READING THE RAZOR BLADE

The Problematic Reception of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema

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Dissertation submitted to the University of Nottingham

for the degree of Masters by Research in French

September 2013

CONTENTS

Abstract

From the early 1990s onwards, a trend in French cinema took the body, especially the violated body, as the starting point of an engagement with the spectator which moved beyond the traditional ocular relationship between film and viewer and into a more physical mode. The reception of these films has been difficult, for a variety of reasons. In this dissertation we look at how this trend, herein described as Contemporary French Extreme Cinema, has been damaged by its critical reception, by its refusal to occupy understood cinematic spaces, and by censorship. The basis for the analysis herein rests in the phenomenological film analyses of Linda Williams, Vivian Sobchack and Laura Marks, through which we draw a new model for film spectatorship based on an awareness of genre and an understanding of the haptic rapport which these films engender. Analysis of this trend is complex, with a multitude of possible approaches, but this dissertation offers a series of suggestions which will hopefully assist in the navigation of such difficult territory. While it would be imprudent to claim to offer any firm conclusions on a trend that, we argue, might not yet be finished, this dissertation nonetheless suggests where the failures might lie, how these might be reclaimed, and how these films might have influenced French cinema as it stands today.

Acknowledgements

There are a number of people without whom this dissertation would not have been possible. I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisors, Dr Lynsey Russell-Watts, Dr Renaud Olivero and Dr Jean-Xavier Ridon, for their friendship, guidance and patience. The French department at the University of Nottingham kindly funded both this Masters and a research trip to Paris. Special thanks go to Dr Nicki Hitchcott for her help throughout my academic career. My thanks also go to my colleagues from Charles V (Université de Paris VII) for their suggestions and shared wisdom, especially Dr Emilia Wilton-Godberfforde. The research for this dissertation was made immeasurably easier thanks to the helpful staff of the Bibliothèque du film at the Cinémathèque française. Finally, I want to thank my family for their love, support and proof-reading.

Introduction

Despite the pioneering place of France in the history of world cinema,[1] French cinema has seemingly always been marginalised in the global popular perception, with films which achieve mainstream popularity abroad apparent exceptions to the norm. The frequent limitation of French film releases to the arthouse circuit upholds this perception, attributing to them an air of pretention which the films themselves might not warrant. Lucy Mazdon holds that 'what we perceive to be an "art" film or a "popular" film depends as much on the particular context of reception as upon the identity of the film itself' (2001: 5). How films are perceived, especially upon first viewing, is an integral aspect of how we construct, relate to and theorise cinematic trends.

On the reception of her films abroad, director Catherine Breillat, whose work is an important part of the phenomenon which we will study in this dissertation, noted 'à l'étranger on qualifie souvent mes films de "french", un adjective qui signifie intellectuel et un peu chiant' (Best & Crowley 2007: 55). Responding to this assertion, Victoria Best and Martin Crowley add that 'French cinema' in common parlance can also function as a byword, 'an ambivalent shorthand for sexually explicit films' (2007: 55). Beyond this, there has long been a consideration of French literature as explicit and in some

[1] Frenchman Louis Le Prince made the earliest known celluloid film recording with *Roundhay Garden Scene* (1888), while the pioneering Lumière brothers were responsible for the some of the earliest screenings where an audience paid to see the film, thus originating the cinema experience as we recognise it today. The Lumière's film *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (1896) apparently caused panic when originally screened (though the veracity of this claim is questioned by several film historians). It is pleasing, however, to imagine that French cinema has always inspired violent physical reactions.

way dangerous. Consider this line from the ‘Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister’ by Robert Browning:

> Or, my scrofulous French novel,
>
> On grey paper with blunt type!
>
> Simply glance at it you grovel
>
> Hand and foot in Belial’s gripe;
>
> If I double down its pages
>
> At the woeful sixteenth print,
>
> When he gathers his greengages,
>
> Ope a sieve and slip it in’t? (Browning 1973: 425)

The soliloquy is that of a Spanish monk who wishes ill upon one of his brothers, and believes that even the slightest contact with this ‘French novel’ would be enough to bring him to ruin. The idea that exposure to French literature can somehow contaminate is a potent one, and one which particularly affects the branch of French cinema which we will explore here.

In the 1990s and 2000s, a trend manifested itself in French film: the use and exploitation of the body as a narrative device. This brought a new aspect to the categorisation of French film. Rather than being jokingly described as naughty, or pretentious, these films brought about an altogether stronger set of responses, described variously as ‘unsettling’ (Smith 2001), ‘pornographic’ (Bradshaw 2002) and ‘irresponsible’ (Mitchell 2003). This trend was first described in detail by James Quandt, who highlighted what he

perceived as an empty stylistic exercise in his article 'Flesh and Blood' (2004).[2] Quandt cited an attempt by the directors involved to be 'wilfully transgressive' (2004: 127) as a unifying factor. I have previously tried to argue for an inclusive approach to these films, suggesting that together they can be seen as a movement, linked by a shared desire to push boundaries and instigate a new form of corporeal cinema (Parsons 2010). However, this is perhaps just as flawed a way of categorising these films as was Quandt's all-encompassing attack. Director and screenwriter Marina de Van explained the problem that some of those involved in the trend have with the artificiality of this method: 'on pioche un film ici, un film là, et on fait un mouvement complètement imaginaire en mettant en rapport les films qui n'ont rien à voir entre eux'.[3] The first of many types of violence that we will explore in this dissertation, then, is the very act of forcing together films which are entirely separate. A better approach might be to accept that these films exist as separate entities, but to point towards a set of axioms which can be extrapolated from the entirety of the trend, an ethos which is perhaps unconsciously shared by the filmmakers and which can then be used as a way of discussing these films without forcing any shared philosophy upon them. This places the discussion outside of the trend, and thus avoids uncomfortable generalisation.

These axioms comprise the attributes which I previously tried to apply to the films as a group. The first of these axioms is a *new cinematic body*. The body is brought into a new domain of cinematic being – it becomes an

[2] Quandt was not the first to perceive the emerging prevalence of the body in contemporary French cinema, but his is the earliest comprehensive response to the phenomenon.
[3] Personal interview conducted in Paris, 22nd September 2011.

integral part of the film, as important as, and indeed sometimes more important than, the narrative. The bodies of the actors, accordingly, are appropriated into this new being and become somehow dehumanised and digitised. In some cases this construction is more artificial than others – in replacing the lead actress of her film *Anatomie de l'enfer* (Catherine Breillat 2004) with a body double, Breillat noted (in a title card prefacing the film) that she is showing 'la construction fictionnelle du corps de la fille'. This new position of the body, as essential to the film, leads us to the second axiom: *physical violation*. The body violated is a motif which perhaps defines the trend more than any other. The directors take the body and subject it to any number of intrusions, excisions, unnatural openings and closings. Even where direct violence is not involved (which is rare), the camera's gaze steps in as the violating agent and offers 'forbidden images' (Quandt 2004: 129) in extreme close up. These images are orchestrated in such a manner as to intimate a particular closeness with reality. This caress of the fourth wall is our third axiom – *simulated proximity*. Even when at their most outlandish, these films strive to incorporate an enhanced sensory aspect which draws the spectator into the film. Best and Crowley have described the 'defining vector' of the work of writer/director Virginie Despentes, co-director of the film *Baise-moi* (Despentes & Coralie Trinh-Thi 2000), which we will examine in Chapter 3, as being 'to produce a form of representation which would minimise its distance from the world represented' (2007: 165). The diminishing of distance between film and spectator, and the rewriting of the film/spectator relationship this entails, is an integral aspect of the discussion of this trend, and one which will be elaborated on throughout this dissertation.

The final axiom might be described as a *directly confrontational style*. These films challenge the spectator, their audience, into accepting and understanding them. Herein lies one of the greatest problems of the trend – it resists facile appreciation and explanation. These axioms can thus be summed up in four points: a focus on the body as a cinematic tool, making it an integral part of the being of the film; an interest in violation of the body, whether by literally wounding it or by exploring it in uncomfortable detail; the minimisation of the divide between film and spectator; and the instigation of a complicated, potentially uncomfortable dialogue with the spectator.

Film critic Mark Kermode once expressed his respect for extreme, challenging films which, as he termed it, 'ride the razor blade' (Kermode and Mayo 2010). This description is an apt one, containing as it does the comprehensible image of dangerous, uncertain behaviour and, more obviously, a suggested proximity of the sexual organs of the rider to a blade. This juxtaposition of sex and violence, or suggestion of sexual violence, perfectly conjures the idea of 'brutal intimacy' which Tim Palmer located within contemporary French cinema in his book of the same name (2011). The intention of this dissertation is to examine this 'razor blade', this uncomfortable space which, it will be argued, exists both within and around these films. The complicated, difficult to assimilate nature of the subject matter becomes a stigma which affects the reception of the films themselves, in some cases spilling out through them into debates which occur on a wider social and political canvas.

It is necessary to outline how I see the functioning of the razor blade within and upon these films. In the first place, in accordance with the films' focus on the physical, we must posit a new, more physical mode of spectatorship, of spectator rapport with the film. This new mode is equally informed by Linda Williams's proposal of 'body genres' (1991), those films which affect the spectator in a physical way (shudder for horror, laughter for comedy, for example), and Laura Marks's description of haptic viewing, whereby the eyes of the spectator function like feeling sensory organs, grazing the skin of the film (2000). These viewing positions can be conflated with Martine Beugnet's proposal of 'cinema of sensation' (2007) which, she suggests, are films which need to be felt as much as consciously understood.

Beugnet makes particular reference to the importance of the films' availability on DVD, with its pause function and the ability to rewind and rewatch, and it is clear that multiple viewings are important in the comprehension of this cinematic trend. Critical reception, however, is often based on a single viewing, perhaps at a film festival amongst crowds of people who will all be responding in different ways to the content of the film. This creates a difficult critical space for the films, bereft of the hindsight and careful analysis required to fully understand them. Consider British film critic Philip Bradshaw, who acknowledges that his opinions on *Irréversible* (Gaspar Noé 2002), while not necessarily unchanged with time, were a rash response to a film which hurt him: 'I have to concede the possibility that I was just freaked out in precisely the way Noé intended' (Bradshaw 2010). This hurt, this freaking out, it can be argued, arises from what we can describe as a failure of this new, contact-based mode of spectatorship: when the

spectator's response to the *simulated proximity* of the film is not successful, a *friction* is created. This is where we can locate the first action of the razor blade within the film/spectator relationship: the friction surrounding the painful rent between how these films should be viewed and understood and how they actually are. The strong critical responses, engendered by this friction, have led to a mythology surrounding these films which does not necessarily reflect their content or intent. While such a mythology can raise awareness of these films, it can also problematically ascribe to them a status which can lead to misunderstanding and misrepresentation: again a rent, a friction, this time between how the films should be received categorised, and how they actually are.

At the heart of this misrepresentation and failure to enter into a satisfactory film/spectator relationship, we can locate the active reformulation of genre at work within the films themselves. These films often take cosmetically familiar generic tropes and subvert them, usually in such a way as to complement the simulated proximity. The spectator is treated as a knowledgeable, active participant in the process of watching: the familiarity and comfort of recognisable genre is twisted into a tool with which to unsettle the spectator, to actively engage them in the act of watching. The danger of such an action is the resistance to this that might occur on the part of the spectator. There risks a *collision* between the usual viewing position and the new one demanded by these films. As with friction, collision represents an action of the razor blade, a potentially damaging cut against the reception of these films.

This idea of a problematic viewing experience draws us to an underlying problem of this trend: what can and should be shown? Censorship has repeatedly offered difficult obstacles to the reception of these films, and in censorship we can locate the third action of the razor blade: *slicing*. This is, as we will see, the most visible and literal of the actions described herein, literally involving the removal of moments of the film. The violence inherent in such an action is clear. The effect that this has on the films themselves is also evident – with elements removed by a party outside of the direct creative process (not the director), the message of the film is uncontrollably altered. In some instances this is a small alteration, and one that does not affect the film to any great degree. In other instances, as we shall see, it can have catastrophic consequences, completely changing the meaning and sense of a film.

This central idea of the razor blade, and its constituent cutting actions of friction, collision and slicing, is suitable because it refers to a physical action and yet can be understood metaphorically, in much the same way as these films refer to a physicality which is, at least superficially, not physical but rather digital or celluloid. Much of the discussion surrounding these films must necessarily involve these abstract concepts and constructs, but the tools proposed in this dissertation might be adopted as useful markers for navigating such difficult territory.

Having earlier mentioned the essentially violent action of ascribing a title to the trend, we must acknowledge that such an action facilitates discussion. It is useful to have a name, a catch-all title for the corpus of films which we are describing. In previous work, I adopted Quandt's title of 'the

New French Extremity', which sufficed in that context as the primary aim there was to reclaim the trend from him, and suggest ways in which the films could be brought together in a more productive and positive way than his pejorative grouping. However, the use of this title requires the proviso that it is not being used in the manner which Quandt intended. It is also misleading – in accepting the trend as 'new' we automatically diminish the importance of preceding films which have had an effect upon the trend, of which there are many. Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall uphold the idea of new extremity or extremism in their book *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe* (2011), which traces links from these French films to what they describe as a wider 'European New Extremism'. In their introduction they argue their case for keeping this title, asserting their belief that it actually does not imply that this trend is new but rather presents a bridging position between newness in the films and their indebtedness to the past (Horeck and Kendall 2011: 5). In order to avoid complications, however, it is preferable for the purpose of this dissertation to remove the 'new' entirely. Jonathan Romney also accepted Quandt's description, going so far as to refer to the directors as 'New Extremists' (2004), but there are many other titles which have been attributed to these films since Quandt's article. For instance, Tim Palmer not only gives a useful name to the thematic conflation of violence and the body often found in these films with the title *Brutal Intimacy* (2011), he also suggests '*cinéma du corps*' (2011: 11). Brutal intimacy serves as a useful description of topic, accurately conjuring the use of the body in these films which, as we stated earlier, is exposed and explored in an intimate fashion by both literally and through the gaze of the camera. The term

'*cinéma du corps*', however, is more problematic. While it functions as a general description of films which make the corporeal essential, it does not contain enough information to tie it specifically to these films under discussed. While Quandt's 'new' appellation is potentially misleading, Palmer's is too vague. The same must be applied to Martine Beugnet's description of the 'cinema of sensation' (2007). There is too great a scope in it, incorporating as it does films which focus on the body in an entirely different way, such as *Zidane, un portrait du 21e* siècle (Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno 2006), which focuses on the sportsman's physicality. Such films are not predicated by sex or violence, and it is these considerations which raise objection, which problematise the films, which are contentious – in other words, the aspects which interest us here. In both Palmer and Beugnet's descriptions there is the added problem that the films they refer to are not necessarily French, and we need to ensure that our title maintains this focus.

In order to avoid these problems in previous names chosen, I propose here a new title for this tendency, this trend: Contemporary French Extreme Cinema. There are several reasons why this serves as a more suitable description. The lack of a definite article highlights that this is a disparate group, not a focused and inclusive movement. 'Contemporary' replaces 'new': we are not suggesting that extreme content has not existed before, but rather clarifying that we are discussing the more recent trend. As noted, the inclusion of the word 'French' is important – not least because we need to ensure that discussion is not overlapping with the wider New Extremism in European cinema (though there are areas where it is important to acknowledge that borderline cases can and do exist). Finally 'extreme

cinema' replaces 'extremity', as this latter suggests a boundary achieved, and it would be unwise to try to proscribe such a position. If one of the axioms of the trend is being directly confrontational, pushing at boundaries, we do not wish to imply that there is an ultimate impassable boundary that has been reached. As we shall see in Chapter 3, even censorship laws are not immutable. With a name given to the trend, we must immediately acknowledge that it is open to question. 'Contemporary' will, of course, become just as limiting as 'new', and so this appellation too must at some point be replaced, especially if new films which can be associated with this title fail to appear.

As for which films should be included in the corpus, I have decided to include all of the films discussed by Quandt and Romney, along with several which were released after both of their articles but which have been affiliated with the trend by other people. As such we take *Carne* (Noé 1992) as the start of the trend, though Quandt's assertion that it represents the 'ur-text' (2004: 129) remains open to question. Noé's short film in the sexually-explicit portmanteau film *Destricted* (2007), *We Fuck Alone* (2006), appears as it is relevant to this discussion, even though the entire film is not. *Process* (CS Leigh 2004) appears on the list because, while the director is American, it was shot in French with French actors, and Romney discussed it in his response to Quandt. *Intimacy* (Patrice Chéreau 2001) similarly appears thanks to its French director and mention by Quandt, even though it was a co-production filmed in English. The list ends with *Enter the Void* (2009), Noé's latest film as of this writing. While perhaps not extreme in the same way as Noé's previous efforts, it still contains themes and images which

correspond with Contemporary French Extreme Cinema, and Quandt himself cites it as something of a resurgence of the New French Extremity in his 2011 follow-up to 'Flesh and Blood', 'More Moralism from the "Wordy Fuck"'. This is not intended to be a closed list – the possibility of more films to follow is something that we will address. It is also possible that the list is not entirely comprehensive – there may be films missing which could arguably be associated with the trend. What this list gives is a sense of the general shape of the trend.

The table below arranges the films into chronological order, grouped into four-year bands. This helps to visually indicate the growth of the trend, its peak, and its subsequent decline. Such a visual depiction raises a number of interesting points: the space between *Carne* and its sequel *Seul contre tous* (Noé 1998) suggests that the impact of the former did not immediately affect the status quo in French cinema. This might have been due to the fact that *Carne*, due to its length, was denied a traditional cinematic and home video release: 'son format un peu spécial (40 minutes) l'empêchait d'être distribué normalement' (Gans 1992). Quandt locates the 'apotheosis and nadir of the trend' (Quandt 2011: 210) in *Anatomie de l'enfer*, and we can see that this film came at the end of the most productive period of the trend, with a fecund three years (2001-2003) giving 12 films. Post-*Anatomie de l'enfer* the trend falls off, reduced to just one film per year. The impact of these films was also lessened, with both *À l'intérieur* (Julien Maury and Alexandre Bustillo 2007) and *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier 2008) being borderline cases which can be more or less aligned with the horror genre. This is not to say that they are not subversive, worthy works, only that they are more easily classifiable than, for

example, Noé's films, which use codes of the horror genre to rather different ends.

This is how Contemporary French Extreme Cinema looks at the time of this writing: [4]

1991-1994	1995-1998	1999-2002	2003-2006	2007-2010
		Romance (99) *Pola X* (99) *Baise-moi* (00) *À ma sœur !* (01) *Intimacy* (01)	*Haute tension* (03) *Twentynine Palms* (03)	
Carne (91)	*Regarde la mer* (97) *Seul contre tous* (98) *Sombre* (98)	*Trouble Every Day* (01) *Le pornographe* (01) *Dans ma peau* (02) *Choses secrètes* (02) *Demonlover* (02) *Irréversible* (02) *La chatte à deux têtes* (02) *La vie nouvelle* (02)	*Ma mère* (04) *Process* (04) *Anatomie de l'enfer* (04) *We Fuck Alone* (*Destricted*) (06)	*À l'intérieur* (07) *Martyrs* (08) *Enter the Void* (09)

With the Contemporary French Extreme Cinema trend now located and described, we can start to look at how it has been rendered inviable. My hypothesis is that the trend has been damaged, and potentially ended, by an arguably unfair and illogical critical reception due, we will argue, to a failure on the part of spectators to submit to the new viewing mode that these films require. They have been adversely affected by their popular perception and sale and the difficulty of assimilating them into understood genres. This is

[4] Full references for these films can be found in the Filmography.

compounded by their extreme content causing problematic issues with censorship. This dissertation thus engages not just with the aesthetic qualities of the films themselves, but also with their production and reception.

Before outlining how this dissertation will progress, it is important to highlight some possible limitations and account for specific choices which will be made. In terms of critical reception, the focus is mostly on the negative, on those critics who did not understand the films. There are, of course, positive critical responses to be found but, given that the central focus of this dissertation is on the diminishment of the trend, we are mostly going to ignore these in order to try to understand what it was that went wrong in the bad critical responses. In writing of this kind, relating to film spectatorship, one must be careful to avoid discussions which are based upon an assumed figure of 'the audience' or 'the spectator'. As Martin Barker notes, 'the idea of an abstracted "spectator", "viewer" or "reader" can only […] be an analytic construct' (2011: 109). Unfortunately, it is often difficult not to fall back upon such discourse, but our aim here is to locate moments of spectatorship in phenomenological terms of engagement with the film itself. Thus, while responses obviously differ between spectators, there is hopefully a firm basis for the assertions made.

The start of the Contemporary French Extreme Cinema trend coincides with the rise in a phenomenological approach to film criticism, spearheaded by the work of commentators like Linda Williams (1991), Vivian Sobchack (1992) and, later, Laura Marks (2000). Phenomenology marks the filmic text itself as the most important aspect of the critical engine, superseding both the critic and filmmaker. This idea of the film as an

important object in and of itself is something that we have hinted at thus far, with discussion of the relationship engendered with the spectator, and also in the quote from Browning, which describes the objectification of French literature. Sobchack describes the experience of film watching as a dialogue between spectator and film, a two-way exchange in which 'we (and the film before us) are immersed in a world and in an activity of visual being' (1992: 8), going on to explain that it 'entails the visible, audible, kinetic aspects of sensible experience to make sense visibly, audibly and haptically' (1992: 9). Such a Sobchackian approach will be something of a *fil conducteur* through this dissertation, prioritising the action of the film, and the filmic text itself, over any other considerations. Laura Marks also highlights the importance of films in and of themselves, these 'tangible and beloved bodies' (2002: xi) that endlessly captivate and fascinate us. She describes images as 'that fold in the universal strudel' (2002: xi), a complex multiplicity of meaning which need only be unfurled, the strudel digested.

