



**FOCUS ON: GASPAR NOÉ**

# Climax

**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.

As *Climax* opens to the sound of Gary Numan's recording of Satie's *Gymnopédies*, and an overhead shot of a bloodied, barely dressed woman running screaming through clean white snow fills the screen, one has the perverse feeling of being in a safe pair of hands. It will hardly be a surprise to anyone who knows Gaspar Noé's oeuvre when the credits run before the film itself (presumably in case we don't make it through to the end). Nor when the film plummets into a neon-lit interior, shot through with the grotesque horror-porn aesthetic familiar from works such as *I Stand Alone* (1998) and *Enter the Void* (2009). With his fifth feature, Noé seems to have completed the transition from French cinema's *enfant terrible* to mature auteur in full control of his material. *Climax* confirms him as one of a few contemporary directors – alongside Michael Haneke, Agnès Varda, perhaps the Dardenne brothers – whose work shows real consistency of vision.

Noé is probably most infamous for the nine-minute rape scene, shot in one unflinching take, in 2002's *Irréversible*. *Climax*, which is based on the supposedly true story of a troupe of 1990s dancers who drank LSD-spiked punch during a post-rehearsal party and succumbed to a collective bad trip, is mostly composed of what appear to be two extremely long takes: the rehearsal itself (a virtuoso musical number) and the gruesome descent into the inferno. In between them comes the party itself, constructed as a series of quick-fire conversations between various pairings of dancers. As was often the case in Noé's *Love* (2015), these short scenes are punctuated by sudden, brief fades to black, not-quite-jump-cuts that sometimes return to find the scene exactly as it was and sometimes reveal another, similar scene. It's a sequence marked by the inattention, excitement and nerviness of the early stages of a party.

All of this is set to a soundtrack of mostly 1990s French electronic dance music, in keeping with the period setting (itself a neat trick for ensuring that there are no mobiles available when chaos falls). Noé is typically attentive to the layering, timbre and overall impact of sound design on the audience. His cast of mostly non-professional actors speak little, but the film's meaning – so far as there is one – lies beyond language, in pulsing beats, inarticulate sounds: grunts, cries and gibbering screams. It is something of a cliché that the films of what has been dubbed the new European extreme cinema – for which Noé is the poster boy – dare you to look away. There were moments when *Climax* made me want to rip up the seat covers and stuff them in my ears.

The film isn't without its antecedents or influences. An early sequence – a precursor to the action proper – opens with a very Haneke-like TV screen embedded amid VHS tapes that include *Salò*, *Suspiria*, *Possession* and *Querelle*, as well as books by Fritz Lang, Luis Buñuel and Nietzsche. There's a series of Godardian intertitles offering up nonsensical truisms. And everywhere is the push-pull of the Artaudian Theatre of Cruelty – a practice intended to 'wake us up. Nerves and heart', through 'immediate violent action' that 'inspires us with the fiery magnetism of its images and acts upon us like a spiritual therapeutics whose touch can never be forgotten.' One critic has described *Climax* as '*Fame* directed by the Marquis de Sade'. Fittingly, the film that *Climax* most put me in mind of was Peter Brook's *Marat/Sade* (1967).

Brook, though, along with fellow artists such as Jean Genet, used brutality as a way of depicting class struggle and human suffering in the midst of changing social structures. It's unclear what the political stakes are for Noé, though it seems some political allegorising is afoot. France is described, variously, as 'hell on earth' and 'the home of Western culture'. The production credits present 'A French Film and Proud of It', while a huge, glittering tricolour forms a backdrop to much of the action. Sofia Boutella (the film's one professional actor, here playing choreographer Selva) declares the rehearsal a success with a cry of 'God with us!' And it is surely no coincidence that the group's first act of violence claims as its victim Muslim dancer Omar, who falls under suspicion precisely because the rules of his faith have kept him from drinking the spiked booze.

