

Making Room for Horror: The Adversity of Genre in the French Film Industry

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This dissertation examines the lack of legitimacy that French horror cinema encounters within France's domestic industry. In a country dominated by a cultural elitism that values art films over genre films, French horror faces multiple challenges from its initial funding to its final reception as a result of rigid television broadcast rules, strict exhibition visa authorizations, and moral conflicts regarding their use of violence. Building on historical and theoretical research as well as empirical data from institutional reports, roundtables, interviews and audience surveys, this dissertation investigates the invisibility of horror in the processes of the French film industry and seeks to find alternate circuits of production, distribution and exhibition that could benefit the genre. The second chapter (the introduction being the first) delves into the history of the horror genre in France in order to understand the lack of recognition it suffers from. Chapter 3 discusses the modes of financing and production operating in France and draws a comparison with the American film industry through the dual experience of director Alexandre Aja who has worked in both countries. Chapter 4 analyzes the regulation of cinematic violence imposed by the state and its unfortunate consequences on the distribution of horror films while considering the notion of affect that is especially relevant to the visceral content of the genre. Chapter 5 deconstructs the French preference for theatrical release by focusing on other modes of distribution like festivals, video-on-demand and streaming platforms. It also includes an interview of Frédéric Garcia who developed a French horror show with Netflix. The last chapter shifts the focus to spectators and addresses their viewing habits and appraisal of French horror by way of a survey distributed online.

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Preface

I am grateful to the University of Pittsburgh, the Film and Media Studies program and the department of French & Italian for allowing me to write a dissertation on a topic that I have been passionate about ever since I watched my first horror movie (at an age I will not reveal because my mother would not approve). I would like to thank my committee members Adam Lowenstein, Randall Halle and Giuseppina Mecchia for their feedback and recommendations that have served me throughout the entire writing process. Words cannot express how indebted I am to David Pettersen, my chair, who has been supporting me since my first day at Pitt, who has provided me with valuable advice to navigate American academia, and whose comments and suggestions on my chapters have helped me sharpen my argumentation to make my dissertation what it is today. I would also like to thank Todd Reeser and David Pettersen for their flexibility during my pregnancy, which has allowed me to keep writing and doing my research in challenging times. This work would not have been possible without the unconditional support of my mother, my family and the many friends I made during the four years I lived in Pittsburgh. Lastly, I dedicate this dissertation to the youngest horror fan I know, my daughter Anna, who will forever be my greatest achievement.

1.0 Introduction

Before 2016, when I shared my interest in French horror cinema, most people – French or not – would admit that they had no idea that France was making horror films. A few of them would mention *High Tension* (Alexandre Aja, 2003) or *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier, 2008) as the two biggest names in the game. And then *Raw* (Julia Ducournau, 2016) came out and brought about major change as to the visibility and perception of French horror. Selected for the Cannes Film Festival’s official competition, winner of the Méliès d’Or for Best European Fantastic Film, winner of the Grand Prize at the Gerardmer Fantastic Film Festival and of so many other top prizes in international festivals, *Raw* was unanimously praised by French and international critics alike as “contender for best horror film of the decade” or “l’une des plus grandes réussites du genre en France (one of the best achievements in the genre in France).”^{1 2} Ducournau’s coming-of-age cannibal story managed to convince both sides of a usually divided French film community: the art/auteur film lovers and the genre fans.

Despite their individual qualities, *High Tension* and *Martyrs* never reached a consensus the way *Raw* did. Both films met numerous obstacles during their production and release that this

¹ David Fear, “*Raw* review: Cannibal Coming-of-Age Movie Is a Modern Horror Masterpiece”, Rolling Stone, March 13, 2017.

<https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-reviews/raw-review-cannibal-coming-of-age-movie-is-a-modern-horror-masterpiece-126800/>

² Paul Hébert, “*Grave*: La réussite du genre à la française”, Le Bleu du miroir.

<http://www.lebleudumiroir.fr/grave-film-genre-francais-cinema/>

dissertation will discuss in greater details, whereas Ducournau’s work was financed, produced and distributed in adequate conditions. Why? Because it fit the industrial and cultural criteria to be considered a hybrid between an art film and a horror film – without being as extreme as what the New French Extremity embodied in the early 2000’s (see chapter 2). Similarly, American films like *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017) or *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018) have been called “elevated horror” for their aesthetics and social commentary that would allegedly go beyond what traditional horror films offer.³ Given the difference in treatment between films identified as horror and films that blur the lines between horror and other genres or styles, I felt the need to ask: why is it so hard to make horror films in France?

1.1 Cultural Biases

To understand the adversity of horror films in the industry, it is first and foremost necessary to interrogate how notions of genre and art interact. France was one of the birthplaces of cinema in the late 19th-early 20th centuries and kept a privileged space in the world film industry until the two world wars of 1914 and 1939 which caused the decline of the French film production. Progressively, the United States and Hollywood dominated the market, only allowing sporadic successes of French productions. When the Blum-Byrnes agreement of 1946 forced the liberalization of the domestic market and triggered an even bigger influx of American goods in

³ Brynne Ramella, “How A24 Horror Movies & Arthouse Horror Became Popular in the 2010’s”, Screen Rant, January 14, 2021.

<https://screenrant.com/a24-horror-movies-2010s-popularity-elevated-horror-trend-explained/>

France, the country decided on a firm cultural policy to rebuild its film industry. Responsibility for the film business was moved from the Ministry of Industry and Commerce to the Ministry of Culture (where it remains today), which started the subsidization of film culture by the government.⁴ France and its self-claimed state of cultural exception touching on every aspect of its culture (art, history, gastronomy, music, literature, etc.) placed the country in an elitist position where cinema is not just a matter of business and entertainment, but first and foremost a form of art and cultural expression to be preserved at all cost. France took a significant stance against globalization when it refused to include cinema in the 1993 General Agreement Tariffs Trade (GATT): to the French, their cinema should not be treated “as goods and services but as a focal point of culture.”⁵

Because of this focus on cinema as art, French film studies have not merely neglected the study of genre films but also of the film industry itself. I would argue that, in addition to having a lot to teach on the financial value of film, the industry is a key place to understand its symbolic value as well. My dissertation will foreground the structural issues of the French film industry by examining its institutions and processes. It will then shed light on the consequences of a cultural exception which undermined film genres like horror that were not deemed worthy of consideration. My research is situated within the framework of industry studies, and it engages heavily with

⁴ Laurent Creton in Michael Temple and Michael Witt, eds., *The French Cinema Book*, 2nd edition (London: Palgrave, 2018), 169.

⁵ Jonathan Buchsbaum, *Exception Taken: How France Has Defied Hollywood's New World Order*, Film and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 5.

Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb's work on the individual constraints that French genre films face.⁶ It will occasionally employ genre theory and reception theory, yet without adopting the text-centered approach that can be found in Raphaëlle's Moine's *Les genres du cinéma* for instance.⁷ Readers should not expect to find textual analyses, sequence analyses or any other close studies of specific films. This kind of work on French horror has already been done, as for example what Alexandra West accomplished chapter by chapter in her *Films of the New French Extremity*.⁸ Instead, I will study French horror films from an industrial standpoint, only sparingly commenting on their plot or effects on spectators when necessary for the argument.

The adversity of French horror films is a conversation that has been taking place in France for a couple years now, mostly during roundtables where directors and producers meet to express their grievances against the film industry as a whole. I believe that pointing out the biases of the French film industry towards low-brow genres will not advance the ongoing debate unless credible suggestions are offered. Therefore my dissertation will include an interview of French showrunner Frédéric Garcia (chapter 5) who worked with Netflix, as well as an audience survey that I designed myself (chapter 6) to bring up answers as to why the French horror genre seems to keep coming to an impasse, and which alternatives exist to counteract the long-term effect of this cinematic elitism.

⁶ Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb, ed., *L'Invention d'un genre: le cinéma fantastique français, ou, les constructions sociales d'un objet de la cinéphilie ordinaire*, Logiques Sociales. Série Études Culturelles (Paris: Harmattan, 2012).

⁷ Raphaëlle Moine, *Les genres du cinéma* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2015).

⁸ Alexandra West, *Films of the New French Extremity: Visceral Horror and National Identity* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2016).

1.2 The Flexibility of Horror

Film lost its medium-based specificity by being played not only in theaters but also on television, computers, phones, etc. This new ecology of media brought a new spatiality where films can be played on a variety of supports, and a new temporality where they can be stopped, played backward, played by chapters, or even accelerated with the new Netflix option. In this context of ever-evolving digitalization and increased accessibility to a wide film catalog, it might be time to ask what people want to watch instead of what is considered worth watching. Given the trending movies and shows on streaming platforms in France – even more so since the pandemic started –, horror seems to be a favorite. Adam Hart explains that the combination of narration and visceral affect in horror makes the genre a great vehicle across media.⁹ From films to video games, from literature to television shows, from paintings and sculptures to merchandizing, horror is an adaptable and malleable genre, which has allowed for its survival until now. If the United States have a long-lasting tradition in horror cinema, from Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931) and James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) all the way to the many productions of Jason Blum, the same cannot be said of France's hybrid cinematic history of the "fantastic" (a term encompassing horror, fantasy and science-fiction that I will discuss in chapter 2). Despite clearer distinctions between the genres today, the term "fantastic" is still being used to discuss horror films in French academia (in Gimello-Mesplomb's books for example) or to classify them in French media (streaming platform Salto only has a "fantastic" section). Because France did not continuously develop its domestic

⁹ Adam Charles Hart, *Monstrous Forms: Moving Image Horror across Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 11.

production of genre films, it left the door open for other countries like the United States, England or Italy to dominate the market in specific decades, up to today where American horror films continue to reach high audience scores while French horror is barely seen.

While US and other national horror traditions are significant objects of scholarly study outside France, horror is a genre that tends to be left out from French film studies. American academia embraced US horror with the rise of cultural studies and the reactionary slashers of the 70's and 80's – for instance Robin Wood and his “Introduction to the American Horror Film.”¹⁰ However, French academia's strong focus on aesthetics and auteur theory stemming from the New Wave's *politique des auteurs* has not made much room for discussions on horror, even less so French horror. Indeed, books like Philippe Rouyer's *Le Cinéma gore: une esthétique du sang* (1997) or Éric Dufour's *Le Cinéma d'horreur et ses figures* (2006) have the merit of examining horror cinema in depth, but they rely greatly on American horror films to prove their point. In contrast, Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb and his two edited volumes *Les Cinéastes français à l'épreuve du genre fantastique* and *L'Invention d'un genre : le cinéma fantastique français*, both published in 2012, give insight on the difficulties for the French ‘fantastic’ genre to exist. My reading of these two volumes motivated my decision to pursue research on the case of French horror specifically. Why separate horror from the umbrella term ‘fantastic’ instead of bundling all low-brow genres together like Gimello-Mesplomb does? The roots of the industrial and cultural prejudices against horror are partly related to violence, resulting in heavy restrictions in terms of television broadcast or exhibition visas. The ‘fantastic’ and science-fiction genres do not

¹⁰ Robin Wood, “An Introduction to the American Horror Film”, in *The American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*, (Toronto: Festival of Festivals), 1979.

necessarily resort to physical or psychological violence and thus do not face the same obstacles than horror does. For that reason, I believe that examining the ‘fantastic’ in general creates a minimization of what horror specifically is going through. It makes sense to me to single out French horror in my dissertation to better understand its lack of legitimacy and deconstruct the industrial hardships surrounding its production and distribution.

Horror is an important element of youth culture, and so horror lets us understand how genre films target and reach young audiences. Teenagers use horror films as a rite of passage into adulthood and as a coping strategy to exorcise their real-life fears usually related to death and social anxiety.¹¹ Between the strict regulation that does not allow teens under 16 years of age to watch horror films, the theater chains that refuse to play them, or the unofficial actors of censorship like religious associations who accuse them of disrespecting human dignity, horror films are denied part of their spectatorship on grounds that cannot be objectively proved.¹² Indeed, psychological surveys show that “there is no evidence that exposure to horror film has adverse or sustained effects on mental health [...]”¹³ Similarly to the enthusiasm that slashers like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) or *Scream* (Wes

¹¹ Stephen Prince, ed., *The Horror Film*, Rutgers Depth of Field Series (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 240.

¹² “*Baise-Moi, Nymphomaniac, Saw: rencontre avec l’homme qui fait trembler les distributeurs*”, Première, July 9, 2015.

<https://www.premiere.fr/Cinema/Baise-moi-Nymphomaniac-Saw-rencontre-avec-l-homme-qui-fait-trembler-les-distributeur>

¹³ G. Neil Martin, “(Why) Do You Like Scary Movies? A Review of the Empirical Research on Psychological Responses to Horror Films,” *Frontiers in Psychology* (October 18, 2019).

Craven, 1996) created in teenage spectators decades ago, the *Paranormal Activity* franchise (2007 – in production) and the *Conjuring* universe (2013 – in production) have become “le terrain de jeu d’adolescents qui jouent à se faire peur (a playground where teenagers enjoy getting scared).”¹⁴ Streaming platforms jumped at the chance to create content appealing to teenagers who represent a significant part of their viewership, like Netflix’s *Stranger Things* or *Mortel*.¹⁵ It thus seems necessary to ask in more depth what teenagers – and horror spectators in general – find in the genre that they cannot find elsewhere.

One final reason to examine French horror in greater length is the globalization of cinema through new media like streaming and video on demand. Streaming platforms in particular – whether French (Salto) or American (Netflix, Amazon Prime) – make available a fair share of horror films and shows that often culminate in the top 10 trending content. Considering that horror is getting popular worldwide, the French film and television industries have begun to realize that there is money to be made by producing horrific content. The CNC (the official government institution for cinema) already launched a couple calls for projects in the past two years to help produce horror/fantastic films, demonstrating the newfound interest in low-brow genres whose visibility would be worth increasing. It is thus timely to debunk the misconceptions around horror and examine the mechanisms of the industry that are currently detrimental to the genre and would deserve some reworking.

¹⁴ Anouchka Collette et Carole Dieterich, “*Annabelle*: le rituel adolescent qui embarrasse les cinémas multiplexes”, Les Inrockuptibles, October 22, 2014.

<https://www.lesinrocks.com/cinema/meme-pas-peur-107067-22-10-2014/>

¹⁵ The CNC’s report “Observatoire de la vidéo à la demande” (2019) estimates that 31% of Netflix’s French viewers are between 15-19 years old.

1.3 Horror versus Extreme

Horror and extreme cinemas are often compared and conflated, especially when it comes to the New French Extremity of the early 2000's. However, horror films belong to a genre while extreme films belong rather to a style of filmmaking that includes horrific imagery in art films. Such inclusion raises questions as to the use of horror as an element versus as a main constituent of a film. My dissertation makes the distinction between filmmakers who self-identify as horror directors like Alexandra Aja or Pascal Laugier, and directors who not identify with the horror genre despite the violence in some of their films like Gaspar Noé or Bruno Dumont. For that reason, my research will be almost exclusively focused on horror films and horror directors. A lot has already been written about extreme cinema and the New French Extremity, so I will only be mentioning extreme films to point out the similarities or differences with horror when it is relevant to their treatment and consideration within the French film industry. For example it would be hypocritical to analyze the negative consequences of a strict regulation on horror while ignoring how detrimental it also is to the distribution of extreme films. On the contrary, when discussing the Cannes Film Festival, it seems appropriate to acknowledge how extreme directors like Gaspar Noé and Lars Von Trier benefit from a certain prestige – in spite of (or maybe thanks to) their controversial films – when horror directors are almost never invited to discuss their work.

The distinction between horror and extreme cinema also lies in the overall division between genre films and art films in France. Genre classification is not an encyclopedic knowledge. As Raphaëlle Moine argues, “examiner la relation des films aux genres ce n'est donc pas tant déterminer quel(s) film(s) on met dans quelle(s) case(s) générique(s) que réfléchir d'une part à qui l'y met, pourquoi et dans quel contexte (examining the relationship between films and genres does not mean to determine which film belongs to which generic category, but rather who puts it there,

why and in which given context).”¹⁶ ¹⁷ Genre partly relies on self-classification, which explains why films can be read as thrillers or as horror depending on the viewer. The debate around genre is especially pertinent in France, where films are often categorized as thrillers or dramas rather than horror to make them attractive to a wider audience.

The country continues to make a difference between art films (praised for their aesthetics and/or socio-political commentary) and genre films allegedly produced for entertainment only. Genre directors have taken a stand against such division, as for instance Fabrice Du Welz:

Pourquoi est-ce qu’on fait cette distinction chez nous ? On considère que le cinéma intéressant est le “cinéma d’auteur”, un cinéma qui vient d’une idée post-Nouvelle Vague. Mais avant la Nouvelle Vague, le cinéma français était du cinéma de genre !

Why do we make this distinction? We consider that the only interesting cinema is the auteur cinema coming from this post-New Wave ideology. But before the New Wave, French cinema was genre cinema!¹⁸

Citing Marcel Carné, Jean-Pierre Melville or Jean Cocteau, Du Welz regrets the condescension with which genre films, especially violent films, have been treated for the last few decades despite their quality, originality and sincerity. Coralie Fargeat also points out the inconsistency of the division, yet for another reason: why are comedies allowed to be entertaining but horror is not? She denounces the contradiction between “the desire to intellectualize cinema and the automatic funds given to low-brow comedies.”¹⁹ Where do French horror films belong if there is no room for them neither in art or entertainment? In order to understand whether French

¹⁶ Raphaëlle Moine, *Les genres du cinéma*, 118.

¹⁷ Translation is mine unless noted otherwise.

¹⁸ Calvin Roy, “Fabrice Du Welz, à bras-le-corps”, *Fais Pas Genre* webzine, October 6, 2019.

¹⁹ARP public roundtable, “Cinéma de genre : espace de liberté et de renouveau pour le cinéma français”, Paris, June 2019.

spectators could appreciate cinematic horror and violence as entertainment, I designed an audience survey whose results are quite telling and show the discrepancy between a cultural elite who denies the legitimacy of low-brow genres and a mass audience who feels disconnected from its domestic film production.

1.4 Making Room for Horror: A Chronology

My dissertation interrogates the lack of consideration towards the horror genre in the French film industry, resulting in complicated contexts of production and distribution, the enforcement of strict regulation in visa authorizations, and the disinterest in audience reception. Each chapter will approach the horror genre in a specific field: history, production, regulation, distribution and reception. Following the chronological steps of a film from its birth to its mass viewing, the chapters will not only highlight the difficulties that horror films meet in their creative process, but will also generate alternatives and suggestions to get around the closedmindedness of a system that is bound to become obsolete faced with the booming of streaming platforms and their international content. Because I am aware that French and foreign readers alike might not be familiar with the functioning of the French film industry, I will begin each chapter with a detailed explanation of the various mechanisms operating within the industry, for instance what the broadcast rules are for television or how the CNC came to be. When deemed necessary, I will also justify the approaches I chose to take in my analysis, whether it took inspiration from genre theory or viewer-centered reception theory.

Scholarship on horror is not scarce, but the Anglo-Saxon angle cannot be denied. French horror, unlike French extreme cinema, has not been extensively discussed in academia. The history

of French horror has been divided into sporadic trends, from Louis Feuillade's serials to Georges Franju's oneiric *Eyes Without a Face* (1960) or Jean Rollin's sexy vampires. But was it even horror to begin with? The genre has rarely been analyzed throughout its entire history since the birth of cinema, mostly because it does not have a long-lasting tradition on its own. Indeed, French cinema has united horror, fantasy and science-fiction under an umbrella term: the fantastic. For that reason, it is technically impossible to analyze the history of horror – and only horror – in France. Rather, it makes more sense to examine the history of the fantastic and the gradual and yet irregular turn to horror. My second chapter (the introduction being the first) will open on a discussion about the concept of genre based on the work of Rick Altman and Raphaëlle Moine, before breaking down the notion of the fantastic to see how it was initially defined by Tzvetan Todorov and how it was then applied in cinema.^{20 21} The following detailed history of the genre will start with the 'fantastic' productions of the first half of the 20th century, will continue with the shift to more horrific content by mid-century, before eventually closing with the New French Extremity and the neo-horror of the 2000's.

The third chapter will focus on the first industrial step that horror films need to take: financing and production. The production of horror films in France can prove quite chaotic for reasons involving state intervention, strict television broadcast rules and generic misconceptions. Despite the emergence of successful markets like video-on-demand and streaming platforms, the French film industry continues to attach great importance to theatrical release and box-office numbers, often refusing to finance straight-to-video films even though it represents a better option

²⁰ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999).

²¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Cornell University Press, 1975).

for horror films considering their stronger results in this type of secondary market, domestically and internationally. The prestige of a release in theaters, combined with the reluctance to finance violent content that will not be easily broadcast or distributed, resulted in the near impossibility for horror films to be produced with a proper budget that would allow directors to achieve their artistic vision. Taking the case study of Alexandre Aja who moved to the United States after the success of *High Tension* (2003), I will draw a parallel between the production of his French films and his American films to recognize the advantages and drawbacks of both industries.

The representation of violence on-screen inevitably leads to regulation restrictions which particularly affect horror and extreme cinema. French regulatory institutions such as the CNC and the Ministry of Culture make rating decisions to limit the exposure of explicitly sexual or violent scenes to young spectators. Chapter 4 will consider the various forces and actors of censorship, official or not, that seek to constrain what can and cannot be shown in different exhibition contexts. While the cases of Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi's *Baise-moi* (2001) or Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs* (2008) have already been debated in academia and in the media, I will still examine them in more depth since the controversy they both caused seems paramount to understand the fragility of rating mechanisms in the country. I will also review the legal battles of films like Lars Von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) and *Nymphomaniac* (2013), as well as the *Saw* franchise, to demonstrate the power of new actors of censorship such as the religious association Promouvoir who has gained enough momentum in France to counteract official governmental decisions and impede the proper distribution and exhibition of films that they deem disrespectful of human dignity. This chapter will also be the chance to draw a parallel between horror and extreme cinemas, as well as to question the relationship between morality and the effects of cinematic violence.

Chapter 5 will open on the role of distributors in France and the preference for theatrical releases. Such consideration for theater as the ultimate exhibition space creates a divide between multiplexes and arthouse (*art & essai*) theaters. Usually inclined towards art and auteur cinema which attracts more of a senior audience, could *art & essai* function as an alternative for the exhibition of horror films, with the appropriate labelling and marketing?

This chapter will also put forward alternate exhibition circuits like film festivals, straight-to-video and streaming platforms, most of them being much more favorable to the genre than the traditional theatrical release and its often disappointing box-office statistics. Netflix has in recent months expanded their original horror/fantastic content by producing films and shows from all over the world, including France. The interview of Frédéric Garcia – the showrunner of *Mortel* that was met with great success on the platform – will reveal the behind the scenes of developing a show with Netflix, the financial and creative freedom that it entails, and the necessity for horror directors to embrace new modes of production. Faced with the international exposure such platforms can bring to French films and shows of all genres, the French industry might need to rethink its rigid functioning and prejudice towards genre in order to work in collaboration with the platforms rather than persist in competing with what has become (unfortunately or not) the new form of movie-going since the pandemic started.

Chapter 6 shifts the focus from film professionals to spectators, suggesting that taking audience responses in a more detailed account than plain box-office numbers could contribute to the revalorization of underappreciated genres. How can audience responses flow back to production practices, in order to possibly develop a competitive horror/fantastic industry? I designed an audience survey that I distributed online to better understand the likes and dislikes towards French horror specifically. The first part of the chapter will explain my approach to the

diverse types of audiences and various forms of cinephilia that will be encountered throughout the survey. It will also be the chance to raise an interesting question that is too often dismissed as sadomasochism: what makes horror pleasurable? The second part of the chapter will go over the habits and preferences of French spectators when it comes to different viewing experiences. The comparison with other national horror cinemas (American, Asian, etc.) will interrogate the disparity between more “mainstream” or “universal” horror movies, and films that remain attached to cultural specificities. Finally, the last question of the survey will offer suggestions regarding the lack of marketing campaigns for French horror films. What is the point of struggling with financing, production, distribution and exhibition if the lack of promotion makes the film invisible on the market, and if the film itself is disconnected from what audiences expect to find in the genre?

The interdependence between the different industrial steps from a film’s financing to its final reception reinforces the idea that French horror films lack critical recognition and box-office popularity for reasons that cannot solely be attributed to either low budgets, strict regulation or poor marketing. Once a challenge is overcome, another one appears just as fast, and so on even after the film gets exhibited in its final form. The underappreciation of the genre has become systemic ever since France decided cinema was an art to be respected and not just a mere form of entertainment. However, the emergence of streaming giants like Netflix or Amazon Prime has changed the face of film industries across the world. France and its cultural exception will not escape the globalization of cinema, and especially not the ever-growing popularity of horrific (or hybrid) content that seems to seduce a wider range of spectators. Could the 2020’s put an end to the marginalization of horror within the French film and television industries?

2.0 History of the French Fantastic

The enterprise of examining the mechanics of the French film industry needs to begin with a contextual chapter to situate French horror as a genre in its national history. France does not have a long-lasting tradition of horror unlike other countries like the United States or England; for many decades its tradition has remained anchored in what is called in French the ‘fantastic’, an umbrella term encompassing horror, fantasy, supernatural and science-fiction.²² If the horror genre has already been analyzed in many academic books across the past decades, the Anglo-Saxon focus has largely ignored the history of the genre in France up until the New French Extremity in the 2000’s. Although the NFE was deemed worthy of critical writing for its visceral aesthetics, it has not exactly been representative of French horror and even less so of France’s relationship with the fantastic, especially considering it was a fairly recent trend. However, the NFE has played a crucial role in triggering a (re)birth of French horror productions which cannot be overlooked.

Prior to examining national history, I find it important to lay the foundations of what genre is, particularly so because the French film industry continues to oppose genre cinema and art cinema, not only in terms of aesthetics and style, but also in terms of funding and critical appraisal. Such differences are of interest to my study of French horror’s complicated relationship with the industry and audiences. Relying on Rick Altman and Raphaëlle Moine’s work on genre, I will explain how genres come to be, how cross-fertilization leads to hybridity between various genres, movements and styles, how film marketing plays with the notion of genre to attract spectators, and

²² From now on, I will use the fantastic without quotation marks as a genre, not to be mistaken for the qualitative adjective.

how such concepts can be applied to horror internationally and domestically. The latter comparison between horror abroad and horror in France will lead me to distinguish the horror genre at large from France's national specificity with a detailed outline of France's history of the fantastic, from its early stages with Méliès' trick films, to the predecessor of horror *Eyes Without a Face* (1960), to the (re)birth of French horror as we know it today.

2.1 What Is Genre?

Genre is a pattern that enables films to be grouped under one category rather than be considered separate materials. Rick Altman's book *Film/Genre* is known for popularizing the semantic-syntactic approach. The author gives the following – and particularly adequate – definition of genre films:

Genre films are films produced after general identification and consecration of a genre through substantification, during the limited period when shared textual material and structures lead audiences to interpret films not as separate entities but according to generic expectations and against generic norms.²³

Beyond the recognition of similarities from the audience, genre is before all a formula developed by film industries in terms of structure, style and semantics to guide spectators into recognition and build future expectation.²⁴ Such intentions explain the existence of cycles, such as the slasher cycle that gained popularity from the 1970's onwards with *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the 13th* (1980) etc., up to the point of becoming self-

²³ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, 53.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

referential in *Scream* (1996). Genre is also a label shared by producers, distributors and exhibitors to set up marketing strategies and target specific audiences. For instance, a film labelled as a horror film and a film categorized as a thriller will most likely attract different types of spectators, as many people are still reluctant to watch horror despite the multiple forms it can take. Psychological horror can be very close to a thriller (for example Michael Haneke's *Hidden* or Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan*), but the mere presence of the horror label might repulse. Critics and academics also play a crucial role in genre categories since they are often the ones defining subgenres or trends, like the film critic James Quandt and the New French Extremity, the film critic David Edelstein and torture porn, or the still undetermined creators of the terms "prestige/elevated horror".²⁵ This cross-fertilization between production, distribution, critical review and reception demonstrates the important yet undermined relationship between the film industry and film studies. Film scholar Christine Gledhill argues that:

Genre was introduced into film studies as an alternative to auteurism, more appropriate to a mass entertainment industry. For film critics it offered a tool capable of putting art back into popular fiction in order to reclaim the commercial products of Hollywood for serious critical appraisal.²⁶

In France especially, as Raphaëlle Moine explains, "un cinéma de genre mercantile et peu créatif (a mercantile and little creative cinema genre)" has long been opposed to "un cinéma d'auteur, affranchi des contraintes institutionnelles, économiques et idéologiques de genres qu'il évite, revisite librement ou transgresse (an auteur cinema, free from the institutional, economic

²⁵ See James Quandt "Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema" (2004), and David Edelstein "Now Playing at your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn" (2006).

²⁶ Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, eds., *Reinventing Film Studies* (London: Arnold, 2000), 222.

and ideological constraints proper to genre that it can choose to avoid, revisit or transgress).”²⁷ The auteur theory (*politique des auteurs*) at the end of the 1950’s not only believed that the director was the sole creative force, but also castigated the lack of ideology and reflection in narrative-driven or aesthetics-driven films; genre films were only worth the consideration if they could be redeemed by their author, as for instance the films of Alfred Hitchcock. Raphaëlle Moine points out that, despite the long-standing fight between the alleged superficiality of genre films and the intellectualism of auteur films, the latter can be heavily generically marked such as Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) or Jean-Luc Godard’s *Alphaville* (1965), both incorporating science-fiction to existentialist plots and thus complicating the distinction between auteur films and genre films.

Altman argues that the oversimplification of narrative and semantic traits proper to genres, like monsters in horror movies or cowboys in westerns, allows spectators to recognize their symbolic value and find comfort in this recognition.²⁸ Horror constitutes an excellent example to discuss genre because it is one of the very few genres that has been able to survive various eras and still be relevant today by bringing variations to existing codes, thus becoming historically and geographically variable but at the same time recognizable everywhere. Although genre categories facilitate identification by establishing boundaries, for instance in databases, genre cannot be reduced to an encyclopedic knowledge. Altman’s semantic-syntactic approach claims that any generic corpus has a dual nature: semantic traits (topics, plots, key scenes, character types, objects, shots and sounds, etc.) being broadly applicable to many films need to be associated to syntactic

²⁷ Raphaëlle Moine, 1.

²⁸ Altman, 26.

traits (plot structure, character relationship, montage, etc.) in order to narrow genres down. In other words, form cannot be separated from content, what is told cannot be separated from how it is being told. For instance, the semantic element of monstrous creatures applicable to horror films in the 1930's can also be found in the science-fiction films of the 1950's. However, the montage and mise-en-scène of a horror film will use specific frames and angles to scare the spectator with the monster, while those of a science-fiction film will insist on the scientific aberration that the monster represents.²⁹ Nowadays semantic and syntactic traits particular to horror in the past are now present in many other genres such as family dramas (*Hereditary*), thrillers (*The Crimson Rivers*) and of course science-fiction (*Life*). If gore in particular used to be confined to B movies in the 1960's (*Blood Feast*), it turned into a key element of special effects in John Carpenter or David Cronenberg's productions in the 1980's (respectively *The Thing* or *Videodrome*), before becoming "un effet gore (a gore effect)" sprinkled here and there in big productions ranging from war movies (*Saving Private Ryan*) to thrillers (*Seven*).³⁰ As far as our discussion on horror is concerned, the hybridity and/or the variations on a familiar model can help bring a wider audience to the horror genre by altering its semantics and/or syntax to please a larger crowd, hence the popularity of recent movies like *Get Out* (2017) or *Midsommar* (2019). On the other hand, as a detailed analysis of audience reception will attest to in chapter 6, the repetitiveness of genre also contributes to fandom, especially when it comes to horror:

Genre films look past the finitude of each screening (for example, a particular movie's denouement), operating instead on the 'cumulative' effect of the

²⁹ In his book, Altman likes taking the example of westerns for their semantic and syntactic traits are easily recognizable. To justify his dual approach, he argues that the *Star Wars* saga shares the same syntax with westerns (conquest and invasion) but is semantically distinct because of its location in space.

³⁰ Philippe Rouyer, *Le Cinéma Gore: Une Esthétique Du Sang*, (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 85.

repetition of motifs, images, and narratives across other similar films. The foregrounding of intertextual repetition, apart from resulting in the ‘predictability’ of genre films, also makes for a different kind of audience pleasure for aficionados of the genre: however much the horror-film lover hopes to find newness, innovation, difference, and surprise, this desire for novelty and difference is always enfolded within the already-known.³¹

France’s fairly small number of horror films and horror directors throughout its filmographic history has not permitted the accumulation and repetition needed to strengthen a relationship with domestic and international audiences.

French genres arguably started with the birth of cinema, caught between the *vues* ((views) of the Lumière brothers and the tricks of Georges Méliès: real life on one side, magic on the other. Nonetheless, Tom Gunning finds common ground in both types of films according to his definition of ‘cinema of attractions’: a cinema that “displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator.”³² At the time, both the Lumière brothers and Méliès intended to captivate an audience that was only beginning its acquaintance with camera work. This notion of ‘cinema of attractions’ does not only apply to early cinema; it will prove particularly relevant to our study of the New French Extremity with its intention to shock the spectators out of their passivity.

Due to the influx of American films entering international markets, especially after the Second World War, many genres are now considered transnational and transhistorical. Nonetheless, singular subgenres emerged across the globe based on national specificities.

³¹ Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 220.

³² Tom Gunning in Wanda Strauven, ed., *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, Film Culture in Transition (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 382.

Nowadays streaming platforms make available national subgenres that were not necessarily known to a global audience in the past (for instance Korean dramas). Who knows whether French vaudeville *La Septième Compagnie* would be trending on Netflix if it was released today? Although the film series was a huge success in France in the 1970's, it was deemed too anchored in French heritage to be exported abroad. Whether a film is too culturally marked to be popular across borders remains an important question in the case of French horror since it is one of the many arguments used against the genre to justify its lack of appreciation internationally and even domestically. Part of the answer resides in the fact that French genres do not represent a steady domestic market. Apart from comedy that continually tops the French box-office, other genres face unpredictable reception in theaters:

Le manque d'un marché stable, l'absence de structures fermes de production expliquent que les genres du ciné français ont tendance à ne pas se solidifier, à se ramifier et se diversifier rapidement en une multitude de sous-genres ou de séries.

The lack of a stable market and the absence of solid production structures explain why French genres tend to be fragile and branch out into a multitude of subgenres or cycles.³³

However, ever since Méliès' special effects, French films have been tainted with bits of fantastic, horror and mystery, admittedly not contributing to a fully developed horror tradition, but allowing the fantastic to be ever present throughout French film history. To talk about French horror is first and foremost to talk about the French fantastic.

