



A YOUNG FRENCH DIRECTOR DEBUTS WITH A BEAUTIFULLY

Since the mid-Eighties, they've just kept coming, these brilliant, audacious French female directors: Claire Denis, Catherine Breillat, Pascale Ferran, Danièle Dubroux, Noémie Lvovsky, Daniele Thompson. Add to their ranks Julie Lopes-Curval, whose bountiful first feature *Seaside* (*Bord de mer*) won the Camera d'Or at Cannes last year.

Set in a less than fashionable beach resort on the Bay of Somme and taking place over the course of a year, *Seaside* includes both locals and summer visitors in its cast of characters. There are about eight leading roles and as many supporting ones, and, as in the plays of Chekhov, which the film resembles in its anti-melodramatic structure and bittersweet tonalities, every character is rich with life. But instead of Chekhov's cluttered dachas and unseen cherry orchards, much of *Seaside* takes place in the open air, and you can feel the sea breezes and the sense of *bonheur* they inspire—even on damp midwinter nights—in just about every shot. Toward the end of the film, a very pregnant young woman in a bright red dress

and a pink sun hat is perched atop a lifeguard stand, a beatific smile on her face. Her husband, a Paris fashion photographer who, with his parents, has spent

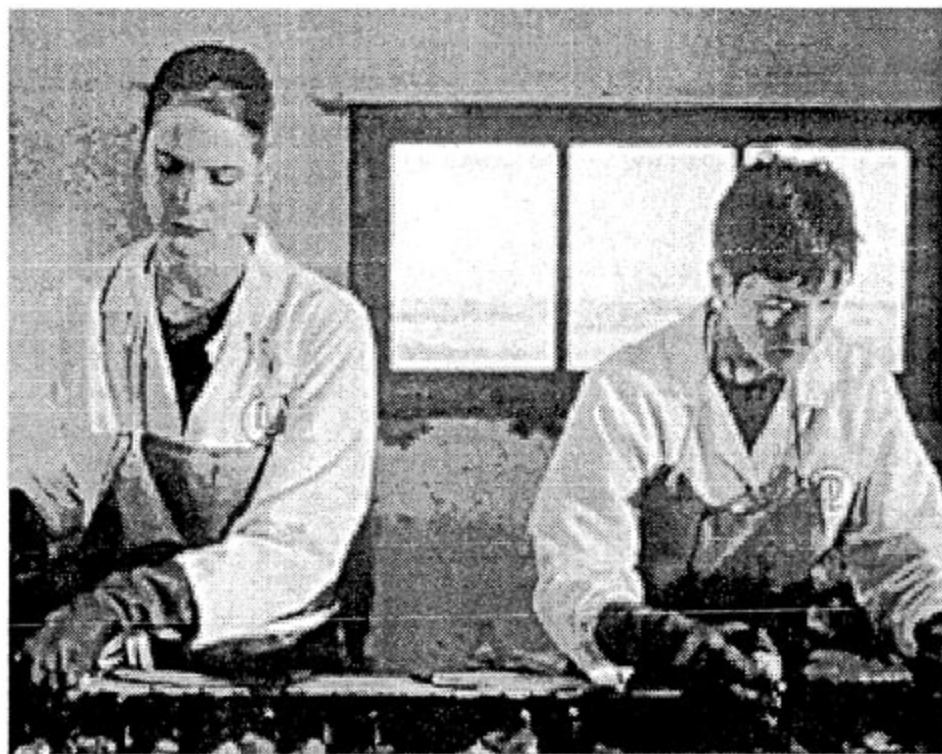
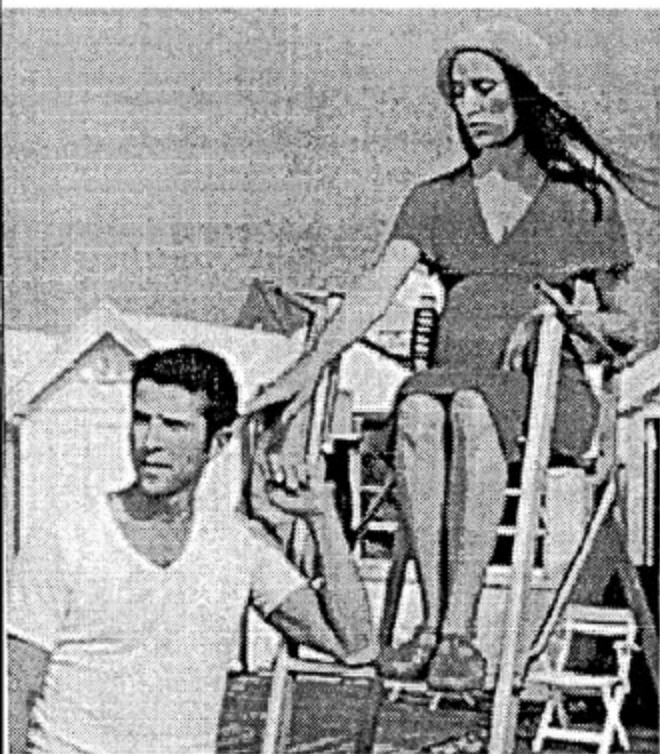
side bears comparison with Eric Rohmer's sublime *Summer*.

