

ALBERT SERRA

soleil couché

Emmanuel Burdeau



La Mort de Louis XIV (prix Jean-Vigo 2016), filmée par Albert Serra telle une comédie macabre, ironique et cruelle, met en scène un Roi-Soleil souffrant, grimaçant, à la fois protocolaire et grotesque, magistralement interprété par Jean-Pierre Léaud (palme d'honneur au Festival de Cannes). Sortie en salles le 2 novembre.

■ Cet été est sorti *Rester vertical*, dans lequel Alain Guiraudie met en scène un cinéaste, prénommé Léo, que la poursuite de désirs à la fois tyranniques et labiles détourne de l'écriture d'un scénario. Lorsque s'achève l'histoire, Léo n'a toujours pas de film. Mais au moins sera-t-il demeuré droit face à qui le tient.

Le nouveau film d'Albert Serra, assez librement inspiré des *Mémoires de Saint-Simon* et de ceux du Marquis de Dangeau, s'intitule

la Mort de Louis XIV et raconte ce qu'énonce son titre. C'est à un acteur nommé Léaud – prénom Jean-Pierre – qu'a été confié le rôle d'un Roi-Soleil qu'on ne voit guère se lever pendant les quelques semaines qui séparent son apparition, poussé dans une chaise dans un jardin de Versailles, de sa mort un certain 1^{er} septembre 1715. Le Catalan a toujours eu un vif penchant pour les hommes couchés, allongés dans l'herbe ou flottant dans l'eau, vautés sur une banquette ou renversés dans une carriole. Ce coup-ci c'est différent : on quitte si peu la chambre que « Rester horizontal » ferait un excellent sous-titre, littéral et un rien moqueur comme l'est ce film, le plus simple mais non le moins mystérieux de son auteur.

Lorsque l'histoire s'achève, Louis XIV meurt, mais au moins sera-t-il resté digne et respecté. Pas un instant, il n'aura cessé d'être l'objet de la sollicitude empressée de ses valets et de ses médecins, en tête desquels se tiennent les inamovibles Blouin

(Marc Susini) et Fagon (Patrick d'Assac), le merveilleux Henri de l'*Inconnu* de Guiraudie à Serra, le jeu se joue entre un corps d'homme – là debout, là couché – et les attentions qu'il recherche, suscite d'une part, et d'autre part entre les attentions et les progrès d'une histoire dérobant aux canons de ce qu'on a coutume d'attendre d'un scénario.

Le sensualisme, l'érotisme, la crudité de Guiraudie sont connus. Serra, à l'inverse, est entré dans le cinéma avec le tandem tendrissant mais chaste d'un vieux maître d'un jeune gros en promenade dans le paysage – *Honor de Cavalleria*, 2006 – en attendant son troisième film, *Histoire de la mort*, pour montrer une étreinte. Or l'absence s'impose, et pas seulement à la première du rapprochement avec *Rester vertical* : plus le Catalan avance, plus il s'enfonce proche des corps ; et plus il s'en rapproche, plus son cinéma conquiert un sensualisme paradoxal.

Tous les visuels/all images:

Albert Serra. « La mort de Louis XIV ». 2015.

Avec/with Jean-Pierre Léaud (Louis XIV).

À-contre/droit: Irène Silvagni (Mme de Maintenon),

Bernard Belin (Mareschal), Jacques Henric (Le Tellier)

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paysage à un corps devenu pareil à un paysage et placé sous le regard d'autres corps qui, au fond, n'en savent pas davantage qu'avant. Autour de Louis XIV, le même conciliabule ahuri reprend donc, le même concert de chuchotis un tantinet pincés, le même foisonnement d'hypothèses fantasmagoriques avancées avec gravité. Profond comique de Serra. Du bruissement des feuilles à celui de la Cour, ce cinéma continue de susurrer dans un sourire. Il a juste changé d'inquiétude. C'était : « Vers où aller ? » C'est maintenant : « Comment guérir ? ». Les réponses, elles, demeurent : aventureuses, au petit bonheur, sinon au doigt mouillé.

J'ai mentionné *Honor de Cavalleria* et *le Chant des oiseaux*, laissant de côté le long-métrage suivant, celui qui précède *la Mort de Louis XIV*, *Histoire de ma mort*. C'est là qu'a lieu la transition de l'extérieur à l'intérieur et des paysages aux corps. Et si point de bascule il y a, il se situe dans les parages de cette carcasse de bœuf autour de laquelle le film s'attarde, tandis que la figure de Dracula s'apprête à supplanter celle de Casanova. Point de bascule ou d'égalité, car, à la vision de *la Mort de Louis XIV*, il apparaît que la différence n'est pas si grande, aux yeux de Serra, entre la jouissance noire du premier et l'hédonisme ricanant du second.

