

# Beyond the Guillotine:

Theorizing the New Extremism in Contemporary French Cinema



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When Bruno Dumont's *L'humanité* won three major awards at the 1999 Cannes Film Festival, the audience's outrage was decidedly off-putting for the director. The thunderous wave of boos and catcalls intimated more than mere disapproval over the jury's decision; the film's tribute was perceived as both a perversion of modern art cinema by the shock tactics of Hollywood's horror franchise, and a threat to the nation's ceremoniously political tradition since the dawn of the French New Wave (*La Nouvelle Vague*). With his intimate close-ups of an 11-year old blood-spattered rape victim, shattering the cool, idyllic vistas of the French countryside, Dumont had committed the ultimate in cinematic transgressions: he had mingled art-house prestige with sensationalist trash, and been commended for it.

There is something supremely abject about the violation of limits that Dumont and other so-called controversial filmmakers have been experimenting with since the radical restructuring of France's film industry by the Mitterrand government's socialist policy. Now touted as the New Extremism (or New French Extremity) by such critics as James Quandt, Martine Beugnet, John Wray, Kerstin Bueschges and Sarah Barrow, this *paracinéma* – or *cinéma du corps* – has brought about a kind of paradigm shift within the French horror genre, one that consists of a move toward a more corporeal, transgressive, and confrontational cinema than has ever graced the "silver screen." As the label suggests, the convulsive violence and sexual explicitness that characterize this body of films is nothing short of excessive, but beneath their fanaticism—which has, for the most part, been devalued as a superficial exercise in style and gore—lurks a fascinating critique of the binary oppositions still operative in film scholarship, specifically those aimed at distinguishing between mainstream American genericism and left-leaning French intellectualism. Arguably, this New Extremism embodies more than a reactionary discourse against the aesthetic traditions of France; it hyperbolizes the sociopolitical reality of the globalization process and its impact on cultural artifacts, however monstrous a shape those representations might take.

### French Cinema in the 1990s

Broadly speaking, the proliferation of multiplexes on foreign soil throughout the 1990s can be considered one of the principal catalysts of France's emergent mainstream genre cinema. With their domestic box-office commanding a meager thirty-five percent at the time (Hayward 298), the state pushed for more big-budget pictures that could challenge Hollywood's then-reign over the spectacle-led *cinéma des producteurs*. The result was a national outpouring of heritage, action and comedy films, works

like Luc Besson's *La Femme Nikita* (1990), Leos Carax's *Les amants du Pont-Neuf* (*The Lovers on the Bridge*, 1991) and Jean-Jacques Beineix's *IP5: L'île aux pachydermes* (1992) that proved more successful in the way of their commercial ambitions than by means of auteurist presence. This phenomenon quickly came to be regarded as the apolitical *cinéma du look*, a movement that emphasized the style of the image over narrative complexity, and drew young moviegoers back to theatres in droves.

Though it was dismissed by the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics as betraying national affinities, such as the psychological realism of France's "Golden Age" and the social concerns of its 1970s militant cinema, the Bessonian practice confirmed the influence and appeal of French cinema on an international scale. Today, Hollywood continues to maintain its grip on screen culture through star vehicles and other economically-driven strategies, but French filmmakers are levelling the score with an approach that combines a slight (if provocative) return to tradition, and deliberately contentious and confrontational themes.

Of interest here is not so much the way in which New Extremist narratives have incorporated the conventional codes of the Hollywood horror picture, but rather how the character of transgression has been re-inscribed by the noted paradigm shift, and works to amplify these codes through a more intellectualized system of meaning. Whereas the critical tendency in horror film scholarship has been largely fragmented so far—divided into those investigations seeking universal truths about horror narratives, and those looking to understand their allure in a specific sociohistorical context—New French Extremism lends itself to readings that trade on both the popular and counter-aesthetic theories of horror. In doing so, it correlates not only with our distinct experience of fear consistent with twenty-first century themes (e.g. cultural fragmentation, alienation, the abject/religious/racial "Other"), but it also provides evidence for the increasing interchangeability of high and low culture codes.

### Crises of Identity and Sexual Politics: Alexandre Aja's *Haute Tension*

Alexandre Aja's *Haute Tension* (*High Tension/Switchblade Romance*, 2003) pays homage to the campy, lowbrow American slasher film by preserving the famous trope of the 'final girl' and the visual excess of its prototypical slaughterfest. The film does not, however, rely on a disproportionate supply of violence to distress its viewership, because the real impact transpires through narrative indeterminacy, which conceals the truth about the killer's identity until its final, gruelling minutes.