³³ Moine, 172.

2.2 Fantastique!

The fantastic as a genre has often been wrongly translated as ‘fantasy’. Where fantasy can be defined as something that is not real, the fantastic is home to uncertainty and hesitation. Tzvetan Todorov’s definition is the most commonly quoted to explain what the fantastic truly includes:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphs, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us.³⁴

The reader/spectator witnesses the hesitation of the character through their focalization, torn between sticking to the conventions of reality and demystifying the supernatural by a rational explanation, or accepting the supernatural as against the laws of nature. The moment of the fantastic resides in this hesitation, but as soon as the character makes a decision, the fantastic turns either into the real (if there is a plausible explanation) or the marvelous (if the laws are otherworldly). Following this definition, films would only be fantastic when the hesitation remains at the end, for instance in *Cat People* (1942) or *Valley of Love* (2015). Both films are open-ended and the spectator is free to interpret them as they please: is Irena a panther? Did the dead son reappear? A majority of films cross the marvelous line as in *The Sixth Sense* (1999) or *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), or resolve the enigma with a rational explanation as is often the case in thrillers.³⁵

³⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 25.

³⁵ Moine, 40.

Contrary to the fantastic which can evolve from surreal to real and vice-versa, the horror genre is cornered into a reality that cannot be changed: “[...] l’horreur se caractérise par la suspension de l’action au profit d’une situation bloquée qui demeure la même du début à la fin (horror is characterized by the suspension of action to focus on a still situation that remains the same from start to finish).”³⁶ Dufour argues that there is little development in a horror film since the characters cannot change what is happening to them until the final resolution; all they can do is try to save themselves but the threat will not go away mid-movie. Confirming what has been previously said about the repetitive horror tropes and symbols as part of the semantic-syntactic approach, Dufour compares horror cinema to a nightmare that would repeat itself. Nightmares are meant to be scary, shocking or disgusting, then so are horror films. While the fantastic builds an atmosphere, horror resorts to effects to dismantle the spectator’s passive gaze. Even though fear is a subjective concept – we are all scared of different things –, horror films intend to make the spectator react one way or another. In that sense, they are more frontal, direct and explicit than the fantastic which relies on ambiguity. By showing rather than suggesting, “le cinéma d’horreur n’est pas un cinéma bavard, mais au contraire un cinéma qui privilégie l’image à titre de vecteur d’informations (horror cinema does not talk much; it rather privileges the image to pass information).”³⁷ There is no debating whether the situation is real or not, the threat is present and it needs to be neutralized. However, threats and fears do not stay the same from one era to the next. Monsters from the 1930’s no longer frighten contemporary audiences, and werewolves and

³⁶ Éric Dufour, *Le Cinéma d’horreur et Ses Figures*, Lignes d’art (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2006), 56.

³⁷ Dufour, 197.

vampires have even become objects of desire with television series *Teen Wolf* and the *Twilight* saga.³⁸

Defining horror is not an easy task: symbols and images, shock effects, semantics, camera style, the list is long and yet can never fully encompass the manner in which the horror genre has evolved over the past century. Based on the idea that horror films embody a society's current fears, American academics and critics have drawn from cultural studies and the intersectionality of gender and race studies to analyze in depth what is at stake in the genre.³⁹ The fantastic has long been a crucial element of cinema, often playing with illusions, dreams and the uncanny. It is important to make a difference between the fantastic as described by Todorov and what it actually constitutes as a cinema genre. As I previously mentioned, very few films maintain Todorov's idea of the fantastic in their entirety. More often than not, they opt for the rational or the surreal, and yet they are still categorized as fantastic films. Gilles Menegaldo's definition may be more appropriate to understand what the fantastic as a genre has meant throughout its history:

Le fantastique concerne la représentation d'un irréprésentable dans un contexte aussi vraisemblable que possible. Il constitue le paradoxe d'un irréel, d'un inexistant, qui pourtant nous affecte, nous fascine et nous terrifie, car il touche à la part d'altérité, d'inexplicable dans le tissu même du réel, dans la nature de l'objet le plus ordinaire, au cœur de l'identité humaine.

The fantastic implies the representation of the unrepresentable in a context as plausible as possible. It constitutes the paradox of the unreal, the inexistent

³⁸ Martine Roberge, *L'Art de Faire Peur: Des Récits Légendaires Aux Films d'Horreur*, 57.

³⁹ Because this dissertation is focused on France and most literature about the horror genre concentrates on American films, this chapter will not develop any further the various psycho-social approaches that have been taken to define the genre. For further reading on the subject, please refer to: Robin Wood on the *Horror Film: Collected Essays and Reviews*, Noel Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror*, Barry Grant's *The Dread of Difference*, Harry Benshoff's *Monsters in the Closet*, among many others.

which yet affects us, fascinates us and terrifies us, because it touches upon the alterity and the unexplainable within the real, within the nature of the most ordinary object, within human identity.⁴⁰

Although Menegaldo's words remain close to Todorov's, they also bring to light another aspect of French fantastic films: they prefer humans to monsters and ghosts. Menegaldo's insistence on the possible and the ordinary can be read in relation with Julia Kristeva's essay on abjection in her *Powers of Horror*: humans are often terrified and at the same time fascinated by the most familiar and trivial things.⁴¹ "Unrepresentable" may be another word for unconceivable and/or unwatchable, just like "unexplainable" may deal with the morally dubious rather than the marvelous. Because genre is a malleable notion in the French film industry, the fantastic has progressively become an umbrella term for any genre that does not depict the everyday reality of today's society, thus including horror and science-fiction as well. A detailed analysis of the history of the French fantastic will highlight its evolution from tricks and magic of the 1910's to fairytales of the 1940's to visceral horror of the early 2000's.

2.3 A Trip to the Imagination

The visual heritage of French horror films dates back to the *Grand Guignol* theater and its performances of macabre and bloody plays from 1897 to 1962 (until the real horrors of World War

⁴⁰ Gilles Menegaldo in Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb, ed., *L'Invention d'un Genre*, 47.

⁴¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

It made faux horror not so enjoyable anymore). Its most famous actress Paula Maxa was nicknamed the most assassinated woman in the world for her numerous on-stage deaths. Loosely based on the actress's life, French director Franck Ribière's 2018 film *The Most Assassinated Woman in the World* plays with the confusion between the murders taking place on the theater stage and their reproductions in real life. Though anachronistic because he first mentioned it in a 1934 essay, Antonin Artaud's 'theater of cruelty' emphasizes the affect triggered by such morbid entertainment, when he explains:

The theater will never find itself again - i.e., constitute a means of true illusion - except by furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism, pour out, on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior.⁴²

Theater, and particularly displays of violence, should unleash the spectators' subconscious and confront them with their deepest dreams and fears, far from the escapism that theater is supposed to represent.⁴³ Artaud's stance on the power of images bears witness to two different types of spectatorship that are still relevant today: on one hand the spectator who remains at an exterior level and only embraces horror for its potential to entertain, forgetting what they experienced as soon as they exit the theater; on the other hand the spectator who submits to the depiction of violence on an interior level, whether physiologically or psychologically, turning the film or play into an object for reflection and contemplation.

Georges Méliès is considered to be the first French fantastic director. He also came from a theatrical background directing illusion shows before turning to film production with his own

⁴² Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1958), 92.

⁴³ Alexandra West, *Films of the New French Extremity: Visceral Horror and National Identity*, 10.

studio Star Film in 1896. His films remained inspired by theatrical compositions with the use of special effects elaborated with optical and mechanical devices to give the illusion of magic. In addition to developing special effects, he also perfected techniques of field depth, framing and editing, as his most famous work *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) demonstrates. From the comic of costumed performers to the macabre of severed heads and ghosts, Méliès' sketches played with fantasy "within the semantic domain of illustration, expecting the audience to know the story already and enjoy its decorative elaboration."⁴⁴ Often set in opposition to the documentary realism of the Lumière brothers, their films worked rather in complementarity, with real life on one side and illustrated fantasy on the other. However, the transition to narrative cinema resulted in the audience's weariness towards the stage format. Despite international distribution and recognition, Méliès' self-made work was "under threat from industrialized approaches to the medium", especially from Charles Pathé and Léon Gaumont's productions.⁴⁵ Indeed, as the relationship between producers, distributors and exhibitors settled down in 1907 – films were no longer played only in fairs or cafés –, France became the biggest exporter of films with Pathé selling more French films in the United States than American studios on their own territory.⁴⁶ Georges Méliès' impressive achievement in special effects became obsolete in the face of the fast-growing cinema industry, which forced him to stop his production in 1912. When two-reelers became standard – meaning that films were now two-reel long –, tricks and special effects needed to be included into a larger dramatic structure, which made way for the serial work of Louis Feuillade.

⁴⁴ Ian Christie in Michael Temple and Michael Witt, eds., *The French Cinema Book*, 31.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, *Histoire du cinéma français*, 3rd ed, la collection universitaire de poche Cinéma, image (Paris: Colin, 2011), 18.

Critics of today see the films of Louis Feuillade as a hybrid between the Lumière brothers and Méliès, calling them “réalisme fantastique” ou “fantastique social” – note that throughout the history of the French fantastic an adjective will often be added to the genre.⁴⁷ From its beginning, the fantastic played with generic identities:

The description of Feuillade’s work by the use of contradictory, ambivalent, or dualistic language (the real/fantastic, everyday/marvelous, tender/violent) speaks to the difficulty in locating his films within a particular genre, style, ideological, or, indeed, metaphysical frame of reference.⁴⁸

The novelty in Feuillade was to make the bad guy the hero, which placed him as the precursor of horror films where the evil figure often stands as the main character and the main attraction of the film.⁴⁹ Once again inheriting from the Grand Guignol, the crimes committed in the series *Fantomas* (1913-1914) and *The Vampires* (1915-1916) were aestheticized and exaggerated to resemble the sensational violence of the *fait divers* (news items about accidents and crimes). Such exhibition of violence resorted in censorship, even though what truly bothered the public order was mostly the mockery of the police and the justice system as the heroes of Feuillade would go unpunished, which in the end did not prevent both film series from being popular successes.⁵⁰ When Léon Gaumont asked his then artistic director Feuillade to adapt five films from the book series *Fantomas*, his first intention was to compete with American productions; little did

⁴⁷ Jean-Luc Douin and Daniel Couty, eds., *Histoire(s) de Films Français* (Paris: Bordas, 2005), 34.

⁴⁸ Vicki Callahan, *Zones of Anxiety: Movement, Musidora, and the Crime Serials of Louis Feuillade*, Contemporary Approaches to Film and Television Series (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 20.

⁴⁹ Douin and Couty, *Histoire(s) de Films Français*, 27.

⁵⁰ René Prédal, *Histoire du cinéma français: des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Nouveau Monde éd, 2013), 46.

he know that this adaptation would launch Feuillade's career as a director and eventually make him the first auteur of French film history.

The impressionist cinema of the 1920's saw the experimenting of film techniques and the manipulation of images to portray the internal state of characters. Through a variety of lightings, camera movements and angles, and editing patterns, directors like Germaine Dulac deviated from narrative-driven films of the time to focus on the abstract, as in the dreamlike sequences of an unhappily married woman in *The Smiling Madame Beudet* (1923), or the rumors of an evil-sent landowner in *Le Diable dans la ville* (1925). Jean Epstein's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) also embodied the search for subjectivity with the "stylistic interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe story, creating fear and suspense out of atmosphere and imagery rather than plot."⁵¹ Like Méliès two decades before, Epstein was retelling a well-known story so that the spectator could enjoy the atmosphere and the fantastic illustration of the story rather than the story itself.

However, impressionism did not keep some directors from combining avant-garde visual style with plot, as did Abel Gance who inaugurated the moving camera and the three-way screen split in *Napoléon* (1927). His 1931 film *End of the World* recounts a scientist's discovery that a comet is about to collide with Earth and his will to proclaim a "universal republic" to manage the forthcoming tragedy. This film is of particular interest to our discussion about genre because in addition to mixing politics and history as Gance usually does, it introduces science-fiction as a serious matter – unlike Méliès' comical and fantasist sketches in *The Impossible Voyage* (1904). Science-fiction possibly being France's least preferred genre to produce, especially space movies,

⁵¹ West, 35.

End of the World remains one of the most relevant references in science-fiction in French film history.

Despite his Danish nationality, Carl Theodor Dreyer worked in France and cannot be ignored in the timeline of the French fantastic genre, most importantly for *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) – that fans of Pascal Laugier’s *Martyrs* (2008) will inevitably cite as one of his influences – , as well as for his 1932 film *Vampyr*. The gothic atmosphere in this story of a student falling under the curse of a vampire stands out with its overexposed exterior shots, its superimposition of shadows and ghostly figures, and especially the uncommon point of view shot from a dead person inside their casket. In spite of its commercial failure at the time, *Vampyr* met critical recognition later on, marking a rare incursion from French productions into the world of horror figures like vampires.

The end of the 1920’s also marked the intrusion of dreams and madness in surrealist films whose most famous ambassador was Luis Buñuel. In his surrealist essay *An Andalusian Dog* (1929) that he directed with Salvador Dali, the editing of unrelated sequences upset the rational balance that could be found in narrative films of the time, besides confronting taboos. Indeed, the controversial scene of the eyeball slit with a razor was meant to shock but also to point out the absurdity of a fake image compared to the real atrocities committed during World War I.⁵² Such extremity was also present in *Age of Gold* (1930) to denounce modern life, the bourgeoisie and the Catholic church as shows the final image of women’ scalps nailed to a cross. If the violence of the New French Extremity made an impact in the 2000’s, a look back to the past, and especially Buñuel’s work, demonstrates how the limits of extremity were already being pushed seventy years

⁵² Douin and Couty, 70.

before. Buñuel was thus no stranger to censorship: at the time, prefects and right-wing activists hold enough power to ban the exhibition of *Age of Gold* – nowadays only the National Centre for Cinema and the Moving Image (CNC) can make such decisions, even though right-wing leaders keep a significant influence (see chapter 4).

Against all odds, the Second World War and the German occupation contributed to the prosperity of French cinema since American films were banned. The French mode of production, seen as “un compromis souple entre économie libérale et dirigisme étatique (a flexible compromise between liberal economics and state interventionism)”, allowed the film industry to persist where the rest of Europe struggled.⁵³ The intervention of the state, which is still an important component of today’s system, enabled the economy of French cinema to keep its head above water, while at the same time maintaining a tight grasp on what type of films were being made. Amidst the popularity of comedies, filmed theater performances, literary adaptations and documentaries, the already little room left for the genre thinned down even more in the context of the war and its aftermath. The *films noirs* and poetic realism of the 1930’s – for example Marcel Carné’s *Port of Shadows* (1938) and Jean Vigo’s *L’Atalante* (1934) – already played with the darker side of life without introducing explicit fantastic or horrific elements. On one hand, it seemed that the supernatural was removed from cinema as an attempt to feel closer to the reality of the war; on the other hand, the marvelous functioned as an escape from that same reality. Jean Cocteau’s films *Beauty and the Beast* (1946) and *Orpheus* (1950) used fairytales and mythology to design an oneiric and poetic world where the fantastic would be more reassuring than frightening:

Cette période expose une féerie et des ambiances poétiques qui avaient une fonction tranquillisante, euphorisante même, l’urgence de la fable et de la

⁵³ Jeancolas, *Histoire du cinéma français*, 58.

rêverie jouant son rôle en cette période de reconstruction socialement et économiquement difficile.

This era featured fairy and poetic atmospheres which served a reassuring, even exhilarating, function; the urgency of the fable and the reverie played a key role during the difficult social and economic reconstruction.⁵⁴

Along with other directors like René Clair and his *Beauties of the Night* (1952), Cocteau gathered millions of spectators around an escapist cinematic universe, far from the grimness of post-war France and the unforgettable remains of Nazism.

2.4 And Horror Was Born

The atrocities of World War II marked a turning point in the history of the fantastic genre in France: the transition to horror. While others would find shelter in poetic realism or fairytales, directors Henri-Georges Clouzot and Georges Franju injected the ambient tension into their films, asking spectators to face upfront the evil of humankind instead of looking away. As early as 1943, Clouzot was bidding on human weakness and cowardice in *The Raven* to tell the story of a small town beset by a series of anonymous letters. Banned from making films for a few years after his collaboration with Nazi-owned studio Continental, the director released his biggest hit in 1953, *The Wages of Fear*, about the long haul of four men driving trucks full of explosives on mountain roads. The film sold almost seven million tickets in France and won the Golden Bear in Berlin and the Palme d'Or in Cannes the same year. However, for the horror fandom, he is best known for *Les Diaboliques* (1955): a wife and a mistress murder their lover, but paranoia sets in when strange

⁵⁴ Claire Forest in Gimello-Mesplomb, *L'Invention d'un Genre*, 93.

events lead them to think he could still be alive. A thriller at heart, the film yet included horrific elements, especially towards the end in a daunting scene bound to be remembered. *Les Diaboliques* is said to have been a major influence for Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) which happens to include one of the most memorable murder scenes in the history of cinema.

Psycho is often cited as the landmark of horror for it moved fear from an outside threat to an inner state, as well as switching identification from the victim to the victimizer, two components that are now commonplace in horror movies but were revolutionary at the time. Although the film was introduced as a "Hitchcock thriller with a twist", it was the first to mix sex and violence, once again a combination that will become the trademark of Jean Rollin or the New French Extremity decades later: "*Psycho* is the film that first linked an erotic display of sexual attractions to a shocking display of sexualized violence."⁵⁵ However, *Psycho* did not only make history for its plot twist and its famous psychopath. Alfred Hitchcock used publicity photos of a terrified audience watching the film – a stunt that *Paranormal Activity* will imitate in 2007 – to start a marketing strategy that will become a reference for future horror films: spectators have to be surprised and upset. The director also insisted on the importance of discipline to preserve the suspense and the fear, so he asked spectators to arrive on time and not spoil the twist, a strange habit at the time but a common one for respectful filmgoers today.

Despite the connection between Clouzot and Hitchcock, I would argue that Georges Franju's *Eyes Without a Face* (1960) was France's own game changer. Franju was an important figure in the history of French cinema not only as a director but as the cofounder of the Cinémathèque, a library, film archive and movie theater where screenings and retrospectives are

⁵⁵ Linda Williams in Gledhill and Williams, *Reinventing Film Studies*, 359.

organized daily. First acclaimed for his documentary on slaughterhouses *Blood of the Beasts* (1948), Franju initiated French viewers to soft gore with *Eyes Without a Face* and the face transplant scene – three years before Herschell Gordon Lewis released *Blood Feast* (1963) which became the ultimate reference for splatter gore. Far from falling into the same *grand-guignolesque* excess, Franju’s camera did not explicitly show blood and flesh, leaving most of the surgery off-screen while only grabbing the sound of the victims’ screams. The horror of the film resides in the repetition of the surgical act and thus raises the question of who the monster is: Christiane, disfigured under her mask, or her surgeon father, murdering innocent young women to give his daughter a new face? As Adam Lowenstein explains, “[...] the roles of Christiane as victimized and Genessier as victimizer include complex, double-edged connotations.”⁵⁶ The reversal of moral values, the complexity of Christiane and Genessier’s dilemma, added to the horrific atmosphere, complicated the reception of the film.

Indeed, *Eyes Without a Face* was not greeted with popular success at its 1960 release. Spectators were split into two categories: the ones who could not go past the horror, and the ones who were able to appreciate the lyricism of the *mise-en-scène*. Franju himself qualified his work of both “film d’angoisse” and “film fantastique poétique”.^{57 58} Adding an adjective to the notion of fantastic continues to be a habit in the French industry, as though the fantastic could not be a good enough genre on its own. As a recent example, Just Philippot describes his own film *The*

⁵⁶ Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (Columbia University Press, 2005), 42.

⁵⁷ Nadia Al Salti in Gimello-Mesplomb, *L’Invention d’un Genre*, 70.

⁵⁸ “Film d’angoisse” literally means a film that causes anguish; it is not necessarily a horror film, it can also be a thriller.

Swarm (2020) as “fantastique social”, since it tells the story of a single mother struggling to make ends meet with her cricket farm until she makes the disastrous decision to feed the insects with her own blood.⁵⁹ Such diversification around the category of the fantastic tends to impede a stable definition of the genre. The French fantastic does not necessarily seek to frighten but to disturb and cause anguish by inserting evil doings into daily life.⁶⁰ Following the reassuring fairytale trend, films like Clouzot’s and Franju’s opted for realism rather than the marvelous to show what (wo)men were capable of. Unlike the more diverse Anglo-Saxon tradition, French monsters have almost always been human; the fear of the ‘Other’ is directed towards humans and their evil actions.

Nevertheless, this shift to horror did not keep directors from experimenting with other genres. Chris Marker, known for his documentaries, directed *La Jetée* in 1963, an experimental science fiction short film using only still photos to narrate a time-travel event. Jean-Luc Godard also made a couple incursions in sci-fi with *Alphaville* (1965) and in horror/comedy with *Weekend* (1967), Alain Resnais with sci-fi film *I Love You, I Love You* (1968), and Jacques Demy with *Donkey Skin* (1970). In the 1960’s and 1970’s, genre films became more popular in Paris and in the provinces thanks to the increase of ciné-clubs, screenings and retrospectives in theaters or associations, as well as specialized magazines such as *L’Écran Fantastique* (since 1969) and *Mad Movies* (since 1972).⁶¹ The box-office hits of *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) – which made ten times its budget with 1.3 million spectators – and *The Exorcist* (1974) with 5.4 million spectators elevated

⁵⁹ I had the chance to attend *The Swarm*’s premiere in Nantes, France, months before the film was released in theaters because of the pandemic, and in the presence of Just Philippot.

⁶⁰ Nadia Al Salti in Gimello-Mesplomb, *L’Invention d’un Genre*, 75.

⁶¹ Gimello-Mesplomb, 213.

horror to a genre worthy of entertainment and critical analysis. However, the enthusiasm was mostly directed towards American or British horror films.

Jean Rollin was one of the few French directors to feature creatures like vampires and zombies in his films, in between working in the porn industry for the paychecks. This double career barred him from any recognition, but his long takes and long shots of castles, beaches or gardens looking like *tableaux* contributed to “the blurring of art and artifice.”⁶² Alexandra West describes his work as “dreamlike disjointed narratives, beautiful nude women and bloodshed”, mixing erotic and horror to arouse as much as to disgust.⁶³ From *The Shiver of the Vampires* (1971) to *The Living Dead Girl* (1982), Rollin’s films gained in plot coherence which made them more credible and thus more enjoyable for some spectators, while others regretted the more frivolous but enigmatic stories of his debut.⁶⁴ The director’s taste for horrific figures was unfortunately not enough for French spectators to grow fonder of French horror films. The small presence and lack of popularity of the fantastic in the French industry, compared to the titans of comedy and drama, can be attributed to various factors throughout its recent history and not only the competition with American cinema:

L'asymétrie d'information sur la qualité des films en circulation, les fréquents débats sur l'identification du genre, l'absence de stars, les mauvais résultats des films au box-office, le caractère expérimental de certains essais prenant pied sur le fantastique et la science-fiction mais mal compris par le public et la critique (Robbe-Grillet, Godard, etc.), les rapprochements fréquents entre ciné fantastique et ciné érotique dans les années 70 (Rollin, etc.) [...] ont conduit au désintérêt progressif des spectateurs et des professionnels, et à un

⁶² Colin Odell in Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik, eds., *Alternative Europe: Eurotrash and Exploitation Cinema since 1945*, Alterimage (London: Wallflower, 2004), 160.

⁶³ West, 41.

⁶⁴ Colin Odell in Mathijs and Mendik, *Alternative Europe*, 171.

rétrécissement de ce marché dans les décennies 80, ce qui s'est soldé par sa quasi-disparition des écrans français dans les années 90.

The unequal information on the quality of available films, the frequent debates on genre identification, the absence of movie stars, the bad results at the box-office, the experimental approach of a few essays using the fantastic and science-fiction but misunderstood by the audience and the critics (Robbe-Grillet, Godard, etc...), the closeness between fantastic and erotic cinema in the 70's (Rollin, etc...) [...] led to the progressive disinterest from spectators and professionals, and to the narrowing of the market in the 80's which caused its almost-disappearance from French screens in the 90's.⁶⁵

For each decade, only a few directors and/or a few fantastic/horror films can be cited, which attests to the obstacles that the genre has met since the birth of cinema. Popular at times, rejected often, only appreciated if coming from the other side of the Atlantic, the fantastic hardly managed to gain a loyal audience. If Méliès, Cocteau or Franju are internationally recognized *auteurs*, their disparate filmographies could not on their own seal the fate of the fantastic in France.

As Gimello-Mesplomb's previous quote stated, the 90's were a rather dry period for the genre *per se*. Instead, fantastic elements were blended into the most popular genre in France, comedy. The gigantic success of *Les Visiteurs* (1993) with nearly 14 million French spectators shows how an audience can be receptive to the fantastic in a comical setting; indeed, the time-travelling occurring in the film thanks to a magic potion only serves as background to the humorous encounter between the medieval main characters and their contemporary counterparts. The encounter with the Other has often been used in French cinema as a crowd-pleasing basis for comedy – *Welcome to the Sticks* (2008) is after all the highest-grossing French film domestically –, but barely seemed attractive in horror. Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro turned to dark comedy with *Delicatessen* (1991), anchoring cannibalism in satire, while Belgian dark comedy *Man Bites*

⁶⁵ Gimello-Mesplomb, 20.

Dog (1992) followed an entertaining serial killer played by comic Benoit Poelvoorde in a mockumentary style. Adding to the trend of qualifying the fantastic of ‘realistic’, ‘poetic’ or ‘social’ to make it more meaningful, Claude Forrest regrets that the genre only seemed legitimate and approachable when hybridized:

Ce parti pris français de mettre le fantastique du côté de la comédie est symptomatique du tropisme de ses intervenants, comme s'ils se condamnaient d'avance à être risibles en s'attaquant à ce genre et prévenaient ainsi tout critique.

When French film professionals choose to include the fantastic only in comedies, it is symptomatic of their timidity; the genre will be laughed at rather than be criticized.⁶⁶

Nonetheless, it is important to mention that Jean-Pierre Jeunet went on to direct *The City of Lost Children* (1995) and *Alien Resurrection* (1997), both films respectively fulfilling fantastic and horrific codes. The use of comedy as a springboard to make the fantastic more accessible does not have to be perceived negatively, especially when genres have become so hybrid today, but it cannot be denied that during the second half of the 20th century the French film industry did not leave much room for genres like the fantastic, science fiction and horror to grow on their own.

The late 1990's-early 2000's brought about major change for horror made in France. The new generation of directors who grew up with American horror classics from the 1970's and 1980's were now ready to make their own films.⁶⁷ Alexandre Aja released his first feature-length *Furia* in 1999, followed by the famous *High Tension* in 2003, while Christophe Gans directed a

⁶⁶ Claire Forrest in Gimello-Mesplomb, 91.

⁶⁷ Mathieu Guilloux, *Le Cinéma de genre, la règle française et les salles Art et Essai* (Masters' Thesis), April 2018,

segment of the horror anthology *Necronomicon* (1993) before releasing *Brotherhood of the Wolf* (2001). Knight Grégoire de Fronsac and his Native American friend Mani – who happens to be a martial arts enthusiast – investigates the killings of a mysterious wolf-monster preying on the villagers of reconstituted 18th century France in the middle of a coup to overthrow monarchy. This imbroglio of fantastic meets history meets politics meets martial arts may sound like a recipe for disaster, but the film sold more than 5 million tickets in France, and made about 70 million dollars worldwide, turning it into one of the highest-grossing French films internationally.⁶⁸ Against all odds, such success can be explained by the displacement of Hollywood tropes to a national context dear to French and foreign spectators, the Revolution:

Le Pacte des Loups utilise donc les moyens et l'arsenal technique des blockbusters américains et déplace des genres néo-hollywoodiens dans un cadre référentiel doublement national, géographique (le Massif Central) et historique et culturel (la Révolution française).

Brotherhood of the Wolf uses the budget and technique of American blockbusters to move post-classical Hollywood genres into a referential frame that is national, geographical (the Massif Central region), historical and cultural (the French Revolution).⁶⁹

Brotherhood of the Wolf is a good example to show the limits of the semantic-syntactic approach and the need Altman felt to add 'pragmatic' to the equation since genres can be read and interpreted otherwise by spectators who make different associations with semantics and syntax: for some spectators, it is a horror film, but for others, it is a gory history movie.⁷⁰ This new space of negotiation emphasizes the dynamics between "le régime auctorial qui propose et le régime

⁶⁸ All box office statistics can be found on <http://jpbox-office.com/>

⁶⁹ Moine, 115.

⁷⁰ Altman, 207.

spectatoriel qui dispose (what the auteur offers and what the spectator takes)”, thus reinforcing the idea that genre is a moving concept.⁷¹

A less visible and much less discussed turn to horror had actually already taken place in the early 1990’s with the work of Gaspar Noé and Jérôme Boivin, respectively for medium-length *Carne* (1991) – whose story was expanded in *I Stand Alone* (1999) – and *Baxter* (1989):

En orientant les histoires vers une horreur sociétale et clinique (parfois à la lisière du polar ou du film noir) plutôt que vers le fantastique traditionnel, Gaspar Noé et Jérôme Boivin préparent le chemin de la nouvelle génération des réalisateurs français de films d'horreur, moins exigeants en termes techniques ou de logistique, mais plus enclins à conférer une identité nouvelle, sans doute aussi plus réaliste et plus violente, au cinéma de genre français.

By orienting the stories towards societal and clinical horror (sometimes closer to crime movies or *films noirs*) rather than the fantastic as we know it, Gaspar Noé and Jérôme Boivin pave the way for the newer generation of French horror filmmakers, less demanding in terms of technique or logistics, but more inclined to give a realistic and violent identity to French genre films.⁷²

With respectively the stories of an incestuous father in *Carne* and a murderous dog in *Baxter*, Noé and Boivin did not hesitate to step into the most tabooed thoughts and behaviors of today’s society. Their cinematic violence relied more on unease and discomfort than fear and suspense. Micciche’s comment on the directors’ limited technique and logistics trickles down from the difficulties for horror films to be financed and produced in France (see chapter 3), but it is important to note that the bleakness of Noé and Boivin’s work contrasted with the fantastic tradition that had been permeating the French industry so far, and paved the way for the New French Extremity to become the phenomenon of the 2000’s.

⁷¹ Moine, 87.

⁷² Jean-Marc Micciche in Gimello-Mesplomb, 116.

2.5 The New French Extremity

The NFE started as an art-house movement in the 1990's merging horror and art aesthetics.

James Quandt first coined the term in 2014 and defines it as such:

[...] a cinema suddenly determined to break every taboo, to wade in rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and subject it to all manner of penetration, mutilation and defilement.⁷³

Targeting films such as Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* (2003), Catherine Breillat's *Romance* (1999) or Marina de Van's *In My Skin* (2002), Quandt privileged form over content, thus overpassing the deeper meaning of each film he criticized superficially. There are indeed a certain number of differences notably in style and intention between horror and extreme films, but Quandt uses them interchangeably to develop his argument.⁷⁴ Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall define more accurately this cinematic trend as a combination of art cinema aesthetics with shock tactics often proper to porn or gore, showing a complete disregard for genre boundaries.⁷⁵ Searching for the affective involvement of spectators through explicitly violent and/or sexual scenes, extreme films annihilate the passive gaze in favor of a haptic experience where the audience becomes complicit, as for instance during the ten-minute-long rape scene of *Irreversible* (2002) shot with a static camera. Caught between the intellectualism of art cinema and the viscosity of horror films,

⁷³ Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, eds., *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 18.

⁷⁴ Every chapter of this dissertation, including the introduction, explains why my research focuses on horror almost exclusively, only using extreme films as a means for comparison.

⁷⁵ Horeck and Kendall, *The New Extremism in Cinema*, 3.

extreme cinema resists categorization while questioning the morality of their spectatorship. Martine Beugnet calls it “un cinéma de sensation (a cinema of sensation)” while Tim Palmer opts for “un cinéma du corps (a cinema of the body)”, both agreeing on the sensory dimension of films that refuse to leave the spectators untouched.⁷⁶

Alexandra West argues that “before the New French Extremity, horror films were the bastard child of French cinema.”⁷⁷ If horror films have indeed struggled to find their place across the cinematic landscape of 20th century France, it is important to insist again on the difference between the trend of extreme cinema personified by Claire Denis and *Trouble Every Day* (2001) or Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh-Thi’s *Baise-moi* (2000), and the rebirth of horror films – which Denis Mellier calls more appropriately “néo-horreur” – with Alexandre Aja’s *High Tension*, Xavier Gens’s *Frontier(s)* (2007) or Pascal Laugier’s *Martyrs*.⁷⁸ West also claims that the New French Extremity “grew out of the instability that French citizens felt every day [...] the gravitation towards horror made perfect sense as France was living in horrific times.”⁷⁹ France has gone through much more horrific times than the 2000’s and yet horror cinema never materialized into a strong tradition, even with the New French Extremity; horror was only given more visibility, partly because extreme films were being discussed critically and academically. However, it is true that French horror films used the unrest occurring in France under Nicolas Sarkozy’s presidency to

⁷⁶ Martine Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and The Art of Transgression* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), and Tim Palmer, *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema*, Wesleyan Film (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

⁷⁷ West, 6.

⁷⁸ Denis Mellier, “Sur la dépouille des genres. Néohorreur dans le cinéma français,” *Cinémas 20* (2010).

⁷⁹ West, 175. The author refers to the social unrest of the early 2000’s in the French suburbs.

develop a political and/or societal stance as is the case for Kim Chapiron's *Sheitan* (2006), Julien Maury and Alexandre Bustillo's *Inside* (2007) or again *Frontier(s)*, similarly to Clouzot and Franju in their era. Some French horror films may anchor their plot in a realistic context at first but eventually turn to the supernatural or exaggerated characters and situations: zombies in *The Horde* (2009), ghouls in *The Pack* (2010) or an incestuous schizophrenic Vincent Cassel in *Sheitan*.