Given the intricate weave of characters and place, it does the film a disservice to describe it through any one narrative thread. But perhaps it's best to begin with Marie (Hélène Fillières), a local twentysomething who works on the sorting line in the pebble-processing factory that is the town's primary industry. Marie lives with Paul (Jonathan Zaccai), who clerks in the supermarket in the winter and serves as a lifeguard in the summer. It's not a promising relationship. Paul is crazy about Marie, but Marie feels trapped by her dead-end job and provincial life. She's sexually attracted to someone who's as restless and discontented as herself—Albert (Patrick Lizana), a manager at the factory, which was founded by his great-grandfather but has recently been taken over by a big corporation. There's a precedent for Albert's involvement with an employee. His father married a sorting line worker, Odette (Liliane Rovère), whose return from London, where she's lived since her husband's death, unsettles not only her son Albert but also Paul's mother, Rose (Bulle Ogier). Girlhood friends, Odette and Rose became estranged when Odette married their boss. Now Rose is retired and in desperate financial straits, having gambled away her savings compulsively playing the slot machine in the local casino. Odette is in a position to help her financially, but Rose is too proud to ask. When the bank repossesses her house, she moves in with Paul and Marie, putting even more strain on their relationship.

Compared with these two intertwined extended families, the summer vacationers—Anne (Ludmila Mikaël), her husband, and their photographer son—seem utterly carefree. But it's Anne, about to become a grandmother and therefore acutely sensitive to time's passage, who experiences the film's most serious crisis of conscience. For

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his every summer in this low-key town, asks her what she's doing. "I'm reflecting," she says. "On what?" he asks. "On this place?" she answers. As the only outsider, the pregnant woman is, of course, the stand-in for the filmmaker, whose directorial presence, prior to this single, extremely moving reflexive moment, has been so subtle that we might have overlooked it entirely. At its best, *Sea-*



CONTROLLED STUDY OF PROVINCIAL MELANCHOLY

the first time she notices the hostile or at best, indifferent, responses of the local people when she tries to be friendly. Walking on the beach she realizes that she's been completely unaware of the existence of the pebble factory, let alone that it, rather than tourism, is the foundation of the town's economy. It is, of course, the reality of class difference that overwhelms Anne on this day and causes her to burst into tears on the beach and, later, to furiously heave the pot of shrimp her husband has been cooking into the sink. The husband is bewildered, but we understand exactly what she's going through. The clues are in the gestures, glances, and fragments of social interaction that have accumulated throughout the film.

Seaside is a delicately balanced ensemble piece, but three actors stand out: Mikaël, Fillières, and in particular Ogier, who gives the most affecting and eccentric performance of her career. Making a furtive dash for the entrance to the casino, she looks like a stubborn toddler in pursuit of forbidden candy; but in close-up, her face is so ravaged that viewers who remember Rivette's *L'Amour fou* as if it were yesterday may gasp when she first appears. What Ogier brings to Rose is precisely a lifetime of experience and the sense that the psyche and the body do not necessarily age in concert. Within Rose, the rebellious teenager cohabits with the ironic senior citizen. She's reckless, terrified, yearning, and resigned all at once. Having decided to swallow her pride and ask her former friend Odette for help, she dresses up in her best suit (from the way she touches it, we know she hasn't worn it in years), but when she gets to Odette's house her courage deserts her. She taps once on the window and flees.