Ce qui se joue autour de Louis XIV tient en effet autant de la cérémonie funéraire que du festin aux chandelles. Après les grenades éventrées par Casanova, les boudoirs dégustés au-dessus de la cuvette et l'oie arrosée de vin – le « R-Oie », persiflait-il –, *la Mort de Louis XIV* est une nouvelle gourmandise teintée de vampirisme, un autre film buccal. Messes basses, diagnostics à peine audibles, bouches qui se querellent sans jamais hausser la voix. Le Roi, quant à lui, tire la langue et fait se pâmer la Cour quand il lui arrive d'avaler un biscotin, de boire une goutte de vin d'Alicante ou de réclamer un

chaud-froid de volaille. On lui présente une tablette remplie d'yeux en verre. Puis ce sont des œufs sur des coquetiers montés en cercle. Ressemblance des choses, assonance des noms. *La Mort de Louis XIV* se regarde du bout des lèvres et se goûte avec les yeux.

ROSE ET FUMIER

Le ballet est feutré, l'agonie même paraît un raffinement. Ce n'est pas la mort qui va bousculer les protocoles de la Cour... Gagnée par la gangrène, la jambe gauche du Roi devient noire, la puanteur monte sans doute – on le rapporte –, mais les uns et les autres gardent leur tenue. Les médecins s'extasieront encore quand, de son cadavre, ils extraieront les intestins de Louis XIV : leur longueur prodigieuse est celle d'un être d'exception et d'un grand mangeur... Ce ton de comédie macabre, ce paradoxe d'or et de merde ont toujours appartenu à Serra. Mais la délectation morbide s'exprime avec une nouvelle force depuis *Histoire de ma mort* : ses films sentent, désormais. Quoi ? Un mélange de rose et de fumier.

Si le Roi demeure quasi intouchable, c'est qu'il a deux corps, comme on sait, l'un réel et l'autre symbolique. En l'occurrence, on dirait plutôt que le Louis de Serra a deux corps dont chacun est réel et symbolique. D'un côté, il est interprété par la modernité cinématographique même, Jean-Pierre Léaud, à qui il suffit d'un infime tremblement de joue, d'une once de sourire, d'un index soudain levé pour que remontent à la mémoire tous les films où il fut génial. Et, de l'autre, le devenir-cadavre n'enlève rien à l'énigme du Roi, au contraire. On ne saura rien, ou si peu, de ce corps, et l'on n'en voit à peine plus, même si on ne cesse pas d'en parler. Pendant une heure cinquante n'auront été émis à son sujet que des jugements hasardeux, des interprétations. Une des causes en est la médecine d'alors,

UN CORPS-PAYSAGE

Dans les premières minutes de *la Mort de Louis XIV*, interrogé par le Roi à leur sujet, le médecin Fagon se risque à comparer la nudité des Marquises de Cujas et de Saxe à des jardins où l'on aime flâner. Un charlatan monté de Marseille et interprété par le Casanova d'*Histoire de ma mort*, le vénérable Vicenç Altaïo i Morral, parlera de la vérole comme d'une rose. De gigantesques peruques fendues en leur milieu donnent à Léaud un air d'arbre ébouriffé, du genre de ceux qu'on croisait dans *Honor de Cavalleria* ou *le Chant des oiseaux*. Don Quichotte et Sancho Pança d'abord, les Rois Mages ensuite étaient, dans ces deux films, des corps égarés dans des histoires et des paysages trop vastes pour eux. Ils ignoraient la route à suivre et les résolutions à prendre. Peut-être ne savaient-ils même pas si leur légende était réelle ou fictive. Cette ignorance essentielle au cinéma de Serra, *la Mort de Louis XIV* en déplace l'objet du



réduite à des conjectures qui, vues d'ici, amusent et effraient aussi. Une autre est le respect dû au Monarque, son caractère sacré : face à lui, les médecins n'osent pas. Vérité du travail de Serra sur les figures de l'Histoire, de la mythologie et de la littérature : la violence qu'il exerce à leur égard n'a d'égale que la décrépitude à la fois confortable et sans remède dans laquelle elles-mêmes aiment à se maintenir. Il ne s'agit pas de mettre à mort les légendes. Il s'agit d'étrier ce qui, en elles, a toujours été complaisamment lié à l'expérience de la fin.

