

INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHE HONORE

MA MERE is an adaptation of a book by Georges Bataille. Why Bataille?

Because he was an important figure in my path to becoming a writer. I grew up with the writings of Bataille, with his conviction that literature exists to give something to the world that it wouldn't have otherwise. That literature is essential to the world, that writing is along the lines of meditation. And also the expression of Evil. Bataille wrote that a sharp form of Evil of which literature is an expression « has for us sovereign value. But this conception doesn't require the absence of morality, but demands a *hypermorality*. » This radicalism of Bataille I see in contemporary writers like Bret Easton Ellis, Dennis Cooper or Sarah Kane. Those three writers have influenced me just as much as Bataille in the writing of this screenplay.

And why make a film based on his work?

When preparing my first feature film, *17 TIMES CECILE CASSARD*, I didn't want to be considered as a writer making a film. That's where my determined refusal to (over)write a screenplay for that film originated from. I wanted to avoid words as much as possible, whether in terms of structure or dialogues. I wanted to make a film owing merely to lighting, actors and music. My determination was naive and childish. I ended up understanding that what might be interesting in my filmmaking was that I actually did have a foot in literature and a foot in cinema. Adapting Bataille was about trying out his radicalness in cinema.

And why MA MERE more than his other texts?

The initial idea of *17 TIMES CECILE CASSARD* was a portrait of a mother, but I didn't go all the way with that mother-child relationship. I quickly thought again about Bataille's book and decided I was going to use it. But not with the idea of doing a literal adaptation. I just wanted to take the story's structure, exactly as someone could read again Sophocle's telling of Antigone. Bataille's text has a mythic side. He exposes the incestuous situation in a very dry manner and very few scenes. Very quickly, it seemed evident to me that I didn't want at all to film early 20th Century folklore about brothels and red rouge. I transported the novel to today and tried to see what of the story's transgressive side persisted. *MA MERE* is an unfinished book which came out in the 60s after Bataille's death. Since then, we have passed through the sexual revolution, all those things which changed the relationship between morality and the body.

What about the idea of transposing the story to the Canary Islands, to a spot of industrial tourism?

It seemed to me like a location where it's easy to recognize the emblematic changes regarding the relationship between the body and sexuality in Western society. The Canary Islands are an industrial tourism spot that gets kind of scary with all those English and German chartered groups. They go there for a week to consume sun, alcohol and sex. They go wild for a short period then go back to "normal" life. I wanted to see how Bataille's characters would hold up against this background of industrial tourism. They could have resembled those tourists, in their addiction to alcohol and sex. But in fact, they're the opposite of that consumption of pleasure and libertinage which is finally very reasonable and gauged. In the works of Bataille, reason is usually something to escape.

Tourists have bodies afraid of getting old. But in Bataille's works, the characters try to transcend their mortal condition through sex...

Yes, appearance isn't a question for them. They're not simply waiting to die. In Bataille's works, death is often a sign of deliverance and almost achievement. Not in any case are his characters docile vis-à-vis death, the wait or the fear. That's what the mother tells the son at one moment : « Swear to me to continue to turn your back on the world of those who are patiently waiting for death to enlighten them. » In *MA MERE* and others texts by Bataille, the description of bodies is in terms of beauty and ugliness, desire, obstination in life. They fight with death, they decide the hour of combat. So there was a desire for the characters' bodies to resist much more than the tourists, that they not be caught up in the fear of growing older nor the claim of a triumphant youth. They are how they are, they have a certain freedom. But I didn't want to stigmatize those tourists either, come down hard on them for their pot-bellied, out of shape bodies lying on the sand. But I did want to present them as people asleep as opposed to the main characters who are awake and energetic.

In Bataille's text, everything which makes up the characters is linked to their sexual life. How do you bring such figures to life on the screen?

It was necessary to bring the story to life and, at the same time, not lose the metaphors of Bataille, where the story follows paths that aren't exactly of a psychological or naturalistic logic. The film has some realistic hooks, notably during the exposition scene where Pierre (Louis Garrel) meets his parents again. But little by little, it becomes more and more mental in its length. I really wanted the scenes to slip away from the reality of the characters. When Helene is found in the dunes, then immediately after, dressed and made-up, this is no longer about real time. This form of disembodiment was the forfeit for the success of the film. From which certain principles of direction: making somehow the composition chaotic, unpredictable, above all not slick, orderly, but instead spread out, syncopated... no travelling shots, but lots of pans and zooms, things very quick and very cut up, establishing shot, close up... I wanted a primitive grammar, to film this story like a children's drawing. Above all not make any beautiful movements for beautiful cinema. It would have been very dangerous to make a beautiful jewelry box out of this story. I just wanted to be closer to people, without ornamenting. Always with reflection. I wanted to hang a mirror broken by fiction.

How did you negotiate the necessity to root the characters in a concrete reality?