An important facet of the discussion of how these films have failed to find acceptance is their critical reception. It seems in some ways that critics have fallen behind academics in understanding what these films are supposed to be doing, how they are supposed to be received. For instance, Beugnet's reading of extreme films holds that historical and political dimensions within them can be arrived at through 'a form of embodied dialogue that takes place between film, spectator and context…which has to be sensed before it can be understood' (Horeck & Kendall 2011: 7). This three-way flow of information, or perhaps it would be more accurate to describe it as unreconstructed data, is not something often taken into

account by critics when dealing with these films. The first chapter of this dissertation will deal with modes of spectatorship and critical reception, examining the friction between the films and their audiences. Where Contemporary French Extreme Cinema requires audiences to engage on a physical level, it is often the case that a purely cosmetic approach is taken to reviewing them. In some cases this critical difficulty is borne of an inability on the part of the critics to understand the directors' chosen form – especially when it is at odds with their previous work. Quandt's article, so important in forming an understanding of the way Contemporary French Extreme Cinema has been received, stems from his dissatisfaction with Bruno Dumont's choice to make an extreme film. This criticism appeared despite the fact that the director's focus on the body began in earlier films, making such a move entirely understandable. This crisis of expectation also affects the sale and presentation of the films: advertising campaigns based on their 'X' factor, most vividly portrayed in the poster for *Romance* (Breillat 1999), create an awkward tension between audience and film.

The idea of films acquiring a cachet based on their censorship history is something which has pushed certain films into a previously unthinkable popularity, attracting viewers who wish to experience the thrill of the banned. This can be seen with the films which were included under the banner of the 'Video Nasties' in the UK.[5] Releases of the films can now proudly proclaim

[5] The 'Video Nasties' scandal is something which will be referred to several times in this dissertation – the 1984 Video Recordings Act in Britain led to a selection of diverse films being vilified as dangerous, 'sickening filth' which the Conservative government felt was morally inappropriate for the British public. Examples such as *Blood Feast* (Herschell Gordon Lewis1963) show how reactionary this act was, widely attacking films based on public perception of their identity as 'dangerous' rather than on their actual content. A fascinating study of the Video Nasties phenomenon is to be found in Kate Egan's book *Trash or Treasure?: Censorship and the changing meanings of video nasties* (2007).

them as ‘uncut for the first time’ and ‘previously banned’, creating interest in spite of the questionable quality of the films themselves. For Contemporary French Extreme Cinema, however, such an approach is ineffective, robbing these films of their ambiguity, in popular perception, by ascribing to them a particular ‘type’ of film.

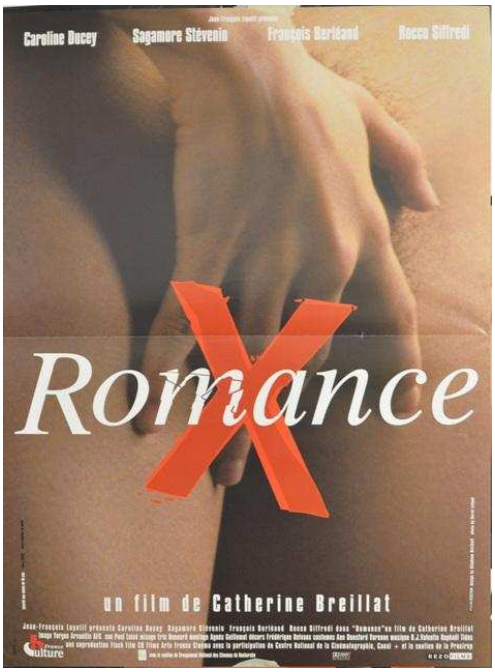

Figure 1: The poster for Romance, emphasising the ‘X-rated’ content.

Popular perception is fed by the ways in which the trend is received and dealt with. For example, the reception of Noé’s *Irréversible* (2002) was coloured by the events surrounding its screening at the Cannes Festival, with 20 people reportedly requiring oxygen after fainting during the film and 250 people walking out. The BBC’s report on the Cannes affair (BBC News 2002) reads almost like an account of a terrorist attack, something which we will

see referred to both in response to Noé's cinema, with the idea of his being an inheritor of the artistic terrorism of surrealism, and in the assertion by Bruno Dumont that *Twentynine Palms* constituted a 'terrorist' cinema (Matheou 2005: 17). The popular perception extends to the directors themselves, who becomes 'names' associated with such dangerous content. The title of *enfant terrible* has been applied to many directors associated with Contemporary French Extreme Cinema.

This idea of these works becoming somehow objectified, regarded as apart from the usual canons of cinema, is one which needs to be investigated. The second chapter of this dissertation will examine some of the ways in which these films stand apart. We can locate their innate difference in the way that the directors respond to and reformat what we might look at as typical genre tropes. In order to highlight the potential damage that such generic reformulation can cause to the film/spectator relationship, we will analyse two films both in terms of their formal innovation and in terms of critical theory on the genres which they most closely resemble. To this end we will examine Alexandre Aja's *Haute tension* both as a formally inventive horror film and as a subversion of the Hollywood slasher film, deconstructing the role of the central protagonist in order to open out the field of spectator investment. We will then follow this with a study of Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms*, looking at it as a subversion of the road movie genre. Through these readings, we will attempt to explain what it is within these films that causes difficulty for the spectator.

From this discussion of how the films play with spectator investment and understanding of genre, we will move to the question of censorship, and

the underlying consideration of just what is acceptable on screen. My third chapter will examine problems which Contemporary French Extreme Cinema has encountered with censorship, and the way that this reflects back to pose problems for the genre. This censorship can take place at different periods in the life of the film. In some cases it might require cuts for cinematic release, or be refused release entirely (or, in extreme circumstances, be pulled from cinemas, as happened with *Baise-moi*). The film might be censored upon its release on DVD, as this represents a different kind of viewing experience with its own rules. The ending of Breillat's *À ma sœur !*(2001) was drastically censored on DVD in Britain, completely altering the effect of the film. We will look at the furore surrounding the removal of *Baise-moi* from French cinemas and its censorship on DVD in the UK, looking to understand how these adversely affected its reception. We will then move to the more extreme cutting of *À ma sœur !* on its UK DVD release. Here the slicing of the razor blade is particularly in evidence, as the cut creates a profound division between what the film is doing and how the spectator receives this. Through a textual analysis of both versions of the cut scene, we can assert that the censoring action deconstructs Breillat's intention and rebuilds a less confrontational and essentially meaningless tract in its place.

Many directors associated with the trend are now working on projects which do not share the same approach to extremity, to using the body as a filmic tool. It is possible that it is simply no longer viable to deal with such extreme content. There seems to have been a shift to a more poetic, less formally challenging style of filmmaking. A notable number of directors associated with Contemporary French Extreme Cinema have now moved

into this new type of filmmaking, which begs the question of whether this is some sort of evolution of the concepts they previously engaged with. This question is even more relevant when we consider the thematic similarities between consecutive works by the same directors. This possible shift in French cinema might give some answers as to the fate of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema. While the films might have been difficult to comprehend, upsetting or even offensive to some viewers, I believe that they offer what Philip Bradshaw termed the 'lightning bolt of terror or inspiration that we hope for at the cinema' (2010), and hope that they will continue to be studied and enjoyed as rich visual texts that perhaps bespeak not a 'cultural crisis' (Quandt 2004: 128) but rather an evolution in cinema towards a more philosophically challenging and physically confrontational model.

Chapter 1 – Friction

A Required Viewing Mode

If we accept that our understanding of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema is indelibly coloured by Quandt's article, we logically also accept that these films are set apart by their focus on extreme depictions of sex and violence. Quandt opined that the desire of these films was 'to wade in rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and subject it to all manner of penetration, mutilation, and defilement' (2004: 127-128), a position which locates the interest firmly in their focus on the physical. To this interest we can add an extra dimension, and one that instructs the entirety of this dissertation to a certain degree: these films can be fascinating because of the effect they can have upon our own physicality. By drawing together key concepts from several theoretical approaches to spectatorship, we can posit a necessary viewing position for Contemporary French Extreme Cinema and through this describe why, in some cases, there is a failure in the film/spectator relationship. We can then begin to understand the negative effect such failures can have on the trend as a whole.

The foundations of this proposed necessary viewing mode can be found in Linda Williams's article 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess', wherein she outlines three types of 'body genre': the horror film and pornography, both of which had already been classified as 'body' genres by Carol Clover for their privileging of the sensational, and melodrama (1991). These genres, Williams asserts, are 'gross' movies which give our body 'an

actual physical jolt' (1991: 2). This jolt is achieved through onscreen representations of 'body spectacle' most explicitly described, according to Williams, 'in pornography's portrayal of orgasm, in horror's portrayal of violence and terror, and in melodrama's portrayal of weeping' (1991: 4). Contemporary French Extreme Cinema, with its focus on extreme physical representation, can be aligned with this theory. However, in the case of these films it can be argued that the spectator is required to understand these responses as described by Williams, to understand what the film is doing to them, and then passively submit to the film. This is a two-fold idea: the spectator must approach the film more than might be considered usual, and at the same time detach themselves from their critical faculties in order to activate a deeper rapport with the film.

This deeper rapport can be considered through Laura Marks's concept of haptic visuality. Marks uses this concept to discuss intercultural cinema, arguing that cultural memory is embodied and so film must appeal to more than optical visuality, more than the 'normal' mode of film viewing, to convey cultural meaning. With haptic visuality described as 'a familiarity with the world that the viewer knows through more senses than vision alone' (Marks 2000: 187), we can see how haptic visuality can be conflated with the concept of simulated proximity outlined in the introduction, that is the reduction of distance between spectator and film through the reduction of distance between subject and representation in the film itself. Both appeal to the spectator's knowledge to engender a closeness. Marks describes the eyes of the spectator acting as touching organs, 'more inclined to graze than to gaze' (2000: 162). The concept of 'grazing' is interesting, as it contains

within it both the idea of moving across something and taking bits away, changing the surface nature of it, as with grazing animals, but also of an uncomfortable bleeding wound caused by rubbing against something. This is a good illustration of the more physical aspect, the need to feel as well as see. The spectator reacts to the films on a non-specific plane of physicality, as well as through the visual perception and mental processing which we would expect in all visual data reception.

Martine Beugnet provides us with a workable position from which to better understand the sort of relationship which is required between spectator and film. She asserts that 'to be immersed in films' sensuous and aesthetic fields…is also to delight in the distinctive capacity of film to become "a sensual and sensible expansion" of ourselves' (2007: 124). Horeck and Kendall summarise this relationship as 'a form of embodied dialogue…which has to be sensed before it can be understood' (2011: 7). This idea of dialogue refers back to Sobchack's description of the film/spectator relationship which we explored briefly in the introduction. For Sobchack, the film watching experience functions as a two-way exchange, wherein the film is not a dormant or dead artefact to be looked at, but rather an entirely dynamic entity with which we can converse: 'through the address of our own vision, we speak back to the cinematic expression before us, using a visual language that is also tactile' (1992: 9).

The idea of immersion in a film is another highly potent image. Immersion holds connotations of being surrounded by data which we cannot immediately process into information but will eventually be able to, as in language immersion. This is a good way of looking at the way the response

to Contemporary French Extreme Cinema should be constructed. We cannot expect to understand these films completely upon our first viewing, at least not until sufficient time has passed to process our responses to them: their effect is such that an initially unfavourable opinion might completely change upon closer examination. The viewing position requires a more nuanced relationship, a dialogue between film and spectator. We might look at such an approach as digestive – the images must be absorbed, broken down, processed. Such an idea refers back to Marks's quite possibly unintentional description of images as being 'that fold in the universal strudel' (2002: xi), a satisfying culinary metaphor, and also looks forward to the conflation of film and nourishment which we will encounter in our examination of the work of Gaspar Noé in this chapter.

This, then, is the required viewing mode for Contemporary French Extreme Cinema: as these films can be considered as associable with body genres, they will elicit physical responses in the body of the spectator. However, these films also reduce the distance between themselves and the spectator through appealing to the spectator's knowledge, which leads to an embodied relationship. The spectator must approach the film as a multi-sensory experience, opening themselves up to its effect, even if this is uncomfortable or upsetting. To borrow the slogan of French film website Allociné, 'ne restez pas simple spectateur!' (Allociné 2013). This is a difficult position, however, as the immediate response to something which inflicts pain is to dislike it, to disengage. The inability to submit to this required viewing mode leads to the first slice of the razor blade, a friction between spectator and film.

Friction

The idea of friction between spectator and film provides a description of the failure of a haptic-informed viewing mode, implying a collision, an uncomfortable rub, rather than the comfortable assumption into and embracing of the film which would occur in a successful application of the mode. The reading of friction is difficult, and perhaps only truly apparent in the post-viewing state of the spectator. For example, if physical discomfort is experienced during the film, this might actually contribute to a successful viewing experience, if it is understood in a useful way, while an apparently comfortable viewing might still result in a response which we could look at as evidence of a frictional experience. What is important to understand about the use of the term friction here is that it represents a failure to communicate, a rent between how a film should be received and how it actually is received. The reception of films is, of course, entirely subjective, and we would never argue for any sort of uniform response. Where the responses become problematic is when they are placed in a position from which they effect the further reception of the film, or the response to subsequent films in the same or a similar lineage: in other words, the critical reception.

The critical reception of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema has been problematic from the beginning, both in terms of response to individual films and in the way that they were first classified and described as a cohesive movement by James Quandt. It might seem reductive to constantly refer back to Quandt's article, but it remains a remarkably potent critical

touchstone.[6] As Quandt himself remarked, 'the article took on a life never intended, with often-uncomfortable results' (2011: 210). The power of a critical response, especially a negative one, cannot be underestimated. As we mentioned in the introduction, critics' reviews are often the result of a single viewing and, we have tried to argue, for Contemporary French Extreme Cinema this is simply not sufficient. These films require time to comprehend, and do not sit well in a critical environment where response is almost immediate. For this reason, the initial responses to films that appear after their premieres at film festivals are particularly problematic, as we will see in relation to the premiere of *Irréversible* at Cannes.

A Statement of Intent: *Carne*

In 'Flesh and Blood', Quandt finds the 'ur-text' (2004: 129) of the trend he describes in the short film *Carne* (Noé 1991). This is where we will begin looking at the frictional relationship, moving forward to engage with the following films in what might be regarded as Gaspar Noé's loose thematic trilogy, films linked by the presence of Philippe Nahon's 'boucher existentialiste' (Gans 1992). These films offer a fascinating window into the critic/film relationship, and enough information exists to offer a conclusive argument for the action of friction thereon.

Carne follows an unnamed horse butcher (Philippe Nahon), and single father, through a series of unfortunate events as he struggles to provide for

[6] In my undergraduate dissertation I attempted to 'disqualify' Quandt, but this now appears more reductive than attempting to assimilate his reading into a fuller understanding of the trend.

his autistic daughter and then goes to prison after grievously assaulting a man he wrongly assumes to have molested her. Upon his release he finds himself lost without his former job, and tortured both by incestuous feelings towards his daughter and by the possibility of becoming a father again.

Having raised the concept of friction at play within the film/spectator relationship, it is interesting to see that the critical response to *Carne* was actually very positive. Jean-Pierre Léonardini described the film as 'une réussite flagrante' (1991), while the unsigned *Nouvel Observateur* review describes *Carne* as being 'né dans le cerveau remarquable d'un jeune réalisateur' (1992). There is, however, an immediate sense that, despite the accolades, critics were shocked by the film, and it could be argued that their responses sublimate their insecurities by categorising Noé's work into a comprehensible space as an inheritor of the surrealist tradition; that the essential meaning of the images was missed in favour of the view that they marked a return to surrealist concerns. In pointing to thematic antecedents, the critics actually created an uncomfortably artificial model, and one which would inform Quandt's angry response wherein he decried the films for their apparent failure to inherit the French tradition of true provocation. We might regard the desire to categorise as a coping mechanism: if a film can be understood as part of a distinct genre, it perhaps hurts less.

Aligning the film with surrealism is not problematic in itself, as it is clearly possible to consider it as an example of a surrealist act. Christophe Gans, for instance, drew parallels with *Un chien andalou* (Buñuel 1928):

> En 1928, Luis Buñuel faisait glisser un nuage devant la lune et le tranchant d'un rasoir sur l'œil d'une jolie dame...Soixante ans plus tard, *Carne* vient nous rappeler que le surréalisme reste un art neuf, et qu'il se pratique toujours comme un acte terroriste (1992).

This is a perfectly understandable position to take, but in describing the film the way they do some critics ignore the importance of Noé's formal innovation and directorial intelligence. Where surrealism either denies the image a specific meaning and rather sees the art as an outpouring of the unconscious (in the automatic school) or points towards a subconscious association with the shared unconscious (in the Veristic school), Noé is entirely deliberate in his choice of images. *Carne* represents the beginning of a playful yet cruel relationship between director and spectator. As Gans noted in his review: '*Carne* est un terrible exercice de manipulation; beaucoup ne le lui pardonneront pas' (1992). Gans's words suggest that the action of the director and film against the spectator can, if they don't watch in the correct mode, lead to a particularly unpleasant and even damaging experience.

To illustrate this deliberately provocative and intelligent assemblage of images, we can examine the opening of *Carne*. After a series of title cards and a short sequence comprising a locked camera shot and dialogue expressed in text, we cut to a close-up on a horse's face. The camera's gaze rests on the animal for a few seconds, and then there is another cut to an intertitle card which warns 'ATTENTION Ce film contient des images qui risquent d'impressionner les plus jeunes spectateurs'. Noé then immediately cuts back to the film with a blast of noise and light coinciding with the horse

being stunned. This is a deliberate and witty move, representative of the directly confrontational style which, as we saw in the introduction, would go on to become one of the predicates of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema. The shock of the real violence is a visceral one, and Noé compounds this effect with his refusal to cut away from the footage.[7]

Figure 2: A shocking explosion of sound and light as the horse is stunned.

The beast spasms and has its throat cut, and then exsanguinates before the dispassionate gaze of the camera. The blood of the horse flows outwards towards the spectator, disappearing into the interstices between film and viewer, encountering the obvious limit of the haptic relationship. Noé will return to this space frequently and, as we shall see later in this chapter, eventually finds a way to at least partially counter its divisive capacity. The soundtrack is composed only of the clanks and rumbles and background

[7] This scene and focus on the dying beast echoes the abbatoir footage of Georges Franju's *Le sang des bêtes* (1949) and the opening of Michael Haneke's *Benny's Video* (1992).

noise of the abattoir, and the flowing blood. We continue to watch as the horse's head is sliced off and skinned.

When a cut finally arrives, we see a black screen with the legend 'Quelques jours plus tard', and then cut again to a piece of meat being sliced. Though it is later confirmed in dialogue, we cannot know immediately that this meat is horse, and yet the effect is much the same. On some level, we understand. Noé achieves a remarkable feat in compounding the jolt of the horse killing with an even deeper one through the association of the powerful footage with the image of the steak (cooked *saignant*, of course), in itself a relatively innocuous image. To cry surrealism is, perhaps, to ignore the clever manipulation occurring here. While the shock juxtapositions of surrealism might seek to elicit a response, the message is obfuscated. The juxtaposition of images is not a sensical process, but rather a dream-like contrasting of ideas. Conversely, Noé makes his position clear: this film is a study of the human beast, the animal inside us all. Capturing the death of the horse on film adds a level of verisimilitude to the succeeding images. It is a potent statement of intent from the first-time director.

There is no reason to discount surrealism as a formal influence on *Carne*, but it is far more than a simple updating or return to the form. The aforementioned *Nouvel Observateur* review describes Noé as a filmmaker 'nourri aux mamelles Buñuel et BD' (1992), and this is an entirely appropriate description for two reasons : firstly, it describes the relation between Noé and surrealism (substituted for Buñuel) as distinct – while they might share genetic code they are certainly separate entities; secondly, the idea of there being a physicality between Noé and his sources corresponds with our

central concept of a more physical reading of film and spectator relations. Following Marks's strudel, this is another link between film and sustenance. The substitution of film for nourishment is actually referred to within *Carne* itself. In the first instance we see the cutting of meat divided by cuts of film, the chop of the cleaver matched with the slice of the celluloid. Later, more tellingly, the Butcher's daughter is shown as unwilling to eat the meat provided for her, yet has just beforehand been shown passively absorbing the horror film shown on the television: her choice consumption is visual.

The choice of film clip for this scene is also telling: *Blood Feast*. This film opened up new avenues for showing filmic violence with its bright, explicit depiction of bloody dismemberment. At the time when *Carne* is set (this scene takes place in 1979) the film still possessed a 'dangerous' quality, something which would continue into the 1980s when, as we saw in the introduction, it was classified as a Video Nasty. The use of this film can be read as another statement of intent from Noé, establishing a careful self-positioning: the horror on the television is, despite its brutality, safe, vacuous filler which can be consumed without concern; the danger is in the real world, that is to say the constructed, fictional world of the film, their reality. This scene is both an acknowledgement of the film's place within a wider filmic canon and a deliberate and calculated distancing from the 'safety' of cinematic violence. The world of the film is a dangerous place, full of borderlines and troubling spaces. The jump cuts, soundtrack cries, strange angles and intertitles offer a fractured normality, while the historical setting and lack of characterisation bestow a sense of parable or myth upon it,

compounded by the use of voiceover to express internal monologue, and the direct questions to the spectator.

To briefly address one more thematic precursor highlighted in the critical reception, this use of intertitles and internal monologue expressed in voice-over can be read as indicative of a comic book brought to life, though exactly which comic and what sort of life are unclear.[8] There is certainly an argument to be made for the influence of comic books upon the *mise-en-scène* of the film. The *Nouvel Obs* review's mention of BDs is echoed in Pierre Murat's *Télérama* review, where he describes the humour as 'charmant et BD' (1992). Beyond this, though, the intertitles can similarly be read as ironic questions of the audience, again raising the issue of being more than a simple spectator. We, the spectator, are being invited to question these statements or respond to these questions, to challenge, to reword the film in our own way. This cannot occur, however, if the film is read as an holistic fact of cinema, an immutable artefact. The film needs to be read as a Marksian multitude of ideas – this twisted strudel again – a complex layering of links and associations which can be responded to or ignored: an open text with which we can engage and of which we can partake.

Though the response is positive overall, there are, it must be said, precursors to the difficult spectator relationship which would arise in

[8] The intertitles which ask 'VOUS – êtes-vous à l'abri d'un dérapage?' and attest that 'N'importe qui peut tout perdre en une seconde' make it tempting to suggest a correlation between the fate of the Butcher and the *Batman* comic story *The Killing Joke* (Moore 1988), wherein the Joker attempts to justify his madness by showing how a good man can be driven mad through the events of one bad day, something he tries to do by ruining the life of moral stalwart Commissioner James Gordon. The outcome of that tale, however, gives lie to this as a justification for immoral actions.

response to Noé's next film to be found within the critical response to *Carne*. Murat brought to the fore an issue which would recur in critical responses to Contemporary French Extreme Cinema in saying:

> Faut-il ou non tourner un film insoutenable sur l'insoutenable, un film ennuyeux sur l'ennui, un film vulgaire sur la vulgarité ? A cette question, Gaspar Noé semble répondre l'affirmative (1992).

