



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

Pola X

The films of the New French Extremity and the accompanying focus on Gaspar Noé examine an important, controversial and highly violent cinema movement. They are not suitable for all.

The film you are about to watch may contain very dark themes, graphic imagery, and scenes of a very upsetting nature including sexual violence and body horror.

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

Perhaps it is on account of excessive taboo-breaking (incest, terrorism, potentially unsimulated sex scenes) or the curse of its source material (Herman Melville's professionally catastrophic 1852 novel, *Pierre: or the Ambiguities*) that Leos Carax's *Pola X* (1999) has fallen into relative obscurity: it is virtually unavailable in the UK, despite the filmmaker's small but conspicuous footprint on the history of French cinema. The fourth of the five films in Carax's swaggering body of work, *Pola X* was perhaps too delirious and anarchic for audiences still dipping their toes into the new trend towards transgression later christened the 'New French Extremity'.

A feral twist on the cliché of suffering for one's art, *Pola X* is Carax continuing, in a sense, his previous work's fixation on young love run amok. Here, though, the object of desire is not the individual, but the notion of artistic truth. 'Pola' is an acronym for Melville's novel (in French, *Pierre, ou les ambiguïtés*), which Carax recalibrates from New York to Paris; X refers to the tenth draft of the script – an arbitrary number, suggesting this version of the story is simply the one we get, out of countless frenzied possibilities. If in *Mauvais sang* (1986) Carax channels Jean-Luc Godard and Charlie Chaplin, then *Pola X* is Carax in the manner of Antonin Artaud.

Pierre (Guillaume Depardieu) lives a pampered life with his widowed mother Marie (a leonine, sensual Catherine Deneuve). Motorbike cruising and sex with his soft-pink fiancée Lucie (Delphine Chouillet) punctuate his routine. Progress is slow on his second novel, but two phrases – 'a mad recklessness' and 'a young irreversible love' – stick out as he clicks away on his computer in a room overlooking a row of sprinklers endlessly watering a manicured lawn. *Pola X* also represents for Depardieu a sort of mid-career fulcrum, marking a departure from boyish, hormone-riddled performances (as in Alain Corneau's *Tous les matins du monde*, 1991) to mature, caustic roles post-millennium – such as the general Armand de Montriveau in Jacques Rivette's *The Duchess of Langeais*, made in 2007, the year before Depardieu's death from pneumonia.

Relationships are arranged and rearranged in pairs and trios, all linked by erotic charge to Pierre, regardless of familial boundaries: Pierre and Marie, lounging and tenderly caressing like old lovers in bed; Pierre, Lucie and cousin Thibault (Laurent Lucas), with whom a sexual relationship is teased. Then appears Isabelle (Yekaterina Golubeva), mangy but captivating, who will replace Lucie as the object of Pierre's affections.

A refugee from the Bosnian Civil War, Isabelle entrances the golden boy with her plaintive beauty. She recounts her painful story to him in a dimly lit forest, their two bodies restless shape-shifters in the dank blue of the night (a *tour de force* by cinematographer Eric Gautier, whose CV includes *Irma Vep*, 1996, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, 2004, and most recently *Ash Is Purest White*, 2018). In high-pitched, broken French she summons disconnected traumatic memories for nearly eight minutes, all captured in one long, mesmerising tracking shot. Crucially, Isabelle reveals she is Pierre's long-lost half-sister; they will live as husband and wife, declares Pierre, newly inspired.

The couple find lodging in an abandoned warehouse where a group of terrorists spend their time rehearsing, banging on steel plates and instruments as if for an industrial noise band. The film is scored by the late Scott Walker, whose shivering holler can be heard in the heavier, experimental tracks. Freshly installed in a terrifying abode of angular metal staircases and open ceilings, Pierre begins to write. The camera hovers menacingly above their rooms, revealing a porousness to the walls around them, a susceptibility to the surrounding madness that aggravates, inspires and poisons Pierre with a similar clanging, joyless ferocity.

This second half of the film devolves into delirium and unchecked, raving physicality, the stylistic vehemence and narrative incomprehensibility mirroring Pierre's degradation. For a film so concerned with the unmasking of truth (Pierre's use of a pseudonym for his first novel; the revelation of a secret room in the chateau), the outcome of madness, death, and an ultimate return to static living suggests a horrifying circularity to Pierre's endeavour.

