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Rites of Passing Conceptual Nihilism in Jean-Paul Civeyrac's *Des filles en noir*

One leading reason for contemporary French cinema's rising profile is a group of films that together constitute a highly transgressive *cinéma du corps*/cinema of the body (Palmer, *Brutal Intimacy* 57-93). Figurehead productions, some disproportionately notorious, are films like *Romance* (Catherine Breillat 1999), *Trouble Every Day* (Claire Denis 2001), *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé 2002), *Demonlover* (Olivier Assayas 2002), and *Dans ma peau* ([*In My Skin*] Marina de Van 2002); the tendency has more recently been extended by *Enter the Void* (Gaspar Noé 2009), *La Sentiment de la chair* ([*The Sentiment of the Flesh*] Roberto Garzelli 2010), and *Hors Satan* ([*Outside Satan*] Bruno Dumont 2011). This *cinéma du corps* consistently attracts scrutiny among—usually skeptical, often hostile—respondents for its stark treatment of sexual behaviours and corporeal processes, the blank or primitivist psychology of its unreadable protagonists, its recourse to abrupt and grisly violence, a proclivity for radical stylistic devices, and a lingering but never quite fully articulated sense of social despair. Undeniably these films do traffic in confrontational materials: rape, murder and assault, self-harm, carnivorous sex, bodily compulsions that are destructive and/or atavistic. In broader terms, moreover, part of the *cinéma du corps*'s extremist reputation comes from its categorical evasiveness, its refusal to shape its textual resources into either coherent socio-political interventions or horror film norms. The films, by consequence, are indigestible, alienating both leftist/academic/socially polemical writers as well as populist/mainstream/genre aficionados.

My aim here is to nuance this *cinéma du corps* template by discussing a related fellow traveller case study, Jean-Paul Civeyrac's *Des filles en noir* ([*Young Girls in Black*] 2010). *Des filles en noir* will let us explore the guiding principles that underpin much of the *cinéma du corps*, beyond the customary attention paid only to such films' aggressively

graphic content. Instead, I will represent *Des filles en noir* through its conceptual agenda, its cinematic engagements, its interactions with mainstays of recent French filmmaking. As such, both this film and the proximate *cinéma du corps* exist as a catalytic strand of cinematic practice, meticulous and oftentimes antagonistic within contemporary France's ecosystem of film aesthetics, industry, and culture. By result, Civeyrac's approach becomes thus: (1) to revive but inflect Impressionist theories of *photogénie* outlined by film writers and filmmakers in the late 1910s and 1920s; (2) to adopt but likewise strategically overturn (or cannibalize) French cinema's conventional coming-of-age narratives, especially texts based upon the rites of passage of female adolescents; (3) to promulgate such techniques through pedagogical channels, crucially the film school circuit in Paris; and (4) to position the resulting product, through venues like the Cannes Film Festival, as a cutting-edge cultural asset in the competitive marketplace of French cinema. Related to these four points, in addition, this article seeks to boost the English-language profile of Civeyrac himself, an underregarded figure abroad, a lecturer-critic-filmmaker whose work recalls the similarly multi-faceted approach of 1920s icons such as Louis Delluc, Germaine Dulac, and Jean Epstein. What especially unites these figures is the formative notion of applied cinephilia, the shared belief that intensive, heightened critical film study—a fixation upon stylistic minutiae—should be vital not only for the writings of impassioned critics, but also, concomitantly, for making discoveries in cinematic expression to augment the work of progressive filmmakers (Palmer, *Brutal Intimacy* 195-215).

