

REVIEW | Faith No More: Bruno Dumont's "Hadewijch"

by Michael Koresky (September 13, 2009)



A scene from Bruno Dumont's "Hadewijch." Image courtesy of TIFF.

Following in the grand tradition of austere European filmmakers, Bruno Dumont gives religious faith quite a workout in his new film, "Hadewijch." Not that this should come as a surprise to anyone who's followed Dumont's career. One of French cinema's most illustrious provocateurs, Dumont has moved rather swiftly from contentious Cannes-winning *enfant terrible* (when his "Humanité" won three awards in 1999, including for his non-actor actors) to loathed international auteur ("Twentynine Palms"), while always finding transcendence in the oddest, most desolate, and often bloody, of places.

Narratively, "Hadewijch" finds Dumont on unexpectedly direct and accessible ground, even if at film's end there remains a baffling opaqueness, both in terms of the director's and the characters' motivations. Thought-provoking, troubling, and inevitably frightening, it provides the most overt psychological portraiture yet seen in a Dumont work. Whereas normally the filmmaker's Bressonian instincts and predilection for grandiose statement making (about capital-letter topics as large and impossible to pin down as War, the West, and Race) disallow his characters of being much more than archetypes, or, to be less charitable, cutouts, the main character of this film, Celine, played magnificently by Julie Sokolowski, feels like perhaps his first fully rounded, intensely personalized creature. That said, she's also unknowable, and perhaps capable of the unthinkable, a tension that makes this, in some ways, Dumont's most discomfiting film.

Though utterly devoted to Christ, Celine is kicked out of a convent, where she has sought refuge from a world and self she might not understand, for not adjusting properly to their rules of conduct. Cast from the convent's garden (initially bare in the dead of winter, though we will see it once again, crucially, in the spring), Celine finds herself searching for connection, although only if it will get her closer to God. Certainly she doesn't find solace in the grotesquely ornate confines of her self-identified technocrat (French minister) father's Parisian apartment (or kingdom, more appropriately); and neither does she wish to express her love for her new friend (and wannabe lover) Yassine (Yassine Salihine), whose Islamic beliefs provide contrast to hers but who cannot comprehend her undying commitment, at the expense of all others, to a being she cannot see or touch.