

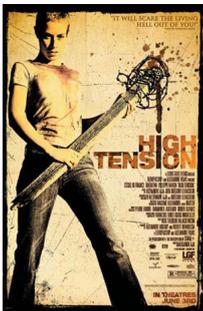
Fango Flashback: “HIGH TENSION”

Written by Jorge Solis
Sunday, 06 June 2010 10:55



Reminiscent of Dario Argento’s gory style, HIGH TENSION (a.k.a. HAUTE TENSION) is an intense French shocker that strikes you in the jugular. Director/co-writer Alexandre Aja lives up to the searing title, creating an admirable tribute to ’70s slasher films like HALLOWEEN and TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE.

In the opening sequence, a scarred and confused woman speaks to a video camera about what happened before. The movie reverts back in time, following two young women as they travel through the night. Actresses Cécile de France and Maiwenn Le Besco fit perfectly in their roles as best friends Marie and Alexia. Marie is the quiet introvert, living in the shadow of her friend. Alexia is completely the opposite, living her life fully, acting as wild and carefree as she can.



The pair believe a nice, relaxing visit to the countryside will help them study for their college exams. After their long journey, they arrive at a secluded farmhouse where Alexia’s parents live. None of them realize a serial killer (creepily played by Philippe Nahon) is lurking nearby. In his introduction, the villain is seen enjoying an obscene game with a decapitated head he keeps as a trophy.

Nahon’s heavy, ogre-like physique adds layers of dread. Here is a relentless killer who doesn’t need a rubber mask to cover up his identity. This deranged man never feels the need to wash his grimy hands, even as they are soaked in blood.

The farmhouse’s doorbell suddenly rings during the late hours. When Alexia’s father answers,

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he is struck in the face with a sharp blade. The insane attacker rampages throughout the house, killing anyone he encounters. Marie hides in a closet after becoming aware of his presence and becomes helplessly trapped in her hiding place, watching the killer slice open the throat of Alexia’s mother.

Suspense builds and builds, never giving the audience a chance to relax, and without any comic relief or lapses in pace, the grisly massacre builds quite a nervous tension. The gruesome FX were created by renowned artist, Giannetto De Rossi, whose spectacular work can be seen in Lucio Fulci’s ZOMBIE and THE BEYOND, DUNE and others. Aja and De Rossi make each killing as visually over-the-top and shocking as possible.

After his bloody terror spree, the psychopath notices Alexia sleeping blissfully in her bed. He decides to wake up sleeping beauty by touching her throat with the tip of his razorblade. Marie chases after the madman, who has Alexia shackled in the back of his dirty van. In one memorable sequence, Marie finds herself ambushed in a dirty bathroom stall under a gas station. The menacing figure wanders through the room, kicking down each door one by one, approaching Marie’s stall while she cowers within, shaking. Does he actually know she’s hiding there, and if so, is he purposely teasing her? The shaky camerawork and eerie music are exceptional in this sequence, creating an unbearably tense highlight.



As the deadly cat-and-mouse game continues between Marie and the psychopath, “who has the upper hand?” is always on Marie’s mind as she obsessively follows him through a forest. The film’s staying power lies in these scenes, which have very little dialogue—but the silence crucial in creating an air of urgency. The climax of chaos and slaughter crashes into a mind-bending final twist, whose change in direction has sharply divided audiences. Some feel this curveball serves the story well, while others see it as unnecessary and implausible, and feel it detracts from the storyline. One might argue this is a perfect example of screenwriters Aja and Grégory Levasseur overdoing their cleverness—but love or hate it, the ending will have you talking.

HIGH TENSION is an example of the difference between what a central character knows and what the audience ultimately learns. Marie is the narrator telling you, the viewer, a story. From her perspective, she perceives herself as the heroine. How do you usually tell a story about yourself? You might tend to embellish the truth, just as Marie does. And even after the twist is

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revealed, for the next 20 minutes, the movie still manages to keep viewers on the edge of their seats, till the very last shot.

HIGH TENSION is an absolutely effective exercise in style and gore. The creative collaboration between Aja and Levasseur that began here continued with the HILLS HAVE EYES remake, MIRRORS, P2 (which they produced and co-wrote for first-time director Franck Khalfoun) and, up next, PIRANHA 3D.

{comments on}