Lopes-Curval remembers being worried that Ogier's nervous tap on the window wouldn't read on film. It was only when she removed her eye from the viewfinder that she under-

stood the power of what Ogier was doing, and that, projected on the screen, the gesture would appear as large and clear as it was to her naked eye. Lopes-Curval may have been learning on the job, but her direction is anything but tentative. After attending university in Paris, she began her career as an actress and a writer, working in theater and television. She wrote the script for *Seaside* in 1999 and then rewrote it when she found the particular beach town that appears in the movie. Alain Benguigui, her producer, was convinced that the script would be best served if she directed it but insisted that she cut her teeth making a short film (*Made-moiselle Butterfly*).

The relationships between mothers and sons are crucial to the structure of *Seaside*. Whether a man decides to remain in his hometown or move away has largely to do with his relationship with his mother, Lopes-Curval explains. As for the father/daughter relationship, she says that she was too shy to deal with it. Might fathers, who are conspicuously absent in *Seaside*, be more prominent in her next film? She doesn't know. What seems fairly certain, however, is that she will make a second feature. If only her counterparts in the U.S. could find their futures similarly assured. —AMY TAUBIN



Photo by Robin Holland



Film Society of Lincoln Center

Chiara Mastroianni in "Carnage," a film in the Rendez-Vous series.

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Bodies Imperfect, Images Ideal

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

The image that haunts "Carnage," a viscerally unsettling comedy written and directed by Delphine Gleize, a 29-year-old French filmmaker of astonishing originality, is the rippling body of a 1,000-pound black Andalusian bull. In an early scene of the movie, which is the find of this year's Rendez-Vous With French Cinema series at Lincoln Center, the beast gores a young matador at the climax of one of the most suspenseful bullfighting sequences ever filmed.

The animal in the ring is photographed so that you feel menaced by the crushing power massed in its glistening body and tremble before the blind fury driving its charges.

The film conveys such a palpable sense of flesh-and-blood vitality and vulnerability (in both animals and people) that the mystique of Spain's national sport as a ritual life-and-death test of courage remains etched

**Screening times for 14
French films, Page 32.**

in your mind.

Watching the bullfight on television is a wide-eyed little girl accompanied by the family pet, a sleek black attack dog that suggests a canine cousin of the bull. Later in the film, the dog consumes a portion of that bull and experiences a shattering seizure.

The bulk of "Carnage" follows the history of the bull's body, once it has been killed and its remains dispersed. Its horns are purchased as a gift by a gnarled old woman for her son, a taxidermist who lives with her in a cramped trailer. Its insides wind up at a high-end restaurant on diners' plates, smothered in a rich red wine sauce.

Its eyes, one of which turns out to be blind, become valuable specimens for laboratory analysis. When a child dis-

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to a plastic model. Albert Dupontel portrays a middle-aged professional photographer whose marriage has lost its zest. After accidentally coming into possession of a life-size, molded plastic sex doll with the body of a 20-year-old woman, he develops an erotic obsession with the toy. Although the movie doesn't know where to take its premise, it is enough of a jolt just to observe this man-dummy affair being avidly consummated.

