



**DENIS VILLENEUVE: THE PATH TO DUNE**

# Polytechnique

Versatile French-Canadian director Denis Villeneuve's eclectic filmography to date has run the gamut from eccentric art films (*Maelström*, 2000) and austere political cinema (*Incendies*, 2010), via cast-heavy Hollywood potboilers (*Prisoners*, 2013), to multi-million dollar blockbusters (*Blade Runner 2049*, 2017). Yet arguably his most controversial and striking film, 2009's *Polytechnique*, only now reaches UK audiences for the first time since its London Film Festival screenings, in a new Blu-ray package.

Inspired by a horrifying 1989 incident at Montreal's engineering school, the film is shot in stark black-and-white and widescreen. It utilises gliding, Kubrickian Steadicam shots and vivid, often dialogue-free sound design to document the excruciating build up, carnage and fallout from a tragic campus shooting that left 14 young women dead and more injured.

The thematic and aesthetic influence of Gus Van Sant's haunting *Elephant* (2003) obviously hangs heavily over the film, as does that film's play with chronology and fatalistic mood. But unlike Van Sant's film, with its impressionistic style and hazily noncommittal, almost scattergun approach to exploring killer motivation – a violent videogame glimpsed here, school bullying and a homoerotic encounter suggested there – Villeneuve's film is far more direct in its approach. It takes the film's killer – and his self-professed hatred of feminists, related in a violent suicide note read in voiceover at the film's start – as a springboard to explore a world defined by embittered male violence, impotence and apathy.

We're presented with three perspectives on the tragedy. At first we observe the shooter, credited only as 'the killer' (Maxim Gaudette) as he writes that long, misogynistic letter, prepares his weapon in a sparse apartment and drives to the college. Then we are introduced to a young student at the college, Valérie (played beautifully by Karine Vanasse, who acted as producer and researcher on the film), as she prepares for an internship interview with a friend. Finally we meet Jean-François (Sébastien Huberdeau), a rather scatty student and friend of Valérie's, who sheepishly borrows her lesson notes before class and sets about photocopying them just before the carnage commences.

Once the shooting begins we then cut between the stalking killer, the hiding Valérie and the delirious Jean-François, who runs through corridors trying to raise the alarm and help the injured. Fleeting glimpses of the future, meanwhile, add an extra layer of pathos and tragedy to the urgent present tense of the film's central set-piece, a jaw-droppingly kinetic and harrowing dramatisation of the shooting itself.

In early scenes, Villeneuve cross-cuts between the 3 perspectives, expertly building tension and dread, while explicitly drawing out the ironic parallels between the killer's hateful rhetoric and the lived experience of male versus female students on campus. The hard-working and ambitious Valérie is shown disillusioned by sexist questioning at her interview, where a professor dismisses her qualifications and suggests inevitable motherhood on the horizon. Meanwhile, Jean-François casts a dishevelled and casual figure in a clearly highly competitive university space. He's happy to coast along on a female peer's work, oblivious to the concerns that are part of her daily life.

Thus, once the killer arrives and orders the men and women in a classroom to divide themselves, the film has already established the space of the university as a world of gender inequality and sexism, a world already pitted against female

students, directly contradicting the killer's claims that women are succeeding ahead of men and taking their place in society. The bloodshed that follows – as he opens fire on the women in the room, killing most of them, before stalking the halls shooting women at random – therefore plays out as an extension of male entitlement and the world at large. This aligns the killer with a zero sum status quo, rather than presenting his actions as nihilistic anarchy triggered by a man 'pushed too far' as so many other films frame this kind of toxic male violence.

On top of his skills as an excellent technician and formalist, Villeneuve has demonstrated a remarkable ability to build coherent and detailed worlds in his movies – physical and psychological spaces that bounce off and reflect one another. The stifling mentality of small-town America in *Prisoners* finds perfect expression in the use of tight close-ups and shallow focus shots, along with vividly rendered suburban sprawl and claustrophobic domestic interiors. A circuit of nightmarish high rises appears to engulf and entrap the paranoid characters in *Enemy* (2013), just as the gaping widescreen cinematography threatens to dwarf them.

The desert borderland of *Sicario* (2015), meanwhile, provides an unforgiving landscape more symbolically aligned with bursts of sudden, merciless violence than with the petty push-pull of political, social and sexual power-plays among special agents and gangsters – all of which become insignificant as soon as brutally realistic violence explodes on screen.

Even the antiseptic grandeur of the elaborate sci-fi landscapes in *Arrival* (2016) and, later, *Blade Runner 2049* provide a powerful contrast with the private turmoils of the lead characters, as they wrestle with personal tragedies, identity crises and their own insignificance against the backdrop of enormous, impersonal urban worlds in crisis.

