

# Camille Claudel

**18<sup>th</sup> April 2020**

France 1988  
Directed by Bruno Nuytten  
With Isabelle Adjani, Gérard Depardieu

When the French sculptor, Auguste Rodin, received his first major commissions in the early 1880s, he gathered together a team of assistants to work alongside him in his studio, which Camille Claudel joined circa 1884. For Claudel, this was an intensive period of training under Rodin's supervision: in tandem, she accepted her first commissions and sought recognition as an independent artist at the Paris Salon. Claudel's works during this period attest to Rodin's influence but equally it is sometimes easy to mistake Claudel's skill for that of Rodin's in works on which she collaborated as his assistant. While Rodin recognised the young woman's talent from the outset, he also fell in love with her almost immediately. This period of happiness and shared passion came to an end in the early 1890s.

A photograph dating from 1899 shows Camille, then aged 45, in her studio, standing opposite *Perseus and the Gorgon*, which she had sculpted that year. The work reveals Claudel's by now classical influences and the passion she was driven by: the Gorgon's severed head is a self-portrait. This photo shows not only a sculptress capable of planning and producing a work of ambitious size, but also a woman scarred by the hardships that she had suffered. It was no easy task for a woman to become an artist in the mid-19th century; she had to cope with moral prejudice, gender-related restrictions in her artistic training and the prevailing male dominance in the Ministry of Fine Arts and the Salon juries. The photo is very different from the clichéd image of Camille's work and life - yet in 1913 she was committed to a mental asylum at her family's request. The following year, she was transferred to a psychiatric hospital, where she remained until her death in 1943.

*Musée Rodin, Paris*

Winner of five *César* awards, including a third Best Actress prize for Isabelle Adjani, this impassioned period biopic was evidently a personal project for its lustrous star, who co-produced and hired her one-time lover, celebrated cinematographer Bruno Nuytten, to co-write and direct. It is possible Adjani

identified certain character-traits she had in common with the tempestuous Camille, notably a tendency to commit wholeheartedly to her art at the risk of her own mental stability. For some this was little more than a vanity project, but there is real dramatic weight here thanks to combustible chemistry between two great actors and the script, co-adapted by Camille's own great-niece.

*Camille Claudel* is not a film for anyone cynical about the power of art to inflame our passions or drive people beyond the brink of obsession and madness. Whereas Depardieu plays Rodin as someone who is almost fatally indecisive, Adjani portrays Camille as a woman who rails against adversity and strives to seize control of her destiny. Yet there is something of the unwitting *femme fatale* about Camille - art is a vampire, the film seems to suggest, that mesmerises but saps life from artists and those around them. However, none pay as high a price as Camille herself.

As one would expect from Nuytten, the film is beautifully shot with exquisite and inventive camera-work. Nuytten evokes a tactile, sensual realm where sculpted art-works slowly come alive before our eyes in blizzards of marble.

Andrew Pragasam, *The Spinning Image*

*The film 'Camille Claudel' is more concerned with the sculptor's personality than with her art, and so it is hard to judge, from the evidence on the screen, how good a sculptor she really was. Certainly, the pressures against an independent woman artist were sufficient in her late-19th-century Paris that she would not have bothered to be a sculptor unless she absolutely had to. The first time we see her, she is grubbing in the dirt of a Paris construction-site, down there in the ditch like a burrowing animal, looking for good clay that she can use in her work. She straightens up and we see her as a very young woman: one of the mysteries of Isabelle Adjani's performance is how she is able so convincingly to span this woman's lifetime and seem to be the right age at all times.*

*Is it Rodin's rejection that drives Camille mad, or is it the fundamental contradiction between what she is, and the time she lives in? We follow her gradual decay, as she moves into shabby lodgings and goes without food or fuel to pay for her art. Adjani is possessed in this movie – her eyes always look haunted and, even in the moments of luxury and romance, there is the suggestion in her body-language of that feral creature down in the ditch, grubbing for clay.*

*Artistic biographies are notoriously difficult to film, although sculptors are a little easier to deal with, as we can at least see the knife shaping the block of clay. But 'Camille Claudel' is not really about sculpture anyway. It is about a woman who tried to place sculpture before everything, until she met a man who did the same thing.*

Roger Ebert

**Next film: 'Apostasy' on 9<sup>th</sup> May 2020, with AGM**

