

## Switchblade Romance (Haute Tension)

Just finished at the Film Theatre, and no doubt coming to video stores some time soon, is this 'slasher' thriller. 'A French horror film? Surely not?', I hear you cry. Well, you're right to be surprised. Not since the heady days of Jean Rollin's vampire films in the sixties and seventies, have we been used to seeing such things, though France is no stranger to extreme cinema of other kinds. This film is avowedly American in its inspiration and it quotes unobtrusively from films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *The Last House on the Left* and *Halloween*, now notorious classics of the genre.

It's the familiar setup. Two girl students turn up at family farm to study for their coming exams in tranquillity. However, even before their arrival the house is shown to have been targeted by a deranged mechanic in a decrepit Citroen camionette. Before long the lead girl is playing a terrifying game of cat and mouse with the killer while doing her best to save her beloved friend from the fate that has befallen the rest of her family.

So why is it so much better than all those *Halloweens*, *Nightmares* and *Screams* from across the water? Because you care? Because there are fewer victims and they matter, rather than being simply wheeled on to be bumped off? In part. It's also a question of atmosphere and setting. The latter is distinctly humdrum. In American films every interior looks just that: a studio interior. They don't know what 'lived in' means, perhaps because they throw anything away that gets that way, or at least this is the world Hollywood projects. So it's more real. Then the atmosphere. Whereas a film like *Scream* will punctuate an intrigue, complete with sentiment and romance, with some sharp shocks to make us thrill, this film is one continuous foot-on-the-sustaining-pedal scare from start to finish. First we wonder how the killer will strike, then we wonder how the heroine will survive, and we root for her.

Then the makers pull the rug from under our feet. The old trick of Hitchcock's *Psycho*: the killer isn't who we think after all. There are certain signs early on: the repeated shots of the back of the two characters concerned, the way one character appears to 'call' the killer up out of the night, the fact that this ancient camionette is remarkably responsive and has a fully functioning set of lights, a line about meeting the family... If you haven't guessed, I won't spoil it, but you should try and see this film if you're remotely into horror and feel jaded, and are of age!

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