

## Q&A WITH BRUNO DUMONT

### **Was there a specific event that sparked your desire to make this film, or was it the general atmosphere, the media noise?**

France is the story of a star woman journalist on a 24-hour news channel against the backdrop of a world thrown out of whack by the “almost parallel world” of media and social networks.

Human societies have lost portions of their normality and natural balances through the concentration inherent to a digital hyper society increasingly segregated along community lines. Its hypertrophied new thought leads to a confusion that, through inveterate digital rigorism, over-interprets reality, and further distorts and disrupts natural proportions and disparities.

The cause of all this is allegedly the new digital perspective—through media images and sounds, and their constantly reconstructed and distorted real—a perspective that now filters the real, and which hyper-connection inflames.

An emblematic social consequence of the cultural damages due to this overprotective and formalistic digital society is the example of the “yellow vest” (NB: worn by anti-government protestors in France): the ill-considered wearing of the yellow vest, a neon garment used for hyper visibility and heavy-handed protection, a vest that unfortunate schoolchildren are now forced to wear to for a regular stroll down the street. In short, everything is going off the rails through the overdevelopment of media and social networks. In their tumult lurks insanity.

Yet under the layers of hypermedia, the real still gurgles.

The North of France is like the pure real where cinema remains. Where actual good and actual evil are recovered and still exist.

Hasn't the natural fiction of the silver screen—cinema—reached all our digital screens, including the most resistant, which are those of the news media allegedly entirely devoted to the real? Hasn't reality become a fiction there, causing its users to suffer disorders brought about by such a divergent tropism?

Fiction's hold on everyday life (the real) is at work. Fiction is at work through all the digital screens in which the natural narration of images and sounds, always cut out (cutting) of the real and edited (editing), irremediably create a parallel world. This new fiction makes cinema spill out of the movie theater and its natural environment. The

dividing lines between reality and fiction are shattered, leading to a schizophrenia symptomatic of the new digital world we're in. Reality becomes a fiction, and the real, a parallel world.

There's a lot of "cinema" all over the place (and in every sense of the term—a lot of playacting, a lot of dreaming). Notably in the media industry.

The media industry is a mass industry that exploits to its own ends this infinite and unavowed possibility of fiction: the media real in the news is no longer so much the real—though it passes as such—in that it is arranged in such a way that reality takes the blame. It's a "halfway" real that makes up the world's new reality. Above all, it is a power of the media, exposed to the foibles of every power, in other words, carried away by all the "transfigurations" of the real.

The way journalists collaborate in this transfiguration of the real is tragic and heroic in that it is the human part inside of an ideological and mercantile industrial system. Journalists' sincerity is often painful to see, because they have so thoroughly adapted to the form of their function that they still believe they are free; free, while the reason they're on the air is precisely that they conform to the system that employs them at their task (or else are immediately cast away, as can be seen here and there).

All this media theater—and the star system it generates, with its televisual "cinematography" and "cinegenic nature"—says a great deal about modernity, about the parallel world of the real, and about each of us, for participating in it.

What a magnificent subject for cinema. Magnificent, because cinema is at stake here, because the imagination spills over into reality, but especially magnificent because the human still refuses it!

France de Meurs is the embodiment of this star journalist of the media system, a real cinema heroine, a tragic conscience, all illuminated, completely human.

***France is an allegory for a media system that has become a machine for making noise and creating buzz. You show that the representation of an event is far more important than the event itself, especially on television. The film expresses this with irony and cruelty. Is that so we become aware of it, or is it already irreversible?***

The public's well-known defiance of the media and journalists shows if not the awareness, at least the intuition that everyone has about a system that preaches the

real when it is submerged in fiction and its representations. The yawning gap and infinite complexity of the real, its “mayhem”—which we see every day out our window—is often constricted and oh so simplified by the “cinematic” prism of small screens and their hypertrophied, rigorist, and near insane digital thought. While in cinema, the mystification of the real (fiction) is a tacit pact with an enlightened spectator, which is not the case in television, because on TV the real is allegedly the real when it is represented. This is why TV is a breeding ground for fake news and the new conspiracy theories induced by the suspicion of fiction that the public clearly feels when faced with media inclined to pull the wool over their eyes. The flattening of reality in media gives rise to alternative and minority ideas, which are bucked up and liberated in this perfunctory and artificial new world.