A hodgepodge of Wes Craven's surrealist-inspired *Nightmare on Elm Street* series (1984 onward) and the transgressive novels of Georges Bataille (*Histoire de l'oeil* [*Story of the Eye*, 1928] and *Le Bleu de Ciel* [*Blue of Noon*, 1935]), *Haute Tension*'s narrative framework sadistically plays with the boundaries between the imagined and the real. The film begins with the syuzhet's conclusion: a two-tiered point-of-view flashback cleverly disguised as the protagonist's nightmare. A young girl in a hospital gown sits, crinkling her toes, with her back covered in lacerations. She begins to speak into a video camera when the scene cuts to a forest setting, the film's "trick" ending. The same girl, now wearing a blood-soaked T-shirt, stumbles through the woods in an attempt to find her way back to the main road. Suddenly, Marie (Cécile de France), the same short-haired

format justifies the narrative pitfalls that one often encounters with the use of the split-personality character device; where it would be physically impossible for Marie and her "darker side" to be in two places at the same time, the narrative structure accounts for this glitch with the inclusion of a dream sequence that alerts us to the diegesis as Marie's subjective and misguided recollection. In hindsight, wherever Marie is shown watching from a distance as the killer butchers Alex's family in progressively imaginative ways, the audience recognizes that this is the version played out in the mind of a lonely, tormented girl.

Beyond Aja's sophisticated use of narrative ontologies, the film is also an incisive throwback to horror scholarship of the 1970s and '80s. Robin Wood, for

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girl from the dream, wakes up from a nap in the back seat of a car.

While such bits of expository information prefigure the ending almost immediately—whereby Marie is revealed to be the very killer she hunts—their proximity to the opening credits renders them forgettable, and their connection to the main storyline is just as quickly made inconsequential. What is signalled as the true beginning of the film—Marie recounting her dream to her best friend Alex (Maïwenn Le Basco) about a man chasing her who almost felt like a figment of her imagination—delivers an intense shock in the end when the audience is made to realize that Marie's real demons lie within.

From the very onset, style and content work in tandem to sever the illusion created by the familiar nuances of *Haute Tension*'s generic conventions. Commonly derivative and thematically impotent, the filmmaker counts on the audience's fluency with slasher narratives to obscure the horror masterfully plotted into the twisted relationship between Marie and Alex. The film's frame-narrative

example, theorized in a series of essays that the thematic core of the horror genre could be reduced to three connected variables: normalcy (under the guise of heterosexuality), the Other (characterized as the monster), and the relation between the two (79). If nothing more than a cautionary tale about the social pressures of being a sexual deviant from a heteronormative perspective, *Haute Tension* adopts an art-house posture towards its audience that reflects its attentiveness to the sexual politics of horror.

### Inside the Maternal Object: Julien Maury and Alexandre Bustillo's *À l'intérieur*

Along similar lines, Julien Maury and Alexandre Bustillo's *À l'intérieur* (*Inside*, 2007) comments upon another popular wave of film scholarship: that of feminist film criticism and its focus on issues of gendered representation and spectatorship. Theories put forward by Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey, in particular, may urge critics to position the film as a direct response to

psychoanalytic claims that narrative cinema—and indeed horror cinema—tends to abjectify female roles.<sup>1</sup>

In keeping with the momentum of most New Extremist narratives, the film offers little in the way of exposition in order to maximize the bludgeoning of its subjects. In this case, a photo-journalist named Sarah (Alysson Paradis), who must face the reality that she will be raising her unborn child alone after she kills her husband in a car accident. Flash-forward in time to Christmas Eve, where Sarah spends the evening alone at home, still sick with grief as she prepares for her scheduled delivery the next day. As in *Haute Tension*, a stranger at the door gives the protagonist cause for concern; a woman feigning the need to use Sarah's phone breaks into her house, then stops at nothing (including an at-home Caesarean section) to steal her baby away from her.

As a home invasion narrative, *À l'intérieur* draws on many of the post-9/11 sensibilities operative in both American and European contemporary cinemas. Responding to the same paranoid landscape and urban malaise of films like Michael Haneke's *Caché* (*Hidden*, 2005) and David Fincher's *Panic Room* (2002), *À l'intérieur* functions to illustrate the dissolution of middle-class society in an era of anxious urbanities, particularly those that might be entertained by a single mother. This constitutes prime subject matter for an art-house cinema audience that connects with the bourgeois values of family and civility, both of which are violated by the woman's intrusion into Sarah's living quarters.

The similarities between the two women — such as their equally pronounced white skin, dark hair and facial features — also produces a striking conflation between the maternal abject coded in Sarah, and the monstrous sterility of her vicious female stalker. Their likeness also gives a subtext to the dénouement, whereby the woman, having murdered Sarah on the staircase and retrieved the crying baby from her stomach, sits on a rocking chair comforting the newborn child. By now, the audience has realized that during the course of the above-mentioned car accident that killed her husband, Sarah also caused the mysterious woman's miscarriage. Julia Kristeva observes that, “the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life” (4). Understood in this light, the film's revenge narrative supports the desperate stranger's primordial desire to restore the life that was stolen from her. By the end of the film, both women have been forced to experience and fear the power and potency of the sexualized Other—that immoral, monstrous female who is ineffective in carrying her child to term.

