

The Body's Night  
An Interview with Philippe Grandrieux



Philippe Grandrieux is the director of numerous documentary-essays and two features, *Sombre* (1999) and *La Vie nouvelle* (2002). These two features constitute the most advanced point of cinematic research, representing for today what the films of Jean Epstein were for the 1920s and '30s or Philippe Garrel's were for the '70s and '80s. Where does such an exigency come from? What horizon of cinema does it open?

The exigency comes from a radical position, a dynamic that seeks to return to the most profound and obscure sources of representational desire. Why make images? What purpose do they serve? What real necessity can animate them? Grandrieux's work confronts precisely these questions. There exists a need for images, and the cinema can measure it. In the history of representations, this need has usually been considered in terms of the sacred, or power, or collective symptom (the *zeitgeist*). But Grandrieux has another answer:

What do we seek, since the first traces of hands impressed in rock the long, hallucinated perambulation of men across time, what do we try to reach so feverishly, with such obstinacy and suffering, through representation, through images, if not to open the body's night, its opaque mass, the flesh with which we think—and present it to the light, to our faces, the enigma of our lives.<sup>1</sup>

Grandrieux's reflection belongs to the body's modernity—the modernity of Sigmund Freud, Antonin Artaud, Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, to name only a few—and thus returns the anthropological need for representation to a state of immanence. The image is no longer given as a reflection, discourse, or the currency of whatever absolute value; it works to invest immanence, using every type of sensation, drive and affect. To make a film means descending, via the intermittent pathways of neuronal connection, down into the most shadowy depths of our sensory experiences, to the point of confronting the sheer terror of the death drive (*Sombre*), or the still more immense and bottomless terror of the unconscious, of total opacity (*La Vie nouvelle*).

*La Vie nouvelle* explores all the ways in which we fail to understand the world: sleep, dream, fantasy, trance, delirium, the plunging of the main character (Seymour, played by Zach Knighton) into the incomprehensible logic of the Mafia, affective vertigo, the general confusion of bodies and perceptions. In order to grasp this ordinary, repressed dimension of human experience, it is clear that we must turn to completely different logics than those of the usual discursive economies,

invent other textures, forge other descriptive paths, employ instruments other than language and its normative links.

Such an exploration, however, should not be opposed either to reason or logic—that would be unreasonable and irresponsible, to neglect, forget and even foreclose what a century of Freudian analysis has taught us about the psyche, to continue to tell our little stories of action/reaction as if oblivious to the panic and the mysteries which we live. Like the films of Epstein and Garrel (but also Tod Browning and Jean Vigo), Grandrieux's tell no story. On the basis of a narrative schema they invent a mode of elaboration—of perlaboration, even—susceptible of acceding to the Id, that grand reservoir of drives which, in the thermally-photographed underground scene near the end of *La Vie nouvelle*, suddenly finds an infernal figuration worthy of El Greco or Dante.

To confront the unknowable, precisely what we don't want to know: because cinema is based upon the linking and unlinking of images, it can risk this. Nothing is nobler than to shatter a film upon such an ambition, such belief, such confidence: the cinema can manifest everything, it can be vertiginous like a coma, pitiless like a Hobbes treatise, limpid like the spectrograph of a corpse.

Such a groping journey into the unconscious (as Jean-Claude Polack explains well) takes the form of a nightmare.<sup>2</sup> But a collective nightmare, in no sense just some tiny, private reverie—part of the effective nightmare into which we have all been plunged since revolutionary ideas revealed their non-viable character and left the world without the slightest hope, cast into a ruin not only material but also moral. Why? What's happened? Why can't people live together? Why is there this war of all against all, general exploitation, ineluctable betrayals at the highest levels, and in the everyday a violence that occurs in every possible way to every possible person?