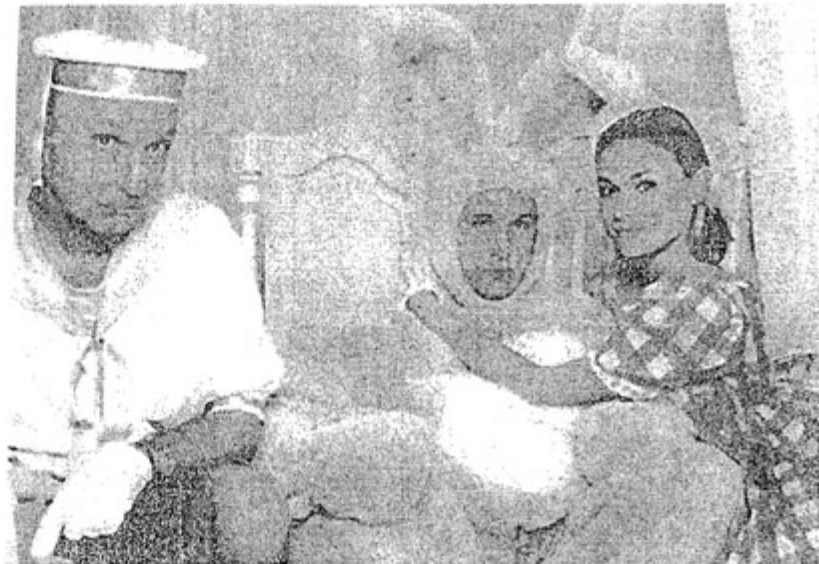
The fatal physical temptation explored in "Life Kills Me" is the promiscuous taking of anabolic steroids. In the sad, realistic portrait of two brothers, North African immigrants trying to establish viable careers in a shrinking employment market, the younger brother, a fanatical body-builder who works in strip clubs and peep shows, ravages his body with bulk-enhancing drugs that destroy his liver.

"Demonlover" and "My Idol" imagine a world in which the people who manufacture and create junky pop iconography are spiritually contaminated by their soulless inventions.

"Demonlover," a complicated story of corporate espionage and double-crossing involving the fight for control of a Japanese pornographic Web site, turns into a video game as it goes along. Connie Nielsen is a corporate spy dispatched to sabotage a deal between a multinational conglomerate and an American Internet company, and Chloë Sevigny, in one of her rangiest performances, is her treacherous assistant. The movie's sinister, final destination is an interactive torture Web site called "The Hellfire Club."

"My Idol," a savage social satire whose melodramatic ending comes as a slight letdown, opens with a bracingly nasty parody of a "Jerry Springer"-like show called "Take Out the Tissues," whose object is to humiliate its contestants and reduce them to tears. An eager-beaver assistant on the hit show is flattered to find himself taken up by its sadistic middle-aged producer, who promises him on-air stardom if he will play along with his mind games.

Spirited away to the producer's country house (where he raises carnivorous birds), the young man auditions for the mogul and his depraved, much younger wife to be their personal live-in entertainer and court jester (and her part-time lover). The grueling trial culminates in a drunken, coke-snorting party at which the



François Berléand, Guillaume Canet and Diane Kruger in "My Idol."

aspirant is forced to dress up in a rabbit suit. The moral of the story, which culminates in violence, is forcefully stated: vicious junk-culture phenomena produce vicious people.

For those leery of these cutting-edge films in which so much blood is spilled, the series is also well stocked with satisfying fare that is more conventional. In "Adolphe," Benoît Jacquot's handsomely photographed costume drama adapted from a 19th-century novel by Benjamin Constant, Stanislas Merhar and Isabelle Adjani play passionate lovers whose clandestine affair turns bitter when he falls out of love. As she did so indelibly in the 1975 film "The Story of Adele H," Ms. Adjani, now 47, immerses herself with an almost scary abandon in the role of a Woman Who Loves Too Much.

Nicole Garcia's drama "The Adversary" is a variation on the same tragic true story that inspired Laurent Cantet's "Time Out," a critical favorite last year. In a performance quaking with contained agony, the great French actor Daniel Auteuil plays an unemployed man and the married father of two who poses as a cardiologist for the World Health Organization while living off money his naïve friends and in-laws hand over to him to invest. The ruse explodes in a horrifying bloodbath.

In a lighter vein, Michel Blanc's "See How They Run," based on Joseph Connolly's novel "Summer Things," is a contemporary bedroom farce about two families, one well-to-do, the other in dire financial straits but too ashamed to admit it, who vacation in the same seaside town. There is endless duplicity and plenty of clandestine sex that crosses gen-

erations, along with the elegant, stabilizing presence of Charlotte Rampling.

Julie Lopes-Curval's "Seaside," which was chosen best first film last year at the Cannes International Film Festival, is a more realistic portrait of an unfashionable coastal town on the Bay of Somme and its restless inhabitants that at moments suggests an Eric Rohmer film set on shabbier real estate. Claude Berri's "Housekeeper" is a cool-headed portrait of a November-May relationship between a middle-aged sound engineer and his much younger housekeeper, who throws herself at him, then loses interest.