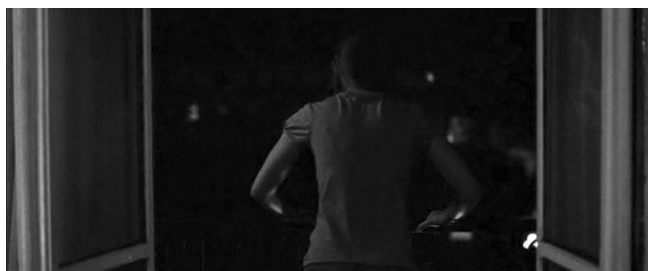
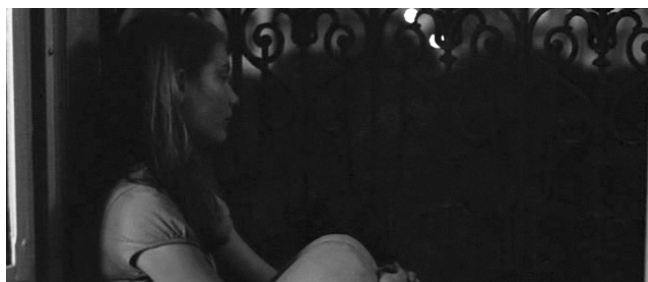
Like much of the *cinéma du corps*, *Des filles en noir* resonates with pent-up anger, corporeal and social estrangement. A brief preface opens the film, introducing Noémie (Elise Lhomeau), a teenaged girl in tears in her bedroom, reaching for a craft knife. After this suicide attempt fails,

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she is left catatonic in a hospital room. Returned to school a year later, Noémie deepens her relationship—a passionate friendship that falls just short of sexual intimacy—with Priscilla (Léa Tossier). Dressed in black, the two girls are withdrawn pariahs. They reject their inconstant boyfriends, commit acts of vandalism, then fixate increasingly on self-murder, eventually announcing in a class presentation that they plan, like romantic artist Heinrich von Kleist, to end their lives. Soon after, talking on cellphones at dawn, both girls perch in high windows, encouraging each other to complete their suicide pact. Exchanging goodbyes, the girls profess their love. Shot from behind, Priscilla falls to her death, but at the last moment Noémie hesitates, screaming in grief and rage as she realizes her friend has gone. After a long fade-out to darkness, we next see Noémie institutionalized, in the throes of crippling self-recrimination. Time passes, and Noémie again takes up playing the flute; she joins an orchestra on tour but remains prone to debilitating depression. The film ends as Noémie, tormented by a nightmare while alone at night in a Grenoble hotel room, walks in a series of long takes to the balcony of her window, as if finally to kill herself, but then just barely, wordlessly, manages to stand her ground.

So bleak and potentially exploitative is this material that Civeyrac was obliged, like many of his *cinéma du corps* peers, to account for himself in interview and in public; the French film ecosystem demands professional rigor from its leading practitioners, especially when their work is combative and uncompromising. Take, for example, the following three related cases: Gaspar Noé touted an avant-garde ancestry, especially drawn from 1970s flicker films such as Paul Sharits's *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* (1968), for the genesis of *Irreversible*; Claire Denis described herself as a formalist experimenter, supplanting the words of scripts with images and sounds on *Trouble Every Day* and *L'Intrus* ([*The Intruder*] 2004); and Bruno Dumont declared *Twenty-nine Palms* (2003) and *Hadewijch* (2009) to be philosophical tracts, distillations of humanity's enduring precivilized instincts, fractured representations of spirituality versus corporeality (Palmer, *Brutal Intimacy* 58–61). In his various roles as instructor, cineaste, and writer-director, Civeyrac has outlined similarly refined conceptual ambitions for *Des filles en noir*, which emerges, in turn, as a culmination of Civeyrac's

work as an applied cinephile: first as a student, then, for more than a decade, as a lecturer at La Fémis, the most prestigious film school in Paris, whose graduates are now dispersed throughout the modern French film industry. From a practical standpoint, Civeyrac argues that he and his disciples want to revive the most exacting parameters of masters past, notably Robert Bresson, but also Jean Cocteau, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and Pier Paolo Pasolini. From a personal artistic perspective, Civeyrac has also worked in interview to underline his investment in *Des filles en noir*'s controversial subject area by citing a friend at La Fémis who shocked the faculty by committing suicide (Calet n. pag.). Civeyrac's work also resonates theoretically, informed by Impressionist concepts set out in the late 1910s and early 1920s by Delluc, Dulac, and Epstein. The main principle at stake is *photogénie*/photogenesis, which proposes that film has a unique revelatory capacity—that it is photographically predisposed to “revealing the inner nature of things,” and that this revealed inner nature is “untrue to everyday



reality just as everyday reality is untrue to the heightened awareness of poetry” (Epstein, “On Certain Characteristics” 317–318). Summarizing this continuum of references, Jean-Luc Douin goes so far as to claim that Civeyrac's main merit as a filmmaker is his investment in, and resurrection of, cinema heritage (22).

