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Grand Guignol and new French extremity: horror, history and cultural context

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Grand-Guignol and New French Extremity: Horror, History and Cultural Context

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Sheffield Hallam University for the degree of MA English by Research

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Abstract

This thesis will investigate and examine the French theatre The Grand-Guignol (1897-1962) and the film movement New French Extremity (1990s-roughly 2008). The theatre and the film movement will be examined in terms of their origins, evolutions and eventual declines. These will be related to French society and culture at the times as well as their historical contexts, for instance the long history of violence on French soil and the rise of the far-right in the 1980s/90s leading to the rise of New French Extremity.

There will be an interrogation of the theatre and film movement's use of 'othering', examining how they both alternately exploit the trope and subvert it, allying themselves with the so-called 'other'.

There will also be an examination of the term 'Grand-Guignol violence', often used colloquially to describe gruesome violence in entertainment. The term will be examined in relation to the stage violence inflicted during Grand-Guignol plays on stars like Paula Maxa and compared with the violence inflicted upon women in the mainly-female-led New French Extremity films. The escapist, entertaining violence of the theatre will also be contrasted with the nihilistic violence of New French Extremity, which often seeks to reinforce social commentary from the creative teams.

The theatre and the film movement are both positioned as key moments in French horror history. This thesis will examine the ways that they are similar and the ways that they fundamentally differ, beyond their obvious stage/film barriers.

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Introduction

This thesis will focus on two key areas of French horror history, separated by almost 100 years. The first being the late 19th/early 20th century Parisian horror theatre The Grand-Guignol and the second the late 20th/early 21st century horror film movement New French Extremity.

The main purpose of this thesis is to examine whether there is scope for comparison between the theatre and the film movement, providing new areas of analysis on both areas. This work will be accomplished by examining the cultural/political outlooks of the theatre and movement, should they exist, as well as examining similar artistic ideals and aesthetic similarities that may arise from the analysis conducted.

The second key aim of this thesis is to address the gap in knowledge on New French Extremity, which lacks the depth of analysis it deserves. By drawing on the limited resources currently available and contributing new analysis on the films involved, this thesis will aim to broaden available literature on the movement. This is important to the wider history of film, as such an explosive and impactful movement should be interrogated in a manner that moves past its outwardly visceral and offensive nature.

Existing texts on the theatre/movement, to be examined and noted in their separate chapters, will be used as a base for research. The key texts to note for this introduction are Mel Gordon's *The Grand Guignol: Theatre of Fear and Terror* (1988), Richard Hand and Michael Wilson's *Grand-Guignol: The French Theatre of Horror* (2002) and Alexandra West's *Films of the New French Extremity: Visceral Horror and National*

Identity (2018). These three books will be examined in detail in the following chapters as they comprise a significant amount of the material evaluated for this thesis. Historical works on French society of the times and broader French history will be used as contextual evidence to further examine the similarities and differences between any commentaries espoused by both areas of study.

As noted, both of these moments in time are highly important to the history of French horror. The theatre, an intriguing nexus between the naturalist form it evolved from and the popular melodramatic form of its contemporaries, shattered taboos and spawned the term 'Grand-Guignol violence', used in academic writing to denote a specific type of violence seen on stage or screen. Many of the films of the New French Extremity, equally violent and transgressive as the plays of the Grand-Guignol, became highly regarded as brutal examples of socially-conscious modern horror. Yet a comparison between the two beyond broad aesthetic similarities does not exist. This thesis will aim to address that lack of knowledge.

Chapter 1: The Grand-Guignol

Forming the main basis of research for this chapter is Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson's book: *Grand-Guignol: The French Theatre of Horror* (2002), which is the main English-language study of the theatre. Mel Gordon's *The Grand Guignol: Theatre of Fear and Terror* (1997, originally published in 1988) also provides an excellent history of the theatre. Accompanying these will be a range of supplementary writings from various sources, such as Grand-Guignol expert Agnes Peirron's 'House of Horrors' (1996), a journal article from *Grand Street* now published online. It remains one of her few works on the theatre translated into English (by Deborah Treisman) and therefore will be a vital piece in providing an accurate history.

As is pointed out in Hand and Wilson's book, Grand-Guignol (accepted use includes and excludes the hyphen) needs some definition as a term, given that it is both the name of the historical theatre that is the subject of this chapter, as well as a colloquial description of violent scenes in modern academic writing. The two authors note this in their opening preface: "The phrase 'grand-guignol' has entered the language as a general term for the display of grotesque violence within performance media" (2002, p.ix). Later in this dissertation this descriptive use of the theatre's name will be examined as an identifier of filmic content in New French Extremity, a key point of influence that the theatre holds in the modern day.

For purposes of clarity, this chapter will focus solely on the so-named Parisian theatre which ran from 1897 to 1962, making a profound impact on both French culture and art, most notably in the horror genre. There will first be an extensive history of the

Grand-Guignol, examining how the theatre emerged, found success, declined and eventually closed. The success of the theatre will be examined as it relates to psychological theories around morbid curiosity. Finally, this chapter will consider the significance of the overwhelmingly female key stars of the time, such as Paula Maxa, setting up a potential point of comparison with New French Extremity's female dominated films.

The Precursor – Théâtre Libre (Free Theatre)

Not to be confused with the renaissance of the Théâtre Libre (acceptable hyphenated or not) in London that began in 2009, the naturalist Parisian theatre of 1887-1896 was a key precursor to the Grand-Guignol. This section will use several articles by unknown authors from newspapers of the time as well as André Antoine's *Memories of the Théâtre Libre* (Translated by Marvin Carlson, 1964), a book which, although informative, is generally considered to contain significantly embellished memories. As such, it will be used carefully and sparingly. Antoine himself "did not call his book a *journal* (diary), but *souvenirs* (memories)" (p.xii).

An anonymous article in *The National Observer* aligns the company exclusively with André Antoine, a former clerk in a Parisian gas company: "The *Théâtre Libre* is the work of one man and that man is Antoine" (1894, p.115). His lofty ambitions attracted ridicule, as noted with regard to their opening performance: "The audience had come to scoff" (1894, p.115). Antoine and his collaborators in the troupe were not blessed with money: "his sole assets were a capacity for getting into debt" (1894, p.115). As another anonymous article in *The Musical World* from 1890 points out with regard to

Antoine's rent payments on the theatre: "the night of their first public representation was fixed purposefully on March 30, 1880 [1887, Date incorrectly stated], so as to coincide with the gas company's salary-day" (1890, p.592).

Nevertheless, Antoine was committed to his work. Piecing together materials from around the time of the theatre, it could be said that Antoine's creation was specifically motivated by what he felt was a stagnant scene. According to the aforementioned *The National Observer* article, he set out to "regenerate the drama" (1894, p.115), a decision perhaps motivated by the fact that "he had been refused admittance to the Conservatoire" (1894, p.115). A renowned music and drama school, The Conservatoire, described by D. Kern Holoman in his online article 'The Paris Conservatoire in the 19th Century' (2015), was "the gateway to the upper echelons of classical music in France" and "dictated the substance of French musical culture—the élite sort, anyway". Antoine's rejection from the school may have helped shape his desire to do something different. He later described the Conservatoire as "a gigantic farce" (1890, p.592).

The Théâtre Libre differentiated itself from its peers through its naturalist approach. Naturalism as a mode is explained by Daniel Gerould in his 1984 *The Drama Review* article: 'Oscar Méténier and "Comédie Rosse": From the Théâtre Libre to the Grand Guignol'. He describes an insistence on "direct observation, research and documentation, precise notation of fact; and objectivity of technique" (1984, p.15). As Gerould notes: "The Theatre Libre helped bring about the end of the declamatory rhetoric that had been part of the French theatrical tradition" (1984, p.16). They did this through the creation of what was, essentially, a new theatrical language: "to

create a new mode appropriate to their documentary approach, the Naturalist playwrights turned to dialect and slang, reproducing the crude and often obscene colloquial speech of specific low-life milieux" (Gerould, 1984, p.16). This approach marked "the first time the language of uneducated working-class characters was heard on stage" (Gerould, 1984, p.16).

In addition to the adoption of this new theatrical language the Théâtre Libre rebelled against the typical notions and form of theatrical storytelling: "Unconcerned with matters of form, the playwrights… rejected the old theatrical formulas and devices such as clever plots, carefully prepare[d] climaxes and tidy, definitive endings in favor of simplicity of action" (Gerould, 1984, p.16). They were most concerned with providing their audience a "slice of life" (Gerould, 1984, p.16).

By exploring "the seamy underside of the *belle époque*" (Gerould, 1984, p.16), the playwrights were able to open up new, previously off-limits, areas of study for the stage: "The struggle for existence could be studied among poor day-laborers, rag-pickers and street walkers" (Gerould, 1984, p.16). This focus and study brought controversy with it: "The dramas and comedies presented by Antoine shattered long-standing taboos with their uncensored dialogue and frank treatment of sexual matters" (Gerould, 1984, p.16). The creators of these plays stood behind their work, "arguing that the essential relationships between man and society could be more vividly revealed in primitive characters and sordid situations than when disguised by wealth, complex psychology and hypocritical pretense" (Gerould, 1984, p.16).

The exact date of the end of the Théâtre Libre is hard to pin down. Hand and Wilson state that the theatre "collapsed in bankruptcy" (2002, p.4) in 1893. The reasons behind its closing are undisputed. The aforementioned unauthored *National Observer* article from June 16th, 1894 notes Antoine "admitting and regretting certain excesses" (p.115) and claiming that his "pecuniary reward derived from the Théâtre Libre… has been a burden of debt" (p.115).

Combing through Antoine's own memories, he describes the end of the Théâtre Libre as coming around June 15th, 1894, when he handed over control of the theatre itself to a young man named Larochelle and assumed responsibility for the debts incurred during his stewardship. Antoine notes that he "lacked the material strength to continue... strangled by a lack of money" (Antoine, 1964, p.226).

Oscar Méténier & The Opening – 1897

A part of the Théâtre Libre's programmes were *comédies rosses*: "short dramatic pieces which looked at the lives and language of the Parisian underclass" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.3). It is through these short plays that we are introduced to Oscar Méténier, one of Antoine's collaborators in the Théâtre Libre. Mel Gordon's brief introduction to Méténier notes that he was "formerly a secretary to the Police Commissioner of Paris and a writer for tabloid-like journals" (1997, p.13). He was "considered the master of the *rosse* play" (1997, p.13) and, as "a co-founder of the Théâtre Libre… Méténier provided Antoine with many of his most controversial offerings" (1997, p.13).

In describing Méténier's work, Gordon provides an insight into the makeup of the plays he had mastered: "Méténier's *rosse* vignettes were brief, rarely longer than fifteen minutes, but lurid and effective" (1997, p.13). As Gerould points out, the "*Comedie rosse* takes sardonic pleasure in undermining the high ideals of traditional religious morality by showing how harsh economic facts and biological drives render those ideals hollow and inoperative" (Gerould, 1984, p.16). Their adherence to a naturalistic approach meant an embrace of neutrality of opinion on the subjects at hand: "Without comment or condemnation - and only the trace of an ironic sneer - the playwright allows the bare truth to expose the falsity of society's hypocritical pretensions." (Gerould, 1984, p.16).

Méténier's work in the police department made him uniquely qualified to comment on the seedy underworld of Paris. He "worked in 34 different metropolitan districts, including several of the toughest working-class areas, where he could closely observe the life of the common people and the street types of Paris" (Gerould, 1984, p.17). Méténier did not judge those living in hardship, in fact he pitied their plight. As Gerould quotes him from an 1891 lecture delivered in Brussels: "I excuse them and I feel for them nothing except immense pity. I love them even!" (1984, p.17). He discovered that the people he studied "were ignorant of good and evil and simply followed their instincts" (1984, p.17), yet "had a stronger sense of courage, honor, friendship and gratitude than the supposedly civilized bourgeois citizens" (1984, p.17). The *rosse* plays that resulted from Méténier's intimate knowledge and appreciation for the plight of the lower classes were shocking. One of his more famous works exhibited at the Théâtre Libre was *La Casserole* (*Stool Pigeon*): "a violent story of betrayal and

murder among prostitutes and pimps at a cheap dance hall" (Gerould, 1984, p.16). The play's ending in particular was seemingly destined for controversy as "a pimp stabs the whore who informed on his male lover" (Gerould, 1984, p.16). Much in the same way that Grindhouse movie theatres would run midnight movies decades later, *Stool Pigeon* was shown at 12.30am, following a warning that "those of delicate sensibilities should leave" (Gerould, 1984, p.16). Perhaps unsurprisingly, it "played to a packed house" (Gerould, 1984, p.16). In an important note to be elaborated on later in this chapter, Méténier's *rosse* plays may have been predominantly naturalist in their approach, yet they retained elements of melodrama. Indeed, as Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare notes in his paper 'Val Lewton, Mr. Gross, and the Grand-Guignol' (2014): "the *comédies rosses* were often inspired by the *fait divers* of the Parisian popular press. This tradition is quite similar to what has been called 'sensation novels'" (p.75). Méténier's works were often based on sensationalist subject matter, a distinct characteristic of melodramas.

According to Gordon, though Méténier's works were successful, André Antoine "grew tired of the offensive and vulgar genre" (1997, p.13). He had grown to believe that one of the signifiers of the *rosse* play had become one of its greatest downfalls: "in its unpredictability, it was predictable" (1997, p.13). Indeed, "to Antoine, the difference between a great *rosse* play and a hackneyed one seemed slight… Méténier and Antoine were moving in different directions" (1997, p.13).

Oscar Méténier was keen to continue his "investigations into the *comédie rosse* and naturalism and he opened the Grand-Guignol in 1897 with the Théâtre Libre model in

mind" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.4). The theatre was situated at 20 rue Chaptal, not far from the Théâtre Libre and the Moulin Rouge. Méténier was rumoured to have given the theatre its name after "the name of 'Guignol', the popular Punch and Judy puppet character from Lyons, which had become a generic name for all puppet entertainers" (Gordon, 1997, p.14), hence the translation of the theatre's name is literally "big puppet show" (Pierron, 1996). The name has another significance in terms of the original character it is derived from: Guignol's "original incarnation was as an outspoken social commentator--a spokesperson for the canuts, or silk workers, of Lyon" (Pierron, 1996). It would therefore seem appropriate for Méténier to adopt the name for his theatre.

Hand and Wilson note that Méténier's initial time in charge "clearly established the Grand-Guignol as a theatre that challenged moral orthodoxy" (2002, p.4), one that would continue the mission of the Théâtre Libre and, concurrently, the "*succés de scandale* of naturalism" (2002, p.4). While "Méténier's expertise in Parisian crime and the underworld oriented the Grand Guignol toward the violent and macabre" (Gerould, 1984, p.18), this does not indicate an early embrace of out-and-out horror. In fact, the plays followed the pattern of Méténier's output under the Théâtre Libre banner. Gerould notes this when describing two of the inaugural shows: "*Meat-Ticket* and *Little Bugger*… are not horror plays, but pure examples of the *comédie rosse* as developed at the Théâtre Libre" (1984, p.18).

Max Maurey – 1898

Max Maurey was the man who would drive the Grand-Guignol in a new direction, taking over from Oscar Méténier in 1898. Mel Gordon summed him up as "a mystery" (1997, p.17), a man "not known to the Montmartre crowd" (1997, p.17) or indeed in any "artistic circles" (Pierron, 1996). He had inherited a "successful house of naturalism, dedicated to the true-to-life representation of a society dehumanized by capitalism and bourgeois morality" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.5). Yet this was not Maurey's passion. In fact he "had little desire to attempt theatrical experimentation for its own sake… Maurey sought sure-fire formulas of terror and fear" (Gordon, 1997, p.17), perhaps indicating that he had more of a business-like approach to the work, focusing on revenue rather than art. What this approach led to was striking.

