



**CRUEL FLESH:
FILMS OF THE NEW FRENCH EXTREMITY**

Man Bites Dog

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

A low-budget Belgian horror movie with strong cult status, *Man Bites Dog* revolves around a film crew shooting a documentary about Ben the serial killer (Benoît Poelvoorde). The crew follows Ben when he visits his parents, attends a bar and recites his poetry. They also follow him when he rapes and murders people: men, women, young and old. Despite its comic aspects, *Man Bites Dog* is truly disturbing, not only because Ben commits his violent acts so cold-bloodedly, but also because the film crew witnessing the brutality seems far from bothered by it. In fact, as the narrative unfolds, the crew becomes more and more involved in the various murders.

What ultimately shocks the viewer in *Man Bites Dog* is not so much Ben's casualness and emotional detachment towards his murderous activities. It is shocking primarily because it questions the boundary between the observant and the participant in violence and, in so doing, invites viewers to redefine their own relationship with violence in the media. Like Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997) and Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994), *Man Bites Dog* raises the issue of public fascination with serial killers. Rémy (Rémy Belvaux), the director of the documentary within the film, keeps on shooting even though two of his soundmen have died in the process. The filming does not end as long as there is an audience willing to keep watching.

While the crew gets increasingly involved in Ben's monstrous acts, Ben himself gains increasing control in the shooting of the documentary. Late in the film, Ben attacks a postman who manages to escape, an event that is stretched out several times in slow- and reverse-motion. In the next shot, Ben appears to be sitting behind the editing table, accusing the filmmakers of not coming to his aid but instead continuing to shoot. This suggests a collision between the representation and what is being represented – the core of the film's 'ethical pursuit'. The violence here is representation, representation is violence, and it is from this in-between space that the terror in *Man Bites Dog* emerges.

Tarja Laine, 'Man Bites Dog' in Steven Jay Schneider (ed.), *100 European Horror Films* (BFI Screen Guides, 2007)

With its piecemeal structure (the by-no-means unhelpful result of a two-and-a-half-year shooting schedule: when funds or free film stock were available, they shot another scene or two), *Man Bites Dog* is a wonderfully ramshackle portrait not just of the charismatic Ben but also of the would-be filmmaker Rémy who falls under his spell. Quickly established as a monster of awesome proportions, Ben has little room for subsequent development (he mostly gets worse) whereas Rémy, a dishevelled figure on the edge of Ben's dark trajectory, gradually assumes the role of instigator and accomplice. It is even tempting, for the penultimate scenes in an unexpected wilderness of snowy roads and frozen trees (more Delvaux than Belvaux at this juncture), to consider him as judge and executioner, conveying Ben to a final appointment

and a shared death – although Ben is the one to insist on a poetry recital before the last hail of bullets.

Amid the uncertainty with which one event follows another in the film, there is an early, significant gulf: Ben suggests a meal to the film crew who, void of appetite after what they've just experienced, nervously turn him down. He wanders off, while a shamefaced Rémy fidgets in the road – and in the next shot they are all sitting around a table. The change of heart, unexplained for a complexity of reasons – the simplest being that the camera didn't happen to be on at the time – prepares the way for all subsequent forays in which the film crew meekly assist Ben in his labours. These include such tasks as catching and holding down a child that Ben is trying to stifle (complaining all the while that there's no profit in infanticide) or, in a scene so bleakly disgusting that the giggles come in self-defence, picking at various grisly remains in a mud pit while Ben hurls insults from a safe distance.

This is humour of a Pythonesque extreme, rescuing its audience from stunned revulsion not only by the absurdity of Ben's career but also by being a patently fake 'documentary' from the moment the first victim is strangled without a glance at the camera hovering in front of her (by contrast with a later postman who asks if he's on television just before Ben pounces on him). Full of amiable puzzles, the film scatters Ben's victims around in such quantity that the most persistent question, adding to the fun, must be how he gets away with it for so long. A car chase in pursuit of another gunman seems to be part of an underworld feud about which, uncharacteristically, Ben has little to say – although it leads to his downfall and it seems odd that the Tavier (assuming that they are indeed his nemesis) make no attempt to move the corpse of their henchman, left for weeks where Ben felled him.