He also sounded a note of caution in saying 'on espère…que créateur et créature ne se confondent pas', pointing to a recurrent theme in the criticism of extreme cinema where the director is vilified for their creation (1992). Both of these issues raised would be responded to in criticisms of Noé's first long-metrage, and thematic sequel to *Carne*, *Seul contre tous*.

Whose Irresponsibility? : *Seul contre tous*

Seul contre tous returns to the characters from *Carne* and explores the same themes of disaffection and social malaise. Despite the butcher's desire to 'repartir à zéro', he finds himself disconnected from the world, reduced to 'une misérable bite'. His situation becomes more and more desperate until finally he murders his daughter and kills himself. We then see, however, that these events only occurred in his head, and we leave him justifying his intention to commit incest.

It automatically becomes clear upon reading critical responses that, despite the similarities, this film was not acclaimed in the way its predecessor was, and rather seen as a potentially dangerous work. Murat's *Télérama*

colleague Bernard Genin describes *Seul contre tous* as 'irresponsable' (1998), which can be seen as an answer to Murat's above-quoted question of whether one can or should attempt to present an honest depiction of a difficult subject. In attempting to do so, Noé is accused of irresponsibility. Genin was not alone in such an assertion: David S. Tran's *Le Progrès de Lyon* review categorised the film as 'ultraviolent et irresponsable', claiming it is a film which might 'provoquer des érections dans les rangs des partis extrémistes qu'il est censé dénoncer' (1998). The important issue here is whether Noé was actually trying to denounce. It seems more likely that Tran assumed a position for Noé, and based his review on its apparent failure. This can be seen as an example of friction: the rub is created by the critic applying their own preconceptions to the film and thus not actively engaging with it.

As with *Carne*, some of the critiques are supportive, while at the same time suggestive of a sense that Noé has perhaps gone, or might soon go, too far. Frédéric Bonnaud's review for *Les Inrockuptibles* is positive, though he notes that a concern for certain spectators might be that 'Noé s'est tellement approché de la bête immonde qu'on risque de le confondre avec elle' (1998: 39). This can be read in response to Murat's concern that 'créateur' and 'créature' might become confused (1992), though it is worth noting that in both cases this does not reflect the reviewer's own reading of the film. Such an reading was present in James Quandt's response to the film which was, unsurprisingly, highly critical. In a worrying conflation of director and film, he described the ideas espoused in the film as being 'safely displaced as the rantings of a mad meatman' (2004: 129). The vehemence of Quandt's

response suggests that the film is in actuality anything but 'safe'. The openness of the subject matter of the film to interpretation, the lack of direct criticism, is for Quandt a dangerously open wound which appears to anger him, indicative of the frictional grazing of a failed viewing experience. Jean-Paul Grousset, in his review for *Le Canard Enchainé*, suggests that a more appropriate title for the film would be 'je t'emmènerai au bout du monstre' (1999). This is an interesting description as it accurately captures the idea of the spectatorial passivity necessary to fully appreciate these films, as previously described. This is a predominantly positive review which can be seen as a successful implementation of the required viewing mode.

What is clear in the film is that Noé has developed his central concern of direct confrontation. *Seul contre tous* transposes Noé's playful use of the 'warning card' in *Carne* to just before the climax of the film, thus referencing cinematic showman William Castle's use of the same device in *Homicidal* (1961), wherein he paused the film before the denouement for a 45 second 'Fright Break' which allowed petrified patrons to leave the theatre and receive a refund for their ticket, and those who remained to be complimented as a 'brave audience'. Noé offers 30 seconds in which to leave the cinema, before flashing the word 'DANGER' and recommencing the film for its graphic climax. This can once again be read as an acknowledgement of cinematic heritage and precedent, and is equally a deliberate attempt to prefigure critics' responses to the violence in the film's conclusion. Noé referred to those people who walked out of his films as 'un public qui ne mérite pas de voir la suite!' (Gans 1992), and this warning card is a sarcastic appeal to the desire to leave, to give up, or otherwise to completely fail to submit to the required

viewing mode. Noé can almost be seen as bringing the concept of friction between film and spectator to the fore in this, making the tension in the viewing experience a concrete fact within the film.

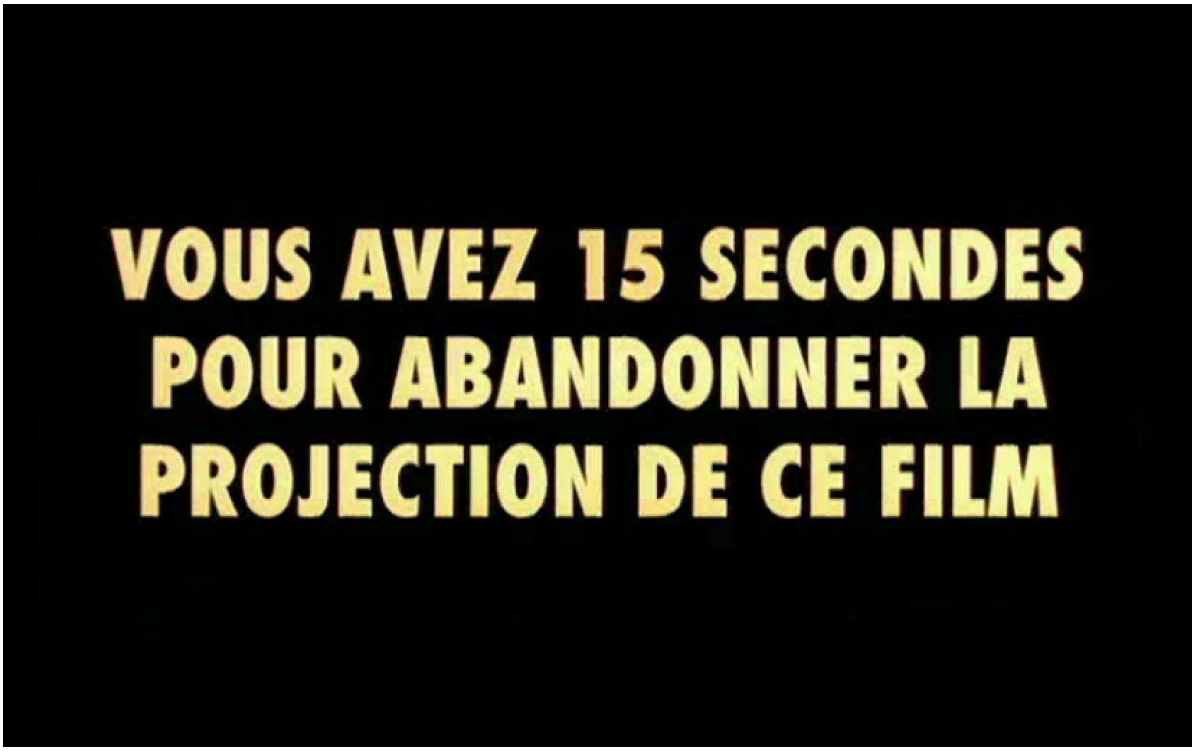

Figure 3: Friction made fact – Noé issues a direct challenge to the spectator to submit to his film, or leave.

Beyond the use of this warning card, *Seul contre tous* mirrors the themes of *Carne* again in providing an illustration of the flexible reality of the filmic world. The carnage of the conclusion is reset, revealed not to have occurred. Such an action compounds the dangerous nature of the filmic world – time in this world is mutable, uncertain. The butcher states at one point that 'les actes sont irréversibles', but this is then shown not to be the case. This complex relationship between cinematic narrative and

manipulated temporality would become one of the central considerations of the concluding instalment of the loose trilogy, *Irréversible*.

Forwards – Backwards and Outwards: *Irréversible*

The final instalment of the loose trilogy only features the character of the Butcher briefly, serving to introduce the central conceit that 'le temps détruit tous'. We then experience a night backwards, starting with friends Marcus (Vincent Cassell) and Pierre (Albert Dupontel) taking a terrible revenge on the denizens of a gay S&M club, moving to discover that this was in response to the brutal rape of Marco's wife Alex (Monica Bellucci). Further back still we see Marco and Alex before the shocking events of the night, innocent and in love. In the end we are left with a timeless scene, unsure in terms of temporal location, at which point the film erupts into light, followed by darkness.

Discussion of *Irréversible* in the context of its critical reception must begin with a discussion of its reception at the 2002 Cannes film festival. The BBC report, with the headline 'Cannes Film Sickens Audience', explained:

> One of the last films to be screened at this year's Cannes Film Festival proved so shocking that 250 people walked out, some needing medical attention…Fire wardens had to administer oxygen to 20 people who fainted during the film (2002).

The dramatic description of events at the festival reads like the aftermath of a terrorist attack, an appropriate analogy given Gans's description of *Carne* functioning in this manner (1992). The notion of terrorism is perfectly

matched to Noé's work: *Irréversible* is a film designed to terrorise the spectator, to attack their senses. In their article on the film, Mikita Brottman and David Sterritt describe how 'people were reportedly nauseated not only by the film's scenes of explicit violence but also by the frenzied, restless camerawork in the long opening shot' (2004: 37). Murat referred to Noé's deliberately provocative style in saying that *Carne* was 'affaibli en partie par la visible volonté de Noé de "faire méchant"' (1991). Whether or not this is truly a weakness or not can be read as dependent on submission to the viewing mode. In his review written for the DVD release of the film, Peter Bradshaw described feeling 'like a battle-scarred Vietnam veteran' (2003) after seeing the film at its Cannes screening. His review is bitter and highly critical, giving the film one star out of five and attacking every aspect of the production. His review becomes more interesting, however, in light of his later response to *Enter the Void*, Noé's next feature film, which Bradshaw loved (five stars out of five this time). As we saw in the introduction, Bradshaw does not change his opinion on *Irréversible*, but acknowledges that perhaps he was 'just freaked out in precisely the way Noé intended' (2010). This sort of self-reflection can be seen as a vindication of my assertion that critical responses informed by solitary viewings are not suitable for Contemporary French Extreme Cinema.

The Cannes effect was not only applicable to those who actually saw the film. The immediate wave of emotion the film engendered bled into popular consciousness in a worrying fashion. Geneviève Wellcome of *La Croix* was present at Cannes but chose not to see *Irréversible*, expounding on her decision to abstain from viewing in an article entitled 'Objection de

Conscience' (2003). Wellcome called upon her right to say 'non à une scenario sordide de femme violée, puis tuée, crimes suivis d'une vengeance atroce', an opinion apparently informed by 'le dossier de presse et témoignages' (2003). Aside from the fact that Alex does not actually die, something else lost in this claim is the reversed nature of the narrative. This is obviously a vital aspect for developing an understanding of the importance of the extreme content in the film.

Another misreading of the nature of the film can be found in Peter Bradshaw's DVD review. He claims that the film is 'an empty, shallow shocker whose vacuity is calamitously exposed in its final act', with his review going on to describe the late scenes in the film (thus early scenes in the narrative) of Vincent Cassel and Monica Bellucci naked in their bedroom as 'a banal, cutesy bedroom scene, shot with softcore insistence on never showing either party's genitals', and suggests that 'the end sequence…even hints that this whole thing might simply have been a dream or fantasy' (Bradshaw 2003). We can compare this to his original review of the film after the Cannes screening in which he describes 'the symmetrical happy beginning (at the end)' as occuring in 'what appears to be a kiddie-filled sylvan meadow' (Bradshaw 2002a). Such assertions show a complete failure to understand the nature of the film. Given Noé's use of the backwards structure, this is the only logical ending for the film. The 'softcore insistence' is a deliberate position counterbalancing the graphic display of the opening of the film, a return to innocence entirely perverted by our foreknowledge of what is to come. This foreknowledge similarly makes the final shot of Monica Bellucci's Alex lying in the idyllic park into a worryingly loaded image. The

menace which we have already experienced is brought to bear on the scene as the camera begins to spin wildly, echoing the sickening camera lunges of the opening sequence. As the camera spins faster and faster it flies off into the sky, and the visual elements of the film blur together, creating a vortex from the image into which the spectator is drawn. The film world is deconstructed, the spectrum of colours blurred into whiteness, and then a dizzying strobe effect begins which brings new elements to the fore; visual illusions which seem to move outwards from the film, at once part of it and separate.

The effect is one of a hinterland being suggested, a breaching of the forbidden space between film and spectator – the very same space into which the blood of the butchered horse ran at the opening of *Carne*. The vortex then suddenly disappears as the film cuts to black. The credits have run at the start of the film, so only darkness is left. The effect is disconcerting: the spectator is abandoned half within and half without the film, caught between the jarring visual effects and the black abyss of the empty screen. Bradshaw's critique reduces the potency of this conclusion, the logical conclusion of the trilogy which has taken the safe displacement of violence as one of its central themes. The final comment from Noé is that our world and the film world are dark mirrors of one another, uncomfortably proximate. This represents the most complete application of simulated proximity. Noé progresses the use of film, moves film forwards, in turning his narrative backwards and opening it outwards towards the spectator, while at the same time drawing the spectator into the haptic embrace of the film. This is achieved through the multisensory assault, which moves beyond the purely

ocular, traditional, viewing experience. We can return to Sobchack here and her assertion that ‘a film is given to us and taken up by us as perception turned literally inside out towards us as expression’ (1992: 12). Noé’s films caress the crux of this relationship, exploring the plane at which film and spectator experience meet.

Figure 4: The final explosion/implosion of Noé’s trilogy.

Critical Mass

The effect of these failed critical relationships is two-fold: first, the films arguably do not receive the acclaim which they deserve for experimenting with the limitations of the film/spectator relationship; second, this sort of criticism actually creates an image of the films which exists separately to the concerns of the films themselves. This latter effect is the more important and

damaging, and can be regarded as one of the leading factors in the disappearance of the trend.

The external existence of these films, external that is to their nature and intent, places the films in an awkward and inappropriate space. This does not mean that the critical reception damages the audience figures seeing the film, and indeed it might have quite the opposite effect. Noé, certainly, now enjoys a position of 'enfant terrible' (Mottram 2010). He has been typecast as a provocateur, but the essence of the provocation has been denatured. This denature is expressed in this superficially comedic quote from director Nicholas Winding Refn in response to his use of graphic violence in the film *Drive* (2011):

> We called up Gaspar Noé and asked him how he did the head smashing in '*Irreversible*'. He's the king of head smashing — you've got to call the king (Lim 2011).

This is indicative of the position Contemporary French Extreme Cinema often occupies: rather than being recognised for his inventive direction, cleverly referential style or ground-breaking introduction of a new physicality to French cinema, Gaspar Noé is 'the king of head smashing'. Whether Noé himself would be proud of such an epithet is unimportant – it is the argument of this dissertation that such descriptions demolish the impressive power of these films and commute them into a strange group which has little bearing on the real world beyond as a source for bloody inspiration and as a poaching ground to find directors that producers hope will bring some of this strangeness into their projects. One of the most important points to carry with

us from this chapter is the idea of ‘créateur’ and ‘créature’ becoming confused, as expressed by Murat (1992), and the idea of these films offering a ‘terrible exercise de manipulation’, as expressed by Gans (1992). Both of these notions play into the idea of these films being somehow dangerous, almost infectious: there is the implication that dealing with such extremes can change and pervert the spectator and the filmmaker. These films stand alone as dangerous entities, to be approached with caution.

Aside from this status of the films as dangerous, the trouble in their reception might also be seen as arising from the comparisons that are constantly being made to recognisable genres. As we have seen in this chapter, these films can be associated with previous films and trends, but equally must be seen as apart. Often they can look like films that we know, but beneath the cosmetic they are offering an entirely different set of spectator interactions, subverting what we understand to create something new. The second cut of the razor blade which we will examine, then, is the collision of genre expectation and the subversive bent of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema.

Chapter 2 - Collision

Subversion

In the first chapter we touched upon the comparison of *Carne* with comics (BD) and surrealism, but did not explore this in detail. This was done purposefully in order to focus the argument on the perceived critical misperception, but it is important to acknowledge that these films do not exist in a thematic void and can, of course, be compared to previous works across a variety of genres and subgenres. Indeed, the crossing of genres is an important aspect in this discussion, as is the tendency of these films to subvert expectation through rewriting of familiar forms, editing of familiar filmic codes. The thematic and formal references which will be discussed in this chapter are those which can be seen as deliberately evocative of familiar themes and forms, used expressly to discomfit or surprise the spectator through subversion of these recognisable images or tropes. The wit and directorial flair displayed in Contemporary French Extreme Cinema is often overlooked as mere empty provocation, part of the so-called 'growing vogue for shock tactics in French cinema' (Quandt 2004: 127). Having already examined the friction arising from the failure to submit to the required viewing mode for these films as an example of the razor blade, this chapter will move on to discuss different ways in which Contemporary French Extreme Cinema is problematised by its subversive approach to familiar genre codes. Through readings of two films contrasted with critical study of the genres with which they are associated, we will argue for a dissonance between the usual,

expected spectator investment and the different relationship which is affected by these films. This dissonance can be seen as another manifestation of the razor blade which in this instance can be described as *collision*: the subversive approach to form and theme acting against the genre-specific assumptions and self-location of the spectator.

The first film we will examine in this chapter is Alexandre Aja's *Haute tension* (2003). While it can easily be classed as a horror film, and more specifically a slasher, the focus on graphic bodily damage and a series of important deviations from what we can look at as the typical slasher formula make this a particularly interesting example of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema's appropriation of genre to create potentially disquieting near-representations. The second film this chapter will examine is Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* (2003). This film is particularly important because it was the starting point of Quandt's article which, as Quandt explains, 'began as a brief review of Dumont's then latest film' (Horeck & Kendall 2011: 209), before exploding into a blanket critique of the entire trend into which he placed the film. We will consider *Twentynine Palms* as a subversion of the road movie genre, encompassing many of the tropes and visual markers but reworking the typical trajectory and concerns of the road movie into something new and disturbing, at odds with the traditional model.

It is important to note that while we are examining these films against bodies of critical study, this is a subjective sample. We obviously cannot offer a comprehensive reading of the entire corpus of material on horror films or road movies, but only use suitable works which serve to support and elucidate the assertions made; there is always scope for further analysis of

Contemporary French Extreme Cinema in light of its filmic antecedents. It is also true that films of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema are often associable with several genres at once; however, in this chapter we will be aligning the films discussed with those genres which they most closely resemble, based on the appearance of telling thematic markers.

Collision

The idea of collision described in this chapter is related to but distinct from that of friction described in the previous chapter. Where friction describes the failure of the spectator to submit to the required viewing mode and the subsequent discomfort and rejection of the film that this can lead to, collision refers to the tension between the spectator's assumptions based on previous knowledge of a particular genre and the way in which Contemporary French Extreme Cinema subverts this expectation.

Without wishing to present a facile depiction of French cinema as the innovative, formally interesting 'good guy' of film versus Hollywood's crowd-pleasing, lowest-common-denominator 'bad guy', it is nevertheless useful to explain collision in terms of this relationship. Director Olivier Assayas, who chose 'the violent thriller – the Hollywood genre par excellence' as the formal starting point for his film *Demonlover*, holds that 'the specificity of American cinema lies with the capacity to establish this kind of physical relationship with the spectator, bringing the body of the viewer into play' (Beugnet 2007: 125). While this might sound like the sort of relationship which we have attributed to Contemporary French Extreme Cinema, Assayas then goes on

to qualify this by noting that he is 'not interested in the way that genre […] reproduces already conventional situations in equally conventional ways' (Beugnet 2007: 126). We might begin to consider, based upon this reading of familiar genre, that Contemporary French Extreme Cinema offers a rupture with what has become the usual, comfortable mode of genre spectatorship. Where Assayas finds films with 'twists that are predictable and predicted to the point where formula itself is utterly worn out' (Beugnet 2007: 126), the films that we are studying here re-establish a dangerous uncertainty.

It is in this new space, one of the reclamation of the power of cinema to shock and challenge, that we can locate the collision of the razor blade. For those spectators habituated into this easy viewing of recognisable genre, Contemporary French Extreme Cinema provides an uncomfortably unfamiliar viewing experience, compounded by the simulated proximity and directly confrontational manner which we have already examined. This rupture in the film/spectator relationship is perhaps best exemplified by the twist ending of *Haute tension*.

The Final Girl Killer: *Haute tension*

Haute tension sees friends Alex (Maïwenn) and Marie (Cécile de France) travelling to Alex's family home, a secluded farmhouse, in order to study. When a murderous trucker (Philippe Nahon, Noe's butcher) arrives and massacres Alex's family before kidnapping her, Marie stows away in his truck in order to rescue her friend. After various encounters, Marie manages to best the trucker and kill him. A twist in the film then reveals that the trucker is

only a figment of Marie's imagination and that in actual fact it was Marie, deranged and obsessed with Alex, who massacred the family and kidnapped Alex. Alex manages to stab Marie and escape, and the ending of the film sees a mad Marie incarcerated but worryingly alive.

It is important to note that the twist ending of *Haute tension* is often the target of criticism. In an otherwise positive review for *Time Out*, for example, reviewer TJ complained that 'with utterly Gallic perversity, Aja throws in a twist, staggering for both its preposterousness and offensiveness, which undermines just about everything that's gone before' (nd). This claim of 'typical Gallic perversity' links back to the opening of this dissertation where we considered the stereotypes of French cinema – in some ways it seems that the filmmakers can do nothing right. Renowned film critic Philip French, meanwhile, claimed that 'a final twist that's meant to end the film in a victory roll…instead results in a fatal tailspin' (2004). Whether or not the twist is fair to the spectator is difficult to judge but, given the penchant already explored for directors associated with Contemporary French Extreme Cinema to '"faire méchant"' (Murat 1991), it is not difficult to accept it as an interesting formal innovation. It would be unfair to claim that we are not in some sense prepared for the twist in *Haute tension*. An early scene where the killer has oral sex with a severed head seems to point to his concrete existence, but as we never see further reference to this scene, it can be retroactively understood as a fantasy, with the severed head's resemblance to Alex an indicator of the affections of the real killer, Marie. Likewise, we see Marie masturbating after catching sight of Alex's naked body, in a potently symbolic scene which ends with a shot of an empty swing – dismissed by Roger Ebert

as ‘the standard thriller shot of the swing seat still swinging, but now suddenly empty’ (2005) – but which possibly represents a shift in the nature of reality within the film. Even the choice of song at the opening, the jaunty Italian pop song ‘Sarà Perché Ti Amo’ (Ricchi e Poveri 1981) is a calculated one, given the meaning of the lyrics (‘it will be because I love you’). The reprise of the song as the girls arrive at the farmhouse can be read either as a humorous comment on the ubiquity of the song on French radio, or else as a subtle portent of the events to come. The carnage, Marie’s killing spree and annihilation of Alex’s family, will take place because Marie loves Alex. Even, if we accept the use of the song in this way, the opening words ‘che confusione’ (‘such confusion’) can be read as indicative of the complicated nature of reality in the film.