Hand and Wilson propose that, despite the changes Maurey imposed, he was not quite dismissing the work of his predecessor. Instead, he was evolving what was already present: he "identified the potential success of the theatre and developed it away from being a Théâtre Libre imitation into being its own unique, successful-and ultimately legendary-venue and genre" (2002, p.5). Maurey was progressing the theatre's programming; he had "identified characteristics within Méténier's enterprise and moved them up the production agenda" (2002, p.5). Gordon states that Maurey's new theatre was to be a place where "every social taboo of good taste was cracked and shattered" (1997, p.18), exposing 'unsavoury' elements of society and depicting taboos through a naturalist lens far bolder than that which Méténier offered. Although Maurey may not have been a known artist, and a man who likely lacked the desire to fully engage with "stuff for poets and painters" (Gordon, 1997, p.17), he did

have what Hand and Wilson described as “financial acumen and artistic vision” (2002, p.6). Above all, he was an intelligent businessman who could understand the most commercially viable elements of the theatre (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.6). He was a perfectionist with a “habit of rewriting scripts and toying extensively with the stage effects” (Gordon, 1997, p.18). Maurey knew what he wanted the theatre to be, and he presided over the “establishment of the Grand-Guignol as the undisputed ‘Theatre of Horror’ (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.6).

The perfectionism Maurey displayed in establishing the Grand-Guignol’s evolved style manifested itself not just in constant script rewrites, but a high level of attention placed on the actors themselves: “Maurey obsessively made each actor work and rework scenes, frequently giving them exact line readings” (Gordon, 1997, p.18). This often made him unpopular with the actors, who believed that they “not the audience, suffered most at the Grand-Guignol” (Gordon, 1997, p.18).

A New Style and Success – 1898 Onwards

Under the stewardship of Max Maurey, the Grand-Guignol played into the darkest fantasies and morbid curiosity of Parisian clients. During their time in the theatre, Gordon proposes that, whilst “watching live realistic and gory enactments of mutilation, rape, torture, and murder, each spectator could play out his fantasies of victimization and retribution” (1997, p.18). This experience was due to: “a combination, broadly speaking, of the erotic and the violent” (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.5). Gordon goes on to note that “this formula would attract the French public that

slaked its blood lust and fascination with the morbid by devouring pulp novels and unlikely tabloid exposés" (Gordon, 1997, p.18).

The Grand-Guignol's programming style under Maurey can be assumed to be a significant factor in its success. One of the most known aspects of the Grand-Guignol is its intelligently designed combination of what is colloquially known as a "'hot and cold shower' of dramatic pieces interspersed with comedies" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.6). Typically, audiences could expect two horror plays and two comedies to alternate throughout the course of a night: "after 'experiencing the horrible,' the audience was able to recompose itself with the likes of *Ernestine est enragee* (*Ernestine is Furious*), *Adele est grosse* (*Adele is Fat*), or *Hue! Cocotte!* (*Hey! Cocotte!*)" (Pierron, 1996). In a significant evolution for the theatre: "the socially ironic bite of Méténier's *rosse* plays were now much more likely to be found in the comedies than in the thrillers" (Gordon, 1997, p.18).

Returning to Maurey's perfectionism, this is perhaps best demonstrated in the attention the theatre paid to their effects. Today, effects can make or break a horror film/play. If they are unconvincing, be it obviously plastic effects or poorly envisioned CGI, the audience can become disengaged. This principle was understood back in the late 19th century and followed the naturalist model that the Grand-Guignol continued to evolve from. The master artist that implemented this horror-focused, realistic style was Paul Ratineau. He, and Maurey understood that "whilst a victim may die a melodramatic death, the means by which they met that death were as naturalistic as possible" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.9). Gordon describes examples: "Mirrors, facial

masks, concealed rubber pieces for wounds and burns, fake heads and limbs… created an atmosphere of sickening and eerie realism" (1997, p.47).

It is useful to note how the Grand-Guignol, no matter how horror-centric its house-style became, fit in with the traditions of its contemporaries and geographical rivals/peers in the wider Montmartre area. Despite its radical form of theatre, "the Grand-Guignol remained inside, rather than outside, the area's melodramatic traditions" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.8). Melodrama was "the great *popular* development of the nineteenth century theatre" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.7). It was the prevalent style in Montmartre, known for the "blood and thunder theatres of the boulevard du crime" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.6), a street so named for the crime melodramas that populated its theatres. Typical elements of melodrama include "exaggerated plot elements and characters (often stereotypes or archetypal in nature)… pathos, overwrought or heightened emotion, moral polarization (good vs. evil)" (Eckersley, 2014).

As such, the Grand-Guignol, while not completely losing touch with its roots, was moving "away from naturalism towards a more melodramatic approach" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.9). Under Méténier, the Grand-Guignol was "never entirely divorced from… melodrama" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.6). Indeed, as previously noted, Méténier's *rosse* plays had melodramatic flairs despite their predominantly naturalist form. This lean further towards melodramatic style was likely driven by Maurey's ability to recognise the differing marketability and popularity of varying theatrical forms, as Hand and Wilson note: "by the beginning of the 20th century, naturalism was

practically a spent force as part of the artistic avant garde, whereas melodrama proved itself to be far more robust" (2002, p.9).

The production style developed under Maurey was unique. It incorporated elements of both the prior stewardship's work and his specific influences, with a melodramatic flair common in the theatre scene that the Grand-Guignol was, at least geographically, a part of. In this sense, Hand and Wilson described "the distinctive house performance style of the Grand-Guignol" (2002, p.9) as "melodrama tempered with naturalism" (2002, p.9).

La Belle Époque

Philippe Jullian described La Belle Époque as covering "the years 1900 to 1914" (1982, p.6). In his paper 'La Belle Epoque', republished (and renamed from its original title: 'Can Can and Flappers') in conjunction with a 1982 exhibit on the era at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Jullian writes eloquently about the cultural birth of La Belle Époque:

> The nineteenth century had ended badly. Its last decade saw a bitter realization of its own faults, and optimism at scientific progress gave way to a kind of disenchantment. Materialism undermined the marvelous but contributed no enthusiasm. Patriotism flung armies into colonial conquest before flinging them at one another, which alarmed the "decent people" and exasperated the workers whom socialism was teaching to think. This disenchantment was reflected in two movements with frequent interruptions: the Decadent movement among intellectuals and the Anarchic movement among the masses. (1982, p.6)

Essentially, dissatisfaction with the state and society at the turn of the 20th century led to a new way of thinking: a new era was born. Diana Vreeland's introduction to Jullian's piece notes that "Paris was the center of the action" (1982, p.3). This vibrant and transformative Paris became "the scene of creative thinking and invention unusually rich in quantity and quality" (Cronin, 1989, p.15). The Grand-Guignol would be a part of this vibrant creativity. In particular, its relation to anxieties of the working class of this period opens an interesting line of analysis.

It is during this discussion of La Belle Époque that the Grand-Guignol can begin to be viewed as a reactive enterprise, intent on challenging conventional entertainment of the time beyond simple aesthetic terms and catering to an audience long neglected. Regardless of the commonplace vision and idea of La Belle Époque, the reality of this creatively fruitful time still retained the class-division that was such a large part of the previous era. And it is here that the Grand-Guignol's appeal to the un-catered-for lower class/non-bourgeois customer base under both Méténier and Maurey can become discernible. Claude Schumacher notes that "in the troubled 1890s as well as the years leading up to the First World War, the theatre catered to a middle-class audience looking for escapist entertainment" (1984, p.5). This summation of typical Parisian theatre of the day indicates a void that the Grand-Guignol could, and would, fill.

Anxieties in France at the time often centred on this aforementioned class-division. As Robert Wilde noted of the lower-class: "many of the urban populace found themselves in cramped homes, relatively poorly paid, with terrible working conditions and in poor

health" (2019). The Grand-Guignol was a theatre pushing away from the typical escapist fantasies of the bourgeoisietowards the escapist fantasies of the lower-class. Hand and Wilson explain that the Grand-Guignol was a theatre catering to a distinctly non-bourgeois audience, a "distinctively Montmartrean: working class or avant-gardist" (2002, p.16). They note that the Grand-Guignol was directly commenting on the times as seen through the prism of the poor: "What was produced… reflected the moods, anxieties and preoccupations of Parisian society during this complex and critical period" (2002, p.16). Plays such as Maurey's *Le Navire aveugle* (*The Blind Ship*), the story of a group of sailors struck blind, dealt with lower-class insecurities such as disease and feelings of imprisonment and hopelessness. It is important to note that the Grand-Guignol's Montmartrean audience, the specific audience they catered for, shared very different outlooks and anxieties to the bourgeois clients of other theatres. The Grand-Guignol's artistic and business decision to provide an alternative form of escapism to this group of people positions it clearly as a theatre pushing back against the norms of the time, norms that were gradually shifting as La Belle Époque went on. In fact, the Grand-Guignol found some success with the upper class under Maurey, as Hand and Wilson summarise: "When Méténier opened the Grand-Guignol in 1897, it was an avant-garde experiment supported by the radical artistic community… Under Max Maurey, the theatre… drew in a more popular audience" (Hand & Wilson, 2002. p.67) becoming "fashionable with the Parisian upper class" (2002, p.67). The Grand-Guignol's shifting audience throughout La Belle Époque would seem to be a clear indicator of the artistic upheaval that Paris was undergoing, and the new artistic ideas that its audiences were being subjected to. The Grand-Guignol's rebellion against

typical bourgeois forms of entertainment, and the eventual embrace of its unique style from wide spectrums of society, exemplifies this change.

The Post-War Golden Age and Camille Choisy

La Belle Époque came to an ignominious end with the 1914 breakout of World War I. The four year war saw brutal fighting on French soil, and, not long into the conflict, the departure of Max Maurey as director of the Grand-Guignol. Somewhat prophetically, Maurey reportedly felt that "after the real-life horrors of war, his audience would have no further appetite for the horrors of the stage" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.16). Hand and Wilson go on to suggest that Maurey, "a man of high morals and a deep sensitivity, lost that appetite himself" (2002, p.16).

The doomsayers did not stop with Maurey. Gordon states that André Antoine, "now an important arbiter of theatrical taste, felt that the Grand-Guignol had used up its novelty" (1997, p.24). This sentiment was also echoed by reviewers of the time such as Fernand Gregh, quoted in Hand and Wilson's work. He stated that: "the so-called Grand-Guignol genre seems to me to be exhausted… we no longer shudder like we used to… we have had our fill of it" (1921, p.57). These expectations of the post-war demise of the Grand-Guignol could not have been more misguided in retrospect.

Camille Choisy took over the directorship of the Grand-Guignol in 1915. Mel Gordon describes Choisy as an extravagant man, someone who felt that the World War I, rather than spelling the demise of the Grand-Guignol, could actually be seen as an opportunity: "the unheroic posture of trench warfare… introduced a new realism and

horror in life" (Gordon, 1997, p.24). This opportunistic approach led to the chance to depict whole new kinds of violence: "for Choisy, the technology of death helped enlarge his hideous vocabulary of torture and death: poison gas, explosive devices, electrical cables, surgical instruments and drills replaces the old pistol, dagger and primitive sword" (1997, p.24).

Choisy's embrace of these new instruments of terror entailed a new "score of special effects in both lighting and sound… staging overtook text" (Pierron, 1996). This new style, an evolution from Maurey's theatre of horror, indicated yet more of a tilt towards melodrama-inspired stylings. Indeed, Choisy's background involved a "career as an actor in second-rate melodramas" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.17). His newfound approach defied expectations, leading the theatre into "its 'golden age'" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.17).

As such, intricacies of effects during the plays were heightened under Choisy's direction. On top of being "expected to inhabit real characters with a full range of powerful and animalistic impulses" (Gordon, 1997, p.24), actors were expected to "possess a double skill in stage concentration and sleight-of-hand trickery" (Gordon, 1997, p.26). For plays under Choisy to work, the actors had to be adept at delivering a performance while they "secretly manipulated catches on fleshy prosthetic creations, intricate spring contraptions, and a host of blood filled devices" (Gordon, 1997, p.26). The theatre's ability to find actors that could pull this off was a key component of their success. One of their most well-known success stories was the 1917 hiring of Paula

Maxa, colloquially known in Pierron's writings as 'the most assassinated woman in the world'.

Paula Maxa and a note on 'Grand-Guignol violence'

As noted, one of the most recognisable names associated with the Grand-Guignol is Paula Maxa. She acts as a key indicator of who was generally afflicted by this so-called Grand-Guignol violence. Her fame was such that newspapers of the day referred to her as "the High Priestess of the Temple of Horror" (Gordon, 1997, p.26). Maxa was "a glamorous actress with an instinctive understanding of the macabre" (Gordon, 1997, p.26). Her career has been described by Gordon with what Hand and Wilson take as "some hyperbole" (2002, p.18), yet it gives a useful indication of the heights of performance Maxa reached: "During her relatively brief career, she was murdered more than 10,000 times and in some 60 ways. A few examples: devoured by ravenous puma, cut into 93 pieces and glued back together, smashed by a roller compressor, burnt alive… she was also raped over 3000 times" (Gordon, 1997, p.26). According to Camillo Antona-Traversi, Choisy's secretary and an early historian of the Grand-Guignol, "Maxa cried 'Help!' 983 times, 'Murderer!' 1263 times, and 'Rape!' 1,804… times" (quoted in Gordon, 1997, p.26).

Laura Robinson's *Variety* article, 'The House of Horrors' (2015), quotes Maxa, unattributed, as saying "In the cinema you have a series of images. Everything happens very quickly. But to see people in the flesh suffering and dying at the slow pace required by live performance, that is much more effective. It's a different thing altogether." Maxa's appreciation of the impact of well-constructed plays led to an

intense work-ethic: she would approach “all of her roles as if she “were carrying a torch”” (Gordon, 1997, p.26). She was meticulous about her performances as Gordon paraphrases from her memoirs: “Maxa wrote about the value of timing, a line or gesture said too fast, or slow, could easily ruin the tension built up over ten or fifteen minutes and destroy the evening” (1997, p.26).

Maxa departed the theatre after Charles Zibell, Choisy’s hands-off business partner, sold his shares in the theatre in 1926 to Jack Jouvin, who “attempted to assume control” (Hand, Wilson, 2002, p.19). Choisy lasted until 1928 before departing. Maxa, although under contract to stay, was “unceremoniously released, according to her own version of events, for having too popular a following” (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.19).

Maxa remains a key point of analysis around the Grand-Guignol. It is curious that she was made a star not by her heroic defeating of evil violence, but by her succumbing to it. The more times and the more brutally she was dismembered, the more her fame grew. She had a talent and a dedication to capturing every aspect of her characters; she was the definitive “leading lady and the most celebrated of all Grand-Guignol actors” (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.18). Yet, unlike typical heroines in today’s plays or films, she was rarely the victor in any narrative sense. Patrons of the Grand-Guignol would pay specifically to see her ‘die’. Pierron quotes an unidentified critic from the day as saying: “Two hundred nights in a row, she simply decomposed on stage in front of an audience which wouldn't have exchanged its seats for all the gold in the Americas” (Pierron, 1996).

Maxa's consistent brutalisation ties into this aforementioned idea of 'Grand-Guignol violence', noted by Hand and Wilson as "grotesque displays of violence within performance media" (2002, p.ix). Andrew Welsh notes this phrase in his review of *High Tension* (2003), one of the New French Extremity films this thesis will analyse. So how can the idea of 'Grand-Guignol violence' be evaluated? What does it mean or, more importantly, who does it occur to? Welsh's use of the term while describing a film involving prominent violence against women indicates that this could be a key tenet of the term. If we look at the theatre itself, the theatre that spawned the term, Paula Maxa's reputation as its finest star, and biggest draw, implies a relationship between 'Grand Guignol violence' and violence against women. Indeed: "Her name became synonymous with Grand-Guignol performance" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.18), at the time the theatre was reaching its most violent and exploitative peaks under Camille Choisy. If Maxa was synonymous with the performance of the Grand-Guignol, it is surely logical to propose that Maxa was also synonymous with the violence of the Grand-Guignol, given how regularly she was a victim of it and how violence was an overriding part of the Grand-Guignol's performances. As this violence was inflicted on Maxa's various characters, it was inflicted on an array of different female roles, an array of different women. This idea therefore pushes the notion of 'Grand-Guignol violence' closer to a more specific description as, in a lot of scenarios, violence against women.