In *Polytechnique*, this impulse to transform everything we see on screen into a kind of vivid psychogeographic expression of theme, character and story is no less apparent. But what makes it particularly striking – and hints at Villeneuve's destiny as a filmmaker working on a far larger scale – is the film's transformation of extremely mundane interior spaces (dorm rooms, corridors, car interiors) into symbolically loaded and nightmarish spaces, stalked by a restless, impersonal camera. Once shooting commences, these morph into a blood-soaked war zone that Villeneuve shoots at low level, often handheld, centring the experience of the terrified students as they run, duck and hide from the killer's bullets.

These sequences, coupled with the brutally matter-of-fact black and white, turn the campus into a hellish metaphorical plane to express the experience of women in the world at large. They draw maximum impact, scale and appropriate horror out of seemingly banal and neutral space. Surreal flourishes, such as the use of perpendicular angles to observe a snowy landscape or a ceiling lit by neon, only add to the malevolent effect, suggesting a hostile, alien landscape.

If it lacks the budget and scale of his later work, *Polytechnique* nevertheless demonstrates a younger filmmaker confidently grappling with edgy material and in strikingly precocious command of performance and style. It provided a showcase for the visual and sonic flamboyance that have characterised his work ever since.

**Paul Ridd, [bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk), 9 December 2020**

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## POLYTECHNIQUE

*Directed by:* Denis Villeneuve

*A Remstar - Don Carmody production*

*Presented by:* Remstar Media Partners, Alliance Films

*Executive Producers:* Julien Rémillard, André Rouleau

*Produced by:* Maxime Rémillard, Don Carmody

*Associate Producers:* Karine Vanasse, Nathalie Brigitte Bustos

*Production Managers:* André Rouleau, Julien Rémillard

*1st Assistant Director:* Benoît Hamel

*Casting:* Emmanuelle Beaugrand-Champagne, Nathalie Boutrie

*Screenplay by:* Jacques Davidts, Denis Villeneuve

*Screenplay Collaboration:* Eric Leca

*Cinematographer:* Pierre Gill

*Special Effects Supervisor:* Jacques Godbout

*Special Effects Co-ordinator:* Carmelle Beaudoin

*Editor:* Richard Comeau

*Key Scenic:* Martin Tessier

*Property Master:* Marceline Gonin

*Costume Designer:* Annie Dufort

*Key Hairstylist:* Martin Rivest

*Composer:* Benoît Charest

*Sound Mixer:* Pierre Blain

*Re-recording Mixer:* Stéphane Bergeron

*Sound Effects Editor:* Christian Rivest

## Cast

Maxim Gaudette (*assassin*)

Sébastien Huberdeau (*Jean-François*)

Karine Vanasse (*Valérie*)

Evelyne Brochu (*Stéphanie*)

Pierre-Yves Cardinal

Johanne-Marie Tremblay

Nathalie Girard

Marina Eva

Canada 2009

77 mins

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## DENIS VILLENEUVE: THE PATH TO DUNE

### Enemy

Wed 1 Sep 14:30; Sun 12 Sep 12:20; Tue 21 Sep 20:55

### Prisoners

Wed 1 Sep 20:00; Tue 14 Sep 14:15; Sat 25 Sep 17:00

### August 32nd on Earth (Un 32 août sur terre)

Thu 2 Sep 20:50; Thu 16 Sep 18:20

### Blade Runner 2049

Sat 4 Sep 20:00; Sat 18 Sep 17:15; Fri 24 Sep 14:15; Sun 3 Oct 17:30

### Maelström

Mon 6 Sep 18:15; Fri 17 Sep 20:55

### Polytechnique

Fri 10 Sep 21:20; Sun 19 Sep 12:15; Thu 30 Sep 20:50

### Incendies

Sat 11 Sep 20:30; Fri 17 Sep 17:50; Sun 19 Sep 14:45

### Sicario

Sun 12 Sep 18:10; Wed 22 Sep 20:40; Sat 25 Sep 20:40

### Arrival

Thu 16 Sep 20:45; Tue 28 Sep 14:15; Sat 2 Oct 17:30

## NFTS AT 50

### The Last Tree + Q&A with director Shola Amoo

Sat 11 Sep 17:00

### Il Postino (The Postman) + Q&A with director Michael Radford

Sun 12 Sep 17:00

### An Evening with Roger and James Deakins

Sun 12 Sep 20:30

### Absolute Beginners + Q&A with director Julian Temple and cinematographer Oliver Stapleton BSC

Wed 15 Sep 20:25

### The Souvenir + Q&A with director Joanna Hogg

Fri 17 Sep 17:45

### The Selfish Giant + Q&A with director Clio Barnard

Mon 20 Sep 20:50

### Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit + Q&A with director Beeban Kidron

Thu 23 Sep 18:00

### Kurt & Courtney + Q&A with director Nick Broomfield

Sat 25 Sep 14:30

### Theatre Girls + Q&A with director Kim Longinotto

Sun 26 Sep 15:40

### Surge + Q&A with director Aneil Karia

Tue 28 Sep 17:40

### Of Time and the City + Q&A with director Terence Davies

Sat 2 Oct 14:15

### Rocks + Q&A with director Sarah Gavron

Sat 2 Oct 17:30

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