Additionally, the opportunistically “virtuous” line of these media industries that diffuse the “zeitgeist,” the puritanism inherent to the new digital thought—gladhanding, “sanitized,” hyper “in” (and banishing the “fringe”), very “neat and tidy,” demagogically relying on polls—exacerbate the anger of a yellowing public enraged by this imposture. The imposture of extolling the real when these industries create fiction, and therefore communication, pure PR.

The spectacle of reality in the media reaches the public in a confusing manner. Television remains a kind of entertainment, even with the news, where paradoxically its fiction fascinates TV viewers, even delights them, through the fanciful, fictional aspect that arises from its “mise-en-scène” both of human interest stories and run-of-the-mill political, economic, and social stories that, like a series, are now equal to or even better than the best fiction plots.

In the narrative of news, the ambivalence of reality and fiction is complex, and the media happily stand out by their dose that more or less makes the poison.

Yet it remains that the media grind their own ideology into the real, opportunistically exploiting the news as a continual source of indoctrination, news that is exploited and produced according to the hierarchy of industrial values and for their permanent propaganda, simplifying reality to their norm: a fiction, therefore, but that of a reconstructed, schematic, geometric real.

In the media, the treatment of art and culture is like a “trademark,” a spirit, in other words that of the “aesthetically correct,” a label typical of this puritan mass cultural industry. Artistically minor works find themselves acclaimed (by the characterless journalists of a system whose function it is to acclaim) consecrating the vapid and consensual values of the industrial system itself and whose formatted works are the

expression—the PR—overflowing with pat good intentions, ideas, narratives, and moralizing inanities, all in keeping with the ideals and rigorism of this mass system and all devoted to its Cause and Academicism...to ultimately truly turn these works into the “Culture.”

In fact, a “subculture” that is the culture of today, where cinema, for example, is so degenerated that its most mediocre films and artists are praised to the skies and given the highest value by the media for being, however unwilling its authors may be, its expressions, its worthiest representatives, in other words, its menial bit players; where American cinema, with the indefectible “Christian puritanism” of its founding principles, remains the unrivaled model of culture, the acme, the myth, supported by hordes of Americanized media putting one over on audiences thus globalized to this mass subculture and all its heroes.

The true expression of reality through moving images and sound is indeed an art. An art whose artists are the only ones most capable of revealing the truths of our existences. An art whose origin is Cinema and whose pioneers are a large number of great filmmakers, and of whom many in history are the subsequent worthy representatives. Without art in cinema, the real stammers, it is distorted, degenerated, and disgracefully exploited to industrial and ideological ends.

Luckily, this “cinematic nature” of news, its fiction, is also its salvation. It still lends it the freedom of near-authentic representation of the real. The turpitude of the media demimonde is therefore not fatal and is only equaled by this alternative possibility of its art.

This dilemma is certainly that faced by heroes—which on our own scale we are forced to be—who always and everywhere must lead the honorable human battle. The media system is not deprived of them, thanks to the human portion that works within it: hence its heroine, who is fully cinematic, alternative, and paroxysmal, France de Meurs.

**Through France’s personal and professional tribulations, we realize that the film’s real subject is thoughtlessness. Nothing matters anymore, nothing is serious. Whatever we do and say, nothing has any importance anymore. Is the media racket responsible for this destruction of our values?**

The perpetual fiction of the real defuses everything because reality exists poorly in the bedlam of media and social networks. The natural balances are jeopardized, disproportion abounds, decadence looms... Apocalypse itself lies dormant in this

regime if fiction does not go back to its theater where religious fiction, for instance, would benefit from returning to the boards.

The subculture will have been responsible for fiction spilling over into the street, where hyper-violence spreads wildly because it is no longer sublimated and contained by true works of art and is underestimated and relegated by this culture of ubiquitous entertainment. One cannot but think—to inform, educate, and entertain—that it is the current media and its inveterate subculture that are at work in society today. Cultural poverty is the cause of everything and is spreading like the plague. The “Yellow Vests” were the mass media public, the very one the mass media created and hatched through the broadcasting of decades of degenerate images, the cause of their fury and madness...

