



*The* LIQUID  
PASSION  
*of Manon Briand's*

CHAOS  
AND  
DESIRE

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Images courtesy of Odeon Films.

Pascale Bussières

Life is overwhelming in its mutability sometimes. Forget sometimes: always. We are constantly, daily, at every moment of our waking life adapting to things unknown, new and unexpected.

Of course, some situations in life are more predictable and familiar than others, like, say, walking down a street you know well, or doing a job you've done so many times before it has become second nature. But even then, something as simple as a change in the weather could revolutionize your experience: a sunny spring day will caress you softly with its warm wind as you stroll, and perhaps provide you with an extra reason to smile; while a rainy mid-October afternoon, when you haven't yet psychologically caught up to the change in seasons so you've worn the wrong kind of coat (again) and forgotten your umbrella, letting the drizzle trickle unpleasantly down the back of your neck—well, that might affect you differently. Some things are harder to adapt to.



Pascale Bussi eres and Jean-Nicolas Verreault.

That fact became tragically obvious to me after my interview with Quebec filmmaker Manon Briand about her latest film *La Turbulence des fluides*, released in English as *Chaos and Desire*. The film is a metaphysical love story, basically, but it's couched in a highfalutin' exploration of the psychological changes humans experience as we try to adapt to incomprehensible meteorological phenomena. The phenomenon that changed *my* life that day was of a very physical order. But more on that later.

Starring Quebec sweetheart Pascale Bussi eres as Alice Bradley, an emotionally repressed seismologist, *Chaos and Desire* is a thematically ambitious, psychologically multifarious film. Briand is known—mainly thanks to her acclaimed debut short, *Picoti Picota* (1995), her contribution to the collaborative work *Cosmos* (1996) and her prize-winning first feature, *2 secondes* (1998)—for her sensitivity, and the detailed attention with which she investigates her themes. More than simple storytelling, her films aim at explaining the world, their narrative thrust serving practically as

accessory, as a means toward philosophizing. This film exemplifies this idea. The filmmaker delves deep into natural phenomena and their associated fields of study—ranging from earthquakes to forest fires to tidal fluctuations and the scientific tools used to study them—and then uses this as backdrop for the building of a relationship between the two central characters and the psychological development of the myriad, intimately explored, secondary characters. The earthly manifestations are the narrative's active agents; humanity follows in their wake.

Born in Baie-Comeau—like Briand herself—but abandoned at birth, Alice Bradley has not returned to her native land since her childhood. Her adult life has been spent in Japan, as far away from her roots as possible, where she lives the clinical, high-paced, high-tech life of the workaholic scientist, allergic to all affective ties. Still licking her wounds from a long-gone but life-changing heartbreak, she has closed herself off from

others, but it's a lifestyle that suits her well. She resents the disruption, then, when it comes one day in the form of an inexplicable phenomenon occurring on the other side of the planet—her birthplace. It seems the tide has stopped. There have been weeks of low tide, in the exact bay where she came to life. The personal encroaches on the professional when her superiors send her to the site where she is to study the matter and report on its possible relation to an expected earthquake of dangerous proportions. Off to Quebec she goes.

Her plans to come, see and conquer as rapidly as possible are sabotaged as soon as she arrives, as such plans are wont to be. Her carefully protected front of social dissociation receives its first blow from Catherine Rolland (Julie Gayet), a friend from childhood turned ecological journalist who just happens to be covering the story, with whom she renews ties. Suddenly Alice is faced with an ability to feel again, which makes her incapable of remaining unaffected by the electric energy of Marc Vandal (Jean-Nicholas

Verrault), an inscrutable supply-plane pilot who seems to mirror her interest. And then the odd behaviour of the village's inhabitants, scientifically unexplainable but impossible to ignore, pierces her indifference as well. Things are coincidentally curious since the water stopped moving. An aura of want hangs over the area, coupled with a suffocating, humid heat and an unidentifiable briny, animalistic smell. Could it be...the smell of sex?

The day of my interview with Briand, it was raining, but I'd worn the right coat and brought an umbrella, so all was good. It wasn't too cold, just a little cool, and the hazy grey-ness gave the streets a calm, reflective feel that wasn't unwelcome, knowing I'd be interviewing Briand in a noisy café. (If you interview any filmmaker in Montreal and let them choose the venue you can bet your bottom dollar they'll suggest this one techno snack bar on the Plateau—it's like a public exhibition for the hip and intellectual, "Look! I'm getting interviewed! By media!") I invested in a snazzy pin-on mic to counter the ambient sound of chattering and clinking china. I was very proud of the gadget as I pinned it on her scarf—it was the subject of a few minutes of conversation. We did a sound check, it worked perfectly, and so we proceeded with the interview.

To be entirely honest, I wasn't (nor am I still) sold on the film when I sat before Briand, so I was slightly nervous. Not having a purely positive basis for your curiosity always makes for a bit more precarious and unpredictable interview. But an hour later, I left the coffee shop radiant, beaming from the fascinating conversation I'd just had. Briand is an intelligent, entertaining orator and a very generous conversationalist. We glided gracefully from subjects ranging from sex and life cycles to working procedures, acting styles, airplanes and Eastern spirituality versus Western religions, and I came out of it with an inside view to the difficulties the film posed for me and with my eyes opened to qualities I had missed.

I began my questioning right with the meat of the matter: "Chaos and Desire is such a liquid film, with water and fluidity and fickle natural rhythms playing important thematic roles—and it's all about sex, and it's all about women, too. Do you think female sexuality is fluid by nature?" I asked.