Peut-être le sait-on : ce qui est un film fut d'abord conçu – le projet capota – comme une installation présentée dans le cadre de la rétrospective que le Centre Pompidou consacra à

Serra il y a trois ans. Le cinéaste avait alors entamé un autre rapprochement, avec le monde de l'art cette fois, à travers la présentation des 101 heures des *Trois Petits Cochons* à la Documenta de Cassel. Il a depuis alterné films et expositions, montrant dernièrement *Singularity* à la Biennale de Venise. Cette première impulsion a laissé des traces : ce film, dans lequel des personnages de tous horizons – dont les écrivains Olivier Cadiot et Jacques Henric – commentent et circulent à leur guise autour d'un lit, met en scène des spectateurs libres de leurs mouvements face à une image qui, elle, ne bouge presque plus.

La Mort de Louis XIV apparaîtra alors comme un film-installation dans lequel l'art

fait semblant de se pencher au chevet du cinéma moderne pour mieux accompagner, sinon hâter, son trépas. Ou peut-être Serra a-t-il voulu, à l'inverse, montrer combien les gesticulations et les murmures demeurent impuissants devant le mystère incarné du cinéma. Qui s'apprête à manger ou à guérir qui ? C'est toujours l'histoire des trois petits cochons... L'ironie et la cruauté fonctionnent dans les deux sens, la délectation morbide aussi. La mort ne livre aucun secret, et Fagon peut lâcher l'ultime phrase, délicieusement ambiguë : « Messieurs, nous ferons mieux la prochaine fois ». ■

Emmanuel Burdeau est critique de cinéma, membre de la rédaction de Mediapart.



Setting Sun

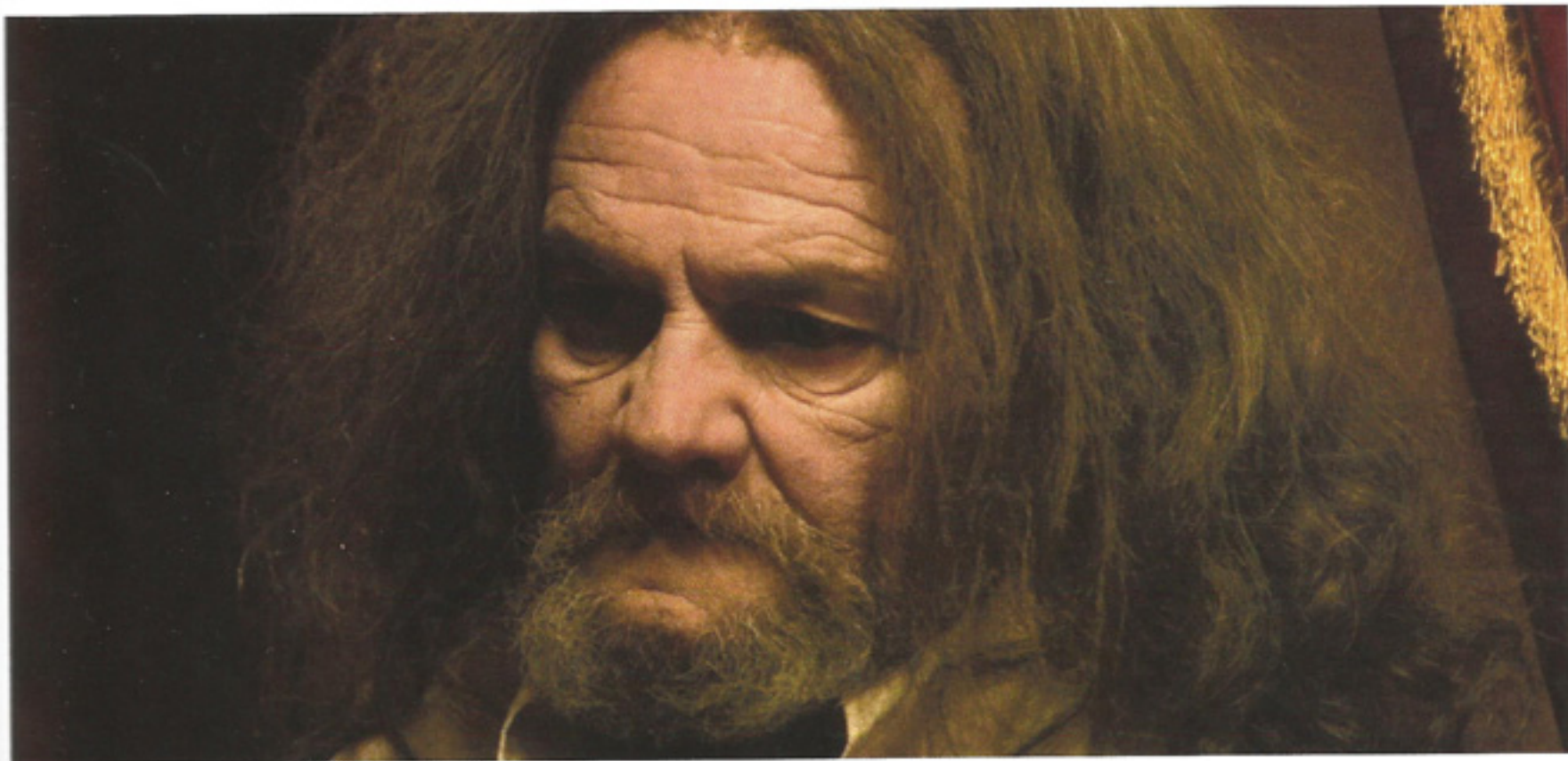
Filmed by Albert Serra like a macabre comedy around the death of the Sun King, *La Mort de Louis XIV* (Prix Jean-Vigo 2016) brings us a sick and grimacing Louis, a figure of protocol yet also grotesque, superbly played by Jean-Pierre Léaud (Palme d'Honneur at Cannes). The film is on theatrical release in Paris as of November 2.