Only an emerging consciousness, of which France is here the heroine and the sketch, would determine the process of elevation out of the system of media alienation.

Human nature ultimately gets through everything and here it is directly via cinema, which by its art transfigured us out of our barbarity. It isn't prohibited for television to lift itself up too. Under its splendor and its tuff, cinema is also capable of the worst. The issue is never aesthetic, it is always political: by wanting this or that, the rest follows... Today everything is institutionally established—the establishment—for the world to be the way it is, and especially for it to remain that way, through all the contradictory thrusts of laws, rules, and customs that interact in such a way that everything stays the same and immobilism prevails.

For the time being, television channels are in a vacuum: we always see the same people on them (artists, journalists, politicians, experts), all “pure consciences,” who invite each other back and forth, boast, hold forth, go in circles, and interbreed. This media enclosure is a resolutely industrial choice (of standardization) of which the “players,” who are conformist and in many cases paranoid, are the civil servants and the menial bit parts. This too is a fiction: by its reduction to a minority, elitist homogeneity, and its repetition; far from the real, from its diversity, from its large numbers, and its evanescence. The virtuous industrial addition of new minorities will further aggravate this new morally righteous segregation in its totalitarian fiction overflowing with contrition and commiseration.

**As the film progresses, the character played by Léa Seydoux slowly becomes aware that she is nothing but the (very attractive) reflection of this slipping of news toward a superficial representation. She understands this over the course of various ordeals that are like her stations of the cross. You turn her into a**

**heroine, who is at once superficial and moving, manipulative and sincere. How do you succeed in writing, then filming, such a crystallization of opposites?**

Human nature is full of opposites, in its depths and on the surface. To film it well is precisely to show it in its different aspects and all its shadowy layers without ever giving in to the uniform and sudden moralization of all its asperities to avoid suffering them. This puritanical vision prevents any accomplished form of cinematography and spiritual elevation. Here, this televisual cinema remains a form of alienation and diversion from our human reality.

France lights up before us, not with a very bright clarity, but a brightening, a constant brightening of her consciousness, in other words of our own. Not without trouble, not without tears. France embraces the vicissitude of human nature, to be that very nature that is here embodied cinematically before our eyes by Léa Seydoux who serves it, devoted to the germination of France, to its peak, which grows in the beating heart of the spectator, to escape the numbness of the real that makes us lethargic.

Human nature is full of opposites. The one thing therefore explains the other as the duplicity of an industrial mass system whose virtuous communication matches its failings, including in its inveterate corruption.

**You film France like a photo-novel heroine. In her life, nothing is “for real.” Her car has no doors, her apartment looks like a museum, everything is merely representation in a fanciful fiction that is too good to be true, like her romance with the stranger she meets at a clinic. One has the feeling that nothing is real in her life, everything is over-the-top, exaggerated, as if she were constantly the heroine of her own existence. Why?**

Because here, it's ostensibly cinema, and precisely to avoid thinking of the real at all costs! There is no more real, everything is transfigured. Everything is representation, not of what we see—which is usefully “fake,” “photo-novel”—and precisely for the view of the beyond it offers and that is not visible without it: a transfigured view of the entire impregnable expanse of the spiritual life it is founded in, the inner truth. The alteration is the mystery. The alteration is the process of this transfiguration of appearances into a representation of interiority of which the spectator is the seer. The film is not a chronicle of a journalist, but the universal bubbling of the existences of souls experiencing human life. France is the absolute heroine of our own life lifted to its munificence and armed with our turpitude, not without possible grace. Only the spectators see. Under this theater, they see the beyond of what is shown to them, however incomplete, so that

they fill it in. France does not exist. Instead, she invites the spectators to meditate about themselves and leave what they saw having been transformed.

**In the same manner, France only exists through her profession. She has no past, no family, no parents. She has a husband she scorns because she makes more money than he does and a child with whom she has no connection. Is this to better concentrate on her media image, which has become her only reality? Is she its unconscious victim or its submissive creature?**

It's to weigh her. France de Meurs is only half-human. She's a movie heroine, in other words a cinematic counterweight. A weight for the spectator's balance. Film spectators focus on what they see and what they ultimately assess. France de Meurs is a cinematic ectoplasm whose surprising and human appearances force the spectator to question the real of which she is nothing but a specter. If France were real, she wouldn't have any effect at all, she would rehash appearances. France disrupts the world she moves through precisely due to the artifice of her presence, the excess and immoderation of her breed. France de Meurs must break through the density of order, habit, and tradition that are at work for the system and condition us to it. Her malevolence is only the counterpoint to her goodness, which always resonates in her range and in so doing is the range of the spectator for whom she is an avatar.