Being a theatre of inherent contradictions (the melodramatic tilts within supposedly naturalist plays for example), the Grand-Guignol of course featured plays that contradict the idea that the entire repertoire was aimed at victimising women. An example can be found in the finale of Jean Aragny and Francis Neilson's 1929 play *La*

Baiser de sang (*The Kiss of Blood*), where the character of Joubert is tormented by Hélène, his former wife who he had tried to murder. Hélène, still alive and masquerading as a vengeful ghost, returns to "drive him to madness and suicide" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.246). The violence that Joubert inflicts on himself throughout the play clearly brings to mind the idea of the victimised female as victor in this scenario.

Despite recognising the contradictions that plays such as *The Kiss of Blood* present, this thesis posits that prior explanations of Maxa's status as synonymous with the violence of the Grand-Guignol form a clear point on the equating of 'Grand-Guignol violence' with violence against women. As a final note, even in a play like *The Kiss of Blood*, the vengeful and victorious woman has not only been subjected (in prior events to the play) to violence, but "has herself been driven mad, and is delusional" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.246), clearly not a positive outcome for the character.

Notes on Later History and Closing

Maxa's departure marked the end of the most fruitful and fascinating years of the Grand-Guignol. Jouvin's tenure marked an attempt to rebrand the Grand-Guignol into a "more anonymous company" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.19). Given the Grand-Guignol's success as a bombastic, well-known house of terror, this was a strategy likely doomed from the start. His post-Choisy/Maxa reworking of the theatre's program was unveiled in 1930. It "played down… physical violence and flesh-searing torture"

(Gordon, 1997, p.28). Instead, Jouvin's program took a supposedly more high-brow approach, focusing on "psychological and sexual menace within the traditional crime and laboratory formats. Mental cruelty, homosexuality, hysteria, unexpected betrayal, and suspense fuelled the plots." (Gordon, 1997, p.28). Following this, "the Grand-Guignol began its slow and irreversible decline" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.21).

Hand and Wilson argue that, despite Jouvin's doomed revamp of the Grand-Guignol program, he was not entirely to blame for the beginning of the end of the theatre. He received appalling press from Choisy loyalists such as Maxa and, despite the obvious association between his changes in style and the theatre's decline, Hand and Wilson argue that "it is unclear whether the changes that Jouvin made to the artistic policy of the theatre contributed to its decline, were made in an attempt to arrest the decline… or were merely coincidental to it" (2002, p.21). Hand and Wilson quote a translation from Pierron's *Le Grand Guignol: Le Théâtre des peurs de la Belle Epoque* (1995) in which she states "Jouvin was not a bad director, he put on some good shows, but he wanted to do everything himself, especially the writing of all the plays, which created a great monotony" (p.1394). The Grand-Guignol had become too repetitive, even with Jouvin's changes, which likely exacerbated the issue.

Gordon suggests that "Hollywood sound films, like *Dracula* and *Frankenstein,* borrowing the very techniques of terror and laughter from the Grand-Guignol, became fierce competition" (1997, p.28-30). This idea will be returned to during an evaluation of the multitude of reasons that the Grand-Guignol shut in 1962, yet is an interesting

early indicator of the challenges the theatre would face in an age that had begun to gravitate toward cinema.

The Grand-Guignol had a brief resurgence under Nazi occupation, with Hermann Goering reportedly being a fan, despite SS hierarchy deeming the theatre to be an "example of *Entartete Kunst* ('Degenerate Art')" (Gordon, 1997, p.30). The fall of Paris had seen Choisy return to the Grand-Guignol, playing the classics for an audience likely made up partly of occupying forces. Following Paris' liberation, the Grand-Guignol's former English owner, Eva Berkson, who took over from Jouvin in 1938 before being forced to flee Paris in 1939, returned to retake ownership.

Over the following years the theatre changed hands multiple times, with various people failing to arrest its steady decline. This included Paul Ratineau, legendary effects artist and actor. He directed three seasons over the years 1946 and 1947, yet could not change the Grand-Guignol's fortunes. Max Maurey's children Denis and Marcel had a go as well, yet, as Hand and Wilson explain: "The form had lost its connection with its audience and the stylized performances and plays themselves seemed out of touch with the post-war mood" (2002, p.23).

It is here that we arrive at the varying theories as to why the Grand-Guignol declined so steadily and surely over the years until its 1962 closing. Critics of the time derided the Grand-Guignol for not changing itself enough over the fifty-plus years it remained open: it "had gone stale and soft" (Gordon, 1997, p.33). This is especially important when taken in a post-World War II context. One of the most common explanations for

the demise of the Grand-Guignol was that it had burnt itself out, its horrors no match for the brutality of real life during the Second World War: “after the horrors of the Nazi genocide, there was no place for theatrical, stylized horror in a modern society” (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.24). As Charles Nonon, the final director of the Grand-Guignol stated: “We could never equal Buchenwald. Before the war, everyone felt that what was happening onstage was impossible. Now we know that these things, and worse, are possible in reality.” (Gordon, 1997, p.33). Agnes Pierron seems to favour this explanation too, as Hand and Wilson translate from her French language work: “during the 1940s, reality surpassed fiction” (Pierron, 1995, p.xxxii). Reactions to the Grand-Guignol’s plays were also negative. Their impact had been lessened by the horrors of the war and their very presence, what they depicted and stood for, was derided. This is no more evident than in René Barjavel’s 1948 review, quoted by Hand and Wilson, of the Grand-Guignol classic *Le Laboratoire des hallucinations*:

> Our fathers allowed themselves to think that these horrible things only happened in the theatre… but recently… I am reminded of the local woman, who, during an air raid, had the head of her neighbour land in her lap. I am reminded of Buchenwald, of Hiroshima, of Katyn. And of all the future Hiroshimas. It seems that the Grand-Guignol can be nothing more to us than a mere diversion. (*Carrefour*, 1948, p.23)

Holly Williams, in her 2019 BBC article ‘Why The Grand Guignol Was So Shocking’, quotes Richard Hand elaborating on the discomfort the French people felt with the Grand-Guignol, beyond simply the poor taste its plays now seemed to exemplify: “I think, for Parisians, watching these playful displays of horror and torture maybe was not quite so much fun in that context… The theatre of horror they were so proud of

took on a bitter taste after Auschwitz, and the fact that it made its money with the occupying forces". This extra piece of information ties back to the brief resurgence that the Grand-Guignol had during the Nazi occupation. It must have been understandably difficult for the French public to return to a theatre that readily accepted the custom of those whose actions were making its plays seem comparatively tame.

Yet, as Hand and Wilson point out, common sense dictates that the Second World War cannot be solely blamed for the Grand-Guignol's demise. In fact, the decline had started "more than a decade before the discovery of the concentration camps, and the First World War had produced carnage on a scale never before witnessed in modern Europe" (2002, p.25). The Grand-Guignol had prospered in the years following the First World War. So there must be other factors at play. Their acceptance of Nazi custom could go some way to explaining the difference between the fallout of the First and Second World Wars for the Grand-Guignol, as well as the fact that memories of the First World War were likely still somewhat fresh for certain potential customers as the Second World War ravaged Europe. After two devastating conflicts comparatively close together, a loss of appetite for horror could be expected.

Hand and Wilson propose a different theory however, one that ties back to Mel Gordon's notes on the Grand-Guignol's newest competitors; *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. The Grand-Guignol started out by influencing the artform rival that would soon overtake it and spell its demise. Mel Gordon explains: "Todd [SIC] Browning created the films that borrowed most heavily from the Theatre of the Grand-Guignol. Especially in *The Unholy Three* (1925), *The Unknown* (1928), *Freaks* (1932) and *The*

Devil Doll (1936), Browning established a particular unhealthy atmosphere that closely resembled pure grand-guignolesque" (1997, p.42). Gordon goes on to note Grand-Guignol influences in the settings, atmosphere and style in various Hollywood productions. This influence ended by the end of the 1930s, when the monster film craze took over Hollywood.

The end of Grand-Guignol's influence on early cinema seemed to spell the beginning of cinema's influence on Grand-Guignol's downward spiral. Interestingly, "the horrors of the war did not affect the popularity of horror films" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.25). If the Second World War marked the beginning of a full rejection of horror then surely horror cinema would have been included. The fact that it appeared immune speaks to deeper problems with the Grand-Guignol. One of these issues would be realism. Despite the best efforts of masters like Maurey, Maxa and Ratineau, "Cinema had already established that it could present horror more realistically than the theatre" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.25). There is a direct comparison to be made between theatre and the screen. Georges Franju's 1959 classic *Les yeux sans visage* (*Eyes Without A Face*), described by Hand and Wilson as one of the "true descendants of the Grand-Guignol form" (2002, p.25), was adapted for the stage in 1962, yet completely failed to meet the standards set by its film predecessor. As Hand and Wilson stated: "The Grand-Guignol finally had nowhere else to go" (2002, p.25). It simply could not compete with the immersion and realism provided by cinema. It is sure that the Second World War, the Grand-Guignol's acceptance of occupying forces custom and general fatigue with its reluctance to overly change style all contributed to its demise,

yet its antiquated perception in the face of technological superiority was likely the final hurdle that could not be overcome.

Morbid Curiosity and the Grand-Guignol

Jack Haskins, quoted in Connie Maxwell's article 'Few Answers on Origin of Morbid Curiosity' (1984), states that: "Throughout human history, humans have been drawn to public spectacles involving bloody death and disfigurement to helpless victims, to public hangings, crucifixions and decapitations. Morbid curiosity, if not inborn, is at least learned at a very early age" He describes it as a "byproduct [SIC] of reason" (1984) and goes on to note simple examples of what we now commonly understand to be morbid curiosity: "At the direct experience level, one sees motorists stopping to ogle automobile wrecks, spectators drawn to burning buildings, crowds gathering at the scene of fights and riots" (1984). Suzanne Oosterwijk, in her study 'Choosing the Negative: A Behavioral Demonstration of Morbid Curiosity' (2017), notes that: "people are curious of highly negative information". She also begins to note its relationship to entertainment, explaining that morbid curiosity "can be inferred from the popularity of horror movies and crime shows".

Morbid curiosity can relate to humanity's enjoyment of darker forms of entertainment. This notion of the unpleasant providing entertainment is picked up by Jeffrey Goldstein in his introduction to his edited collection *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment* (1998): "People voluntarily expose themselves to, and seek out, images of violence" (p.2). Goldstein's look at violent entertainment proposes a useful idea: that the morbidly curious seek out violent forms of entertainment with their minds

tempered by a subconscious suspension of disbelief. This suspension of disbelief is informed by the entertainment's inherent inclusion of "clues to their false identity" (p.2). Goldstein relates this to the bright coloured plugs that toy guns carry to identify their falsehood. He points out that "many in the audience appear eager to be taken in by dramatic violence; perhaps attraction is enhanced by the viewers' willing suspension of disbelief" (p.2). It is here that we can first begin to relate Goldstein's theories, and wider theories around morbid curiosity, to the attraction of the Grand-Guignol. Although, under effects artists such as Ratineau, the Grand-Guignol aimed for maximum realism with its gore and death effects, the setting would always be a theatre, a place for entertainment. The plays were often highly unrealistic in terms of their settings and characters, where dark laboratories and mad scientists abounded. One need only look at the list of ways Paula Maxa was killed. The Grand-Guignol may have grown out of naturalism, and retained an element of this throughout much of its lifespan, but its tilts towards the melodrama that was so common in Montmartre at the time indicated a key element of the dramatic to its shows.

Goldstein states that "films portraying violence often induce reflexiveness in viewers - we become aware of the camera, of the music, or of special effects, and in every case are aware of our status as viewers" (p.3). It is no leap to declare that this awareness, this detachment, is more acute for audiences in the theatre, an art form that, lacking the editing and technological advancements of certain forms of cinema, could be regarded as inherently less immersive. The Grand-Guignol's audience enjoyed a different kind of immersion, one that is typically unique to theatre: "The involvement of some playgoers was so strong that they sometimes shouted, 'Assassin!' at the

various ‘villains’” (Gordon, 1997, p.27). This, of course, indicates deep involvement in what was occurring onstage, yet also illustrates more of a party atmosphere at the shows. Indeed, the grotesqueness displayed became a point of pride, rather than of deep disgust, to the ‘Guignolers’ (Grand-Guignol patrons) who “liked to repeat the number of times that the house physician was called to treat temporarily sickened spectators” (1997, p.27). That they appeared to view this as somewhat of a game implies an inherent detachment from the violence onstage, and more of an enjoyment of studying the morbidly curious who turned up to try to stomach the Grand-Guignol’s plays. This directly links to Goldstein’s idea of an awareness of status as viewers.

Tanya Jurković, in her paper ‘Blood, Monstrosity and Violent Imagery: Grand-Guignol, The French Theatre of Horror as a Form of Violent Entertainment’ (2013), notes the “sense of security… in which the viewers feel safe to enjoy, envision and in a way become the participants in the performances enacted on the small stage of the Grand-Guignol”. The Grand-Guignol maintained a detachment between its morbidly curious spectators and its plays. This was a place to enjoy violence and horror with no true threat, a key tenet of this thesis’ understanding of morbid curiosity, which generally appears to involve safe voyeurism rather than a conscious jeopardisation of one’s own safety. It was the perfect place for the morbidly curious. John M. Callahan summarises this neatly: “For its patrons, the Grand-Guignol offered a chance to be scared in complete safety... It was a good night out” (1991, pp.166-167).

It is here that the Grand-Guignol’s downfall can be examined as it relates to detachment within Goldstein’s violence as viewing pleasure. World War II is viewed as

a partial influence on the decline of the Grand-Guignol. French soil was occupied, atrocities were visited upon people throughout Europe, concentration camps showed the brutality on a scale scarcely imaginable, even by the Grand-Guignol's writers. Morbid curiosity was, by then, surely a lesser factor in the attraction of the Grand-Guignol. Hand and Wilson's idea of "the playful audience" (2002, p.69) seems scarcely imaginable in the years of hardship following the conflict and the occupation. A point could be made that the popularity of horror films in the post-war era could be disqualifying to the point about a loss of morbid curiosity. This is disprovable due to the nature of popular horror films of the time, which remained so markedly divergent from reality; the continuation of the *Mummy* and *Frankenstein* sagas for example, that they cannot be directly correlated with the Grand-Guignol.

Contemporary Fears and Fear of the 'Other' in the Grand-Guignol

Othering arises from what Robin Wood describes as "surplus repression" (2003, p.25), a concept linked with "basic repression" (2003, p.25). Basic repression is "universal, necessary, and inescapable" (2003, p.25) and transforms us from mere animal to fully-fledged human. It involves "postponement of gratification…thought and memory processes…self-control, and…recognition of and consideration for other people" (2003, p.25). While basic repression "makes us distinctively human" (2003, p.25), surplus repression is what confines us to the societal roles we are born into: as Wood states: "monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists" (2003, p.25). Those who do not fit into these roles will naturally be 'othered' by a repressive society, they are different, and therefore could be considered either a threat or something to be looked

down on. As Wood states: “Otherness represents that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with…in one of two ways: either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it” (2003, p.27). The repression of that which is ‘othered’ results in the ‘other’ potentially becoming monstrous in the eyes of the masses.

Agnes Pierron best summarises the use of ‘othering’ and contemporary fears in the Grand-Guignol performances: “Fear of 'the other' appeared at the Grand-Guignol in countless variations: fear of the proletariat, fear of the unknown, fear of the foreign, fear of contagion (for all the blood spilled, sperm ejaculated, and sweat dripped there” (1996). Pierron’s noting of a “fear of the proletariat” (1996) is strange and contradictory. The Grand-Guignol plays often aligned themselves with the oppressed, the outcasts, catering to their core audience, whilst at other times exploiting and demonising those less fortunate, an inherent contradiction in the theatre.

An important fear in the public consciousness at the time was syphilis. Sexual energy and eroticism was long a part of Grand-Guignol plays, and sexual acts reportedly often took place in the theatre’s seating: “the theatre’s balcony proved to be an ideal and daring place to engage in necking sessions and more pronounced sex play” (Gordon, 1996, p.28). It is unsurprising that in the midst of this sexually charged atmosphere, the Grand-Guignol would choose to engage so heavily with such a sex-adjacent fear of the day. Sarah Dunant summarises this: “late 19th-century French culture was a particularly rich stew of sexual desire and fear” (2013). The Grand-Guignol creatives clearly saw an opportunity within this, as Pierron notes: “In several plays, among them

Maurey's *La Fosse aux filles* (*The Girls' Den*), a brothel visitor was exposed to syphilis" (1996).

