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Tim Palmer, *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2011. 304 pp. Tables, figures, notes, bibliography and index. \$28.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8195-6827-4.

Review by Andrew Asibong, Birkbeck, University of London.

Brutal Intimacy is a remarkably comprehensive, wide-ranging and, above all, informative analysis of a number of key strands in contemporary French cinema. Focusing mainly on films made since 2000, Palmer covers an enormous range of works from the first decade of the new millennium, providing an extremely useful continuation of the English-language analysis of recent French film-making already carried out by, for example, Phil Powrie, in his two books on 1980s and 1990s French cinema, and Guy Austin, in his book *Contemporary French Cinema*.^[1] Palmer's overarching argument, a position to which he returns again and again in the course of his study, is that French cinema in the new millennium, far from being moribund or obsolete, is alive, exciting and more invigorating than ever. Palmer repeatedly considers the influence of Truffaut's seminal *Les 400 Coups/ The 400 Blows* (1959) on the young French filmmakers working today, claiming that the energy, youthfulness, daring and originality of that masterpiece is as much in evidence in the diverse work of Bruno Dumont, Lola Doillon and Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi as in Nouvelle Vague classics by Chabrol, Godard, Rivette or Rohmer.

Accessible, enthusiastic and lucid, Palmer's material is organised in an original and quite intriguing fashion. He approaches the corpus from a number of exciting and unpredictable angles: the first-time filmmaker; cinema of the body; "pop art" films; and women directors. These are unusual thematic points of entry, which allow the reader to approach the films under discussion with fresh eyes and potentially to draw out connections between disparate works which might otherwise go unnoticed were the material to be presented along purely *auterist* lines. The final chapter, on the influence of the prestigious Paris film school FEMIS (and "cinephilia" more generally) on the filmmakers currently emerging from France, is quite fascinating, and succeeds in teasing out links between structures, institutions, taste and the aesthetic product itself. Palmer attempts throughout his study to place facts and figures high on his analytical agenda. Few surveys of a national cinema display quite such enthusiasm for the presentation of data (e.g., budgets, audience trends, public attitudes towards specific issues) in combination with such thorough reviews and appraisals of the film-objects themselves.

It is precisely this dedication to detail, deliberation and description that pushes the book a little too far in its quest for comprehensiveness, though. Palmer tries too hard to include too many films and too many filmmakers, and it is not always clear why some (often quite uninteresting) material has been included for pages and pages of quite descriptive analysis, while the provocative and consistently ground-breaking work of directors such as Arnaud Desplechin (*Rois et Reine/ Kings and Queen*, 2005) or Abdellatif Kechiche (*L'Esquive/ Games of Love and Chance*, 2004) is practically ignored. Keen to insist on the allegedly sociological relevance of films such as Lola Doillon's youth-orientated *Et toi, t'es sur qui?* (2007), or Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud's much-hyped *Persepolis* (2007), Palmer sometimes pushes the "social comment" angle of the films in a simultaneously heavy-handed and superficial manner. For example, he will inform the reader that Doillon's film operates as a statement about teenage alienation—figures on unsupervised adolescent internet consumption are duly cited (p. 28)—or speak of *Persepolis* as a document that reflects on the politics of the Islamic headscarf—cue references to

slightly irrelevant speeches by Sarkozy against the burqa (p. 51)—without actually interrogating the nuances of the films' discourse and aesthetics regarding the topics he claims they are coherently investigating.

There is a general reluctance throughout the book, in fact, to engage seriously with what might really be *at stake* in much of the filmic material being presented. Palmer castigates certain critics of a film like Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible/ Irreversible* (2002) for allowing political considerations to colour their analysis of the film's "worth," but he himself goes so far in the other direction that his critical appraisals become at times almost banal. This tendency towards neutral (but sometimes bland) final appraisals leads to a situation of such total non-discernment that the cinema of Noé, Dumont and Claire Denis all gets discussed within the same overall category of "cinema of the body" without the very significant divergences between the ways in which those three filmmakers actually go about constructing and deconstructing the (gendered and racialized) bodies they film ever actually getting addressed.

