
Facts

Directed by Bruno Nuytten
Written by Bruno Nuytten and Marilyn Goldin
In French with English subtitles
159 minutes

Themes

Art, gender and sexuality, fin de siècle France

Summary

Who was Camille Claudel? Camille Claudel was one of the most gifted sculptors working in fin de siècle Paris. In spite of the fact that as a woman she confronted many obstacles to success as a professional artist, Claudel produced important works which brought her critical, if not financial, success. Emotional difficulties (many of which related to her relationship with Auguste Rodin) and obstacles which stood in her professional path, made it impossible for Claudel to make a success of her career as a sculptor. Her mental health declined, and Claudel was eventually committed to a mental asylum where she remained for 30 years.

Claudel’s art remained largely unknown outside of France until the 1980s when two major retrospective introduced her sculpture with great success to the public.

Summary Nuytten’s film focuses on Claudel’s years in Paris. In this period she was a student and atelier assistant to Rodin and later worked independently. In time Claudel and Rodin became lovers and this relationship is the central concern of the film. Rodin, who was embroiled in a long-term commitment with Rose Beuret (the mother of his son), would not commit to Claudel. Eventually the passionate but painful affair ended. Nuytten portrays Claudel as the gifted sculptor that she was, but for the most part keeps aesthetics and the politics of the Parisian art world in the background, preferring instead to place the love affair and Claudel’s eventual decline into madness at the foreground of his film.

Although more might have been made of the specific problems and double standards that did so much to hinder Claudel's ability to achieve professional success, Nuytten’s film nevertheless does a good job of portraying the social and psychological pressures that contributed to her decline.

The film has often been criticized for being too long, but the beautiful cinematography and dramatic narrative keep the viewer engaged throughout.
The Film’s Feminist Subtext Produced for the popular audience, Nuytten’s Camille Claudel is not an educational documentary and art historians will wish that it offered greater specificity concerning the circumstances that worked against Claudel’s professional advancement. Yet, the critical work of feminist art historians and cultural theorists has contributed much to the film’s subtext. For centuries woman more likely served as the subject and inspiration for art (the object of the gaze) rather than as the producers of art. Since the Renaissance, it has been the norm for the female nude to serve as the subject for male artists. The gendered structure of the relationship between male artists and female models has meant that the female body in art has signified a mixture of sexual and aesthetic meaning. When women take the position of artist they disrupt the normative artist/model paradigm and they sometimes produce images of the nude that do not conform to established readings. This notion that women’s images are less legible than are men’s is one of the issues raised in Nuytten’s portrayal of Claudel’s story.

For example, many scenes in Nuytten’s film draw parallels between Claudel’s body and the body of Rodin’s models. As if to suggest that Claudel is confronted with the paradigm man=artist/woman=subject, Nuytten portrays Claudel as if she is being pulled ineluctably into the position of the object of Rodin’s gaze. Accordingly, an early scene in the film shows Claudel surreptitiously watching Rodin at work with a naked female model as he presses his face against the model’s body seeking aesthetic inspiration by way of physical, sensual encounter. In a later scene, Claudel leaves her own position as artistic producer aside as she steps naked onto the model’s platform offering her body to Rodin’s sexualized artistic gaze. This reading of the Claudel/Rodin story is particularly pertinent as masculine sexuality was recognized as a pervasive aspect of Rodin’s aesthetic approach in the popular imagination of his day (Wagner, “Rodin’s Reputation” 1991).

Also consistent with contemporary theories of subjectivity which have shaped much feminist analysis the film articulates the notion that women who acknowledge and express socially forbidden feelings and emotions risk entering a world of madness. In a scene showing Rodin ending his relationship with Claudel, the male artist explains his inability to participate any longer in the relationship by saying “I don’t want any more complicated emotions.” The implication of the film is that Claudel does not (or cannot) close herself off as Rodin does from these tormenting and disruptive “complicated emotions.” Unlike women who choose to follow the bourgeois social conventions of her day—in Freudian terms, those who conform to the “law of the father”—Claudel’s actions challenge these norms. She chooses to follow dangerous passions into dark psychological territories, which lead to social castigation, irrationality, and madness.

Camille Claudel’s life in a nutshell Camille Claudel was born on 8 December 1864. The family home was located in the village of Villeneuve-sur-ère in the Champagne region of France. The Claudel home in Villeneuve, which appears in Bruno Nuytten’s film as a symbol of Camille’s bourgeois social status, remained a refuge for the family throughout the course of their lives. Although the Claudel family maintained a home in Paris, they regularly vacationed at their home in Villeneuve and Camille’s mother and father eventually retired there. Although the film suggests that Camille had no love for the family home, letters written while she was confined in mental asylums frequently expressed her longing to return to Villeneuve.
Camille’s father, Louise-Prosper Claudel, was a registrar of mortgages and made a respectable but not lucrative salary. Two of his children, Camille and her younger brother Paul, showed great interest in artistic and intellectual pursuits, which necessitated education in Paris. Although his occupation did not allow him to live with his family in Paris, Camille’s father moved his wife and three children to a Montparnasse apartment in 1881. Camille enrolled to study sculpture at this time at the Académie Colarossi, a private art school which accepted both male and female students. The Ecole des Beaux-Arts, the most prestigious institution of art education at the time, was not open to female students. When Camille arrived in Paris she was 17 years old.