*La Vie nouvelle* offers an inventory of the state of the human psyche at the turn of the twenty-first century: hooked on sentimentality, dazed from unhappiness (“the wars of the twentieth century and the twentieth century as war,” as Czech philosopher Jan Patočka wrote in his *Heretical Essays*<sup>3</sup>), devastated by lucidity like Pier Paolo Pasolini's Medea yelling at the burning house where her young children are dying: “Nothing is possible any longer!” All the same, we absolutely cannot despair, since *La Vie nouvelle* exists, and since work of this quality shows us, despite everything, what beauty, profound intelligence and gestures of love the human spirit is still capable of.

■ Nicole Brenez: You're happy with your new film, **La Vie nouvelle**?

■ Philippe Grandrieux: Yes, very happy. It was made in such a dazzled state of perception, and to see that projected and recaptured gives me great joy.

■ Brenez: You've invented an unprecedented way of working. The experience involves accomplishing all levels of creation at the same time. Can you describe how **La Vie nouvelle** was made?

■ Grandrieux: Since the very first sensations, the very first ideas, the writer Eric Vuillard<sup>4</sup> and I worked by mail, constantly corresponding until the end. In the course of the film's genesis, Eric travelled half the world—he fled, by train, by bus, from Moscow to Peking, then to South America ... he needed to move around. So we were in permanent contact, but with much land and sea between us—an immense physical distance, but an intense proximity. Often we said that we should tear out scenes on land.

■ Brenez: You've shown me a few pages of the script; they look more like a prose poem than a standard scenario.

■ Grandrieux: Yes. Eric worked very energetically. He looked after the writing, and his style excited me a lot. My desire was sparked by these fragmented phrases. They didn't directly give me images but they gave me energy, the necessary intensity to produce sensations.

■ Brenez: What were your starting points?

■ Grandrieux: Once, during a journey to Sofia in Sarajevo, I saw a young G.I. with a young prostitute in a hotel. Their youth fascinated me—intact despite the chaos and disaster that reigned in Eastern Europe. I went home, spoke to Eric, and he went to Sofia for two or three days. So there was an extremely simple, basic narrative premise: a young man meets a young woman (Anna Mouglalis as Mélanie) and wants her for himself, in an Orphic way. Little by little the film was constructed in terms of intensity—relations of intensity between characters who could inhabit or haunt the film. For instance, we never exactly know whether Roscoe (Marc Barbé) and Seymour are friends, or father and son, or lovers... There's the impression that everything is moving all the time, like a kind of vibrant, disturbed materiology.

That's what we were looking for: a disquieting film, very disquieting, very fragile and vibrant. Not

a film like a tree, with a trunk and branches, but like a field of sunflowers, a field of grass growing everywhere. Here's the biggest rupture: in the way the film was conceived. It was conceived and developed on questions of intensity rather than psychological relations. My dream is to create a completely "Spinoza-ist" film, built upon ethical categories: rage, joy, pride ... and essentially each of these categories would be a pure block of sensations, passing from one to the other with enormous suddenness. So the film would be a constant vibration of emotions and affects, and all that would reunite us, reinscribe us into the material in which we're formed: the perceptual material of our first years, our first moments, our childhood. Before speech. That's the impulse—the desire—which led to the film.

■ Brenez: This intensity manifests itself in (among other ways) a disjunction on the plastic level: each sequence is visually very different.

■ Grandrieux: That comes from this sensation of something discontinuous, but at the same time gathered up in the same, unconscious force, the same drive that brings together very disjointed events. It happens via fragments, blocks of pure sound and image events. One day I would like to make a film where this process of fine fragmentation would occur in a more vigorous way, achieved not just at the level of the sequence but from one shot to the next.

■ Brenez: But that's already the case in **La Vie nouvelle**, with its art of kinetic match-cuts. Did you plan these?

■ Grandrieux: Yes—blindly.

■ Brenez: Like relationships established not in a causal but a caused way, gradually?