Syphilis ties into numerous fears of the day in France, and provides a key to explaining how the Grand-Guignol's plays catered to contemporary anxieties. Gérard Tilles M.D.'s comprehensive online article 'Stigma of syphilis in the 19th century France' (1996) discusses this anxiety in the years predating the introduction of the definitive treatment of penicillin in 1943. The article is clearly written by a doctor whose first language is not English, yet it is well-sourced and intelligently written enough to be considered credible. Tilles points out that, due to its proliferation, unidentified cause (up until 1905) and lack of a cure in late 19th/early 20th century France: "syphilis [was] the center of moral concern and anguish". There became a relationship between morality and syphilis: "the syphilis contagion was considered as being transported into the families from… prostitutes or women of the working classes" (Tilles, 1996). Hence the general discourse around the spread of disease was "superceded [SIC] by that of a conflict of classes, prostitutes symbolizing more the de-moralisation of the society" (Tilles, 1996). Thus a class dispute was born, the type that the Grand-Guignol thrived upon. Tilles references syphilis being regarded as a "moral and fateful disease" (1996), one vested upon prostitutes and women of the working class as punishment for their actions. They were "demoralizing… society thus they deserved imprisonment as the only efficient treatment" (Tilles, 1996).

Jill Harsin, in her journal article 'Syphilis, Wives, and Physicians: Medical Ethics and the Family in Late Nineteenth-Century France' (1989) described France's attempts to

contain the disease: “the registration and regular examination of prostitutes that had long been a feature of Paris and other large cities, was reaffirmed and extended throughout France as a means of controlling venereal disease” (p.72). This registration and examination system led to widespread arrests. This ties into Wood’s notion of rejecting or annihilating the ‘other’. Since those suffering could not be adequately rendered safe or assimilated, this was the option taken by France. Tilles describes how, between the years 1871 and 1905, 725,000 women suspected of carrying syphilis were arrested, giving the appearance of a deliberate targeting of women. This is an uncited number, but receives some validation from Harsin’s paper, in which she notes that “the disease rate for arrested women hovered around 12 percent” (1989, p.74) between the years of 1888 and 1903.

The outbreak of syphilis, the moral concerns around its spread, and the resulting arrests led to a paranoia throughout Paris and wider France. French dermatologist Jean Alfred Fournier, whose research on syphilis became famous, stated “that perhaps thirteen in one hundred of all Parisians had syphilis” (Harsin, 1989, p.74). Harsin points out that this statement, taken from a quote in Louis Flaux’s *La Police des Moeurs devant la Commission extraparlementaire du régime des moeurs* (1910), is made without evidence. It is perhaps therefore symptomatic of wider paranoia around the outbreak. If the steady mind of one of the doctors researching the disease makes such a hyperbolic claim, then surely those lesser educated on the subject would easily become part of an exponentially growing fearful environment.

The widespread concern around syphilis may have been slightly misguided. Harsin notes that "surveys of people at risk—prostitutes, both registered and unregistered, as well as military men—yielded small but stubborn minorities of those with syphilis" (1989, p.74). Regardless of this, the fear of syphilis was very much a contemporary issue in the Paris of the early 20th century. Hand and Wilson state that the Grand-Guignol of this time, under the leadership of Max Maurey, "sought to exploit contemporary fears" (2002, p.15). This is likely why we see plays focused on the issues Pierron described: *La Fosse aux filles* (*The Girls' Den*) and *L'Auberge rouge* (*The Red Inn*) for example. That fear of contagion that ran through Paris at the time provided a perfect societal fear for the Grand-Guignol to exploit.

It is here that we find a demonstration of how the Grand-Guignol used 'othering' to develop a caricature of society's fears in its plays. Maggie Griffith Williams and Jenny Korn summarise the years of theoretical work on and research into 'othering' in a succinct and simple way: "Othering is the process by which one group reproduces and reinforces distinctions, dominance, and subordination against those without power… Othering may occur when one group emphasizes a commonality… belittling the lack of that commonality in the other" (2017, p.23). This speaks to how Parisian society looked down on those afflicted with syphilis. Those infected were feared and looked down upon, they were 'other' to the general healthy Parisian of the time. The Grand-Guignol turned the sufferers of the disease, and by extension the disease itself, into a device for fear, playing on that which preoccupied the thoughts of many fearful patrons. This demonstrates an obvious 'othering' of these characters, and likely helps explain how they were such successful theatrical devices:

> Playing upon the public's fear of disease and its immutable spread, many productions during this era focused on characters infected with rabies and syphilis, tapping into a reality that was all too familiar with its audience. (Robinson, 2015)

Syphilis was by no means the only disease focused on. Rabies is mentioned by Robinson, and Pierron notes leprosy as well as many other mystery ailments. Regardless of the disease used by the playwrights, they can all likely be viewed as proxies for a society preoccupied with a fear of disease. The Grand-Guignol's treatment of those suffering characters may often have involved 'othering', but it also brings to light a sensitivity for the plight of the afflicted. It is well established that syphilis was a socially-motivated fear. It was incorrectly regarded as a problem of the lower class, an issue born from "prostitution and illicit sexuality" (Harsin, 1989, p.74). It is even suggested that "the increasingly fervid rhetoric against syphilis… represented an attempt to repress sexuality among the young at a time of weakening sexual constraints" (Harsin, 1989, p.74). And it is here that the Grand-Guignol's perspective on the issue comes to light. It certainly demonised disease, and often 'othered' those afflicted. Yet it also often aligned itself with the afflicted: "The heroes of Paul Cloquemin and Paul Autier's *Gardiens de phare* (*Lighthouse Keepers)* and of Robert Francheville's *Le Beau Regiment* (*The Handsome Regiment*) had rabies" (Pierron, 1996). This demonstrated both a sympathy for, and a lionisation of, the afflicted. This allying with the 'other' will be useful in terms of a comparison with New French Extremity in a later chapter, and will be examined in more detail there.

Tying this sympathetic approach to the Grand-Guignol's social perspective and aim at a lower-class appeal is simple. The lower-class, the prostitutes and the unfaithful were often unfairly regarded as the vestiges of disease, the carriers of syphilis. The Grand-Guignol catered to the contemporary fears of its patrons, yet it also provided them with heroes suffering from the very diseases that had been used as societal weapons against them.

This thesis will now turn to an examination of France's turbulent and violent history, providing specific, and important context for a later evaluation of New French Extremity.

Chapter 2: The History of Violence in France

This chapter aims to follow on from this thesis' case study on the Grand-Guignol by providing extensive context for the next point of focus, New French Extremity. By running through France's turbulent history, this chapter will set up themes and points of discussion for the following exploration of New French Extremity. It will focus on analytically useful moments in time, setting up an argument for the movement as being a specific product of France's violent history by exploring themes such as an insular France, a divided France and a France scarred by its violent past.

Much of the historical research in this chapter is based upon the aforementioned work by Alexandra West along with the exhaustive archives of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, supplemented where needed by other journal articles, books and web pages.

The Hundred Years War to La Belle Époque

The Hundred Years War (1337- 1453), sporadic conflicts born out of power and land disputes between France and England, is described by Alexander West as resulting "in a centralized government. England lost territory it had previously laid claim to, a great boon to France, which, in turn, established the idea of nationalism in the land and the beginnings of a French sense of identity and pride" (2016, p.14). This is an early example of France as a prideful, insular country, containing a nationalist streak born from conflict. Civil conflicts however, did not end with the centralisation of French governance post-Hundred Years War. During the 16th and 17th centuries, wars between Catholics and Protestants, alternatively supported by the monarchy "in order to secure

their power and maintain peace" (West, 2016, p.14), eventually ended with Catholic religious dominance and a reduced Protestant presence.

From 1643-1715, France maintained a "unified front to the rest of the world, bolstered by their national pride, which was fostered by their multiple war victories" (West, 2016, p.14). Yet despite this projected image, France was suffering internally due to "massive financial debt from helping fund the American Revolution" (West, 2016, p.14). The unrest within France was symptomatic of the largest problem at the time: the conduct of the centralised government of the Ancien Régime, which consisted of nobility and clergy across France and presided over an obvious class divide: "Those not in the Régime were taxed heavily and frequently" (West, 2016, pp.14-15). Bisson and Drinkwater et al note the regime's "inability to change or… to pay its way" (2020) as resulting in a population that was "angry, hungry and poor" (West, 2016, p.15), a demonstration of class divide and hidden strife that rings true with modern France.

Louis XIV's death in 1715 served to "advance the Enlightenment in France" (West, 2016, p.15). The Enlightenment, a "conscious formulation of a profound cultural transformation… [that] undermined belief in the traditional institutions" (Fournier, Weber et al, 2020) resulted in the French people seeking "a way to change their status and end the disparity between classes" (West, 2016, p.15). The philosophies that they came to believe in told them of man's fundamental rights at birth and of equality to their leaders.

In May of 1789, a meeting of the Estates General; “the clergy (First Estate), the nobility (Second Estate) and the peasants (Third Estate)” (West, 2016, p.15), fell apart rapidly and the Third Estate met to declare themselves a new National Assembly, pledging in secret to construct a constitution for France.

Between June 27th and July 1st 1789, uprisings over food shortages in Paris led Louis XVI to send in troops. As West describes: “the politicized citizens saw this as an antagonistic act and responded by seizing the Bastille Prison on July 14. Idealistically, the storming of the Bastille was meant to free prisoners as a symbolic act but, in reality, was used to attain weaponry” (2016, p.16). The Bastille victory was seen as “a spectacular symbolic event—a seemingly miraculous triumph of the people against the power of royal arms” (Shennan, Popkin et al, 2020). The next steps occurred rapidly as West explains: “On August 4, 1789, the National Assembly abolished the Ancien Régime… On August 26, the National Assembly proclaimed the Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizen, which detailed the rights applied to every person that were made integral to the new constitution” (2016, p.16). This demand for equality regardless of social status was a key desire amongst ordinary French citizens of the time: “The French Revolution was underway” (West, 2016, p.16).

Political disagreements in the Revolution between the Jacobins, who wanted France to become a Republic, the National Assembly, aiming for a less radical approach, and the monarchy, wishing to cling to their power, led to a lot of infighting. A resource-based war with Austria supported by Louis XVI and the National Assembly led to a split between those two parties due to treason by Louis XVI: he had encouraged Prussians

to fight alongside Austria, against his own side. This resulted in the suspension of the monarchy, democratic elections and the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793, as voted for by the common people of France.

The September massacre of 1792 is a keen illustration of the horrific random acts of violence that have occurred on French soil and is seen as the inverse of the storming of Bastille: “citizens entered the prisons, set up “popular tribunals” to hold perfunctory trials, and summarily executed between 1,100 and 1,400 prisoners out of a total of 2,800, stabbing and hacking them to death with any instruments at hand” (Bernard, Blondel et al, 2020). This event also ties into something that will be explored later in this thesis, suppression/wilful forgetting of history. While Bastille Day is a national holiday in France, its darker inverse is much less known or discussed. On September 22nd 1792, Year 1 of the French Republic was declared.

Following Louis XVI’s execution, the Reign of Terror began, resulting in the executions of tens of thousands of perceived enemies of the Revolution. Napoleon Bonaparte was France’s first emperor at this time, reigning from 1804-1814 (with a brief spell in power in 1815) and overseeing a system that can be seen as cruelly ironic. As West summarises: “the Revolution could be seen as a failure as it tore down a structure from which only the wealthy benefited, only to be replaced by another system of power eerily resembling that which had come before” (2016, p.18). Napoleon, in addition to gaining control over continental Europe through the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), presided over important social changes, abolishing feudalism and most importantly moving “political power away from the Church and towards the state” (West, 2016,

p.18). This was soon to be undone following his defeat at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 and Charles X's rule of 1824-1830. Here we see an example of the consistent social instability throughout French history where norms and concentrations of power were changed at an alarming rate, an obvious contributor to historical insecurity and uncertainty.

Several more Revolutions (The French Revolution of 1830 and The Revolution of 1848) resulted in yet more power shifts, the abdication of Charles X, the installation of a constitutional monarchy and a short lived Second Republic. The Second Republic's perceived conservatism in its early phases led to yet more protests on May 15th 1848. Protesters "marched from the Bastille to the Palais Bourbon, where the newly elected chamber of the Second Republic sat" (West, 2016, p.19). The breaking up of the march by the National Guard caused the protest to turn violent. Troops poured into Paris "to put a swift end to the emerging insurrection. Four thousand citizens were killed in six days" (West, 2016, p.19). Yet again we see an example of the state acting as aggressor against its citizens and of class-motivated political uprising ending in bloodshed.

Elections in December of 1848 resulted in victory for Louis Napoleon, Napoleon Bonaparte's nephew. Ruling over a France broken by a brutal past few decades, West describes his rule as failing "to undo all the traumas of France in the 1840s" (2016, p.19) yet notes his successes in, amongst other things, "bringing the country up to date with industrialization" (2016, p.19). In December 1851 Napoleon dissolved the National Assembly in a coup designed to help him avoid retirement into a life of debt: "some 70 leading politicians were arrested, and the outlines of a new constitution

were proclaimed to the nation. It restored manhood suffrage, sharply reduced the assembly's powers, and extended the president's term to 10 years." (Fournier, Tuppen et al, 2020).

The restoration of universal suffrage for men was something that had been resisted by the now-dissolved National Assembly as they feared the peasant vote would drive them out of office. Napoleon's coup resulted in the beginning of the Second Empire of France. West summarised this period as resulting in "victories in battle, freedom of the press, and continued economic expansion" (2016, p.19). Yet again, stability was relatively short-lived: "The Prussians… gained power in the 1860s" (West, 2016, p.19). Napoleon had declared war on Prussia in July 1870 "after a deliberate provocation from Otto Von Bismarck, a conservative statesman who dominated European affairs" (West, 2016, p.19). The war was short, with 270,000 French troops meeting double the number of Prussians with backup from Germany. The French surrendered on September 1st 1870.

Following the French defeat at the hands of the Prussians, a new government was formed on September 4th 1870, becoming the Third Republic. Despite the French surrender, Prussia continued to claim territory and eventually laid siege to Paris, occupying it and seeing the establishment of the Paris Commune, a radically socialist government, which would rule Paris for several months. Following an armistice between France and Prussia, the Paris Commune refused to give up its power and submit to government authority. They were crushed by the French army in what was

known as “The Bloody Week”. The end of the fighting with Prussia led to the beginning of La Belle Époque, discussed in the previous chapter.

The Dreyfus Affair

The Dreyfus affair, a “major point of political upheaval” (West, 2016, p.20), was a key point during La Belle Époque and “the Third Republic’s greatest political and moral crisis” (Fournier, Flower et al, 2020). The crisis centred around Alfred Dreyfus, “a career army officer of Jewish origin [who] was charged with selling military secrets to the Germans” (Fournier, Flower et al, 2020). Tried and convicted in 1894, Dreyfus was imprisoned for life on Devil’s Island. Adam Gopnik describes the humiliation Dreyfus endured after his court martial: “His insignia medals were stripped from him, his sword was broken over the knee of the degrader, and he was marched around the grounds in his ruined uniform to be jeered and spat at, while piteously declaring his innocence and his love of France above cries of “Jew” and “Judas!”” (2009).

Secrets continued to leak after the imprisonment of Dreyfus and in 1896 “new evidence came to light… identifying a French Army major named Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy as the true culprit” (West, 2016, p.21). This evidence was suppressed and more charges aimed at Dreyfus instead: “The chief of army counterintelligence, Colonel Georges Picquart, eventually concluded that Esterhazy and not Dreyfus had been guilty of the original offense, but his superior officers refused to reopen the case” (Fournier, Flower et al, 2020). Notable politicians and public figures took up Dreyfus’ cause, with leaked intelligence from the army arousing yet more controversy. By 1898, France was split: “Intellectuals of the left led the fight for Dreyfus, while right-wing

politicians and many Roman Catholic periodicals defended the honour of the army" (Fournier, Flower et al, 2020). Émile Zola's famous letter *J'Accuse* appeared in the French paper *L'Aurore* in that same year and was a key component in stoking outrage around the case. Later in 1898, evidence against Dreyfus was discovered to be forged. Esterhazy fled to England. Dreyfus was eventually exonerated in 1906 and reinstated in the army.