## Human Sacrifice and Other Philosophical Questions: Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs*

Though Barbara Creed argues that, “the most popular horrific figures are ‘bodies without souls’ (the vampire), the ‘living corpse’ (the zombie) and the ‘corpse-eater’ (the ghoul)” (47), Paul Laugier's existential study of the martyr figure resurrects one of the more compelling images of horror from the dregs of ancient philosophy, in an effort to explore human depravity in its thankless search for higher knowledge.

*Martyrs* (2009), echoing the real-life case of Elisabeth Fritzl, begins with the story of Lucie (Mylène Jampanoï), a young girl who escapes from an abandoned abattoir where she had been held and systematically tortured for an indeterminate amount of time. Placed in an orphanage by the authorities who rescue her, she befriends a girl named Anna (Morjana Alaoui), who soon discovers Lucie's dark secret: a demon from her past—a psychological manifestation of her guilt over not having been able to save another girl with whom she was enslaved—continues to torment her, urging her to seek revenge on those who captured them.

Fifteen years later, Lucie rushes into a middle-class family's home, summarily killing every person inside — that is, both the parents and the children. Anna, waiting outside in the getaway car, reluctantly agrees to help her bury the bodies. Lucie's demon eventually drives her to suicide, and Anna is left alone to clean up the mess, when she discovers a secret underground chamber and frees an emaciated girl who is kept blind by a metal helmet drilled into her skull. In a spine-chilling twist, the audience is made aware that this will not be Lucie's story, but rather Anna's. As she tends to the skeletal hostage, trying to calm her in a warm bath, strangers burst into the home and immediately shoot the prisoner dead. Now Anna, knowing the terrible fate that awaits her, is taken against her will and made the latest test subject of a secret society headed by Mademoiselle (Catherine Bégin), who seeks to discover the secrets of the afterlife by making martyrs of her captives.

The film's emphasis on the emotional and psychological journey of its protagonist rescues it from the pejorative categories of French torture porn (*cinéma gore*) or the American “gorno” flick. Closer to what one might call an anti-exploitation film, *Martyrs* denies its audience the normative pleasures derived from torture spectacles like Eli Roth's *Hostel* (2005) or John Stockwell's *Turistas* (2006) by adopting a vérité-style aesthetic that amplifies the unsettling realism of Anna's predicament. Put another way, Laugier's film offers an intellectual or even

1. See Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (1977) and Mulvey's 1989 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”.



spiritual motivation for the violence being inflicted; rather than give a voice to Mademoiselle, the tyrannical captor who enjoys very little screen time, *Martyrs* opts to focus on Anna's strength of will to tolerate and even to transcend the insufferable pain she is made to withstand through her years of incarceration. In true art-house form, Laugier allows his audience to commune with the film, writing an enigmatic ending that leaves the legitimacy of death-for-higher-purpose to the viewer's discretion.

### Death To The Old...

For American audiences, one of the greatest achievements of the New French Extremism has been a re-engagement with wider intellectual and philosophical lines of enquiry. For French audiences, the benefit has issued from a new receptivity to Hollywood's big-budget approach to the fear spectacle, with its affective power to bludgeon audiences to attention. The three films under scrutiny in this essay demonstrate that overlaps between the stubbornly independent traditions of cult European and American genre cinemas can in fact inspire greater fear and fascination with the cinematic apparatus, in all its gruesome splendour. By compelling viewers to concentrate on the formal ingenuity of their stories, then immersing them in their stylish eccentricity, New Extremist narratives arguably stay truer to film's ontological status as an art of pure, visceral experience, one that is as mentally stimulating as it is physiologically rousing. From a critical perspective, they also foreground structures of cinematic discourse—for example, the generic critique of the slasher film imbedded in *Haute Tension*'s narrative twists, or the psychoanalytic inflections that ooze from the different characterizations of the abject in *À l'intérieur* and *Martyrs*—which, like Jean-Luc Godard's generation of *Nouvelle Vague* filmmakers, endeavours to make the material identity of the cinema visible, and its ideologies palpable.

As Joan Hawkins notes, "horror is perhaps the best vantage point from which to study the cracks that seem to exist everywhere in late twentieth-century 'sacrilized' film culture" (131). In sealing the fissures that exist between popular and art-house cinemas, this latest paradigm shift mutually satisfies the intellectual pleasures of art cinema

audiences who crave innovative narrative and stylistic techniques, and the affective delights of horror audiences who wish simply to be utterly terrified.

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