Aja’s work is cosmetically very familiar, an updating of slasher film tropes, with the addition of modern, realistic gore effects and a frenetic pace. However, in manipulating the place of one of these tropes, the Final Girl, Aja reconfigures the film into a commentary on the spectator’s investment in this character and in screen violence. In order to achieve an understanding of Aja’s manipulation, we must first examine the expected positioning of the Final Girl character, both within the film and in terms of relationship to the spectator. The Final Girl is, put simply, that one girl who manages to best the killer in a slasher film (though the term can also be applied to similar characters in different genres, such as science fiction). The concept was outlined in detail by Carol Clover (1996). Clover locates the Final Girl as a character with a position within the film which reflects the informed superiority of the spectator: ‘she is intelligent, watchful, level-headed; the first character

to sense something amiss…the only one, in other words, whose perspective approaches our own privileged understanding of the situation' (1996: 44). The usual position for the spectator is to accept the Final Girl as our proxy. The Final Girl is the character who we, as spectator, are invested in: 'she is by any measure the slasher film's hero' (Clover 1996: 45). She is a figure which both men and women can identify with, as she represents at different times the varying pleasures of sadism and masochism, acting variously as screaming victim and furious avenger. Marie perfectly fulfils the function of the Final Girl. By definition the character must be a survivor, and our first introduction to Marie shows her in a hospital, her body covered in nasty wounds. Immediately we are invested in her – we know that she will survive whatever she will face, and are interested in discovering how. As the film progresses she shows further aptitudes which enamour her to us (the 'us' in this instance being the informed spectator, familiar with the codes of the horror genre).

Marie notices when the killer enters the house ('the first character to sense something amiss'), and takes steps to ensure that he does not find her ('intelligent'). She takes the time to make her room so it looks unoccupied, and pulls up her legs so that when the killer inevitably lifts the mattress on her bed she remains hidden ('level-headed'). She manages to avoid the killer as he hunts down Alex's family, gains an understanding of him through spying on his actions from a hiding place ('watchful'), and sensibly arms herself when she gets the opportunity ('intelligent' again, and also satisfying our investment by acting logically in the way that horror film characters often do not).

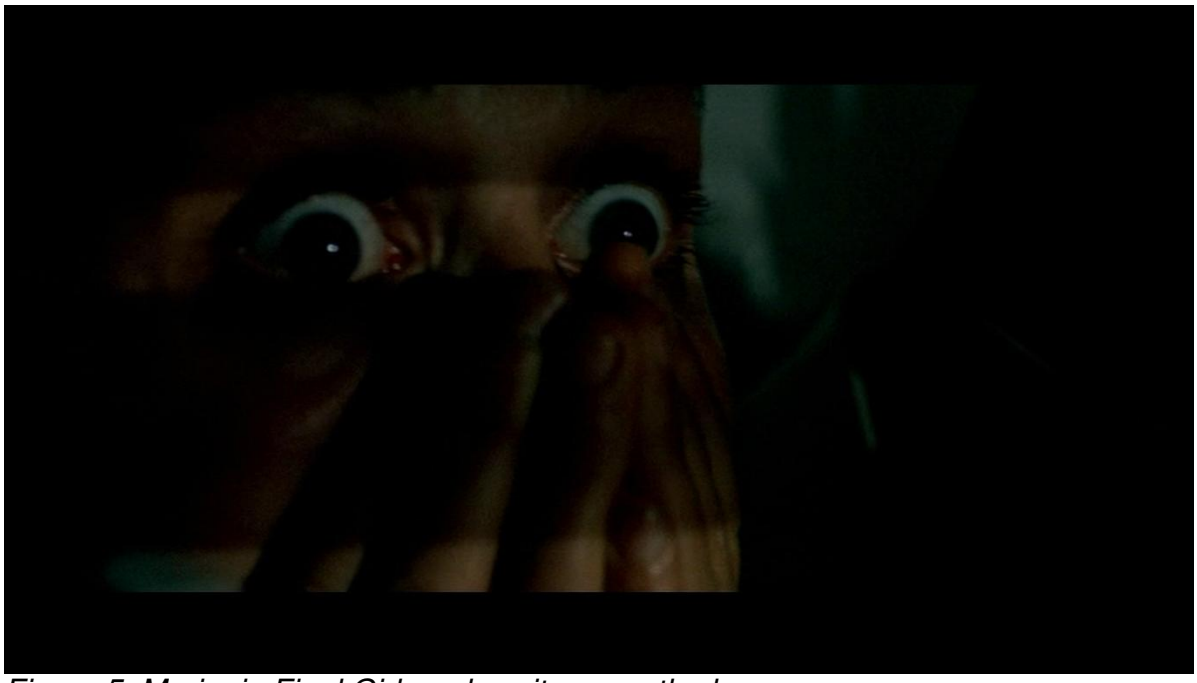

Figure 5: Marie, in Final Girl mode, witnesses the horror.

Given the twist, there are necessarily a number of other subversions to the slasher formula which Aja effects. Clover notes that 'much is made of the I-camera to represent the killer's point of view' (1996: 45). Aja deliberately does not use this slasher trope – the killer is almost immediately identifiable, beyond a couple of early scenes where his face is hidden, first by the camera focussing on his truck and body, then by the bright lights of his truck. Unlike, for example, Michael Myers, the almost spectral killer from *Halloween* (John Carpenter 1978), the killer here has a face, a voice and a place within the film, rather than acting as the apparent proxy of the sadistic viewer. He is not privileged with the usual position, primarily off-camera or behind-the-camera, which reflects our own as watchers. All this is, of course, an elaborate deception: the killer remains exactly as unseen as Michael Myers or any other barely-glimpsed slasher fiend because the body we do see is but a

construct of the true killer's madness. Aja is completely aware of the idea that 'horror film so stubbornly genders the killer male and the principal victim female' (Clover 1996: 47), and he plays with this assumption.

Figure 6: Marie is revealed, via CCTV, to be the killer.

Being a slasher film, even a modern and fast-paced one, *Haute tension* must follow certain narrative beats: the threat is introduced; the killer acts; and the Final Girl evolves to face him. This relationship between killer and Final Girl is usually marked by specific moments, such as a well-timed jump scare which brings killer and Final Girl into direct and actual confrontation for the first time. We can look at Michael Myers appearing, ghost-like, from the shadows to stab Laure Strode in *Halloween*, or Freddy Krueger appearing behind Nancy Thompson in the boiler room in her dream in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven 1984). As Clover notes, 'it is the exceptional film that does not mark as significant the moment that the killer

leaps out of the dark recesses of a corridor or cavern at the trespassing victim, usually the Final Girl' (1996: 48). Of course, in *Haute tension* this moment is subverted, with the leaping killer appearing at a distance to the characters concerned, the police, on a monitor screen, and thus at a double distance from us watching, in a reinterpretation of a scene we have already experienced, albeit experienced as an unreal construction. The subsequent cut back to Marie, now understood as mad, villainous and disturbing to us as spectator, is effective exactly for the reason that it is not orchestrated as a jump: the very fact of Marie is now that which is troubling.

However, even though she has become a figure who inspires terror, we still retain an attachment to Marie. 'If, during the film's course, we shifted our sympathies back and forth, and dealt them out to other characters along the way, we belong in the end to the Final Girl; there is no alternative' (Clover 1996: 45-46). The painful truth of *Haute tension* is that, in the end, we do still belong to our Final Girl (Marie), even though Alex has nominally taken her place. The threat posed by Marie has not been vanquished; her troubling presence and capacity to worry us have not been removed. While it is not strange for slasher villains to survive, ready for a sequel, there is usually a moment of victory for the heroic characters, or the villain disappears into nothingness. Even if they are sure to return, their physical essence is at least momentarily dissipated (as with Michael Myers vanishing at the climax of *Halloween*, or any number of endings in the *Friday the 13th* film series where Jason Vorhees appears to have finally been vanquished). Not so Marie, who continues to exist as a physical fact, an unhealed wound. This continuation of a character that should be dead, or at least defeated, is a complication of the

traditional slasher model, and this strange space is further perverted by the relationship already described between spectator and killer, who remains our Final Girl. In conflating these characters of killer and Final Girl, Aja opens up the field of responsibility for the spectator, and demands a level of self-awareness in our complicity. The violence of the film is orchestrated like *Grand Guignol*, pushing further and further in its extremity, and as spectators we are invited to enjoy the excessive amount of gore on display. The violence against the victims in a slasher films is usually deemed as acceptable because it will eventually be matched with violence against the killer; the treatment of Michael Myers by Laurie Strode provokes the spectator to 'cheer on' the Final Girl (Clover 1996: 46), the same for brave Alice decapitating Mrs Voorhees in *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham 1980). This is cathartic violence, and theoretically negates any thrill gleaned from the previous acts of butchery. In other words, the violence perpetrated by the Final Girl is safe, acceptable violence – albeit with a worryingly bloodthirsty aspect – which delivers us as spectator from any forbidden pleasures we might have enjoyed. Marie's attack on the killer is hugely satisfying, their mismatched physiques making for a particularly enjoyable moment of vanquishing. At this point, however, the game changes: Marie is the killer, and thus we as spectator are robbed of our catharsis, and forced to face up to our own pleasure derived from the violence we have watched.

This leads to a particularly well-constructed end scene. Clover notes that 'it is through the killer's eyes (I-camera) that we saw the Final Girl at the beginning of the film, and through the Final Girl's eyes that we see the killer, often for the first time with any clarity, towards the end' (1996: 60). Evidently

this is not the case with *Haute tension*, but the idea of sight and seeing, who sees whom and when, is intriguingly opened out by Aja into a potentially very disturbing and un-healing conclusion. With Marie disarmed and imprisoned, we return to the opening scenes, where we heard the wounded Marie saying 'je laisserai plus jamais personne se mettre entre nous'.

Figure 7: Marie's killer gaze remains potently unbroken and invasive.

Obviously we now understand that she is not the damaged survivor we assumed her to be but rather the worryingly intact antagonist. Divided by a two-way mirror, we see Marie and Alex in the same shot, as Alex asks 'vous êtes sûr qu'elle me voit pas?'. An off-screen presence affirms this, only for Marie to pause, turn to the camera (facing both Alex and us), and throw up her hands in a gesture both pleading and threatening. This provides the 'jump' scare which traditionally ends a slasher film. Not only can this be seen as a satisfyingly creepy conclusion, but this final shot is also a common

formulation found in Contemporary French Extreme cinema, where the final shot or final shot of the central protagonist is often a direct appeal to the spectator.[9] Here the gaze of the Final Girl killer meets our own, but she is only seeing a reflection of herself in the two-way mirror. The gaze is accusatory in part, but also suggests a worrying complicity: we have not been able to enjoy the valedictory funeral pyre or machete-hacking which traditionally remove the killer from the film, and the killer is left reaching out to us. In a world where the rules are usually clearly demarcated, the existence of Marie reminds us of the complicated nature of real violence. The Final Girl is popular because of her almost supernatural ability to overcome the killer – Aja painfully reminds us of the artificiality of such a character.

Haute tension is indeed an 'exceptional film', though not quite in the way that Clover meant (1996: 48). It is one that provides the visceral thrill of the traditional slasher film while at the same time confronting the spectator with their own culpability. It is unfairly overlooked in most critical studies of the Contemporary French Extreme Cinema trend, and was only mentioned in passing by Quandt. That it manages to be 'a smart, sadistic, graphic and perverted flick that lives up to the term "horror"' (Fallon 2004), while at the same time challenging convention should make *Haute tension* the ideal model for a more easily exportable version of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema. Indeed, Aja has enjoyed the most successful career outside of France of any of the directors affiliated with the trend. However, the depressing fact is that his Hollywood work, while often very well crafted and

[9] Other examples include *Dans ma peau*, *À l'intérieur* and *Martyrs*.

enjoyable, shows a vastly diminished engagement with the intellectual concerns of *Haute tension*.

Other slashers have, before and since, played with the idea of the expected Final Girl also being the killer, or at least less innocent than we would expect, such as *Night School* (Ken Hughes 1981) and *All The Boys Love Mandy Lane* (Jonathan Levine 2006), but no filmmaker has been as brazen as Aja in permitting the false Final Girl to fully complete her required role before altering our perception of her true nature. As Manohla Dargis notes, 'Mr. Aja has clearly made a dissertation-level study of classic American horror, specifically 1970's-era slasher flicks' (2005). Aja understands what it means to be a spectator of a slasher film and, crucially, what it takes to undermine the sense of security which investment in the Final Girl bestows upon us.

The Anti-Road Movie: *Twentynine Palms*

While perhaps not an immediately obvious choice for comparison with *Haute tension*, *Twentynine Palms*, released in the same year as Aja's film, offers a subversion of genre comparable to Aja's effort. Where Aja subverted our expectations surrounding a particular character in the film, Dumont presents a twisted reading of the road movie genre itself, entirely reversing or deliberately misappropriating thematic markers in order to toy with spectator expectation. The effect is equally as confrontational and intelligent as Aja's take on the slasher film, similarly appealing to the brand of 'switched-on' spectatorship that the new viewing mode requires. *Twentynine Palms*, as

previously mentioned, holds particular importance in the field of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema. Released in 2003, it is the third film from director Bruno Dumont. The film marked a change in Dumont's style, or perhaps more accurately represented a purer distillation of it, reducing plot to a minimum to focus on aesthetic concerns.

We follow a couple, David and Katia, played by David Wissak and Katerina Golubeva, in what are possibly caricatures of themselves, as they travel around the Twentynine Palms area scouting locations.[10] In between trips out on the road they stay at a motel where they have brutal sex and often argue. A sense of mounting unease eventually explodes into a violent attack on David by a gang of hillbillies who beat and rape him. He in turn succumbs to madness and kills Katia, before finally killing himself.

While Dumont classified his film as an 'experimental horror film' (Matheo 2005: 16), the formal considerations are based on familiar tropes of the road movie. This was highlighted by many critics, with the *Variety* review referring to it as 'a narcolepsy-inducing road movie' (Nesselson 2003). In order to argue for the subversion described at the start of this chapter, we must first develop a general understanding of the axioms of the road movie. The primary consideration is, as the name suggests, travel. More specifically, travel in the United States of America. Though there are examples that can be found across disparate cultures, the road movie genre is essentially entangled with the idea of travel and expansion which is so important to the philosophy of the USA. Ideas of immigration, westward expansion, and

[10] In his interview with Matheo Dumont asserts 'I wanted Katia to be a hysterical character which Katia Golubeva is, frankly' (Matheo 2005: 18).

Manifest Destiny are key touchstones of the genre. Laderman highlights the importance of America to the road movie, and vice versa, in noting that 'we might speculate that the American road movie is the perfect vehicle for post-1960s (postmodern) global exportation of American culture' (2002: 247). In travelling their cinematic roads we might learn something of their culture. Culture, and the acceptance or rejection of it, is another aspect which Laderman holds as key to understanding the genre. He suggests that the road movie represents a process of cultural critique through traversing of cultures, a process of 'defamiliarization' (2002: 2) which looks to revelation in the new, the discovered, 'beyond the borders of cultural familiarity' (2002: 1).

Daniel Lopez's description of the road movie ascribes to the protagonist a close rapport with the road, a destiny which necessarily involves travel. For Lopez these people 'seek the freedom of the road as a refuge from a harrowing past, or to search for its exhilarating, liberating strength' (Laderman 2002: 17). The road offers a chance to forget the past and find the future, presenting a limbo state. This state can be understood through the elements of lawlessness and manifestations of the hobo character which recur throughout the road movie genre. Criminals are situated, between their often harrowing past and some future idyll, in their existence in the thrilling now, while for the hobo the road is their life, so past and future are unimportant. The idea that the road comes with its own set of rules and even, on occasion, its own logic, underpins many cinematic voyages. Characters encountered on the road are part of this limbo state: they are often kooky, curious, or worrying, representing the 'other' that is

located on the road, in contrast to those worlds which are being left behind or approached.

The road movie is often located as a predominantly masculine space which 'traditionally focusses, almost exclusively, on men and the absence of women' (Cohan and Rae Hark 1997: 2-3), 'a space that is at once resistant to while ultimately contained by the responsibilities of domesticity: home life, marriage, employment' (Cohan and Rae Hark 1997: 3). This is not the only possible reading, however. Cohan and Rae Hark also point to the importance of the couple to the road movie, describing it as a 'dominant configuration' (1997: 8). Such an assertion can certainly be supported with examples of couples such as the titular *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn 1967), or *Thelma & Louise* (Ridley Scott 1991). We might, then, see the road movie as a point of confrontation between unrestricted masculinity and domesticity, with the overriding sense being of a longing for freedom either from or in either one of these capacities. Sargeant and Watson assert that 'road movies offer audiences a glimpse at an ecstatic freedom' (1999: 13). Caryn James also points to the road as offering a chance at liberation, at release, whereon characters travel 'through danger and disillusionment to healthy self-knowledge and back to the safety of home' (1990). This idea of the road offering liberation is expressed clearly through the genre's preoccupation with travelling shots and compositions which situate the road as the path to a symbolic vanishing point on the horizon. Travel, rather than scenery, is the key. As Jean Baudrillard asserts in his philosophical travelogue *Amérique*, which frequently describes the importance of movement, 'rien n'est plus étranger au travelling pur que le tourisme ou le loisir' (1986 : 14). The very

movement of the voyage, the state of being in motion, is that which effects change.

Thus we can see the road movie as a space wherein these concerns are examined. There is an essential hope inherent in the genre's looking towards travel as a means of self-liberation, either from everyday problems or a more nebulous social malaise. The placement of the protagonists as frequently outside of the law (such as the aforementioned characters Bonnie and Clyde or Thelma and Louise), or as beings for whom the law is not a direct controlling force (in the ever-popular hobo figure) permits the spectator to partake in this liberation without necessarily condoning it. Even the darker road movies, as described by Caryn James, hold the road as a space for discovery, for movement as a celebration of personal freedom, no matter how badly the journey ends, and indeed 'often have forced happy endings, which suggest a nostalgic longing for the road to Oz' (1990). This is clearly not the same road which Dumont has us travel in *Twentynine Palms*.

The idea of the road as a parable for the American Dream provides a thematic shorthand which permits Dumont to actively critique America without recourse to literality. The titular location of the film, Twentynine Palms, is the site of one the largest air force bases in the USA. This fact is only referred to obliquely in the presence of soldiers, notably at the diner where one looks like a chameleon in his camouflage gear. The film was released in September 2003, and it cannot be ignored that earlier in that year the USA and a 'coalition of the willing' (Schifferes 2003) had gone to war with Iraq, something to which the French were opposed, with President Jacques Chirac warning that 's'affranchir de la légitimité des Nations Unies, privilégier la

force sur le droit, ce serait prendre une lourde responsabilité' (2003). The friction between the two countries is expressed without any direct mention. Rather than any obvious attack on America, Dumont instead highlights the rotten heart of the road, and thus of America, in mapping the psychological effect of travel on his protagonists. Dumont expressed his dissatisfaction with Hollywood cinema, another exported cultural object through which America can be critiqued, and claimed *Twentynine Palms* to be 'a negation of American cinema, almost a terrorist attack' (Matheo 2005: 17). This statement is both reminiscent of the critical response to Gaspar Noé discussed in Chapter 1 and a deliberately provocative reference to the underlying cultural confrontation between France and America.

While Laderman points to 'defamiliarization' (2002: 2), looking for revelation in the new, through the road movie, Dumont conversely offers a situation wherein the familiar is rendered dangerous and unknowable. The journey is a succession of false starts and the travel is entirely cyclical in nature. The protagonists go nowhere, learn nothing, and eventually reach their brutal demises. Caryn James notes that 'today's best road movies are bizarre, comic, one-way journeys to the dark side of self and society' (1990). In some ways such a description suits *Twentynine Palms*: it is certainly a one-way journey to a very bleak, dark conclusion. Where the film differs, however, is in its lack of comedy and the bizarre. If anything, *Twentynine Palms* shocks with its blandness. As Dumont himself noted, 'I'm always looking for things to film that are drab, ordinary' (Matheo 2005: 16). The world of the film is certainly drab: a succession of bleak desert vistas and identical motels and cafés. Once again we might look to Baudrillard and his reading of

the specificity of the desert as being that 'toute profondeur y est résolue – neutralité brillante, mouvante et superficielle' (1986: 119). There is nothing to be discovered in the journey, no change to be experienced. The desert functions as a reflective plane, serving merely to echo and distort that which enters into it. There is an argument to be made for Dumont's treatment of the desert as an echo of the hapticity in Noé's work, and indeed of the central concept of the razor blade. In both instances, the outwardly innocuous plane, either desert surface or cinema screen, somehow exerts a force over the spectator, engaging with them both on a visual level and on a deeper, more physical level as well.

Far from Lopez's idea of looking for liberation in travel, in the case of *Twentynine Palms* Katia and David lack such an intimate relationship with the road: they are only on the road because they need to be for David's work, and furthermore Katia is not even a good driver, as witnessed by her damaging the car when David lets her take over the driving. Dumont gives lie to the idea of the road movie being centred around a spirit of 'travelling for travelling's sake' (Laderman 2002: 10). The road here holds no allure; it is nothing but a means to an end, and an uncomfortable one at that. As Baudrillard claimed of the desert, 'pas de charme, pas de seduction dans tout cela' (1986: 119). Indeed, the road is not even specially favoured in the cinematography: it is part of an alien landscape, but not an essential aspect in itself. Backdrop is abstract, a surrounding to which David and Katia are oblivious. 'They fuck and fight, fight and fuck' (Quandt 2004: 131), 'squabble with each other in between bouts of thankless sex' (Matheo 2005: 16), in spite of their surroundings. Their foray outside of their comfort zone, an

almost mythical, safe LA which they intend to return to after making this reconnoitre, and which David angrily says he wishes he had never brought Katia from, leads to their annihilation. Dumont transfers the characters' symbolic ignorance of their surroundings across into the presentation of other characters in the film. He reduces everyone apart from David and Katia into half-people. Until the camera focusses on the rapist's twisted face as he climaxes, nobody else is treated to such a close-up. People are either distant figures, or in cars, or else bisected by the shot. The theoretically limitless scope of discovery is reduced: David and Katia live in their own world, and the irruption of others into it is a harbinger of their doom.