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This summer saw the release of the film *Rester vertical*, in which a director by the name of Léo is distracted from writing his script by desires that are both tyrannical and labile. When the story ends, Léo still has no film. But at least he has remained upright in relation to the desires that drive him.

The new film by Albert Serra, freely inspired by Saint-Simon's *Memoirs* and those of the Marquis de Dangeau, called *La Mort de Louis XIV*, relates exactly what its title says. It is an actor by the name of Léaud—Jean-

Pierre—who plays the role of a Sun King whom we seldom see rise during the few weeks that separate his appearance, pushed in a chair around the garden at Versailles, from his death on September 1, 1715. The Catalan director has always taken an interest in men lying on the grass or floating in the water, lounging on a banquette or leaning back in a carriage. This time it's different: we spend so little time out of the

« La mort de Louis XIV ». 2015.
Avec/with Marc Susini (Blouin), Patrick d'Assunção (Fagon), Bernard Belin (Mareschal). (© Capricci)



chamber that “Staying Horizontal” would make an excellent, literal subtitle, and a slightly mocking one, as is the film itself, which is the director’s simplest but not least mysterious work.

When the story ends, Louis XIV dies, but at least he will have remained dignified and respected. Not for a moment does he cease to be the object of the close ministrations of his valets and doctors, led by the impassible Blouin (Marc Susini) and Fagon (Patrick d’Assunção, the marvelous Henri in *L’Inconnu du lac*). From Guiraudie to Serra, there is an ongoing game between a man’s body—there erect, here supine—and the attention that he seeks or inspires on one hand, and on the other between those ministrations and the unfolding of a story that bucks the standard expectations we bring to any screenplay.

A BODY-LANDSCAPE

The sensuality, eroticism and also the rawness of Guiraudie’s work are well known. Serra, in contrast, entered the world of cinema with the endearing but chaste tandem of a thin old man and a young fat man walking in the countryside—*Honor de Cavalleria*, 2006. It was not until his third film, *Histoire de ma mort*, that he showed an embrace. But it is clear, and not only if we compare this piece with *Rester vertical*: the further the Catalan goes, the closer he gets to bodies, and the closer he gets to bodies, the more paradoxically sensual his cinema becomes.

In the first minutes of *La Mort de Louis XIV*, questioned by the king on this subject, the doctor Fagon ventures to compare the nudity of the marquises of Cujas and Saxe to gardens where it is pleasant to idle. A charlatan who has come up to Marseille, played by the Casanova of *Histoire de ma mort*, the venomous Vicenç Altaïo i Morral, speaks of the pox as a rose. Gigantic wigs split down the middle give Léaud the appearance of a tousled tree, the kind you would see in *Honor de Cavalleria* or *Le Chant des oiseaux*. In these two films Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, first of all, and after them the Wise Men are bodies lost in stories and landscapes that are too big for them. They do not know what road to take or what resolutions to adopt. Perhaps they do not even know if their legend is real or fictive. This ignorance is essential in Serra’s cinema. In *La Mort de Louis XIV* it is displaced from the landscape to a body that has become like a landscape and placed under the gaze of other bodies that, ultimately, do not know any more than they did before. Around Louis, then, we see the same confused confabulations, the same concert of slightly awkward whispering, the same welter of wild speculations put forward with gravitas. This is Serra’s rich comedy.