"Well, it's a nice image," answered Briand, pensively. "I don't know if I'd be able to define the difference between male and female sexuality, but the idea of water—it depends if we're speaking of sexuality or eroticism. The fluidity of the film is used on a more poetic level than in a carnal, tactile or graphic one. At the same time, it's the whole idea of the cycle of water, or the cycle of life that was of interest, and I think women feel the film more directly because of this fact—the cycle, maternity, the idea of returning to the womb, of dying in order to live again better. It was a binary theme, really: there was this interest to talk about fluid on a very human level, about all that is attraction, desire, all that's carnal; and then also much more poetically, about the cycles of life and death."

"Was the film also an investigation of the kinds of lives people are leading today?" I continued. "You seem to be making a

statement about a growing loss of personal contact in our need to work, work, work, produce and consume, and the necessity to get back in touch with the natural reality of feelings." "I think you could say grjchhhxx, and for me rchgrshxx grchxrgqrshhxck krschhrqgshxxx," she answered. Or that's what my tape said, at any rate, when I got it back home and began transcribing my fabulous interview. "Rchgrshxx grchxrgqrshhxck krschhrqgshxxx," for the next 50 minutes, with only the first question salvaged. I sat there in disbelief. No words, just screeches, for the whole tape. Bloody Sony pin-on mic. Talk about natural—okay, technological—disasters.

It was, of course, all rather appropriate within the context. Briand and I dwelled upon the subject introduced in the second question for quite some time, discussing the invasion of technology in people's lives and the failure it has represented in terms of spirituality. Briand said the theme came to her because she has been pondering, as of late, the things science cannot explain. The film's poetry—because it remains deeply poetic, through its faults—lies in the realization by the hyper-rational Alice that not all aspects of life can be easily, factually explained. Some phenomena, like mysterious deaths, complex loves and still tides, are incomprehensible to even the most astute among us.

The film is rife with countless interesting areas for tension and curiosity to flourish. But somewhere in the complicated mix—narrative directions are plentiful—the sensitivity intrinsic to Briand's perspective is lost and morphs into sentimentality. The fault perhaps resides primarily in the excess of plots and subplots, themes of first and secondary importance. The director's affinity for developing well-rounded characters is unfortunately responsible for making things confusing here, with too many distinct personalities wandering on-screen, all demanding attention and pause. Alice alone is a hearty meal, as we share the journey of her shut-off heart as it begins to thaw, then seizes up again with anger and fear, and then lets itself go fully to open up to love.

Then there is Catherine, the friend, who is originally French, but travels the world incessantly, unable to settle down, and who has always secretly been in love with Alice; there's of course Luc, the love-interest pilot who's mourning the mysterious death of his wife who was absorbed by the tide and disappeared into the sea one tragic day less than a year ago; there's his adoptive daughter, Yoko, who's undergoing a premature spiritual crisis (she serves as a kind of mirror image to Alice, in that she's of Oriental origin migrated to the Occident); there's the ex-nun turned waitress, Colette (played by the legendary Geneviève Bujold), source of wisdom and ex-nanny to Alice; and finally there's every other villager in sight. Briand's point is that everyone is affected by nature's whimsy, and in some quite dramatic ways; but for filmmaking's sake, there are much too many bodies here.

The plot is no simpler: the film's first quarter is set in Japan, which provides Briand with the opportunity to look at the increasing coldness of human interaction within our super-productive contemporary society; but it's too captivating a




theme to be explored on the fly before we even address the story's main issue of nature versus culture. Also, once the narrative's main location of Baie-Comeau is reached we aren't about to settle down: we simultaneously follow a seismological investigation, an in-depth psychological self-analysis, a spiritual quest, a riff on unrequited love, the development of another, complicated though requited love and a bifurcation into detective work for a while as Alice and Catherine solve the case of Luc's wife's death (as a sideline). This is in addition to sidetracking into the heads and lives of the odd-bird locals.

Briand's approach to filmmaking is one of collage, as she described it. She has written as well as directed all her films, and the way she proceeds is by collecting things—newspaper clippings, notes she takes, thoughts she has—that she researches in depth and then weaves together as a whole. In this case she began with an interest in the scientific and metaphysical divide, a fascination for a specific place—the bay in Baie-Comeau where she grew up and returns to on holidays—natural occurrences, and a particular news story, the one reflected by the disappearance of Luc's wife. Only after these things are all laid out in her mind does she search for a unifying narrative—a love story, in this case.

It makes for a rich kind of film, full of imagery, allegory and variety, but *Chaos and Desire* shows how it can lack centrality. The film's physical requirements were also an issue here: being a film centred around the idea of there being no tide, shooting had to take place only when the tide was low; the fact that it was supposed to be swelteringly hot also meant it could only be shot on sunny days. Another element in the story required forest fires (Luc is a supply-plane pilot who puts fires out by dumping water on them, and his wife's body is eventually picked-up by the plane of one of his workmates), which meant they needed fire shots, which they only got in the last couple of days of the 40-day shoot. Aerial shots were also essential to the film's aesthetic, which required the renting a helicopter and the necessity of shooting a supply plane in action required a need for a planes' availability (those not busy actually fighting real-life fires). It was administratively quite hellish. Add to that the fact that both central actresses had babies on site (this was Bussièrès's first role after becoming a mother), and the result is a lively, though not uncomplicated environment for filmmaking.

One of the few quotes I gleaned from the aborted interview tape—fate smiled on me—was a statement Briand made to the effect: "Everything that could have posed complications during the making of that film did, so in those circumstances, it was the best we could have hoped for." It's a philosophical stance that befits *Chaos and Desire*. Some things in life are just a little harder to adapt to.



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