Figure 8: David and Katia and one of the half-people that populate the road they travel.

This deconstruction of characters reflects Aja's manipulation of killer and Final Girl. Marie is also effectively a half-person, completed only through

her destruction of the killer and unification of the halves of her real self. In both instances the directors manipulate the spectator through what they permit to be shown. They might not be as terrible exercises in manipulation as those performed by Noé, lacking the additional multisensory violence of his films (the painful sound, the disorienting camerawork), but they still show the capacity for complex deconstruction of the film/spectator relationship that is to be found in Contemporary French Extreme Cinema.

While some find the road of the road movie to be a masculine space, the presence of Katia indicates that this is not the case in *Twentynine Palms*. It is possible, however, to read the clan of rapists as indicative of the result of this masculine preoccupation, a carful of destructive, enraged half-people who roam the roads, attacking those who trespass on their territory. In terms of the couple, David is a highly unlikeable character, victimising Katia even as he is destroyed by the madness in his own country. Katia can be read as representative of the old world in the East: her embodiment in a Russian actress speaking French is fitting given the historical animosity between the USA and Russia and the then very current anger directed against France by the USA.[11] This was the year in which the cafés run by the House of Representatives in America were symbolically changing the name of 'French fries' to 'freedom fries' in a petulant display of discontent at the position France took on the war with Iraq, discussed earlier.[12] When they exit the car at the Joshua Tree plain, Katia symbolically touches a cactus, engaging sensuously with her surroundings. David, conversely, seems unconcerned

[11] It should be noted, however, that Dumont himself does not see this casting as significant, stating in an interview with Liza Bear 'that she was Russian was incidental to the story -- I had absolutely no geopolitical intentions' (2004).
[12] http://edition.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/03/11/sprj.irq.fries/

with the space he inhabits: he is a man whose job is to look, and yet crucially he never truly sees. He does not notice the portents of danger around him as Katia seems to, and is brutally punished for this. That he then punishes Katia, angrily murdering her, can be read as both a commentary on the negative effect of America's recourse to violence and a criticism of overpowering masculinity. I have previously described both the moment where David forces Katia to perform oral sex on him underwater and the moment when he treats her face as a passive orifice as points at which 'David's masculinity is, quite literally, silencing Katya's feminine voice' (Parsons 2010). Dumont's road is one of simplistic, almost caveman brutality, which perverts and destroys rather than healing.

In Dumont's work, the potential ecstasy of freedom offered by the open road is transmuted into paroxysms of ecstatic terror, such as when Katia breaks down in fear as she faces the road at night, or madness, as witnessed in David's violent destructive and self-destructive actions in the finale. Katia's breakdown comes at a point where she has run away from David following an argument. It is night time, and she approaches the edge of the road with trepidation. Through a series of shots, Dumont visually expresses her disaffection, her dislocation from and fear of the world of the film. At one point she runs in fear and hides from an approaching car, an action completely at odds with the almost mechanophile preoccupation with vehicles one expects in a road movie. Later, she sits down on the sand in front of the road. Behind her is the desert, at her right an illuminated building, and on her left the darkness of the night.

It is as though she is faced with three impossible options: a return to the lifeless desert, an acceptance of the perverted American Dream, or a leap into unfathomable darkness. Eventually, of course, this decision will be taken out of her hands. This framing is typical of the way Dumont depicts his America. Rather than the open vistas and road of the traditional road movie, Dumont offers closed spaces, suffocating and inescapable.

Figure 9: Katia alone in the desert, trapped between America and darkness.

Even the road is often curtailed, such as on the Joshua Tree plain where the road ends at the foothills and the desert continues beyond. Baudrillard asks, of the journey through the desert, 'jusqu'où peut-on aller dans l'extermination du sens, jusqu'où peut-on avancer dans la forme désertique irréférentielle sans craquer […]?' (1986: 15). For Dumont, the answer is simple: not far.

At the climax of the film, following the rape, we return to the motel. David locks himself in the bathroom and Katia is unable to make him leave. Finally he does open the door, and is revealed to have shorn off his hair. With the bruises from his attack he appears quite inhuman. Screaming, insane, he stabs Katia to death. David has symbolically reshaped himself, but his transformation is not into an improved figure. Rather, he has taken a retrograde step towards the half-men that surround them. We do not see him in close-up after the door opens, but rather at a distance, or half-shot, and finally as a small point on a huge frame; dead. David, previously so favoured by the camera's gaze, has been subsumed into the wilderness.

Figure 10: Figures in a landscape; David, in death, becomes part of the terrain.

Far from being a satisfying experience of liberation engendered through travel, Dumont instead takes the tropes of the road movie and

restructures them into his ‘experimental horror film’, creating a space where travel is cyclical, the travellers caught in an ever-decreasing spiral of disaffection which eventually destroys them. The collision between the hopeful exploration of the typical road movie and the uncomfortable and brutal introspection of Dumont’s film is a palpable slice of the razor blade, once again highlighting these films’ position as other and different, as non-conformist and difficult to assimilate or approach in anything we might consider as a ‘traditional’ manner.

The Shock of the New

The thematic and formal genre-specific references and subversion at work within the films discussed in this chapter are not limited to these directors, and can be found in all of the films associated with Contemporary French Extreme Cinema. Dumont and Aja are criticised in just the same way as precursors like Noé. Far from the hollow shock exercises suggested by Quandt, as we have seen in this chapter the provocations of these films are based upon an assumed comprehension of what it means to be a spectator of the chosen genre, and a knowledge of what must be done to shock such a sensibility. We have seen how the directors produce cosmetically familiar films which undercut the apparent normalcy with a violent restructuring of both onscreen representations and spectator relationships.

This distancing from normality which these films engage in, however, can lead them into more difficult territory than mere unfair criticism. Their desire to blur and cross boundaries, to break with traditional modes of

representation and, perhaps especially, to engage in simulated proximity to bridge the divide between film and spectator can carry these films beyond being debated over taste issues and into the realms of legality. The final action of the razor blade which we will examine in this dissertation is the most physical of all manifestations of the concept: the genuine cut of censorship acting upon the films.

Chapter 3 – Slicing

Censorship

The focus of this dissertation is on the problematic reception of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema and the ways in which these problems have led to the disappearance or diminishment of the trend. We have seen in the preceding chapters how this problem might be manifested in critical mis-reception and in the ways in which the films subvert spectator expectation. We have located the reason for the potentially uncomfortable and confrontational viewing experience offered by these films in their preoccupation with narrowing the divide between film and spectator by directly appealing to the spectator's senses through representation of physicality, described as simulated proximity, and in the spectator's inability to adopt to the mode of viewing required to appreciate this embodied type of cinematic experience. The danger of this confrontational mode of filmmaking is that the transgression of boundaries, the pushing at the borders of acceptability, creates a problem outside of the intimate film/spectator dialogue. In opening up the filmic territory to encompass more extreme content, the films and filmmakers are liable to cross into complex fields of real-world legality. In this chapter we will examine the possible outcome of such transgression, a third distinct action of the titular razor blade on the films and on the spectators: censorship.

This chapter will examine some of the instances of censorship conflicting with Contemporary French Extreme Cinema. This is a wide-

ranging topic and so our engagement with it here does not seek to be an exhaustive study. Many of the films associated with the trend have been banned or censored at one time, either heavily or partially, and indeed at the time of writing this dissertation many of them continue to be.[13] In this chapter the discussion will be limited to two films, *Baise-moi* and *À ma sœur !*, and even within this sample we will only be focussing on some of the many censorship issues surrounding them. I chose these two films as there are strong parallels that can be drawn between them, despite their vast formal differences, and also because both have particularly interesting censorship histories, and indeed current situations. Both films deal with female experiences of patriarchal society, but both take very different routes to present their argument. The link is in the directors' subversive approach to the subject matter. In discussing the two films, Colin Nettelbeck notes:

> If Catherine Breillat and Virginie Despentes have caused such an upset, it is because they confront conventional male-structured representations of heterosexual sex, including previously honoured boundaries between eroticism and pornography, and break even the most durable taboos, such as those that forbid the portrayal of real sex on screen (2003).

The positions taken by Breillat and Despentes are not ones which can be easily categorised. Beugnet notes that in Breillat's oeuvre and in *Baise-moi* 'female characters defy the usual pattern of "progressive" gender portrayals and have generated highly polarised debates' (2007: 47). These shared traits of taboo-breaking and confrontation align Breillat and Despentes both with

[13] For example the Australian ban on *Baise-moi*, which was still in effect as of 17/04/2013.

Contemporary French Extreme Cinema and with each other, and their closeness is compounded by their choice of topic. There are other links outside of their films as well, most notably in the support that Breillat gave to Despentes during the scandal caused by the censorship of *Baise-moi*, which we will examine later in this chapter. Something for which both directors show a concern is the drawing of a distinction between the power of words and the power of actions. This interest in the division between language and action can perhaps be linked to the fact that both Breillat and Despentes are authors, with *Baise-moi* being an adaptation of Despentes's 1993 novel of the same name. As we will see in the discussion in this chapter, Despentes's philosophy in *Baise-moi* seems to rest on the idea that, in order to break with patriarchal oppression, women must 'act-out' in such a way that they become exempt from classification. Only in breaking all the rules can they truly be freed. In *À ma sœur !,* Breillat offers a caustic examination of the limits and structures of sexual dialogues, pointing to the physicality which underlies them.

Before we engage with a discussion of these two films, it is important to outline my opinion of the censorship of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema in terms of the film/spectator relationship described throughout this dissertation. I have tried to argue throughout that the engagement of these films with extreme content is a meaningful and sensible one, rather than simply gratuitous. As such, though it might be a contentious claim to make, we could argue that the extreme content in Contemporary French Extreme Cinema is more useful and worthy than that in many other examples of extreme cinema. Where films such as *A Serbian Film* (Srđan Spasojević

2010), to choose a widely-publicised example, use gratuitous gore or sex as an aggressive force, a tool to shock the audience into submission, we could argue that censorship is not particularly damaging. *A Serbian Film* can arguably stand to lose two minutes without any real detriment to its thematic concerns. Contemporary French Extreme Cinema, however, has a more subtle engagement with extreme content, using it not as a blunt object with which to assault the spectator but rather as a point of weakness between film and spectator, a breach through which the film can touch and be touched; a suggestion of increased closeness, a simulated proximity. We will see the importance of the body to the narratives of both of the films studied in this chapter, and it is something which we have seen throughout this dissertation. What I do not wish to suggest is that all censorship has a deleterious effect on the spectator, that censorship in itself is wrong. Where censorship does create problems is in those instances in which it has not been carefully applied, where it does not respect the rhythms of the film in terms of the relationship constructed between film and spectator. It is important to adopt as nuanced an approach to censorship as I have argued that we should take to the films themselves. While Christophe Bier criticises Virginie Despentes's apparently contradictory position on censorship as 'je suis contre la censure, mais…' (2000: 149), it is important to acknowledge that censorship is a highly subjective process and thus it is difficult to make objective statements about it. In this chapter we will examine both instances of censorship which do not necessarily damage the power of the cut film and those that unequivocally do.

Slicing

The third manifestation of the razor blade, then, is what we will refer to as the slicing of censorship. As with the two previous manifestations, friction and collision, there are multiple ways in which this slice can be read. In the immediate sense it refers to the physical action of censorship, of cutting a film. While the advent of digital film has rendered such editing less violent than in the past, where cutting would have involved the literal slicing of celluloid, an action that was apparently, and appropriately, often performed with a razor blade, the cutting terminology still continues in common parlance. We can return to Mark Kermode, whose work gave us the razor blade terminology in the first place, who describes 'this habitual slicing vernacular, with its constant references to scissors, knives, cuts, trims' (2011: 301), noting that it is essentially 'rooted in the age old physicality of celluloid' (2011: 302). Clearly there is still an accepted sense that censorship exerts a physical influence on a film, physically diminishes it. The idea of an oppositional violence to those types of violence already examined in this dissertation is fascinating: it could be argued that the effect of censorship is just as damaging as the supposed effect of the films themselves. If we accept my idea of simulated proximity, we are accepting a more intimate relationship. The cutting of the films represents a break in this relationship, a severance or interruption of the haptic rapport: a significant rupture. It is also important to note that censorship can be total, with some of the films associated with Contemporary French Extreme Cinema being subject to outright bans in certain territories. This represents the ultimate slice, the removal of the films from the public sphere.

The importance of censorship to my central concept of the razor blade acting upon these films, contributing to their disappearance, cannot be overstated. With reference to Despentes and Breillat, Nettelbeck notes that 'the sex-based scandals around their films have certainly contributed to their marginalisation' (2003). This can be seen as true for both the films and the directors: as we saw with Gaspar Noé in Chapter 1, the idea of *créateur* and *créature* becoming confused is a constant consideration. This branding of the directors as 'Extremists' (Romney 2004), sullying their intent even when it might popularise their name, of the sort we discussed in chapter 1 with relation to Noé, is compounded when issues of censorship are raised. By pointing to the illegal otherness of the images, censorship politicises the films in a way that is detrimental to their true meaning. The censor's blade becomes the razor blade, slicing into the films and neutering their power. Even when cuts on the films are rescinded, the scars remain in their popular perception.

Nadine et Manu Vont En Tuant: *Baise-moi*

Alongside Noé's *Irréversible*, *Baise-moi* probably represents the zenith of the popular perception of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema.[14] The plot sees a young woman, Manu (Rafaëlla Anderson), who has just been raped, and has murdered her brother, forcing another woman, Nadine (Karen Bach), to drive her away from Paris. Nadine, a prostitute, has coincidentally just

[14] A quick Google search shows it appearing on both the *Telegraph* and *MSN Movies*'s lists of the most controversial films ever made, while the same for *Irréversible* shows it appearing on *Time Out*'s list.

killed her flatmate and witnessed the murder of her best friend. The women quickly form a bond and indulge in a killing spree, unleashing their unfocused rage in an indiscriminate fashion. A media storm follows, but remains at a distance. Eventually Manu is killed and Nadine, after avenging her and then failing to commit suicide, is captured by the police.

The indiscriminate nature of the violence is one of the most complicated aspects of the film to read. Best and Crowley point to the oppressive masculine space, this 'spectrum of exploitation, objectification, humiliation and abuse' (2007: 172), in which the rape of Manu and her friend is located as an indicator that *Baise-moi* is a rape-revenge film, and such an assertion is certainly borne out on a superficial level.[15] The opening shot is of Nadine's face, wearing an unreadable expression and bathed in odd red light, possibly suggestive of violence. She both holds the gaze of the spectator and seemingly shies away from it, repeating this action twice.

This shot might be seen as both prolepsis to the moral ambiguity of the rape-revenge film and an unspoken request for spectator complicity in this. In what could be read as justification for such a reading, Nettelbeck associates the opening shot with the violence at the conclusion, suggesting that 'the aggressively spiked necklace that Nadine is wearing links the opening of the film to the chaotic, murderous climax in which she – wearing the same necklace – and her companion […] massacre the denizens of a sex-club' (2004).

[15] The rape-revenge genre typically sees a woman demeaned and sexually abused by men, only to regain her strength and take her revenge against them. A classic example is *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi 1978).

Figure 11: Nadine, dangerously ambiguous.

The parallels with the genre continue with the rape of Manu and her friend, shown in graphic detail with shots of actual sexual penetration and erect penises. However, after this point *Baise-moi* diverges from the expected formula. Both Manu and Nadine kill people who have not directly wronged them, actions which stand in stark contrast to the righteous indignation which fuels the rape-revenge film. In what can be regarded as their 'acting-out', both women sublimate their rage against society into formless, angry violence. They are not killing men who have wronged them, or even women who have allowed themselves to be wronged: they are just killing. When one character notes 'vous avez tiré sur un homme de famille et une femme', Nadine agrees 'on n'a aucune circonstance attenuante'. This is simply random, explosive violence. Manu and Nadine even have 'good' sex with men along the way, pausing their journey to enjoy themselves but ensuring that the ultimate control in the bedroom rests with them. When one of the men they pick up for sex suggests that the women engage in 'un petit

soixante neuf', a request that can be seen as representative of the masculine-constructed fantasy of 'controlled' lesbianism prevalent in heterosexual pornography, 'homosexuality performed between heterosexual females, thus including the men within the sphere of pleasure', and thus a patriarchal imposition on femininity, he is evicted from the room with a pointed 'dégage' but, crucially, he is not killed (Parsons 2010: 16).

Figure 12: Manu engaging in 'good' sex.

Beugnet notes that 'the trajectory of the heroines eschews rationalisation' (2007: 49): trying to apply pre-existing rules or concepts of rape-revenge is impossible.[16] Despite the clear visual and thematic markers tying *Baise-moi* to recognisable genres, the film as a whole, in the manner

[16] This is equally true for other genres with which the film has been associated, such as the road movie.

discussed in Chapter 2, refuses such classification. As Manu later comments, in a display of self-reflexivity, 'on n'a pas le sens de la formule, on n'a pas les bonnes répliques aux bons moments!'. She is referring here to a mainstream cinematic ideal which they cannot attain, despite the visual references.[17] Nadine's response to this is telling, and corroborates my assertion at the start of this chapter: 'on a eu des bons gestes, c'est déjà un début'. The words are not of the utmost importance: it is the actions that count. This, as we will see, is also often the case with censorship.

The story of the censorship of *Baise-moi* in France is particularly interesting and important in terms of the acceptance of these films and the curious and difficult space they occupy, or are forced to occupy. Released in France originally as 'interdit au moins de 16 ans', the highest mainstream classification, on the 28th June 2000 the film was quickly withdrawn from most cinemas after pressure was applied to the French government by André Bonnet, head of *Promouvoir*, 'association de défense des valeurs judéo-chrétiennes et de la famille' (Bier 2000: 145-146). Bonnet claimed that *Baise-moi* was an overtly political film, 'une opération concertée qui vise à "faire sauter le verrou" du X et à réintroduire les films pornographiques et/ou violents dans les salles de cinéma grand public' (Bier 2000 : 146). This complaint led to the film being reclassified with an X certificate. The film was thus left in a limbo state: it could not be played in mainstream cinemas as it lacked a *visa d'exploitation*, but it was not the sort of X film which specially

[17] For instance, when they visit the gun shop, Nadine is wearing a wig which looks very much like that worn by Uma Thurman in *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino 1994). It is clear that Despentes and Trinh-Thi do not lack 'le sens de la formule' – they know exactly what they are doing.

licensed pornography theatres would play. This latter option was useless anyway, as only one such cinema still existed and its proprietor did not feel that *Baise-moi* was pornographic: 'c'est bien joué, mais, pour un voyeur, c'est nul' (Bier 2000: 148). The film was, as Bier asserts, 'dans une situation impossible: totalement interdit sans l'être' (2000 : 147). Note, however, that I described the film as having been withdrawn from *most* cinemas: despite the film being legally impossible to screen, certain cinema owners railed against the ruling, most notably Marin Karmitz, the director of the MK2 chain. Just as Bonnet called to the political angle of *Baise-moi*, so Karmitz asserted that in banning the film from public view 'on détourne le souci de la protection des mineurs pour porter atteinte à la liberté d'expression' (Bier 2000: 149). The idea that state censorship was being enforced led to the explosion of *l'affaire Baise-moi* (Seguret 2000), the most visible debate on the censorship of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema.

One of the people to eloquently defend the film was Catherine Breillat, obviously no stranger to critical scandal. Her film *Romance* had caused debate upon its release for featuring scenes of unsimulated sex, and the uproar placed Breillat at the forefront of the debate on sex in film. She issued a petition which argued that the treatment of *Baise-moi* represented the government bowing to pressure from 'un groupuscule d'extrême droite se réclamant de la défense des valeurs judéo-chrétiennes et de la famille' (Bier 2000: 148), and questioning where such acquiescence would lead. The petition was signed by, amongst many, François Ozon and Claire Denis, both directors who would later be associated with the New French Extremity by Quandt. Eventually, Minister of Culture Catherine Tasca decided that the 18

certificate would be reinstated, allowing the film to receive its *visa d'exploitation* and thus be eligible for general release. It returned to cinemas on 29th August 2001, over a year after its original release.

There is an important question to be answered regarding where exactly the problems lay with *Baise-moi*. Wimmer holds that 'the film was disturbing because it brought to the surface what should best remain hidden: namely, the social salience of class, ethnic and gender difference in the context of new challenges to national identity by minority groups' (2011: 140). The film certainly does engage with these problems, most importantly with issues of gender difference, but the offense caused by the film cannot be limited to the theoretical questions it poses. As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, Despentes shows a particular interest in the distinct separateness of words and actions. We can see this interest at work in the scene before Manu and her friend are raped.

They sit on a bench and trash talk men, with Manu reducing the importance of the men whom she is told have been mocking her: 'je leur chie tous dessus!'. The first shot of this scene places the women above the city, and after this they are filmed either together in a mid-shot, or prioritised in close-ups. This positioning appears to describe both a feminine complicity and a position of power. However, when the men appear they are symbolically above them, their threatening physical presence creating a rupture with Manu's language which has hitherto seemed powerful.

Figure 13: Overlooked? Manu and friend beneath the men.

The next scene presents the rape, and throughout the women do not speak normally: Manu maintains a stoic silence while her friend cries and screams and pleads for them to stop. The former scene is a very potent critique of the domineering position of men, but it lacks the impact of the rape sequence. While Wimmer holds that '*Baise-moi*'s formal and political engagement with such issues of gender, race and identity was neutralised in favour of a less threatening debate about the visibility of violence and pornography within mainstream cinema' (2011: 139), the basic fact of the matter is that the reaction from *Promouvoir*, and indeed other parties critical of the film, focussed on the explicit sex and violence, rather than the thematic concerns which motivated them.