■ Grandrieux: Yes, like in differential calculus, from one discrete element to another discrete element. That's why there is this constant vibration of the film, because it comes from the structure. Those who reproach the film for its violence want to know a reason for that. But what kind of reason? It isn't a question that can be resolved on the level of a social or psychological morality, but a morality of forms.

■ Brenez: **La Vie nouvelle** is a milestone for many reasons, notably because it opens out the most extensive visual palette ever seen on screen, from the least identifiable blur to the most trenchant sharpness. Was that planned, or did you discover these optical nuances, this entire kinetic vibration, in the physical act of shooting?

■ Grandrieux: No, there was no plan. Every time, there was a totality invested in the body, every moment of every scene was invested as if it were the last possible image. Often I shot at such a frantic speed that the crew couldn't keep up with me. Sometimes the crew were stuck in one place, so I went out on foot alone and kept filming.

■ Brenez: There reigns in **La Vie nouvelle** an avidity, not in the sense of invidia but as an appetite—an appetite not for things but for sensory phenomena. Now, in terms of sensory exploration, a particularly striking moment is the track-in, down a hotel corridor and out a window, towards the urban landscape. It's as if one were seeing a frame for the first time: the image opens up, the frame opens, then the screen, the theatre, and finally us too, everything is opened and we gaze wide-eyed into this most intensive clarity. Did you foresee this shot?

■ Grandrieux: Yes. I knew since the location scouting in the hotel's corridors that I wanted this sensation of opening, a very large opening onto the city, resulting from camera movement.

■ Brenez: We really only grasp at that moment the extent to which **La Vie nouvelle** is a political film—although, with the opening images of the people of Sarajevo, it's there from the beginning. In **Sombre**, we only realized it at the very end, with those long travelling shots on the crowd at the Tour de France. A political film on the material, not sociological state of the world...

■ Grandrieux: ...on what links us very intimately to chaos, to disaster. Which takes us to the question of what it is to be human, this constant menace, a pressure so great that it envelops us.

■ Brenez: That landscape shot seems entirely new in your cinema, and it is almost like a visual condensation of what has been written for a century on disaster as the very symbol of civilization. The urban landscape represents what is familiar in its pure state, except we have never also considered it at the same time catastrophic. It's a little like the ruins in Roberto Rossellini's **Germany Year Zero** (1947), except that here there is no need for a war—it's daily war, it's Europe.

■ Grandrieux: Yes, all that is given in the truth of Sofia.

■ Brenez: But it's also the exacerbation of any suburb in any city, any oppressive housing estate which drives people crazy with unhappiness, which mutilates them and robs them of themselves.

■ Grandrieux: And the travelling shot comes after a long sequence where a client strikes Mélanie—after that, there's a possibility of understanding that in each of these little windows the same story is happening. Or maybe some other story, but always this story of what it is to be human, i.e. confronted with alterity, with the Other who is infinitely possible and yet infinitely closed and inaccessible, no matter what one does. And it's from there that one journeys, works, loves, fucks...

■ Brenez: Or survives, or not...

■ Grandrieux: Or goes mad, and starts shooting people in Washington...

■ Brenez: Or in Palestine. It's the human condition.

■ Grandrieux: Yes, Eric and I worked with this theme. Eric sent me a very beautiful note where he suggested the film should be "a documentary on the living."

■ Brenez: And rightly so, because it strikes me that in both your films—totally so here—the basis of your work is the body, drives, the being-ness of things. Because you possess this knowledge of cruelty, you are the only person who has won the right to reintegrate sentimentality. This is at work in **Sombre** in the character of Claire (Elina Löwensohn), but in **La Vie nouvelle** it's a question of the relations between young people, and what allows you to depict them as angels. Sentimentality has probably been the most taboo dimension of representation in modern cinema, but you have finally reintegrated it, because you situate yourself at the antipodes of that which produces an effect of perfect, affective plenitude. The first ensemble of sequences in the nightclub, divided in two by the angelic apparition, treats the two possible versions of a relation to the body, the terrestrial and the celestial, like recto and verso.