France de Meurs is a star journalist of a 24-hour news channel. So much so—and only to this end—that she is relieved of the weight of normalcy from which she emancipated herself through the function of her notoriety. France has adopted the form of her function in the media system that employs her. Only her conscience lifts her out of it to reveal the tragedy that unfolds and of which she reveals the duplicity by being part of it. France is not a moral conscience—a pure conscience—but a human conscience struggling with the contradictions of her condition. Her elevation is not that of a hypostasis or a Saint, but indeed an entirely human elevation, with its remorse and its highlights. The film is not a breviary, nor a lesson in morals in the manner of the morally righteous people who make art like parish priests. To hell with pure conscience! France is only the present, in the moment that we see her. It is the spectator that is aimed at.

**Aside from her beauty, what led you to cast Léa Seydoux? What kind of actress is she? Cerebral or instinctive? How does her personality participate in developing France's character—if at all?**

France de Meurs and Léa Seydoux ate each other alive. Léa Seydoux's beauty is nothing compared to all the precision of her acting and its finish. Léa Seydoux harmonizes and is dissonant at every opportunity, and in every entrenched layer of the

ballets of human emotion. She is a very singular film actress who is note-perfect in her way of centering herself on her character. She is a very moving person, in equal measures in the dark zones and those of extreme brightness. No rehearsal, only a few takes are required for this lady. Her sense of humor and her natural funniness enriched France, who received a great deal of her affability.

**Blanche Gardin embodies the symbol of this media system: a grotesque, superficial woman. Like a character in the theater, a ridiculous creature. Did you choose Blanche Gardin because her personality, which is known to be lucid and dark, makes it possible to counterbalance her character's hysteria and keep it at arm's length? Is it to reinforce the film's allegory?**

Lou ate Blanche Gardin right up. The grotesque is so connected to intelligence in Lou that it says a great deal about the turpitude of elites so set on the alienation of the masses. In any system, each collaborator inexorably takes the shape of his or her function: Lou singlehandedly embodies a media system in which only ratings determine the value of acts, regressing in a kind of media barbarism by which the worse things are, the better it is. Blanche Gardin is admirable at portraying this apocalyptic slyness that amiably collaborates in every industrial system to achieve its aims. Hers is probably the most real character, and therefore the funniest, because she's so inside it all.

**How would you describe the character played by Benjamin Biolay?**

Fred de Meurs is the natural husband for the exceptional woman. A sensitive and astute man, "emasculated" by his wife's excessiveness and yet not made effeminate by it. Conflict is not to his advantage, so he intelligently keeps his distance. France's self-esteem will have eaten away at her love for her husband. Movie protagonists are inhuman in that they are the twins of the spectators who exert and elevate themselves through the film. They are pure excess and absolute voids. Thus, Benjamin Biolay's fine acting is very contemporary of a new gentle, subtle, and reclusive virility. Fred is also an abstraction in that he is missing a good deal of his masculinity, deliberately allowing spectators to fill their selves in him.

**After the ordeals, lucidity: France learns to be content with the present, to make do with it. This is when we return to the North region. Here, there is no more irony; only a moment of grace, even though we have just been close to horror. Do you think that the beauty of nature is the only thing that can repair us?**