The 2010's showed continuity with the usual suspects of French horror: Laugier's *Ghostland* (2018), Gens's *Cold Skin* (2017) or Maury and Bustillo's unfortunate prequel *Leatherface* (2017). The main difference being that these three examples were all films shot in English and produced with foreign funds, a growing trend among French directors, weary of struggling with the French production system (extensively discussed in chapter 3).⁸⁰ Newcomers like Mathieu Turi (*Hostile* in 2017) and Coralie Fargeat (*Revenge* in 2017) also made the decision to shoot in English after being denied financial aid from the CNC. Both films were much bigger hits internationally than domestically and thus helped maintain the image of French horror abroad. When Julia Ducournau released *Raw* in 2016, the film's hybridity between an *auteur* identity and the horror of cannibalism proved that the New French Extremity was not going extinct. The gigantic critical success of *Raw*, once again at the international level, enabled a small change in perception towards horror, not only from critics and spectators, but also from the French industry itself, including the CNC who now seemed ready to open more doors for the genre (see chapter 3). The upcoming release of Just Philippot's *The Swarm* (2020) – which benefited from the CNC's

⁸⁰ I will not expand any further on recent French horror as the following four chapters will closely examine their production, distribution, exhibition and reception.

call for horror/fantastic projects and which keeps being compared to *Raw* – might help gauge whether the industry and the audience could welcome homemade horror in the long run.

This chapter showed that the difficulty for French horror to solidify and find long-lasting support might stem from its diversity and hybridization with the fantastic, as well as its many ups and downs faced with more popular genres and the cultural elitism of auteur films. Throughout more than a century of history, there were only moments where French horror was deemed worthy of consideration before fading out again and coming back another decade in another form. The following chapters will expose the many prejudices against French horror from an industrial point of view, from its production to its reception. They will reveal some of the biased mechanisms of the domestic film industry and the devastating consequences for a genre that is still waiting for its right to exist.

3.0 Financing and Production: A French Matter of Selection

In the 2000's, French horror became a hot topic due to the increased critical popularity of the New French Extremity, a cinematic trend that had the merit of reviving the horror genre in France and exporting it abroad, despite the differences between horror and extreme cinema that I have mentioned in the previous chapter.⁸¹ While a certain number of books and articles have been written about the historical, political and societal content of these horror and extreme films and/or their theoretical propensities, few of them – if any – took into proper consideration the industrial context in which the movies were produced.⁸² In fact, very little literature about the horror genre, French or international, pays attention to the preproduction of movies before they hit the theater screen. Whether in academic journals or press articles, horror has been studied and critiqued in a content-based or theory-based bubble that tends to ignore the challenging mechanisms of the film industry. Even though I do not intend to negate the hard and valid work of the authors who have been writing about French horror, I do want to emphasize the necessity to gain an insightful understanding of the French film industry in order to grasp in its totality the stakes and hardships of making a horror film in France. Considering the fairly equal weight of public and private funds in the French film industry, it goes without saying that the film director is very far from having the last word on how their own film will be financed, produced, distributed and exhibited. In the

⁸¹ The term New French Extremity is described in greater detail in chapter 2.

⁸² See Alexandra West's *Films of the New French Extremity: Visceral Horror and National Identity* (2016), Tim Palmer's *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema* (2011) or Martine Beugnet's *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (2007).

struggle between cinema as art and cinema as business, what space is left for horror, a genre that is often neither considered artistic/intellectual or profitable in France?

French film production is on the rise with a total of 237 French films produced in 2018, among which 79% benefited from state funds.⁸³ ⁸⁴ The financing of French films amounts to 957 million euros – including 890 million euros from French funds –, a stable yet decreasing number compared to previous years. Even though numbers and statistics about French film production and its financing are easily accessible on the CNC’s website (National Center for Cinema and The Moving Image), it seems to be much more difficult to obtain numbers on production costs and financing for specific film genres. While it is in the CNC’s best interest to boast about French cinema’s access to public funding since they are the ones financing it, they remain more secretive about which film genres benefit or not from this same funding. It has thus been so far very challenging to find accurate numbers on the French horror production of recent years. However, Unifrance’s 2016 report on the exportation of French cinema abroad sheds light on the production and release of French horror, albeit three minor details: their report incorporates fantasy and science-fiction in the same category, it analyzes data ranging from 1995 to 2014, and it only takes into account films that were released theatrically.⁸⁵ The numbers are still appalling: only 48 horror/fantasy/sci-fi films have been released in France during these 19 years. Compared to the 1,647 comedies and 750 dramas over the same time period, needless to say that horror does not

⁸³ All production statistics from 2018 can be found in the CNC’s report titled “La production cinématographique en 2018”, available at www.cnc.fr.

⁸⁴ This chapter was written before the pandemic forced theaters to close down.

⁸⁵ UniFrance is the official institution in charge of the international promotion of French cinema. Their 2016 report titled “Quels sont les genres du cinéma français qui s’exportent le mieux ?” is available at www.unifrance.org.

benefit from the same interest. The combination of French horror/fantasy/sci-fi only represents 2% of what domestic audiences watch, against 12% among international audiences which means that these three genres are performing better outside of France. It is also important to keep in mind that the years 1995-2014 included the release of two very successful films that could potentially distort the numbers: *The Fifth Element* (1997) and *Lucy* (2014) both directed by French director Luc Besson.

The first part of this chapter will function as a detailed explanation of what production entails in the current French film industry, from the role of a film's producer, to public funding from governmental institutions, and the significant weight of television in terms of financing. The association of all private and public actors of production will call attention to the many disadvantages that horror directors suffer from when looking for funding, which often results in much smaller budgets and much smaller distribution windows than initially needed. The second part of the chapter will include the case study of French horror director Alexandre Aja, his decision to work in the United States and his struggle to ensure decent production conditions and maintain his artistic freedom. A closer look at the difficulties that even successful directors tackle during the production process will inevitably raise doubt about the future of horror in France, despite several attempts over the last two decades from television channels and the CNC to offer a helping – yet very tiny – hand to the genre.

3.1 The Economy of Cinema

A proper analysis of any film industry requires empirical work based on numbers and statistics as well as professional testimonies, all included in the following chapter. In *L'économie du cinéma en 50 fiches*, Laurent Creton argues in favor of film studies that would take into better consideration industrial economics rather than solely focusing on cinema as an abstract art:

En ne souscrivant pas à la prévalence de l'interprétation esthétique des œuvres, les sciences sociales contribuent à la désidéologie de l'art : il n'est ni liberté pure, ni valeur absolue, et il peut être pensé pertinemment grâce à l'étude des acteurs, des institutions et de leurs interactions.

By refusing to favor the aesthetic interpretation of works of art, social sciences contribute to the de-idealization of art: it is neither pure freedom, nor absolute value, and it can only be examined pertinently thanks to the study of actors, institutions and their interactions.^{86 87}

However, any work willing to take distance from the aesthetics and thematic content of films to focus on the industry should also avoid the pitfall of analyzing raw numbers without the adequate context. All statistics – despite their objectivity – need to be anchored in a realistic contemporary context – here proper to France – which cannot deny the existence of subjective decisions within the network of film producers, official institutions, television channels, etc. While this dissertation relies partly on CNC's reports and other statistical records, it also bears in mind the subjectivity of financing decisions, rating decisions and preconceived ideas from producers, directors and spectators surrounding the horror genre. Subjectivity inevitably runs through some of the interviews and roundtables mentioned in this chapter, especially when directors feel

⁸⁶ Laurent Creton, *L'économie du cinéma en 50 fiches*, 5th edition, Focus cinéma (Paris: Armand Colin, 2016), 11.

⁸⁷ All translations are mine.

restrained in their creativity; however, the consensus met by many film professionals in the past few years is reason enough to connect the dots and dig deeper into the perception of horror in a country with very little tradition of the genre, unlike the United States or England.⁸⁸

Regarding the terminology, a *producteur délégué* (executive producer) does not only hold a key financial role by arranging funding; they are also responsible for any logistics of preproduction, production and postproduction – such as putting together a crew, coordinating writing and editing, making sure the film stays within budget and the allocated shooting time. They can delegate tasks to a *producteur exécutif* (line producer) who, however, cannot handle the finances and sales of the film.⁸⁹ As Laurent Creton describes: “le producteur a pour mission de gérer la relation entre le monde de la création artistique et celui des logiques économiques (the producer’s mission is to manage the relationship between the world of artistic creation and the world of finances).”⁹⁰ The producer is the person in charge of filling the gap between the creative freedom of the director/screenwriter and the reality of film financing. They are only financially responsible for what has not been funded by state aids and private parties. Unifrance reports that French producers only tend to contribute up to 20% of a film’s total budget.⁹¹ Indeed, French film production largely depends on pre-financing from external public and private funds. Public funds include automatic and selective aids from the CNC, tax cuts, regional funds and the European Cinema Support Fund; private funds encompass television presales, European or international

⁸⁸ See chapter 1 for a comparative history of the horror genre in France.

⁸⁹ The terminology – albeit typologically similar to English – carries different meanings in the American film industry, hence why I am using the French terms and their English equivalence in parentheses.

⁹⁰ Creton, *L'économie du cinéma en 50 fiches*, 95.

⁹¹ CNC, “La production cinématographique en 2018”.

coproduction funds and SOFICA (*Sociétés pour le Financement de l'Industrie Cinématographique et de l'Audiovisuel*) investment company funds.

The CNC's automatic aid was created on September 23, 1948 in an effort to help national cinema after the end of the Second World War and the wave of American films on the French market. The automatic aid consists of a tax on box office sales (now extended to video sales and television broadcast) regardless of film nationality, which is then redistributed for the production of new French films – which means that French films benefit from the success of other national cinemas as well. Despite its name, the automatic aid only benefited 79% of French films in 2018 because of eligibility criteria such as the producer's ability to reinvest their profits in a limited time, or the presence of foreign funds in case of a coproduction.⁹² The CNC's selective aid (*avances sur recettes*) was added on June 19, 1959 to facilitate production with a system of advances that need to be reimbursed after the film's exhibition. The selection is based on quality, creativity and the potential commercial success so the aid can be reimbursed. While the existence of the automatic and selective aids has not been called into question because they are both extremely important to the wellbeing of French cinema, film professionals have expressed their concern over the type of films that keep benefitting from them.⁹³

Jean des Forêts, producer for the Petit Film company and one of the producers of *Raw*, is the first to admit that *Raw* did not face the challenges that many other French horror films encounter during the financing process, partly thanks to the selective aid it received. He claims:

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Concerns over this matter were raised for instance during the CNC-SACD (*Société des auteurs et compositeurs dramatiques*) public roundtable on April 25, 2017. The participants and their opinions are discussed throughout this chapter.

“J’ai le sentiment que ces films sont exclus, n’ont pas le droit à une sortie salle digne de ce nom, ni même de place au sein des films français (I have the feeling that such films are excluded as though they did not belong in the theaters or even fit in with other French films).”⁹⁴ This statement needs a bit of nuancing for several reasons. First, although it is true that only one horror film in 16 years benefited from the selective aid, other projects with horrific or fantastic elements made the list: Quentin Dupieux’s *Deerskin* (2019), Gaspar Noé’s *Climax* (2018), Yann Gonzalez’s *Knife + Heart* (2018), Gilles Marchand’s *Dans la forêt* (2016) or Robin Campillo’s *They Came Back* (2004). Second, Thierry Lounas, producer for the Capricci company, contends that : “on ne peut pas affirmer que le CNC n’aime pas les films de genre, simplement peu de films de genre demandent des aides au CNC (it cannot be said that the CNC does not like genre films; very few genre films ask for state aids).”⁹⁵ The fact that the CNC launched a call for projects in 2018 to offer financing to horror/fantastic/sci-fi films shows that the institution is apparently willing to support various genres.⁹⁶ Detractors would argue that only three projects were selected, none of them of the horror genre per se, and that they were “only” awarded 500 000 euros each which cannot be enough to produce a feature-length.

It is legitimate to ask whether this temporary interest for genre films will lead to a larger and lasting understanding of less popular genres in France. Another reason why horror does not

⁹⁴ CNC-SACD public roundtable “Le genre en France : réalité ou utopie?” 2017. The video is available on Youtube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1AT7Jxo4ds>.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ The full description and the winners of the 2018 call for projects can be found here:

https://www.cnc.fr/professionnels/aides-et-financements/cinema/production/appel-a-projets-de-films-de-genre_563143. Interesting fact: Julia Ducournau was the president of the committee.

benefit from the CNC's funding could be explained by the different set of expectations. Horror films – albeit for subgenres like psychological horror or comedy horror – do not usually have a lot of lines of dialogue and rely more on visual spectacle. As a consequence, producers (CNC included) expect more than just a script to make their financing decisions. During discussions at several roundtables or in festivals, directors explain that producers ask for visuals (drawings, posters, etc.), test shoots, the name of the special effects company that will be working on the film, the director's vision statement, etc. Depending on their initial budget, horror directors cannot always provide such detailed information, or they simply do not want to deal with the likely rejection. In 2011, V erane Fr ediani (producer of *Inside* and *The Pack*) was already complaining: “nos projets n’obtiennent jamais l’avance sur recettes, alors on a compris, on ne les pr esente plus ! (our projects never receive the selective aid, so we got it, we do not even ask anymore!)”⁹⁷ However, as unfortunate as the lack of public aids for the horror genre is, the CNC is not solely responsible for its difficult financing. In fact, as the next section – and to some extent the next chapters – will show, the complicated broadcast of horror films on television and the small distribution windows also play their part in the limitations of horror production.

3.2 The Weight of Television

The economy of French cinema has grown more and more reliant on television over the past decades, making it one of the most prevalent actors of financing. Among the reasons to explain this search for audiovisual support, one can name the rise of production and distribution costs, the

⁹⁷ CNC-SACD public roundtable, “Existe-t-il une  criture sp ecifique pour le film de genre au cin ema?”, 2011.

lack of profits partly due to uneven marketing, and the audience's taste for American films or French comedies – what Creton calls the “effet podium (podium effect)” in reference to box office popularity.⁹⁸ Little by little, television funds have come to compensate cinema's loss of profits. In 2018, television channels invested 282 million euros, which amounts to the financing of approximately 160 French films.⁹⁹ While the numbers may look impressive for a country the size of France, it is 22.5% less than in 2017. However, the domination of television in film financing lifts a weight off producers' shoulders by allowing them to invest smaller amounts and secure a distribution window since the financed film will eventually be broadcast on the financing channel. France is very strict on media chronology which can be defined as such: “un dispositif de régulation qui organise la sortie échelonnée des films sur différents supports afin d'optimiser leur valorisation grâce à la détermination de fenêtres d'exclusivité après la première qui est réservée aux salles (a regulation device that organizes the gradual release of films on various media, so as to optimize their valorization through exclusive release windows after the initial theatrical release)”¹⁰⁰ France imposes a period varying from 8 to 22 months between the theatrical release and the first television broadcast, depending on whether the channel requires a subscription or not. Subscription channels like Canal + have to wait 8 months, or 17 months as far as OCS and Ciné + are concerned; free channels like TF1, France Télévisions and M6 have to wait 22 months (see Fig. 1 at the end of this chapter). Canal + has a privileged statutory window because the channel is the biggest film investor with 114 million euros in 2018; in comparison OCS provided 27 million

⁹⁸ Creton, *Économie du cinéma*, 51.

⁹⁹ CNC, “La production cinématographique en 2018”.

¹⁰⁰ Laurent Creton, *L'Économie du cinéma en 50 fiches*, 37.

euros, Ciné + 18 million euros, and what all the other channels put together “only” amounted to 121 million euros.¹⁰¹

However, the role of television as coproducer raises multiple concerns, starting with the lack of independence that comes with the reliance on television funds: “dans un processus de quasi-intégration progressive au système médiatique à dominante télévisuelle, le cinéma se voit imposer une mutation du mode de consommation et valorisation (in the process of being progressively integrated into television, cinema has to face the mutation of its consumption and valorization modes).”¹⁰² Since the 1980’s, French television and French cinema have gradually merged to become production partners. The increasing weight of television in the everyday life of consumers has led to the institutionalization of film presales and pre-financing which have now become one of the safest ways to ensure a better distribution and broadcast window. However, despite the significant involvement of television in film production, it would be wrong to assume that channels are willing to endorse any film. Convincing a cinema producer and convincing a television producer to finance a film involve very different skills. The financing of films with primetime and/or commercial quality, though understandable to some extent, has resulted in the automatic rejection of horror on certain channels.

French television enforces broadcast restrictions on films that do not benefit from an “all audiences” rating: films rated “prohibited under 12 years old” can only be aired before 10pm four times a year on free channels, while subscription channels such as Canal +, OCS and Ciné + can

¹⁰¹ CNC, “La production cinématographique en 2018”. Note that most investments suffered a decrease compared to 2017: minus 25% for Canal + and minus 20% for free channels.

¹⁰² Creton, *Économie du cinéma*, 5.

broadcast films rated “prohibited under 16 years old” after 8.30 pm and films rated “prohibited under 18 years old” after midnight (mostly pornographic films).¹⁰³ Needless to point out that such restrictions leave no room for horror on free channels, relegating all horror films to subscription channels with a smaller audience. Although the three subscription channels mentioned above are willing to broadcast horror on primetime and even have specialized subchannels called “Ciné + Frisson” and “OCS Choc,” they are not horror-specialized channels, and thus horror films have to coexist with thrillers, sci-fi, fantasy, etc. on their programming. The 8.30 pm primetime slot makes the highest advertising profits, so channels tend to “favoriser nettement certaines productions génératrices d’audience télévisée (greatly favor the productions likely to attract the bigger television audience)”, which is especially true for the biggest free channels such as TF1, France 2 and M6.¹⁰⁴ The dichotomy between television building on consumer/customer taste and loyalty, and cinema advocating for creative freedom and risk-taking can lead to a production struggle between the two forces of financing.¹⁰⁵ It is also important to keep in mind that television relies on other content to ensure consumer loyalty such as television films, television shows and reality television, all of them being much cheaper to produce. As Creton explains: “pour cette machine à diffuser des programmes, très efficace, le cinéma n’est que l’un des fournisseurs, même s’il reste l’un des plus prestigieux et des susceptibles de générer une audience (for this highly efficient broadcast machine, cinema is just one of the providers, even though it is the most prestigious one

¹⁰³ The ratings are given by the CNC. A detailed description of the French rating system can be found in chapter 3.

¹⁰⁴ Laurent Creton and Université de Paris III, eds., *Le Cinéma à l’épreuve du système télévisuel* (Paris: CNRS, 2002), 17.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

and the most likely to generate high audience scores).”¹⁰⁶ In other words, although television channels will never stop financing films thanks to their audience performance, they have the luxury to pick and choose where to put their money.

Yet another notable concern, common to state aids and television funds, is the mandatory theatrical release. Whether for the CNC’s automatic and selective aids or for television coproduction, the film must be released in theaters to receive funding. In a time where video-on-demand and streaming platforms like Netflix have become compelling alternatives, displacing spectators from theaters to the comfort of their own living rooms, film professionals wonder whether the prestige of a theatrical release still bears meaning today:

Il faut réduire le délai entre la sortie en salles et la sortie VOD, surtout si la sortie salle est technique sur une ou deux copies. Cela aiderait le cinéma de genre à toucher son public. [...] Aujourd’hui rien ne vous empêche de sortir de la chronologie des médias et de faire financer votre film par Netflix ou Amazon. J’y vois au contraire une avancée de votre point de vue : vous pouvez discuter avec un seul opérateur à même de financer intégralement votre film.

The time frame between the theatrical release and the video release has to be shortened, especially if the theatrical release only concerns one or two prints. It would help genre films find their audience. [...] Nowadays you can ignore the media chronology and have your film financed by Netflix or Amazon. It facilitates the director’s vision: they only have to interact with one producer that will finance their work entirely.¹⁰⁷

Reports show that video sales profits (either DVD/Blu-Ray or on demand) amounted to more than one billion euros in 2017, a number very likely to increase over the years. In comparison, theatrical profits “only” culminated at 1.3 billion euros, a fairly small difference that does not

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 1.

¹⁰⁷ CNC-SACD public roundtable “Le genre en France: réalité ou utopie?” 2017.

justify the continuing importance given to theatrical release over direct-to-video or on demand alternatives.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, another 2019 report on French films' profitability claims that only two French films were profitable in 2018.¹⁰⁹ While chapter 5 will extensively discuss the different modes of distribution and exhibition in France and their potential evolution to fit market needs, it seems timely to point out the interconnectedness of production and distribution through vertical integration.

3.3 Vertical Integration and the New Industrial Power

The United States were known for their vertically integrated studio-system controlling the creation of films from their production to their exhibition. Even though this system is no longer in use since the 1950's, its success remains an inspiration and influence in other parts of the world such as Europe and Asia. Vertical integration aims at controlling supply and outlet to expand a company's grasp on the market. It also helps with the amortization of financial loss since the different branches of a company do not suffer the same consequences in case of a failure. For instance, in a media corporation, if a film is poorly distributed, the distribution branch suffers but the production branch can compensate the loss. Poor distribution can prove catastrophic for a small

¹⁰⁸ CNC "Les principaux chiffres du cinéma en 2017", 2018.

¹⁰⁹ Le Film Français, "Quels ont été les films les plus rentables en salles en 2018? » n°3844, February 15, 2019.
<http://www.lefilmfrancais.com/cinema/140758/quels-ont-ete-les-films-les-plus-rentables-en-salle-en-2018-notre-classement-complet>

independent distribution company, which is why vertical integration has been progressively growing in the past decades in France. The French group Pathé-Gaumont-MK2 is a great example of a corporation that combines production and distribution in addition to their monopoly on exhibition. Other groups were born out of a more surprising combination of existing industrial companies: for instance the merging of Canal +, Seagram, Fnac and Vivendi that gave birth to Vivendi, of Bouygues and TF1, of RTL and M6, or of France Telecom and Orange (Orange and its OCS subscription channels now being Canal +'s biggest competitor in terms of film and television broadcast).¹¹⁰

In December 2018, Dominique Boutonnat, a film producer elected president of the CNC in 2019 (also worth mentioning a friend and campaign donor of French president Emmanuel Macron), published a report titled “Rapport sur le financement privé de la production et distribution cinématographiques et audiovisuelles” (“Report on private financing of cinematographic and audiovisual production and distribution”).¹¹¹ The report suggests creating more vertically-integrated media companies, similar to the American major studio-system, and using more private funds to produce French films (as opposed to state aids). In other words, Boutonnat, a businessman at heart, wishes to bring an industrial logic – like the one already in place in the United States – to a French film market that still hangs on to a cultural exception that has not proved profitable over the years. In the eternal fight between culture and industry, Boutonnat picked his side:

¹¹⁰ Laurent Creton and Université de Paris III, 31.

¹¹¹ Report available at https://www.cnc.fr/professionnels/etudes-et-rapports/rapport-sur-le-financement-prive-de-la-production-et-de-la-distribution-cinematographiques-et-audiovisuelles_990381.

Pour conserver une production cinématographique et audiovisuelle indépendantes, capables de proposer au marché national et international des œuvres de qualité, il faut donner à la production française (et à sa distribution) des moyens, notamment financiers, de devenir plus autonome (notamment par le renforcement des fonds propres des entreprises) et de produire des œuvres ambitieuses (avec la capacité et le temps nécessaire pour les développer).

To maintain independent cinematographic and audiovisual production that would offer quality work nationally and internationally, French production (and distribution) needs more resources, money in particular, to become more autonomous (by reinforcing company investment funds) and to produce ambitious films (by being given the time and the ability to do so).¹¹²

Many filmmakers reacted negatively to the report, fearing that Boutonnat's desire for a more private film economy would create a "studio effect" that would favor big productions more likely to attract larger audiences at the cost of cultural diversity. In other words, this private system of financing would leave no room for small and middle budget films or less popular genres. A petition was circulated against Boutonnat's nomination to the CNC presidency, with Jacques Audiard, Claire Denis and 70 other French filmmakers among its signatories.¹¹³ Boutonnat was still elected president of the CNC but it is too early (as of late 2019 when this chapter was written) to see the results of his project. The immediate reaction of French filmmakers is still symptomatic of France's attachment to its cinema as art and culture, and shows the reluctance to move to a

¹¹² Dominique Boutonnat, "Rapport sur le financement privé de la production et distribution cinématographiques et audiovisuelles", 6.

¹¹³ The petition is available at: <https://www.change.org/p/pr%C3%A9sidence-de-la-r%C3%A9publique-nouvelle-pr%C3%A9sidence-du-cnc>.

purely industrial approach, even though powerful streaming platforms like Netflix – now also producing content in France – are becoming more and more overbearing.¹¹⁴

To better understand the economic mechanisms of French cinema that are especially relevant to genres like horror, it is necessary to discuss the leading role of Canal +. Under the impulse of then French president François Mitterand, Canal + was created as the first pay television channel in France in 1984. Modeled on the American channel HBO, Canal + was to be solely financed with private funds, to focus on cinema and sport, and to broadcast 40% of French programs (a number still true today).¹¹⁵ In 1990, Canal + developed their own production company, StudioCanal, which is still a major source of investment in French and European cinema three decades later. At the same time in the 1990's, the diversity of films, political satires and sports games enabled the channel to gain subscribers and increase their popularity, so much that Canal + became part of a multinational corporation under the name Vivendi (joining Universal Music, Universal Studios, Polygram, USA Networks, etc.).¹¹⁶ However, the merging with American companies quickly threatened Canal +'s independence in terms of decision-making towards French production and broadcast: “his [Jean Marie Messier's, president of Vivendi in the early 2000's] increasingly grandiose ambitions to transform Vivendi into a world media power, shedding its French identity, provoked traditional French capital to cut him down to size.”¹¹⁷ Claiming that the cultural exception was dead, Messier's international ambitions, especially on the

¹¹⁴ The weight of Netflix and other streaming platforms in the current French film industry will be fully developed in chapter 4.

¹¹⁵ Jonathan Buchsbaum, *Exception Taken: How France Has Defied Hollywood's New World Order*, 29.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

American market, led to a loss of profits and of Canal + subscribers, as well as Messier's and other executives' resignations, which testified to the limits of media conglomerates in France.

As previously mentioned, Canal + invested 114 million euros in film production in 2018 (French, European and co-productions included).¹¹⁸ Despite the 22.5% decrease compared to 2017, Canal + remains the biggest investor among all French television channels. Thanks to its more flexible broadcast rules, Canal + is known to invest in all film genres, a blessing for horror films which cannot be broadcast on free channels. Yet, the reliance on one television channel comes with its own limits: “lorsque Canal + s'enrhume, toute la production française tousse (when Canal + catches a cold, the whole French production is coughing).”¹¹⁹ Indeed, when the channel is not doing so well in terms of profits, the consequences on film financing are immediate. With the rise of other subscription channels whether in cinema (OCS, Ciné +) or sports (Bein Sports), Canal +'s revenues have faced a steady decline over the last few years, which complicated the reinvestment in film production – hence the lower number for 2018 –, but did not ultimately challenge the channel's dominance on the market of film financing. Furthermore, whereas Canal + embraces the horror genre, other television channels keep their distance. Albeit being able to broadcast content rated “prohibited under 16 years old,” OCS's programming director Boris Duchesnay admits that the channel tends to reject the production of films that could fall under this rating category.¹²⁰ At the 2018 Cannes Film Festival, Ciné +'s director Bruno Deloye promoted a new collection of films called “Ciné + Horreur” on the channel's streaming platform, introducing it as a new space for the

¹¹⁸ CNC, “La production cinématographique en 2018”.

¹¹⁹ Creton, *L'économie du cinéma en 50 fiches*, 116.

¹²⁰ ARP (*Société civile des auteurs réalisateurs producteurs*) public roundtable, “Cinéma de genre: espace de liberté et de renouveau pour le cinéma français”, June 2019.

genre. Among the 80 films available, between the B movies and the American horror classics, the French horror selection is extremely slim.¹²¹ In the end, where can French horror films turn to for production opportunities?

3.4 The Production of Horror

Canal + continues to play a key role in the production of horror films in France, otherwise rejected from most other channels where it is deemed too violent to be broadcast. If in 2019 the channel only offers a label called *Nouveau Genre* where a diversity of genres are being introduced and broadcast – horror only being one of many –, back in the early 2000’s Canal +’s commitment to horror was much stronger. Following the small success of Xavier Palud and David Moreau’s *Them* (2006), and trying to ride on the international wave of popular horror films such as *Saw* (2004) or *The Descent* (2005), Canal + started a project titled *French Frayeur* (2007-2011).¹²² Looking to promote French horror films domestically and internationally, producers were offering financing in exchange for original screenplays.

This is how Pascal Laugier’s critically-acclaimed *Martyrs* came to life. Producer Richard Grandpierre asked Laugier to write a film in three months with a limited budget of 2 million euros

¹²¹ CNC public roundtable, “Comment faire du cinéma de genre en France ?”, Cannes Film Festival, May 2018.

¹²² *Them* gathered 250,000 spectators in France, which might not seem much, but is quite satisfactory for a French horror film. All box-office data in this chapter are collected from jpbox-office.com

(which is the average budget for a horror film in France).¹²³ ¹²⁴ Whether the controversy surrounding the film's initial "prohibited under 18 years old" rating (extensively discussed in chapter 4) was good or bad publicity, *Martyrs* only attracted about 90,000 spectators in France and did not even benefit from an American release. Despite the undeniable quality of the film and the critical praise, the limited profits confirmed the contingency of success of the *French Frayeur* project and of French horror production in general. As is the case for a few French horror directors, Laugier turned to North America to produce his following films: *The Tall Man* (2012) starring Jessica Biel was a French-Canadian-American coproduction that cost 18 million dollars and gathered 500,000 French spectators, while *Ghostland* (2018) was produced by an American company (Incident Productions), also cofinanced and shot in Canada (with tax cuts) for a smaller budget of 4 million dollars and a smaller audience of 250,000 spectators in France. Pascal Laugier's films produced with foreign funds and shot in English were more successful than his first two French films. Whether or not French spectators are partial to American films, whether American productions benefit from better marketing strategies or feature more familiar plots, the difference in box-office numbers raises a series of questions that chapter 6 on audience reception will strive to answer.

Other production companies jumped on the horror train unsuccessfully in the early 2000's. Once again after the unexpected and rather unexplainable success of French horror film *Deep in the Woods* (2000) – 750,000 spectators but one of the worst scores on French online database

¹²³ Frédéric Astruc, *Martyrs de Pascal Laugier: Mélancolie du chaos*, 2018, 64.

¹²⁴ Richard Grandpierre worked for Canal +’s production branch StudioCanal and, since 2003, for independent production company Eskwad. A few of his noteworthy productions include *Brotherhood of the Wolf* (2001), Pascal Laugier’s first film *Saint Ange* (2003), as well as numerous French comedies.

Allociné –, French production company Fidélité Films launched a call for projects for their new label Bee Movies (a play-on-word with B movies). Their goal was to produce five films with a one-million-euro budget each. The collaboration with StudioCanal, Eskwad and French distributor Wild Bunch sounded promising, but it was up for another failure. While it is hard to pinpoint one single reason for the failures of films like *Bloody Mallory* (2002) and *Maléfique* (2002), the directors and producers’ lack of experience and lack of familiarity with the genre, in addition to very small budgets, can be listed as potential explanations.¹²⁵ Sombrero Films and their 2007 label Studio Mad experienced the same indifference and absence of profitability with films like *Mutants* (2009), *High Lane* (2009) and *Caged* (2010). While most of these films are neither good nor terrible, the repetitive low critics’ scores and low box office numbers were enough to cast doubt on the value of French horror production, which undeniably slowed down in the 2010’s. The CNC’s call for horror/fantastic/sci-fi projects in 2018 poses the same problem than all these different labels and film series: can French horror find its place on the map if it continues to be given only temporary visibility with small budgets?

A roundtable titled “Cinéma de genre: espace de liberté et de renouveau pour le cinéma français” was organized by the *Société civile des Auteurs Réalisateur Producteurs*, and took place in Paris in June 2019 in the presence of French horror directors Alexandre Aja (*High Tension*, *Mirrors*, *The Hills Have Eyes*, *Crawl*), Julia Ducournau (*Raw*) and Coralie Fargeat (*Revenge*).¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Benoit Marchisio, “Autopsie du cinéma d’horreur français”, Ulyces, 2014.

<https://www.ulyces.co/benoit-marchisio/autopsie-cinema-horreur-francais-aja-gans-laugier/>

¹²⁶ Video of the roundtable available here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnyVbbElxwc&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1MRcDsfeRe2I_auPR6Z4EugD2YSKzmuAmuLeRW1VqSAM5dSVrEuzpxKyo

The panel agreed on the lack of significant budget for French horror films, most of them being financed for less than 2 million euros. However, when Ducournau expressed the need for bigger budgets to sustain better make-up and special effects, she was met with the examples of American film *Insidious* (2011) made for 1.5 million dollars and Spanish film *REC* (2007) made for 2 million dollars, both widely popular successes. Now I would argue that both films play with jump scares and dark rooms, which is not so common in France, especially when you compare them to films like *Raw* and *Revenge*. Ducournau and Fargeat's films, along with many other French horror films like *Frontier(s)*, *Martyrs* or *Inside*, tend to play with excess, blood, and physical violence. The need for such conspicuous special effects is quite different than what is required to scare the spectator for just one second in a brief jump scare. Many French horror films like to show and display, as opposed to other horror films that rely almost exclusively on suggestion and tension building. It would be wrong to compare horror films with radically different intentions and argue that if James Wan can direct *Insidious* for 1.5 million dollars and still be successful, then so can any other director.

During the same roundtable, Coralie Fargeat argued against the *auteur*-inclined and intellectualizing tendencies embraced by the CNC and French cinema at large, and unfortunately detrimental to the horror genre. Pleading for horror as a form of entertainment versus a form of intellect, she emphasizes the need to satisfy the viewing pleasure of young adults as the main target for horror films. By doing so, she also brings up the contradiction between the French desire to intellectualize cinema and the CNC's automatic aid redistributed to low-brow comedies.¹²⁷ Why

¹²⁷ Despite culminating at the top of the French box-office, many French comedies continue to be accused of racism, sexism, ableism, etc., especially but not only in Anglophone countries where they are perceived as politically and

would comedies be allowed to entertain, but not horror? Why would horror be required to have intellectual/artistic/societal subtexts to be taken seriously by state institutions? What space is left for purely visual satisfaction? All these questions make all the more sense when applied to Coralie Fargeat and her first feature film *Revenge*, an especially violent and gory rape-revenge story. In an interview, the director explained that her film did not receive the CNC's selective aid for a surprising reason: "ce genre de films n'aurait pas besoin de l'avance sur recettes parce que ce sont des films qui seraient plus commerciaux, et qui auraient plus de facilité à trouver des financements privés (this kind of films would not need the selective aid because they would apparently be more commercial and so be more inclined to find private funds)."¹²⁸ To Fargeat and to anyone familiar with the horror genre in France, the assumption that French horror films have a commercial potential is completely false. *Revenge* only sold 38,000 tickets in France, which cannot possibly be mistaken for commercial success. What is even more surprising is that *Revenge* was released at the peak of the #MeToo movement in France, and was thus promoted on national and international television channels and newspapers as a "feminist weapon for the #MeToo generation."¹²⁹ The word-of-mouth did not unfortunately help with box-office results and profits, but at least gave the film international visibility and Fargeat international recognition. What Fargeat is trying to

morally incorrect. The comedy *Serial (Bad) Weddings* (2014) was as lucrative as it was controversial, even though it topped the French box-office in 2014 and became the 6th highest-grossing film in French history.