■ Grandrieux: Yes, two faces of the same coin.

■ Brenez: Or the same desire: we only ever love a body according to this doubled, twisted relationship. You manage to capture the totality of desire in a single sequence, everything appears and everything disappears, leaving us as abandoned and unhappy as the character.

■ Grandrieux: Indeed, that's the result ...

■ Brenez: **La Vie nouvelle** is a film devoted to the inaccessible, but at the same time it offers us everything. It is a film about abandonment, but it never becomes melancholic, which would be the usual way of depicting loss.

Grandrieux: There's no melancholy. The film was made under the sign of enormous heat, vital energy, the blazing sun. That surpasses desire, it is even more archaic and formative; it comes from the sun itself, from a star beyond us that we aspire to, in a totally chaotic way. This aspiration towards great energy and happiness, it infused the film, which we made in a wild state of joy, six weeks of shooting like a single stroke, without a second thought [*arrière-pensée*].

Brenez: Without "deeper motive" [*pensée de derrière*] either, as Nietzsche would say.<sup>5</sup> But you mentioned blazing sunlight, while in the film there are no shots of the sun, only darkness, twilight or dawn—sometimes it's hard to tell.

Grandrieux: The sun remains hidden, we never show it. But it's there as something we chase, which dazzles and blinds us, which gives us an appetite to live. In this sense, there is no melancholic temptation, nothing is truly lost, everything is available immediately—things can disappear but they aren't lost. It's like a multiple look, which never ceases to sweep up the pieces, and proceeds without any nostalgia.

Brenez: In the greatest affective films—Nicholas Ray's, for example—the fusion not only of characters but also phenomena is projected towards the horizon. But in your work this fusion is already given. Creatures can be separated, but something more profound links and keeps them together.

Grandrieux: It's a vibrant presence. My perception of the film was physical and intimate, like for a shaman. I just had to be a conductor for the flux, the music, the rhythms—the body exists to transmit all this.

Brenez: We see this in the match cutting that whirls around like a dervish, in the dance scene between Boyan (Zsolt Nagy) and Mélanie. Moreover, the anthropologists and filmmakers who have worked with shamans, like Raymonde Carasco, tell us that for the shaman, it's a matter of transforming this world into another, but in the most precise way. Trance is often considered as a state of confusion, but in fact it's the contrary—the access to a much clearer perception.

Grandrieux: Yes, because it's the perception of the Real. The film is probably troublesome in this regard, because it belongs on the side neither of the Symbolic nor the Imaginary. It's created within the framework of the Real, in the sense that it develops a perception of the world which is of an immediate order,

a "first look." Instantly the whole world is given, without anything needing to be said, without any discernible distance, no gap wedged. A first look—of course this is a pure phantasm—belonging to a child. Everything's there, all at once, a totality is seized. When I talk about vibration, that's what I'm trying to convey.

Brenez: So, a "first look" which demands a "last image"! Of course, when I say last image, I mean that in the sense of an ultimate image, necessary from start to end. Jean-Luc Godard said that he looks for the first image, the matrix that engenders all the other images. With you, it's the last image, in the sense that there is no other image possible.

Grandrieux: Yes, an image that is totally absorbing—and devastating when you find it.

Brenez: What is the process used in the thermic camera sequence? Is the thermic footage printed in negative?

Grandrieux: No. The thermic camera is used by the military, but above all by engineers in order to gauge the resistance of materials. It records the different levels of temperature in a body. You can set the camera to record particular temperatures of your choice: for example if you set it between ten and eighteen degrees, variations in temperature will be indicated by variations in shades of grey.

Brenez: But usually, thermic shots are in color?