I really didn't want the film to have an erotico-chic side or zoom in on a privileged class with only sexual problems. The idea to expatriate the characters was a way of not needing to say a lot about them so that they would stand out enough. It's essentially their surroundings which make them exist. Also there was all the work with the actors so that their characters wouldn't be merely figures. That was very different depending on the character. Helene, the mother (Isabelle Huppert), is the only one whose dialogue rings of Bataille's language. That creates a sort of other-timeness, a distance that I found interesting since she's a character who has a sort of foresight about what's going to happen. The others are of a much more natural register. In Bataille's book, Hansi (Emma de Caunes) is a very rich heiress who lives in a manor with a maid. This literary device couldn't work in cinema or we'd fall into caricature. That's where the idea came from to have her run a hotel residence with Loulou, without defining too much what they do exactly.

In Bataille's book, Loulou is a woman. Why transform her into a man for the film?

Again, that was about a caricature inherited from erotic literature. Loulou is a false maid who is whipped by her mistress. I thought it would be exciting to transform her into a boy, to break the slightly systematic side of the masculine character in Bataille's work, surrounded only by women. Loulou is a backup for Pierre, who's no longer the only man who lives out a sexuality both put into danger and awakened by life. For the character of Loulou, I was inspired by the writing of Bret Easton Ellis or Dennis Cooper. He's an adolescent whose absolute passivity is a virtue, a threat to him and the people around him. Contrary to Pierre, who is so much at the mercy of the urges of his mother and Rea. Pierre resists, he doesn't give himself up right away. There's a progression.

And Marthe (Dominique Remond) and Robert (Olivier Rabourdin)? Did you create them?

They're mentioned once in the book. It was interesting to face them against Helene. Those domestics represent a strong moral position. They're on the side of reason and order. They're an obstacle to the sexual fiction. Pierre has to deliver himself to live out fully his abandonment.

« Perversion doesn't exist », says Hansi at one moment. That phrase could summarize your direction in one line. The spectator is never put into a voyeuristic position. He or she lives out the scenes inside.

The real danger would have been to think that all of these people were doing very wicked and very perverse things and to look at that in a slightly excited or scared way. Personally, I don't demarcate well perversion from goodness. I refuse to judge characters. But I hope it's drawn through the direction and the way I present the fiction, the « hypermorality » which Bataille spoke of. Meaning a morality which isn't subservient to the one which governs our society.

At the end of the film, I would like people to say these characters are neither monstrous, nor more perverse than ourselves, but that they're simply more free, more fully alive. That they've succeeded, but we're still prisoners of our reason. The novel is told by the son and I really wanted to be in the innocence of his regard. I say innocence in the sense where his regard is one of love, thus not open to attack. It's in the acuity of this regard that Bataille is transgressive, beyond all the sexual episodes which were reduced and would not have been at all interesting to show. I wasn't looking to show off. I didn't tell myself that I was going to film nude bodies like they have never been filmed in cinema. The screenplay had been misinterpreted. It described sex scenes in a very explicit manner. That wasn't because I thought of concentrating on obscene details. No. I just wanted the reader to understand very precisely what the characters do in terms of gestures. The real problem of Bataille's book is that he says a lot that they do « the worst things that can be done ». Except he doesn't say what they do! We get the feeling he's always playing with metaphors. But in cinema, what does this mean, « the worst things that can be done »? That depends on one's sexuality, on what a person esteems to be acceptable or not. Very quickly I realized that this was slippery ground and not very interesting. This called for a will to have sex scenes tell precise things. Not just limited to the fact of coupling up. I think each sex scene is very scripted and tells a lot of things about the characters and their relationships with one another. *The worst things* are along the fictional path of what the audience can imagine.

The liberty of bodies according to Bataille comes in part from the fact that they're not about seduction or representation...

Yes, these characters aren't asking to be looked at by others. That's freedom for an actor. Because despite everything, one of the definitions of an actor is to ask others to look at him or her. But here, they couldn't act that way. There's no seduction at stake here in the film. Only take what there is to take in the immediacy of relationships. The mother announces the character of Rea and the character of Rea arrives. And immediately they're in a taxi and they kiss. The same with Hansi. Not at any moment is there direction about meeting or seducing, that « I want you, I don't want you. »

The song "*Happy Together*" accompanies the death of the mother... This musical counterpoint musical rings of a Bataille joke, a pure and blasphemous laugh.

Yes, that's equivalent to the « infinite joyous laugh, the one that's dying out. » For me, the energy let out at the end is very Bataille. The death of the mother isn't an end, it's a surge. And this energy, this crazy laughter, carries the morgue scene, which is a sort of primitive scene in all Bataille's texts, « eroticism as an approbation of life until death ». It's the disarray of the living facing this force which the person who dies gives to the one who remains. It's a force passed through sex and desire.

The film stops abruptly, interrupted like Bataille's unfinished book...

Generally, Bataille worked a lot on not finishing, to stop his ideas from being etched in stone. I wanted to rediscover this feeling. If the shot lingered on Pierre, we would go back and forth in judgment: « Look at how guilty he feels! » But if we catch people off guard like that with a white screen, there's no moral point of view, just an « inner experience » to share.