¹²⁸ Interview of Coralie Fargeat by Mathieu Guilloux, "Le Cinéma de genre, la règle française et les salles Art et Essai."

¹²⁹ Anne Billson, "How the 'rape-revenge' movie became a feminist weapon for the #MeToo movement", *The Guardian*, May 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/may/11/how-the-rape-revenge-movie-became-a-feminist-weapon-for-the-metoo-generation>

denounce is the importance given by the CNC and French cinema to *auteur* films, their screenplays, dialogues and character development at the expense of spectacle. *Revenge*, like many but not all French horror films, almost entirely relies on visuals and symbolism: a young woman who has been raped spends an hour and a half chasing and killing her assaulters in the desert. Adding to the B-movie inspiration behind the film (that Fargeat acknowledges), it is rather clear that *Revenge* does not fall under the “arty” category that the CNC’s selective aid committee cannot seem to get enough of.

Only Julia Ducournau’s *Raw* benefited from the selective aid in recent years. While this exception should not be overlooked, the film received other significant advantages such as being presold to Canal +, Ciné + and Belgian channel RTBF, as well as being financed by French and Belgian production companies for a total budget of 3.5 million euros. It was selected for the official selection at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival – a very rare occurrence for a horror film – before Ducournau eventually decided to run in the Critics’ Week category instead where she won the FIPRESCI prize. The film also won the Grand Prize at the 2017 Gerardmer Fantastic Film Festival in addition to many other distinctions; it was then distributed by Wild Bunch and even nominated for a *César* (the French equivalent of the Oscar). Even though it did not exceed 150,000 spectators in French theaters, *Raw* was released internationally and made 3 million euros worldwide, enough to be considered profitable compared to other French horror productions. Thanks to this mini success-story, *Raw* is now one of the most popular French horror films but cannot unfortunately be representative of France’s treatment of the genre. Despite being often categorized as horror, the successful journey of the film also led to other classifications such as “arty” and “*auteur*”, almost as though it would have been impossible for a regular horror film to gain so much recognition and appreciation. Now Ducournau herself described *Raw* as “un film hybride, mutant, il fallait qu’il

soit reconnu dans le saint des saints du cinéma d’auteur, le sortir de sa niche (a hybrid film, a mutant that needed to be recognized among the peers of auteur cinema; it could not be niche).”¹³⁰ From the screenplay to the soundtrack and aesthetics, the artistic quality of the film cannot be denied but cannot either elevate *Raw* as the savior of French horror.

Before and after *Raw*, horror films continue to be marginalized and denied production opportunities for their violence, gore and taboos. The radically different production stories of *Revenge* and *Raw* can only reinforce the disparity among the genre. Tired of scrounging for money, a few French horror directors turned to other countries for alternate modes of production: Pascal Laugier coproducing and shooting in Canada, Marina de Van doing the same in Ireland, Julien Maury and Alexandre Bustillo directing *Leatherface* (2017) in the United States, Mathieu Turi and Coralie Fargeat shooting in English, etc. The following case study of French horror director Alexandre Aja and his decision to leave France and work in the United States will exemplify the dead-end that horror directors sometimes experience with the French production system.

3.5 Alexandre Aja: from *Furia* to *Crawl*

For the past two decades, Alexandre Aja has been one of the biggest names in French horror cinema. Director, producer, writer, Aja wears many hats in the horror film industry both in France and in the United States. After directing his first two films in his home country (*Furia*,

¹³⁰ Thomas Baurez, “*Grave*: itinéraire sans faute d’un film qui ébranle le monde du cinéma”, L’Express, March 2017. https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/cinema/grave-itineraire-sans-faute-d-un-film-qui-ebbranle-le-monde-du-cinema_1882677.html

1999, and *High Tension*, 2003), Aja accepted the many American offers he received and left for the other side of the Atlantic where he has been working ever since the mid 2000's. Far from cutting all ties with his French horror colleagues, Aja continues to work with long-time friends Grégory Vasseur and Franck Khalfoun (for which he respectively produced *The Pyramid* and the remake of *Maniac* for instance). Aja is regularly invited to film festivals, masterclasses and roundtables in France to discuss his cinematographic work and debunk the many misconceptions around his American career. Aja proves to be an excellent case study for his double experience in France and in the United States, as well as his honest and knowledgeable approach to the advantages and drawbacks of both production systems. Analyzing the financing and production context of a few of his films will give more insight into the motivations behind French horror directors' desire to work abroad, including the success or disappointment that it sometimes entails.

Alexandre Aja's first film *Furia* was financed by a grant he had won at the Paris Festival for best screenplay, and was produced by his father Alexandre Arcady – also a filmmaker with whom Aja started working as an actor and assistant director. The film flopped at the box-office with merely 8,000 spectators but did not keep the young man from embracing his next project. With the help of Grégory Levasseur and their shared interest in classic horror films, Aja wrote the screenplay for slasher *High Tension*: Alex (Maïwenn) and Marie (Cécile de France) spend a weekend in Alex's rural family home. In the middle of the night, a killer attacks and murders Alex's family. Alex gets kidnapped and Marie chases the killer to retrieve her friend. Aja had managed to get M6 on board, one of the free channels that almost never finance horror films. But that was before a news story created paranoia and caused the channel to withdraw the funds: a French teenager wore a *Scream*/Ghostface mask and stabbed his girlfriend to death in 2002. Similar stories of violence and murder involving the *Scream* movies had already been breaking

out in France.¹³¹ Due to the eternal debate of fiction influencing reality – something that will be further developed in chapter 4 on censorship and regulation –, Aja lost part of his funding. Nonetheless, thanks to the support of French director Luc Besson and his company EuropaCorp, he succeeded in making and shooting his film in Romania for 2.5 million euros.¹³² *High Tension* attracted 110,000 spectators in France, it was presented at the Toronto International Film Festival and Sundance, it was distributed by Lionsgate in the United States, and it met even more success on video; more than enough to open doors and push Aja and his colleagues to try their luck in the United States. In an interview with French webzine ‘Fais pas genre’ Aja explains:

Mais l’idée d’aller ensuite travailler aux États-Unis était là depuis le début, car lorsque l’on écrivait on se rendait bien compte que nos histoires n’avaient rien de franco-françaises, il y avait bien sûr toujours quelque chose dedans très inspiré par le cinéma américain des années 70 et 80.

We have always had the desire to work in the United States; when we were writing, we could sense that our stories were not Franco-French, they were always inspired by American cinema from the 70’s and 80’s.¹³³

When mentioning “Franco-French stories”, it is possible that Aja refers to films anchored in a French context such as *Sheitan* (Kim Chapiron, 2006), *Frontier(s)* (Xavier Gens, 2007) or *The Horde* (Yannick Dahan and Benjamin Rocher, 2009). It is true that the films would lose most of their significance outside of their French location and characterization. In comparison, Aja’s work

¹³¹ Paul Webster, “French teenage murder linked to *Scream* horror films”, The Guardian, June 2002.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/jun/06/france.paulwebster1>

¹³² Luc Besson then asked Aja and Levasseur to direct his film *District 13* (2004) but they both decided to continue their career in the United States.

¹³³ Joris Laquittant, “Alexandre Aja, l’Américain”, Fais Pas Genre, June 2016.

<https://faispasgenre.com/2016/06/alexandre-aja-lamericaain/>

and directorial intentions have much wider borders which bring him closer to what is done in the United States. The obvious inspiration from slasher and serial killer movies in *High Tension* made his decision to leave France all the more explicit. Even though Aja might not have struggled as much as other French directors – or at least did not stay in France long enough to endure the financial pressure repeatedly –, it would be very wrong to assume that his experience in the United States was effortless.

Alexandre Aja's first three films on the American side were all remakes: *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), *Mirrors* (2008) and *Piranha 3D* (2010). At times attacked on his lack of original screenplay, Aja retorts: "C'est vrai que quand on regarde ma filmographie il y a beaucoup de titres qui se présentent comme étant des remakes mais je pense en réalité qu'ils n'en sont pas vraiment. Il s'agit plutôt de relectures (it is true that my filmography is filled with remakes but I think they rather are re-readings)." ¹³⁴ Indeed, Aja's remake of *The Hills Have Eyes* adds a political approach to Wes Craven's original work by attributing the killer family's physical deformities to nuclear testing, something that the horror master himself did not necessarily approve of:

Nous avons été aussi pas mal en désaccord avec Wes Craven sur les questions de scénario car nous voulions appuyer sur le sous-texte politique et polémique qu'offrait cette idée d'essais nucléaires, mais lui refusait cette direction en nous disant que c'était un « truc de français » et que les Américains ne comprendraient pas cette position anti-nucléaire et anti-américaine.

We had quite the disagreement with Wes Craven about the screenplay because we wanted to insist on the political and polemical subtext that nuclear testing would imply, but he kept rejecting the idea saying that it was "a French thing" and that Americans would not understand this anti-nuclear and anti-American stance. ¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

Despite his previous affirmation about his projects being “universal”, Aja might be more French than he thinks; indeed, French cinema often resorts to political and societal themes in all film genres. The subtlety and implicitness of some American films to ensure proper international distribution can sometimes lead to bland universalism, something that French cinema continues to fight by defending its national (his)stories. Back to *The Hills Have Eyes*, even though Craven disapproved of the screenplay, he still agreed to produce the film, which was especially welcome when the Weinstein brothers dropped their initial funding offer. The story repeated itself: after *High Tension* losing part of its funding, so did *The Hills Have Eyes*, which can only show that having a movie produced in the United States does not necessarily guarantee financial security. Nevertheless, the budget for *The Hills Have Eyes* being more than five times higher than *High Tension*'s, the comparison stops here: Aja managed to shoot his film in appropriate conditions for a total profit of 40 million dollars in the United States and 70 million dollars worldwide. The success of the remake turned the French director into the new horror it-boy for better or for worse.

Aja went on to direct the remake of Korean film *Into the Mirror* (2003), renamed *Mirrors* (2008). Once again, the director only kept the roots of the story – mostly the presence of mirrors – but wrote his own screenplay and returned to Romania for shooting. The film was not met positively by critics but ended up being profitable at the box-office. However, things took a turn for the worse with *Piranha 3D* (2010). One of Aja's first grievances with his American experience was the lack of recognition for his writing. He made it a point of honor to rewrite original screenplays in order to add his personal touch to the films. Logically, he insisted on being credited as a writer for all his projects, in vain. In the United States, it is very common for production studios to override directorial decisions if they think it can make the film more profitable. Directors must compromise and sometimes sacrifice their artistic integrity to align with the studio. Although

Aja had always managed to have his say, his experience with *Piranha 3D* was so bad that he admitted in an interview being so ashamed of the film that he did not even want his name to appear in the credits.¹³⁶ Due to financing issues, post-production became nightmarish when the budget for special effects was cut down: the 3D computer-generated piranhas looked horribly unrealistic which ridiculed the entire film. The critical disaster was thankfully counterbalanced with 83 million-dollar profits worldwide – more than Aja’s previous films. When one knows that the *Sharknado* franchise made more than 4.5 billion dollars worldwide, is it even surprising?

Skipping straight to Aja’s latest film *Crawl* that was released summer 2019, one can only assume that the alligator movie came as redemption after Aja’s frustrating experience on *Piranha 3D*. For this story of a daughter and father facing blood-thirsty alligators in the middle of a Florida storm, Alexandre Aja stacked all the odds in his favor, starting with his choice of producers: Craig Flores (*300*) and Sam Raimi (*Evil Dead*, *Spiderman*). The latter played a key role in securing enough funds when Aja was once more struggling with financing.¹³⁷ After Raimi struck a deal with Paramount – Aja had previously worked with Fox -, the film was given enough budget to start shooting in Serbia. Why choose Eastern Europe again? Shooting a proper alligator movie requires a flexible schedule to tackle unexpected situations likely to arise when shooting in pools of water, especially when humans and puppets act like fake alligators before the computer-generated imaging steps in. To avoid repeating the fiasco of *Piranha 3D*’s postproduction, Aja played his cards well by securing 40 days of shooting. The director explains that the shooting schedule is dependent on the film budget. With *Crawl*’s budget of 15 million dollars, Aja was

¹³⁶ Mad Movies, n°331, July-August 2019.

¹³⁷ Mad Movies, n°330, June 2019.

allowed to shoot for 40 days in Serbia for a lesser cost.¹³⁸ Had he shot in the United States or in France, despite the tax cuts, he would have had less shooting days and it could have compromised his artistic vision – another reason why many directors choose to shoot abroad.

Going back to what was discussed at a roundtable previously mentioned, Aja insists that many horror movies cannot be properly made without a significant budget; he makes it very clear in interviews that, without his average 15 million dollar budgets, he would not be able to make his movies come to life – something that other French directors would probably disagree with considering the discrepancy between French and American budgets. Pascal Laugier, Xavier Gens, Julia Ducournau, or Julien Maury and Alexandre Bustillo have all managed to make admirable horror films well under Alexandre Aja’s American budgets. I would even argue that with one of the smallest budgets in Aja’s filmography, *High Tension* remains one of his most appreciated films. However, it would be wrong to claim that success is not a matter of money; in addition to the talent and creativity needed to make a compelling horror film, the cost of special effects, sound design or marketing campaigns cannot be denied. It would be more accurate to say that a minimum is required, in between the insufficient average French budget of 2 million euros and the American average of 15 million dollars.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Mad Movies, n°331, July-August 2019.

¹³⁹ Many French films must manage with a small budget no matter their genre or *auteurist* ambition (for the exception of popular comedies and the occasional big-budget productions like Besson’s *Valerian*). The added inconvenience that I insist on in this chapter is the chain reaction from producers who refuse to finance horror films because of the limited distribution windows coming afterwards.

French journalist Philippe Guedj attributes Aja's success in the United States to his easy-going nature and his sense of business, as opposed to other French directors who tried to work across the pond but did not make it big:

Sans doute parce que sa conception d'un cinéma à la fois populaire et décomplexé s'avère parfaitement compatible avec les attentes commerciales et esthétiques des décideurs hollywoodiens, là où le caractère plus imprévisible et radical d'un Mathieu Kassovitz, d'un Fabrice du Welz ou d'un Pascal Laugier aurait de quoi les effrayer. Aja accepte la part de business du "show-business."

Aja's conception of a cinema that would be at the same time popular and unapologetic is perfectly compatible with the commercial and aesthetic expectations of Hollywood producers; whereas the unpredictable and radical tempers of Mathieu Kassovitz, Fabrice du Welz or Pascal Laugier would scare them away. Aja accepts the business part of "show-business."¹⁴⁰

Following Guedj's logic, directors who refuse to compromise their integrity to comply with American standards do not understand business. Not only is this opinion dismissive of Du Welz or Laugier's talent – as though their sole temper would be reason enough to refuse to work with them –, but it also reduces Aja's American career to a series of fortunate events when the last few pages show how tenacious the French director had to be to find his place in the sun. The motivation behind this case study hinges around the misconception surrounding Aja's career, which Guedj exemplifies. Although I do not disagree with Aja's impressive ability to navigate the American system – without forgetting the support he received from renowned directors like Craven and Raimi –, working in the United States is not synonymous with having it easy. In contrast to Du

¹⁴⁰ Philippe Guedj, "Pourquoi Alexandre Aja ne connaît pas la crise à Hollywood", Le Point, July 2019.

https://www.lepoint.fr/pop-culture/pourquoi-alexandre-aja-ne-connaît-pas-la-crise-a-hollywood-24-07-2019-2326493_2920.php

Welz or Laugier's darker and heavier filmographies, Aja's advantage is indeed to make films filled with serial killers, piranhas and alligators, but his decade-long experience as a writer, director and producer, as well as his persistence despite the roadblocks, all have a major role to play in his international acclaim.

Another reason for selecting Aja as a case study is his understanding of the benefits and shortcomings of the French production system – an objective attitude that I find particularly important to adopt. French cinema would not be what it is today and would not continue to prosper if it was not for the CNC's automatic and selective aids. The protectionism that France maintained for decades to ensure the well-being of French culture has led to the incredible consideration French cinema receives around the world. Even though state aids are not favorable to horror films, their necessity cannot be understated. What needs to be questioned is not the existence of such aids, but maybe the decisions of committees who continue to dismiss horror as a low-brow form of entertainment. Furthermore, although television broadcast rules are nearly impossible to change for free channels, subscription channels have a larger possibility to step up and help the horror genre in the long-run. When one realizes how quickly Netflix is embracing French original content – including horror, fantastic and sci-fi –, Canal +, Ciné + and OCS could use their own streaming platforms to compete with the American giant. Even though this dissertation solely focuses on cinema, it is still worth mentioning that Netflix producing French horror television shows such as *Marianne* (2019) and *Vampires* (2020) could possibly revive an interest in French horror.¹⁴¹ It is high time French production studios and companies recognize the potential of the genre when executed with a proper budget and directorial vision. However, I still want to insist that the

¹⁴¹ More about French horror/fantastic content on Netflix can be found in chapter 4.

popularity of horror does not exclusively depend on its production. While it represents a decisive first step, the following process of regulation, distribution, exhibition and audience reception are just as crucial to turn a film into a success. A well-financed and well-produced movie can still end up a total failure if rated too severely, exhibited in too few theaters or snubbed by the audience and critics.

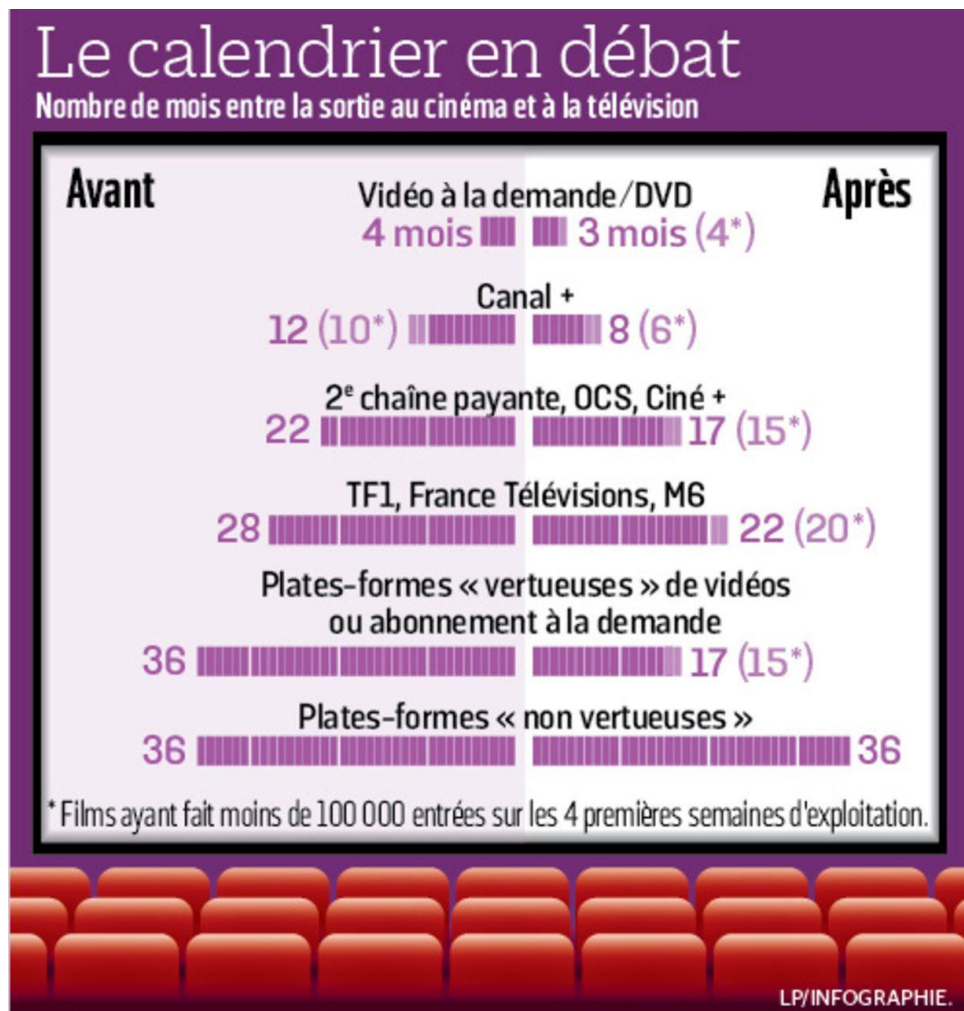


Figure 1 New Chronology of Media ©Le Parisien Infographie, 2019

4.0 Film Regulation: Between Creative Freedom and Moral Obligation

To the question “can you show everything?” the French film industry has long had an ambivalent response, oscillating between the necessity of regulation and the desire for liberalism.¹⁴² When it comes to the representation of violence and sex on-screen, the industry and its official regulatory institution, the CNC (National Center for Cinema and the Moving Image), face the dilemma of balancing out the freedom of artistic expression with the exposure of children and youth to explicitly sexual or violent scenes. With Austrian director Michael Haneke pushing the boundaries of gratuitous torture in his two versions of *Funny Games* (1997 and 2007), or French director Catherine Breillat including unsimulated sex scenes in *Romance* (1999), the trend of horror and extreme cinema that started throughout Europe in the 1990s and continued through the 2000s with the New French Extremity challenged the decision-making process of the CNC, whose model of strict regulation of cinematic sex and violence no longer proved sustainable. Within a democratic society, how far the politically or morally correct can be pushed in terms of film production, but also in terms of film control? The CNC itself recognized “une part majeure de subjectivité (a fair share of subjectivity)” in their rating decisions, raising a flag about issues of fairness and morality.¹⁴³

¹⁴² I choose to use the term ‘regulation’, as ‘censorship’ might prove too negatively connoted regarding the actions of the CNC. However, I might sometimes resort to the term ‘censorship’, for example to refer to other regulatory actors with stronger attitudes.

¹⁴³ CNC’s activity report from March 2005 to March 2006. All reports cited in this chapter are available on www.cnc.fr.

The critical study of regulation plays on multiple levels, as described by Mark Readman in *Teaching Film Censorship and Controversy*. First, there is the social level with audience reactions based on a society's current state of mind or even current state of affairs; second, the psychological level with the conscious or unconscious impact on the spectator; third, the philosophical level with the freedom of expression and the possible paternalism of regulatory institutions; fourth, the political level when regulation is supervised by political figures (for instance in France where the Minister of Culture makes the final rating decision); and finally the legal level in terms of youth protection and the juridical battles that ensue when parents or religious associations disagree with a film classification.¹⁴⁴ Because of their explicit and graphic approach that tends to divide spectatorship, horror and extreme cinema happen to be the most effective 'genres' of films to shed light on the different forces that seek to constrain what can be shown or not in French theaters.

Through the case studies of horror films from the *Saw* saga (2004-2017), Lars Von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009), as well as the now famously controversial Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs* (2008) and Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi's *Baise-Moi* (2001), I will discuss the different modes of regulation operating in France, along with their heavy consequences for the distribution and exhibition of explicit genres and styles of filmmaking. In his article on new censorship theory, Matthew Bunn asked: "why single out state censorship as important when it may be an insignificant part of a broader, omnipresent phenomenon?"¹⁴⁵ His question raises the subject of nonstate actors of censorship, a particularly visible presence in France today. My study of rating

¹⁴⁴ Mark Readman, *Teaching Film Censorship and Controversy*, Teaching Film and Media Studies (London: BFI Education, 2005), 8.

¹⁴⁵ Matthew Bunn, "Reimagining Repression: New Censorship Theory and After," *History and Theory* 54, n°1 (2015), 39.

decisions and their implications in the life of a film will call attention to the damaging role of nonstate actors, such as the theater chains refusing to play horror films, or the religious associations taking their moral beliefs to court. By reconstructing implicit notions of genre (what do horror and extreme cinema provoke?) and implicit notions of spectatorship (who is the audience and what are their reactions?), this chapter will then shed light on the internalized constructs of censorship actors in terms of cinematic affect: what is deemed shocking for some might not be to others, so how can regulation ensure balanced decisions?

4.1 Why Censorship?

If film censorship started in France as a circumstantial practice when only deemed necessary, it has now become a process of regulation impacting all films before their circulation: all films need a visa to be released. In *La censure en France à l'ère démocratique*, Pascal Ory asks: “Si la censure, dans un régime que l'on dit libre, existe sans recours aux circonstances exceptionnelles, peut-on encore valablement soutenir et à quel prix une opposition radicale entre liberté et censure, entre droit et arbitraire ? (In a so-called free country, if censorship does not require exceptional circumstances, can you still maintain a radical opposition between freedom and censorship, legitimacy and arbitrariness?)”¹⁴⁶ The censor, in the shape of regulatory institutions, acts as the spokesperson of a society, hiding behind the collective. Claiming to represent the majority, the French regulation system grounds its decisions on anticipated reactions that are themselves based on the “average” spectator. This model raises once again the issue of

¹⁴⁶ Pascal Ory, ed., *La censure en France à l'ère démocratique : 1848 - ...* (Bruxelles : Éd. Complexe, 1997), 14.

arbitrariness in the democratic model France embodies today. Jean-Luc Douin explains: “le cinéma, dont on cherche à protéger un groupe social non homogène, aux intérêts multiples, en prenant des mesures unilatérales, et qui finissent par favoriser des intérêts particuliers contre l'intérêt général, est otage du fantasme (by protecting a non-homogeneous social group sharing multiple interests, and by taking one-sided decisions that benefit personal interests as opposed to the general interest, fantasy is holding cinema hostage).”¹⁴⁷ In other words, despite cinema triggering a multitude of affective responses varying from one spectator to another, it is being held captive through regulation in the name of societal morality.

The construct of a vulnerable audience requiring protection, and not limited to children and youth, has always existed with all forms of leisure. As Francis Couvares argues, “censors have urged the suppression of cheap amusements because they arouse strong desires and strong antipathies in an untrustworthy public.”¹⁴⁸ The fear of moral perversion emanating from all types of visual entertainment has led to the systematic control of cinema today, which certain people deem necessary while others feel infantilized to have decisions made for them. Before examining the consequences of fear and morality on horror and extreme productions, I will first sketch out a brief history of film control in France from its very beginning to the current components of the CNC, in order to show the evolution from a system of censorship to a system of flexible regulation.

¹⁴⁷ Jean-Luc Douin, *Dictionnaire de La Censure Au Cinéma : Images Interdites*, Perspectives Critiques (Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 1998), 2.

¹⁴⁸ Francis G. Couvares, ed., *Movie Censorship and American Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 2.

4.2 The Implementation of the CNC

Film censorship started as early as the peep shows in the kinetoscopes in the late 19th century.¹⁴⁹ With the appearance of the cinematograph, censorship was first established locally by towns and cities whenever a show or a film was at risk of disturbing the public order. Mayors had the power to ban films, which quickly became a concern to producers and exhibitors. Pathé (still one of the biggest French film production and distribution companies) was particularly fond of including sex and public executions in their productions. When Pathé filmed the “Quadruple exécution capitale de Béthune” in 1909, Georges Clemenceau himself, then Secretary of the Interior, prohibited the exhibition of the film in the first instance of national censorship.¹⁵⁰ To avoid the growing discrepancies between local, regional and national bans, starting in 1916, each film needed to be delivered an authorization visa for exhibition. The decree of July 25, 1919 gave birth to the *Commission nationale de contrôle des films* whose mission was to deliver visas under the supervision of the Minister of Education and Fine Arts: films could be authorized, cut or banned. During times of war or social unrest, whether during the two World Wars, Algeria’s war of independence or May 68, censorship tended to be more ideological and political, unlike today’s regulation which is more focused on sex and violence.

War and post-war times were also synonymous with protectionism: not only were visas harder to obtain for imported films, but the exportation of French films was rigorously regulated in order to give the best image possible of the country. The end of World War II and the 1946

¹⁴⁹ A kinetoscope is an exhibition device designed for one person to look at moving images through a peephole.

¹⁵⁰ Albert Montagne, *Histoire Juridique Des Interdits Cinématographiques En France, 1909-2001*, Champs Visuels (Paris : Harmattan, 2007).

Blum-Byrnes Agreement opened the door to American hegemony on the French territory: quotas for the limited exhibition of American films were no longer in place. Following the influx of American cinema on the market, the CNC was created in 1946 in an effort to provide “les cadres juridiques, financiers, professionnels et culturels de l’industrie du cinéma (the film industry’s juridical, economical, professional and cultural framework).”¹⁵¹ In addition to delivering exhibition visas to all films through regulatory commissions, the CNC has since been contributing to the elaboration of laws and decrees, project development and production as well as international coproduction (as discussed in chapter 3), and professional and educational training. For the sake of this chapter, I will keep my focus on the CNC’s role as a regulatory institution only. Since its creation, the CNC has exerted political, ideological and religious censorship towards a vast range of films, but my interest will only be directed towards its regulation of recent horror and extreme films. The *Commission nationale de contrôle des films* became the *Commission de classification des films* in 1986: a name change reflecting the desire for less censorship in favor of a liberalizing approach by way of classification and suggestion.

4.3 The CNC Today

In its current form (as of 2021), the CNC is composed of a main commission (*commission plénière*) and subcommissions; the latter are in charge of watching and classifying films, and they only reach out to the main commission if at least two members do not give an ‘all audiences’

¹⁵¹ Montagne, *Histoire Juridique Des Interdits Cinématographiques En France, 1909-2001*, 31.

rating.¹⁵² This main commission includes politicians, film professionals, social sciences experts and young adults, all appointed by several Ministries, including the Ministries of Culture, of Justice and of Education. The weight of politics and government influence in the CNC's work becomes even more obvious when one knows that every commission decision awaits the approval or request for reexamination from the Minister of Culture. Contrary to the private ratings systems of the United States (Motion Picture Association of America) or the United Kingdom (British Board of Film Classification), the final rating of a film in France is ultimately decided by a political figure.

Child protection and respect for human dignity are the two main criteria applied by the commissions in regards to the representation of violence and sex on-screen: “[La commission] veille à protéger les enfants et les adolescents des impacts indésirables que peuvent avoir sur leur personnalité ou leur développement certaines œuvres cinématographiques (The commission intends to protect children and youth from the undesirable effects that films can have on their personal development).”¹⁵³ Classifications are divided into four categories: all audiences, prohibited under 12 years old, under 16 years old and under 18 years old (see Fig.2 at the end of

¹⁵² In 2017, 90% of films were rated ‘all audiences’, according to the “Bilan 2017 du CNC”.

¹⁵³ CNC's activity report from January 2007 to December 2009, p.5. The full quote reads as: “Youth protection is the foundation of film classification. Any public exhibition of a film in France is submitted to the preliminary delivery of an exhibition visa by the Minister of Culture following the recommendation of the *Commission de classification des films*, as stated in article L. 211.1 in the Code for Cinema and the Moving Image and as determined by the decree of February 23rd, 1990. The commission intends on protecting children and youth from the undesirable impacts that films can have on their personal development. The commission is a diverse and independent authority whose role is strictly advisory. It is composed of 28 members, presided over by a state adviser and a substitute president appointed by the Prime Minister. Its administration is part of the National Center for Cinema and the Moving Image.”

this chapter). Any age restriction can be accompanied by a warning (*avertissement*) in order to avoid an even more severe classification; for example a film can be rated -12 with a warning to avoid the -16 rating.¹⁵⁴ While the commissions do not follow a detailed checklist or precise guidelines, they do pay attention to the cinematic representation of violence, delinquency, drugs, family and social environment, and sex, asking questions such as: is violence introduced as an efficient course of action? Is delinquency normalized? Can sexual scenes hurt the sensibility of young viewers? Is the atmosphere of the film threatening?¹⁵⁵

Considering that “violence” and “sex” are the recurring keywords in the chart (see Fig.2 again), it is safe to say that classification is first and foremost detrimental to horror and extreme cinemas, even though violent or sexual scenes can potentially hurt any film genre. The paradox of the CNC’s regulatory commissions is that, despite their claim of not being a censorship institution, they are the first to admit in their reports that genre film directors are forced to make cuts before submitting their film to the commission, acknowledging the existence of a preventive self-censorship: “la tendance [...] consiste plus fréquemment que précédemment à opérer des coupes dans les films français dits d’horreur afin d’éviter une classification trop élevée (we noticed an increasing trend of making cuts in French horror films to avoid a severe classification).”¹⁵⁶ For

¹⁵⁴ CNC’s activity report from March 2005 to March 2006, p.23. There are three types of warning: stereotyped, circumstantial, or behavioral. The stereotyped warning is formulated as such: “This film includes scenes [images] that could disturb young spectators.” The circumstantial warning lists the reasons why a young audience could feel disturbed, without spoiling the plot. The behavioral warning gives out recommendation: “This film is not recommended for all audiences/is not recommended for sensitive viewers.”

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p.23.

¹⁵⁶ CNC’s activity report from January 2007 to December 2009, p.36.

example, *the Horde* (2009) would have been released with a -16 rating if the director had not previously deleted scenes in order to get a -12 rating with warning. Some distributors even make the decision to release films straight to video to avoid a severe classification that would kill their chance of exhibition anyway.¹⁵⁷ Indeed, obtaining a -16 rating is synonymous with a limited distribution (number of prints), but also a limited exhibition as many theaters do not want to take the additional cost of security that comes with controlling identity documents.¹⁵⁸ The case study of the *Saw* films will bring forth the role of theaters as unofficial actors in the regulation of horror films, especially knowing that theater chains such as Pathé or UGC represent 60% of the market.¹⁵⁹ As previously stated, any film rated -18 will most likely be limited to a few prints in small independent theaters, since bigger theater chains almost automatically refuse to show them due to security constraints (which I discuss in further details in chapter 5).