The fact that *Baise-moi* contains scenes of non-simulated sexual intercourse was certainly problematic for the British censors, with the

aforementioned penetration and erects penises being historically prime bait for censorship in the UK, but the overriding concern for the BBFC was the conflation of sexual and violent imagery. For the cinema release of the film in the UK, the rape scene was cut by 10 seconds to remove a shot of vaginal penetration. In the BBFC's justification for releasing another film featuring sexual intercourse, *9 Songs* (Michael Winterbottom 2004), uncut several years later, they note that 'it never mixes up the sex with violence and is careful to avoid looking like a pornographic work' (O'Brien 2012: 178). Explicit sex is not a problem in itself: it is the context, rather than the action, that makes this unacceptable. The BBFC were actually very complimentary about *Baise-moi*, describing as 'a serious and well-made film' (MacKenzie 2002: 323), but the images within the film conflicted with their guidelines on what was acceptable to show on screen. Upon its release on home video in Britain, the BBFC imposed another cut, of 2 seconds. This was to remove a shot of the gun entering the man's anus when Manu and Nadine massacre the members of the swingers club. Again, what problematises the scene is the juxtaposition of sex (penetration) and violence (the gun). Another consideration in this instance was the re-watch capability that home video provides – the scenes could now be repeatedly viewed, and out of context. In many ways, the BBFC's cutting of *Baise-moi* was actually well orchestrated and subtle. With both cuts in place there is actually a sort of symmetry achieved: a penetration for a penetration. The BBFC's cutting of the home video release of *À ma sœur !*, conversely, is inelegantly achieved and potentially opens up more wounds than the uncut version.

Wisdom of the Ugly Duckling: *À ma sœur !*

À ma sœur ! was the first film that Catherine Breillat made after *Romance*, which was a *cause célèbre* for its presentation of real sex. *À ma sœur !*, in contrast, appears cosmetically to be a less confrontational piece. There is no real sex, and comparatively little nudity, just 'much fumbling and two brief shots of [an] erect penis' (Vincendeau 2001: 18). The film is an account of beautiful fifteen-year-old Elena's (Roxanne Mesquida) first sexual encounter with Fernando (Libero De Rienzo), an older boy she meets on holiday. As we have come to expect from Contemporary French Extreme Cinema, however, this traditional tale of exploratory young love is subverted, becoming a brutal examination of the social and gendered politics that surround sex. This subversion is most clearly indicated by the direction of gaze within the story. Rather than focus directly on the relationship between Elena and Fernando, Breillat recounts it from the perspective of Elena's overweight twelve-year-old sister Anaïs (Anaïs Reboux). Through her we see the relationship as an ugly, brutal thing, wherein her sister is subsumed into the adult world through a process which involves sacrificing herself to the demands of men. As Beugnet notes, 'Anaïs [observes] the ineluctable process whereby her (beautiful) sister Elena […] is caught in all the stereotypical (social and cultural) trappings of romance' (2007: 48). Hers is the coldly scientific parallel to Elena's romanticised vision of love and sex, seeing the loss of virginity merely as a perfunctory stage in the life of a woman. As Dumont did in *Twentynine Palms*, Breillat reduces the outside world in order to focus on the protagonists, though her reduction is far less extreme than Dumont's half-people. The girls' father is mostly absent, and their mother does not seem to

take much interest for most of the film, leaving Elena to be coerced into a sexual relationship and Anaïs to watch all with her unceasing gaze. Breillat located this parental absence in a division between adults and adolescents: 'the children are shutting them out […] the adolescent girls create their own world' (James 2001: 20). When the relationship is finally discovered, their mother ends the holiday and drives them back to Paris, only for a man to murder her and Elena and rape Anaïs. When the police find her, however, Anaïs claims that she was not raped.

While the plot ostensibly looks at Elena's loss of innocence and first experiences of masculine manipulation, it is Anaïs's body that we as the spectator are invited to focus our gaze upon. The *Fat Girl* of the American release title, Anaïs is explored as a recognisable yet alien body, embodying an uncomfortably fluid and experimental moment of teenage development.[18] Even the physicality of the actress is used by Breillat as a coding of this uncertainty – in some frankly directed scenes we watch actress Anaïs Reboux, sharing the first name of her character, exploring her pubescent body. There is a startling honesty in the way this is filmed, awkward and fumbling as her chubby fingers lift her dress and expose her flesh. Her still childish figure echoes her narrative dislocation, inchoate and unformed in body and likewise not yet located as a sexual being due to her virginity and self-dislocation from sexual concerns, especially in contrast to her beautiful sister who is adored both by their parents and by men. It is possible that Anaïs recognises her own bizarre nature when she regards herself in the mirror, turning her hungry gaze inward, and simply exclaims 'putain'. While

[18] Interestingly, *Fat Girl* was also the original title Breillat chose for the film (James 2001: 20).

Sally Hussey suggests that this is a self-hating use of the term, describing herself as a 'slut' (2001), a literal translation, I would propose that in fact she is merely using the word as an expression of shock. She seems to understand her oddness here, to realise that she is not part of the same world as her sister. This outside presence she represents is repeatedly characterised by Breillat's positioning of Anaïs in relation to other objects on screen. In one shot she lies on the beach in the foam of the waves, configured as a beached whale, or washed up suicide victim.

Figure 14 : J'ai mis mon corps à pourrir: Anaïs as a foreign body.

Later, she squats naked on the sand, the curves of her skin breaking the texture of the shot. This oddness is compounded by the counter shot showing Elena and Fernando looking down at her, uncomprehending. The rape scene, while seen as incongruous by many critics, is carefully

foreshadowed. In their drive back to Paris, described by Nettelbeck as 'hallucinatory' (2004), there is little discussion beyond reproach from the mother and Anaïs's complaints that this has nothing to do with her (a reminder of her state of disassociation from the sexual politics). Eventually they pull over at a roadside rest area to sleep. Elena's earlier comment that Anaïs would survive a crash as she is not occupying 'la place du mort' (a term denoting the passenger seat, as this was statistically the most dangerous seat to occupy in a car crash) is coldly realised as, in a shocking irruption of violence, a man smashes through the windscreen and kills first Elena, with an axe, and then their mother, whom he strangles. Anaïs slowly leaves the car but the man backs her into the woods. He forces her to the ground and removes her underwear, which he stuffs into her mouth. He then proceeds to rape her, with the focus resting on Anaïs's face. When he is finished, she removes the underwear from her mouth and he leaves her. The scene then cuts to the next day, with crime scene technicians bagging evidence from the scene, wrapping plastic bags around Elena's hands to protect DNA samples. We watch the police guiding Anaïs from the woods, and one of the officers notes 'elle dit qu'elle n'as pas été violée'. Anaïs retorts stubbornly 'si vous voulez pas me croire, ne me croyez pas', and the film ends on a freeze frame of her face, uncertainly looking off screen in a manner likened by Vincendeau to Antoine Doinel's (Jean-Pierre Léaud) ambiguous stare at the conclusion of François Truffaut's 1959 New Wave film *Les quatre cents coups* (2001: 20), another film which deals with the painful end of childhood.

The manner in which Anaïs will eventually lose her virginity is coded into the film from the opening shot. The focus is on Anaïs's face, ambiguous, echoing the similar shot of Nadine in the opening of *Baise-moi*. Anaïs, in a non-diegetic recording, reads the rhyme written by Breillat 'Moi je m'ennuie', and the lyrics are ominous portents of what is to come: 'si encore je pouvais trouver, homme ou femme…un loup-garou, moi je m'en fous'.

Figure 15: Anaïs's penetrating gaze, ambiguously shrouded in darkness.

Later, in another reading of the same rhyme, Anaïs speaks the line 'un animal, ça m'est egal'. Both of these statements become imbued with dark meaning at the film's conclusion when Anaïs is raped by the wild man who appears from the woods, and her 'earlier expressed preference for first-time sex without love is horrifically fulfilled' (Vincendeau 2001: 19). As Sally Hussey describes the sequence, 'a "werewolf" attacker pushes Anaïs to the

ground and devours her' (2001). The nature of Anaïs's aggressor also correlates with her desire for her first time not to be with a man. Her sung dark desires and her assertion that '[les hommes] sont tous tarés' are metaphorically correct and painfully prescient in that the man who rapes her is portrayed as subhuman, a 'loup-garou', but at the same time is also clearly a deranged individual, otherwise 'taré'.

The werewolf analogy appears to summate Breillat's opinion of men, at least within the context of this film. Even when men are seemingly innocuous or foolish there is a dark edge to them, an underbelly of misogynistic violence waiting to manifest itself. In the scene in which Anaïs bears silent witness to the deflowering of her elder sister, her tears are demonstrative of her awareness of this hidden patriarchal subjugation, even though the actual act occurring at the other side of the room is depicted in a bathetic way, with awkward movements and a humorous focus on their feet. That Anaïs seems aware of this duality of men from the start can retrospectively be seen as a clue to her eventual survival, where her mother and sister are seemingly unaware, or else wilfully ignorant, and thus perhaps fated to die. Elena is a dreamer, full of romanticised ideas of the world, and despite her initially confident manner – apparently sizing Fernando up as a partner with discussion of their fathers' jobs and later mocking him about his weight – she is completely overwhelmed by his 'hackneyed male flattery' (Vincendeau 2001: 19). Their exchanges might be laughable if they weren't juxtaposed with Anaïs's coldly philosophical reaction to the situation, described by one of the respondents in Martin Barker's study on extreme cinema as 'the wisdom of the ugly duckling' (2011: 112). Beugnet fully

describes the unbalanced political aspect of the seduction thus: 'led to subject herself wilfully to the "loss" of her virginity, Elena becomes a typical victim of the understated, routine violence of heterosexual seduction' (2007: 48-49). The rape scene can thus be read as offering a sort of catharsis, as Anaïs is exposed to the true nature of masculine affection, and survives this encounter. While Peter Bradshaw was worried by the idea that Breillat seemed to be suggesting in the ambiguity of Anaïs's reaction to the rape that 'a vivid unanswerable reality about sex has intruded at last' (2001), the conclusion can certainly be viewed as a meditation on the question 'wasn't the wolf-man's rape simply the overt expression of the predatory male attitude embodied in Fernando's seduction of Elena?' (Barker 2011: 112).

The rape scene actualises Anaïs's position in the adult world, forcing her to prematurely become a sexual being, her nascent sexuality brutally activated. It completes the relationship with the spectator – while she has hitherto been a complex and somewhat disturbing figure, a liminal body, the fact of the rape causes Anaïs to be re-understood as a victim, an abused child, despite her protestations. In precisely the way Breillat seems to intend, Anaïs becomes a figure of identification only when she has been sexually dominated. She receives, in some ways, exactly what she wanted. Her refusal of victimhood, her claim that she 'knowingly submitted to the experience' (Beugnet 2007: 48), shows that she herself realises that this destructive and violent event signifies her becoming as an ordered, and thus subjugated, female, and that this is something which she would deny. We can link this back to Manu's rejection of the trauma of rape in *Baise-moi*, where she states 'ma chatte, je peux pas empêcher les connards d'y entrer,

j'y ai rien laissé de précieux'. Both of these statements point to a restorative power of words, even if they cannot offer a break with the patriarchal system of control.

Figure 16: Anaïs post-rape, resolute.

À ma sœur ! has been censored to varying degrees in different countries, perhaps most notably in Canada where it was initially banned.[19] Here we are going to look at the censorship of the film on DVD by the BBFC, as it demonstrates a particularly troubling effect of censorship. The BBFC decided that a cut was required 'to [a] scene of sexual assault on [a] young girl […] to address the specific danger that video enables the scene to be used to stimulate and validate abusive action' (2002). The cut removed the

[19] Though this ruling was eventually overturned and it was later released in cinemas.

entire rape sequence. The apologetic liner notes on the Tartan DVD release of the film explain the BBFC's decision:

> Although *À ma sœur !* was passed fully uncut for its original UK cinema release, it was subsequently decided, by the British Board of Film Classification, that the video version should be cut by 1m 28s in order to receive an '18' certificate […] Unfortunately, the removal of this sequence considerably impacts upon the film's complex themes and concerns (2002).

The ending of the film thus contains a shocking jump as Anaïs is led into the woods and forced to the ground, and is then shown being taken from the woods by the police. The BBFC's cutting of the film robs us of the spurious catharsis provided by the rape sequence. The loss of the actual rape removes the commentary Breillat is making about the role of women in gendered societal terms, effectively neutralising this 'powerfully acid piece of filmmaking' (Vincendeau 2001: 20). Importantly, Anaïs, during the rape, places her arms around her attacker in a heavily symbolic move which highlights the sexual politics at play within the scene and within the film as a whole. As Nettelbeck notes, 'through the gesture, almost involuntary […] [Anaïs] is preparing the paradox of her final statement, in which she denies having been raped' (2003). The way the cut removes this potent image in the BBFC-edited video version points to an altogether darker reading of Anaïs's violation. Vincendeau suggested a reading of the film whereby Breillat is pointing to rape as empowering, which I would disagree with. The power lies in her denial of it. However, with the rape scene removed, this looks more plausible, raising some uncomfortable questions. The removal of Anaïs's

embrace of her attacker might also make her subsequent denial of rape appear to be mere ignorance, as though she does not understand what has happened to her, suggesting that she is simply a victim. Such a reading suggests a very callous use of rape, especially rape of a minor, in the film. It ripens the scene, and indeed the film, for misconstruction as merely a hollow exercise with no motive beyond the desire to shock – a familiar misrepresentation of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema! Such misreading was already present in the cinema reviews of the (still intact) film, such as Bradshaw's which called to the 'great arbitrary swipe of violence […] a shocking but empty gesture' (2001). For Bradshaw the change of tone in the conclusion broke with the atmosphere established in the film, coming 'quite out of left field', a 'grotesque eruption following what had been a very well- observed and well-acted human drama' (2001). This is arguably not the case – while the irruption of violence into the film can be said to be shocking, the gesture is far from empty. Rather, the explosive violence merely serves to crystallise the theme of women as victims of gendered society that Breillat has explored in the film thus far (and in much of her earlier and indeed later work). Where Marie in *Romance* is able to assert herself by killing Paul, her husband, here the destructive masculinity Breillat draws is able to completely destroy or subjugate the women. That Anaïs tries to claim ownership of her experiences through her refusal to describe her rape as such is a powerful statement on the societal demands on women according to Breillat. In stark contrast to the 'acting-out' of Manu and Nadine in *Baise-moi*, this is a cutting example of 'acting-in', adopting the dominated yet defensive role that Breillat here seems to suggest is ultimately the lot of all women. The censor's cutting

of the scene creates not only a jarring leap in the narrative, but it might also actually make the scene more disturbing. As Scott McCloud noted with regard to comic book characters, 'to kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths' (1993: 69). Not seeing what happens to Anaïs is somehow more uncomfortable, not just because we can imagine all sorts of horrible aggressions against her but because the edited conclusion now seems to suggest that women's destiny is acceptance of domination, rather than the more hopeful model Breillat proposes, wherein women can gain strength through an understanding and criticism of the socio-sexual constraints imposed upon them.

Final Cut

While the censorship debate needs to remain wide and open and nuanced, it can nevertheless be argued that the effect of censorship on Contemporary French Extreme Cinema has helped to push the films into the difficult space which I have described throughout this dissertation. These are not low-art, trashy films which will benefit from the cachet of being, or having been, banned but rather intelligently constructed texts which elevate the body to a textual, relational plane and thus require a sensitive spectatorial approach. Extremity is a requirement for these films, a necessary point of recognition and comprehension.

It can be argued that too much focus falls on the act of censorship itself, while the essence of the films is ignored. While *Baise-moi* was held up as a case for freedom of speech, the film itself was disregarded, 'almost

universally denounced as crude, profane and "tediously bleak"' (Day 2009). The 'powerful symbolic charge' Wimmer describes (2011: 131) might in itself be seen as uncomfortable static, a field surrounding the film and masking its true power, reducing it to a commodity for use in political debate. This might be seen as another aspect of the razor blade's action: the reshaping of a powerful film into a powerfully politicised but essentially meaningless entity.

The approach to censorship is changing, with *Baise-moi* having been released in the UK uncut during the writing of this dissertation. The new BBFC description of the censors' approach notes of the two newly complete scenes:

> The [rape] scene includes nudity and an explicit close shot of real penetration. However, neither the nudity nor the real penetration are portrayed as sexual or titillating. On the contrary, the rape is presented as violent and horrific, and, in this context, the shot of penetration reinforces the violation and brutality. In a later scene a man is anally penetrated with a gun. Again, the act is clearly one of violence and it relates back to the earlier rape (2013).

Such a description shows a commendably nuanced understanding of the extreme content. However, it might be a case of too little being done too late. While there are still those who champion the film as important, with Martyn Conterio noting upon the uncut UK re-release of the film that '[*Baise-moi*] needs less defending and more celebrating for having the guts to show society its ugly nature' (Conterio 2013), the damage of having been censored has had its effect. Despite the DVD box stating: 'one of the most

controversial movies of the last 20 years, *Baise-moi* was described as the most sexually explicit film to ever reach British screens by the UK press', *Baise-moi* almost feels like a relic of a time long gone, where films tried to shock not with gratuity but with a calculating truthfulness. James Quandt's retrospective regard over these films refers to many of them now looking like 'desperate artefacts' (2011: 213). Perhaps these films were desperate, but only desperate in the sense that they sought desperately to open a new film-spectator dialogue, one which has since seemingly, sadly, been cauterised by disinterest.

Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation has been to provide a possible explanation for the diminishment of the trend which we have referred to as Contemporary French Extreme Cinema. A parallel purpose has been to argue for the intellectual worth of this trend, which has frequently been overlooked. In the introduction we hypothesised that the reason for the diminishment and possible disappearance of the trend could be located in the failures in the relationship between film and spectator, brought about through spectator inability to submit to, or adopt, the required mode of viewing that these films demand.

The new viewing experience referred to throughout this dissertation is based, as we explored in the introduction, in the use of physicality as a relational tool to bridge the inherent gap between film and spectator. The required viewing mode which must be adopted by the spectator in order to successfully engage with the films involves an acceptance of this physicality, and an investment in it. Taking the basic fact that there cannot be physical contact between film and spectator, we examined what might be done to mimic it. This idea of bridging, of somehow navigating a void, is what we termed simulated proximity, a concept which we located as one of the key axioms which unite the disparate films that we have grouped together as Contemporary French Extreme Cinema. The theoretical basis for this concept drew together Laura Marks and Victoria Best and Martin Crowley to propose an active reduction of distance between theme and form, in order to

present as close an experience as possible, and conflated this position with Vivian Sobchack's location of the filmic text as essential in and of itself.

The apparent failure of the film/spectator relationship was explored through examinations of critical reception, genre subversion and censorship, with each of these areas demonstrating different aspects of this failed relationship. My overarching razor blade concept has provided a uniform manner with which to approach these distinct but interconnecting considerations, constantly referring back to the physicality which is the essential factor that marks these films out as different. At the same time, this examination of failures has hopefully also demonstrated how these failures can be avoided, or at least used more constructively to build a new understanding of the films discussed.

Discussion of Gaspar Noé's loose trilogy of films in Chapter 1 allowed for an exploration of how these films progressively move to further Noé's engagement with this gap between spectator and film. While *Carne* begins with graphic footage of a horse being slaughtered, the shock of the footage is still divided from the spectator, the blood running offscreen highlighting this apparently impassable interstice. The intertitles which seem to speak directly to the spectator show Noé beginning to push at these limitations. The next film in the series, *Seul contre tous*, continues this idea of dialogue with the spectator, leading up to the moment in which Noé offers a direct challenge in the countdown sequence which forces the spectator to make an active decision to witness the violent conclusion. Again, this serves to solidify the relationship between film and spectator, demanding an active investment. The final step in Noé's attempt to simulate proximity was far more

controversial and confrontational. In *Irréversible*, Noé actually uses camera movements and sound designed to induce nausea in the spectator, opening out the film/spectator relationship beyond the ocular and into new realms of physicality. The apex of this comes, we argued, with the conclusion, which sees a vortex of light creating abstract shapes which appear to move outwards from the screen. The subsequent cut into blackness severs this closeness.

The primary focus of Chapter 1 was on the critical reception of Noé's films, and much of the negative response seemed unwittingly affected by an inability to process this reduction of distance. Angry, aggrieved responses attacked Noé's own ethical position, failing to draw a distinction between film and filmmaker. This confusion of 'créateur' and 'créature' had been prophesised at the start of Noé's directorial career, and is a consideration that stretches across the trend. The sorts of damning criticism that these films received might have been the reason for so many of the directors to abandon such subjects, and thus curtail what might have been a fruitful and worthy direction of filmmaking. Only the directors themselves could respond to this, but it is true that films that are not successful do not lead to future funding opportunities. Marina de Van explained that difficult subjects such as extreme sex and violence are 'pas vendeur'.[20] It thus makes sense for directors to abandon extreme content, in order to receive funding for future projects, or else to move on to parallel fields which are more popularly acceptable, such as Alexandre Aja who decamped to Hollywood where he has primarily worked on the horror remake cycle.

[20] Personal interview conducted in Paris, 22nd September 2011.

Exploration of the response to Noé's films led us to a point at which it is clear that critical response can engender an adverse system of classification. This was highlighted by the location of Noé as 'king of the head smashers' (Lim 2011), an epithet which points to a misunderstanding of the essentiality of violence in Noé's oeuvre. This idea of misrepresentation, or misunderstanding, links back to the quote from Catherine Breillat which we explored in the introduction, where she noted that her work is often classified as belonging to a particular, and distasteful, brand of 'French' cinema (Best & Crowley 2007: 55). Indeed, throughout this dissertation we have encountered moments of this sort of judgemental critical response, such as the *Time Out* review of *Haute tension* which described the director as working with 'typical Gallic perversity' (T 2004). In many ways it appears that French cinema is inescapably located as a marginal cinema, with the innovations of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema thus destined to be ignored as typical French business with no bearing upon any wider filmic context. This is exactly the sort of position that the work in this dissertation seeks to combat, and we can locate it alongside the central premise of the shocking newness of the films as another reason that they might have disappeared.

We can similarly look to a critical conservatism in the responses, an angry retaliation against films which, for some, somehow break the rules. Throughout this dissertation we have referred back to James Quandt's article, 'Flesh and Blood'. It might seem reductive to refer constantly back to this pejorative piece, but it remains a seminal work for understanding responses to this trend. Quandt's work represents the crystallisation of the way in which the trend is mis-received and misrepresented. Quandt draws the films

together with no consideration of their thematic or formal innovations, holding them to be, collectively, somehow representative of an aberration from worthy cinema. Rather than seeing the extreme elements within the films as vital, integral to the text, Quandt regards them as mere empty provocation, used for their senseless shock-value.