Renting a studio that she shared with a number of other female art students, Claudel received the tutelage of the sculptor Alfred Boucher. Boucher had seen early student work by Camille and encouraged her to seriously pursue sculpture as a profession. In 1882 when Boucher could no longer offer his instruction to Claudel and her fellow female art students, he sent Rodin in his place. Rodin recognized Claudel’s talent and eventually invited her to work as one of his many studio assistants.

Letters written by Rodin and Claudel and the reports of friends and acquaintances establish that by 1885 a romantic relationship had blossomed between the famous artist and his student. When this relationship became public, Claudel’s family threw her out of the house and Rodin began to pay her expenses. The couple socialized in Paris together, shared a studio, and vacationed together. The surviving documents indicate that the relationship was stormy and passionate, that Claudel became pregnant and had an abortion, and that Rodin made promises to her that he would leave his long-time relationship with the mother of his son, and marry her. By 1892 when it became clear that Rodin would never follow through with his promises Claudel left him.

After her break with Rodin Camille continued to work toward her professional goals, but her professional association with Rodin together with her long-time personal involvement with him hurt her ability to succeed. Although her work was positively reviewed by many critics it was also often viewed to be derivative of Rodin’s. At times she confronted a type of censorship experienced only by women artists, as when the sensuality of her work was viewed to be inappropriate. For example, because the nudity in La Valse (The Waltz) was considered too erotic, Claudel was asked by representative of the State to add drapery to the female figure featured in the sculpture (Mitchell, “Intellectuality and Sexuality” 436). Much more devastating was Claudel’s decline into paranoia, which came during the years following her affair with Rodin. Although Rodin tried in many ways to support her career both finically and by encouraging critics to write about her work, Claudel became convinced that her former lover was trying to steal her ideas, even that he was trying to kill her.

During her years of mental decline Claudel lived an isolated existence and was frequently out of money. Promises of government commissions for her work came to little and her dealer was unable to find patrons for her work. In one important instance, Claudel appears to have been correct in her belief that Rodin was sabotaging her career. An important work, L’Age mû (The Age of Maturity), which featured an aging man turning away from a young female nude, was
commissioned by the State in 1895. By 1898 the commissions was cancelled, apparently at the request of Rodin who may have viewed the work as a humiliating exposure of his personal life.

In the following years Claudel mental state deteriorated and she became increasingly difficult to work with, refusing students and even commissions. Her behavior became more paranoid and erratic and her finances were a constant source of strain.

Camille’s father, who had always supported her, died on the 2nd of March 1913. Ten days later her mother had Camille committed to a mental asylum. Her fear of further scandal ran so deep that Camille's mother insisted that she be “sequestered” in the asylum. This meant that Camille was not allowing to receive visitors or letters from supporters. Her mother never visited Camille in the asylum. Camille remained hospitalized for the rest of her life and died in the asylum in 1943.

**Viewer's Guide**

The film does a good job of sketching in the Claudel family dynamics. How do the family dynamics within the family affect Camille? Who supports her and who doesn’t? What effects do you thing shape an unstable psychological and financial situation for a woman in this period?

Is this a feminist film? Does this film offer clichés about the woman artist or does it offer thought provoking arguments about the difficulties that faced women artists during this period in history? Do women still face any of the obstacles that Claudel faced?

What was it like to be a young sculptor during this period? How did one get training? How did one procure materials? How did one get recognition and compensation for one’s talent? Could a sculptor be successful without the financial support of dealers and the State and without the generosity of critics and other established artists? How would the challenges differ for a young female and a young male art student of sculptor?

Claudel’s sculpture often spoke of the dramas taking place in her life. Though the film does not focus on this aspect of her life and art as much as it could (or perhaps should) one does glimpse something of this in the art shown in the film. Describe some of the ways that Claudel’s sculptures related to issues at work in her life.

Feminist art historians have argued that masculine sexuality and aesthetics were closely entwined during the late 19th and first half of the 20th century. In what ways does this film illuminate interplay of sexuality and art during this period?
Resources

Ayral-Clause, Odile. Camille Claudel: A Life. New York: Abrams, 2002. This is an excellent and easy to read biography of Camille Claudel. I couldn’t put it down.


Scholl, J.A. Auguste Rodin and Camille Claudel. USA: Presel , 1999. Schmoll downplays the strength of Claudel’s work in comparison to Rodin’s but offers a useful quick visual reference for a comparison of the two artists’ works.

Wagner, Anne M. “Rodin’s Reputation.” Eroticism and the Body Politic. Ed. Lynn Hunt. Johns Hopkins University Press. 1991. 191-242. This excellent article documents how masculine sexuality and aesthetic “genius” were entwined in the popular imagination regarding Rodin. By looking at popular renditions of Rodin in the media Wagner shows how pervasive was the sexualization of aesthetics with regard to this artist.

Contributor

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