The CNC's 2010-2012 report reveals the consequences of ratings on future distribution and exhibition. During these two years, only one film rated -16 sold more than 100,000 tickets in France; it was an American horror film produced by Eli Roth, *The Last Exorcism* (2010), and which benefited from 200 prints.¹⁶⁰ On average, French films rated -16 get 13 prints versus 400 prints for French films rated all audiences, which immediately shows the limited chances of heavily rated films to sell tickets and meet success. Even though the justification for the small

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p.37. For instance, most of Japanese director Koji Wakamatsu's extreme films were released straight to DVD in France because they would have all been rated -18 anyway.

¹⁵⁸ A print is the reel or digital copy of a film. The number of prints is not the same as the number of theaters where a film is distributed. One theater can carry several prints of the same film.

¹⁵⁹ Xavier Albert and Jean-François Camilleri, *Le Marketing du cinéma* (Paris : Dixit éd., 2015), 20.

¹⁶⁰ CNC's report from January 2010 to December 2012, p.53.

number of prints relies on the alleged lack of popularity of French horror and extreme films, it is arguable that the lack will never be fulfilled and the stigma around violent or sexual content will never be reduced unless there is a larger access to such films. Meanwhile, when 19% of French films get a -16 rating, only 2.6% of American films do; however, the report adds that many American films get a -12 rating, which allegedly ends up “balancing things out” between French and American productions.¹⁶¹ When one knows the discrepancies between the distribution of -12 and -16 rated films, the balance is actually far from being reached. While films such as *Paranormal Activity* (2007) are given an all audiences rating with a warning, more explicit and yet not necessarily more frightening horror films from the 2000’s and 2010’s – like *Saw* for instance – continue to endure the severity of official and non-official actors of regulations.

French television could also be considered as another actor of regulation, since television channels only invest in films they will be able to air. The rules of television broadcast in France are quite strict: films rated -12 can only be aired before 10.30 pm four times a year on free channels, which leaves close to no room for horror films. Subscription channels such as Canal + , Ciné + or OCS have looser rules: films rated -16 can be aired after 8.30 pm and films rated -18 after midnight (even though pornographic films are privileged during this timeframe). For this reason, subscription channels end up being the biggest buyer of horror films.¹⁶² Unfortunately, a few channels cannot invest in the entire genre catalogue, creating an even larger gap with profitable investments such as comedies and dramas which can be broadcast on any channel, while horror producers and directors keep aiming for lower classifications for a chance to sell their work.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p.59.

¹⁶² CNC’s report from January 2007 to December 2009, p.11.

4.4 *Baise-moi* and the Case Against Female Violence

Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi's 2001 film *Baise-moi* exemplifies the limitations of the regulatory system, as well as its laws and decrees, when faced with violent and sexual content. *Baise-moi*, based on the novel written by Despentes herself (1994), tells the story of two young women who decide, after being raped, to go on a killing spree. The film incorporates unsimulated sex scenes, including rapes, as well as continuous gun violence. After first attributing a -16 rating to the film, the CNC's regulatory commission came under fire from the religious association Promouvoir who summoned the Council of State to have the movie banned. Promouvoir was founded in 1996 by former French magistrate André Bonnet who is affiliated with right-wing leaders; they advocate for human dignity in cultural performances while in the meantime attacking any visual content that does not conform to strict Catholic values. In addition to their relentless attacks on cinema, Promouvoir is also known for taking action against French public schools for promoting sex education and AIDS prevention courses, or against the French national railway company (SNCF) for allowing LGBT individuals to benefit from discounts.¹⁶³ Regarding *Baise-moi*, the CNC was forced under pressure to backpedal and give the film an X-rating, the same rating given to pornographic films.¹⁶⁴

Since 1975, the *loi X* (law X) had imposed an X-rating on all pornographic films in addition to heavy governmental taxes on profits and exhibition. The law had disastrous economic

¹⁶³ Council of State, decision n°213303 and n°183575 available here:

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichJuriAdmin.do?idTexte=CETATEXT000008045978>

¹⁶⁴ Report from the Council of State available at: <http://www.conseil-etat.fr/Actualites/Communiqués/Annulation-du-visa-d-exploitation-avec-interdiction-aux-mineurs-de-16-ans-pour-le-film-Baise-moi>.

consequences on the French porn industry while at the same time making it profitable to the state. When the decree of February 23, 1990 cancelled the -18 rating, the only option left for explicitly sexual and/or violent films was the X-rating, which equated a total ban from regular exhibition spaces. Indeed, an X-rated film did not hold a visa and thus could not be exhibited outside of adult movie theaters or sex shops. While pornographic films still had their own (yet limited) venues for exhibitions, violent films had none: with its X-rating, *Baise-moi* had no visa and nowhere to be exhibited. The case of Despentès and Trinh Thi's film illustrated the inconsistency within the classification system and its consequences on exhibition.

Faced with the contradiction of X-rating a film that was not pornographic in its intention, this time the CNC yielded with the decree of July 12, 2001 which reintroduced the -18 rating and allowed for the release of *Baise-moi* under this same rating. Although a -18 rating does not give much room for exhibition either since most theaters refuse to play such rated films, the new decree legalized the release of extreme genre films and alleviated them from heavy economic constraints. In her article "Sex and Violence from a Pair of Furies", Leila Wimmer interrogates the controversy around *Baise-moi*, asking whether the censorship was directed towards sex and violence or specifically towards the film's denunciation of patriarchy. The two female protagonists, both of Arab origin, shoot several white middle-class men throughout the film, which led Wimmer to argue: "The formal and political engagement with such issues of gender, race and identity was neutralized in favor of a less threatening debate about the visibility of violence and porn within mainstream media."¹⁶⁵ In other words, she argues that the CNC and Promouvoir might have solely

¹⁶⁵ Leila Wimmer in Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, eds., *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 139.

focused on the sex and violence that they deemed gratuitous, while at the same time disguising their issue with the gender politics of the film. Had the sex and violence been enacted by men, possibly white men, would the CNC classification have been as severe and would the film have triggered such divisive reactions? While this chapter and this dissertation in general have no intention and no room to expand on gender studies in genre films, Wimmer's argument seems relevant regarding the similar controversies of *Martyrs* and *Antichrist* where female violence is also at the heart of each film.

4.5 Torture and Controversies

Along with *Baise-Moi*, Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs* (2008) was one of the most mediatized regulation controversies. The film follows the radical actions of a young woman seeking revenge on her torturers (it would be a shame to say more and spoil it for those who have not seen it). *Martyrs* was initially rated -18 by the CNC for its particularly violent second half – even though it is arguable that the first half is equally brutal. The distributor, Wild Bunch, the filmmaker association SRF (*Société des Réalisateur de Films*) and the self-designated association of film professionals 'Le Club du Vendredi 13' collectively asked for the CNC's reexamination with petitions, protests and a letter sent to the Ministry of Culture. 'Le Club du Vendredi 13' issued the following statement, arguing against the (in)famous cultural exception:

Issu de l'esprit de la nouvelle vague et d'une « idéologisation » de la différence culturelle, le système institutionnel et artistique du cinéma en France cantonne les films de genre uniquement au cinéma commercial ou B (disant « Bis », voire Z) sous le prétexte qu'ils ne seraient pas motivés par une idéologie, un thème social ou psychologique suffisamment développé pour être entendu par les élites. Ce serait oublier que le film de genre est le cinéma de prédilection des grands auteurs du cinéma français et mondial que sont

Tarantino, Kubrick, Jeunet, Lynch, Cronenberg, Les Frères Coen, Raimi, Melville, Hitchcock ou encore Lucas.

Originating from the spirit of the New Wave and the “ideologization” of cultural difference, the institutional and artistic film system in France restricts genre films to commercial movies or B movies (or even Z movies). Arguing that they do not hold enough ideological, social or psychological ground to be appreciated by the elite, this claim also ignores the fact that major *auteurs* of French and international cinema such as Tarantino, Kubrick, Jeunet, Lynch, Cronenberg, the Coen brothers, Raimi, Melville, Hitchcock or Lucas all turned to genre films in their career.¹⁶⁶

Belgian director Fabrice Du Welz (*Calvaire*, *Alléluia*) denounced the prejudice against French horror films as morally and ethically dubious, imploring the CNC to revise their classification system to be more inclusive of genre films. The CNC eventually agreed to change *Martyrs*' rating to -16 with the following warning: “Ce film inflige des images extrêmement éprouvantes exposant le supplice d’une jeune femme. Sa vision comme son interprétation requièrent des spectateurs préparés et distancés (This film contains extremely grueling images of a young woman’s torment. Its viewing and interpretation require preparation and detachment).”¹⁶⁷ As for French writer Christophe Triollet, he sees the controversy as a gigantic marketing stunt, allowing for:

[...] l’entrée officielle au panthéon des œuvres torturées par la commission, la projection assurée dans de nombreuses salles de cinéma en France et à l’étranger, la diffusion sur les chaînes du groupe Canal et la mise en vente du DVD en version normale, longue, uncut et ultimate.

[...] official access to the pantheon of films tortured by the commission, guaranteed exhibition in many theaters in France and abroad, airing on private TV channels and release of a DVD including long, uncut and ultimate

¹⁶⁶ Écran noir, “Le Club du Vendredi 13 défend le cinéma de genre”, June 14, 2008.

<http://ecrannoir.fr/blog/blog/2008/06/14/le-club-du-vendredi-13-defend-le-cinema-de-genre/>

¹⁶⁷ <https://www.cnc.fr/professionnels/visas-et-classification/117112>.

versions.¹⁶⁸

It is true that the film was pre-sold to Canal + and more than 50 countries even before its release, owing to the film market at the Cannes Film Festival. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to assume that the mediatization of Laugier's struggle with regulation opened doors to the film's success in theaters. In reality, *Martyrs* was only distributed on 68 prints, only gathered 91, 236 spectators in France, and was not even released theatrically in the United States.¹⁶⁹ In spite of the word-of-mouth that such mediatic exposure can trigger, horror films rarely, if ever, benefit from strict ratings commercially speaking.

Since the reinstatement of the -18 rating in 2001, Darren Bousman's *Saw III* (2006) was the first film to be rated -18 for nonsexual reasons. The CNC's commission argued that the scenes of gratuitous torture justified their decision, which started a controversy among horror producers and directors on both sides of the Atlantic. The first argument against the CNC's decision was that the first two films of the franchise had only been rated -16, so what was pushing a more severe rating this time, considering that all films play with the same codes of gore and 'torture porn'?¹⁷⁰ Although the SRF requested a reexamination, advocating against "une grave menace pour la liberté de diffusion des œuvres et la liberté individuelle des spectateurs (a serious threat to the freedom of exhibition and the individual freedom of spectators)", the commission confirmed the decision:

¹⁶⁸ Christophe Triollet, ed., *Gore & violence*, Darkness, censure et cinéma (La Madeleine-France : Éditions LettMotif, 2017), 302.

¹⁶⁹ All data taken from <http://jpbox-office.com/>.

¹⁷⁰ Christophe Triollet, *Gore & violence*, 229. The term 'torture porn' was created by David Edelstein in 2006 against the banalization of violent and gory films such as *Saw*.

Bien qu'il s'agisse d'un film « de genre », cette proposition est motivée par la très grande violence du film, qui enchaîne sans répit des scènes de tortures morales et physiques appuyées, gratuites, sadiques et pour certaines insoutenables, donnant le sentiment qu'un palier est franchi dans ce qui est montré dans un film appartenant à cette catégorie cinématographique.

Even though it is a “genre” film, this decision was based on the graphic violence that includes successive scenes of gratuitous and sadistic moral and physical torture, taking violence to a level that exceeds what can be shown in this genre category.¹⁷¹

In regard to the CNC's chart, whereas criteria for sex scenes are quite precise, the ones for violence are limited to “graphic violence” or “incitement to violence” without further details. If penetration and unsimulated sex scenes justify a -18 rating, then how is the level of violence measured?

The *Saw* franchise follows the sadistic tortures – sometimes leading to murders – of victims judged morally deviant by the infamous Jigsaw and his accomplices. By making his victims face the possibility of their own death, the tormentor hopes for repentance and gratitude. The aesthetics of all *Saw* films are what Philippe Rouyer calls “une esthétique du sang (blood aesthetics)” or, in other words, gore.¹⁷² Gore could be defined as follows: “un mode de représentation qui exprime le refus de la suggestion en maintenant dans le cadre des scènes de violence explicite avec pour but ultime de provoquer le dégoût chez le spectateur (a mode of representation that expresses the refusal of suggestiveness by keeping explicitly violent scenes in the frame with the intention to provoke disgust in the spectator).”¹⁷³ With no desire for ellipses or off-screen shots, gore has

¹⁷¹ CNC's report from March 2006 to February 2007, 12.

¹⁷² Philippe Rouyer, *Le Cinéma Gore*, 85.

¹⁷³ Triollet, *Gore & violence*, 31.

nothing to hide and yet it entirely relies on what Rouyer calls “le royaume du faux et de l’illusion (the kingdom of fake and illusion).”¹⁷⁴ Gore is one of horror’s subgenres that does not strive for realism but for excess. In that sense, many scenes from *Saw III* are indeed disgusting, but the exaggerated fake bright red blood splatters and the executions look utterly unrealistic. The CNC mentions in their reports that the “grandguignolesque” aspect of violence or the improbability of the plot, that is to say the distance created with unrealistic situations of violence, are all factors that play a role in a more lenient classification of a film.¹⁷⁵ It then comes as no surprise that the SRF raised their voice – in vain – against the -18 rating of *Saw III*.

Despite the initial -16 rating delivered in 2010, *Saw 3D*’s classification was changed to -18 in 2015 under the pressure of Promouvoir. Five years after its original theatrical release, Promouvoir requested the invalidation of *Saw 3D*’s visa, claiming that some scenes were not following the 1975 decree demanding the restriction of graphic violence.¹⁷⁶ Although the administrative tribunal of Paris originally rejected the request, Promouvoir persisted until the Council of State eventually agreed to modify the rating. Granting that the modification only impacted the video sales of an otherwise hugely successful American franchise, the power given to Promouvoir to disavow the CNC’s decision raises a serious issue in terms of nonstate censorship. Based on their own appraisal of cinematic violence, Promouvoir imposes their views as the norm in opposition to the official system of regulation. In recent years, the religious

¹⁷⁴ Rouyer, 14.

¹⁷⁵ “Grandguignolesque” is the adjective derived from the Grand Guignol theater, a popular yet horrific mode of performance in Paris in the first half of the 20th century.

¹⁷⁶ Albert Montagne’s *Histoire Juridique des Interdits Cinématographiques* is a great source of information for all laws and decrees found in the CIC (Code de l’Industrie Cinématographique).

association has managed to become a very successful actor of censorship in the country, weakening the power of the CNC and revealing the lack of consistency and support between state institutions such as the CNC and the Council of State.

The case of the *Saw* franchise is interesting because all the films are connected and require prior fan knowledge. *Saw 3D* especially plays on previous chapters by punishing ungrateful survivors from all previous *Saw* films. If this interplay highlights the intention to target a specific fan audience, it also questions the attribution of more severe ratings for only two films out of the seven. As Martin Barker explains, “all real audiences come with prior knowledges, hopes, fears and expectations”; in other words, the audience of *Saw* comes prepared for the visceral display on screen.¹⁷⁷ The perception of violence does depend on the audience: fans and specialists of horror could hardly react to violent scenes out of habit or even laugh at the exaggeration, while uninitiated viewers could get too scared or disgusted to be entertained. The paradox of films such as *Saw* is that they usually address a niche of spectators, and not a wide audience at all. Unfortunately, this niche includes a relevant percentage of youth, the exact target that the CNC and other actors of regulation claim to protect. By acting on behalf of an imagined vulnerable spectatorship that teenagers would represent, the CNC is in fact depriving horror films of their main audience by restricting their access.

Yet another problem to add to the long list of obstacles horror films have to face comes from theater chains. If all of them are already reluctant to hire additional security to control identity documents at their entrance, the UGC chain has even started removing horror films from their

¹⁷⁷ Martin Barker. “Watching Rape, Enjoying Watching Rape . . . : How Does a Study of Audience Cha(lle)nge Mainstream Film Studies Approaches?” in *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, 109.

program because of several incidents: material degradation, noise complaints, fights and assaults, all caused by teenagers during the screenings of *Paranormal Activity 4*, *Sinister* and *Saw III*.¹⁷⁸ Albeit a minor impact for American horror films that do not have to rely on French profits for success, the situation is much more delicate for French horror films that cannot afford the bad publicity.¹⁷⁹

4.6 Extreme Cinema and Cultural Elitism

The rise of extreme cinema throughout Europe in the late 1990's and the trend of the New French Extremity in the 2000's brought about major change in the consideration for violent and sexual content in films. As defined by Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, extreme films play on the "sensory and affective involvement of audiences," by combining art cinema aesthetics with shock tactics often proper to porn or gore.¹⁸⁰ Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997), Catherine Breillat's *Romance* (1999), Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible* (2002) or Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* (2003) are, among many others, notable instances of extreme cinema. Lars Von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) incorporates some elements of drama (a couple moves to a cabin in the woods after the death of their infant son), and of horror (the woman is unable to deal with her grief, ends up attacking her husband and mutilating herself), while also including a few explicit sex scenes.

¹⁷⁸ Susie Bourquin, "Ces films d'horreur qui sèment la zizanie", Europe 1, October 14, 2014.

<https://www.europe1.fr/culture/Ces-films-d-horreur-qui-sement-la-zizanie-684138>.

¹⁷⁹ Issues of distribution and audience reception are discussed in further details in chapters 5 and 6.

¹⁸⁰ Horeck and Kendall, *The New Extremism in Cinema*, 3.

The film was rated -16 at its release, despite the unsimulated sex scenes that usually justify a -18 rating. The CNC commission supported their decision by stating that the -18 classification “est exclue pour les films présentant une dimension esthétique (is excluded for films with an aesthetic dimension),” which reinforced the divide between genre films and art films.¹⁸¹ When Promouvoir and the association *Action pour la Dignité Humaine* (Action for Human Dignity) requested the invalidation of the current visa in favor of a stronger classification, the Council of State asked the CNC for a reexamination. The commission stood their ground and responded with the following comment:

[Les scènes de sexe et de violence] s’inscrivent dans une démarche esthétique et d’illustration d’un sentiment de culpabilité maternelle et ne sont jamais gratuites.

La mise en scène révèle l’intention artistique de l’auteur du film, qui ne saurait être réduite à une succession de scènes choquantes ; que les scènes litigieuses sont destinées à montrer la douleur éprouvée par les personnages et ne s’enchaînent pas sans signification.

The violent and sexual scenes are not only incorporated within an aesthetical intention to illustrate a feeling of maternal guilt, but they are also never gratuitous. The *mise en scène* highlights the artistic intention of the director which cannot be reduced to a succession of shocking scenes; the contentious scenes are not deprived of meaning as they strive to show the pain experienced by the characters.¹⁸²

When pitted against the numerous scenes of torture and mutilation of the *Saw* films or *Martyrs*, it is true that *Antichrist* only contains a few but it still includes close-ups of mutilated genitals. Promouvoir did not give up and caused the invalidation of the visa several times over the course of seven years until the final settlement to keep the -16 rating in 2016.

¹⁸¹ CNC’s report from January 2007 to December 2009, 142.

¹⁸² Ibid., p143.

The lenience towards Von Trier's film could be connected to his status as a renowned auteur. The director usually draws a crowd of cinephiles who are relatively used to his style of filmmaking, what Hickin calls the "sense of cultural and artistic respectability that excused [extreme cinema's] explicitness and legitimized their release."¹⁸³ Because extreme cinema is more directed towards adults and art crowds in small independent theaters, the French film rating system proves to be more lenient. By adapting their rating to the targeted crowd of the film, the regulatory system validates the notions of "ordinary vulnerable viewers and sophisticated secure viewers," as though art films, no matter how horrific or explicitly sexual, could not possibly negatively affect their spectators the same way genre films do with their own audience.¹⁸⁴ For instance, Von Trier's *Nymphomaniac, Volume 1* (2013) was released in France under a -12 rating despite the nudity, the numerous close-ups on male genitalia and unsimulated penetrations. The CNC considered that the sex scenes were "realistic but measured," and that since the protagonist was willingly submitting herself to sadomasochistic practices, there was nothing to censor.¹⁸⁵ This very permissive rating can only raise doubts about the CNC's objectivity when it comes to critically acclaimed directors.

The discrepancy between the classifications of extreme art films and horror films establishes a correlation with the concept of the low-brow, the ugly, and Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural taste. Extreme films are "conferring aesthetic status on objects or ways of representing them that are excluded by the dominant aesthetic of the time."¹⁸⁶ By associating violence and sex

¹⁸³ Daniel Hickin in *The New Extremism in Cinema*, 125.

¹⁸⁴ Mark Readman, *Teaching Film Censorship and Controversy*, 25.

¹⁸⁵ CNC's activity report from January 2013 to December 2015, 34.

¹⁸⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984), 47.

usually confined to low-brow genres such as porn or horror with an aesthetic vision proper to European art films, extreme cinema legitimizes elements that have always been on the margins of taste. Films of extreme cinema or the New French Extremity capitalized on provocation through the conflation of low-brow and high-brow, redefining the notion of cultivated taste in art audiences. However, Bourdieu also points out:

The paradox of imposition of legitimacy is that it makes it impossible ever to determine whether the dominant feature appears as distinguished or noble because it is dominant, or whether it is only because it is dominant that it appears as endowed with these qualities.”¹⁸⁷

Are extreme films critically acclaimed because they are directed by ‘auteur’ filmmakers, or did they succeed in legitimizing a new hybrid style of their own? The same debate could apply to what is now being critically labelled as “elevated horror” with American films such as Ari Aster’s *Hereditary* (2018) or Jordan Peele’s *Us* (2019).¹⁸⁸ Bourdieu puts forward the refusal “of what is facile in the ethical or aesthetic sense, of everything which offers pleasures that are too immediately accessible and so discredited as childish or primitive.”¹⁸⁹ Beyond the ugly or disgusting aspect of torture films such as *Saw* or *Martyrs*, Bourdieu implies that any easily entertaining art faces rejection when it breaks the distance between the spectator and the object; in other words, if the spectator laughs, cries or screams, then the distance has been annihilated.¹⁹⁰ In her essay “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” Linda Williams connects horror with

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 92.

¹⁸⁸ The directors themselves do not necessarily identify with this label attributed to them by critics and journalists.

¹⁸⁹ Bourdieu, 486.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

pornography and melodrama for their qualities as “body spectacle”.¹⁹¹ Whether with the “cries of pleasure in porn, screams of fear in horror, sobs of anguish in melodrama,” the three genres embody the corporal excess that society frowns upon. The dismissal of direct cinematic affect circles back to the CNC’s concern with the potential affective responses triggered specifically by horror films. Despite various claims from official and non-official actors of censorship surrounding the dangers of cinematic violence and sexuality, what is the place of affect in horror studies? Is there a correlation between what is watched on screen and what could be potentially performed in real life?

4.7 Affect and Morality

Affect differentiates itself from feeling because it cannot be described through language; Teresa Brennan explains that “feelings as sensations have found the right match in words,” but affect is more physically and physiologically based and is comparable to the unexplainable atmosphere in a room.¹⁹² The bodily responses – what Williams already mentioned with cries, screams and sobs – give affect a universality that allows its easy transmission within a group. While feelings are individual, affect is precisely what motivates regulatory institutions to make decisions based on the well-being of a group, whether it is homogeneous or not. The fear of introjection to the self and projection to others created by violent cinematic content has become the motivation behind severe classifications in an attempt to protect vulnerable groups of viewers.

¹⁹¹ Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44, n°4 (1991): 4.

¹⁹² Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 5.

In his book *Pleasures of Horror*, Matthew Hills takes issue with the literalist reading of horror films that “treat the genre as a moral problem by collapsing fictional representations into the real, thereby suggesting that watching horror films will either: a) corrupt and deprave or b) desensitize viewers.”¹⁹³ Put differently, horror could only serve two functions: mimetic (where spectators would imitate screen violence) and cathartic (where spectators become immune to violence). Such theoretical readings of horror films end up justifying censorship practices.

The classification commission of the CNC, like many other regulatory institutions, base their judgment on youth protection, as they presume that children and teenagers do not have the maturity to distance themselves from what they see on screen. This statement implies that adults can make their own interpretation of cinematic violence and sex, but is it solely a matter of age?

Christophe Triollet argues:

La distanciation entre la réalité et l’enjolivement ou la grandiloquence rendus sur grand écran peut ne pas être effectuée par des spectateurs faibles et influençables qui comparent hâtivement, puis calquent leur propre vie sur celle des héros et anti-héros d’un film.

The detachment between reality and embellishment or grandiloquence appearing on screen cannot always be processed by weak and impressionable spectators who draw hasty comparisons and model their own life on those of heroes and antiheroes in movies.¹⁹⁴

The commission itself admits being often torn between two attitudes: make classification decisions based on worst case scenarios, or respect the director’s vision.¹⁹⁵ While the results of

¹⁹³ Matthew Hills, *The Pleasures of Horror* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 3.

¹⁹⁴ Triollet, *Gore & violence*, 262.

¹⁹⁵ CNC’s report from January 2010 to December 2012, 54. Full statement: “The current restriction categories gather groups of very heterogeneous individuals in terms of psychological and physiological maturity, of receptivity and

psychological and audience studies on the effect of violence would make for whole dissertation on its own, it is still important to point out that most of these studies rely on audience predictions and mechanical measurements that cannot produce solid enough results to reflect the majority.¹⁹⁶ However, against the idea of an ‘abstracted’ spectator, it is important to locate the spectator in a specific context, whether it is their knowledge of the genre or the director, the influence of the film’s marketing campaign, their own tendency to be easily scared, etc.¹⁹⁷ Despite the variety and diversity in spectatorship, regulatory institutions continue to hold the impersonal spectator as the point of reference for their ratings decisions.

Horror films complicate morality because they often trigger ambiguous desires within the spectator who equally wishes for order and disorder to prevail. They force the spectator to “think through one’s relationship to morality rather than just adhering to it.”¹⁹⁸ Comparable to Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject, the inner struggle of being attracted and repulsed by the same cinematic element often leads to fascination.¹⁹⁹ Continuing with that idea, Stephen Prince talks of a double-standard for horror where the depiction of violence can enhance or criticize real-life

vulnerability. One can choose to always protect the less equipped, most likely a minority, which leads to recommend precautionary restrictions. On the opposite, one can choose to favor the film’s vision whose impact on individuals should not constitute a risk, hopefully a majority, which leads to temper classification. The commission is very often torn between these two positions.”

¹⁹⁶ Frey’s *Extreme Rhethoric*, Horeck and Kendall’s *New Extremism* and Middleweek’s *Real Sex Films* all have great several chapters on audience studies; *Horror Films: Current Research on Audience Preferences and Reactions* tends to be more negatively biased towards horror viewers based on a small research spectrum.

¹⁹⁷ Martin Baker in *The New Extremism in Cinema*, 109.

¹⁹⁸ Horeck and Kendall, 4.

¹⁹⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

violence.²⁰⁰ W some horror films rely purely on visuals and entertainment, others ask for a reflective involvement where the spectator can be the judge and the victim at the same time. By putting the spectator in both positions, horror cinema enables the switch between maintaining and breaking the critical distance and scopophilic pleasure. In addition to playing with one's sense of morality, horror also acts as a reminder of mortality. Religious or spiritual viewers might reject horror cinema as offensive (especially possession and ghost movies) because it puts forward alternative concepts of mortality that humans naturally seek to repress through religion or beliefs, in what could be called coping mechanisms.²⁰¹ Likewise, the explicitness of gory movies reveals the fragility of the human body that society strives to conceal through science and cosmetics. The fear of mortality plays a role in Promouvoir's battle for human dignity, equally motivated by religion and conservative values.

However, the fear of death does not have to be perceived negatively. Watching horror films has become an initiation rite for teenagers who brag among each other about how many jump scares and gory scenes they can handle, often without their parents knowing. This rite of passage also reveals a transgressive pleasure when overlooking rating decisions that were specifically designed for them. The collective or individual experience of watching horror films enables the integration of fear rather than its repression, thus functioning as a transition from childhood to adulthood.²⁰² This is not saying that children and teenagers should all watch horror films to control

²⁰⁰ Stephen Prince, ed., *The Horror Film*, 132.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

²⁰² Walter Evans, "Monster Movies and Rites of Initiation," *Journal of Popular Film* 4, n°2 (April 1, 1975): 124–142. In this article, Evans draws a comparison between the personal and social needs of adolescents nowadays and the rites of initiation in what he calls "pre-modern" cultures.

their fears, or that they would all have the same reactions to violence; this is simply pointing out how some teenagers envision the genre as a rite of passage or as a way to interrogate death through fiction.

Prince explains that children between 3-8 years old tend to be frightened by animals and creatures, children aged 9-12 are more scared of personal injury and death of self and family, and teenagers experience social fear mostly about school. While younger children are afraid of appearances, older children focus more on behavior, which is the difference between perceptual and conceptual.²⁰³ In their survey on scary media, Clasen, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and Johnson suggest that:

The appetite for threat simulations emerges early in ontogeny, but the appetite tends to be satisfied through play activities and moderately scary stories, not *bona fide* horror films, novels and video games. With cognitive maturation, individuals seek out more frightening media material.²⁰⁴

These distinct fears and anxieties of children and youth do not necessarily appear in horror films; they can be found in all genres, including movies labelled as family-friendly. I personally remember being terrified of *Jumanji* (1995) when I was a kid, and to this day the beating drums of the board game still haunt me, even though I can stomach the goriest scenes in the many horror films I watch. Prince continues by arguing that “research on coping with media-induced fears indicates that the presence of a caring adult and discussion with a parent are potent fear reducers for children,” which encourages parents to play a role in their children’s media education.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Prince, 230.

²⁰⁴ Mathias Clasen, Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, and John A. Johnson, “Horror, Personality, and Threat Simulation: A Survey on the Psychology of Scary Media,” *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences*, 2018, 12.

²⁰⁵ Prince, 236.

4.8 Alleviating the Burden of Regulation

In this age of mediatic overload with cinema, television, the internet and video games available to us in the palm of our hands, another concern of the CNC has been the open access to violent or sexual images through mass media, raising the question of the possible inutility of even classifying films. Their 2005 report insists on critical engagement with media through school and education, as a possible way to familiarize children and teenagers with the influx of images in today's society.²⁰⁶ In an attempt to empower parental education, the introduction of a "with accompanying adult" category has been suggested but continues to face criticism: would this measure end up being counterproductive, making parents the only judges and thus weakening even more the official power of state institutions? To mitigate the severe consequences of the -16 rating, a new -14 classification has also been offered; however, it raises the problem of having too many categories and complicating even further the access and exhibition of films in theaters.

The National Audiovisual Institute (INA) has expressed their interest in the removal of the entire visa authorization system in France, arguing in favor of a more liberal approach: films would be released without a visa, like books, and would only require a classification by a judge in case of litigations.²⁰⁷ However, when associations like Promouvoir already sue several films a year, the absence of a rating system would most likely open the door to an incredible number of litigations from nonstate actors of regulation such as theaters, parents or educators.

²⁰⁶ Unfortunately, film and media studies are not required in French schools.

²⁰⁷ Marc Le Roy, "Protection des mineurs et œuvres cinématographiques, un état des lieux", INA, May 30, 2012.

<https://larevuedesmedias.ina.fr/protection-des-mineurs-et-oeuvres-cinematographiques-un-etat-des-lieux>.

Despite the occasional lack of consistency between the CNC and the Council of State, the collaboration of French institutions allows for a public rating system which is a lot less strict than what is done in the United States or the United Kingdom. Indeed, the autoregulation through private systems such as the MPAA or the BBFC gives rise to stricter rating decisions as well as requests for cuts and reexaminations. While the CNC no longer operates as a censor by requesting cuts, self-censorship from filmmakers and interventions from other actors such as theater chains and associations still play a significant role in the French regulation of films. Granting that the interpretative and sensory response to films is a subjective matter, there seems to be no ideal solution for a rating system that would always be fair to all. Once again, the internalized moral constructs regarding acceptable use of cinematic sex and violence enable nonofficial members of society to acquire almost as much power as the official institutions in charge, extending the notion of regulation and censorship far beyond the realm of the original film rating system. Censorship can sometimes be celebrated because it makes certain films harder to watch, harder to find and thus more distinctive and desirable, which creates a subculture proper to a particular type of horror fandom. However, I do not believe that the directors and the films I examine in this dissertation are reaching for this subculture and spectatorial niche of censored and unappreciated films that tend to align more with the category of paracinema or B movies.





Visa obtenu	Violence	Sexe
- de 12 ans 	Présente sans être excessive.	Présent sans être excessif.
- de 16 ans 	Pas de jurisprudence. La Commission de classification évoque la sexualité associée à la violence ou la présence forte de la violence avec caractère continu ou éprouvant.	Scène de sexe non simulée mais unique et brève complétée par la manière de filmer et la nature du thème traité par l'auteur.
- de 18 ans 	Grande violence.	Scènes de sexe non simulées crues et explicites sans intention des auteurs de faire un film pornographique.
X 	Incitation à la violence.	Nécessaire présence de scènes de sexe non simulées assorties d'une intention des auteurs de réaliser un film pornographique.

Figure 2 Classification Chart ©INA (www.ina.fr)

5.0 Watching Horror: Alternate Modes of Distribution and Exhibition in France

Once the financing and production of a horror film are completed, the next step consists in finding the best distribution strategy to ensure the exhibition of said film to the largest audience and, when possible, to the most appropriate audience in terms of taste and age range. All steps from the genesis to the exhibition of a film are deeply interconnected. Indeed, while some producers can prove more daring to support films that will not necessarily reach the masses, others such as television channels and big production companies aim for the largest audience possible, most often than not bidding on a film's potential for entertainment. That is when distribution comes into play: producers will be more inclined to finance a film if it is ensured to be widely distributed. If the film is too niche, too violent or too provocative, which will limit the distribution and exhibition in theaters, then some producers simply refuse to take the risk.

In this chapter, I will first go over the role of distributors in the French film industry, as well as their growing need to adapt to the new challenges imposed by globalization, mainly the seemingly unstoppable popularity of Netflix, as “the rise of streaming platforms and their direct access to consumers inevitably throws the future of sales agencies as intermediaries into doubt.”²⁰⁸ The constant renewal of genre films and series – including horror – that Netflix produces and makes available to millions of French subscribers continues to divide opinions: a blessing or a curse? After producing French series *Marianne*, *Mortel* and *Vampires*, Netflix now appears as a competitive alternative for the production and distribution of horror content in France. Although

²⁰⁸ Screen International at Cannes, May 14th, 2020, 46.

the platform has not yet produced a French horror film, this discussion is still relevant to the current state of the French film industry since it shows Netflix's interest in the horror genre on an international scale. The last part of this chapter includes the interview of Frédéric Garcia, showrunner of *Mortel*, to discuss his experience with the American giant.

