

REVIEW: HAUTE TENSION/SWITCHBLADE ROMANCE

Oedipus Wrecks: Le rouge et noir ... mais aucun pourquoi!

Dir: Alexandre Aja, 2003

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Plot Synopsis

A gamine Marie (Cécile De France) and her friend Alexa (Maiwenn Le Besco) arrive at Alex's parents' home deep in the French countryside. When everyone is in bed asleep (except Marie who is busy masturbating), a burly man in overalls arrives and proceeds to: decapitate Alex's father with the help of a large piece of furniture; butcher the mother with a switchblade (whilst Marie looks on aghast between the slats of a wardrobe); and then shoot the young brother as he flees on his hands and knees through a field. Alexa is subsequently kidnapped in the back of the killer's van whilst surreptitiously accompanied by Marie who endeavours to free them both. When the van stops at a gas station to refuel, Marie telephones the police for help after witnessing the killer murder the gas-station attendant with an axe. However, when the police arrive and view the CCTV footage of this latest murder both the viewer and the police chief are shocked to find that Marie is the killer.

In the film's concluding pursuit of Alexa by Marie, representations of the killer flit between the form of Marie and the man we had previously witnessed carrying out the murders but whom we now know to be imaginary. The pursuit culminates in a violent embrace in which Alexa impales Marie with a steel rod. The final scene depicts a heavily wounded Marie in a psychiatric unit viewed through one-way glass by Alexa and a doctor. Marie's preternatural desire allows her to sense Alexa's presence behind the mirror and make one last imploring gesture towards her.

Analysis

For once, the translation of a film's title is an improvement on the original. *Switchblade Romance* cleverly both describes the murder weapon of choice whilst alluding to the volte-face in victim/perpetrator perspectives that gives the film its twisted impact. This is no conventional whodunnit, but rather a psychoanalytical exploration of our deepest desires – this film is a sustained rejoinder to those who tend to dismiss psychoanalytical interpretations of film as needlessly complex over-interpretations. Given: the whole film's overall depiction of the murderous consequences of repressed sexuality; the book-ending of the film with an opening scene of masturbation that immediately precedes an orgasm of violence that climaxes with the closing impalement that finally brings the two lovers together; and add to this, the detumescent final scene in a psychiatric unit where Marie is now kept (*une petite mort*) - it is difficult to conceive of how this film could make sense without a psychoanalytical reading.

Switchblade Romance's psychoanalytical focus undermines conventional movie expectations both implicitly and explicitly. At the implicit level, there is an almost apologetic nod to Hollywood with an overturning car stunt. Working back from the end of the film, it becomes apparent that such an accident did not physically take place. This serves to underlie the fact that the film's true significance resides in the psychological states being portrayed - the physical crash was purely imaginary, whilst the psychic crash proves all too real. At the explicit level, the film repeatedly



undermines the traditional symbolic order with its representations of a heavily sexualised death drive. In one of the earliest scenes, this is presaged by the manner in which the phrase “giving head” is depicted with pathological visual literalness. The imaginary male killer is shown to be receiving fellatio before the head in question is thrown out of the van - pre-decapitated. Soon after, the patriarchal head of the family is again rather literally removed - this time, beheaded by a piece of his own furniture. “Why?” is the forlorn question that whistles through the serrated windpipe of the dying mother of this particular Oedipal family wrecked by an outburst of extreme, yet methodically executed, violence - a destructive orgy of sublimated sexual energy caused by the killer's inability to repress her Sapphic longings.

In initial ignorance of subsequent plot developments, the viewer naturally assumes this “why?” is an existential question about a specific case of random violence, but as the film progresses we find that it in fact represents a shocked questioning of the depths of desire and the profound consequences it may have for those who welcome it without adequate caution. The repressed nature of the women’s relationship is hinted at early on. Any suspicions generated by Marie’s butch haircut and behaviour towards Alexa are initially quashed when the latter admits that she slept with a man, but a certain tension is maintained when, in response to the playful accusation of being a slut, Alexa accuses Marie of being afraid of sex - an accusation that appears to have some resonance. Whilst Marie smokes outside before turning in for the night, sexual frisson re-emerges as she voyeuristically observes her friend



showing through the bathroom window. There is a hint that she is seen by Alexa doing this, but this is not dwelt upon and Marie goes back inside.

The elemental power of the repressed sexual tension between the two women (about to play itself out so explosively) is foregrounded by the contrast to be made with a series of weak men. The nouveau-rustique father was thought of as a hippy by his neighbours for the first five years he lived there and despite fixing the farmhouse up in an area where real working farms are scarce, we see that his work is computer-based. Other potentially patriarchal figures are presented as underwhelming. The countryside police chief arrives at a crime scene in his pyjamas and a potential male rescuer turns out to be less a knight-in-shining-armor than an ineffectual Mr Bean as Marie phallically wields a saw cuts through both him and his car. The one strong male character is the imagined murderer. “He” evinces fox-like cunning and peasant solidity/insouciance throughout his murdering spree until we find out that he is in fact the phantasmic embodiment of Marie’s female desire.

Big stick

“No-one will come between us” is the mantra that begins and ends the film spoken by a traumatised Marie in her isolation room . It is momentarily a literal truth as the psychotic killer is only eliminated when Marie is “kebabbed” with an iron rod, by the object of her desire - Alexa. Whilst the murderous nature of the desire is killed off, the desire itself stubbornly remains. Intriguingly, despite having the opportunity, Alexa does not kill Marie and when, looking through a one-way mirror at the end of the film, she asks for confirmation that she can’t be seen, the final action we witness is Marie immediately sensing her presence and instinctively reaching out to her ... The 17th century German mystic Angelus Silesius wrote “Die Rose ist ohne warum; Sie blühet, weil Sie blühet” [The Rose is without an explanation; She blooms, because She blooms] Whilst there is there is no real answer to the “why?” of a beautiful red

rose, there is similarly no precise answer or logical “why?” in this film’s red-in-tooth-and-claw brutality. Rather, *Switchblade Romance* vividly portrays the underlying violence of our most instinctive drives, it shows the disastrous consequences that can accompany not only the return of the repressed but also getting too close to the object of your desire, the blood and darkness of our unconscious - le rouge et noir!

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