From these points of departure, Civeyrac configures a conceptually precise aesthetic that is founded, above all, by an exacting emphasis on performance. As Dominique Widemann puts it, Civeyrac is “a cineaste of bodies and their languages” (19). Civeyrac's rationale, moreover, contextualizes the opaque screen psychology of his lead roles—a *cinéma du corps* staple—by way of his demanding casting



process (which required a full year of screen tests) to discover inexperienced “virginal” actors, Lhomeau and Tossier. Civeyrac chose this duo by applying Impressionist doctrine to Bressonian methodology in order to pursue their innate authentic *photogénie*: an essence distilled not from narrative exposition but through exhausting sessions of protracted rehearsals and multiple takes (frequently scores of digital video set-ups) that ultimately reveal, when the actors are pushed to physical breaking point, what Civeyrac describes as “the personhood behind the personality . . . we must believe that these girls are burning from the inside” (Calet n. pag.). Hence Noémie and Priscilla's inexorable compulsions to self-harm are conceived less as blatant social or political indictments than as the culmination of cinematic imperatives; these formal and artistic abstractions are the commitments of an applied cinephile. Amplifying this stylistic process is Civeyrac's collaboration with his cinematographer, Hichame Alaouié. Like Éric Gautier's photography for Olivier Assayas (another of Civeyrac's citations), *Des filles en noir*'s aesthetic exists perpetually *in medias res*. Establishing shots are removed in favour of meandering anamorphic medium close-ups consisting of shallow-focus Steadicam tracking shots. The two girls' faces and upper bodies float, adrift, as if fundamentally disconnected from the indistinct diegetic spaces around them: dismal school corridors, grey parks, busy shopping malls, hospital corridors, cramped apartments in unlovely tower blocks (Jones 217–219). Editing his scenes together, Civeyrac cuts and bridges shots on the focal point of the girls themselves, as if their corporeal connection is the only meaningful diegetic current, the only source of energy that exists.

Civeyrac trains the viewer, in turn, to scour the frame for microcurrents, tiny instances of *photogénie* that constitute the two girls' course toward annihilation. This design

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again revives Epstein's theory that cinema's vocation is to capture inchoate ephemera, to render the intricacies of close-ups as profound disclosures: “[T]he mouth which is about to speak and holds back, the gesture which hesitates between right and left, the recoil before the leap, and the moment before the landing, the becoming, the hesitation, the taut spring” (“Magnification” 236). As Jonah Horwitz interprets such logic, Epstein's “prizing of liminality . . . implies that the merest suggestion of feeling at the limit of perceptibility is both more moving and more photogenic than an overt, dynamic expression of feeling” (116). Early on, for instance, we study Noémie in long take, post-suicide attempt, as she wanders in and out of frame while her mother, off-screen, chides her to get ready for school. Hints at Noémie's disposition cover her bedroom walls: a gloomy but generic teenaged *mise en scène* of rough sketches, art prints, a Heath Ledger still, the cover of Joy Division's infamous LP, *Unknown Pleasures*; there is even a model raven by the window that distantly evokes the Gothicism of Edgar Allan Poe. Civeyrac's focal point, though, is Lhomeau's brittle body language: the distended cast of her glassy facial features, beads of sweat that punctuate her pallid skin, and the quick snaps she takes from a burning cigarette, gestures

that juxtapose with her otherwise narcotized pacing. This young woman seems prematurely spent and contaminated by stress, a dynamic underpinning all of *Des filles en noir*'s diegetic world in heavy doldrums, an eerie external stasis in which internalized pain, festering, intermittently detonates. That classical cinematic fixture, the lucid and psychologically transparent goal-oriented protagonist, dissipates entirely here. Will Higbee, a representative objector to such *cinéma du corps* tactics, critiques this treatment as “auteurist evasions,” in which “deviant” behaviours are excised from any defined social context. Like many similar dismissals, this interpretation rests on a restrictive, traditionalist notion that film art derives entirely from a political dichotomy: either