The dancers themselves are a mixed bag racially and sexually. Controversial gay icon Kiddy Smile plays DJ 'Daddy' as a kind of benevolent uncle figure. The dancing itself – a stunning, contortionist version of voguing – is developed out of France's multiracial, polysexual ballroom scene. Nina McNeely's choreography glories in the athleticism of these black, brown, white and yellow bodies, clad in PVC, net, sequins and lurex. But at the same time it casts them as creepy, creaturely and aggressively sexual, even before the drugs take hold. What does it mean when one character lipsticks a swastika on another's forehead? Of course, the film offers no answers. *Climax* is neither as graphic nor as shocking as Noé's earlier work (in fact, despite the incest, infanticide and immolation, its final 30 minutes are, well, a little anticlimactic). Still, Noé remains the eternal provocateur, one whose flaws put other directors' successes to shame. Not everyone will like what he does here, but there's no denying that he does it very well.

**Catherine Wheatley, *Sight & Sound*, October 2018**

---

## CLIMAX

*Director:* Gaspar Noé

*Production Companies:* Rectangle Productions, Wild Bunch

*In co-production with:* Les Cinémas de la Zone, Eskwad, KNM, ARTE France Cinéma, Artémis Productions

*With the support of:*

Centre National de la Cinématographie et de l'Image animée, Sacem

*In co-production with:* VOO, Be tv, Shelter Prod

*In association with:* Taxshelter.be, Ing

*With the participation of:* Cineventure 3

*Produced by:* Edouard Weil, Vincent Maraval, Brahim Chioua

*Screenplay:* Gaspar Noé

*Director of Photography:* Benoît Debie

*Editing:* Denis Bedlow, Gaspar Noé

*Art Director:* Jean Rabasse

*Costumes:* Fred Cambier

*Sound:* Ken Yasumoto

*Choreographer:* Nina McNeely

## Cast

Sofia Boutella (*Selva*)

Romain Guillermic (*David*)

Souheila Yacoub (*Lou*)

Kiddy Smile (*Daddy*)

Claude Gajan Maull (*Emmanuelle*)

Giselle Palmer (*Gazelle*)

Taylor Kastle (*Taylor*)

Thea Carla Schøtt (*Psyche*)

Sharleen Temple (*Ivana*)

Lea Vlamos (*Lea*)

Adrien Sissoko (*Omar*)

Vince Galliot Cumant (*Tito*)

France 2018

96 mins

The screening on Mon 30 May will be introduced by season programmer Anna Bogutskaya

---

## FOCUS ON: GASPAR NOÉ

### I Stand Alone (Seul contre tous)

Sun 1 May 18:10; Fri 20 May 20:40

### Irreversible: The Straight Cut (Irréversible)

Mon 2 May 18:30

### Enter the Void

Sun 8 May 14:30; Sat 21 May 20:00

### Love (3D)

Sun 8 May 18:15; Mon 23 May 20:20

### Gaspar Noé in Conversation

Tue 10 May 21:00

### Gaspar Noé's Mixtape + Q&A with Gaspar Noé

Thu 12 May 18:00

### Lux Æterna

Fri 20 May 18:40; Mon 23 May 18:40

### Climax

Fri 27 May 18:15; Mon 30 May 20:50 + extended intro by season programmer Anna Bogutskaya

---

## NEW & RE-RELEASES

### Croupier

From Wed 4 May

### Vampyr

Thu 5 May Preview 18:15; Mon 23 May 14:00 Seniors' Matinee + discussion

From Fri 20 May

### Cabaret

From Fri 6 May

### Vortex

Tue 10 May 18:00 Preview + intro by Gaspar Noé

From Fri 13 May

### Get Carter + The Frighteners: The Manipulators

Mon 30 May 18:00 + intro by Douglas Weir, BFI Technical Delivery Manager

From Fri 27 May

---

## BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](http://bfi.org.uk/join)

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at [www.bfi.org.uk/signup](http://www.bfi.org.uk/signup)

## BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](http://player.bfi.org.uk)