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Entertainment : Film & TV : Interviews

Bertrand Bonello

14 Jul 2005

French cinema has always had a tendency to err on the side of obscurity. Works like Beau Travail, by Claire Denis, and Wild Side, by Sébastien Lifshitz, are equal parts film, poetry, philosophy and art. Sometimes they're so personal to their creator a complete understanding of intent seems impossible without a direct phone line to the filmmaker.

Tiresia is one of those movies. Bertrand Bonello's follow-up to *The Pornographer* is a contemporary retelling of an ancient Greek myth, centring on a beautiful Brazilian pre-op transsexual prostitute who starts the film as a woman and ends it as a man; is kidnapped, blinded and then blessed with the gift of second sight...and that's just the first half.

Even our film reviewer, Rachael Scott, was scratching her head by the end. It was time to pick up the phone and ask Monsieur Bonello if he could throw some light on his intriguing film.

What inspired you to make *Tiresia*?

A friend's dream around 1992. In his dream he was lying on a bed and someone was standing next to him and telling him this story. My friend told me the dream a few days later and the story never left me.

Terranova chooses not to have sex with Tiresia even though she offers herself to him. What motivates Terranova to kidnap Tiresia?

It's nothing sexual. It's purely aesthetic. It's like stealing a beautiful painting from a museum to have it at home. For Terranova, Tiresia represents an idea of perfection. Better than a man, better than a woman. His fascination is intellectual, philosophical and aesthetic.

Did you consider casting a genuine transsexual for the role of Tiresia?

I refused to cast a real transsexual for ethical reasons. I think that becoming a woman for them is real war. A war against the world, a war against their own body. It's very difficult physically and psychologically and I think that to ask a real transsexual to become a man again in the second part of the film would have been too hard psychologically. I didn't want to take the risk.

Also, I didn't want the audience to look at the main character as a freak. By taking a woman and a man, you get the mental (and mathematical) idea of what a transsexual is and it brings us back to the myth, which is good. Of course, it was out of the question to take only a man or only a woman. A transsexual is not a transvestite.

But all the other "roses" in the film are real transsexuals. I have to say that they all really understood my point of view of not taking one of them for the part of Tiresia.

When Tiresia is washing herself in front of Terranova she says, "Look at what I've become. It's inhuman, it's disgusting." During research for the film did you find that this is how pre-op transsexuals view their bodies?

Not at all. A lot of transsexuals want to stay like that because it's what makes them so specific and they are often proud to be like that. Tiresia is only trying to disgust Terranova by showing him her penis so that he lets her go. Then, she realises that he loves her the way she is.

It struck me that Tiresia is in a constant state of 'captivity' by forces she has little control over – firstly by her gender, then by her kidnapper and, finally, by her gift of second sight. Was this intentional and, if so, what's the deeper thinking behind it?

Yes. It's totally intentional and even the most beautiful aspect of the story for me. Tiresia always wants to – has to – escape something. She's an object of fate. At one point, she accepts this state and she becomes powerful.

You use the same actor to play Terranova and Father François, implying that the Catholic Church wishes to control and possess Tiresia in the same way as her kidnapper. Would you say this is the case?

Yes and no. It's more a question of observing than possessing. I would say that Tiresia fascinates both Terranova and François. Not for the same reasons, but in the same way. Tiresia has something that they don't have and in a way, they are jealous of it.

At one point the priest tells Tiresia that he can't be "above all things and transform them". Some would argue that this is exactly how the Catholic Church considers itself. Do you think that the Catholic Church play's a negative role in society?

That's a very tricky question. The Catholic Church is a dogma and it's very difficult to have a progressive dogma. When Pope John Paul II died we could measure the role of the Catholic Church in the last decades. Great in some aspects, such as peace, human rights, etc, but terrible in a lot of other aspects, such as AIDS.

To go back to the film, I think François fears Tiresia because he's full of doubts, meanwhile Tiresia is full of truth. Also you can see shots of the empty church and shots of Tiresia's house full of people.

If I'm right in assuming the woods where Terranova meets Tiresia are the Bois de Boulogne, then can you tell me a little bit about that area of Paris?

Yes you're right. It's Le Bois de Boulogne. It's huge, on the border of Paris. During the day it's normal woods,



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with kids and family. At night, as shown in the film, you have all these transsexuals with their clients and their cars. Most of the transsexuals are Brazilian and Polynesian. The mix of transsexuals and trees makes the atmosphere totally surreal. It's not aggressive. I really enjoy walking there.

In 2003 the French Interior Minister passed strict new laws on prostitution. What effects have the new laws had on the prostitutes who work in there?

Le Bois is very special. As it's far from houses, police don't bother the prostitutes who work there too much. It's different inside the city where it becomes very difficult for prostitutes to work in decent conditions - if they ever had some. Le Bois is like a no man's land.

You recently made a short film called *Cindy: The Doll is Mine* starring Asia Argento as the photographer Cindy Sherman and the model she's photographing. Sherman is famous for questioning stereotypical attitudes towards female identity and roles in society, and Tiresia wishes to change her identity from a man to a woman. Is this a coincidence or is there an intentional theme running through your work?

I am not searching to have coherence between the films, but I must have obsessions, like every director. The question of "the copy and the original" is one of them I guess and anything about transformation is another.

You made a documentary in 1996 about Paolo Pasolini. Would you say he's had a strong influence on your work? And who else has inspired your films?

On my work, I don't know. On my life, yes. The way he mixes reality and poetry is unique, essential and brilliant.



I guess anyone who has a strong vision of life through his art inspires me. It's a very wide net from Tod Browning to Kiarostami and from Dreyer to Cronenberg.

As a director whose work challenges his audience and isn't obvious in its intent, what would you say if a Hollywood studio came knocking on your door?

This is close to science fiction, but I have to say I would love that. I would love to make popular films. For me the division is not independent films vs. studio films, but good films vs. bad films. I have a great respect for directors who succeed in having a personal vision inside a studio picture. It's so difficult.

Of course, my first question would be about the final cut. They would probably refuse me it and that would be the end of the conversation.

Finally, what will you be working on next?

I am finishing an album, for which I did everything (writing, producing, playing all instruments, recording and mixing). It's called *My New Picture* and I have two scripts ready, one in French, one in English, and I'm hoping to shoot one of them next spring.

Read our review of [Tiresia](#), which is released in the UK on 15 August 2005.

Tiresia [2003]

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Author: Rachael Scott

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