As with Depardieu's committed physical performance, the film's most striking moments are articulated in terms of bodily ruptures: Pierre and Isabelle as disembodied limbs and writhing shapes during sex; Marie's dead body splayed out on the road like a rag doll after a night-time motorbike ride in search of her son. Carax's strangest inclinations might be manically disseminated, but it's this unchecked, visceral life force just beyond articulation that packs a punch. And unlike Carax's other films, such an unshackled, inwards-looking portrait of the artist has the effect of a pained, personal reflection on the limits of art.

Beatrice Loayza, *Sight & Sound*, October 2019

Whether one regards *Pola X* as a preposterous self-indulgent folly or as an improbable triumph of romantic audacity – in fact it's a bit of both – there's no denying Leos Carax's intense imagination and commitment. His act of hubris and commercial perversity in updating and transposing to contemporary France Herman Melville's critically savaged 1852 novel *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* may be freighted in more ways than one. As a not-so-distant scion of the Dupont dynasty, Carax himself hails from a background similar to Pierre's. Carax has indicated that the book has been an important one to him for many years and it's not such a great leap to discern some degree of over-identification with Melville's critical and commercial misfortunes. The film's very title, an acronym of the book's French title (*Pierre, ou les ambiguïtés*), foregrounds the act of adaptation, bringing us back to authorial will. On one level the film is an unmistakable if masochistic act of self-parody comparable to Melville's. Even without the comedy of Pierre's metamorphosis from graceful novelist of leisure into caricatured starving artist, there's little doubt the publisher's evaluation of his manuscript ('A raving morass that reeks of plagiarism') is a just one. On another level, the film, in all its deranged

grandeur, represents a defiant refusal to capitulate to the dictates of commerce after the failure of *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* and nearly ten years in the wilderness.

At the same time, more than in any of his previous films, Carax invests the narrative with highly charged subtext. Pierre's relationships with his mother and Thibault are visibly fraught with intimations of prior or latent sexual interest. Pierre and Marie address one another as 'brother' and 'sister' and enjoy an unusual level of intimacy. Pierre's blonde cipher-fiancée Lucie and the dark waif Isabelle seem equally passive manifestations of Pierre's implicit psychosexual crisis. Lucie is little more than a projection of Pierre's own self-absorbed aristocratic entitlement, but as his cousin and a mirror image of his mother, she represents the next best thing to Marie herself.

Isabelle by contrast is a projection of Pierre's guilt and self-loathing, a return of the repressed in both personal and historical terms. As his half-sister, she represents an opportunity to succumb to his desire for an 'unnatural' (incestuous) relationship. At the same time she is a reproachful spectre, an incarnation of the unspeakable suffering that has underwritten a century of European genocide in which his father and his class are implicated. This is made manifest in the film's stunning prologue montage: an image of the earth from space accompanied by a voiceover quotation from *Hamlet* ('The time is out of joint...'), smash-cuts to dropping bombs. From this Carax cuts to the paradise of the Valombreuse estate, making an explicit connection between Pierre's privilege and the horrors of 20th-century war.

Carax doesn't idealise Pierre or the world he falls from any more than the cold industrial urban hell he descends into. In fact, the film's most remarkable formal aspect is its bold use of visuals to balance the two realms. In one of the film's pivotal scenes, Isabelle's audaciously over-extended monologue explains her backstory as she and Pierre make their way through the woods at twilight. Carax tests legibility and exposition to breaking point in this scene, and its visual liminality becomes a metaphor for the contradictions in the director's uniquely self-defeating talent. His narrative and formal risk-taking are indistinguishable from failure.