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it is progressive (challenging the viewer in order to yield didactic leftist social diagnoses) or reactionary (beguiling the viewer in order to reinforce rightist social perspectives) (Higbee 326-327). Civeyrac's protagonists, by contrast, embody no such obvious conclusions—rather they exhibit a numbed neutrality that masks their corporeal volatility and the twisted agency of their latent violence, a violence all the more disarming for its almost total lack of editorial context. *Des filles en noir* lyrically invokes, but does not condescend to judge or explain.

Des filles en noir's subversions also stem from a generative mechanism that is usually overlooked in film studies. This is the nature of filmmaking as a conversational practice, cinema craft as a means to engage with peers. Here, the *cinéma du corps* progresses not as a movement in the packaged sense of the *nouvelle vague*, but more as a shared, ongoing cinematic paradigm in flux. Thence arises, like many abiding interests of other *cinéma du corps* filmmakers, Civeyrac's caustic, frequently nihilistic interest in the inherited norms of contemporary French film culture. The template at hand is the feminine French adolescent coming-of-age text, frequently associated with women filmmakers, a paradigm traced by Carrie Tarr to the early 1970s, which explores “childhood and adolescence . . . [a] foregrounding of the perceptions of child or adolescent protagonists whose experiences are normally marginal and marginalized [that] has the potential to challenge hegemonic modes of seeing” (Tarr and Rollet 25). This cycle, a feminine version of the

so-called *film d'ado*, whose protagonists teeter on the brink of womanhood, originated on a mass scale with films such as Nina Companéez's *Faustine et le bel été* (1972), Liliane de Kermadec's *Aloïse* (1975), and Nelly Kaplan's *Néa* (1976); it was then popularized further by Diane Kurys's commercial crossover success, *Diablo Menthe* ([*Peppermint Soda*] 1977) (Palmer, “Women Filmmakers in France” 72). Catherine Breillat's film *Une Vrai jeune fille* ([*A Real Young Girl*] 1976) made such materials far more sexually frank and explicit; it was produced in 1976 but only received distribution after the furore over Breillat's similarly dispassionate, and ultimately seminal, *Romance* in 1999. Since the 1970s, these rites-of-passage, female-centred productions have become a staple of French filmmaking; they constitute a large part of France's cultural personality and contribution to world cinema, and are regularly affiliated with debutant filmmakers who annually create about forty percent of all French cinema (Palmer, *Brutal Intimacy* 15-56). Cinema itself, arguably, is a medium perfectly suited to the adolescent state of inherent neuroplasticity, the teenaged mind and body perpetually alive to new encounters, an aroused receptivity to sensorial stimuli that lack prejudicial adult filtering.

Today, the female-focused coming-of-age template, in which girls precariously advance into adulthood, embattled but ultimately empowered, is a constant not only in French film production, but also in how that filmmaking is paraded on the global film festival circuit. In recent years, sample films, many of them domestic and international prizewinners, include Marjane Satrapi's *bande dessinée*-inspired *Persepolis* (2007), Lola Doillon's *Et toi, t'es sur qui?* (2007), Céline Sciamma's *La Naissance des pieuvres* ([*Water Lilies*]



