energy and gets considerably heavier. I have faith in the retrospective abilities of the audience, in the possibility to show something that you don't understand right away, but that will make sense eventually. It provides a sense of motion and intensity with regard to the film as a whole. Films that constantly take you by the hand, that explain and justify

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everything, every step of the way, make me feel bored or depressed. A director has to play with what happens in the head of the spectators, and trust them to enjoy such shifts.

Hors Satan takes on one of the challenges that cinema has grappled with since its birth, namely how to shoot a miracle. This challenge you've taken on in a very special way.

I know that as I shoot I must abide by a few rules, which are those of the type of representation that is mine, with live sound, with specific camera angles and positions, without using music... I can't possibly parachute some "effect" out of nowhere, from some other aesthetic universe. For a long time I did think about how to remain within this framework. And about how to shoot this situation in a way that wasn't necessarily related to religion. I don't believe in God, and my film doesn't demand any faith from the public besides the faith in cinema. Because to me cinema is what allows the extraordinary to be accommodated in the ordinary. It allows us to catch a glimpse of and to feel the divine in man. This is what makes cinema akin to mysticism. Mysticism says "behold the earth and you shall see the sky". Well, there you are, cinema can do that with all its devices. And you don't need a religion for that either.

At some point the man says, just after he shot the deer: "I shot without seeing". This sentence resonates like some kind of motto summarising filmmaking.

It's a hunter's sentence. If you see a lark in stationary flight, this means there's an animal down below. There is an invisible promise. And then you've got to act. At the beginning of the film, the guy says: "there's only one thing to do", and then, "we did what we had to do". These are concrete situations, with actual responses, without second thoughts.

For a while, the film was referred to as *The Empire*. Why did you change its title?

In fact, it was called *Hors Satan* from the beginning, but then at some point there was a doubt, and this title made things more complicated during shooting. Until the film is completed and can dovetail with the title, it's tough to justify it, it's tiresome. So during production we called it *The Empire*, which in the script is the name of the place where the story occurs. In the end I took up the original title again, because it fits with the whole project.

The title conjures up novelist George Bernanos.

Rightly so. Through Bernanos I learnt that by peering into the ordinary, one sees the supernatural appear. To me, Zola and Bernanos are very much akin.

But this film isn't actually based on the expectation of some apparition resting on duration, which was one salient element in your previous films. By and large, here you have shorter shots, and the editing is different, with fewer sequence shots.

Yes, there's been a maturation of sorts, which means I rely less on duration. I discover how to reach my goals in different ways, which include framing and the actors' acting just as much as editing itself. On average, the shots in this film are significantly shorter than in my previous films. This is also the first film I've edited singlehandedly. I edited the first 20 minutes of *Hadewijch*, but this time around I really wanted to be fully in charge of the process, whilst being helped by an editor. I wrote a great deal, I shot just as much, but then I deleted many things in the editing process. I need all this material in order to fine-tune the editing. Pretty much like a sculptor needing a block of marble from which to carve.

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What if I tell you this is a film about good and evil...

I suppose this is the material I started from, but anyway, this may be argued for any film, don't you think? Except that here this is not so much about a simplistic opposition but rather about how one constructs one's relation to the world, a relation in which good and evil do exist, and where the point is to find one's place and "do what needs to be done".

This "thing to do" is not moral but vital. It's about grappling with the world, about the possibility of acting, not about preaching what is good or what is evil. The film doesn't take a moral stand, it only registers some actions. It goes beyond good and evil, in its own way. And then, it all takes place deep inside each and every one of us: what the film strives to do is to elicit individual reactions from the public, during but above all after the film, based on things experienced as you watched the film. I certainly don't want to be a filmmaker with ideas to promote, what I want to do is to shoot films based on feelings, banking on how feeling certain things, when faced with some landscapes, physical presences or sounds, will have some effects on the audience. It might bring about ideas in them. But it's not up to me to suggest that or to tell the viewers what to think. This is rather like an art of conversation, really.

I want to jump off the roof whenever an actor has too many things to say, or holds forth on something complex. I'd rather be raw. That's also why I don't want to make a whole lecture on the film's "message", what's important to me is how the viewer experiences the film as it is shown.