The Dreyfus affair brings up interesting divides within France and opens up a discussion of contemporary fears of the day, some of which seem to run concurrent with those modern-day fears that inspired the rise of New French Extremity. Adam Gopnik's *The New Yorker* article 'Trial Of The Century' (2009) discusses these fears. Gopnik's first point of note concerns how unfeasible it seemed that the kind of prejudiced stereotyping that highlighted the Dreyfus Affair would happen to "an assimilated Jew" (Gopnik, 2009) in "a city that was the pride and pilothouse of civic rationalism" (Gopnik, 2009). The discriminatory treatment of Dreyfus "was the first indication that a new epoch of progress and cosmopolitan optimism would be met by a countervailing wave of hatred that deformed the next half century of European history" (2009).

Gopnik's next point focuses on potential paranoia in the French population. He points out that Dreyfus "was not the Faceless Foreigner but the Enemy Within" (2009). Dreyfus was not a symbol of a faceless 'other' intent on causing damage to France, he became a portrayal of an anti-Semitic stereotype: a "faithless Jew" (Gopnik, 2009) who the French public were inspired to carry out their aforementioned "degradation ritual"

(Gopnik, 2009) on. This disturbingly anti-Semitic public degrading of Dreyfus continued into the press, a key example being journalist Léon Daudet, who wrote the following in 1895: "…his future is dead along with his honour. He no longer has any age. He no longer has a name. He no longer has a complexion. His is the colour of treason. His face is grey, flattened and base, showing no signs of remorse, a foreigner certainly, a wreck from the ghetto".

The Dreyfus affair and the hysteria that surrounded the officer's fraudulent conviction is a clear indicator of a reactionary French public, one with fault lines of division waiting to be cracked open. As West notes: The Dreyfus affair led to a deep divide between the pro-Army (and mainly Catholic) supporters and the pro-republican contingent known as the Dreyfusards" (2016, p.21). This analysis is of course referring to the French public of the late 19th/early 20th century. Yet, as later work in this chapter will show, the Dreyfus affair and the clearly prejudiced public scapegoating/shaming that occurred still remains relevant today.

It is worth making a brief note on the state of Paris at the turn of the century. Alexandra West summarises the changing culture within the city:

> As industrialization swept through France, more and more workers were required, necessitating more homes in populated urban areas-foreshadowing the Paris suburbs. The Paris Metro was built and worked, alongside buses and street-cars, to get the workers to and from their homes, in turn allowing the wealthy to remain in Paris and poor/working class to occupy the suburbs, ensuring a physical distance between them (2016, p.20).

This is a useful description of the genesis of geographical class divides that would be so well utilised in modern day *banlieue* films: *La haine* (1995) and *Banlieue 13* (*District 13*, 2004) being good examples of these. As West notes: France "is a country where the tension of the divide between classes has always been simmering just below the surface" (2016, p.13). These notes on class divides in France will be extremely useful during later analysis of New French Extremity films, particularly *Frontier(s)* (2007).

World War I (1914-1918)

Conventional wisdom establishes La Belle Époque as ending with the outbreak of World War I. The war saw the Allied Forces (France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Italy, Japan and the Russian Empire) fighting the Central Powers (Germany, the Ottoman Empire and Austria-Hungary) on primary battlegrounds in and around France.

The scale of World War I was previously unexperienced. As West explains of France's military efforts: "In 1914, France had a population of 40 million, with 1.1 million registered service men in army reserve. By 1918, France had managed to mobilize 8.6 million men to fight in the war" (2016, p.22). This scale of mobilisation was matched by the extreme casualties that France suffered on its way to victory, its numbers dwarfing those of the other warring nations, they were left with "1.39 million dead and another 4.25 million wounded" (West, 2016, p.22), which was twice the number of casualties suffered by the United Kingdom.

Fournier, Tuppen et al note the devastating physical effect (outside of human casualties) that the war had on France: "Large parts of northeastern France, the

nation's most advanced industrial and agricultural area, were devastated. Industrial production had fallen to 60 percent of the prewar level; economic growth had been set back by a decade" (2020). They also note that key lingering scars of World War I were "psychological lesions caused by the strain of protracted warfare and by the sentiment that France could not again endure such a test" (2020).

The post-war years were dominated by "a failing economic structure, making any attempts at rebuilding the country and strengthening national morale nearly impossible" (West, 2016, p.22). This was compounded by a persistent insecurity regarding national safety from a potentially future-resurgent Germany. These fears eventually proved to be well-founded. By 1931 the effects of the 1929 stock market crash in America had hit: "France's exports were no longer in demand, industry was slowing down, and unemployment was rising" (West, 2016, p.23). West goes on to summarise the population issues France was having towards the mid-1930s: "Deaths were outnumbering births… with their population stalling at 41.3 million, barely over a million more than in 1914" (2016, p.23). Meanwhile, Germany was in the midst of a resurgence, a growing population coinciding with their 1933 withdrawal from the League of Nations and the rise of Adolf Hitler, a spiral towards war that found France "unwilling and unable to do anything to stop it" (West, 2016, p.23).

World War II

The French military leaders made several crucial errors in their early handling of the second World War. Following France and Britain's declaration of war against Germany in 1939, there was a six-month period bereft of land operations in which the conflict was dubbed "The Phony War". This perhaps lured the French generals into a false sense of security, as they held the old fashioned view that "war would once again be fought in the trenches as it had in World War I" (West, 2016, p.23). As West notes, they had failed to account for "advances in technology and strategy" (2016, p.23). This outdated view of war led to the French being taken completely by surprise. On May 10th, the Germans attacked through the Ardennes Forest, previously assumed to be impassable by armies and "by May 20th, the Germans had the Allied forces surrounded. Northern France began to panic and approximately 10 million French citizens, including 2 million from Paris, fled their homeland" (West, 2016, p.23). The Third Republic's government fled and by June 25th an armistice was reached, capping the French military, surrendering the Alsace and Lorrain provinces to Germany and accepting German occupation of "the most valuable parts of France" (West, 2016, p.23).

In Vichy, a town in the unoccupied South of France, an area described by President Philippe Petain as the "French State" (West, 2016, p.23), the Third Republic met its end and the Vichy government was born. This transition marked a sharp departure from the liberal leanings of the Third Republic. The Catholic Church returned to prominence in the government with Petain viewing it as "his duty to protect what remained of France from the horrors of the Nazis" (West, 2016, p.24). He did this through a

clampdown on liberal ideals, freedom of speech and the press and through enforcing a 'traditional' lifestyle.

Bachrach, Fournier et al explain the Vichy government's downfall as beginning in November 1942, when Anglo-American troops landed and secured an armistice with Vichy forces in Morocco and Algeria. Hitler's retaliation for the Vichy troops' capitulation abroad was swift: "On November 11 Hitler ordered his troops in the occupied zone to cross the demarcation line and to take over all of France. The Vichy government survived, but only on German sufferance—a shadowy regime with little power and declining prestige" (Bachrach, Fournier et al, 2020). With the Vichy government operating directly under Nazi control, they began to engage in what West describes as "enthusiastic anti-Semitism" (2016, p.24). The same government that had attempted to protect the French people from the worst of the Nazi occupation were now engaging in full throated persecution of vulnerable minorities. West notes the historical roots of anti-Semitism in France: they had been "part of France's tradition until 1789, at which time Napoleon emancipated the Jewish population" (West, 2016, p.24). Taken in conjunction with the blatant anti-Semitism displayed during the Dreyfus Affair, France's brutal treatment of Jews during World War II is an interesting example of an undercurrent of pervasive distrust and selective 'othering' in French culture, something that becomes clearly relevant when looking at films of the New French Extremity. As West notes, this hatred and mistreatment was not only reserved for Jews: "the hatred was also spread to homosexuals and other minorities, many of whom were rounded up and deported" (2016, p.24).

A resistance had formed in the North of France during the Vichy government's subservience to Nazi rule. As West states: "While the resistance was passionate, they were disorganised and lacked the proper means of communication"(2016, p.24). They had a key supporter in Charles de Gaulle, the ex-Junior War Minister, who had "fled to Britain at the beginning of the war" (West, 2016, p.24), and "read his message of support for the resistance… over the BBC airwaves, which made its way to France" (West, 2016, p.24). He emerged as the "unchallenged spokesman for French resisters everywhere" (Bachrach, Fournier et al, 2020).

The resistance played a key part in the Nazi retreat of 1944. By the time the Allied forces stormed the beaches at Normandy on the 6th of June 1944, "the armed underground units had grown large enough to play a prominent role in the battles that followed—harassing the German forces and sabotaging railways and bridges" (Bachrach, Fournier et al, 2020). With an incremental German retreat underway, the resistance began capturing "town halls and prefectures from Vichy incumbents" (Bachrach, Fournier et al, 2020), gradually liberating areas of France and aiding the Allied advance. De Gaulle, having set up a provisional government, began sending "delegates into the liberated areas to ensure an orderly transfer of power" (Bachrach, Fournier et al, 2020). By August 26th, de Gaulle marched with a procession into Paris, declaring France liberated from the Nazis.

Post-War France

"No serenity was possible… The war was over, it remained on our hands like a great unwanted corpse, and there was no place on earth to bury it" (de Beauvoir, quoted in Jones, 1994, p.276).

The Fourth Republic had begun, and yet no peace could be found amongst the French people. Celebrations were ringing out across Europe, and some healing of the psychological scars of war had been found through the French resistance's folding into Allied forces marching on Berlin, yet the shadows of the Vichy governments adherence to the Nazi rule and their oppression of French people loomed large. Efforts were made to move on at a rapid rate, modernizing France to mask the horrors visited on its people. Kristin Ross addresses this in her book *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* (1995): "In France the state-led modernization drive was extraordinarily concerted… it was headlong, dramatic and breathless" (p.4). A modernization effort of this scale and intensity was a huge gamble for France's leaders to take. As Ross explains:

> The speed with which French society was transformed after the war from a rural, empire-oriented, Catholic country into a fully industrialized, decolonized, and urban one meant that things modernization needed - Educated middle managers… social sciences that followed scientific, functionalist models, or a workforce of ex-colonial laborers - burst onto a society that still cherished prewar outlooks with all the force, excitement, disruption, and horror of the genuinely new. (p.4)

This could have resulted in disenfranchisement amongst an already deeply traumatised French people, yet, as West explains, it partially worked: "It was a gamble

that, in large part, paid off, allowing the citizens of France to forget the atrocities that occurred on their soil in favour of the clean slate modernity offered" (2016, p.25).

Regardless of the optimism offered by modernization, France fractured again over the following 15 or so years. The Fourth Republic was marked by many shifts in power between the communist, socialist and Catholic parties. Politics moved "towards the center to make concessions for the desires of the Right and Leftist parties" (West, 2016, p.26). Charles de Gaulle "led the charge of the right" (West, 2016, p.26) and came to power in 1958, bringing about the start of the Fifth Republic.

France's withdrawal from Algeria in 1962 marked its "last hold on any claim to being a superpower that could stand among the world leaders" (West, 2016, p.26). Algeria's liberation followed a 7 year war during which French troops committed abject, Nazi-reminiscent horrors. Acknowledgement of these horrors was scarce, as was acknowledgement that French colonization likely led to the colonies recognizing only violence as a means of "control and assertion" (West, 2016, p.27). It was hard to stomach the idea that the French were inherently responsible not only for the acts of torture and violence they committed to quell uprisings during the Algerian War, but for the very violence displayed by the native people of that land. This appeared to have repercussions on French soil. Kristin Ross comments on the era: "it is… during these years that France distances itself from its (former) colonies, both within and without: this is the moment of the great cordoning off of the immigrants, their removal to the suburbs in a massive reworking of the social boundaries of Paris and the other large French cities" (1995, p.11). As the immigrants were pushed out from the cities the

middle-class withdrew “to their newly comfortable domestic interiors, to the electric kitchens, to the enclosure of private automobiles, to the interior of a new vision of conjugality and an ideology of happiness built around the new unit of upper-middle class consumption” (Ross, 1995, p.11).

An intriguing dichotomy emerged during this period. Immigrants may have been gradually moved out to the suburbs and rejected from the hearts of French cities, yet employers “actively sought workers from the colonies and former colonies to contribute to the man-power needed for postwar reconstruction” (West, 2016, p.27). France essentially needed what it wanted to distance itself from: an immigrant, colonial workforce. This workforce was then excluded from the fruits of its efforts. As Ross explains: “once modernization has run its course, then one is, quite simply, either French or not, modern or not: exclusion becomes racial or national in nature” (1995, p.12). Ross is equating modernity with inherent French-ness according to the middle-class city dwellers who rejected those who had helped to provide them with their new lifestyle. Of course, this exclusion had a large element of racial motivation to it. West describes the workers as “an integral part of postwar France” (206, p.27) yet points to Ross’ explanation of how France viewed the workers, with an interesting modern day parallel to be discussed later:

> The immigration that haunts the collective fantasies of the French today is the old accomplice to the accelerated growth of French society in the 1950s and 1960s. Without the labor of its ex-colonial immigrants, France would not have successfully ‘Americanized,’ nor competed in the post-war industrial contest. In the economic boom years… France made use of the colonies ‘one last time’ in order to resurrect

> and maintain its natural superiority over them - a superiority made all the more urgent by the ex-colonies' own newly acquired nationhood. (1995, p.9)

This gives rise to an idea of a pervading insecurity among the French middle-class. Those experiencing a new modern way of life at least partially created by those that they regarded as less-than-French must have experienced insecurity around their status, hence Ross' explanation of their use of colonial workers to reinforce their own superiority. The removal of said colonial workers from the cities was surely a way to enforce a distinct 'them and us' mentality, one that helped the inner-city dwellers feel secure in their new lives.

The 80s-90s and the Rise of the Right

> "The films of New French Extremity deal in the terrifying reality of the current and forgotten historical past of France, challenging the country and audiences around the world to awaken from a deep, shared slumber"
>
> (Subissati, 2016, p.6)

The election of Francois Mitterrand in 1981 marked a return of left-wing politics in France after years of right-wing control. As West states: "Mitterrand's tenure was marked by ups and downs and many lost elections, resulting in 'cohabitation governments' led by Jacques Chirac (1986-88), and Édouard Balladur (1993-95)" (2016, p.28). Chirac would become president in 1988, bringing the right back to power, with his tenure giving rise to huge controversies within France. The first one to note was the banning of the hijab in public schools, a controversy that started in September, 1989 "when three Muslim school girls were suspended for refusing to remove their

headscarves in class in a middle school in Creil, a suburb of Paris" (Diallo, 2018). The furore around this move escalated until "Education Minister Lionel Jospin issued a statement declaring that it was educators, and not the state, who had the responsibility of accepting or refusing the wearing of the hijab in classes on a case-by-case basis" (Diallo, 2018). For the next 15 years the debate continued until 2004, when the French parliament passed a law banning conspicuous religious symbols (such as the hijab) in public schools. This law was then built on in 2010 with a ban on "the wearing of the full-face veil anywhere in public" (Diallo, 2018). This overt and selective discrimination towards religious minorities that began under Chirac is a clear indicator of how prejudiced some elements of society can be in France.

The controversy around the hijab was an early indicator of a strong rise of right-wing sentiments in the years leading up to and throughout the 80s and 90s. These right-wing sentiments, as pointed out by Jackman and Volpert in their paper 'Conditions Favouring Parties of the Extreme Right in Western Europe' (1997), were often regarded as "a grass roots political response to insecurity" (P.504). Insecurity is an understandably common social theme throughout the history of France. A key part of French political history in this period was the rise of The National Front (now the National Rally). The party's relevant history is important to explain before the societal conditions of the time and the reason for the sentiments of the French people are examined. The National Front was "founded in 1972 by François Duprat and François Brigneau" (Ray, 2020), but, for the purposes of the time period in question, is "most commonly associated with Jean-Marie Le Pen, who was its leader from 1972 to 2011" (Ray, 2020). Michael Ray summarises the party's ideological history: "the party has

strongly supported French nationalism and controls on immigration, and it often has been accused of fostering xenophobia and anti-Semitism." (2020). The National Front began to achieve meaningful victories in 1984, "winning roughly 10 percent of the vote and 35 seats in the National Assembly" (Ray, 2020). In the 1988 presidential election, Le Pen experienced a relatively high level of success, "garnering almost 15 percent of the popular vote" (Ray, 2020). As Ray notes, his nature courted controversy: he was "one of the most divisive personalities in French politics throughout this period, and some of his public comments, which minimized the events of the Holocaust, led to fines and widespread criticism." (2020). Le Pen's success in the presidential election was repeated in 1995, when he again won around 15 percent of the vote. By this time the National Front was established as a mainstream-adjacent force in French politics: they "won mayoral elections in Toulon, Orange, and Marignane, and a former FN member was elected mayor of Nice" (Ray, 2020). Throughout this time, they continued to court the disaffected amongst the French population, placing themselves outside of the political establishment. Various minor successes and failures continued throughout the proceeding years until Le Pen surrendered leadership of the party to his daughter Marine Le Pen in 2011.