However, since more than 40% of a film's profits benefit the exhibitors, theatrical exhibition remains the norm.²⁰⁹ Most producers and distributors will aim for a release in theaters before turning to streaming or video, often to the disadvantage of horror films. It is first important to make a distinction between multiplexes and arthouse theaters (*Art & Essai*) in their relationship to horror cinema. Whether in terms of attendance or funding, both types of theaters present advantages and drawbacks regarding horror which is still too often deemed undesirable. Considering the affective corporality of horror films, it is worth digging deeper into the 'competition' between the theatrical experience and the home experience with streaming and video. For instance, Adam Hart explains that watching horror at home gives the possibility of regaining control over one's own fear and bodily reactions because immersion becomes a choice, not a constraint like in theaters.²¹⁰

Between film festivals (specialized in horror or not), streaming platforms and video, other circuits are available in France for the distribution and exhibition of horror films, whether following or replacing theatrical releases. While the Cannes Film Festival has no problem including extreme films in its selection, especially if they are from regular guests Lars Von Trier

²⁰⁹ Another 40% benefit the producers and distributors while the rest goes to various taxes. Laurent Creton, *L'économie du cinéma en 50 fiches*, 63.

²¹⁰ Adam Charles Hart, *Monstrous Forms: Moving Image Horror across Media*, 29.

and Gaspar Noé, horror and its many subgenres are not equally represented in the various selections of the festival. For horror fans and other spectators interested in discovering the genre in its every form, horror/fantastic film festivals represent a much more pertinent place to enjoy exclusive content that may or may not become available later on other exhibition windows. In times of globalization, interconnectedness and at-home entertainment, how can horror films find their place in the evolving French film industry, and how can they find their audience in the midst of the largest film selection ever made available to the public from the comfort of their home?

5.1 Distributing Genre in France

I will first examine the current state of film distribution in France to gain a better insight on the challenges proper to the horror genre. In France, the distributor buys the film's rights from the producer (either temporarily with a mandate or permanently) and distribute it to exhibitors, mostly theaters and television. Distribution companies usually have a sales team in charge of finding exhibition windows and redistributing receipts to beneficiaries, a marketing team to promote the film, and a technical team to make prints.²¹¹ Some directors or producers stay loyal to the same distribution company in a given country – for instance Bong Joon-ho and French company Joker Films –, while others tend to pick the most profitable option. In France, the ten biggest distributors combine 70% of total receipts, and among those 50% go to American major film studios like the Walt Disney Company or Universal Pictures International (see Fig.3 at the

²¹¹ Xavier Albert and Jean-François Camilleri, *Le Marketing du cinéma*, 29.

end of this chapter).²¹² The presence of StudioCanal, Pathé Distribution and Gaumont in the chart indicate the resilience and success of French companies to distribute popular content – most of it being comedies and action films. However, it is undeniable that American films occupy most of the screen space, especially with their numerous franchises now owned by Disney (Pixar, Marvel, etc.). Considering that distributors contact exhibitors to ask how many screens will be available on a given Wednesday (release day in France), often depending on weekend performance numbers, it is easy to imagine the overbid happening between distribution companies to place their films in theaters. With the amount of films now being produced and released, the turnover in theaters becomes shorter and shorter, giving films very little time to prove their worth before being removed. In these conditions, smaller independent distribution companies can hardly compete with American or even French studios.

Because distributors rely heavily on theater receipts since the video market is not granted the same importance as theatrical release, the competition among films and the decline of theater attendance over the years caused many to go bankrupt. Now distribution companies turn to vertical integration, often adding a production branch to limit financial impact when a film flops, or the opposite, earn higher revenues when a film is successful. The rise of streaming platforms producing their own content has also accelerated diversification strategies:

The films produced by EuropaCorp are symptomatic of this new trend. [...] Aimed at controlling all stages of production, distribution and exhibition, including full control of their films' various windows, from theatrical via home entertainment to broadcast television and beyond, EuropaCorp's strategy is built around the concept of a vertically integrated studio.²¹³

²¹² CNC, “Observatoire de la diffusion cinématographique”, January 29, 2020.

²¹³ Michael Temple and Michael Witt, eds., *The French Cinema Book*, 261.

While EuropaCorp has not produced or distributed a horror film in recent years – they distributed *High Tension*, *Frontier(s)* and *The Eye* in the 2000's –, their example of vertical integration and their interest in genre films make their case compelling.

The company was founded by director Luc Besson and producer Pierre-Ange Le Pogam in 2000 and has since developed production, distribution and sales branches, in addition to building a film school located in the northern suburb of Paris (*la Cité du Cinéma*). Eager to make films that could resonate with domestic and international audiences so as to expand their market, EuropaCorp has successfully produced and/or distributed comedies (for instance the *Taxi* franchise), action films (*Tell No One*, the *Taken* franchise, etc.) and science-fiction films (*Lucy*, *Valerian*, etc.). Besson's commitment in his films to maintain a sense of French identity (either with the location, the casting, the storyline, etc.) while adhering to a commercial approach (foreign partners, private funding, fast production methods, etc.) continues to divide opinions, especially in the French 'exception' debate which Charlie Michael defines as the idea that French filmmaking should be “a bastion of artisanal, aesthetic alternatives to North American hegemony”.²¹⁴ Nonetheless, Besson's resilience to make French science-fiction and action films cannot be overlooked in the continuing outpouring of American films in theaters.²¹⁵ How is France supposed to maintain (or even create?)

²¹⁴ Charlie Michael, *French Blockbusters: Cultural Politics of a Transnational Cinema*, Traditions in World Cinema (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 3.

²¹⁵ After the box office failure of *Valerian* (2017) that hardly made more than its initial budget of almost 200 million dollars, EuropaCorp was in receivership and was bought in 2020 by American firm Vine. The distribution branch will stay focused on French films thanks to a deal with Pathé. Read more at: <https://www.lesechos.fr/tech-medias/medias/europacorp-peut-redemarrer-avec-vine-majoritaire-au-capital-1180706>

a more diverse film offer if people assume that specific genres like action, superhero or horror should be left to the United States only?

While only very few French companies remain supportive of horrific content, such as StudioCanal and Wild Bunch, they cannot hide the difficulty of placing violent movies for exhibition. Horror and extreme films represent a significant financial risk for distributors. Indeed, the latter do not benefit from the same freedom as other circuits of distribution/exhibition – like film festivals for instance – because of commercial stakes and legal issues: if they distribute a film that either does not meet its audience or gets sued for its extremity, there are financial consequences for the company because the film gets removed almost immediately from exhibition or video sales and can no longer make money (see the example of *Antichrist* in chapter 4). The difficulty of securing an audience in theaters causes distributors to juggle with “ideals of art and transgression, imperatives of commerce and conformity, and their identities as cinephiles and businessmen.”²¹⁶ How to find a middle ground between distributing the radical content they are interested in, while at the same time satisfying the commercial obligations they are tied to? Even though Wild Bunch praises itself on its “radical, innovative, visionary, truly extraordinary, often controversial, always provocative” line-up, it is important to keep in mind that distributors willing to work with extreme content must be ready to face censorship (in addition to bans and obscenity laws in other countries).²¹⁷ Sometimes legal fees become part of the distribution budget and distributors count on the video release of uncut versions of a film to increase publicity and make

²¹⁶ Mattias Frey, *Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 74.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

up for the financial loss. In the end, between big companies being criticized for taking inspiration from the American studio system, and smaller companies taking risks on extreme content, the traditional distribution of horror films to theaters seems to be more and more compromised.

5.2 Looking for Theaters

Although theaters have become one way to watch movies in the presence of many alternatives like DVD/Blu-Ray, video-on-demand, streaming, etc., France continues to grant them enough value to make a theatrical release an imperative for recognition and revenues: “among many types of screen, media, and modes of access to films, the theater is no more than one of them, certainly the first in the chronology of media, contributing greatly to the conferring of symbolic value on cinematic films.”²¹⁸ France flaunts its impressive numbers as it is the first European country in terms of theater attendance with more than 200 million spectators in 2018, for profits up to 1.3 million euros, which makes sense considering that France also has the biggest number of screens in Europe (5,982 as of 2018). It is also interesting to note that almost 33% of French spectators are over 50 years old, a statistic to keep in mind when questioning the place of horror in theaters (the age range of 15-24 years old which is usually the target for horror films only represents 15%).²¹⁹ Since the 1990's, the numerous policies for cultural management in France have brought theaters to modernize their equipment for more comfort, technical innovation, wider

²¹⁸ Alistair Fox et al., ed., *A Companion to Contemporary French Cinema* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK ; Malden, MA, USA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 35.

²¹⁹ All statistics taken from the CNC's report “La Géographie du cinéma en 2018”, September 19, 2019.

and more exclusive film selections, all of which contributed to the differentiation between multiplexes and arthouse theaters. Even though 56% of theaters are single-screen (often labelled *Art & Essai* for their commitment to art films), 60% of ticket sales are to multiplexes, either for their proximity, their improved watching experience or their loyalty cards. While extreme art films are usually shown in arthouse theaters, horror films seem to be confined to multiplexes. Given the different imperatives of both types of theaters, how can this division be rationalized? What can theaters bring to the table to facilitate the exhibition of violent films?

As previously mentioned in chapter 4 on censorship and regulation, several multiplexes have limited or removed entirely horror films from their screens allegedly for incitement to violence. French directors like Alexandre Bustillo do not hesitate to voice their concern over the censorship imposed by exhibitors:

Les véritables fossoyeurs du cinéma de genre (qu'il soit français ou étranger) sont les exploitants qui ne veulent plus de ce genre de films dans leurs salles, sous prétexte qu'ils rameutent un public de sauvages. Le gouvernement ne fait qu'émettre un avis, la véritable censure se fait ailleurs, en empêchant ces films d'être distribués de façon correcte. C'est donc devant les salles de cinéma qu'il faut manifester, pas devant le Ministère de la culture, afin d'obliger les exploitants à ouvrir leurs salles.

The real gravediggers of genre cinema (whether French or international) are the exhibitors who no longer want those films in their theaters because they supposedly draw an audience of young savages. The government only gives recommendations; real censorship happens elsewhere when films cannot be properly distributed. So we have to protest in front of theaters, not in front of the Ministry of Culture, so exhibitors open their doors.²²⁰

²²⁰ Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb, ed., *Les cinéastes français à l'épreuve du genre fantastique: socioanalyse d'une production artistique*, Collection Logiques sociales. Série Études culturelles (Paris: Harmattan, 2012), 59.

I would disagree with Bustillo and his argument that the government only gives a recommended rating because the CNC and Ministry of Culture's regulatory decisions have to be scrupulously enforced by theaters. It is impossible for exhibitors to change the rating of a film. If theaters do not want such severely rated films, their only solution is to not program them at all. However, by pointing at the detrimental choices theaters make by rejecting horror films, Bustillo not only denounces the discrimination towards the genre but also towards young spectators, something that Xavier Gens experienced firsthand with the release of his film *Frontier(s)*:

Le vrai barrage est venu des exploitants à cette période, au moment de la sortie de *Saw 3*, film interdit aux moins de 18 ans. Ça a fait la une des journaux. Ce qui s'est passé c'est qu'il y a eu un contrôle d'identité dans une salle de Rosny. Les gamins de banlieue sont arrivés sans papier d'identité. On a voulu les contrôler mais ils n'avaient pas leur papier. Cela a créé une émeute. Cela s'est répercuté sur la violence de *Saw 3*, car on a stigmatisé la violence de ces jeunes à travers *Saw 3*. Les exploitants qui appelaient ça le « public à capuche » ne voulaient pas de ces films-là, comme *Frontière(s)*, car on était trop extrêmes. On a dû perdre 70, 80 salles. Non pas parce que c'était violent, mais ça attire un public qui n'est pas désirable. Cela est aussi arrivé à *Banlieue 13*. Cette situation a découragé beaucoup de salles, et les producteurs.

The roadblocks came from exhibitors when *Saw III* was released under a -18 rating. It was even in the front page of newspapers. A movie theater in Rosny (city in the suburbs of Paris) asked teenagers for their ID, but they did not have it so they rioted. Their violent reaction was conflated with the violence in *Saw III*, which led to the stigmatization of both the film and the teenagers. The exhibitors did not want such films, like *Frontier(s)*, because they were too extreme. We lost 70 to 80 theaters. Not because it was violent, but because it drew an unwanted crowd. The same happened with *District 13*. This situation discouraged many theaters and producers.²²¹

²²¹ Public roundtable at the Gérardmer Film Festival, “Le cinéma de genre français, mythe ou réalité ?” February 2, 2018.

Similar incidents happened at the release of *Annabelle* (2014) when groups of teenagers disrupted screenings.²²² The conflation between violent films and violent young spectators was quick to be made, as though horror films were systematically attracting the 'wrong' crowd. But what about other genres that do include young spectators as well such as comedies, action films or superhero movies? Because horror films generally do not attract people over 50 years old, they can be removed from exhibition with little impact on revenues. If the French film industry boasts about diversity – which is mostly geared towards the production of art films –, can one actually speak of diversity if there is limited access to specific genres?

Nevertheless, to set the record straight, the reluctance to program horror films does not only come from multiplexes. Such incidents only happened in multiplexes because arthouse theaters and single-screen theaters in general do not accept horror films. Understandably enough, single-screen theaters would rather program popular films to attract all types of spectators and make bigger profits. However, arthouse theaters with multiple screens do not embrace the horror genre either. Those theaters, often labelled *Art & Essai*, do face more budgetary restrictions than multiplexes, but they also benefit from funding from the *Association Française des Cinémas d'Art et d'Essai* (AFCAE) to encourage “la garantie du pluralisme des acteurs de la diffusion et de l’exploitation, et celle de la diversité de l’offre cinématographique (pluralism among the actors of distribution and exhibition, and diversity of the cinematographic offer).”²²³ Once again, the words 'pluralism' and 'diversity' appear in their official statement, but they resonate differently in the

²²² Céline L., “Quand la séance tourne à l’horreur”, DNA, October 14, 2014.

<https://www.dna.fr/edition-de-strasbourg/2014/10/14/quand-la-seance-tourne-a-l-horreur>.

²²³ <http://www.art-et-essai.org/3/qui-sommes-nous>.

absence of genres like horror or science-fiction from programming. By such words, the AFCAE mostly means to select films from different countries or from young/less known directors, but this ‘diversity’ does not extend to genres since dramas tend to populate arthouse theaters. Various arguments can be made to explain the lack of horror films in such theaters. First, their spectators are older (over 50 years old), mostly women and from middle to upper classes, which is rather far from the typical horror audience.²²⁴ In his masters' thesis on genre films in French arthouse theaters, Mathieu Guilloux shared a survey among the members of the commission in charge of recommending films to the *Art & Essai* label. Out of 32 respondents, 90% are over 40 years old (no one is under 30), and only 6% name horror/fantastic as their favorite genre.²²⁵ It is thus not only a spectatorship issue: the association itself is run by members who show little interest towards horror.

Arthouse theaters tend to favor auteur cinema, and French horror directors are not considered auteur. The auteur label recognizes a director's identity throughout his filmography, which would technically fit the identifiable work of John Carpenter, Wes Craven, or Pascal Laugier in France, but horror directors only find their place in arthouse theaters during special events. A common issue to all theaters is the fast rotation of films due to the high number of productions. If multiplexes can keep films on their programs for two or three weeks even if they do not perform too well, smaller theaters do not have the financial ease to slow the rotation and risk losing money: “a principle of proliferation is joined with a devaluing of films that are regarded

²²⁴ CNC, “Le Public du cinéma Art et Essai”, October 2006, 13-16

²²⁵ Mathieu Guilloux, *Le Cinéma de genre, la règle française et les salles Art et Essai*, 78.

as disposable.”²²⁶ While the imposition of time requirements in theaters has been suggested for the most fragile films to have a fair chance of finding their audience, it is likely that art and auteur films would be the first – and maybe the only – to benefit from such a measure; furthermore, it could possibly force low-revenue theaters to lose money over unsuccessful movies or maybe to not program them at all so as to avoid financial loss.²²⁷

To support genre films, Mathieu Guilloux encourages arthouse theaters (through the AFCAE) to organize monthly events to introduce genres that their usual audience might not know much about: [...] “aider les cinémas qui n'ont pas l'habitude de travailler cette typologie à attirer, à construire et à cultiver un nouveau public (help theaters that are not used to working with such films to attract, build and cultivate a new audience).”²²⁸ Guilloux interviewed the creator of the *Absurde séance* at the Katorza theater in Nantes (a monthly screening of horror/fantastic/exploitation films) who admitted that, despite the success of the event, it was mostly attracting spectators aged 25-30 years old:

Le spectateur fidèle [des séances Art et Essai du Katorza], lecteur de Télérama, s'aventure peu à l'Absurde séance. Ces spectateurs 'cultureux' n'ont pas le goût de l'aventure. Pour eux, c'est une séance non-propre, avec des films qui ne sont pas pour eux. Des préjugés qui sont malheureusement dommageés, mais présents.”

Our loyal moviegoers [of the Katorza's *Art et Essai* screenings], readers of Télérama, dare not attend the *Absurde séance*. These culture-buffs are not that

²²⁶ Fox et al., *A Companion to Contemporary French Cinema*, 37.

²²⁷ Jonathan Buchsbaum, *Exception taken*, 192.

²²⁸ Guilloux, 97.

adventurous. To them, it's a dirty screening with movies that are not tailored for them. Such biases are a shame but they are real.^{229 230}

Such division in cinema spectatorship can only be resolved with educational and recreational support, proper funding for events and advertising, and more open-mindedness at the same time from the spectators and from the entire film industry in order to embrace the diversity of all genres whether their intention is to be aesthetic, realistic or entertaining.

The importance of exhibiting horror films in theaters stems once again from the symbolic value given to the cinematic experience. In the presence of alternate modes of watching films that I will discuss in the rest of the chapter, what makes the theatrical experience so special? Like an “interlude in time and space”, full attention is given to the film in silence and darkness where action and movement are limited.²³¹ The big screen, the surround sound and other technical attributes have enabled theaters to remain a privileged space for cinema. When it comes to watching horror, the darkness of the theater plays a specific role because it enables what Julian Hanich calls the “hiding effect”: it is okay to scream and jump when other social circumstances would make it more awkward.²³² Hanich also insists on the “feeling-in-common”, the move from individualized immersion at home to collective immersion where you can turn to others to grab

²²⁹ Ibid., 88.

²³⁰ Télérama is a French magazine on culture and television whose writing is sometimes made fun of for being conceited.

²³¹ Laurent Creton, *Économie du cinéma*, 64.

²³² Julian Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: the Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, Routledge advances in film studies 5 (New York: Routledge, 2010), 63.

hands or even laugh at yourselves for being scared.²³³ This immersive experience allows horror films to attract and reject spectators when the shock comes on screen. They cannot escape the shock, the jump scares, the gore, etc. Even if they look away, they will hear the music and sound effects that are purposefully designed to scare even without the image. However, I would argue that if some spectators specifically look for this exacerbation of emotions due to the full immersion, it can also explain why others do not feel comfortable watching horror in theaters when maybe they would allow themselves to do so at home. Watching a horror film in the comfort of one's home, possibly with the lights on and low volume, lessens the immediate shock effect. Adam Hart argues:

The video viewing experience offers some suggestion of control over the remote control, the lights, the screen itself: the disciplinary regime of the movie is countered by more salient modes of resistance. It might still make us scream, but only if we choose to give it our full attention - an offer we can fully rescind at some point.²³⁴

In a domestic setting, spectators can remain active, whereas the theatrical experience requires passivity and concentration that some spectators do not appreciate or, in the case of horror, feel uncomfortable with. Even though theatrical release remains sacred in France and can prove more fruitful in terms of profits and recognition – in addition to being the ultimate cinematic experience for some of us –, it comes as no surprise that producers and filmmakers now turn to alternate circuits of distribution and exhibition for horror films given their difficulties to consolidate an audience in theaters.

²³³ Ibid., 76.

²³⁴ Hart, *Monstrous Forms*, 29.

5.3 On Display in Festivals

Film festivals, specialized in horror/fantastic or not, have more flexibility with content and classification than theaters: usually, the films in competition have not been shown in front of an official rating commission like the CNC. As Mattias Frey explains, festivals have the “freedom to represent and debate marginal, sensitive and difficult subject matters.”²³⁵ Because festival programmers do not fear censorship the way distributors do, they can challenge their audience with content that could potentially trigger a legal battle outside festival grounds, which also “reinforces the events’ liberal, tolerant, artistic, and cosmopolitan identities”, something that the Cannes Film Festival is no stranger to.²³⁶

Since its first edition in 1946, the Cannes Film Festival has claimed to encourage cosmopolitanism, diversity and collaboration with film industries from around the globe. Its appeal has also been residing in its location on the French Riviera, its extra cinematic events (conferences, television and radio shows, etc.), and the stardom of the red carpet walk and parties.²³⁷ The conditions to be part of a selection (whether the official competition or the side selections) are fairly easy to comply with: the festival is open to any film that has been produced in the past twelve months, has not been exhibited in its home country or on the internet, and has not been played in another festival.²³⁸ Yet, some genres continue to be underrepresented in all selections, horror being

²³⁵ Frey, *Extreme cinema*, 54.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

²³⁷ Vanessa R. Schwartz, *It’s so French! Hollywood, Paris, and the making of cosmopolitan film culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 98.

²³⁸ Read more about the side selections and the rules for competition on the official website:

one of them. The festival committee has been keener to select extreme films, often from the same directors: Gaspar Noé's films were selected six times, and Lars Von Trier's thirteen times. Their films are almost automatically shown at the festival, in competition or during special screenings. The media visibility for directors like Noé and Von Trier is particularly prominent as their films usually buzz for their graphic imagery, causing spectators to feel nauseous and/or shocked and exit the theater.²³⁹ Even though Cannes welcomes extreme cinema and gives those movies a chance to be watched outside the realms of censorship and conformism, such selection creates multiple divides.

First of all, Cannes extending invitations to the same directors calls into question their claim for diversity and shines a light on their preference for auteurism over genre. Festivals and award ceremonies have often been called “incestuous” as film professionals congratulate each other based on their own taste and sensibility, a very important distinction from horror festivals where attendees can vote.²⁴⁰ It is also important to note that the Cannes Film Festival is a private event where the public can buy tickets for side screenings – if there are enough seats – but cannot attend the official competition. In the end, even though participation to renowned festivals can increase distribution to theaters or video sales, very few of the films in competition meet consequential success in theaters. Julia Ducournau's *Raw* was initially selected for the official

<https://www.festival-cannes.com/en/>

²³⁹ I have personally seen it happen at the 2019 edition of the festival with the screenings of Noé's *Climax* and Von Trier's *The House that Jack Built*. You can read more about Gaspar Noé's scandalous Cannes screenings at <https://www.rtl.fr/culture/cine-series/festival-de-cannes-2015-gaspar-noe-la-carte-scandale-de-la-croisette-7777497297>

²⁴⁰ Albert et Camilleri, *Le Marketing du cinéma*, 62.

competition when the director and her producer asked to compete in the side selection of the Critics' Week instead: "l'idée est de faire une entrée modeste et de ne pas être noyé dans la masse (the idea is to make a discreet entrance and not lose oneself in the crowd)", a privileged decision that most horror films will never have the chance to make.²⁴¹ Indeed, *Raw* is a hybrid between genre and niche – in other words, between the entertainment of horror and the aesthetics of an art film–, which turns it into an acceptable fit for the festival. When horror films (that are not trying to be anything but horror) are exceptionally part of side selections, they receive depreciative reviews from the press, for instance Babak Anvari's *Wounds* in the 2019 edition which was called "le faux pas d'une sélection jusque-là irréprochable (the blunder in an almost flawless selection)":

Il y en aura toujours pour dire qu'il faut des 'films de genre' dans une sélection cannoise. 'Le film de genre' ! Derrière cette expression se cache souvent avec pudeur le sentiment qu'on vient de voir au mieux ce qu'on définissait autrefois comme un film de série B, et au pire d'un mot qui désigne aussi ce que laisse derrière elle une vache dans un pré.

Some will say the Cannes festival needs 'genre films.' 'Genre film', a term used to hide the feeling that, at best, you just watched what used to be called a B movie, and at worst, something resembling what a cow would leave behind.²⁴²

²⁴¹ Thomas Baurez, "Grave: itinéraire sans faute d'un film qui ébranle le monde du cinéma", L'Express, March 15, 2017. https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/cinema/grave-itineraire-sans-faute-d-un-film-qui-ebbranle-le-monde-du-cinema_1882677.html

²⁴² Jean-François Lixon, "Cannes 2019: *Wounds* de Babak Anvari, film d'horreur poussif et sans imagination", France Info, May 22, 2019. https://www.francetvinfo.fr/culture/cinema/festival-de-cannes/cannes-2019-wounds-de-babak-anvari-film-d-horreur-poussif-et-sans-imagination_3454815.html

Whether the film is good or bad, such comments are an attack on horror, calling for its discrimination in festivals. When the Cannes Film Festival invited John Carpenter in 2019 to give him a recognition award (the *Carrosse d'Or*) before a special screening of *The Thing* (1982) and a Q&A, the event had a full house, which could hypothetically demonstrate the attendees' interest in Carpenter but also in the horror genre. Inviting and awarding Carpenter could potentially mark the beginning of a more open-minded approach towards genre in the future.²⁴³ Indeed, the same year Jim Jarmusch's zombie movie *The Dead Don't Die* opened the festival (yet without taking part in the main competition), and Brazilian film *Bacurau* won the Jury Prize (yet categorized as a western/thriller rather than horror).

Nonetheless, the Cannes Film Festival represents a bargain for international film sales thanks to its film market where film professionals from around the world can do business together. More than 50% of the films in the official competition, as well as the Directors' Fortnight and Critics' Week selections, are sold by French companies.²⁴⁴ In addition to being a privileged platform for distribution, Cannes has also become the place to be for production and festival programming, as executive director of the film market Jérôme Paillard explains: "More than half the market attendees are neither sellers nor distributors. The producer population continues to rise and we have some 1,300 festival programmers coming in each year with Cannes being a major source of films for festivals going on around the year."²⁴⁵ Indeed, introducing a film in Cannes helps legitimate a director's work for other festivals, and for domestic and international distribution

²⁴³ As I was writing this chapter, the 2020 edition of the festival had been cancelled because of Covid-19.

²⁴⁴ Screen International at Cannes, May 14, 2019, 44.

²⁴⁵ Screen International at Cannes, May 15, 2019, 30.

to theaters or video. For instance, Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs* was offered for sale at the film market in 2008, which helped with its international recognition (but not its profits). However, ultimately, outside of its film market boosting the French film industry, the Cannes Film Festival remains a place for auteur-driven selections where horror has not quite found its place yet.

Thankfully, a fair number of horror/fantastic festivals take place in France every year, among which the Strasbourg European Fantastic Film Festival, the Bloody Weekend Film Festival (in Audincourt), L'Étrange Festival (in Paris), Hallucinations Collectives (in Lyon), and the two biggest events, the Paris International Fantastic Film Festival and the Gérardmer International Fantastic Film Festival. The latter has been the most acclaimed horror festival in France since its creation in 1994 to replace another popular fantastic festival in Avoriaz. Its creator Lionel Chouchan explains that Avoriaz's shutdown was not caused by "un manque de popularité – au 'box-office' des festivals, Avoriaz se situait directement après Cannes – mais davantage à une volonté politique (a lack of popularity – at the 'box-office' of festivals, Avoriaz was right behind Cannes – but rather a political decision)."²⁴⁶ In the middle of the GATT negotiations, France and the CNC deemed auteur films more representative of the French culture and language than genre cinema, hence the decision to stop promoting the Avoriaz festival and its horrific line-up.²⁴⁷ If the CNC changed their attitude towards horror with their recent call for projects (see chapter 3), it would be hard to forget how detrimental their decisions were to horror cinema for several decades. Nevertheless, the determination of Gérardmer's organizers and promoters paid off: with its

²⁴⁶ Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb, *L'Invention d'un genre*, 118.

²⁴⁷ The GATT (General Agreements on Tariffs and Trade) negotiations of 1993 were the birth of the French cultural exception: the French refused for culture to be treated as yet another commercial product.

competitions of feature-length and short movies, its roundtables and conferences, and its prestigious guests attracting 40,000 attendees each year in the Vosges mountains, Gérardmer has succeeded in becoming the meeting place for international horror while at the same time bringing into focus the work of French directors.

During the 2020 edition, the festival organized an homage to French genre films titled “Dans les griffes du cinéma français” (in the claws of French cinema) to which some of the biggest names in French horror/fantastic were invited: Christophe Gans (*Brotherhood of the Wolf*, *Silent Hill*), Xavier Gens (*Frontier(s)*, *Cold Skin*), Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury (*Inside, Leatherface*), Dominique Rocher (*The Night Eats the World*), Coralie Fargeat (*Revenge*), Marina de Van (*In my Skin*), Jean-Pierre Jeunet (*Amelie*, *Delicatessen*), Benjamin Rocher (*The Horde*), Fabrice du Welz (*Calvaire*, *Alleluia*), Alexandre Aja (*High Tension*, *Crawl*), etc.²⁴⁸ If French horror was very well represented that year, only five French films were awarded at the festival in almost two decades: Ducournau’s *Raw* and Laugier’s *Ghostland* respectively won the 2017 and 2018 Grand Prize, Éric Valette’s *Maléfique* and Lucile Hadzihalilovic’s *Evolution* respectively won the 2003 and 2016 Jury Prize, and *Ghostland* won the Public Prize in 2018. Even though French horror has been more productive since the 2000’s, the same can be said of the United Kingdom, Spain or Japan whose horror cinema keeps swiping festival prizes all over the world, including at Gérardmer.

In terms of representation, the Sitges International Fantastic Film Festival in Spain largely contributed to the revival of French horror/fantastic films, selecting many of them in its yearly

²⁴⁸ You can find the homage and the full guest list on the official website:

<http://festival-gerardmer.com/2020/dans-les-griffes-du-cinema-francais/>

competitions: “le festival témoigne toute à la fois du dynamisme et de la variété de la production française, mais met aussi en évidence une réelle qualité du genre français qui semble avoir du mal à être reconnue comme telle dans l’enceinte hexagonale (the festival not only confirms the energy and diversity of French production but also highlights the real quality of French genre films that struggle to be recognized as such in France).”²⁴⁹ For its 2020 edition, Sitges selected no less than seven French feature-lengths (*Jumbo*, *Meander*, *Savage State*, *The Swarm*, *le Dernier voyage de Paul W.R.*, *Mandibules* and the animated film *Little Vampire*) which rarely happens even in French festivals. In addition to its visibility in domestic and foreign festivals, French genre cinema regularly gains recognition from the European Fantastic Film Festivals Federation which awards the Méliès d’Or every year to the best European fantastic film; past winners include *Raw* in 2016, Fabrice du Welz’s *Alleluia* in 2014 and *Martyrs* in 2009.

In December 2019 I attended the Paris International Fantastic Film Festival and witnessed how committed the organizers were to help young French directors and screenwriters navigate the hardships of the film industry. Director of the festival Cyril Despontin (also in charge of the Hallucinations Collectives Festival) started the PIFFF in 2011 to fill the absence of horror/fantastic festivals in Paris. With the help of Fausto Fasulo (editor in chief of Mad Movies magazine), Despontin selects French and international feature-length and short films for separate competitions, giving French directors a chance to be seen and rewarded (as was Pierre Mazingarbe and his horror-comedy short *Boustifaille*).²⁵⁰ In addition to the competition, for the past four years the PIFFF has been awarding the Climax prize to recognize the work of French screenwriters: after

²⁴⁹ Gimello-Mesplomb, *L’Invention d’un genre*, 124.

²⁵⁰ See the full list of winners on the official website: <http://www.piff.fr/2019/palmares2019-fr%20>.

a call for projects, five contestants present a video pitch of their film in public and in the presence of producers. The 2019 winners were Mathieu Delozier and Joël Petitjean for their future film *Sacrifice*.²⁵¹

One final event of the PIFFF to help comprehend the working of the French film industry was the masterclass of Olivier Afonso who directed the horror comedy *Girls with Balls* (2019) distributed by Netflix. Afonso is also a special effects makeup artist who worked on *Raw* and *Frontier(s)* before applying his skills to his first feature-length. He discussed his ambition to mix humor and gore, along with the difficulty to convince producers who thought it was either too funny or too violent, as though both aspects could not be compatible. In the end, the film was produced by multiple companies for a small budget that only allowed five weeks of shooting in Spain with a foreign crew. *Girls with Balls* was not released to theaters but at least had the chance to be available on Netflix. While few films presented in French horror festivals benefit from a theatrical release in France – mostly Gérardmer's winners –, some are lucky enough to find their audience in VOD or streaming, two modes of distribution that might just be more relevant for the horror genre.

5.4 The At-Home Alternative

Whether with television, video or streaming, the offer of films available from home has exponentially grown over the past decades to now reach a culminating point with VOD and the unstoppable rise of Netflix. Since the 1990's, outings to theaters have been competing with cable

²⁵¹ More details about the competing projects available here: <https://www.grandprixclimax.com/finalistes-2017>.

subscriptions, especially with Canal + and its large catalog of movies, and now with a wide range of streaming platforms. Already in 2014, the average French person would spend 1,350 hours watching television versus 7 hours spent in theaters.²⁵² In recent years, VOD and streaming have taken over the business of at-home entertainment. Given that television is mostly watched by people over 50 years old, whereas on-demand and streaming are popular among the 15-24 year old range, the latter do appear as more logical options for the distribution of horror considering the genre's target audience but also the reluctance of television channels to broadcast severely rated content.²⁵³ Nevertheless, Yvan Guyot, programming manager for Canal +, confirms: “Les films de genre fonctionnent très bien chez les abonnés lors de leur diffusion et indépendamment de leur accueil en salle [...] et multiplient par dix ou vingt leur nombre de spectateurs lors de leur diffusion sur les antennes de Canal (genre films work very well with our subscribers whether or not they were successful in theaters [...] they multiply their number of spectators by ten or twenty when being broadcast on Canal).”²⁵⁴ Even though the categorization of 'genre films' is quite vast, the fair amount of horror films broadcast on Canal +, Ciné + and OCS (and available on their on-demand platforms) demonstrates a shared interest not only from those channels to promote a genre that does not get much recognition in theaters but also from subscribers to try watching films that they would not necessarily see on the big screen.