From the rustling of leaves to that of the court, his cinema continues with its smiling whispering. All that has changed is the nature of the disquiet: from “Where should we go?” to “How can I get well?” The answers, as ever, are hazardous, seat-of-the-pants stuff, finger in the wind.

I mentioned *Honor de Cavalleria* and *Le Chant des oiseaux*, leaving aside the long film that followed, the one before *La Mort de Louis XIV*, *Histoire de ma mort*. That is where the transition from exterior to interior, from landscapes to bodies, occurs. And if there is a switching point, then this is in the environs of that carcass of an ox on which the film dwells, as the character of Dracula is about to replace that of Casanova. A switching point or point of equality, because, judging by *La Mort de Louis XIV*, there is not such a great difference in Serra’s eyes between the dark pleasure of the former and the sniggering hedonism of the latter.

What is played out around Louis is as much candlelit feast as funeral ceremony. After the pomegranates gutted by Casanova, the *boudoirs* savored over the basin and the goose washed down with wine—“king goose,” he mocked—this death of Louis XIV is a new delight tinged with vampirism. Another buccal film. Low murmurings, barely audible diagnoses, mouths that quarrel without ever raising their voice, while the King puts out his tongue and has the court in ecstasy when he manages to swallow a small biscuit, to drink a drop of wine from Alicante or call for a poultry chaudfroid. He is offered a tablet full of glass eyes. Then come eggs in a circle of eggcups. The play of resemblances, the assonance of names. *La Mort de Louis XIV* is a film to watch with the lips and taste with the eyes.

ROSES AND DUNG

The ballet is stealthy, the agonizing itself seems refined. Death will never overturn Court protocol. Gangrene turns the King’s left leg black, there must have been a stench—the smell is reported—but all maintain decorum. The doctors are again ecstatic when they remove the intestines from Louis’ body: their prodigious length shows the king to have been an exceptional man, and a big eater. This comic tone seems macabre. The juxtaposition of gold and shit has always typified Serra’s work. But that morbid delectation has gained a new power since *Histoire de ma mort*. His films now have their smell. A mix of rose and dung.

If the King remains almost untouchable, that is because, as we know, he has two bodies: one real and one symbolic. In Serra’s film, however, it is more as if Louis has two bodies, each one both real and symbolic. For one thing, he is played by an emblem of modern cinema, Jean-Pierre Léaud, who

need only move his cheek slightly, smile oh so faintly or raise a finger to conjure up memories of all those films in which he was so brilliant. And, on the other, this becoming-corpse leaves the King just an enigmatic as before, perhaps even more so. We will know nothing, or so little, about this body, nor do we see much more, even if it is a constant subject of conversation. Over an hour and fifty minutes, all that has been put forward are uncertain judgments and interpretations of this body. One reason for this is that the medicine of the day had little more than conjecture to fall back on. Today, its speculations both amuse and frighten. Another reason is the respect owed the Monarch, his sacred character: doctors do not dare speak forthrightly about him. This is Serra’s truthfulness in his approach to historical, mythological or literary figures: the violence he inflicts on them is equaled by the decrepitude that is at once comfortable and incurable, the decrepitude that some wish to maintain. It is not a matter of killing off legends, but of draw out the part of them has always been rather smugly linked to the experience of the end.

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Some may know that this film was originally conceived to serve in an installation as part of the Serra retrospective held there three years ago, organized by the Pompidou Center. The filmmaker had begun to work on a rapprochement with the art world, by presenting the 101 hours of his *Trois Petits Cochons* at Documenta in Kassel. Since then he has alternated films and exhibitions, recently showing *Singularity* at the Venice Biennale. This first drive has left a mark: this is a film in which characters from all kinds of backgrounds—including the writers Olivier Cadiot and Jacques Henric—comment and come and go around a bed, staging spectators who move about freely in relation to an image that has all but stopped moving.

La Mort de Louis XIV can thus be seen as an installation in which art seems to busy itself by the bedside of modern cinema, the better to accompany, if not even expedite, its death. Or perhaps, on the contrary, Serra’s aim is to show how powerless all this gesticulating and murmuring is when faced with the mystery embodied by the cinema. Who is about to eat or cure whom? We’re back to the story of the three little pigs. Irony and cruelty are at work in both cases, as is morbid delectation. Death yields up no secrets and Fagon’s final words are deliciously ambiguous: “Gentlemen, we shall do better next time.” ■

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