As noted, the National Front and Jean-Marie Le Pen were consistently accused of xenophobic leanings and often outright racist ideologies. Pierre Bréchon and Subrata Kumar Mitra, in their paper 'The National Front in France: The Emergence of an Extreme Right Protest Movement' (1992), equate the National Front with an extremist movement, noting the inherent threat posed by these kinds of groups: they offer a "challenge to liberal democratic societies because of their intransigent opposition to

tolerant pluralism" (1992, p.63). They do this by using and inflaming tensions around "unresolved issues of identity, ethnicity and religion" (Bréchon & Mitra, 1992, p.63). The furore around the Islamic Headscarf issue had "created a national stir and helped mobilize public opinion in favour of the National Front" (Bréchon & Mitra, 1992, p.66), which of course positioned itself in opposition to racial and ethnic minority groups such as the Muslims in question. They had "used the incident for political propaganda, arguing that the incident demonstrated a form of religious and cultural colonization of France that threatened her very identity with extinction" (Bréchon & Mitra, 1992, p.67). This type of language evokes ideas of the colonizer becoming the colonized, likely a natural anxiety for a French public who had seen their power on the world stage decline through decolonization. The thought of 'occupation', an idea that the National Front seemed to stoke, was, rightly or wrongly, greatly concerning to a portion of the French public. Bréchon and Mitra point out that, in the National Front's view, "since immigration was the root cause of these problems… most immigrants should be sent back to where they came from" (1992, p.67).

The societal conditions of France during these years must now be examined to ascertain how the National Front appealed to people, and what subsets of society they targeted. As discussed, France had undergone drastic modernisation in the post-war decades. As Jackman and Volpert note: "while rapid economic growth and the introduction of new technologies may benefit the large majority, it marginalizes a minority both economically and socially in the process" (1997, p.504). This minority can be assumed to predominantly include ex-colonial immigrant-founded communities pushed out to the fringes of the major power centres of France. Whilst these people

experienced their own kind of alienation and discrimination, modernization was disenfranchising another group, the sorts of people that right-wing parties could build their appeal on. Jackman and Volpert reference Hans George Betz's 1990 essay 'Politics of Resentment: Right-Wing Radicalism in West Germany', which describes disenfranchisement in West German society of the time, an issue that Jackman and Volpert view as equivalent to the France of the time. Betz is quoted as follows:

> Contemporary societies' demands for flexibility and mobility have led to the fragmentation and decomposition of traditional milieus and social institutions while furthering tendencies towards the individualization of life's chances and life's misfortunes... [The marginalized include] young people, unskilled or semiskilled low income workers, elderly people drawing small pensions, farmers fearing economic and social downward mobility, and lower level employees. (1990, p.47-48)

The appeal of right-wing politics to a white disenfranchised lower class is well documented throughout recent history; see Donald Trump's victories amongst non-college educated white voters throughout the USA for example. The National Front's aforementioned demonisation and othering of the immigrant (non-white) community gave the (white) un/semiskilled and poor, left behind by the advent of modernity, a scapegoat to blame their troubles on. As Jackman and Volpert note: "The ensuing social isolation is said to have made these segments of society more susceptible to new collective identities and simple solutions such as those offered by extreme right-wing ideologies or organizations that claim to reaffirm traditional values" (1997, pp.504-505). Parties such as the National Front are "distinguished by their neo-fascist and anti-system stances, which in recent years have typically centred on immigrants

and foreign workers" (1997, P.507). It is easy to see how victims of a modern France, left behind by a changing system, could flock to a party such as the National Front.

It is here that the concept of 'the enemy within' can be explored as a contemporary anxiety for white working class people in modern France. The National Front stoked growing right-wing fears of immigrants living in France, allowing those who followed the party to 'other' those who appear different to them. This fear of 'occupation' by immigrants and a misfocused sense of a changing France, likely shifting more due to modernization rather than immigration, led to demonisation and a strong cultural divide between two disadvantaged segments of French society.

In 2005, a violent period of unrest began in the suburbs, further stoking this divide. This unrest was encouraged by "evidence of police brutality as well as conservative discourse" (West, 2016, P.29). Angelique Chrisafis, in her *The Guardian* article ''Nothing's changed': 10 years after French riots, banlieues remain in crisis', notes the reasons for the conditions amongst banlieue communities that led to rioting. She explains the community's sense of "isolation of being hemmed in by motorways… the feeling of abandonment by the state… the "stigmatisation and discrimination" against people who live there" (2015). Indeed, "the suburbs had been the site of multiple riots and political unrest for several decades, but the two-year period beginning in 2005, marked its most violent and consistent outbursts" (West,2016, p.29). While the conservative discourse that West mentions has been explained earlier in this chapter, her note on police brutality needs some more elaboration as yet another example of a 'them and us' mentality seen in evidence throughout key events in French history. The

riots are generally accepted to have started because of the deaths of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, two youths from Clichy-sous-Bois, an isolated banlieue of Paris. Aged 15 and 17 respectively, they "had been playing in a football match and were walking home for the evening Ramadan meal. When a police van, which had been called to a local building site, crossed their path, they ran. An inquiry concluded that they had not committed any crime, but had fled simply because they had seen police." (Chrisafis, 2015). They hid in an electricity substation and were "killed by tens of thousands of volts" (Chrisafis, 2015).

The reason for the two boys immediately running at the sight of the police should be examined in a wider context. In the early 2000s, deaths of young people at the hands of French police had begun to be well publicised, and yet it would be many years before the issue would be governmentally accepted and acknowledged. In fact, the increase in police brutality was likely a by-product of future president Nicholas Sarkozy's 2002 'war on delinquency'. As interior minister, he enacted this plan, "which focused French security policy mainly on the popular districts of the banlieues. This policy identified a main internal threat to the country: the popular neighbourhood youngsters, who became – in spite of themselves – the main face of fear in France" (Meziane, 2013). As Meziane goes on to explain, in his article 'Stolen Lives: A new generation rises up against French police violence' (2013): "The French police appears to devise its law enforcement policies in these neighbourhoods in terms of principles of war and territorial conquest. A real policy of harassment was implemented by the police towards the youth, worsening an already wide fracture between the Police and the communities". With these types of adversarial policing tactics in play, backed by

the government, it is easy to see why two disadvantaged youths would flee to their eventual deaths.

Sarkozy eventually ascended to the presidency in 2007, promoting "with increasing menace… his 'path of brutality', which his opponents viewed as viciously unnecessary, socially conservative reform" (West, 2016, P.29). Sarkozy's rise to president was again fraught with socially motivated violence: "the streets of Paris and its suburbs were the site of deadly riots, pitting young people from immigrant families against the police, marring Paris' beatific façade and tourist trade" (West, 2016, P.29). The results of these continuous riots were clear, while they "stemmed from police violence" (West, 2016, P.29), they resulted in "Sarkozy's zero-tolerance policy, creating a state of fear and panic" (West, 2016, P.29). Amongst the opponents to Sarkozy and his policy platforms was *La haine* (1995) filmmaker Mathieu Kassovitz, who, in 2005, had written an open letter (reproduced and referenced from West's book) to the then interior minister. Several striking moments stand out in this letter, specifically his characterisation of Sarkozy's antipathy to the banlieue-type communities. Kassovitz writes:

> Sarkozy does not like this community. He wants to get rid of these 'punks' with high-pressure water hoses, and he shouts it loud and clear right in the middle of a 'hot' neighbourhood at 11 in the evening. The response is in the streets. 'Zero tolerance' works both ways. It is intolerable that a politician should allow himself to upset a situation made tense by years of ignorance and injustice, and openly threaten an entire segment of the French population (West, 2016, P.29).

The release of the ‘final’ New French Extremity film *Martyrs* (2008) marks the conclusion of the French history relevant to this piece. Sarkozy was in power, and would remain so until 2012, when left-wing politician François Hollande took the presidency. As West notes, the remnants of the great divide in France have still not healed: there remain “continued clashes between the police and the people” (2016, P.30) with terror attacks on French soil marking key events in more recent history. These are significant events worth exploring, but they lie outside the timeframe relevant to New French Extremity films, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: New French Extremity

"The films of New French Extremity are startling, unforgettable, troubling, and deeply French"

(Subissati, 2016, p.6)

New French Extremity (or The New Wave of French Extremity) is a movement of ultra-violent, socially conscious French films released from the early 90s to the late 2000s. As Subissati notes in the above quote: New French Extremity is often regarded as a product of France, the inevitable product of a country plagued by wars, civil unrest and bloody revolutions, whose soil is saturated with blood from hundreds of years of violence.

New French Extremity lacks the breadth of critical writing and analysis that other film movements benefit from, perhaps due to it being relatively recent. As such, this chapter will mainly draw on the only substantial work: Alexandra West's *Films of the New French Extremity: Visceral Horror and National Identity* (2016). It will also resort to books such as Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall's edited collection *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe* (2011), Stuart Willis' *The New Flesh: 21st Century Horror Films A-Z, Volume 1* (2015) and Phil Russell's *Beyond the Darkness: Cult, Horror, and Extreme Cinema* (2012). Aside from West's in-depth work and mentions in other books, the majority of other sources on New French Extremity are journal and online articles. The key ones to mention include Matt Smith's unfinished (the expected part three never materialised) series 'Confronting Mortality: "The New French Extremity",

the *Hostel* Films and Outdated Terminology' (2011) and Matt Armitage's 'Method Behind the Madness: New French Extremity' (2018).

For the sake of ease of reading, following their first mention, the English film titles will be used throughout this chapter.

A History of New French Extremity

"the most brilliant and dangerous nation… an object of admiration, hatred, pity or terror but never indifference"

(Alexis de Tocqueville on France. Elster. 2011. P.185)

Emerging during a period of unrest in the mid/late -1990s, New French Extremity damned the society of the time and captured the anxieties, fears and issues prevalent in French culture. As West explains of the conditions that resulted in such a viciously relevant movement: "From their demands of revolution in the 18th century to 1968 to 2005, France has failed to create change consistently demanded by its people. The government's use of fear caused its people to resort to anarchy, constantly destabilizing the country. The auteurs of New French Extremity may not offer solutions for which the masses have clamoured, but they offer a vision of France, one that has not forgotten its history but confronts it" (2016, P.31).

Generally accepted as the clearest early examples of New French Extremity are Philippe Grandrieux's *Sombre* (1998), François Ozon's *Les amants criminels* (*Criminal Lovers*, 1999), Catherine Breillat's *Romance* and, perhaps most notably, Gaspar Noé's

Seul contre tous (*I Stand Alone*, 1998). Noé's film, following a butcher's mental breakdown and subsequent violent outbursts, acts as a sequel to his short film *Carne* (1991), perhaps the earliest example of a film in the New French Extremity movement. *Carne* too focuses on the butcher's downward spiral and his lashing out against the society that has disadvantaged him. Noé's general influence on the movement is clear, and, as West notes, it was his second feature film that genuinely thrust the movement towards the mainstream: "it would come to a head with *Baise-Moi* (2000) and *Irreversible* (2002), both of which ignited national, and even international debate" (2016, p.43).

The years of 2000-2002 would see the release of many other films associated with the movement, notably Bertrand Bonello's *Le pornographe* (*The Pornographer*, 2001), Claire Denis' *Trouble Every Day* (2001), Olivier Assayas' *Demonlover* (2002) and Marina de Van's *Dans ma peau* (*In My Skin,* 2002).

These films led to 2003, when the first of the 'Fab Five' was released: Alexandre Aja's *Haute Tension* (*High Tension*), which marked a shift from more outwardly 'arthouse' films with horror elements to more purely focused horror films with arthouse sympathies. The following five years would see 'Fab Five' quintet completed with David Moreau and Xavier Palud's *Ils* (*Them*, 2006), Xavier Gens' *Frontière(s)* (*Frontier(s)*, 2007), Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury's *À l'intérieur* (*Inside*, 2007) and Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs* (2008), which marked the zenith, and the end of the main phase of New French Extremity. The 'Fab Five' are often regarded as some of the most

important films in the movement, and as such will form a large part of this chapter's analytical work.

The codification of the movement came in 2004, with James Quandt's rather belittling *Artforum* article 'Flesh & Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema'. In it Quandt states: "The critic truffle-snuffing for trends might call it the New French Extremity, this recent tendency to the wilfully transgressive" (2004, P.126). Quandt's codification of the movement has been derided by academics and online commentators as overly dismissive to the films he discussed in his original article. Yet, regardless of his personal antipathy towards the works discussed, notably Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* (2003), his article coined the term New French Extremity, and likely was a main step in allowing films of the era and afterwards to be discussed under this singular umbrella.

Quandt's opinions on the movement, its genesis, its height and its end, remain unmoved, as demonstrated in his 2016 *Toronto International Film Festival* article: '12 Years Later, The New French Extremity is Still Pissing People Off'. In this article, he responds to his critics in a similarly dismissive way to how he responds to the movement he helped to codify.

> What, then, was the New French Extremity: a manifestation of cultural and political impasse, an anxious reaction to fin de siècle and the late capitalist condition the French call précaire; a short-lived resurgence of the violational tradition of French culture… the wilful imposition of thematic pattern on a disparate and disconnected group of films? In the waning days of the phenomenon, the answer appears no

clearer, but many of its films have quickly come to look like desperate artifacts. (Quandt, 2016).

Characteristics of New French Extremity Films

James Quandt's antipathy to the movement led to a crudely reductionist passage in his first article on the subject, one that dismissively summarises the most typically offensive characteristics of New French Extremity films:

> a cinema… 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. Images and subjects once the provenance of splatter films, exploitation flicks, and porn-gang rapes, bashings and slashings and blindings, hard-ons and vulvas, cannibalism, sadomasochism and incest, fucking and fisting, sluices of cum and gore proliferate in the high-art environs of a national cinema whose provocations have historically been formal, political, or philosophical (2004, P.126).

This statement essentially describes New French Extremity as encroaching on a cinema he believes to be above them. What Quandt fails to grasp is that less has changed in French cinema than he believes. He notes that French cinema has typically been a "national cinema whose provocations have historically been formal, political, or philosophical" (2004, p.126). This remains true, but the method of delivery for formal, political and philosophical provocation shifted with New French Extremity, it became more viscerally provocative, more violent, bloody, sexualized, yet as these following notes will show, one of the key characteristics of virtually all the films in New French Extremity is their cultural, political, historical or philosophical provocations.

As previously noted, Gaspar Noé's influence on the movement is clear, and his films *Carne, I Stand Alone* and *Irreversible* all hold commonly identifiable characteristics: "These three films… ask the questions: Who lives and exists on the outskirts of society? How did they get there? And what happens when they take action against that society?" (West, p.46). These would all be elements that would resurface at the height of New French Extremity with the 'Fab Five'. West notes that "the cinema of Noé is one of confrontation and disruption where the status quo is continually and violently challenged" (2016, p.46). This common theme of a violent disruption of normality would resurface throughout the 'Fab Five' and various other New French Extremity films, especially those relying on home invasion narratives as the 'Fab Five' do.