Cyril Despontin also brings the video alternative to the table:

Il existe une exploitation directe en vidéo pour le cinéma de genre, notamment au Japon et aux Etats-Unis [...]. Or en France, un film sans sortie salle prévue est déprécié. Cela pénalise son producteur qui rassemble moins d'argent.

²⁵² Creton, *L'économie du cinéma en 50 fiches*, 33.

²⁵³ CNC, “Observatoire de la vidéo à la demande”, December 19, 2019

²⁵⁴ CNC-SACD public roundtable, “Le genre en France: réalité ou utopie?” April 25, 2017.

C'est un cercle vicieux. En France, la sortie salle, même minime, donne de la valeur au film.

Genre cinema benefits from a straight-to-video distribution in Japan or the United States [...] But in France, removing the theatrical release means losing money, especially for the producer. It's a vicious circle. In France, even a short theatrical release gives value to a film.²⁵⁵

Indeed, a release straight-to-video is synonymous with failure as though the movie was not worth the time and budget to be distributed in theaters. Looking at it from the opposite angle, releasing a film in theaters only to see it flop will then give the impression that the film is bad when maybe it just did not find the proper audience – which is a very common issue with horror films especially French ones. In the United States as in many other countries, there is a market for horror films being released straight-to-video unrelated to their quality. French magazine *Mad Movies* makes an excellent job listing those monthly international video releases, but the striking absence of French horror films in their pages shows how often the latter are forced to be theatrically released or condemned to oblivion.

The 2019 numbers for VOD are particularly encouraging with an estimated turnover of one billion euros, including 800 million euros for subscriptions, 100 million for rentals and 100 million for sales.²⁵⁶ Even more surprising, in terms of spectators, Netflix would be equivalent to the 6th most watched channel (after TF1, FR2, FR3, M6 and FR5). The American giant now has close to 7 million subscribers in France, catching up on Canal +'s 8 million subscribers. Despite losing more and more subscribers over time – which journalists are quick to assign to Netflix –, Canal + has the advantage of broadcasting movies only eight months after their theatrical release (versus

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ All statistics about VOD and Netflix taken from “Observatoire de la vidéo à la demande.”

36 months for Netflix).²⁵⁷ Channels like OCS play on their ability to make available popular television shows less than 24 hours after their American broadcast (*Games of Thrones*, *The Walking Dead*, etc.). Nevertheless, in comparison with French channels and VOD platforms, Netflix's major asset is to produce and stream their content in a wide array of genres, including horror, for a low price.

In 2019, Netflix invested 52 million euros in original French series.²⁵⁸ Because series are more popular than films on the platform (77% versus 15% of what subscribers watch), Netflix has so far focused most of its French production branch on series, launching a total of seven shows from various genres: comedies (*Family Business*, *Plan Coeur*), political drama (*Marseille*), science-fiction (*Osmosis*), and fantastic/horror (*Marianne*, *Mortel*, *Vampires*). Netflix's interest in the fantastic/horror genre extends to its entire catalog, not just its French productions. Since the tremendous success of *Stranger Things* (2016-in production), Netflix has been expanding its international horror catalog: only to name a few shows, *The Haunting of Hill House* (USA), *Ghoul* (India), *Kingdom* (South Korea), *Curon* (Italy), *Ju-On: Origins* (Japan), etc. Although the platform's viewership data has been largely criticized and questioned, it would be logical to think that their horror series must be largely watched across the globe for them to keep producing more and more original horror content in many languages.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁷ Read more about Canal +'s business strategy:

<https://www.businessinsider.fr/canal-france-a-perdu-un-nombre-important-abonnes-depuis-2015-comment-la-strategie-de-vincent-bollore-a-completement-echoue-face-a-netflix>.

²⁵⁸ The CNC report indicates that the investment could reach 153 million euros by 2024.

²⁵⁹ Netflix is accused of boasting viewership numbers, because they now consider someone a 'viewer' if they have at least watched two minutes of one film or episode. For instance, on July 8, 2019, Netflix posted on their

Opinions on Netflix differ in France. Some film professionals see the platform as disloyal competition with easy money, fast production and limited creative freedom. In an interview, Pierre Jolivet – who is a film director – considers Netflix a threat for French cinema's diversity, going as far as calling Netflix's growing popularity “un enjeu politique et même un enjeu de civilisation (a political concern and even a civilization concern).”²⁶⁰ Anxious about the formatting and the standardization that could result from Netflix's funding of French projects, Jolivet forgets that not every director's ambition is to make French movies for French people. In the globalized world we live in, many young directors aspire to have their film watched all across the globe, hence their purposeful attempt not to make it look 'too French' (for instance Coralie Fargeat's *Revenge*). Some beginner film professionals see Netflix as the opportunity to have their film or series produced and widely distributed in a short amount of time instead of tweaking their project again and again to please the CNC, television channels or other sources of funding, as shows the following interview of Frédéric Garcia.

Twitter page (<https://twitter.com/netflix>) that 40.7 million household accounts had started watching season 3 of *Stranger Things*, a record-breaking audience in just four days. However, viewership data is never made available to the public. Read more: <https://www.wired.com/story/netflix-viewership-two-minutes/%20/>

²⁶⁰ “Netflix est-il une menace pour le cinéma français?”, *Europe1.fr*, February 26, 2019.

<https://www.europe1.fr/culture/netflix-est-il-une-menace-pour-le-cinema-francais-on-peut-etre-dans-une-derive-extremement-dangereuse-3864530>

5.5 *Mortel*: A Netflix Story

To discuss this new mode of production and distribution, I had the chance to interview Frédéric Garcia, showrunner of Netflix fantastic series *Mortel* in winter 2020. *Mortel* was released on Netflix in October 2019, quickly gaining popularity among French teenagers.²⁶¹ The series of six episodes tells the story of suburban teenagers Sofiane and Victor making a pact with a voodoo devil so Sofiane can find out what happened to his missing brother. Both young men develop superpowers that they must learn to hide and control. The series is halfway between fantastic and horror, it is located in the French suburbs (without a political agenda unlike *Frontier(s)* or *Inside* for instance), and teenagers can identify with its modern rap and electro soundtrack. Garcia explains that *Mortel* “fait du genre pour parler de sujets difficiles et pour toucher les gens différemment (plays with genre to discuss sensitive topics and touch people differently).”²⁶² Garcia worked as a screenwriter for multiple (non-horror) television shows while striving to find producers for *Mortel* for several years. He regrets that “personne ne voulait produire au motif qu'aucun diffuseur ne l'achèterait (nobody wanted to produce it because they thought no one would buy it)”, unfortunately too common a problem for horror content:

Des adolescents en banlieue qui cherchent un meurtrier vaudou dans une cité du Havre, ça ne réunit pas donc ça ne vend pas. C'était un pari trop risqué pour les chaînes car elles ont de toute façon admis qu'elles ont perdu cette audience jeune [...] *Mortel* était donc trop décalé par rapport aux lignes éditoriales des différentes chaînes de télévision françaises qui produisent des

²⁶¹ See hashtag #Mortel on Twitter. Garcia was not allowed to share audience statistics or personal messages but affirmed that the show was extremely popular among teenagers.

²⁶² All quotes and information taken from the interview “Frédéric Garcia, pacte avec le diable” by Emmanuelle Ben Hadj, Fais Pas Genre, March 2, 2020. <https://faispasgenre.com/2020/03/frederic-garcia-mortel-entretien/>.

créations originales. Ce n'est pas qu'ils n'aimaient pas la série, mais ça ne rentrait tout simplement pas dans l'une des cases de leur grille de programme.

Teenagers looking for a voodoo killer in the suburbs of Le Havre, it's not for everybody so it does not sell. It was too big a risk for channels because they know they lost their younger audience [...] *Mortel* was out of phase with the editorial intentions of French channels which usually produce their own content. They did not dislike the show, but it did not fit any of their broadcast programs.

When Garcia met Gilles de Verdière from Mandarin Productions, the latter immediately contacted Netflix, convinced that the platform would most likely be the only option for such a project. Contrary to television channels and their target audience of older age, Netflix needs to diversify their content to please all their subscribers. Not only were they not bothered by the genre and cultural specificities of Garcia's project, but they also gave him the appropriate budget to make the series the way he had envisioned it. Eighteen months after Garcia met with the Netflix team for the first time, *Mortel* was available online, a much shorter window than what French circuits usually offer.

Garcia notes two major differences when working with Netflix:

Dans un circuit de chaînes classiques, deux choses auraient été différentes. On m'aurait demandé d'écrire beaucoup avant de me confirmer qu'on allait rentrer en production, alors qu'avec Netflix tu es sûr que la série va exister, tu rentres tout de suite dans un processus concret. La deuxième chose, c'est qu'en signant avec mon producteur et Netflix, ils savaient que je voulais être 'showrunner' et pas juste scénariste comme on l'entend en France.

With television channels, two things would have played out differently: I would have been asked to submit a much longer screenplay before production starts, whereas I immediately knew it was a done deal with Netflix. Second, when I signed with my producer and Netflix, they knew I wanted to be the showrunner and not just the screenwriter as is usually the case in France.

Garcia pitched the series without a script, only counting on the precise vision he had of his project, something that is usually considered insufficient for French funding (see chapter 3). As per the

American concept of 'showrunner', the young man insisted on having a say on every aspect of the show, confirming the 'auteur-friendly' and 'creative-oriented' approach of the platform: “Si tu remplis le contrat, que tu es transparent quant à tes intentions, et que tu gardes en tête le côté divertissant et surprenant, tu n'auras aucun problème avec eux (if you fulfill the contract, your intentions are transparent and you keep in mind the importance of entertainment and mystery, you will have no problem with them).” By asking for entertainment and cliffhangers, Netflix makes their intentions clear: keeping spectators in suspense so they come back for more, and leaving no room for dull and slow content. Such demands could potentially exclude certain types of filmmaking but greatly benefited the three fantastic/horror series that Netflix produced in the past couple years: *Mortel*, *Marianne* (2019) and *Vampires* (2020).

Another difference with a Netflix distribution is the classification and its resulting advantage over theatrical exhibition. Unlike the ratings imposed by the CNC for theatrical release, the streaming platform only issues a recommendation: all three French horror series are not recommended to spectators under 16 years old. Unsurprisingly, the warning does not keep teenagers of all ages to watch the shows, which once again contributed to *Mortel*'s success. When asked his opinion on the Netflix debate in the French film industry, Garcia builds on what I was arguing earlier against Pierre Jolivet's statement: “Les gens qui ont peur de Netflix ne s'adressent jamais au même public qu'eux, donc ça me fait rire (the people who are afraid of Netflix make films for a very different audience, so I find their frustration funny).” Indeed, though film professionals denounce the absence of teenagers in theaters, they make little effort to provide interesting content for this age range. It then comes as no surprise that many young people turn to VOD and streaming to watch films and series that are specifically designed for them.

Finally, Garcia also acknowledges that French horror tends to be subversive and extreme on purpose which cannot go hand in hand with entertaining the masses: “Il faut savoir changer de casquette. Je suis un averse consommateur de cinéma indépendant, mais quand je fais *Mortel*, je mets ma casquette 'grand public' sur la tête (it's important to wear many hats. I am an independent cinema enthusiast, but when I direct *Mortel*, I wear my 'general public' hat).” Citing the examples of Xavier Gens with his action movie *Hitman* (2007) or Julia Ducournau and the episodes of *Servant* (2019-2020) that she directed for M. Night Shyamalan on Apple TV, Garcia reaffirms the possibility – or even necessity – for horror directors to diversify their work in order to facilitate funding, gain larger distribution and exhibition windows, and reach a wider audience. Now this diversification can be read as an opportunity or a sacrifice as some directors are simply not willing to let go of their niche identity. Considering how difficult it can be for horror films to expand their spectatorship, it is worth asking what spectators are looking for and what they are trying to avoid when it comes to the genre.

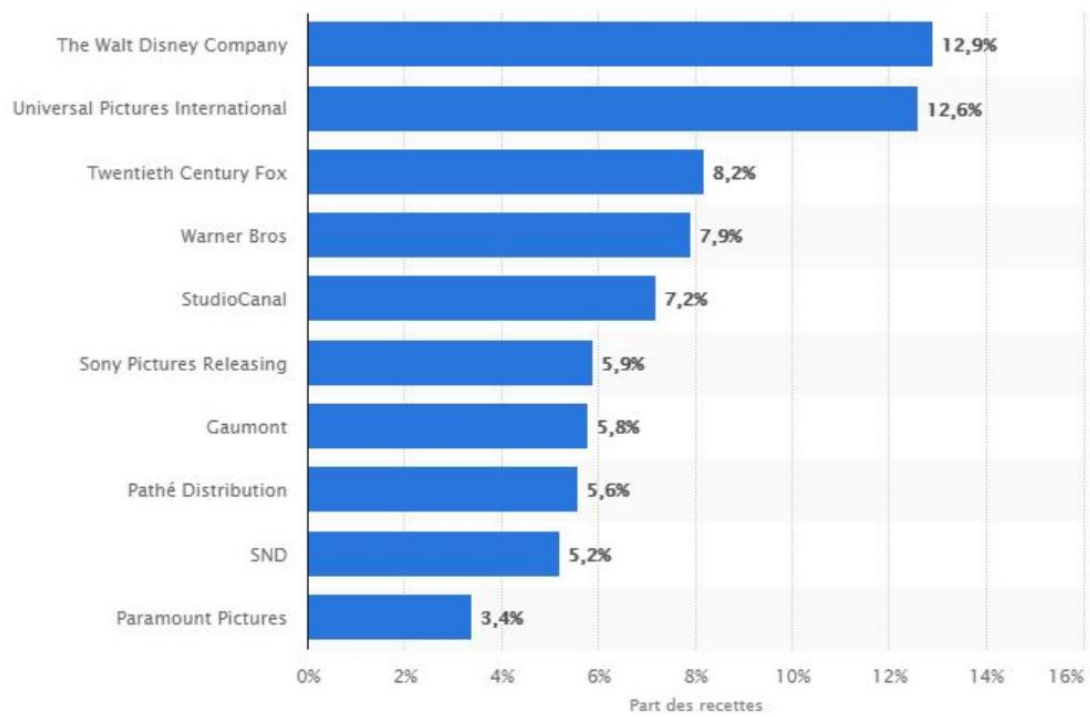


Figure 3 Ranking of Film Distributors in France in 2017 ©Statista (www.statista.com)

6.0 A Survey of Horror Reception

“Wait, France makes horror films?” I have heard that question countless times throughout my years of researching French horror. Even from people who enjoy the genre, and even from French people. And when I answer “of course”, some of them will remember that Julia Ducournau’s *Raw* is French, or that Alexandre Aja is also French. Both directors are two big names in the game, but what about the many other films and the many other directors? What about the people who really had no clue that French horror existed? The previous chapters have shown that the French film industry complicates the production, distribution and exhibition of horror films. If French spectators ignore the existence of the genre in their own country, the question of reception needs to be added to the long list of challenges. The many surprised reactions to my dissertation topic led me to design an audience survey to help clarify the lack of popularity of French horror.²⁶³ Is there a systemic connection between the small supply of horror productions and the audience’s ignorance or disinterest for the genre? Why would spectators be dismissive of French horror? Do they find something in American or international horror that they cannot find in French films? Is it too poorly marketed and circulated to reach the masses? All the more questions to answer to understand why even when French horror films are released in theaters they sell so few tickets.

The first step towards understanding the reception of films is to analyze who their audiences are. The concept of cinephilia that was born in France with the *ciné-club* movement in the 1950’s has drastically changed with the expansion of multiplexes and the technological

²⁶³ My audience survey is available in the appendix of this dissertation.

advances that facilitated the access to films.²⁶⁴ From occasional spectators to horror fans to accomplished cinephiles, reception theory can help with the empirical work that a survey represents. I will explain the creation of my audience survey, the circumstances of its distribution, and the choices I made to examine the responses in the most pertinent way for this specific chapter on horror reception. I will divide the rest of the chapter into four parts where I will incorporate the survey results among other academic or practical takes on each subject: the pleasure and psychology of watching horror, the reasons to like or dislike French horror, the comparison with other horror cinemas, and the issue of marketing. While the survey responses will not give a definitive answer as to why French horror continues to be underappreciated today, it will bring some clarity to a certain number of problems within the genre or with its misunderstanding, as well as give suggestions to enhance the visibility and accessibility of horror in France.

6.1 Audiences and Cinephilia

According to CNC reports on the year 2018, 33% of moviegoers are over 50 years old, whereas only 15% are between the ages of 15 and 24 years old.²⁶⁵ While French television audiences are 50 years old on average, Netflix displays opposite tendencies with one third of their spectators around 15-24 years old.²⁶⁶ The previous chapter on distribution has demonstrated the

²⁶⁴ Laurent Jollier and Jean-Marc Leveratto in Michael Temple and Michael Witt, eds., *The French Cinema Book*, 322.

²⁶⁵ CNC, “La Géographie du cinéma en 2018”, September 19, 2019.

²⁶⁶ CNC, “Observatoire de la vidéo à la demande”, December 19, 2019.

importance of streaming platforms like Netflix for particular reasons: make room for the horror genre in France and offer original content that would not be financed on more traditional networks, and reach out to younger audiences that are progressively turning away from theaters and television. Because Netflix viewers tend to prefer shows to films (77% versus 15%), the American giant has invested in several French horror shows (*Marianne*, *Mortel*, *Vampires*) but only one horror comedy film (the very poorly received *The Manor*). The reason why I start with statistics is to justify my decision to include audiences from all media in my survey. Even more so with the pandemic, the lockdowns and the unfortunate closing of theaters in France, horror – and cinema at large – has moved even further into the realm of VOD and streaming. I will thus adapt the content of this chapter to the various audiences across media instead of solely focusing on theater moviegoers.

In their book *Le Marketing du cinéma*, Albert and Camilleri acknowledge three types of audiences: “le public acquis” (established audience) who are genre fans or people who can watch anything without judgment, “le public captif” (captive audience) that needs to be persuaded through marketing with trailers, posters or word-of-mouth, and “le public hors-cible” (unintended audience) that would not be targeted in the first place, like seniors for horror films.²⁶⁷ French horror is so particular that it almost only attracts “le public acquis”, meaning spectators that are already very familiar with the genre. Furthermore, marketing campaigns are too often non-existent for French horror films, so the captive audience is hardly an option in this case. Jason Mittel regrets that “within traditional genre studies, the audience seems to function as a given, preconstituted

²⁶⁷ Albert and Camilleri, *Le Marketing du cinéma*, 70.

receivers of the formulaic texts traditionally held to be equivalent to a given genre.”²⁶⁸ It happens all the more with genres like horror that tend to appeal to their fan base, resorting to well-known tropes and codes – or subverting them –, but often remaining within the same range of interpretation and expectation. Reception theory can adopt that text-centered approach, where the audience’s pleasure and emotional engagement is only connected to the text, i.e. the film, and the repetitive viewings of a genre.

Another approach would be context-centered: the audience “situates texts within historical variables, related discourses, and intertextual relationships to posit potential readings [...]”²⁶⁹ Such contextual reception based on historical, political or cultural readings implies subjectivity and thus a polysemy of the text. For instance, watching *Eyes Without a Face* at its release in 1960 must have been a much more frightening experience than it is now in 2020 where the film is more often than not acclaimed for its lyricism rather than for its “gory” scenes. Another example would be that a foreigner watching Xavier Gens’ *Frontier(s)* without any knowledge of France’s history with Nazism, or of the 2005 riots in the French suburbs, would have trouble understanding the background of the film and the fear that the Maghrebi characters experience.

Although both text-centered and context-centered approaches can play a role in the completion of an audience survey because spectators are inevitably influenced by the medium and the context in which they watch it, the approach that I wanted to adopt in my analysis is viewer-centered. It was important to me to understand viewing practices and habits, likes and dislikes, in order to raise the plausible causes for French horror’s problematic reception. As Mittell explains,

²⁶⁸ Jason Mittell, “Audiences Talking Genre: Television Talk Shows and Cultural Hierarchies,” 94.

²⁶⁹ Mittell, 96.

“audiences use and constitute genres outside the moments they watch television – to fully account for audience generic practices, we would need to access everyday conversations, reflections on previous viewings [...].”²⁷⁰ The very moment of reception is usually not enough to draw conclusions on a film; some people need to reflect on what they have just seen, interact with others, read online reviews or share their thoughts on social media to fully digest their cinematic experience. My thoughts behind the audience survey were to constitute an empirical basis for this chapter. Ideally the survey would be spread out between various locations, different moments in time, and among diverse communities of spectators. Of course the viewer-centered approach comes with its fair share of partiality, especially considering the high potential for horror fandom and the fact that many horror fans produce their own content in blogs, podcasts, YouTube videos, fan fictions, etc.. Such an approach also evidently raises the question of what it means to be a fan or a cinephile in the world we live in today.

In the *French Cinema Book*, Franck Le Gac argues that the elitism of cinema started with the ciné-club movement of the 1950’s when cinema went from being a popular art to a highbrow art, “simultaneously becoming a domain of expertise”.²⁷¹ The idea that only film professionals, scholars or critics could properly reflect on the form and content of films reinforced the *Cahiers du Cinéma*’s ideology of cinema and the auteur theory deriving from it. In that sense, “true cinephilia” can be opposed to “contemporary movie fandom.”²⁷² However, evolving modes of film consumption through television and then VOD and streaming platforms, as well as the expansion

²⁷⁰ Mittell, 99.

²⁷¹ Franck Le Gac in Temple and Witt, 229.

²⁷² Laurent Jollier and Jean-Marc Leveratto in Temple and Witt, 321.

of film studies, have turned the elitist knowledge of cinema into a more common and accessible expertise:

The new cinephilia is therefore less a transformation of the meaning of film consumption than it is a transformation of its morphology, partly brought about by the development of cinema studies, but even more so by the multiplication of screens, the direct access to catalogues, and all the opportunities to build a personal collection of films offered by new technology.²⁷³

Nowadays cinephilia is no longer exclusively associated with professional film expertise but also with the common knowledge of everyday moviegoers and consumers. Fandom might take cinephilia one step further by expanding the appreciation for a genre, a director, a film series, etc. in various ways: writing fan fiction, collecting related objects, creating podcasts or YouTube channels, developing academic research, joining online communities, etc.

What can also distinguish regular or occasional moviegoers from critics, scholars, fans or cinephiles is the difference between interpretation and evaluation. My experience of talking about films with people who do not consider themselves cinephiles resonated with what Noël Carroll explains in his article “Introducing Film Evaluation”: when asked about a film, most of them tend to evaluate it on a good or bad scale.²⁷⁴ Instead of interpreting what they have just watched, some people will remain on the surface level of whether they liked it or not and why. It is also noticeable that such evaluation calls for categorization: people will often compare the film to another one from the same director or same actor or same genre, which reduces it to a category instead of its own object worthy of reflection and consideration.

²⁷³ Ibid., 322.

²⁷⁴ Noël Carroll in Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, eds., *Reinventing Film Studies*.

Considering my desire to thoroughly examine opinions on French horror, I tried my best to design a survey that would leave little room for evaluation but would force the respondents to ponder and formulate their thoughts in more details. Even though there are a few narrow questions to elicit statistics on gender, age and viewing habits in the first half of the survey, I purposefully did not include multiple-choice questions in the second half, and rather opted for open-ended questions to elicit more personal responses about the reception of French horror. I did not want to influence the responses with too many given options, so the analysis would emerge from the data and not from what I already knew.

My initial intention in terms of distribution was to mix purposive sampling (printing flyers with a QR code and distributing the survey in horror film screenings and horror festivals) and convenience sampling (sharing the survey on social media to reach all types of spectators). The pandemic and consecutive lockdowns in France decided otherwise. I distributed a few flyers in person at the Paris International Fantastic Film Festival in December 2019 (attendees were surprisingly reluctant to even take the flyer), and during the premieres of *The Swarm* and *Saint Maud* at the Katorza theater in Nantes (both films yet to be released in 2021). Most respondents actually completed the survey after clicking on the link that I shared on my social media (Facebook and Twitter) and that my friends shared on their own social networks as well. In the end, a little over 100 respondents completed the survey before I had to close it to analyze the results. Given the circumstances, I am satisfied with this number, mostly because people took the time to write entire paragraphs to answer my questions, so the results are much more detailed than what I had anticipated. It is important to keep in mind during the analysis that the comments will inevitably be partial and only cover a very tiny portion of French horror reception, but I would rather rely on

a small pool of dedicated respondents than on what I imagine people think when watching French horror films, or on statistics only.

I will not make a difference between male and female respondents, first because there is almost an equal number of men and women (49.5% vs. 47.5%), and second because the majority of answers go in the same direction, as there were no notable differences between what men or women had to say for each category of questions.²⁷⁵ As for age, 57% are 25-35 years old, 21% are 35-45 years old, 17% are 16-25 years old, and only 4% are over 45 years old – once again the online distribution might have impacted the age range of the survey, as many people I interact with on social media are more or less my age.

Although I specified that the survey was not directed towards horror fans only and that everybody was welcome to complete it, 74% of respondents call themselves horror fans. The interesting point is that 37% of them started enjoying the genre between the ages of 10 and 15, and 39% between 15 and 20, which reinforces the idea that teenagers are very receptive to horror and its multiplicity of themes. Those numbers show that horror is not necessarily of negative influence to teenagers (see chapter 4); otherwise it would not create such long-lasting and committed fandom. Horror even triggers an interest beyond the moving image (television shows and video games included): 31% indicate reading horror or fantastic literature, while others mention horror art such as paintings, sculptures, etc. When asked if they work in a field related to horror, 15.5% answer positively: most of them are film professionals, and a minority is either students working

²⁷⁵ The subject of female spectators of horror has already been tackled by Isabel Pinedo in *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasure of Horror Film Viewing* (1997), and Brigid Cherry's doctoral thesis *The Female Horror Film Audience: Viewing Pleasures and Fan Practices* (1999).

on their theses or YouTubers/podcasters. Whether people enjoy the genre professionally or casually, it is worth wondering where they find satisfaction in watching horror, even more so because horror tends to polarize opinions when it comes to viewing pleasure.

6.2 The Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing

The purpose of horror viewing has been studied theoretically for decades now, especially in American cultural studies, following the popular American slasher cycles of the 70's, 80's and 90's. In his "Introduction to the American Horror Film", Robin Wood was among the first to apply the notions of the repressed and the reactionary to horror films, claiming that they embodied the fears and anxieties of society.²⁷⁶ Rick Altman follows a similar lead by arguing that "genre viewers can be satisfied only by an increasing opposition between generic pleasure and the cultural interdictions that restrict it", emphasizing as well the ideological interest behind horror viewing: playing with taboos that society forbids or frowns upon.²⁷⁷ The emergence of torture porn and extreme cinema in the late 1990's-early 2000's took the idea of challenging the politically correct even further by making violence and sex very explicit. However, when Altman says that "our very pleasure in fleeing culture will eventually be used to seduce us into celebrating culture's very values", he forces the need for films to have a positive impact on their viewers when the latter might just watch them for entertainment with no other motive.²⁷⁸ The same holds for Noël Carroll

²⁷⁶ Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film."

²⁷⁷ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, 152.

²⁷⁸ Altman, 156.

and his reasoning on fear and disgust being “part of the price” to enjoy the thrills of a narrative and satisfy one’s own curiosity.²⁷⁹ Such theoretical takes are so focused on the film itself that they forget about spectators and the wide range of viewing experiences. When Matthew Hills regrets that “theoretical answers seem to be determined in advance of critics’ encounters with horror texts”, he points to the use of psychoanalysis, cognitivism, sociology or history to justify why people would even watch horror.²⁸⁰ The alleged moral subversion of the genre requires horror viewers to answer for their taste, whereas spectators of other genres are rarely put in this situation.

Mathias Clasen and his colleagues developed a psychological survey on 1,000 American respondents to understand why people seek out the “negative” affect of horror. To summarize the results, they found that liking horror is not a “niche phenomenon”, and that people see the genre as a harmless and safe thrill-seeking activity (what the researchers call “benign masochism”).²⁸¹ They also claim that, in addition to the search for adrenaline and emotional and intellectual stimulation, spectators of horror test their capacity for adaptation in the face of a simulated threat. In other words, what would one do in a given life-threatening situation? They explain that this interest in testing one’s limits begins early in life, changes form and then decreases with age:

We would suggest that the appetite for threat simulations emerges early in ontogeny, but that the appetite tends to be satisfied through play activities and moderately scary stories, not bona fide horror films, novels and video games. With cognitive maturation, individuals seek out more frightening media material. With old age, the appetite begins to dwindle.²⁸²

²⁷⁹ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 179.

²⁸⁰ Matthew Hills, *The Pleasures of Horror*, 2.

²⁸¹ Mathias Clasen, Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, and John A. Johnson, “Horror, Personality, and Threat Simulation: A Survey on the Psychology of Scary Media,” 2.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 12.

Such suggestions echo Stephen Prince's argument about the evolution of fear: children can confuse fiction and real danger, whereas adults (even young adults) have the cognitive abilities to detach themselves from what is happening on screen.²⁸³ While younger children have a perceptual fear (what they see), maturity brings out a conceptual fear (what could happen), which is why young children can be frightened by animals and creatures while older children, teenagers and adults are scared of death and injury.²⁸⁴ Horror cinema can thus be used during adolescence as a means to control anxiety towards death, functioning as a coping strategy, in addition to create social bonding.

In his book *Monstrous Forms*, Adam Hart explains that the various subgenres of horror create different types of affect (carnavalesque gore and disgust, psychological horror and tension, jump scares and fear, etc.), but horror always asks for a physical response: "where conventional movie-image narratives try to bring viewers into an immersive diegetic world, horror reaches out to prod and provoke its audience."²⁸⁵ He describes horror viewing as a "self-conscious experience" where the absorption and immersion of traditional narrative-driven films are replaced with confrontation and visceral reactions.²⁸⁶ The screams, the jumps, the tension, the surprise coming from the spectators are integrated within the text itself; a horror film lacks coherence on its own, it needs an audience to function. As Hart would say, "your body is required to make a scene

²⁸³ Stephen Prince, *The Horror Film*, 230.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 232.

²⁸⁵ Adam Charles Hart, *Monstrous Forms*, 7.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

cohere.”²⁸⁷ The prioritization of spectatorship in the horror genre makes it all the more problematic that French horror films suffer from a bad reception.

6.3 Preferences and Habits

When asked about their favorite subgenre, 26% of respondents prefer psychological horror, 20% possession and ghost stories, and 17% slashers. Almost half of the people enjoy horror subgenres that do not usually show excessive blood or gore, which would attest to the fact that physical violence does not seem to be a criterion for horror to be enjoyable. However, when the same people are asked to choose their top 3 favorite horror films, the results contradict the previous statistics: slashers and other gory movies undeniably come first. Here are the 15 most cited films (with the number of times they were cited out of 103 respondents):

1. *Scream* (19)
2. *Hereditary* (12)
3. *The Thing* (12)
4. *Alien* (10)
5. *Halloween* (9)
6. *Suspiria* (9)
7. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (9)
8. *Raw* (8)
9. *Shining* (8)
10. *Evil Dead* (7)
11. *It Follows* (7)
12. *The Conjuring* (7)
13. *Martyrs* (6)
14. *Saw* (6)

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 51.

15. *The Fly* (6)

Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996) is the indisputable winner of this ranking, followed by other American classics such as John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) or Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979). Very recent films find their place as well, with David Robert Mitchell's *It Follows* (2014) or Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) surprisingly coming second. There is a more or less a balanced mix between older and recent horror films (the oldest film cited here being Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* from 1974). It would be worth wondering whether an all-American panel would have responded otherwise, maybe citing horror films from the 1930's that French spectators might not be as familiar with, since France did not have the same relationship with the genre throughout its history (see chapter 2). The Anglo-Saxon influence of the ranking cannot be denied, but the good news is that two French movies make the cut: Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2016) and Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs* (2008), both often acclaimed by international critics.²⁸⁸ Both films confirm their status as fan favorites in the top 3 favorite French horror films:

1. *Raw* (24)
2. *Martyrs* (15)
3. *Them* (7)

Needless to say that Julia Ducournau made an impact with her first feature-length that seems to be inevitably cited in any discussion surrounding French horror. *Martyrs* might not be as unanimously approved of given its extreme brutality, but still wins the support of horror fans. David Moreau's *Them* (2006) and its unsettling story of a couple hunted down by children usually

²⁸⁸ Rebecca Hawkes, "Why Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs* is the greatest horror film of the 21st century", The Telegraph, April 1, 2016. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/what-to-watch/martyrs-2008-pascal-laugier/>.

fares well with spectators. However, a more negative commonality between those three films is their poor results at the French box-office. Despite their critical success, *Raw* and *Martyrs* only respectively sold 150,000 and 91,000 tickets in France. *Them* surprisingly did a better job with 251,000 tickets even though it is now the “less known” of the three films. Such low numbers can partly be explained by the desertification of theaters when it comes to French horror.

In the survey I asked how often people were watching French and American horror films in theaters, on television and on VOD/streaming:

Table 1 Viewing Habits for American Horror Films

American Horror Films	Often	Sometimes	Never
Theaters	39%	50%	11%
VOD/streaming	59%	37%	4%
Television	9%	24%	67%

Table 2 Viewing Habits for French Horror Films

French Horror Films	Often	Sometimes	Never
Theaters	12%	58%	30%
VOD/streaming	20%	69%	11%
Television	3%	25%	72%

First of all, the numbers for television are appalling, regardless of the film nationality, which is not symptomatic of spectatorial habits but of the problematic rejection of horror films from public channels (see chapter 3). Considering that American films occupy twice as much screen space than French films – meaning that they are played on twice as many theater screens –

they are of course more visible and thus get better results; it was then predictable that American horror films would show higher statistics for theater viewing.²⁸⁹ Same for the video category as American films tend to be marketed and promoted better on VOD and streaming platforms. The number that is more upsetting here is the 30% who admit to never watching French horror films in theaters. If American films make decent numbers in the French box-office or on video, why would production companies still be reluctant to invest in French horror? Professor Michel Etcheverry explains:

Les attentes du public ne sont peut-être pas non plus étrangères à ce handicap: peut-être par conditionnement culturel, peut-être aussi plus simplement par simple comparaison de la qualité des films, le spectateur ordinaire trouvera toujours plus légitime un film de science-fiction anglophone que son équivalent français.