We are the human endings of the fields and pastures, like hedges, waterways, animals, and wind, we are, from one little parcel to the next, all the parts of a whole whose unity

we feel, along with its vortex carrying us away. Cinema reveals this mystical connection that unites everything and everyone carved according to this same pattern. The North is a land of permanent grace where cinema elevates everything mystically, beneath its luminous light. Under its monumental exterior it displays the spirituality of the world, in unison with everything united. Thus in the North, France accomplishes the resolution of Evil of which she was only an echo, because hell lies here. How relieved she is before the monstrosity of the man, and the benediction of this woman, his wife. How relieved she is before the monstrosity of the monster, on which television feasts for the profound fiction that it cuts from the absolute evil of humanity, for which France cries sincerely, and the two sound and image engineers, heads down, feel the burn while all the beauty of the world, and its goodness is at their feet, and the wind stings. At every degree of Evil, in the North and in her “anywheres,” France is humanly sanctified, up to the death of her family, which is correlated with all the human deaths of which this devoured little neighbor is the fruit. Here, Nature has finally emptied itself of God to be clad exclusively in its original splendor; it is our consciousness that is finally illuminated, entirely through France, whose emancipatory mission this was, and of which the North was the site of glory. The North is where the residual interpenetration of the finite and infinite is so strong and visible, that one accepts how, in a human life, you are never done with anything, without always desperately desiring it. From this mystical joining of the finite and the infinite in the land and its inhabitants, hearts are consoled and elated. Thus, France demystifies cinema, only to re-mystify it in an illuminated state. Reparation is achieved, through cinema.

**What kind of instructions did you give the composer, Christophe? The film's music is devoid of irony, even rather lyrical. Was that your intention?**

More like how it used to be in film when the music was supposed to explain. Deep, the music sometimes reaches the very withdrawn places in our heart, that are not without touching the mind and the soul, out there in the mysteries where everything mingles and without any more clarity to those depths than we had already seen in *Joan of Arc*. The music was supposed to explain to us what was taking place in France's heart. Especially when it was difficult to understand or we had difficulty following. Christophe worked directly on the film's editing and the zones in question where the story's articulations were on edge. It is very psychological music. France takes human contradiction to its apogee, so she is often counterbalanced by music that is opposite to her actions and that already announces the internal palinode of her existence. Then France isn't human anymore, but a chant, the chant of humanity in the tumult of existence. Christophe understood everything; he had earlier explained (the writer) Charles Péguy having only read half the book. The musical lyricism that dominates through Christophe's work is the echo of that great tragedy drawn tight in the modern

life of this woman exerting herself. Grace seems to be the destiny, the fatality, whatever happens or comes about. A human and fated grace whose strings are literally taut by the end. The musical composition chants the uniting and melodic continual breath and blood of the heart of this woman carried to the edge of an unfulfilled love she senses, and of the death that takes her apart, as promised and returned as she is to the human glory of the ordinary and perseverance. France is finally humanized. And we are too, cinematically, through her.

Christophe died a few weeks later, having seen the final cut, with his final music, in the screening room. We were happy with his work: how his music explained everything.

## **CAST**

### **Léa Seydoux – *France de Meurs***

One of the most sought-after actresses of her generation in France and internationally, Léa Seydoux has won many awards including the 2013 Palme d'Or at the Cannes International Film Festival for Abdellatif Kechiche's *Blue is the Warmest Color*, which she shared with Kéchiche and co-star Adèle Exarchopoulos, and marked the first time that a Palme d'Or was also awarded to actors.

Alternating between auteur-driven and mainstream films, Seydoux' numerous credits include Christophe Honoré's *The Beautiful Person*, Bertrand Bonello's *Saint Laurent*, Arnaud Desplechin's *Oh, Mercy!*, Rebecca Zlotowski's *Dear Prudence* and *Grand Central*, Benoît Jacquot's *Farewell, My Queen* and *Diary of a Chambermaid*, Sam Mendes' *Spectre*, opposite Daniel Craig, Yórgos Lánthimos's *The Lobster*, and Xavier Dolan's *It's Only the End of the World*. She will soon be seen in Wes Anderson's *The French Dispatch*, the new James Bond film by Cary Fukunaga *No Time to Die*, and David Cronenberg's *Crime of the Future*.

### **Selected Filmography**

- 2021 **No Time to Die** by Cary Fukunaga
- 2021 **French Dispatch** by Wes Anderson
- 2021 **The Story of My Wife** by Ildikó Enyedi
- 2020 **France** by Bruno Dumont
- 2019 **Oh, Mercy!** by Arnaud Desplechin
- 2018 **The Command** by Thomas Vinterberg
- 2016 **It's Only the End of the World** by Xavier Dolan
- 2015 **Spectre** by Sam Mendes