Gavin Smith, *Sight and Sound*, June 2000

POLA X

Director: Leos Carax
Presented by: Aréna Films (Paris)
Production Companies: Pola Production, Théo Films, France 2 Cinéma, Pandora Filmproduktion, Euro Space, Vega Film
With the participation of: Canal+, La Sept ARTE, ARD, Degeto Film, Télévision Suisse Romande, Filmstiftung NRW
With the support of: Eurimages Conseil de l'Europe, Filmstiftung NRW, FFA – Filmförderungsanstalt, CNC – Centre national de la cinématographie, Procirep, L'Office Fédéral de la Culture Suisse du Département Fédéral de l'Intérieur
With the support of: Amuse Inc., Digital Media Lab, TV Tokyo, Taiwa Inc, Dentsu
Executive Producers: Albert Prévost, Raimond Goebel
Producer: Bruno Pesery
Commissioning Editor (WDR): Wolf-Dietrich Brücker
Associate Producers: Karl Baumgartner, Kenzo Horikoshi, Ruth Waldburger
Unit Production Managers: Christophe Frossard, Odile Marcel
Unit Production Managers (Germany): Detlev Jansen, Marcelo Busse
Production Managers: Sylvie Barthet, Dschingis Bowakow
Production Accountant: Laurence Picollec
Post-production Supervisor: Françoise Piraud
Assistant Directors: Gabriel Julien-Laferrrière, Émile Louis, Mathilde Cukierman, Arnauld Mercadier, Richard Kravetz, Delphine Lemoine, Myriam Segall, Diane Stein-Bois
Assistant Directors (Germany): Surk-Ki Schrade, Jürgen Jansen
Script Supervisor: Élie Poicard
CASTING: Antoinette Boulat
CASTING (Germany): Eve Kirchner, Outcast
Screenplay: Leos Carax, Lauren Sedofsky, Jean-Pol Fargeau
Inspired by the novel by: Herman Melville
Director of Photography: Eric Gautier
Steadicam Operators: Carlos Cabecerán, Patrick de Ranter
Special Digital Effects: Ex Machina (Paris)
Special Effects: Ex Machina (Paris), Pierre Foury, Benoît Squizzato, Georges Demétrau, Daniel Lenoir, Jean-Christophe Magnoud)
Special Effects (Germany): Flash Art
Editor: Nelly Quettier
Art Director: Laurent Allaire
Set Decorator: Régine Constant
Set Decorator (Germany): Anique-Fatum Celikasian
Sculptors: Jean-François Grand, Anne Dollet, Laurent Garenne, Michel Tancelin
Property Master: Bernard Bridon
Costumes: Esther Walz
Wardrobe: Corinne Bruand, Camille Ballouhey
Wardrobe (Catherine Deneuve): Chris Fageol
Wardrobe (Germany): Claudia Maria Braun, Elke Freitag
Make-up: Bernard Floch
Make-up (Catherine Deneuve): Cédric Gérard
Make-up (Germany): Esmè Sciaroni, Kerstin Baar
Hairdresser: Stéphane Malheu
Hairdresser (Catherine Deneuve): Agathe Moro

Hair Colourist: Christophe Robin
Colour Timer: Pierre Berlot
Music: Scott Walker
Music Supervisor: Negus-Fancey Co Ltd
Music Recordist/Mixer: Geoff Foster
Sound: Jean-Louis Ughetto, Béatrice Wick, Jean-Pierre Laforce
Sound Re-recording: Vincent Montrobert, Frank Mettre
Co-sound Re-recording: Stéphane Thiebault, Carl Goetgheluck
Recorder: Benjamin Viot, Valérie Deloof, Pascal Chauvin
Sound Effects: Pascal Dédeye
ADR Recordists: Jean-Pierre Hoüel, Jean-Louis Lebras
Post-synchronization: Marion Lorthioir
Equestrian Adviser: Mario Luraschi
Armourer (Germany): GOS Filmservice
Animal Trainers: Pierre Cadéac, Fauna & Films Villemer
Stunts: Jean-Louis Airola, Dominique Julienne, Action Cinéma, Ciné Cascade International
Stunts (Germany): Stuntteam Steinmeier

Cast

Guillaume Depardieu (*Pierre Valombreuse*)
Katerina Golubeva (*Isabelle*)
Catherine Deneuve (*Marie*)
Delphine Chuillot (*Lucie de Boisieux*)
Laurent Lucas (*Thibault*)
Patachou (*Marguerite*)
Petruta Catana (*Razerka*)
Mihaela Silaghi (*the little girl*)
Sharunas Bartas (*the boss*)
Samuel Dupuy (*Fred, houseboy*)
Mathias Mlekuz (*TV presenter*)
Dine Souli (*taxi driver*)
Miguel Yeco (*Augusto*)
Khiredine Medjoubi (*café owner's son*)
Mark Zak (*Romanian friend*)
Anne Richter (*chef's wife*)
Myriam Defremont, Michel B. Duperial, Pascal Parmentier, Jean-Jacques Colin (*policemen*)
Bill 'Smog' Callahan, Mario Gremlich, Bobo, Kerstin Fischer, Tom Ivison, Tom Liwa, Thomas Klein, Peter Sarach, Fritz Wittek, Till Lindemann, Steve Donnelly, Christoph Schneider, Stefan Claudius, Stuart Grimshaw, Roland Höppner, Markus Kirschbaum, Axel Neumann, Martin Siry, Julia Zanke, Kersten Ginsberg (*musicians*)
Mouloud Larabi
Blanche de Saint Phalle
Marie Thomas
Albert Prévost
Sandrine Fleischmann
Catherine Genièvre

France-Switzerland-Germany-Japan 1999
134 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

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