There are usually a couple of misfires in the Rendez-Vous series, and this year is no exception. Laurent Bouhnik's "24 Hours in the Life of a Woman," a handsome, elaborately constructed screen adaptation of a story by the Austrian novelist Stefan Zweig, wanders back and forth in time without defining a theme or finding an emotional center. Jeanne Labrune's "C'est le Bouquet" is a fussy comedy of tedious verbal hair-splitting and misperception wound around a floral delivery.

For arresting visual beauty, nothing in the series matches Raymond Depardon's black-and-white film "Untouched by the West." Freely adapted from a novel by Diego Brosset, the movie tells the story of an African boy who is adopted by hunters and grows up to be a guide. Its vision of desert tribal people struggling to survive in one of the most hostile climates on earth is, in a word, timeless.

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"New York Times"

March 7, 2003

Housekeepers, Bullfighters, Demonlovers

PARDON OUR FRENCH

BY LESLIE CAMHI

FILM

RENDEZ-VOUS WITH FRENCH CINEMA

March 7 through 16, at the Walter Reade

As Francophobia runs rampant through our streets, salons, and media, the Film Society of Lincoln Center's annual series proves yet again that French cinema offers distinctive pleasures, from audacious postmodern spectacles and meticulous period dramas to the most nuanced descriptions of romance and its vicissitudes. To forgo them would be folly.

Former Gamma photographer and renowned documentarian Raymond Depardon steps through colonialism's mirror in the Sahara with *Untouched by the West*, his austere retelling of a turn-of-the-century French officer's novel about a hunter who used all his cunning to resist occupation. Shot in rich black-and-white on the arid plateaus of Chad (and using silent cameras capable of withstanding sandstorms), Depardon's film captures the languorous pace of desert culture, as well as the minimalist beauty and latent menace of the landscape.

Olivier Assayas's visually sumptuous *demonlover* begins as a glossy corporate thriller, with Connie Nielsen and Chloë Sevigny facing off amid the glass-enclosed corridors of a mysterious multinational. Then it flips into a strange tale about Internet porn and the ever-more-permeable boundaries between fantasy and reality, as the characters' identities and motivations (as well as the illusions they labor under) shift almost more quickly than you can follow them. The film's moral message seems skewed but its intelligence and daring are palpable.

Literary adaptations abound. Veteran director Claude Berri's *Housekeeper*, based upon the contemporary novel by Christian Oster, sparkles with the compressed charm of a masterful short story. Jean-Pierre Bacri gives a flawless performance as a sound engineer floundering (with harshly comic dignity) on the edge of midlife depression, after being dumped by his girlfriend (a surprise cameo by director Catherine Breillat). Emilie Dequenne cultivates

an air of tattered insouciance as the girl whom he hires to clean his apartment. Perhaps predictably, youth teaches age a lesson, as her joie de vivre wins out over his curmudgeonly reserve. Yet despite its bitter aftertaste, this rueful film goes down as easily as scotch to the lonely.

For the epic treatment of masculine passivity and romantic ambivalence, try *Adolphe*, Benoit Jacquot's opulent screen version of the 19th-century novel by Benjamin Constant. The author, lover, and intellectual companion to the



OVER THE SAND: JAURIS CASANOVA AND AUDREY BONNET IN *BORD DE MER*

writer Madame de Staël, seems to have channeled several affairs into his portrait of the relationship between a wealthy, brooding young rake (Stanislas Merhar) and the mistress of a provincial baron (a still radiant Isabelle Adjani), a mother of two and 10 years his senior, whom he frivolously seduces and then finds impossible to abandon. Jacquot's sensual approach to language and coolly aristocratic visual style convey Constant's remarkably lucid delineations of a passion whose decline is entirely anticipated.

The French system of state financing for film continues to support emerging women directors, as several auspicious debuts in this series make clear. Julie Lopes-Curval's *Bord de Mer* is perhaps the most accomplished. Winner of the Camera d'Or at Cannes last year, this simple tale about the year-round inhabitants of a once-fashionable seaside resort is permeated with a Chekhovian melancholy. Bulle Ogier delivers a tough and touching performance as an aging gambler; Hélène Fillière plays the town's prettiest girl, who dreams of elsewhere. Striking, pared-down camerawork and elliptical dialogue convey the characters' sense of isolation and longing.