Palmer's summing up of the importance of the three (differently) controversial directors discussed in this section is symptomatic of his occasionally excessive tolerance of platitude: "Exploring sexuality and physicality at fascinating extremes, we should begin to consider this controversial strand of contemporary French cinema as having a rigorous, committed intensity akin to the avant-garde at its most dynamic and compelling—troubling every day indeed" (p. 78). It is as though the only important point about the three of them is, for Palmer, that they are somehow corporeally transgressive (a questionable assertion in any case), and that if anybody objects to any of their body-orientated foci then this objection will surely be on the grounds of conservatism or political correctness. Surely there comes a point at which the different ethico-political implications of cultural interventions as fundamentally dissimilar as Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001) and Noé's *Irréversible* demand to be acknowledged and explored?

Moreover, theorizations of just how the category of "cinema of the body" might be understood, interrogated, critiqued or deployed remain quite shallow and undeveloped. No mention is made of Steven Shaviro's important work on Romero, Cronenberg and the Deleuzo-Guattarian politics and dimensions of bodily affect and corporeal horror in film.^[2] Even so, it is this "body" chapter that remains the most compelling, not least because it focuses its analysis under a somewhat more tightly constructed theoretical umbrella than many of the other sections of the book, very few of which seem to have a great deal to do with the "brutal intimacy" of the book's title. The sub-section on the work of Marina de Van is particularly enjoyable. Here, Palmer writes with verve and panache, demonstrating his clear familiarity with and enthusiasm for de Van's overall project and vision. His interviews with both de Van and viewers of her film *Dans ma peau/ In My Skin* (2002) contribute a great deal to the confidence and originality he displays here.

Most disappointing is his chapter on "feminine cinema," which lumps together a number of films made by female directors (Siegrid Alnoy, Christine Carrière, Lucile Hadzihalilovic, Alanté Kavaïté, Claire Simon), but fails to demonstrate in convincing terms why the gender of the director is actually a legitimate criterion for analysis. Given that elsewhere Palmer discusses work by de Van, Denis, Bruni-Tedeschi, Doillon and many other female directors in non-gendered terms, his decision to devote this one chapter to a specifically gendered consideration of one small sub-group is intriguing, but ultimately puzzling, especially since no significant conclusions are drawn regarding the putative "femininity" of the works in question, and little or no engagement with a genuinely feminist set of considerations is made. As with the attempts elsewhere to link sociological phenomena to the films under discussion, the overall effect is one of a somewhat half-hearted politicization, lip service being paid to the issues of "real life" without the necessary links being made between that "real life" and the art-work as either a consensual or disruptive cultural object.

Ultimately, *Brutal Intimacy* will prove to be a useful guide for students (undergraduate and postgraduate), teachers and lovers of contemporary French cinema, not least since it contains such a wealth of information about the vast range of films that have been made in France so recently. It may well be a text best suited for dipping in and out of, though, depending on which film or director the reader has a particular interest in finding out more about. The overall lack of methodological rigour and the relative thinness of sustained theoretical analysis does mean that the book is a little unsatisfying as a complete monograph. The final sentence is a key example of the way in which Palmer allows himself to get away without saying a great deal: "Through all its varied avenues of activity, contemporary French cinema is united, above all, by its pursuit of elaborating ever more cinematic means of expression" (p. 215). The provocative title appeared to promise a more focused consideration of recent French cinema's specificity vis-à-vis the ethics and aesthetics of problematic relationality.

NOTES

[1] Phil Powrie, *French Cinema in the 1980s: Nostalgia and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Phil Powrie ed., *French Cinema in the 1990s: Continuity and Difference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Guy Austin, *Contemporary French Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

[2] Steven Shapiro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

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