The idea of aberration, of the films being somehow at odds with their thematic and formal predecessors, is one that has been important throughout this dissertation. While Quandt's suggestion that the films represent a futile avenue of exploration, that they now look like 'desperate artefacts' (Quandt 2011: 213), is something that this dissertation has sought to refute, there are other instances of aberration, which we can see as deliberate, that are entirely purposeful and intelligent. Critic Jonathan Romney described the wider New European Extremism as 'a cinema which is vital, troubling and, above all, itself critical' (Horeck and Kendall 2011: cover quote). We have seen that Contemporary French Extreme Cinema certainly demonstrates a keen awareness of both genre tropes and their meaning to the spectator. Deliberate ruptures with understood modes of spectatorship are important: in calling to familiar genre identifiers and subverting them, these films create a point of tension between the expectation of the act of film watching and the experience of it. The terminology of this dissertation has focussed on physicality, a metaphorical portrayal of the film/spectator relationship as one of shifting contacts between the text and the viewer; a physical dialogue. In Chapter 2, we looked at how the subversion of genres can serve to open wounds in this physical dialogue, to create a point of collision. The importance of the focus on this action of the razor blade, this apparently

uncomfortable reworking of genre, is that these wounds can also be read as constructive. In cutting open the sealed wholeness of genres, Contemporary French Extreme Cinema offers the potential for an examination of their inner workings. With genre both deconstructed and also invigorated through the physicality which these films possess, the filmic field is opened out for new spectator experiences to be arrived at.

The idea of active deconstruction and reconstruction of genre is clear in the approach that the directors studied in Chapter 2 take to their chosen forms. In the reading of Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms*, we saw the reduction of background characters to half-people, reduced either by their positioning in relation to the characters or by the framing of the shot itself. Such an action can be seen as part of the alienating intent of Dumont's project, to focus on his 'bad actors' (Matheo 2004: 18) to highlight the artifice of the film, but also as an action towards controlling the focus of the spectator. This type of manipulation was also evident in the other film discussed in Chapter 2, *Haute tension*. While Alexandre Aja does not use the camera to reduce the characters, he does manipulate the spectator in a comparable way through the half-figure of Marie, who exists as both Final Girl and killer. Aja breaks down the traditional relationship between the spectator and these two characters by making them into one being. Both Aja and Dumont use familiar thematic markers to engage the spectator, but rework them in a way that can provoke collision.

The idea of reworking familiar genres, or types of cinema, was also of primary importance to the films discussed in Chapter 3. Despentes and Trinh-Thi's *Baise-moi* encountered difficulty in its reception due to its

inclusion of graphic scenes of actual sex, performed by porn stars. It was from a reading of a critical response to Despentes's work that the concept of simulated proximity first emerged, and it is still with Despentes that we see this most explicitly, with this use of porn stars to perform sexual intercourse in a film that is not pornographic. The censorship of *Baise-moi* in the UK changed between its cinematic and DVD releases. The same was true of the second film discussed in the chapter, Breillat's *À ma soeur !*, which was not censored upon its cinema release. However, the capacity to rewatch provided by home video, the 'possibility of close and repeated viewings' located by Beugnet (2007: 19) as an important way of approaching these films, was seen as problematic in itself. The decision was taken to heavily censor the conclusion of Breillat's film due to the apparent danger of it being used as part of the process of child abuse. The question of whether or not this was a valid criticism of the film is one far removed from the focus of this dissertation, but our reading of the censored and uncensored versions of the film highlighted the fact that the censored version reduces the capacity of the film to engage the spectator, and also to challenge the spectator's position regarding the film. At the same time, the cuts create a new, uncomfortable and illogical experience of the film. The wound created by censorship, which I referred to as a slice, is one that cannot be understood or logically calibrated by the act of spectatorship alone, given that the work is rendered incomplete. Such slicing into the films thus destroys or at least damages their intellectual purpose, placing as excessive images which are actually integral to the film. As we also saw in the chapter, the outright banning of certain films associated with the trend is obviously another troubling aspect of their

reception (or non-reception). Such treatment bestows upon the films an illicit frisson which is at odds with their serious intent, and can lead to yet more misrepresentation, this time holding the films up as examples of something counter-cultural and yet hollow, empty naughtiness of the kind associated with the Video Nasties films.

Reading the Razor Blade

At the outset, we looked at the idea of the razor blade, setting it up as a malleable tool with which to examine the different uncomfortable moments which can be located in the act of watching extreme film. Having now offered up various readings of the films from this trend, we can assess just how important these uncomfortable moments are to the central hypothesis of this dissertation.

The critical reception and censorship of these films might be regarded as examples of oppositional violence, outside forces which are in contention with the films. The films themselves represent a fusion of different violences: the violence in the narrative, with violation of the body having been explored as an integral facet of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema, compounded by the explicit imagery which is also violent in its contrast to what is usually shown onscreen; the violence in the haptic engagement with the spectator, based in the corporeality of the narrative violence, which opens up a new and possibly uncomfortable mode of film watching; and the violence of genre appropriation, with the filmmakers cutting into familiar forms and creating a confrontational newness.

As we have seen in this dissertation, these violent actions can lead to ill-formed critical judgements – I do not place myself above this, as I have had to negotiate my own gut reactions to a number of these films. This trend represents, to an extent, uncharted territory for critics. The eventual acceptance of these films, if we ever reach that point, will only be attained through a process of mediation: academia can provide the middle ground between the films and the critics and public, helping to salve the wounds of the razor blade and enable a greater understanding of the importance of this cinema.

Limitations

An uncomfortable aspect of studying extreme cinema is the impossibility of making objective statements, both about the films and about spectator response to them. At the beginning of this dissertation, we quoted Martin Barker's proviso that one must be careful to avoid falling into the trap of discussing an 'abstracted "spectator", "viewer" or "reader"' (Barker 2011: 109), as such objectivity cannot exist when dealing with humans and our multitudinous experiences of life. What we are able to do, and what we have hopefully done in this dissertation, is to use close textual analyses and readings of surrounding literature, itself often based on close textual readings, to show that there are openings that can be examined both within the films and within the film/spectator relationship. If we have managed to show that such spaces warrant and require further exploration, then this dissertation has been a success.

There are areas where challenges might be made to the construction of the trend presented in this dissertation. While I have named Contemporary French Extreme Cinema as a trend which stands apart in its interests, it must be noted that it intersects with others. In the introduction, I discussed my reasons for not accepting similar groupings, such as Beugnet's 'cinema of sensation' (2007: 16) and Palmer's '*cinéma du corps*' (2011: 57), but others might find these to be more interesting ways of defining the trends. This might also create problems when considering the diminishment of the trend: if criteria are shifted, it could be argued that trends are still continuing. What needs to be clear is that this dissertation, and my own formulation of the trend, is but one of a multitude of possible readings of these films. This is actually an exciting prospect, as it opens up a dialogue between commentators on their individual selection methods.

On va où?

The question with which James Quandt ends his 2011 retrospective look at the trend, 'what was the New French Extremity?' (Quandt 2011: 213), is an important one to address here. Having given our own name to the trend, and having argued that the trend might not yet be finished in the way Quandt perceives, we might instead ask in this conclusion - what has happened to Contemporary French Extreme Cinema? Inevitably, there is not one answer to this question. There are, however, clear indications of a new trend which has formed, marking what might be regarded as a progression of directorial interests.

Many of the directors associated with Contemporary French Extreme Cinema have now moved towards a more poetic, lyrical and far less confrontational style of filmmaking. Catherine Breillat followed *Anatomie de l'enfer*, for Quandt the 'apotheosis and nadir of the trend' (2011: 210), with the far less confrontational historical drama *Une vieille maîtresse* (2007), and then with two reworkings of traditional fairytales for television channel Arte, *Barbe bleue* (2009) and *La belle endormie* (2010), based on *La Belle aux Bois Dormant*. Thematically, these films can be seen as following her earlier works, examining both sexual power dynamics and the difference between words and actions which we looked at in the context of *À ma sœur !* in Chapter 3. This exploration is clearest in *Barbe bleue*, which is explicitly a narrated tale. The framing story sees a wise and well-informed young girl reading the story to her fearful, naive older sister, their dynamic echoing that of Anaïs and Elena in *À ma sœur !* There is once more a conclusion which sees the destruction of the less wise sister, but the form is in no way as directly confrontational as the earlier film.

Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void* might in some ways be seen as a film which bridges these two trends. While I included it in the corpus of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema, due to its mention by Quandt in his 2011 article, it is not as confrontational as Noé's earlier works. While it contains extreme images, the focus is not on simulated proximity but rather, seemingly, on an exploration of fantasy and disassociation. Other films which we have not discussed in detail herein have also been followed by more poetic works. Marina de Van's sophomore film, *Ne te retourne pas* (2009), once more engages with the same questions of self-identity and duality of

self and body which she explored through bloody self-mutilation in *Dans ma peau*, but this time her focus in not on the carnal aspects of these questions. Although the film presents some disturbing images of bodily alteration, this time the narrative moves away from physicality to present a reworking of the ghost story. In contrast to the norm of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema, *Ne te retourne pas* also reaches a restorative climax, with haunted heroine and ghost merging into one compatible form. Such a conclusion stands at odds with the raw, exposed, uncertain conclusion of *Dans ma peau*. Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury's second film after *À l'intérieur*, *Livide* (2011), is likewise a less confrontational film. While the narrative can be read as a consideration of transgression in the same way as their debut film, *Livide* is a formally sound horror film, using non-subverted genre tropes and references to create a familiar rather than an alienating spectator experience.

Such transitions can also be located in the work of Pascal Laugier, whose American film *The Tall Man* (2011) replaces the extreme torture and violence of *Martyrs* with a fairytale-influenced tale of stolen children, and Leos Carax, who moved away from the extreme images of *Pola X* (1999) to instead present the warped magical realism of *Holy Motors* (2012). With so many directors moving in similar stylistic directions, we are presented with an entirely new field of filmmaking to map and analyse, even while facing a plethora of unanswered questions regarding Contemporary French Extreme Cinema. It might actually be the case that this new field, which I will temporarily refer to as Contemporary French Cinematic Fairy Tale, in lieu of a better title, might actually provide another lens through which we can examine Contemporary French Extreme Cinema. The trajectory of certain of

the directors' works might seem clearer in retrospect, may appear as a necessary point on their career path.

Last Words

The scope of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema is vast, with the possibility of deep intertextual readings crossing the borders between such fields as film studies, spectator studies, psychoanalysis and aesthetics. The multitextual experience of these films is such that a solitary, comprehensive study of the entire trend as located here would be impossible. We must also remember, as we discussed in the introduction, that the very act of drawing the films together is complicated, and can be seen as yet another instance of violence. What we must look for, then, are more studies like this dissertation, which engage with the films in terms of several fundamental assertions which link them. My proposed concepts, particularly those of the razor blade and simulated proximity, might be adopted as useful tools in this regard, as both are founded in the sort of close textual study that this trend requires, and yet are fluid concepts that can be stretched to facilitate an open and inclusive discourse around the films.

The academic worth of this dissertation can be measured in its location of the trend not as a finished, closed path of French cinema, but rather as part of an evolution of French cinema into new modes of engagement with the spectator. This new state is one of heightened textual awareness, wherein a renewed importance is bestowed upon thematic markers. We do not want to suggest that the trend is finished, to be 'sounding

the death knell' (Horeck and Kendall 2011: 16) in suggesting that we might not see a return to extreme French films in future. Indeed, if anything this dissertation has demonstrated the worth of such films, and their stimulating capacity for breaking with cinematic tradition. We must perhaps await the next film from Gaspar Noé, who was described by Quandt, albeit sarcastically, as 'reassert[ing] national dominion' in the field of extreme cinema with *Enter the Void* (Quandt 2011: 212), to see whether or not he has abandoned the idea of using film as a striking force, exposing 'forbidden' images (Quandt 2004: 20) as a way of breaking down the division between spectator and screen. What is also clear from this dissertation is that in and on and through the films of Contemporary French Extreme Cinema, the razor blade will continue cutting for a long time yet.

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Appendix 1

le nouvel observateur
18 juin 92

Carne, de Gaspar Noé, avec Philippe Nahon, Blandine Lenoir, Frankie Pain.
Encore plus court, de quelques minutes, mais tout aussi bon dans un genre différent, l'humour rouge, « Carne » est né dans le cerveau remarquable d'un jeune réalisateur nourri aux mamelles Bunuel et BD. Le mélange est étonnant. Toutes les métaphores que la viande peut appeler répondent présent, puisque le personnage principal est un boucher chevalin, solitaire rougeaud fou de sa fille muette. Accouplements bestiaux, abattage de quelques steaks saignants, premières règles, meurtre, tout y passe avec un sens du CinémaScope sûr, écarlate et cru.

Appendix 2

LA BAISE CRADE DE GASPAR NOE

Avec «Carne», moyen métrage sur un boucher d'Aubervilliers, Gaspar Noé revient aux sources surréalistes du cinéma. Explications d'images par l'auteur.

GASPAR NOE. Je suis né à Buenos Aires... Mon père est un peintre argentin de renommée internationale. Très tôt, il a eu une bourse du Guggenheim pour aller travailler à New York. Et moi, j'étais dans le sac. Pendant trois ans, j'ai gambadé dans Central Park au milieu des hippies. Puis, nous sommes retournés à Buenos Aires. Sept ans assez tranquilles ont passé et il y a eu un coup d'Etat. On a été obligés de plier bagages. J'avais douze ans quand nous nous sommes installés en France...

Vos meilleurs souvenirs de Buenos Aires ?

G.N. Comme ça, tout de suite, un arc-en-ciel sur une plage pluvieuse pendant un pique-nique avec mes parents. Sinon, les dernières minutes de «2001, l'Odyssée de l'Espace» dans une salle archicomble de Buenos Aires. Je devais avoir 6 ans et je voyais le foetus astral. Pour le reste, ce sont surtout des souvenirs sexuels...

Rien dans le genre «bunuelien» ? Pas de gouvernante frappée par une balle perdue qui s'écroule en vous révélant ses dessous noirs ?

G.N. Non, rien à voir. Même pas un petit viol de bonne ! (rires).

Il a bien fallu un déclic pour que vous ayez envie de faire du cinéma...

G.N. J'ai vu «Eraserhead» de David Lynch ! Il passait dans une salle, à l'Olympic Entrepôt. C'était bien avant qu'il soit réédité sous le titre «Labyrinth Man»... Il y avait trois chats pelés dans la salle. J'ai découvert qu'il existait un cinéma qui ne ressemblait à rien d'autre. Et c'est devenu comme un satellite vers lequel je tendais.

GASPAR NOE, le réalisateur de «Carne», un premier film saignant.

Votre premier court métrage, «Tintarella di Luna», ressemble plutôt à du Tarkovski...

G.N. A Louis Lumière, j'étudiais pour être caméraman et chef opérateur. Et c'était l'époque où sortait «Stalker» de Tarkovski... J'ai eu un choc. Cette lumière en biais, ces plans frontaux, ces murs couverts de moisissure, cette sensation organique... Si on cherche bien, je crois qu'on peut trouver des tas de points communs entre «Stalker» et les films de Lynch.

Comme «Carne», «Tintarella di Luna» est en scope...

G.N. Pas tout à fait. Le scope de «Tintarella» est le moins cher qui existe. Nous n'avions pas le matériel adéquat à l'école, et j'ai simplement eu recours à un subterfuge. J'ai tourné avec un cache très allongé qui donne l'impression que c'est du scope. Il paraît que ce procédé a un nom : l'«Arabiscope» ! On connaissait le Cinémascope américain et sa version ■■■

7 à Paris 17.6.92

bon marché, le fameux TechniScope des Italiens. Il y a donc plus cheap : l'« Arabiscope ». A l'époque, on avait peut-être utilisé ce truc dans les pays arabes pour concurrencer les « superproductions » italiennes en Techni-Scope...

Genre « Antar, fils du désert » ?

G.N. Oui, c'est ça (rires).

Dans « Carne », il y a par contre un choix très affirmé de se servir du scope pour découper les visages, masquer les yeux...

G.N. Là encore, c'était un peu guidé par la nécessité... Avec les objectifs que j'avais, les très gros plans m'étaient interdits. Impossible de cadrer une bouche plein pot, par exemple. La distance la plus courte que je pouvais espérer, c'était la moitié d'un visage. Masquer les yeux crée tout de suite une inquiétude chez le spectateur. Quand tu parles à quelqu'un, tu as besoin de regarder ses yeux pour savoir ce qu'il pense. Les yeux représentent l'esprit, alors que la bouche constitue la partie animale, organique d'un visage.

Ce choix est très affirmé dans vos films : l'ordre des instincts, le désordre de la raison...

dissocier la saleté du sexe, alors que la saleté fait son grand intérêt...

Dans tous vos films, on voit des gens en train de forniquer... Généralement des gros lards en tricot de peau qui se frottent...

G.N. Pas laids. Normaux ! Pourquoi il n'y aurait que les beaux qui puissent baiser à l'écran ? Sur « Tintarella », je n'ai pas osé demander aux acteurs de se dépoiler. Dans le script, il était écrit : « Mario et sa femme sont accouplés comme des animaux ». Je voulais dire par là qu'ils le faisaient à quatre pattes. Tous les jours, j'ai repoussé le tournage de cette séquence et je me suis retrouvé à la filmer en dernier. Faut me comprendre, j'avais 18 ans, mes comédiens avaient la quarantaine. Le mari de l'actrice était sur le plateau. Je ne savais pas comment leur expliquer. Alors ils se sont retrouvés sur le lit en train de se frotter sans baisser leurs slips. Et je me suis contenté de filmer ça. Au résultat, le plan fonctionne très bien. Mais je me suis juré de réussir ma scène érotique le prochain coup. C'est peut-être pour cette raison que j'ai fait ensuite « Pulpe amère », le récit d'un viol entièrement en plan-séquence.

A la fin de « Pulpe amère », un carton nous apprend que c'est une histoire

« Neuf personnes sur dix me haïssent d'avoir tourné ce film. »

G.N. C'est toujours l'histoire d'un passage à l'acte, vécu de façon extrême. Et foireux. La violence au cinéma a un côté hypergraphique qui la rend satisfaisante. Alors que nous savons tous, pour l'avoir expérimenté un jour ou l'autre, que c'est sale et confus, que tu ne t'en dépêtres pas, que le lendemain tu y repenses...

Comme le sexe ?

G.N. Il y a des gens qui s'évertuent à

vraie, que ce type qu'on a vu violer sa bonne était votre oncle...

G.N. C'est un pur mensonge. Mais il a l'avantage de laisser le spectateur sur une drôle d'impression. L'aspect social de l'anecdote devient soudain très important.

Dans « Carne », vous avez renoncé à filmer un plan de sexe en érection...

G.N. Ce plan était prévu à la fin, quand le boucher encule la patronne du bar. Le film était déjà tellement extrême... J'aurais bien aimé le faire ; il m'a manqué au montage. Et c'est en compensation, à cause de ce vide que j'ai pensé ajouter le monologue du boucher. Il n'était pas prévu à l'origine. Et je me suis retrouvé en train de tartiner tout le film avec cette voix off. Je voulais rendre le côté « boucher existentialiste », « philosophie du pauvre » qui finalement sonne très direct. Quand on regarde bien, on s'aperçoit que les scènes les plus hard sont portées par cette voix off. Mais les gens ont davantage été révulsés par les images que par les idées exprimées par le boucher... L'équarrissage du cheval au début du film a fait très mal.

C'est la chaîne que vous établissez entre cet équarrissage, le steak dans l'assiette de la femme enceinte et l'accouchement qui provoque le malaise. Dans « Le Chien andalou », l'art de Bunuel tient à ce genre de collages...

G.N. J'adore « Le Chien andalou ». C'est là que j'ai pris l'idée qu'il faut toujours prévenir le spectateur, annoncer l'horreur qui va suivre... En mettant cette image du cheval au début, je savais que j'allais provoquer la fuite des trois quarts de la salle. Un public qui, de toute manière, ne mérite pas de voir la suite (rires).

« Carne » retrouve les couleurs, très rouges, presque couperosées, qui font le charme kitsch de « Blood Feast », le fameux nanar gore dont on voit des extraits sur la télé du boucher...

G.N. Je voulais surtout que «Carne» ait les couleurs de la pelloche qui a beaucoup tourné... Tout en rouge, ocre, jaune. Ce sont les couleurs de la viande, de la graisse, et comme mon film ne parle que de chair... J'ai appelé ce procédé le «ColinColor», parce que mon chef opérateur s'appelle Dominique Colin. Il a un labo de tirage, aujourd'hui fameux, qui s'appelle Les Trois Lumières. Il se trouve que Dominique avait fait des essais pour accentuer le contraste sur d'autres films, et il était parvenu à ce résultat un peu étrange... Sur «Carne», on a simplement prévu le coup en ne filmant que des matières, des éléments rouges et bruns.

Vous avez été surpris par l'accueil à Cannes en 91?

G.N. Franchement, je ne m'y attendais pas! Quand je tournais le film, je savais que je le mènerais jusqu'à son terme, mais que neuf personnes sur dix allaient me haïr pour avoir tourné ça... Et puis il y a eu tous ces prix... Bon, le prix Très Spécial, c'est normal. Sa vocation est justement de récompenser un film «très spécial». Mais le prix de la Jeunesse...

Vous avez eu le prix de la Jeunesse?

G.N. (rires) Vous imaginez, ces jeunes dans le jury, triés sur le volet, propres sur eux, équilibrés et tout et tout... Et ils choisissent «Carne»! A mon avis, la tendance ne va pas tarder à s'inverser. Je le sens. Il y a des signes qui ne trompent pas. «Carne» vient d'être rejeté par l'Aide à la diffusion. Il a été jugé moralement abject par les gens qui y siégeaient.

RECUEILLI PAR CHRISTOPHE GANS

7 A PARIS 17 JUIN 92

FESTIVAL DE CARNE

Avez-vous noté qu'en France les premiers films ont toujours quelque chose de souffreteux, de geignard? Comme si, derrière leurs images, les auteurs s'avançaient, la tête basse et la main tendue, quêtant un peu de considération. Dans «Carne», le réalisateur Gaspar Noé ne réclame pas notre intérêt, il nous l'arrache. Le choc est bref et violent. «Carne» s'impose dans un claquement sec: le pistolet d'abattage vient de perforer la tête du cheval. En quelques coups de couteau rapides et précis, l'animal est égorgé, décapité, dépecé sous nos yeux. Un cut de montage impitoyable enchaîne le gros plan d'un steak noirâtre dans l'assiette de la femme du boucher. Dans l'image qui suit, celle-ci accouche d'une fille. C'est imparable. Le film a commencé depuis une minute.

