

including verbatim recitations, by the late Gaspard Ulliel, of Donald Trump's greatest tweets) and the anxieties being mined about life and death—the latter, to paraphrase Cocteau, suddenly hurrying to meet us en masse—can only be classified as universal.

Back for a moment to those talking dolls, ostensibly manipulated by Labèque as a salve for her boredom, but gradually granted their own fluid, stop-motion agency up to and including hardcore, incestuous fucking. Once again, though, Bonello's tactics seem less about surfing the zeitgeist than acknowledging and measuring it, a certain knowing, po-mo pastiche being the coin of the realm these days. If the underlying joke in these bits was actually about Trump we'd be in Adam McKay territory, but what's really at stake in these interludes is the voracious, pervasive slippage between virtual and IRL discourse, the realization of which drives people ever deeper into themselves and their own private, dopamine-dispensing Revelators as the ground beneath their feet keeps shifting apocalyptically.

Narrowing his address to his next of kin and utilizing an exponentially more private narrative and symbolic syntax, Bonello simultaneously achieves the goals of a good horror filmmaker (to be scary) and a concerned parent (ditto). In a late sequence featuring crudely rotoscoped animation, Labèque sits on her bed recounting her nightmares to an older man who looks suspiciously like Bonello. "Did all that scare you?" he asks, as if acknowledging culpability in his progeny's oneiric ordeal—and maybe her waking nightmares as well. "No, it enlightened me," she replies, adding that the 21st century, with all its apocalyptic uncertainty, belongs to her. "You can't steal it."

Bonello ultimately gives himself the last word in *Coma* via another epistolary monologue, but it's this exchange, shot through with equal measures of tenderness and terror, that clarifies his intention to make not only a film about horror or youth, but also about the horror of youth—of staring down a birthright that seems to be receding in the rearview mirror. The Girl says she's going somewhere where free will exists; whether that means the future or her dreams is hard to say, but the wisdom of Bonello's harrowing bedtime story lies in its recognition that the same sunken place that produces monsters is where responsibilities begin. ♦

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ABOUT THE FILM

A teenager has a special power: she can bring us into her dreams but also her nightmares. Locked in her room, her only relationship to the outside world is virtual. She begins to go back and forth between dreams and reality, guided by a disturbing and mysterious YouTuber, Patricia Coma.

82 min. | France | 2022

In the Bedroom by Adam Nayman

The following is an excerpt of an article originally published in Cinema Scope 93, Winter 2022

Officially, Bertrand Bonello's last three features comprise a triptych about youth, but there's also a shadow interpretation waiting to be made of *Nocturama* (2016), *Zombi Child* (2019), and *Coma* as an extended, eccentric treatise on horror-movie history and aesthetics—call it a self-reflexive Trilogy of Terror. Whatever its debts to *Le diable probablement* (1977), *Nocturama* hewed closer to Romero than Bresson, restaging the late-capitalist tragedy of *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) in a Parisian department store minus any visible zombies, but with the creeping sense of persecution and dread intact. Less successfully, but with true daring, the partially Haitian-set *Zombi Child* walked with Val Lewton and Jacques Tourneur down the path of mordant, morbid post-colonial allegory, waving at *Candyman* (1992) and *The Craft* (1995) along the way. And now, made deep in the throes of COVID lockdown—direct from the director's own home in Paris—comes the skeleton-crew vision of *Coma*, which borrows its title from noted technophobe Michael Crichton and its bad vibes from David Lynch, Kurosawa Kiyoshi, and *Unfriended* (2014), raw materials it duly dunks in a high-speed blender.

That Cuisinart analogy isn't a throwaway, by the way: Bonello is cinephile enough to remember that *Unfriended*—one of the great studio B-movies of the new millennium, and uniquely Deleuzian besides—peaked with a possessed kid shoving his hand in a food processor in the midst of a group chat. He pays homage in *Coma* by having Julia Faure's eponymously surnamed character, a popular YouTube influencer, do likewise during one of her abstruse yet accessible instructional videos. That Faure's ever-deadpan Patricia Coma suffers no apparent injury in the process speaks both to her strangely ephemeral, quietly menacing nature (she's the ghost in *Coma*'s machine) and the crypto-Surrealist ethos of Bonello's film, which unfolds as a veritable nocturama: a guided tour through twilight zones plucked from the collective pop-cultural subconscious. *Coma*'s dream logic is as old as Jean Cocteau, whose famous maxim that “living is a horizontal fall” comes to mind via Bonello's relentlessly subdividing structure and recurrent supine imagery. If Patricia Coma and her bizarro self-help bromides suggest a very contemporary sort of internet Svengali, then Louise Labèque's unnamed,

digitally anesthetized protagonist—splayed eternally in her bedroom purgatory, iPhone and laptop at the ready—is a stand-in for her cozily dissociated, habitually doom-scrolling constituency, glued to her screens with eyes wide shut.

Coma opens in epistolary mode, with a long passage of onscreen text (projected silently overtop of the climax of *Nocturama*) announcing the project as a dedication to Bonello's stepdaughter, Anne. It's an overture which obliges us to consider that Labèque is playing a version of same, but either way, “The Young Girl,” as she's referred to in the credits, is not a particularly dynamic presence. Bonello uses Labèque's passive, statuesque blankness as a foil to his own formal gamesmanship.

In the absence of clear ideology (like *Nocturama*) or mythic exposition (as in *Zombi Child*), the backstory of *Coma*'s heroine is reduced to production design and scattered intellectual properties, tchotchkes that mark her as a child of James Dean and Pikachu. The Girl's submissive relationship to mass media, meanwhile, is synecdochized by her fascination with a Patricia Coma-approved device called a “Revelator,” which obliges its user to tap out progressively precise patterns of coloured light. The absurdist caveat is that this handheld, battery-operated machine has been calibrated so that the player never loses no matter the complexity of the sequence, a magic trick with disturbing undertones.

The metaphor for technology's progressive, seductive sublimation of free will is not subtle, and the sticking point for some viewers may be that *Coma*'s episodic-slash-essayistic treatment of its themes—from ambient technophobia to pandemic-era authoritarianism to various hauntological phenomena—is counterintuitively lucid to the paranoid trance state Bonello seeks to generate. Such chiding is, perhaps, a fairer form of criticism than the clueless or unobservant plaint that this rigorously conceived and executed feature (accurately described by Erika Balsom as a “maximalist work made under extreme constraint”) is “messy” or “doesn't make sense”; it's also probably preferable to the cheerier but similarly empty-calorie corollary that *Coma* is quote-unquote “bat-shit” or “insane.” Ultimately, it's Bonello's willingness to be direct, not at the expense of his experimental impulses but in league with them, that makes his film so effective—a doodle with the force of an incantation.

Like the majority of COVID productions, from Ben Wheatley's *In the Earth* (2021) to Claire Denis' *Avec amour et acharnement* (2022), *Coma* is littered with recognizable temporal signifiers that threaten to render its contents forever freeze-framed. But Bonello—whose great *L'Apollonide* (2011) was the rare period piece with an original and affecting relationship to time and history—is too smart and restless to settle for making a proverbial “movie of the moment,” or to be limited by his circumstances in all but the most prosaic ways. His multi-format, shape-shifting weave of static daytime interiors, mobile POV nightscapes, and authentic-looking social-media pastiche is dazzling, but never weightless—there is, always, a centre of gravity. Drill down deeper through *Coma*'s layered strata of Zoom calls, Instagram posts, Blumhouse homage, and wacky conceptual gags (including an entire narrative strand focused on Barbie dolls whose dialogue