Grandrieux: Yes, and afterwards you can alter the colors. But the principle is that it is no longer light which makes an impression. With infrared photography, you must use an infrared light, a beaming light that illuminates the bodies, and the reflection of that registers on the celluloid. But here, there is no light. It is the animal warmth of the bodies which imprints itself on the celluloid. The scene was shot in total darkness; no one could see anything except me through the camera. All the participants were in an absolute blackout, and they moved around in a deranged state.

Brenez: How did you direct them?

Grandrieux: There were eighty people. I had built a labyrinth inside the Fine Arts Gallery basement at Sofia. I told everyone simply to enter it. The noise they made was deafening; some of them were very scared.

Brenez: A bit like a collective performance piece?

Grandrieux: Yes, that was our idea from the outset. Eric and I had worked on a project called **A Natural History of Evil** which began

like that, a scene in which the viewer too would understand virtually nothing. They would see bodies caught up in some kind of ritual to which we would have no access, whose codes are unknown. A very archaic ritual, perhaps with glimpses of body parts, something which would be happening and repeating weirdly. I wanted total night—to work in the deepest recesses of night.

Brenez: At the start of the film, we are plunged into a state of dread, corresponding to the scene of the little, blind boy in **Sombre**. So, straight away, you put your films into a grave state of peril. The pathetic effects which follow are going to have to be much stronger than this already terrifying opening scene. And your films do manage to go much further than their initial set-ups—the blind groping in **Sombre** or the horror of **La Vie nouvelle**. Do you try to kick off from an "emotional launch pad," where you indicate the tonality of the whole piece and thus the tenor of our response to it?

Grandrieux: An emotional launch pad, that's what it is. It's a sensation that has been researched, but also forgotten. For example, after I'd started shooting this scene of people in darkness, I altered the thermic light level. But the image still didn't seem strong enough, so I slowed down the speed and shot at eight images per second. And this was when I felt it started to vibrate. I was far away and I moved up closer. When we look for something in a scene, there is an intense relation to forgetting: what you have to avoid at all costs is a simple execution of what you've pre-planned.

Brenez: You're looking for the physics of the scene.

Grandrieux: Yes, not its pre-given content. In this scene, it wasn't just a matter of filming people moving around in darkness. The reason I film as I do is because if the scene isn't unmade, destroyed, attained or ruined during shooting, I experience such depression, boredom and disgust—it's incredibly physical—that I just can't go on filming. For me, the moment when it becomes possible to shoot is the moment I am no longer a slave to order, to some necessity to execute the scene. The totality of the body, an entire affective framework, must be engaged.

Brenez: It's like that the whole time?

Grandrieux: For **La Vie nouvelle**, yes. If not, I didn't shoot.

Brenez: Were the actors able to follow you? Were they empathetic?

Grandrieux: Yes, they were all impressive, the way they abandoned

themselves to the film. It would have been impossible to do it otherwise.

■ Brenez: How did you work with Eric and Marc Hurtado of the group Etant Donnés on the soundtrack?<sup>6</sup>

■ Grandrieux: I think their films are magnificent, and we have a lot in common. All three of us have worked with Alan Vega. They'd made a CD based on texts by Georg Trakl, of whom I'm an absolute fan.<sup>7</sup> A character in one of my film projects is named Trakl. So, there was an enormous connivance between us. I sent them a first draft of the script and asked them to compose the music based on what they read. They sent back three or four hours of music and sounds. I shot the film with this material, it was played loudly on set. And it was also present all through editing, as a layering of sound, a sonic structure. Then, once Françoise and I had some things in place, Eric and Marc returned to Paris and we worked together for fifteen days. During this time everything was recomposed in a very precise way, scene by scene, on the one hand retaining some of the initial sounds, on the other hand finding new ones... The sound editor, Valérie Deloof, is terrific. A sound design or sonic sculpture is constructed using direct sounds, sound effects, ambient sounds, and the sounds provided by Etant Donnés. As they composed, we mixed almost immediately in order to judge the form being created. They would re-listen, change certain elements... They were unbelievable, fantastically generous. They came with their sounds, their sonic space, and they gave it to the film.