2007) and *Tomboy* (2011), Sophie Letourneur's *La Vie au ranch* (2009), Rebecca Zlotowski's *Belle épine* (2010), Kattell Quillévéré's *Un Poison violent* ([*Love Like Poison*] 2010), Mia Hansen-Løve's *Un Amour de jeunesse* ([*Goodbye First Love*] 2011), Emmanuelle Millet's *La Brindille* (2011), Delphine and Muriel Coulin's *17 filles* (2011), Isabelle Czajka's *D'amour et d'eau fraîche* ([*Living on Love Alone*] 2011), and, in a more commercially mainstream direction, Sophie Lelouche's *Paris-Manhattan* (2012). These films are the backdrop, the stimulus, for much of *Des filles en noir*'s diegetic world. Whereas such films are seldom triumphalist, nor without melancholia, they do conventionally depict their young female protagonists evolving under duress into adults toughened by adversity—whether it is solitary pregnancy (*La Brindille*; *17 filles*), political oppression (*Persepolis*), displaced or absent families (*La Naissance des pieuvres*), unexpected parental separation (*Un Poison violent*), or maternal death (*Belle épine*). Civeyrac categorically inverts this paradigm into *cinéma du corps* entropy—Noémie and Priscilla's coming-of-age trajectory unravels them, their adolescent rites of passage are not a transitory state, but a terminus. One iconic shot central to *Des filles en noir*—a reverse angle of the girls sitting, at night, on window ledges—makes the dichotomy overt: the set-up is reprised almost identically in *17 filles*, but whereas that film uses it to show an abused, pregnant girl leaving her family home to escape and join her friends, suggesting tentative emancipation, Civeyrac shows it instead as the prelude to suicide (Priscilla) and institutionalization (Noémie).

More broadly, while the traditional *film d'ado* depicts feminine consolidations in the face of sociodomes-

ticures, Civeyrac displaces or else ambivalently notes such contexts to his doomed protagonists. The salient data, potential hinges to Noémie and Priscilla's lives, are that in early 2010, as *Des filles en noir* went into production, France was enduring a twenty-three percent unemployment rate among fifteen to twenty-four year olds; in addition, by this time France had the third-highest suicide rate in Europe at 14.6 per 100,000 people, behind only Finland and Belgium, a crisis highlighted by the widely reported case of 24 mass suicides at France Telecom in late 2009 (INSEE 2010; *Economist* 2009). Civeyrac's crucial inversion, however, is that his protagonists perceive adulthood, their future, to be compromised regardless of their success or failure. In one interrogation at school, Noémie gives her most devastating line, delivered impassively by Lhomeau like an aphorism: “Why study? To become unemployed? To be exploited? To exploit others?” To a classmate who attacks her admiration for the romantic suicide of Kleist, she deadpans: “Sure, you love life, it's great. And your death will be great, after work, in front of the TV, with your fries and Coke.” Versus her mother, who apparently studies relentlessly to seek promotions in her career at a supermarket, Noémie reflects, “In



the end, you're exhausting yourself for how much more a month, three euros fifty?” To an aging, bedridden relative, the only person other than Priscilla who sparks Noémie's solidarity and curiosity, she asks: “Aren't you sick of it? It's not a life.”

Returning to Tarr's initial claim, that French rites-of-passage films use the perspective of female adolescents to challenge hegemonic social discourse, Civeyrac takes this logic to an understated but truly nihilistic extension: if the teenage years are really our most vivid, so rife with experiential purity, then why continue further? If debilitation and banality configure adulthood, why persist? In pitiless contemporary form, Civeyrac implicitly returns us to Albert Camus's famous 1942 formulation in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide” (11). In this frame, *Des filles en noir* underlines how nothing nourishes the forever-restless Noémie and Priscilla: we never see them eat or drink (even during an extended dinner party set piece, another French film