«Carne» raconte la trajectoire extraordinaire d'un monstre ordinaire. Largué par sa femme, le boucher d'Aubervilliers se voue tout entier à l'éducation de sa fille. Mais le malheur colle à ses semelles. Acculé par les dettes, offusqué par la couleur de ses nouveaux voisins, taraudé par l'inceste, le bonhomme finira par sortir de ses gonds. Il ira sur un chantier planter un Arabe, le premier qui lui tombera sous la patte. «Carne» ressemble à un fait divers rapporté dans une feuille de chou: des dates et des faits. Pas d'échappée onirique ou horrifique. Gaspar Noé garde sa réserve pour mieux inciter le spectateur à sortir de la sienne, à investir le film de ses peurs et de ses troubles et, finalement, à imaginer le pire alors que le pire n'a pas lieu. «Carne» est un terrible exercice de manipulation. Beaucoup ne le lui pardonneront pas.

Dans la monotonie ambiante, «Carne» a tout d'un aérolithe tombé à la faveur de la nuit. Et son auteur, tout d'un petit homme vert débarqué dans le champ de patates et de navets du cinéma français. En fait, Gaspar Noé pratique un cinéma qui, de tous temps, a eu le don d'horripiler les âmes charitables, les curés et les gardiens de l'ordre. En 1928, Luis Bunuel faisait glisser un nuage devant la lune et le tranchant d'un rasoir sur l'oeil d'une jolie dame... Soixante ans plus tard, «Carne» vient nous rappeler que le surréalisme reste un art neuf, et qu'il se pratique toujours comme un acte terroriste.

C.G.

N.B. Depuis son passage à Cannes 91, «Carne» a écumé les festivals, les séances spéciales, les nuits continues. On l'a même aperçu sur Canal +. Son format un peu spécial (40 minutes) l'empêchait d'être distribué normalement. Aujourd'hui, il sort enfin, accolé au «Bunker de la dernière rafale», un autre petit chef-d'œuvre destroy signé quant à lui Caro et Jeunet (les réalisateurs de «Delicatessen»).

Voir salles page 42.

Appendix 3

Télérama N° 2562 - 17 février 1999

Les avis sont partagés

Sortie Gaspar Noé filme avec crudité l'enfer d'un type qui a tout raté et hait le monde entier. Réalisme radical ou provocation gratuite ?

Seul contre tous

Pour

D'une virulence implacable

Pas de fausse piste. Pas d'ambiguïté. Le héros de *Seul contre tous* est en enfer. L'enfer d'un homme réduit à moins que rien. Il a tout perdu, tout raté. *« Mon histoire est très simple,* dit-il d'emblée, *c'est celle d'un pauvre type. »* Dans une tronche aux traits épaissis par cinquante ans de non-existence grisâtre, le regard clair, d'une fixité hostile, est une froide mise en garde : mieux vaut se tenir à distance. La seule chaleur qui émane de lui, c'est sa voix. Mais il parle si peu (sauf en voix off). Le boucher devenu chômeur (on ne saura jamais son nom) est un bloc hermétique, verrouillé de l'intérieur. Oui, c'est à l'intérieur que ça se passe, et là, c'est le chaos.

Résumons. L'homme a abandonné sa fille adolescente. Il végète dans la banlieue de Lille entre sa femme enceinte qu'il n'aime pas et la mère de celle-ci qu'il déteste. Son ordinaire : un concentré de médiocrité rance. Il faudrait pouvoir s'échapper. Trouver un job. N'importe quoi. Il devient veilleur de nuit dans un hospice : c'est n'importe quoi. En plus sinistre. Un prétexte suffit pour qu'il pète les plombs. Il tabasse sa maîtresse, s'acharne sur son ventre, sur le bébé à naître. Monstrueuse bouffée de cruauté sauvage. L'homme fuit à Paris. Il est, désormais, seul contre tous…

Depuis *Carne,* moyen métrage électrochoc, sorti il y a six ans, on savait Gaspar Noé adepte du cinéma hors piste. En quelques scènes raides, saisissantes, secouantes, il « cadre » la suite de l'aventure : son personnage est en état d'insurrection, et l'espoir qu'il a, vaguement, de « repartir de zéro » est, sans aucun doute possible, le pire des leurres.

Seul contre tous, c'est un tunnel dont on n'imagine même pas qu'il y ait une lumière au bout. Il ne faut pas longtemps pour que l'espoir se ratatine. D'une rencontre l'autre, le vide se fait autour de l'homme, et en lui la haine monte. Elle vient du tréfonds, elle enfle, elle se nourrit de tout : des promesses non tenues des uns, du mépris des autres, d'une altercation de bistrot, d'une passe minable avec une pute déjetée.

Mais pas de pitié à l'horizon. Gaspar Noé a une ligne de conduite : il ne cherche ni à plaindre ni à juger son héros, mais à comprendre. A sonder les abîmes qu'il côtoie, à décortiquer sa parano ; à reconstituer le puzzle d'une personnalité laminée, et à recoller les morceaux d'un sens moral déchiqueté. Il traque un individu qui n'a vraiment rien d'aimable. Qui se montre même odieux dès qu'il en a l'occasion. Plus il s'enfonce, plus il éructe. Moins il y a de raisons de s'y attacher. Et pourtant, dans cette espèce de mécanique à mouliner du désespoir très noir, il y a une force de conviction si étonnante que, peu à peu, le personnage cesse d'être un cas pour redevenir un homme. Cet homme seul qu'on voit arpenter des rues vides et longer des murs d'usine gris sans fin : son paysage mental sans issue…

Pour réussir ce portrait de l'extrême, Gaspar Noé a fait des choix de mise en scène radicaux. Il provoque une étrange

Télérama N° 2562 - 17 février 1999

et troublante friction entre un naturalisme poussé des comportements et une stylisation à bloc des ambiances et des décors. Ou, si l'on veut, il filme du « tripal » de manière épurée. Se dessine, à la longue, une vérité comme dégraissée, grattée jusqu'à l'os : une espèce de reflet, déformé, excessif, parfois caricatural, mais très plausible d'une certaine France d'aujourd'hui. Pas rassurante mais authentique.

Gaspar Noé revendique tous les artifices imaginables dans le but de créer l'émotion (voir portrait). A côté de certains effets de ponctuation sonores assez gratuits, il ne réussit rien mieux que la voix off, dense, incessante, proche de la logorrhée obsessionnelle. Et c'est exactement de cela qu'il s'agit : d'un homme taraudé par l'obsession de l'échec et d'une vengeance qu'il veut sans pitié. Délire verbal va-de-la-gueule, simpliste, cinglant, pessimiste, redondant, ordurier, puéril, douloureux, agressif. Ce flot de mots, c'est de la souffrance brute qui se cache sous la couche de beauferie apparente. Une pulsation profonde. Une formidable machine à broyer du noir qui entraîne le héros – et le spectateur – vers l'inéluctable.

On n'est pas obligé de suivre Gaspar Noé jusqu'au bout. Ni d'applaudir à ses provocations. Mais son film est une implacable et souvent vertigineuse plongée dans les méandres affectifs d'un homme aux abois. On reprochera peut-être au cinéaste son absence de compassion pour l'homme qu'il traque ainsi sans répit (et auquel Philippe Nahon, prodigieux, donne une épaisseur hallucinante). On peut aussi bien le louer pour son absence d'hypocrisie. Rien n'est fait pour plaire dans *Seul contre tous* ; la violence y est aussi crue que chez Scorsese, et aussi peu gratuite. L'épilogue – ambigu, c'est le moins qu'on puisse dire – est contestable et sera contesté. Mais ils sont rares, finalement, dans le cinéma français, les films où l'on a vu dénoncer avec une telle virulence la saloperie de la vie pour qui n'est pas né sous une bonne étoile ● **Jean-Claude Loiseau**

Contre

Ecœurant de complaisance

Combien de temps peut-on supporter un personnage devenu une boule de haine, qui vomit le monde entier et n'a plus que sa hargne pour moteur ? Quelques minutes. Ensuite, son délire obsessionnel sur la vie *(« un océan de merde »)*, l'homme *(« une bite »)*, la femme *(« un trou »)*, son obsession à *« exploser la gueule »* à quiconque se trouve sur son chemin tournent au rabâchage.

Pourquoi cet homme disjoncte-t-il ? Gaspar Noé évacue la question dans le prégénérique, en résumant brièvement la vie semée d'échecs de son triste boucher. Ensuite, il le lâche dans la ville, où chaque rencontre se solde immanquablement par un échec. Il accumule ainsi frustrations et rancœur, et il est mûr pour exploser. Dans tout cela, Gaspar Noé ne prend pas parti. Sauf à faire apparaître des cartons, où l'on peut lire, plein écran, quelques pensées profondes : *« L'homme a une morale »* ; *« Vivre est un acte égoïste. Survivre est une loi génétique »* ; *« La mort n'ouvre aucune porte »*.

A force d'en rajouter dans l'outrance, il s'égare dans un humour « trash » gratuitement provocateur. Ainsi, par exemple, quand il peint le ménage du boucher, tiraillé entre sa femme et sa belle-mère, sur un ton qui voudrait évoquer Reiser ou Vuillemin. Et quand il envoie un carton annonçant : *« Vous avez trente secondes pour quitter la projection de ce film »*, on a l'impression qu'il se grise de sa propre audace.

En cherchant bien, dans ce voyage au cœur des ténèbres, on aperçoit deux (toutes petites) lueurs. La première quand le boucher, devenu veilleur de nuit, assiste à la mort d'une vieille femme auprès d'une infirmière débutante. La jeune fille, bouleversée, se blottit contre lui. Un instant on croit qu'il va compatir. Mais cette idée doit faire horreur à Gaspar Noé. Son personnage se borne donc à raccompagner l'infirmière chez elle, en espérant *« se la faire »* et en constatant que *« les vieux schlinguent »*.

Puis le boucher retrouve sa fille, une gamine de 14 ans, quasi autiste. Là, on touche à la conclusion ahurissante de ce film : puisqu'elle est la seule pour laquelle il éprouve une amorce de sentiment humain, il va donc l'aimer. Et pour pimenter cette apologie de l'inceste père-fille, Gaspar Noé nous inflige d'abord une scène de meurtre – fantasmatique – d'une rare complaisance, au cours de laquelle le boucher rate sa victime, ce qui permet à la caméra de bien la montrer se convulsant dans son sang.

Les responsables de tout ce gâchis ? La société, les possédants et les lois aberrantes que ceux-ci ont érigées pour se protéger, répond le cinéaste, qui voudrait nous faire croire que son personnage n'a jamais eu le choix. A plaider ainsi l'irresponsabilité, Gaspar Noé signe un film irresponsable ! ● **Bernard Génin**

Français (1h33). Réal., scén. : Gaspar Noé. Montage : G. Noé et Lucile Hadzihalilovic. Image : Dominique Colin. Son : Olivier Le Vacon. Avec : Philippe Nahon (le boucher), Blandine Lenoir (sa fille), Frankye Pain (sa maîtresse), Martine Audrain (sa belle-mère). Prod. : Cinémas de la zone. Distr. : Rezo Films.

2!

Appendix 4

Le Canard Enchaîné 17 FEV. 1999

Le Cinéma

Seul contre tous

(Etal d'urgence)

ON peut avoir été boucher chevalin et vouloir le redevenir. C'est le cas du protagoniste de ce film. Mais l'homme, démuni de ressources, a beau faire la tournée d'anciens collègues, il n'obtient ni travail ni aide.

Que l'infortuné personnage, tourmenté aussi par le problème de sa fille, incrimine la malchance, on le comprend. Qu'il maudisse un sort injuste, pourquoi pas ? Mais le voilà exhibant un revolver qu'il identifie à sa morale. Replié dans une chambre d'hôtel, il fulmine des anathèmes tous azimuts. Et ce qu'on avait pu prendre pour la légitime révolte d'un paumé devient le numéro sordide d'un énergumène qui pousse loin la noirceur.

Avec Philippe Nahon, singulier comédien, le cinéaste Gaspard Noé a tourné ce film sans

équivoque. Mais il aurait dû lui donner un titre plus précis. En l'appelant, par exemple, « Je t'emmènerai au bout du monstre ».

Jean-Paul Grousset

Appendix 5

"CARNE"

Deux films français à la Semaine de la Critique

DU TENDRE ET DU SAIGNANT

De l'un de nos envoyés spéciaux.

LA sélection française de cette trentième Semaine de la Critique s'est révélée faste. Dans « la Vie des morts », moyen-métrage de 52 minutes, Arnaud Desplechin use savamment de la caméra à l'intérieur d'une maison bourgeoise où s'est réunie une famille, au sens large, après la tentative de suicide d'un jeune homme dont on ne sait s'il survivra. Adultes et rejetons des deux sexes sont cernés d'un trait ferme. Chaque comportement sonne juste. Il y va d'une sorte de réalisme contemporain traité avec un tact affectueux. Des acteurs rompus à la scène, « Bernard Ballet, Suzel Goffre, Hélène Roüssel, André Cellier, Thibault De Montalembert, Roch Leibovici, Marianne Denicourt... » livrent le meilleur de l'écorce intime dans cette brève chronique suspendue au dernier souffle d'un désespéré au cours de laquelle se révèle un « nœud de vipères » comme les autres où des mères meurtries mortifères et mortifiées préparent la nourriture de leurs enfants, maris compris, en cachant autant que faire se peut les larmes inhérentes à leur fonction. Ce parcours sensible laisse bien augurer du devenir de réalisateur de Desplechin, sorti de l'IDHEC, chef opérateur de formation, qui participa au scénario d'« Un monde sans pitié », de Rochant, et qui tourne en ce moment - son premier long-métrage, « la Sentinelle ».

Autre moyen-métrage (40 minutes), « Carne », de Gaspard Noé, qui constitue une réussite flagrante. Il s'agit de la triste existence d'un boucher chevalin (Philippe Nahon), plaqué par sa femme et amoureux éperdu de sa fille (Blandine Lenoir) mutique et traumatisée à vie... Des cartons à la manière de « France Dimanche » ponctuent le récit, découpé en images comme autant de bas morceaux. La vision la plus noire va de pair avec l'humour vache de la même couleur. Un ton impitoyable, une cruauté hypernaturaliste mâtinée d'esprit « Hara-Kiri », un sourd éclat de rire devant l'opacité du monde vu par les yeux d'un beauf entêté, voilà ce qui fait tout le prix de cette histoire saignante, impeccablement emballée.

Jean-Pierre Léonardini

L' Humanité - 14-5.1991

Appendix 6

Carne

A la vision de *Carne*, une chose est sûre : Gaspar Noé n'a pas de l'humanité souffrante une vision très réconfortante. *« Neuf secondes d'orgasme pour l'homme, soixante ans de souffrance pour l'enfant »*, telle est, en gros, la morale de son film.

Attention : ce n'est pas Gaspar Noé qui dit ça, mais son héros. On espère, d'ailleurs, pour Gaspar Noé, que créateur et créature ne se confondent pas. Car le héros de *Carne* est un boucher chevalin sanguin, paranoïaque au dernier degré, qui hait le monde entier, y compris lui-même, à l'exception, peut-être, de sa fillette de 15 ans, une semi-débile qu'il aime d'un amour équivoque et soigne comme une poupée molle.

Sans vouloir seulement oser supposer qu'il partage les réactions terrifiantes et les obsessions tristes de son personnage, force est de constater, tout de même, qu'en Gaspar Noé croît et prospère l'idée, très en vogue actuellement chez certains intellos fatigués, que l'homme n'est qu'une sous-merde terrifiante. De la bidoche. Et de la bidoche avariée, répugnante.

D'où son trio de personnages : un con, une débile et une pouffe. D'où cette couleur vinasse dont il a enrobé le film. D'où les plans, sur écran large, où il saisit des bouts de visage, des morceaux de corps, comme de la chair putride. Pas gai, on vous jure que tout ça n'est pas gai. Cela dit, il y a de la rigueur dans la mise en scène de Gaspar Noé. Il va tranquillement jusqu'au bout de son propos, avec une obstination désarmante, et une sobriété qui évite le plus souvent la complaisance.

Cette persévérance dans le glauque aboutit pourtant à des instants d'humour, très BD et charmants : la scène où le boucher parano voit, par sa propre faute, sa boucherie devenir la propriété d'Arabes très gentils qu'il hait profondément...

En fait, le problème du film n'est pas « comment est-il ? » mais plutôt « pourquoi l'avoir fait ? ». Qu'est-ce que *Carne*, en définitive ? Une farce, style *Hara-Kiri*, joliment troussée par un branché de plus ? Dans ce cas, elle n'irait pas très loin.

Ou bien est-ce – on aurait tendance à le croire – la peinture horrible d'un monde peuplé de bouffons horribles, commettant des actes horribles par incapacité de fuir l'horreur ? Noble propos. Affaibli, en partie, par la visible volonté de Gaspar Noé de « faire méchant ». De vouloir l'être à toute force.

C'est son droit, bien sûr. Mais l'on en revient alors au problème éternel et jamais résolu du regard posé par l'artiste sur ceux qu'il observe. La morale du regard, en quelque sorte, (étant bien entendu que la morale est au moralisme ce que la musique est à la musique militaire).

En d'autre mots, faut-il ou non tourner un film insoutenable sur l'insoutenable, un film ennuyeux sur l'ennui, un film vulgaire sur la vulgarité ? A cette question, pour l'instant, Gaspar Noé semble répondre par l'affirmative.

Mais au moins, parce qu'il a du talent, échappe-t-il à la facilité qui guette Caro et Jeunet dans *Le Bunker de la dernière rafale*, présenté, avec *Carne*, en complément de programme. Ce court métrage, réalisé en 1981, est devenu une sorte de film-culte. Ça ne l'empêche pas d'être monotone pour la forme et déplaisant pour le fond. Depuis, Caro et Jeunet ont réalisé *Delicatessen*. Ressortir ce *Bunker* est un mauvais service à leur rendre ● **Pierre Murat**

Un penchant pour le glauque, où l'humour n'est pas absent.

Français (40 min). Réalisation et scénario : Gaspar Noé. Image : Dominique Colin. Son : Olivier Le Vacon. Montage : Lucile Houdzihalilovic. Avec Philippe Nahon (le boucher), Blandine Lenoir (sa fille), Frankye Pain (la patronne), Hélène Testud (la bonne).

Télérama 17/6/1992

91184

Appendix 7

Le Progrès de Lyon 17 FEV. 1999

« Seul contre tous »

Un boucher rumine sa haine. Ultra-violent et irresponsable

Le film n'est pas en odorama. Il s'en dégage pourtant une puanteur insoutenable. Cette odeur nauséabonde a plusieurs noms, selon que le « héros » exige « la peine de mort pour les bâtards », tabasse le ventre de sa « grosse » pour l'avorter malgré elle, ou rêve de flinguer ces « tantouzes de bourgeois ». Cela s'appelle la haine, le racisme, l'homophobie, la bêtise, et pour parler franchement, la connerie.

« Seul contre tous » est un film odieux car il est à l'image de son personnage, un boucher, chômeur et impuissant, qui n'a que son langage ordurier pour ruminer sa condition de pauvre type. Il prône la « *violence utile* » pour « *sortir digne de merdier* ». Il longe des murs où chacun peut lire « *Arabes dehors !* ». Pour lui, « *vivre est un acte égoïste, survivre une loi génétique* ». Sa vie est un tunnel, sans lumière au bout.

Le film explore la paranoïa, ainsi que les fantasmes d'ultra-violence de ce boucher français. Le réalisateur, Gaspar Noé, appelle cela une « comédie » où tout est exagéré. Il s'agit, en fait, d'une œuvre oppressante où le talent du réalisateur et le jeu au cordeau des acteurs dérapent vers un réalisme effroyablement irresponsable.

« Seul contre tous » a tout pour devenir le spectacle porno-crade préféré des frustrés immatures. Ou provoquer des érections dans les rangs des partis extrémistes qu'il est censé dénoncer.

DAVID S. TRAN

Appendix 8

La Croix 24/05/2002

COMMENTAIRE

Objection de conscience

■ Les journalistes qui se rendent à Cannes pour suivre le Festival sont des chanceux. Voilà dix journées particulières pendant lesquelles le « festivalier » s'extrait du monde pour le redécouvrir par le regard des cinéastes. C'est avec plaisir que l'on va aux rendez-vous des salles obscures pour découvrir les œuvres afin de faire partager aux lecteurs ses impressions, ses appréciations, ses passions. En cela tient l'essentiel du métier de journaliste : aller voir et rendre compte. Pourtant, la « festivalière » de *La Croix* ne publiera pas de compte rendu du film *Irréversible*, de Gaspar Noé, qui concourt pour la Palme. Elle a décidé de ne pas se rendre à la projection.

Selon le dossier de presse, et tous les témoignages de ceux qui l'ont vu, il s'agit d'une véritable horreur annoncée. Ce film a fait l'objet d'un battage médiatique et commercial évidemment fondé sur la perspective d'un scandale. Cette horreur, on revendique le droit de lui dire « non ». « Non » à un scénario sordide de femme violée, puis tuée, crimes suivis d'une vengeance atroce. « Non » à des images proclamées d'avance comme étant d'une cruauté insoutenable. Au moment de la sélection, Gilles Jacob, le président du Festival, et Thierry Frémaux, son directeur artistique, n'ont-ils pas reconnu avoir plusieurs fois détourné leur regard au passage de certaines scènes, tout comme Monica Belluci, pourtant interprète principale du film ?

On ne dira rien sur *Irréversible*, donc. En toute ignorance de cause et en toute conscience. On peut refuser certains plats avancés, on peut refuser la banalisation de la barbarie, même quand elle s'offre le luxe d'une montée des marches du palais. Sans doute les cinéastes ont-ils le droit de tout faire. Le public, et, avant lui, ceux qui découvrent les films, ont le droit de ne pas tout accepter. Question de responsabilité. Et de résistance.

Geneviève WELCOMME

Le film de Gaspar Noé sort aujourd'hui en salles. Il est frappé d'une interdiction aux moins de 16 ans, avec un message d'avertissement au public.