■ Brenez: Ultimately, the work doesn't resemble their own soundtracks. They have entered into your universe, even if they too deal with intensity... What does the film's final scream express?

■ Grandrieux: A devastation, but also perhaps a rebirth. There it is, the "new life."

■ Brenez: Like **Sombre**, **La Vie nouvelle** is traversed by flashes, by certain high moments of cinema—not at all in terms of influences or reproductions, but all the same you connect with certain images.

■ Grandrieux: You film with a history behind you. It's hard to film as if Dreyer, Murnau and Lang had never existed. But I never think of antecedents as I film a shot; I couldn't. I don't have a cinephile background. My cinematic culture was formed late. When I was eighteen, nineteen, I'd only seen regular films like **The Guns of Navarone** (1961)—which, by the way, I liked a lot! But I had an urge to

make films and, in the course of my studies at INSAS in Brussels, I discovered three films a day, seeing things that I had no idea existed. I remember **Moses and Aaron** (1975) by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, that was a blow, an aesthetic and political shock. I still recall it today. Suddenly—cinema.

■ Brenez: A reinvention of thought—not discourse, thought.

■ Grandrieux: And what came through bodies, fragmented bodies, legs, the extremely flat earth, the sunlight at its zenith, the brutality of the shots. All of that struck me. I was motivated. My cinephilia has constructed itself in a fragmentary way, but it's not like there is cinema on one side, and literature and philosophy on the other. All of it is part of the same question, the same attentiveness, the same enterprise.

■ Brenez: Exactly. When I left a screening of your film, I said to myself: "At last, the equivalent in images of Jean Epstein's great texts." Epstein is the one whose thought on what cinema can be and do went furthest—I mean in terms of completely reorganising our categories, in particular our perceptual categories. And his final texts, highly political, are as remarkable as they are unknown. For me, **La Vie nouvelle** is the first film shot inside the human body—not only physiologically, but also in the sense of showing everything that dwells within us. I know of no other filmmaker who has attempted this, apart from Epstein in his writings.

■ Grandrieux: Well, Epstein is fantastic. I remember his text recollecting Trieste, a grand hotel where he came across a screen, deckchairs ... the light faded, the projector began, and the chairs started trembling... The image trembled, everything trembled, he was under the impression that the trembling of the images had spread to the hall. In fact, it was an earthquake! That's great. It's terrific that cinema can have a place within experiences that are so concrete, so physical—in the presence of a body, this mass through which things are thought.

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Translated by Adrian Martin

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1  
Philippe Grandrieux, 'Sur l'horizon insensé du cinéma', **Cahiers du cinéma hors série: Le siècle du cinéma** (November 2000).

2  
Cf. Jean-Claude Polack, 'La Forme Cauchemar' ("The Nightmare Form"), in Nicole Brenez (ed.), **La Vie nouvelle: nouvelle vision** (Paris: Editions Leo Scheer, 2003).

3  
Jan Patočka (ed. James Dodd & trans. Erazim V. Kohak), **Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History** (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1996).

4  
Eric Vuillard is the author of the novels **La Chasseur** (Paris: Editions Michalon, 1999) and **Bois vert** (Paris: Editions Leo Scheer, 2002). He also worked on the crew of **Sombre**.

5  
This sense of the term *pensée de derrière* derives from Pascal: "One must have deeper motives and judge everything accordingly, but go on talking like an ordinary person." From A.J. Krailsheimer (ed. & trans.), **Pensées** (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 53.

6  
Etant Donnés comprises Eric and Marc Hurtado, who are collaborative musicians, filmmakers, poets and performers.

7  
Georg Trakl (1887-1914) was an Austrian Expressionist poet. His work is collected in Daniel Simko (trans.), **Autumn Sonata: Selected Poems of Georg Trakl** (Kingston: Moyer Bell, 1989).