The intertwining of sex and violence is a key characteristic of a certain subset of films within New French Extremity. These include Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi's brutal rape-revenge film *Baise-Moi* (2000), which literally translates to "Fuck Me" or "Rape Me", *Irreversible*, *Demonlover*, *Trouble Every Day* and *Twentynine Palms*. This intertwining of sex and violence is a characteristic notably absent from the key films of the movement: the 'Fab Five', which virtually omit overt notions of sex. Considering extreme cinema's typical use of intertwined violence and sex to shock, as seen in *I Spit on Your Grave/Day Of The Woman* (1978), *Srpski film* (*A Serbian Film*, 2010) and countless other examples, it is an interesting omission to make for five films generally considered to be near the pinnacle of extreme cinema. The early, outwardly arthouse, films in the movement often featured "minimal plot" (Armitage, 2018). In fact, films such as *Demonlover* feature an actively devolving plot structure, which somewhat loses its own story at a point in the third act.

With regard to the 'Fab Five', their first commonality is their home invasion narratives. Each film is based, to varying degrees, around this structure, harking back to Noé's reliance on a disruption of normality (or seeming normality in *Martyrs* and *Frontier(s)*), and what it does to the lead characters. On the subject of lead characters, all of the 'Fab Five' films, and a vast majority of New French Extremity works, feature women in the main roles.

In looking at notable characteristics of the movement as a whole, it is important to note the obvious use of unflinching, often shocking, violence in the horror-based titles. The main element in what classes these films as 'extreme', their depictions of torture, murder, dismemberment and various other acts is taken to new heights in films such as *Martyrs*. As noted by Quandt, the films in the movement are bonded by their transgressiveness, one of their "key hallmarks" (Armitage, 2018). Matt Armitage in fact summarises New French Extremity best, ignoring the dismissive analysis of Quandt and distilling the essence of the movement: "Its true nature is in an uneasy nexus between arthouse, body horror, slasher and exploitation films" (2018).

The Forgotten Violence of France's Past

Alexandra West, having discussed the history of violence on French soil, raises "Slovenian Marxist philosopher" (2016, p.31) Slavoj Žižek's writings on violence "as a means of understanding public consciousness" (West, 2016, p.31). He describes an "endorsement of emancipatory violence" (Žižek, 2008, p.174) in society, a type of violence that can be used "as a means of understanding public consciousness" (West, 2016, p.31). Essentially, by using violent outbursts throughout French history (The French Revolution, the riots of 2005 etc), he is describing a violence that "seemed to have no lasting impact but that of disruption" (West, 2016, p.31). Geoff Boucher describes Žižek's noting of "the redemptive violence of those who have nothing left to lose" (2009, p.425). This describes the disenfranchised in France lashing out through essentially the only means available to them, regardless of the consequences of their actions, which are sadly likely to only perpetuate the stigma around lower-class people and in turn increase the systemic persecutions levelled against them.

Žižek's writings invoke "German philosopher Walter Benjamin, who wrote of 'divine' and 'mythic' violence in his essay 'Critique of Violence'" (West, 2016, p.31). Benjamin's 1921 essay is reproduced in *Walter Benjamin: 1913-1926 v. 1: Selected Writings* (1996). West summarises his points in a concise and useful way, noting that he "identified 'mythic' violence as state-founding violence which establishes and conserves laws, while 'divine' violence breaks and disrupts the cycle of violence used to maintain order" (2016, p.31). Based on these definitions it is possible to describe the Paris riots of 2005 for example as 'divine' violence, a pushback against the 'mythic' violence perpetrated by the police and ruling classes. Žižek works with these

definitions to further describe 'divine' violence: "divine violence serves no means, not even that of punishing the culprits and thus re-establishing the equilibrium of justice. It is a sign of the injustice of the world, of the world being ethically 'out of joint'" (2008, pp.199-200). As West notes: "this notion of 'divine' violence can be applied throughout French history and extends to New French Extremity, which can be seen as artistic representation of the idea" (2016, p.31).

West describes New French Extremity as a movement which "consistently and continually brings to light that which has been repressed and which the government feels is best forgotten" (2016, p.31). It acts as an angry rejection of the Quandt (and other critics)-held idea that French art must be provocative in a less outwardly brutal way; it is "a demarcation in French cinema" (West, 2016, p.31). It can say what it has to say in a different way to the status quo of French cinema; it is deliberately uncomfortable, deliberately upsetting that which has come to be expected as standard. As West noted, the films do this in the commentary they deliver as much as the way in which they deliver said commentary. They are acting as an exposé: they "merge history with the present" (West, 2016, P.31), reinvigorating and reinforcing the genuinely uncomfortable idea that "violence in France has always been a given, not an anomaly" (West, 2016, p.31).

Indeed, in this way, New French Extremity could be interpreted as an artistic expression of a form of violence as catharsis. It is directly confronting viewers, and most specifically French viewers, with the historically founded idea of French violence as a long-held national typicality. Barring *High Tension*, all of the 'Fab Five' films

achieved their highest box office figures in their home country (according to boxofficemojo.com), suggesting that there was certainly a receptive audience for them. Through the direct confrontation that they offer, the films in the movement could perhaps be seen as encouraging an acceptance of French violence, an understanding and comprehension of that which the government has attempted to ensure that society forgets. Metin Colak, in his conference paper 'The New Extremism: Representation of Violence in the New French Extremism' (2011) discusses the works of "cultural critics Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson" (p.492), who he describes as noting "that the main characteristics of contemporary society are crisis, violence, chaos and uncertainty" (p.492). These types of characteristics are best expressed "in visual arts, particularly in cinema" (Colak, 2011, p.492). Colak suggests that the general critical consensus is that "the new zeitgeist is a visual and cinematographic age. In this context, cinema [has] surpassed all other forms of art in reflecting contemporary social crisis, violence, chaos and uncertainty" (2011, p.492). If cinema is predominant mode of expression for reflecting cultural issues, then a movement such as New French Extremity is perhaps best suited to reflect France's history of violence, it has produced its own "suitable film language, a film style that… [is] severe, tough, aggressive and irritating" (Colak, 2011, p.498). It is criticising a modern society, specifically the governmental class, for their preference that France forgets its past. Through its embrace of an 'extreme' filmic language, it is showing us "that the radical criticism of the contemporary societies could only be possible within a new *avant garde* language" (Colak, 2011, p.498). It is necessarily violent to deliver its point.

In summary, New French Extremity is an artistic expression of 'divine' violence, a necessary and specific outcry against a world "ethically 'out of joint'" (Žižek, 2008, P.200). It expresses itself through a new language, radically different to the majority of the past of French arthouse and underground cinema, a type of filmic language that is designed to provoke and render its audience uncomfortable. It is confrontational with its message, a message designed to re-accustom its audience with French history, provoking the notion that violence is almost a historical tradition in France.

Noé, the 'Fab Five', Class Division and the Fringes of Society

Gaspar Noé's films pose questions that would echo throughout many subsequent films in the movement. These aforementioned questions can now be examined in more detail: "Who lives and exists on the outskirts of society? How did they get there? And what happens when they take action against that society?" (West, 2016, p.46). In *Carne*, the character of The Butcher takes misguided revenge for a non-existent sexual assault on his daughter by attacking an innocent man. He is sent to jail, released, works a job in a bar, loses his apartment, his daughter to an institution and begins a "carnal relationship with the female owner of the bar, who supports them both" (West, 2016, p.46). The Butcher acts as an unreliable narrator and is "content to blame the problems of the world on anyone outside of himself, but fails to accept or see his own faults" (West, 2016, p.46). *I Stand Alone*, due to funding issues, did not release until seven years after *Carne*, despite the strong reception Noé's short had received. Through *Carne* and the short pieces he worked on leading up to *I Stand Alone* Noé had "developed an original, stylized, synthesized, shocking film language in which he

pushes the audience to the limit" (Colak, 2011, P.494), beginning to demonstrate the visual elements that would come to be a hallmark of the films in the movement.

The social commentary in *I Stand Alone* is perhaps even stronger than in *Carne*. The film again follows The Butcher (Philippe Nahon reprises his role), who, now "separated from his beloved daughter… finds himself prowling the city streets, his increasing sense of isolation detailed in the character's omnipresent voiceover" (Hickin, 2011, p.120). *I Stand Alone* is a scathing indictment of French society, highlighting the isolation and desperateness of those who find themselves disadvantaged. In fact, as Noé stated at the Edinburgh Festival, "A lot of people ask me if this is a racist movie, and I say, yes, it's an anti-French movie" (Spencer, 1999). He also stated that, as well as to "dishonour France" (Spencer, 1999) and the societal/structural issues within France, *I Stand Alone* was made "to depict the France I see every day, a France that looks more like the country described in Hugo, Zola, Henri Charriere or in any other documentary about Vichy, than the vision of France depicted in the films that invade my TV screen, made by more civilised film-makers" (Spencer, 1999). *I Stand Alone*'s message is structural, commenting on the systemic failure, throughout many administrations to arrest the decline and disenfranchisement of France's lower classes. Noé is speaking out against entrenched structural and societal issues based in a right-wing ideology that has become "embedded in the fabric of France" (West, 2016, p.48) despite the history of hardship that the country has faced at the hands of right-wing aggressors and rulers. As West explains, "*I Stand Alone* has been criticized for homophobic and racist content, but as Noé described, his film is racist against France, a country which turned on immigrant and homosexual citizens, among others, in order to appease a right-wing

fascist agenda that became a part of everyday life during the Nazi occupation" (2016, p.48). Noé makes it clear that he does not endorse his protagonist's horrendous actions, despite understanding The Butcher's plight: "The liberal agenda behind Noe's deadpan irony is betrayed, however, by the skill with which he turns his monstrous aggressor into a pathetic victim at the film's finish" (Spencer, 1999). Demonstrated through 'uncivilised', anti-society acts such as incest, murder and the beating of a pregnant woman, Noé is depicting "a man on whom society has given up and who, in turn has given up on society" (West, 2016, p.48). The Butcher becomes "Noe's embodiment of the far-right hatred and bigotry that he saw in a France divided by racial tension and growing support for the Front National" (Armitage, 2018). His actions are used by Noé to comment on said society and the detachment his character feels from it: they become a "criticism of society's hand in the actions of the individual" (West, 2016, p.48). Society becomes responsible for the actions of an individual due to the systemic disadvantages that individual faces. Noé "mixes the brutality of one man against the brutality of society, challenging his audience to empathize while remaining critical of his actions" (West, 2016, p.50), encouraging his audience to see the reasons behind the brutality.

A further note worth making with regard to *I Stand Alone* concerns the way Noé's use of locations betrays his disdain for the way France is often depicted onscreen. The film takes place in an array of rundown apartments, dingy bars and almost post-apocalyptic looking street settings. It consistently displays "images of downtrodden humanity, the precise iconography of cruddy working-class interiors (the wallpaper and kitschy art, the dirty mirrors and naked light fixtures)" (Rosenbaum, 2019), building its own

specific world. This is the world “In the bowels of France” as the film’s tagline states. Noé is dispelling notions of Paris as the ‘city of love’ as The Butcher wanders between old acquaintances trying to find a job, only to be turned away. Perhaps the key location is the banlieue outside Lille that a large portion of the film takes place in. It is industrial and brutal in its construction and rundown in condition, quite literally on the fringes of a stereotypically beautiful French city. That is not the world Noé wants to show. He is showing the viewer that “the streets of the modern metropolis are dark, gloomy, full of pain, cruelty” (Colak, 2011, p.495). He wants to force his audience to dispel stereotypes around France and reconcile with the conditions in which those on the fringes of society must exist.

Noé’s next film, 2002’s *Irreversible*, “would catapult the director into the international spotlight” (West, 2016, p.50). Known for its backwards narrative, nine-minute anal rape sequence and the film’s violent opening (narrative ending), *Irreversible* was, and is, “often condemned as excessive and unnecessary” (Armitage, 2018). As Armitage notes however, “this view seems to miss the point” (2018). Matt Smith explains why Noé would likely view *Irreversible*’s rape scene as a necessary evil: “Noe is earnest in his approach, open and honest, and he got backlash for it. The rape itself is horrific because rape is supposed to be horrific. The lingering camera… is a commentary on the sexualization of rape scenes in cinema, not just in revenge films, but across all genre boundaries” (2011). It is perhaps his way of re-centring perceptions of a vile act, often understated or glossed over in film, a rebuke to a culture he perceives as minimising the impact of acts such as this. Indeed, as Armitage points out, *Irreversible* “bring[s] into harsh focus an often-ignored part of modern urban French life in contemporary

French cinema. There has been a steady rise in rape culture in the “banlieues”: low-income housing projects in suburban areas of large cities” (2018). The rape’s setting in an underpass adds to this aspect of Noé’s message, that under the surface and at the fringes of a seemingly functioning and happy society, genuine horrors occur, horrors that the society as a whole would prefer to ignore. This is best represented by the citizen who walks down the underpass stares during the rape and, instead of trying to help or calling the police, he simply turns around and walks back out.

The rape scene in *Irreversible* ties into a typical stylistic characteristic of New French Extremity: its unflinching nature. Noé’s refusal to cut away from the violence, instead choosing to let his camera rest for once during an otherwise chaotically shot film, “extends… [your] discomfort, revels in it, until you the viewer are forced to question why you are watching it and whether you should be” (Armitage, 2018). As Armitage states: “Violent horrible things happen every day and we tend to look away then also” (2018). Noé, and those who would follow him, prefer to directly confront their audiences with what they perceive as necessary to see in order to most effectively deliver their message.

An interesting note to make on these three of Noé’s films is the fact that they all feature misguided vengeance. In *Carne* and *I Stand* Alone, The Butcher firstly attacks the wrong person for the non-existent rape of his daughter, then lashes out (mainly verbally) at anyone he perceives as having wronged him when his true enemy is himself/the society that has made him that way. In *Irreversible*, Marcus and Pierre, searching for Alex’s rapist, attack the wrong man, culminating in Pierre brutally beating

his head in with a fire extinguisher. These misguided acts of vengeance would hold some form of commonality with the concept of 'divine' violence. They in essence serve no purpose other than that of disruption, they do not punish any perpetrators, they simply become violent reactions against a situation, outbursts against the world. Throughout *Irreversible* (viewed chronologically), until the fire extinguisher scene, Pierre is the incorruptible character, the calming influence on the explosive Marcus, reeling from the attack on his girlfriend. Pierre's eventual succumbing to violence in the brutal murder of an innocent man is Noé's depiction of "the corruption of the incorruptible" (West, 2016, P.54). He exists in a world that will not allow him to do right, no matter how hard he tries, and he is eventually reduced to a violent outburst that will condemn him. Again, Noé is using the concept of misguided revenge throughout his early films to illustrate a broken society, one where even the most decent of men (Pierre) are reduced to the level of pointless violence and outbursts of rage more reminiscent of The Butcher's character. It is Noé's world that does this to them, or Noé's perception of our real world, a Paris (and indeed France) that is inhospitable, "racist and homophobic" (West, 2016, P.55) and degrading to the people who live on the edge of society.

Armitage makes an interesting point to link Noé's work with the later New French Extremity films, tying them all back to James Quandt: "Whilst Quandt saw these early films as a decline in the quality of film art in France and a needless vogue for shock tactics, what unites them is a message about the ugliness of modern society, and the realities of existence in modern-day France" (2018). This note links Noé's early examples of New French Extremity to the films generally considered its peak, the 'Fab

Five', some of which display threads that can clearly be tied back to Noé's socially conscious filmmaking. This is most evident in Xavier Gens' *Frontier(s)*.

Frontier(s) "opens with footage of riots in the Paris suburbs in response to the election of an extreme right-wing candidate. It then transitions from the frying pan into the fire, as four hoodlums flee the authorities for the countryside and wind up in an inn operated by cannibalistic neo-Nazis" (Tobias, 2008). The footage opening *Frontier(s)* is from the real-life 2005 Paris riots, immediately establishing an undercurrent of threat to the four minority characters, who would have faced Sarkozy-led discrimination during this era. It is interesting to theorise that, since France came relatively close to electing an extreme-right candidate in 2002 with Jean-Marie Le Pen, *Frontier(s)* posits the banlieue-centred reaction to this event if it had come to pass. Gens spoke to this idea in a *Rue Morgue* piece by Jason Lapeyre:

> *Frontier(s)* is about the evolution of the extreme right in France. In 2002, during the presidential elections, Jean-Marie Le Pen made it to the second round of voting for president, and that was the most fear I ever felt in my life. I wanted to translate that fear into *Frontier(s)*… The French knew the danger [Le Pen] represents, and everybody voted against him because when you see representatives on the extreme right making it to the second round of the presidential election, that's really frightening to everybody. You cannot accept that as truth. (2009, pp.20-21)

Gens' mission to carry his own fear into *Frontier(s)* is immediately achieved by grounding his story in a divided France, torn apart by the victory of the right-wing ideas he feared. He compounds this by focusing his story through four minority characters, those in the most danger.