But the real joke, justifying the invention of the unseen Tavier gang and their unpleasant habit of skewering rats, is of course that the actor Vincent Tavier (playing one of Rémy's disposable soundmen) is the last to get shot, after co-writing the script and, like most of the team, filling out a whole range of production roles. This is a family affair, bargain-basement indulgence of the *Wayne's World* kind, with space for Ben's (real) family to crack their usual jokes and for his roguish grandfather to hustle for drinks while telling gleeful tales of his own misspent youth.

Although the spectres presiding over this feast of horrors are those fashionably raised by the latest spate of urban-psycho movies, the figure of Ben – unlike, say, the serial-killer Henry, who is malevolently straight-faced – has the ingratiating brutality of Richard III as played by Robert De Niro. Performed by Benoît Poelvoorde with a venomous and self-congratulatory charm, he is fully the contemporary villain, his conceit unhampered by pity or remorse, unless it be over a killing that could have been more efficient in which case, Rémy and his spotlights are usually to blame. His attacks on the dull streets and compliant citizens of his hometown have a flamboyance and bravado with which it is wincingly easy to sympathise. Thanks to him, to encounter *Man Bites Dog* is to submit to a torrent of hilariously cruel humour, enacted without fuss or rancour, and inconceivably authentic.

Philip Strick, *Sight and Sound*, January 1993

MAN BITES DOG (C'EST ARRIVÉ PRÈS DE CHEZ VOUS)

A film by: Rémy Belvaux, André Bonzel, Benoît Poelvoorde
Directed by: Rémy Belvaux
©: Belvaux-Bonzel-Poelvoorde
©/Production Company: Les Artistes Anonymes
Produced with the support of: Centre du Cinéma et de l'Audiovisuel de la Communauté française de Belgique, La Province de Namur
Producers (for Artistes Anonymes): Rémy Belvaux, André Bonzel, Benoît Poelvoorde
Production Manager: Vincent Tavier
Production Assistant: Annamaria Szomolanyova
Assistant Director: Vincent Tavier
Script Supervisor: Valérie Parent
Screenplay/Dialogue by: Rémy Belvaux, André Bonzel, Benoît Poelvoorde, Vincent Tavier
Based on an original idea by: Rémy Belvaux
Lighting Cameraman: André Bonzel
Special Effects: Olivier de Lavelaye
Special Effects Assistant: Florence Thonet
Editing: Eric Dardill, Rémy Belvaux
Make-up: Bénédicte Lescalier
Film Stock: Kodak
Optical Transfer: Clotilde François
Original/Additional Music: Jean-Marc Chenut
Additional Music: Little Egypt
Original Music Performed by: Jean-Marc Chenut, Laurence Dufrière
Original Music Recorded at: Studio Blue Cry
Original Music Recorded by: Philippe Malempré, Peter Soldan, Marc Neuttiens, Olivier Gilson, Johnny Maillard
Sound Recording: Alain Oppedzi, Vincent Tavier
Re-recording Mixers: Franco Piscopo, Clotilde François
Sound Editing: Franco Piscopo, Clotilde François
Sound Effects: Bertrand Boudaud
Sound Effects Recording: Clotilde François, Franco Piscopo
Sound Film: Agfa

Cast

Benoît Poelvoorde (*Ben Patard*)
Jacqueline Poelvoorde Pappaert (*Ben's mother*)
Nelly Pappaert (*Ben's grandmother*)
Hector Pappaert (*Ben's grandfather*)
Jenny Drye (*Jenny*)
Malou Madou (*Malou*)
Willy Vandenbroeck (*Boby*)
Rachel Deman (*Mamie Tromblon*)
André Laime (*singing incontinent*)
Edith Lemerdy (*nurse*)
Sylviane Gode (*female rape victim*)
Zoltan Tobolik (*male rape victim*)
Valérie Parent (*Valérie*)
Alexandra Fandango (*Kalifa*)
Olivier Cotica (*Benichou*)
Pol Vanderwarren (*lawyer*)
Anne Lagrange (*journalist*)