staple Civeyrac deconstructs); they are never in a state of repose or leisure; the latent sexuality of their intimacy never culminates (they are heterosexual yet shun boys for each other); and there are neither reliable males nor father figures present, no social safeguards to protect them from self-destruction. One key sequence, the two girls' first extended conversation, presents this paradigm in a busy lunchtime café. As elsewhere, a suite of track-and-pan Steadicam glides (Michel Guilloux ascribes to such shots a "painful tenderness . . . [a regard] which never amounts to naturalism and its sociological pretensions" [n. pag.]) places the girls both within and without this social space, attuned to but excommunicated from the adult world around them. Civeyrac's frame scans seemingly innocent ephemera—a couple happily reunited, a businessman reading a paper, lunch orders issued—which juxtapose with the girls' sober but aghast commentary: "She's afraid to be alone"; "He's only hitting on her to screw her"; "The worst thing is we're already like them." The disjunctions amplify through an ingeniously mixed soundtrack of grating acoustic shards—tinny vocals from adjacent music, noise from a pinball table, the clatter of cutlery, irritating conversational babble—that disproportionately accompanies the girls' passage through the café. These sounds make them, and us, uncomfortable conduits to this detritus of the everyday, a prosaic diegetic world reconfigured as insidious, engulfing, menacing (this heightened stimuli or sensory overload is also apparent in *Dans ma peau*, a proximate *cinéma du corps* text; Marina de Van uses a similarly designed sequence, set in a supermarket and shopping mall, as a prelude to her protagonist's main bout of self-mutilation). Before another long, funereal fade to black, the sequence ends on Noémie, eyes averted, saying blankly, "You have to be a genius to escape this shit." Priscilla responds, "I'm no genius, I never will be." Noémie's

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last line is, "Me neither." This, then, is the enervating perceptual process at the film's core, a dynamic Louis Guichard describes as a "cold cocoon enclosing adolescence, barring [its protagonists] from access to life" (n. pag.). Much of Civeyrac's previous work, especially *Fantômes* (2001) and *À travers la forêt* ([*Through the Forest*] 2005), interweaves supernaturally ghosts with the living, the present with the past; but now it is as if the dead and the alive have somehow coalesced, cancelled each other out, manifesting from the girls' perspective as this army of drones going blindly about its business, an acquisitive and routinized existence that passes for life. And in the *cinéma du corps* of *Des filles en noir* and *Dans ma peau*, reaching this awareness is the precondition for self-harm.

The *cinéma du corps* nonetheless does retain tiny glimmers of hope, a vestigial capacity to survive peaceably within this world. Usually overlooked by critics, such moments, like the gentle Paris apartment love scene between Vincent Cassel and Monica Bellucci near the climax of *Irreversible*, are all the more compelling for their fragility, their fleeting calm in the face of near-constant diegetic unrest. So comes *Des filles en noir*'s concluding sequence, one of Civeyrac's most moving and exquisite applied cinephile designs. Five shots that run just over four minutes summarize

the film's trajectory from internalized horror and recoil to stasis, consolidation, and perhaps the distant prospect of something more. Noémie wakes up, gasping, from a recurrent nightmare in which she seeks but cannot find Priscilla in a fog; she moves to her balcony window and we see her from behind, tensed, standing in near darkness; next comes a close-up profile of her studying the ground far beneath her as tears fall from her face and sobs convulse her shoulders; cut, hours later, to the dim blue sky of dawn, and a tilt down to Noémie now slumped against the guardrail as early morning sounds (car engines, deliveries, passersby) float up from below; then we end on a frontal close-up of our protagonist's exhausted but finally stilled facial features, her damp face, and the measured blinks of her eyes as her trauma seems to recede. This climactic passage, built around a crescendo of birds singing, revives poetically the famous moving-image centrepiece of Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1963): its delicate study of a woman in intimate repose, her steady gaze representing a symbolic port in a storm, a repository for human endurance or even beatific empathy in the midst of ubiquitous suffering and calamity. Civeyrac's finale, a cinematic tapestry of the face, inspired Serge Kaganski, following *Des filles en noir*'s Directors Fortnight premiere at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival, to pay tribute to the director as "one of our best active cineastes . . . [a filmmaker] fascinated by the beauty of a shot, the filming of a face, the restoration of dawn . . . [with] a grace and intensity that is absolutely stupefying" (71). Such is the status of *Des filles en noir*—and the *cinéma du corps* with which it is engaged—as a distillation of much of what is admirable about the contemporary French film ecosystem. Modelled by Civeyrac, these are filmmakers that inventively mine film history and pedagogy by conflating film study with film practice, carrying on a cinematic conversation that somehow disgorges lyrically affective fragments within some of the most uncompromisingly stark works in contemporary world cinema.

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