Delphine Gleize's *Carnages* is the most whimsical. Using interlocking plots, the film follows multiple characters across France and Spain who receive different pieces of a 1000-pound Andalusian bull that died in the ring. Gleize's orchestration of this choral narrative is impressive, but her film suffers from an excess of cuteness, and its convoluted structure prevents us from entering any of its stories too deeply.

Finally, Marina de Van's *In My Skin* is undoubtedly the goriest. De Van wrote, directed, and stars in this semi-autobiographical horror film about a young woman whose life is just coming together—exciting job and live-in boyfriend on the horizon—when she accidentally gashes her leg, and discovers a passion for cutting herself. De Van shows us too much, but this satire of alienation is at times insightful and grimly hilarious. **V**

the VOICE

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Going Seine

"Rendez-Vous with French Cinema 2003" chases Gallic greatness By **Stephen Garrett**

One of the most appealing aspects of the Film Society of Lincoln Center's annual survey series "Rendez-Vous with French Cinema 2003" is its democratic blend of art films and lowbrow crowd-pleasers. The combination is usually a mixed blessing, and that's true of this year's mélange of strained French farces, twisted insights into the modern condition and wonderful character studies.

Manic-and-mannered comedies based on misunderstandings and deliberate deceptions seem especially popular at the moment in France. Actor-turned-director Michel Blanc delivers one of the survey's popular hits with the hysteric (though far from hysterical) *See How They Run*, an unsatisfying comedy of errors about a vacation retreat, in which delightful divas such as Charlotte Rampling and Carole Bouquet are forced into pained

roles as frustrated wives. Less laden with nagging characters is *C'est le bouquet*, Jeanne Labrune's clever though uninspired study of the chain reaction among friends and strangers when a long-lost lover calls a now-married woman (Sandrine Kiberlain) after 20 years. Most outrageous of all is *My Idol*, Guillaume Canet's

fascinating mess of a movie in which an eager young wanna-be game-show host spends a weekend with his boss, a morally bankrupt TV producer. As a view into the deranged minds of reality-programming gurus, it's priceless—though some may be turned off by its absurdist twists.

Among the more intriguingly extreme views of a modern world gone wrong are a quartet of pictures with haunting messages about humanity. Making an encore appearance at the Walter Reade is *demonlover*, Olivier Assayas's nihilistic drama of industrial espionage and cyberporn, which popped up last month in the "Film Comment Selects" series. Its raw images of physical exploitation linger powerfully. Marina de Van's horrifyingly graphic *In My Skin* is a shudder-to-think exploration of one woman's developing taste for eating her own flesh—an unholy vision indebted to Claire Denis's *Trouble Everyday*. Using a dead bull's body parts as her morbid conceit for interconnecting disparate lives, Delphine Gleize's *Carnage* weaves a technically audacious but preposterously contrived dissection of emotional ennui. And Valérie Guignabodet's *Monique*, though technically a comedy, still registers high on the creep scale with its tale of a cuckolded husband and the

high-end silicone sex doll that he makes his healing companion.

But the most successful movies in *Rendez-Vous* this year strike an exquisite balance between form and content in delivering astute character studies. One of the most stylistically satisfying is Raymond Depardon's *Untouched by the West*, a beautiful b&w reverie that depicts a Saharan native living in an out-of-time culture unspoiled by the modern world. Bittersweet, with a deceptively simple mise-en-scène, is Claude Berri's melancholic May-December romance *Housekeeper*, a remarkably complex study of a middle-aged man whose love life is slowly deteriorating. And most absorbing of all is Julie Lopes-Curval's

Seaside, a multiracial study of the year-round inhabitants of a coastal resort town. The breadth of emotions covered by the drama over a calendar year are enhanced by a subtle but poignant use of the landscape. The film, which won the Camera d'Or at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival, is a reminder of how, at its best, French cinema is unparalleled at tapping the essence of humanity in all its forms.

"Rendez-Vous with French Cinema" is at Walter Reade Theater Fri 7 through March 16. See Alternatives & Revivals.



SLICE OF LIFE Marina de Van's hunger knows no bounds in the sharp drama *In My Skin*.