The audience's expectations might be disadvantageous to the genre: maybe because of cultural conditioning, maybe also because of the quality of films, the ordinary spectator will always find an Anglo-Saxon science fiction film more legitimate than its French equivalent.²⁹⁰

The idea that Americans have more legitimacy in horror/fantastic/sci-fi because they have a longer tradition and produce a much bigger number of films, including big-budget productions, can only discredit French directors' work as though it could never be good enough. A few people in the survey conceded that they do not like French films for no other reason that they are French. Such negative attitude towards French cinema reinforces even further the misconceptions about less popular genres like horror. It was important for me to shed light on more articulated reasons

²⁸⁹ CNC report, "L'évolution de l'offre de films en salles", September 25, 2019.

²⁹⁰ Michel Etcheverry in Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb, ed., *L'Invention d'un genre*, 143.

why French horror might be underappreciated or why, on the contrary, it would need to be defended.

6.4 What Makes Horror French

The answers to the question “why do you like or dislike French horror?” are contradictory for the most part. The pool of respondents seems to be split in two, with the supporters on one side and the detractors on the other. Nonetheless, relevant arguments emerge on both sides to help understand the recognition or the grievances towards the genre. On a positive note, French horror is considered to be “sensitive”, “intelligent” and “assertive”. Spectators appreciate the attention given to the human side of horror, the psychology and development of characters. In that sense, French horror films are deemed to be more realistic and easier to identify with: “[...] Je trouve que ce sont des films qui ont le mérite de montrer la réalité, de se poser avec un traitement du scénario et des personnages plus aboutis [...] (I think that such films have the merit of showing reality, with an elaborate screenplay and thorough characterization).” The originality of their screenplay is often praised, though it is acknowledged to most likely compensate for the lack of special effects due to the small budgets. By “assertive”, people either mean that French horror films do not hesitate to take one step further in terms of graphic violence and extremity (*Martyrs* can be cited as an example), or that they are not scared to send a social or political message (as in *Frontier(s)* for instance): two very different meanings of “assertive” that created polarized reactions in the survey. As far as violence is concerned, the responses were mixed. On one hand, 75% of participants are not bothered by extreme violence in cinema, which does not necessarily mean that they enjoy it or look for it, but it will not stop them from watching. On the other hand, a minority regretted the

extremity of French horror films, along with the lack of happy endings (though the latter is a trademark of French cinema in general). Regarding ideology, the assumption that horror films need to have a message does not sit well with some spectators who call it “unnecessary militancy”, the same way it does not please directors like Julien Maury and Alexandre Bustillo:

Que ce soit *À l'Intérieur* ou *Livide*, il y a toujours un fond, une manière d'ancrer l'histoire dans une certaine réalité. Ça nous aide à construire la psychologie de nos personnages, mais on n'a pas non plus un couteau entre les dents, persuadés d'avoir des choses à dire et que le cinéma va être un médium pour faire passer nos idées. Nous, ce qui nous énerve, ce sont les gens qui font des films d'horreur, mais qui s'en défendent. J'adore *Grave*. Quand on me dit que ce n'est pas qu'un film d'horreur, ben si ! C'est un peu franco-français de vouloir être plus malin que son sujet. Nous, on est fiers de ne faire 'que' des films d'horreur, on n'a pas de condescendance par rapport au genre.

Whether in *Inside* or *Livid*, there is always a background to anchor the story in a given reality. It helps us build the psychology of our characters, but we don't feel pressured to have something to say, and to use cinema as a medium to spread our ideology. What upsets us is when people make horror films but don't own it up. I love *Raw*. But when people say it is not a horror film, then what is it? It is so French to try to outsmart your subject. We are proud to “only” make horror films, we are not condescending towards the genre.²⁹¹

With the exception of *Inside* that indeed uses the riots in the French suburbs as background for a few scenes, it is true that most of Maury and Bustillo's films remain free of strong political or social agenda. Coralie Fargeat also defended a similar viewpoint during a roundtable in 2019 where she pleaded for the financing of horror films whose mission would simply be to entertain

²⁹¹ Mad Movies n°342, October 2020, p.53.

and not necessarily make people reflect on a particular issue (see chapter 3).²⁹² Could the problem be that French horror films are just too French?

The question of integrating horror narratives within a unique French context is a very divisive one. On one hand, spectators enjoy a French setting in a genre that is usually dominated by American culture. The success of *Mortel* on Netflix shows that spectators are not reluctant to have a horror/fantastic story take place in France, with typified French characters listening to French music (see the interview of *Mortel*'s showrunner Frédéric Garcia in chapter 5). Michel Etcheverry argues that some French spectators are unable to “se projeter dans un univers qui ne soit pas celui du quotidien des Français moyens (see themselves in a cinematic universe too far removed from the daily life of an average French person)”, which sounds not only reductive but also wrong considering the success of American films in France.²⁹³ Actually, a few survey participants complained about the Frenchness of horror films which supposedly impedes their search for escapism, as though they could only be entertained if there was nothing to remind them of their daily life. In the end it just seems to be a matter of preference and boils down once again to what spectators are looking for in a film: reflection or entertainment.

If the levels of violence and “Frenchness” appear to be the two biggest arguments either in favor of or in opposition to French horror – two arguments that have a lot to do with personal taste and expectations and thus cannot be judged –, other reasons were brought up in the survey and attest to the “bashing” that French horror (and French cinema to some extent) is a victim of. Here

²⁹² ARP public roundtable, “Cinéma de genre : espace de liberté et de renouveau pour le cinéma français”, Paris, June 2019.

²⁹³ Mitchel Etcheverry in Gimello-Mesplomb, 137.

are a few generalizing responses that were expressed: “Je n’aime pas les films français car je les trouve mal faits (I don’t like French films because they are not well done)”, “j’ai un mauvais a priori sur le cinéma français en général (I’m prejudiced against French cinema in general)”, “le manque de qualité de jeu chez les acteurs français me gêne (the bad acting of French actors bothers me)”, “pas assez qualitatif en termes de scénario, originalité, acteurs (not enough quality regarding original screenplays and actors)”, “peu crédibles (not believable)”, “je n’aime pas les films d’horreur français pour leur manque de moyens et leur scénario trop simpliste (I don’t like French horror films for their lack of budget and their simplistic screenplays)”, etc. If it is true that some French horror films lack quality in their screenwriting, acting or artistic vision (*Bloody Mallory* and other films from the “French Frayeur” era are often criticized for those reasons), the same can be said of other genres or other nationalities; it cannot be expected that all films from a category should be good. So why incriminate French horror as a whole? The negative biases of French spectators partly contribute to the low box-office numbers and video sales of French horror films – I insist on “partly” because marketing is also a big issue that I will discuss later on –, which circles back to producers and financiers refusing to take risks for a genre that does not sell well.

Because I anticipated that the survey responses would be antithetical when it comes to the question of liking or disliking French horror, I also asked whether people preferred other horror cinemas and what they enjoyed more about them, in the hope that it would elicit more objective answers. American horror is valued for its bigger budgets and more spectacular special effects, for its monsters (it is true that French horror films focus more on humans than monsters or ghosts), and for its acting (some spectators are receptive to the American acting method that is more realistic and less naturalistic than the French one). American horror comedies are also appreciated – even though France might retaliate with its awaited horror comedy *Teddy* that won the Jury Prize

at the 2021 online edition of the Gerardmer International Fantastic Film Festival. Participants also admitted that the accessibility and visibility of American horror in theaters and on streaming platforms encouraged them to watch it more often. If the preference towards American horror was to be expected, there was a similar consensus in favor of Asian horror as well.

Japanese and Korean horror films are celebrated for the originality of their screenplays and the quality of their artistic direction. Japanese horror films in particular are praised for their intimism and minimalism in connection with the symbolism and beliefs behind their ghost/spirit stories: “J’aime beaucoup le cinéma d’horreur japonais car il a un rapport très différent aux symboles. Le sentiment de la peur est assez universel, mais sa représentation passe par une imagerie différente (I like Japanese horror a lot because it has a different relationship to symbols. Fear is quite universal, but its representation goes through a different imagery).” For instance, the original J-Horror movies like *Ju-On* (1998), *Ringu* (1995) or *Kairo* (2001) relied on atmosphere and suggestion – which did not prevent them from being very scary – whereas their American remakes were a lot more explicit and closer to slasher movies. Japanese horror is of course capable of gore, for instance in *Battle Royale* (2000) or recently with the Netflix series *Alice in Borderland* (2020), but spectators appreciate the range of emotions that Japanese and Korean films can bring out:

Un film d’horreur peut jouer sur d’autres émotions, c’est ce que j’aime dans le cinéma d’horreur coréen de ses dernières années (*Seoul Station*, *The Wailing*, *I Saw the Devil*, etc.) [...] Beaucoup de gens vont au ciné voir des films d’horreur pour ressentir des émotions, et bien souvent on entre dans la surenchère de gore ou de spectaculaire. J’aime quand l’horreur se fait plus minimaliste et passe par les émotions avant tout.

Horror films can play with other emotions, that is what I like in recent Korean horror cinema (*Seoul Station*, *The Wailing*, *I Saw the Devil*, etc.) [...] A lot of people watch horror movies in theaters to feel emotions, and most often it ends up in an overbid of gore or spectacular. I like it when horror is more minimalist, when emotions come first.

To sum up, the survey responses seem to be split in two again. The people who like French horror are also more inclined to like other international horror cinemas, especially Asian; they welcome original screenplays, emotional engagement, and they are not bothered by socially or politically-oriented plots. On the other hand, the people who dislike French horror are the ones who almost exclusively watch American horror, and are convinced that the United States are the best at producing and directing horror because they have a long-lasting tradition, bigger budgets, more versatility with subgenres, and thus a wider capacity for entertainment. They also confess turning to American films because they are more accessible and better promoted, which adds the question of marketing to the mix. Would French horror be more popular if it benefited from larger marketing campaigns?

6.5 Marketing French Horror

American films already benefit from great popularity in France and internationally; they are often believed to be universal, thanks to the American culture being spread out across the world and English being the most learned language. Their investment on marketing and promotion only reinforces their accessibility. Jonathan Buchsbaum talks of “the saturation of national exhibition space with wide release, heavy marketing expenditures, and financial partnerships with local distributors or exhibitors.”²⁹⁴ I would add that promotion goes even further with movie premieres, distribution of goodies, and partnerships with stores and restaurants. During the movie premiere

²⁹⁴ Jonathan Buchsbaum, *Exception Taken*, 170.

of *The Swarm* (the film tells the story of a single mother taking desperate measures to keep her cricket farm going), small boxes of roasted crickets were handed out to spectators, which is quite the original stunt for the promotion of a French horror film. Indeed, France pales in comparison to the United States when it comes to marketing. Laurent Creton regrets that French marketing works in reaction rather than anticipation, meaning that very little budget is usually allocated to marketing, especially considering that it can already be complicated to gather funds for production to begin with.²⁹⁵

Poster design plays a crucial part in promotion since it is the first thing that spectators usually see, even before the trailer. Yet, French posters are openly criticized for their lack of originality. For instance, actor Vincent Cassel posted on his social media a collage of posters for recent comedies that all use the colors blue and yellow, and all have the main actors in similar poses (see Fig.4 at the end of this chapter). He captioned: “Exemple flagrant du formatage, du manque d’invention, de la flemme et du nivellement par le bas des distributeurs (Blatant example of formatting, lack of inventivity, laziness and dumbing down from distributors)”. A French journalist also posted on Twitter a collage of *The Swarm*’s and American film *Take Shelter*’s posters whose similarities are also very striking (see Fig.5). Of course so many movies are being made that eye-catching originality cannot be expected all the time, but those two examples show that sometimes very little effort is being made in terms of graphic design. When *Brotherhood of the Wolf* was released in 2001, a wide range of posters were displayed in the streets and in the media, including with each character holding their weapon of choice (see Fig. 6). Mathieu Guilloux explains that such aesthetics were borrowed from fighting video games like *Soulcalibur*, and thus

²⁹⁵ Laurent Creton, *Économie du cinéma*, 134.

reached out to younger viewers.²⁹⁶ The fact that the film had a large marketing campaign helped draw spectators of all ages to theaters for a result of 5 million tickets sold, which is exceptional for a “monster” movie that plays with so many genres (see chapter 2).

American cinema has the advantage of relying on seriality, something that French cinema is rather reluctant about, except for a few comedies that worked well in the box-office. Rick Altman points out that studio films using the same characters, plot points and aesthetics already have a pre-sold audience:

Instead of starting over again, publicity for the next film need only point to its continuity with the previous film in order to assure a strong audience. Following this logic, Hollywood regularly eschews genre logic for production and publicity decisions in favor of series, cycles, remakes and sequels.²⁹⁷

The *Scream* and *Halloween* series for instance have always had sequels or reboots up to now, and continue to sell millions of tickets with each film released. *The Conjuring* films (2013, 2016, 2021) have expanded to a whole universe with *Annabelle* (2014, 2017, 2019) and *The Nun* (2018). They are “brand-name movies,” meaning they are immediately recognizable even by non-horror fans, not only by their name but also by their iconic villains. And yet it doesn’t stop their marketing teams to heavily promote the films by all means, including jump-scare ads on YouTube.²⁹⁸ Faced with the outpouring of promoting posters and advertisements, French horror and its non-existent marketing budget can hardly compete.

²⁹⁶ Mathieu Guilloux, 33.

²⁹⁷ Altman, 115.

²⁹⁸ Travis Clark, “YouTube removed a jump-scare ad for the upcoming horror movie *The Nun* because it violated its shocking content policy”, Business Insider, August 15, 2018.

Beyond poster campaigns and other promotional means (trailers, goodies, interviews, etc.), other factors can influence spectators' decisions to watch a film or give it the cold shoulder, consciously or unconsciously. Critics for instance have a key role to play. Before Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2016) that won unanimous praise for its mix of genre and art aesthetics, non-horror specialized critics had no shame crushing French horror films, leaving them no chance to be seen by their pool of readers. Pascal Laugier was for many years a victim of that bashing by the general press, *Martyrs* being called "une fosse à purin sanguinolente (a bloody manure pit)," and its potential spectators "des masos (masochistic)".²⁹⁹ Ten years later, for the release of *Ghostland* (2018), the same magazine called him "un maître de l'épouvante (a master of terror)".³⁰⁰ Laugier himself admitted that it took many years for *Martyrs* to be accepted: "Il a mis six ans à être accepté, jusqu'à ce que le *New York Times* écrive que c'était un film important (it took six years for the film to be accepted, until the *New York Times* wrote that it was an important film)." He was surprised to see that the general press wanted to interview him now: "Cette interview pour *Télérama* est la preuve que les choses commencent à bouger (this interview for *Télérama* is proof that things are starting to move)".³⁰¹

²⁹⁹ "Martyrs: un scénario prétentieux aux relents misogyno-religieux", Paris Match, September 2, 2008. (It is interesting to see that the name of the writer was removed but the film review remains available on the website) <https://www.parismatch.com/Culture/Cinema/Martyrs-Un-scenario-pretentieux-aux-relents-misogyno-religieux-134212>

³⁰⁰ Fabrice Leclerc, "Ghostland: la critique du film avec Mylène Farmer", Paris Match, March 13, 2018. <https://www.parismatch.com/Culture/Cinema/Ghostland-la-critique-du-film-avec-Mylene-Farmer-1478906>

³⁰¹ Frédéric Strauss, "Pascal Laugier: 'Cette interview pour *Télérama* est la preuve que les choses commencent à bouger pour mes films fantastiques'", *Télérama*, March 14, 2018.

The fact that *Ghostland* won the Grand Prize at the 2018 edition of the Gerardmer Festival (*Raw* had won the prize in 2017) might also be no stranger to that newfound interest. One can only hope that the curiosity towards French horror will continue with the winners of the 2021 online edition that was heavily mediatized for being one of the only French film festivals to be scheduled in the middle of the pandemic: *The Swarm* won the Critic prize and Audience prize, while *Teddy* won the Jury prize and Youth prize. The mediatization of early box office returns can also shape people's opinions. The press, the radio and specialized social media pages (Fan Actu, Allociné, etc.) are already sharing such information, often to the advantage of American blockbusters or French comedies. Before the first lockdown in March 2020, and in between the first and second lockdowns from May to November 2020, the TF1 news broadcast got into the habit of briefly discussing the box-office: during the week of March 4th, Leigh Whannell's *Invisible Man* ranked n°3 and ended up cumulating close to 750,000 spectators, which is a fairly good number for a horror film considering the low attendance of theaters at the time. If the biggest French channel could share box-office statistics every week (and not only when theaters are threatened to close down because of the virus), would it help horror films get more visibility, and thus maybe redirect spectators towards the genre, and who knows, maybe even towards French horror?

Contrary to American television for instance, French television does not allow the broadcast of movie trailers to advertise for theater releases. The measure was implemented in 1992 to avoid unfair competition with American blockbusters and their big marketing budgets that

<https://www.telerama.fr/cinema/pascal-laugier-cette-interview-pour-telerama-est-la-preuve-que-les-choses-commencent-a-bouger-pour,n5527763.php>

would leave no room for French films.³⁰² However, American studios keep dodging the bullet by partnering with brands, as explains distributor Christophe Courtois:

Il suffit à Disney de faire de la pub pour Disneyland en mettant l'accent sur le *Roi Lion*, alors que le film sort comme par hasard l'été suivant. Ou de mettre des Minions dans des pubs pour Oasis.

Disney can advertise for Disneyland and focus on the Lion King, and the film is getting released in the summer. Or Minions can appear in commercials for Oasis (fruit drink).³⁰³

It would then only be fair to give a chance to smaller films to advertise their release as well, maybe during a time of day (or night), or on a channel, where prices for commercials are a little cheaper. Furthermore, commercials for Netflix have recently multiplied on television, so why not promote theatrical releases as well? In the survey, quite a few participants complained that they did not even know which movies existed or were available to watch in theaters or on platforms because they have little visibility. Because television remains one of the biggest media, it would give films “une vitrine nationale (a national window)”, probably more effective than a poster campaign.³⁰⁴ The debate is still ongoing today.

The final question of the survey asked French spectators which suggestions they would give to make French horror more visible. Some of them echoed what I had discussed in this very

³⁰² Albert and Camilleri, *Le Marketing du cinéma*, 277.

³⁰³ Sandra Onana, “Pourquoi l’autorisation de la pub pour le cinéma à la télévision divise-t-elle autant?”, *Télérama*, March 11, 2019.
<https://www.telerama.fr/cinema/pourquoi-lautorisation-de-la-pub-a-la-television-pour-le-cinema-divise-t-elle-autant,n6161337.php#:~:text=%C2%AB%20C'est%20une%20id%C3%A9%20scandaleuse,fa%C3%A7ons%20d'aid%20la%20t%C3%A9l%C3%A9vision.>

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

chapter or previous chapters: promoting French horror films on all media, including them in renowned film festivals (chapter 5), loosening television broadcast rules so they can be financed by and played on public channels (chapter 3), allocating more funds to young directors without genre discrimination (chapter 3), or introducing a “prohibited under 14 years old” rating to make them more accessible to their targeted audience (chapter 4). Others had interesting yet unfortunately less realistic recommendations, one of them being the casting of famous actors, which is easier said than done considering the limited budget of most French horror productions and the fact that some actors are not interested in horror films at all. Actually, it is not rare to see the same faces in French horror films: Béatrice Dalle in *Inside* and *Among the Living* (both from Julien Maury and Alexandre Bustillo), Laurent Lucas in *Calvaire*, *Alleluia* (both from Fabrice Du Welz), *In My Skin* and *Raw*, Philippe Nahon in *Carne*, *I Stand Alone* (both from Gaspar Noé) and *High Tension*, etc. Survey respondents also suggested test screenings, a common practice in the United States but not in France. Once again, they cost money that horror films do not have; only big-budget films resort to test screenings to make sure the audience will respond positively and ensure their profits.

The creation of a studio similar to what Jason Blum is doing with Blumhouse was also suggested to mass produce and export French horror films. Luc Besson and EuropaCorp attempted to do so with science-fiction and action films, and it worked for a couple decades until their bankruptcy in 2019 (see chapter 5). A rumor circulated that Alexandre Aja wanted to put together a “Blumhouse à la française”, but I have not been able to find any official source about the project, so it must have passed into oblivion. Collaborations and coproductions with foreign studios, producers and distributors could also help increase popularity domestically and internationally, but so far whenever French directors have worked with other countries, the films ended up being

entirely produced with foreign funds and thus lost their French nationality. It all comes back to horror films and their directors not having the financial luxury to do what they want, hire who they want, shoot where they want, have the special effects that they want, and widely promote themselves. As unfortunate as it sounds, French horror films are not given the means to be popular because they are not trusted to be popular.

6.6 Conclusion

The previous chapters have demonstrated how difficult it can be for horror films to be properly financed, produced and distributed, and now the survey results are shining a light on the consequences for reception: invisibility, underappreciation, prejudice, along with a general miseducation about cinema. Cultivating cinephilia from a young age was already one of the solutions approached in chapter 4 to counterbalance the severe regulation of violent films: people need to understand what they watch, and the first step is to make the difference between fiction and reality. The problem is that fiction is mostly taught in French schools through literature courses. Learning about cinema before the age of 18 solely depends on teachers being willing to include films in their curriculum (and not just watch a film the last day of classes before summer break). Art and music courses have both been mandatory for decades, but film education has only been offered in high school for a few years and remains optional. I did not personally get the chance to take a film class until I started college. Unless people develop an interest in film and educate themselves on their own, very little is done in France to promote film education academically speaking, especially if you do not live in Paris. The fact that some people do not understand the inner workings of a film, or the mechanics of the film industry explains why they

make comments like “I don’t like French films”, and why they tend to blame actors or directors for things that are sometimes out of their control.

There are many answers to the question “why aren’t French horror films popular?” that I have divided into five different chapters. Pointing fingers at producers does not make much sense if there is no understanding of how regulation and distribution work. Blaming French spectators for being judgmental towards horror sounds like the easy option to ignore the impact of poor marketing. Everything is connected, and thus everybody is somehow responsible for the difficulties that French horror has encountered for decades. In the saturated film market of today resulting in too many productions, short exhibition with quick turnover, fierce competition and overwhelmed spectators, there is only one question to ask: how could French horror possibly stand out without the proper financing? Professor Charlie Michael advocates for an economic open-mindedness to approach potential big-budget genre films “not merely as the homogenized products of a top-down hexagonal rush towards digital platforms and global capitalism, but rather as the complex productive consequences of a culture industry submerged in the throes of adapting to new paradigms.”³⁰⁵ As showrunner Frédéric Garcia was explaining in chapter 5, it is important for producers and directors to change hats and move away from the auteur label to embrace other genres. Instead of seeing American streaming platforms and their popular content as a threat to the French cultural exception, France might need to catch up and allow its cinema to branch out of the art/auteur aesthetics it is known for. American cinema only has the monopoly on genres like horror or science-fiction because France never felt compelled to develop their own. Now that such genres are trending every day on Netflix and Amazon Prime, the French film and television industries are

³⁰⁵ Charlie Michael, *French Blockbusters*, 87.

starting to reconsider the potential of horrific content through a variety of shows, films and games that have recently been broadcast or will be released later this year.



Figure 4 Vincent Cassel Denounces the Formatting of French Comedy Posters on his Instagram Page

©Vincent Cassel



Figure 5 Journalist Damien Leblanc Calls Attention to Poster Similarities Between *Take Shelter* and *The Swarm* on his Twitter Page ©Damien Leblanc



Figure 6 Poster Campaign of *Brotherhood of the Wolf* ©Cine Node

7.0 Afterword

Given the difficulties for making genre films, and the growing possibilities for alternate circuits of production, distribution and exhibition that new media offer, what might the next few years look like for horror content in France? In terms of film releases, 2021 should be a prolific year for genre films – if theaters are allowed to reopen, because as of April 2021 they are still closed in France. French webzine Fais Pas Genre put together a poster of all upcoming releases (theatrical or not, considering the current context), among which Alexandre Aja's *O2* – shot in French and in France which had not happened for Aja in more than a decade – set to be released on Netflix (see Fig. 7). Others include Julia Ducournau's *Titane*, Jean-Pierre Jeunet's science-fiction comedy *Big Bug* (on Netflix), or the (unusual) superhero movie *Comment je suis devenu super-héros* by Douglas Attal. After the discussion on Netflix only having produced French horror television shows so far (see chapter 5), it is interesting to note that the platform is now investing in French genre films. Of course two of the most eagerly awaited films are the winners of the Gerardmer International Fantastic Film Festival during their 2021 online edition: Just Philippot's horror drama *The Swarm* and the Boukherma brothers' horrific comedy *Teddy*.

During a roundtable organized by Unifrance in November 2020, Philippot confirmed his partnership with French company SoFilm and with the CNC to adapt screenplays.³⁰⁶ So far many French horror directors were used to writing and directing, but the future of the genre could reside

³⁰⁶ Roundtable organized by UniFrance, “Cinéma de genre français: discussion avec une nouvelle génération de réalisateurs prometteurs”, November 3, 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3QDU7urZq8&feature=youtu.be>

in a stronger collaboration between screenwriters and directors within larger organizations like the CNC or production studios. Mathieu Turi and Romain Quirot were also invited at this roundtable to discuss their latest films to be released this year, respectively *Meander* and *The Last Journey of Paul W.R.* After producing and shooting his previous film *Hostile* (2017) abroad, Turi explained that *Meander* was shot in France, in French and English, so it could benefit from OCS funds (OCS being a French subscription channel). He also revealed that his next film would be shot entirely in French to receive even more funds, which means two things: that French companies and channels seem ready to finance horror films – possibly as a way to counteract Netflix’s involvement in the genre –, and that directors are willing to stay in France if they receive enough funds to fit their artistic vision. Romain Quirot was a little less enthusiastic as he explained that he did not receive any CNC aid, including for the special effects that his film was so dependent upon. Considering that Quirot’s short film *The Last Journey of the Enigmatic Paul W.R.* – on which the film is based – was a finalist for the 2017 Oscar Shorts, and that famous actor Jean Reno is starring in it, the CNC’s decision to refuse any funding is even more surprising. Among the suggestions given in the audience survey (chapter 6), famous actors and more elaborate special effects were both advised to gain credibility and appeal to wider audiences. Quirot’s film fulfilled both recommendations and yet was dismissed by the CNC’s selection committee, once again amplifying the discrepancy between what is deemed worthy of consideration by cultural institutions and what French spectators want to see in movies.

Besides, the CNC launched yet another call for projects for horror/fantastic/science-fiction films in 2020, with Alexandre Aja as vice-president, and Just Philippot was once again awarded financial aid for his new project *Acide*, two years after *The Swarm* benefited from the 2018 call for

projects.³⁰⁷ As talented as Philippot is, Quirot's frustration can be understood when he argues that the government agency continues to help the same people. Another call for projects titled Parasomnia Productions was initiated by French production companies Moana Films and Sony Pictures Entertainment France to finance genre films up to 1 million euros and about 25 days of shooting.³⁰⁸ As encouraging as it is for the support of genre films, skeptics will argue that the budget is too small and the shooting time is too short. Even the call for projects mentions that there will be "a limited number of characters and settings, very few extras, mechanical rather than digital special effects, etc." Considering the failure of similar initiatives in the early 2000's with Bee Movies or Sombrero Productions (see chapter 3), it might be time to rethink the current financing system rather than producing movies that are bound to remain invisible or underappreciated for their low budget. If 2021 will definitely see the production and release of many horror/fantastic films, it will not see them awarded at the Césars ceremony (the French Oscars) on March 12th as none were nominated, despite the potential of *Jumbo* (Zoé Witttock), *Adoration* (Fabrice du Welz), *A Mermaid in Paris* (Mathias Malzieu) or *La Dernière vie de Simon* (Léo Karmann).

While the French film industry is taking small steps, television is jumping ahead with a variety of hybrid content playing with the horror genre. In December 2020, television channel TF1 introduced a gameshow called *District Z* where contestants had to complete physical challenges surrounded with zombies to win money for charity. Xavier Gens agreed to be in charge of the artistic direction and even shot a very compelling trailer for the show. Gens' admirable mise-en-

³⁰⁷ See the winners of the call for projects here: https://www.cnc.fr/professionnels/aides-et-financements/resultats-commissions/appele-a-projets-de-films-de-genre--resultats-de-la-commission-du-13-decembre-2019_1386846

³⁰⁸ Read the call for projects here: <https://parasomnia-productions.fr/?fbclid=IwAR3ejE7SVVoJUG0h-qevEsZFoz1nOQS1qNNYmtjxNeUkxX8USPUr1yXj8zw>.

scène was a selling point, and the gameshow was renewed for a second season after satisfactory audience statistics. However, it was also criticized for its resemblance with long-existing gameshow *Fort Boyard* (which could even lead to judicial proceedings), and for its lack of horror: “[...] comme si la production n’avait pas eu le courage d’exploiter son idée à la *Walking Dead* jusqu’au bout, en lui préférant une version lisse et policée (as though the production cut short its *Walking Dead* inspiration, in favor of a more polished look).”³⁰⁹ The gameshow was broadcast on primetime at 9pm on a free channel which, as I have explained in chapter 3, limits the possibilities for violence. The success of a zombie show is already a remarkable step forward for a channel that usually stays away from anything slightly horrific.

Other channels have also opened their doors to scary content, for instance M6 and W9 with respectively television show *They Were Ten* and television movie *Escape Game*. The adaptation of Agatha Christie’s *And Then They Were None* (renamed *They Were Ten*) has not been broadcast yet but is available on French streaming platform Salto. Pascal Laugier is behind the camera (but did not write the screenplay) for this eight-episode mini-series that has been widely negatively received by critics for its writing, its stereotyped characters and its lack of audacity. No interview of Laugier is yet available to clarify his involvement in the project. *Escape Game* was broadcast on February 9, 2021 and gathered more than one million spectators (a very good number for a small channel like W9). At first the resemblance with Adam Robitel’s *Escape Room* (2019) cannot go unnoticed, but the film takes another direction by digging into the characters’ past which makes

³⁰⁹ Martin Rousseau, “Malgré d’excellentes audiences, *District Z* ne convainc pas les internautes”, Sud Info, December 12, 2020.

<https://www.sudinfo.be/id294517/article/2020-12-12/malgre-dexcellentes-audiences-district-z-ne-convainc-pas-les-internautes>

it more dramatic than horrific. In the end, even though television channels are starting to accept more horror-inspired content on primetime slots, they try to blur the line between horror, thriller and drama to make it more accessible to a wide audience. Given the positive audience statistics, it might be the best way for now to democratize horror on a small scale.

France also decided to retaliate against Netflix, Amazon Prime and Disney + with their own streaming platforms, and surprisingly enough they are betting on horror. TF1, M6 and its affiliates, and all France Television channels got together to launch Salto in October 2020, a streaming platform where said channels offer their own television shows to watch before they are being broadcast (as is the case for *They Were Ten*), in addition to exclusive international content (some of it bought from Hulu). Salto specifically put forward horror/thriller shows like *Clarice* – a sequel of *Silence of the Lambs* centered on the FBI agent –, or *Monsterland* – an anthology of horrific stories that the platform promoted by sending make-up boxes to influencers so they could channel their “inner demon”. Although French horror is not yet represented on Salto, the emphasis on genre that the platform is proudly showing can only be read as a positive sign and a potential entryway for more horror-oriented content in the near future.

In terms of horror representation on streaming platforms, Shadowz (“the first screaming platform” as the creators like to call it) has been a game changer. Inspired by the American streaming platform Shudder, Shadowz was launched in France in March 2020 after a successful kickstarter campaign, and offers a vast international catalog of horror films (feature-length and short). Between classics, B-movies, documentaries and recent releases, Shadowz makes available all possible subgenres in horror/science-fiction/fantastic, in addition to providing exclusivities that have never been distributed in France, and giving visibility to young French filmmakers with their

short film section. For the spectators who complain rightfully that they do not know where to find French horror films (see chapter 6), Shadowz is the answer.

It is legitimate to ask how horror films will find their place when theaters will finally be allowed to reopen and will have to handle the incredible influx of productions that have been postponed for half a year now. Will they systematically be released on video to make room for blockbusters and comedies? Will horror be the sacrificed genre when time comes to make decisions as to which movies get a theatrical release? After a year of living in the midst of a pandemic with theaters closed, the French film and television industries had to find elaborate ways to keep spectators entertained while overcoming financial issues. I believe that television and streaming specifically have taken their chances on horrific content with very decent results whether in audience statistics or numbers of subscribers, which shows that the future of the genre might just be on small screens as much as in theaters.

LA NUÉE JUST PHILLIPOT **EN** **MANDIBULES** QUENTIN DUPIEUX

GAGARINE FANNY LIATARD & JÉRÉMY TROUILH **LE DERNIER VOYAGE DE PAUL W.R** ROMAIN QUIROT

PARADIS SALE BERTRAND MANDICO **2** **TEDDY** FRERES BOUKHERMA

KANDISHA JULIEN MAURY & ALEXANDRE BUSTILLO **NI DIEUX, NI MAITRES** ERIC CHERRIERE

02 ALEXANDRE AJA **TRALALA** FRERES LARRIEU **0** **ANNETTE** LEOS CARAX

MESSE BASSE BAPTISTE DRAPEAU **COMMENT JE SUIS DEvenu SUPER-HÉROS** DOUGLAS ATTAL

TITANE JULIA DUCOURNAU **2** **EARWIG** LUCILE HADZIHILIOVIC **VAURIEN** PETER DOUROUNTZIS

OGRE ARNAUD MALHERBE **BIG BUG** JEAN-PIERRE JEUNET **L'ORIGINE DU MAL** SÉBASTIEN MARNIER

BENEDETTA PAUL VERHOEVEN **1** **INEXORABLE** FABRICE DU WELZ

PAR UN DEMI-CLAIR MATIN BRUNO DUMONT **INCROYABLE MAIS VRAI** QUENTIN DUPIEUX

ILS ETAIENT DIX PASCAL LAUGIER **LE** **KAAMELOTT** ALEXANDRE ASTIER

LE CALENDRIER PATRICK RIDREMONT **LE CINÉMA FRANÇAIS PROMET DE NE PAS FAIRE GENRE !** (ET IL EN MANQUE SÛREMENT...)

MÉANDRE MATHIEU TURI **LA CORDE** DOMINIQUE ROCHER

ROUGE FARID BENTOUMI **DUNE DREAMS** SAMUEL DOUX

BARBAQUE FABRICE EBOUÉ

Figure 7 Films and Shows To Be Released in 2021 ©Fais Pas Genre

Appendix A Audience Survey on French Horror Cinema

Read the results of the audience survey (in French) by clicking on the following link:

https://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/41404/2/BenHadj_SurveyReport.pdf

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