Paul Bottemanne (*taxi driver*)
Vincent Merveille (*boxer*)
Irene Gilissen (*lady on train*)
Sabine Tavier (*Madame Pipi*)
Annamaria Szomolanyova (*violinist*)
Carlos Campo Miranda (*night watchman*)

crew
Rémy Belvaux (*reporter*)
André Bonzel (*cameraman*)

sound engineers
Jean-Marc Chenut (*Patrick*)
Alain Oppedzi (*Franco*)
Vincent Tavier (*Vincent*)

Villa's family
Gina Cotica (*mother*)
Ricardo Cotica (*child*)
Pierre Vanbraekel (*father*)

video crew
Marcel Engels (*cameraman*)
Franco Piscopo (*sound engineer*)
Alain François (*reporter*)

postmen
Venelin Proikov (*first postman*)
Fernard Dubois (*second postman*)

waiters
Antoine Chapelot (*sommelier*)
Hugues Tavier (*buffet waiter*)

victims
Pascal Lebrun (*bullet in the shoulder*)
Stéphane Aubier (*bullet in the eye*)
Alain Hologne (*right in the chest*)
Micheline Hologne (*right in the temple*)
Philippe Blasband (*in his bathroom*)
Aldo Fostier (*in the left side of the groin*)
Jean-Pol Cavillot (*in the right side of the groin*)
Anny Hologne (*with bag*)
Eliane Léonard (*with lace*)
Vincent Merveille (*broken back of the neck*)
Marie Tavier (*with bound hands and feet*)
Bruno Belvaux (*with a 6.35*)
Lucien Belvaux (*in the back*)
Jean-Claude Moschetti (*with a P38*)

spared victims
Laurence Dhondt, Daniel Tursh, Benoît Mariage, Emmanuelle Bada,
Pierre Vanbraekel, Stéphane Aubier (*journalists*)
Jean-Paul Geets (*client at Malou*)

Belgium 1992©
96 mins

CRUEL FLESH: FILMS OF THE NEW FRENCH EXTREMITY

Carne + La Bouche de Jean-Pierre

Sun 1 May 11:50; Thu 12 May 20:45 (+ Q&A with Lucile Hadžihalilovic)

Baise-moi

Sun 1 May 18:20; Sat 7 May 20:50

The Ordeal (Calvaire)

Mon 2 May 12:30; Sun 22 May 18:20

Man Bites Dog (C'est arrivé près de chez vous)

Mon 2 May 15:10; Tue 10 May 20:55

Sex and Death, but Make It Arthouse

Tue 3 May 18:10

Trouble Every Day

Tue 3 May 20:30 (+ intro by writer and creative Sophie Monks Kaufman);

Tue 24 May 20:45

Criminal Lovers (Les Amants criminels)

Wed 4 May 20:50; Sat 14 May 12:00

Pola X

Thu 5 May 20:25; Sat 28 May 17:50

Romance (Romance X)

Fri 6 May 18:00 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley, King's College London);

Tue 17 May 20:45

Philosophical Screens: Romance

Fri 6 May 20:00

In My Skin (Dans ma peau)

Sat 7 May 17:50 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley, King's College London);

Thu 19 May 20:40

High Tension (aka Switchblade Romance) (Haute Tension)

Mon 9 May 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by author Alexandra West);

Sat 28 May 12:20

Inside (À l'intérieur)

Sat 14 May 20:50; Thu 26 May 18:20

Them (Ils)

Mon 16 May 20:50; Sun 29 May 18:20

Irreversible (Irréversible) (theatrical version)

Sat 21 May 17:45

Martyrs

Sat 28 May 20:50; Tue 31 May 20:40

Horror à la Française

Free to view on the BFI YouTube channel from 11-31 May

BFI Courses: City Lit at the BFI: New French Extremity

Every Tue from 10-31 May 18:30-20:30