Frontier(s) involves a set of unlikeable characters coming face to face with an almost unimaginable horror in the French countryside. The young criminals in the film could be pictured as a stereotype of banlieue residents; coarse and unpleasant. Gens' film allows them to escape their societal confinement on the edges of the city, rising up as a part of a 'divine' violence-like protest and emancipating themselves from their surroundings, then using their need to flee criminal punishment as an excuse to escape their social/structural imprisonment. The fact that they are swiftly met by a Neo-Nazi family of cannibals opens the door for a close analysis of the film's social commentary. The family are clearly a leftover of the occupation, perhaps representing West's previously noted statement on how "a right-wing fascist agenda that became a part of everyday life during the Nazi occupation" (2016, P.48) still festers under the surface of political discourse in France. The main characters who end up at the family home are the exact sorts of people that the Nazis would be prejudiced against, young Muslims. Gens depiction of this divide, and the horrendous violence it leads to, perhaps acts as his commentary on modern French society. Modern France is multicultural and multi-ethnic, and yet there remains an undercurrent of occupation-born ideas, heavily prejudiced against this multiculturalism. The more that the disadvantaged attempt to rise up and demand an equal seat at the table, the more the entrenched discriminators will push back on them. In *Frontier(s)* this is taken to a literal extreme with its highly metaphorical plot.

Gens' film acts as one of three films associated with the movement (with *Calvaire* (2004) and *Sheitan* (2006)) that explore "the forgotten space between departures and destinations, where travellers are in limbo. Their focus is on the excruciating journey

between expectation and reality, the real and imagined" (West, 2016, P.124). As West states: "the travelers in these films are searching for something new and are met by the deteriorating minds of the forgotten towns, cultures and politics" (2016, P.124). The Muslim youths in *Frontier(s)* are looking to escape the police and, in essence, escape the general hardships of their disadvantaged lives, and yet, in their escape, they run into something far worse. Gens removes his characters from one place that they are unsafe in and places them in even more unfamiliar territory. In doing so he plays into the common horror trope of examining "the fears surrounding the unknown elements that exist outside of the urban landscape" (West, 2016, P.132). As West notes however, Gens' socially conscious filmmaking distorts this common trope: "In *Weekend* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, the 'othered' lower-classes are cannibalistic antagonists who brutalize the seemingly normal and relatable protagonists. In Gens's film, the classically mobile classes (law enforcement, white rural-Nazis) prey on the 'undesirables', represented by Yasmine and her friends, who are young and Muslim" (2016, P.133). Through this realignment of audience sympathies and a new focus on a different type of lower-class protagonists, Gens is refocusing his film, directing sharp criticism against those he considers to be true threats to the lower-class he sympathises with. As West describes: "Gens casts a critical eye on politicians like Le Pen and Sarkozy, who have more in common with the Geislers than the protagonists" (2016, P.133). Gens' implied criticism of politicians like Sarkozy and Le Pen manifests as his characters are forced into their journeying narrative predominantly because of the "actions of law enforcement and the government" (West, 2016, P.134). He also emphasises the point that these characters can never truly feel safe in France. As previously noted, they escape one situation

(persecution by the state) to find themselves assaulted by vicious remnants of the occupation. Yasmine's eventual escape from the family is no cause for celebration, as she is immediately confronted by police. She has nowhere to go in Gens' vision of modern France. She confronts two mirrored societies: the macrocosm of modern France with its newly elected extreme-right president and the microcosm of the Geisler farm with its Nazi patriarch. This is Gens' way of relating the events on the farm to the wider country, their hierarchical structures lead back to a similar place, an extreme right figure prejudiced against people of Yasmine's origin. West seems to partially disagree with the notion that Gens is quite this damning of modern France, noting that the film's ending "does not reveal whether the world is indeed a safe place for the young Muslim woman and her unborn child" (2016, P.134). It would be prudent to point out, however, that the entirety of the film has been leading the audience to believe that Yasmine and her friends are unable to find any form of shelter or safety. The ending seems to fit in with this. She is likely to be arrested and eventually returned to her socially disadvantaged situation in the banlieues, Gens' way of closing the circle on his plot and relating to his viewer that nothing will ever work out for Yasmine, and the real-life people she represents, damned to live at the fringes of society unless something drastic changes.

Frontier(s) holds an interesting parallel with the Dreyfus Affair and the idea of an enemy within. Certain elements of French society at the turn of the 20th century perceived this hidden enemy to be Jews. In the modern era, these fears (often born from right-wing insecurities or racism) manifest in a demonisation of immigrant-founded communities, i.e: the main characters in *Frontier(s)*. The film involves a

refocusing of this idea however, if elements of French society view Muslim-French people as an enemy in their country, *Frontier(s)* demonstrates an opinion that the true hidden enemy in French society is the remnants of genuinely extreme right-wing thought, manifested in the rural Nazi family. Just as the Dreyfus Affair involved an unjust persecution and exposed Anti-Semitic actors in France at the time, *Frontier(s)* endeavours to expose what the filmmakers believe to be the true danger in modern France, and it is not the young Muslims that lead the film.

Adam Gopnik's remark on the blatant discrimination against Alfred Dreyfus taking place in Paris, "a city that was the pride and pilothouse of civic rationalism" (2009), brings up the potential for comparison with the modern day. The reviling of Dreyfus was led by right-wing factions and figures such as the anti-Semitic author Édouard Drumont, "whose book *Jewish France* had already, in the eighteen-eighties, been a huge success" (Gopnik, 2009). His work was anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic, as Gopnik describes: "In a tone familiar from today's anti-Muslim polemics, and using the usual toxic cocktail of absurdly inflated numbers, hysterical overstatement, and guilt by association… Drumont managed to convince readers that France's real crisis was the decline of Christianity" (2009). This vein of antisemitism in France is seen to be very much alive when examining the rise of Jean-Marie Le Pen. Catherine Fieschi's extensive piece: 'Muslims and the secular city: How right-wing populists shape the French debate over Islam' (2020), notes how "France, like Germany, has a strong intellectual far-right tradition with deep anti-Semitic roots. There is a tradition from which the far-right and right-wing populists can draw from to develop a discriminatory discourse". She goes on to explain how Le Pen drew from this, initially keeping his far-

right rhetoric “narrowly fixated on France’s Jewish population” (Fieschi, 2020). Indeed, his “most controversial statements were anti-Semitic not Islamophobic — for instance, his quasi-revisionism on the existence of gas chambers” (Fieschi, 2020).

Fieschi posits that this anti-Semitism hamstrung Le Pen and the National Front’s general appeal in France as, due to deep-rooted trauma from WWII, “for many French citizens, an anti-Semitic discourse was, for a long time, possibly more troubling than an anti-Islam or an anti-Arab one” (2020). The same could not be said about their pivot to more explicitly anti-Islam and anti-Arab overtones. Realising their need for a fervent supporter base, constructed from the generally disparate elements of the right: “traditional counter-revolutionaries, anti-Semites, anti-communists, ultra-conservative Catholics, revisionists, colonialists, anti-Gaullists, violent nationalists, and straggling neo-Nazis and neo-Fascists” (Fieschi, 2020), the Front shifted their messages around the ‘enemies’ already in France, their ‘enemy within’. Le Pen had noticed “diminishing returns in the overt quasi-biological racism of the traditional far-right” (Fieschi, 2020), shifting the party position “toward a racism (sometimes referred to as “differential racism”) rooted in cultural, rather than biological difference” (Fieschi, 2020). This is what inspired the Front’s influential negative messaging around immigrant communities (Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: (“An election campaign poster for French far-right National Front reads 'Choose Your Suburb - Vote Front', December 6, 2015” (Christophe Petit Tisson), From NEOnline, 2018)

Fieschi best describes this shift to an ‘enemy within’ style messaging: the National Front had gradually fostered “an evolution from a focus on the Arab migrant to a focus on the settled Muslim, to Islam as a threatening cultural other, and finally to an ideological category: Islamism (incompatible with the ideology of French Republic, and more broadly European civilization)” (2020).

This idea of the settled threat lurking within the country likely goes a long way to explaining the systemic discrimination and disadvantaging that immigrant-founded communities, such as Arab/African-founded banlieues, face in modern France. Again, this necessitates a return to fearful ‘othering’ and a likely paranoid hangover from the occupation. It is around the ‘enemy within’ mentality, championed by the ‘intellectual’

right-wing of people like Le Pen, and the National Front, that *Frontier(s)* makes a bold statement.

The film endeavours not to spoon feed its message to its audience, portraying just about every character in the film as varyingly terrible in their own way. Instead, it invites questions about why they are that way, in a fashion reminiscent of Noé's works, focusing on the idea of nature vs nurture (with a heavy emphasis on the latter). As previously noted the film opens with footage from the real-life 2005 Paris riots, although the film is not set during those specific disturbances. At surface level, the audience is witnessing disadvantaged youths inflicting wanton violence for little reason (at least little reason explained in the film). The reality is that the riots are clearly another example of 'divine violence', of the rising up of society's systemically oppressed and disadvantaged. The people rioting, and *Frontier(s)* main characters are this way because they have been forced to adapt by an oppressive system. Whereas Le Pen and the right in France like to depict Muslims and minorities as inherently culturally incompatible with their version of the country (nature), the reality is that these people, most of them born French citizens to immigrant families, have experienced a hard life of oppression on the fringes of society. They adapted to survive (nurture). *Frontier(s*)' depiction of these characters, with some analysis and critical thought, can be seen to lean into this 'nurture' model; its characters may not be likeable, their world is distinctly alien to a lot of the audience, but there are clearly reasons behind it.

Frontier(s) then brings its main characters, the clear depiction of what Le Pen and the National Front would regard as the 'enemy within', into direct confrontation with what the film regards as the true danger, an extreme representation of the right. As stated, the leads in the film simply have nowhere to turn in France. There is a further point to be made around the Nazi family; they are the physical embodiment of racist and degrading ideas spreading generally unseen throughout France. With their revised messaging, the National Front spread their appeal with a lack of pushback, stigmatising those they regarded as enemy to France and likely helping slightly more moderate and distinctly more 'marketable' politicians such as Sarkozy to gain power and implement some versions of the oppression that organisations such as the Front would prize. The hidden enemy within France (especially at the time of *Frontier(s)* release) is the pervasive right-wing dialogue spreading unchecked throughout France, depicted in its extreme by the Nazi family existing unseen in the heartland of the country.

The Dreyfus Trial ended up in an exposé of anti-Semitic thought precipitating an 'enemy within' attitude around Alfred Dreyfus himself and the Jewish population as a whole. It ended up exposing the true danger as the hysterical, discriminatory and paranoid thought around Dreyfus and all Jews. The true 'enemy within' back then were those blinded by right-wing thought and fears of the 'other'. *Frontier(s)* endeavours to show that this is likely still the case.

The other key 'Fab Five' film to discuss in this section is *Martyrs*. Described by West as "possibly the most nightmarish film in contemporary horror cinema" (2016, p.147), Laugier's film focuses on the horrifying abuses a woman suffers at the hands of a

secret society after she joins a friend's quest for vengeance. From its opening, depicting a filthy and brutalised young girl, Lucie, escaping a torture facility, to its ending with her friend Anna skinned alive gazing into the afterlife, *Martyrs* remains the zenith of the New French Extremity movement, outdoing its contemporaries in terms of the philosophical questions it poses and the violence it employs to further its plot. The film also offers a commentary on class divide through its use of a secret society attempting to 'martyr' those they perceive as receptive to their practices (women): "In a first-world culture which is wealthy enough to worry about the afterlife, a secret society has come together to murder woman after woman in the hopes of validating the society's existence. They kill in order to give themselves a reason to live on; their luxury, based in wealth, causes the pain and suffering of those who fall beneath them" (West, 2016, p.152). It is no coincidence that the characters of Anna and Lucie, one victimised and one to be victimised, grow up broken in different ways in an orphanage, forced to lean into their friendship and co-dependency to survive, while those exacting the brutal torture on them and others live in a stunning upper class modern house, living a supposedly idyllic family life.

The depiction of this outwardly idyllic family life in the household that Lucie massacres during the first act of the film is intriguing to analyse. If there is a societal commentary to be picked out from this film, it is born from Laugier's depiction of the family's hidden life, quite literally a torture basement underneath their seemingly perfect house. Perhaps Laugier is speaking to the rot pervading under the surface of French society, particularly given how France, and cities such as Paris, are often seen as beautiful places of harmony, liberalism and love. Yet, as has been examined, under this

exterior lies a country split by stark ideological, cultural and political divides. The history of France is soaked in blood, paved over by a promoted idea of a country of romance. Just as France's history is unavoidably violent, so is the history of the family in *Martyrs*.

France's modern-day society disadvantages certain ethnic groups and poverty-stricken individuals. This ties into a common theme of *Martyrs*, that of victimhood. The secret society in the film are fixated on martyring people, that is bringing them so close to death that they walk the line between life and the afterlife, able to relay what they see with regard to life after death. Their consistent failure to do this, over many years, means that they create no martyrs, only victims of their appalling abuses. Their reach extends beyond those they have in immediate captivity. Lucie escaped their clutches and yet, after massacring the family she holds responsible for her abuse, she commits suicide, unable to escape the demons pursuing her (depicted graphically and literally in the film). As West puts it, "they have managed to create another victim" (2016, P.153). Lucie rises up, killing her former oppressors, yet receives no emancipation, she is simply left alone with her personal battles, her friend unable to reach her. The riots of 2005 as well as the many other civil disturbances around them seem to hold a commonality with the film's depiction of Lucie's tragedy. The oppressed rise up, and yet said rise brings seemingly little change in the short term, only more violence and more oppression, oppression that people like Nicolas Sarkozy can pretend to justify based on the actions of the disadvantaged fringes of society.

Home Invasion and a Fear of the 'Other'

Matt Smith writes of the common themes throughout the 'Fab Five' films. Among them he notes: "home invasions that lead to unspeakable violence, and the fear of the Other, most often embodied by Arab immigrants and their offspring" (2011). All of the 'Fab Five' films feature home invasion narratives, and several include a distinct commentary on France's fear of an 'other' in modern society. A key example is 2006's *Ils* (*Them*). Matt Smith notes that the plot "concerns a couple besieged by a group of children one night and toyed with vis-a-vis a game of hide and seek, wherein the very house they live in becomes a trap from which they might not escape" (2011). *Them* stands out as the tamest member of the 'Fab Five', utilising a common horror premise and lacking the overt brutality of its contemporaries. Yet it remains "an exercise in carefully calibrated suspense" (Smith, 2011), and when examined through its social commentary, it has a lot to say.

The best place to start when evaluating *Them* is with its title, which as Smith notes "is indicative of a fear of the Other, the non-French, the non-White, the savage nature of poverty/races/etc. It is, after all, an unidentified group of others – them – that terrorizes the young couple (the wife is French) in their Romanian house" (2011). It is the film's first comment on a society that does not need to put a distinctive face on its fears. As an extension of an 'us and them mentality', if they are 'other' they are to be feared.

West's analysis of *Them* takes a slightly different track, yet one that ties back into a fearful French society, unaccepting of those 'other' to them. She approaches the film

through its use of children as the antagonists, essentially relating the film's depiction of fear of the 'other' to French history through "the scars that the sins of the parents inflict on their children" (2016, P.136). This speaks to an idea of inherited prejudice, inherited violence born from a country with a substantive history on the two subjects. The children in the film are faceless, they are frightening depictions of a potential future for France, therefore in being faceless, they could be anyone. The use of a home invasion narrative reinforces this, it brings the danger into a space that should be safe: "the world may be dangerous outside, but the home can be controlled" (West, 2016, P.136). This plotline could be the filmmakers' way of playing into the fear of an existentialist, 'other' threat that modern France believes could take over their homes.

It is worth returning to the fact that the film takes place in Romania. One of the most interesting lines of the piece is quoted from one of the children, in an on-screen caption at the end of the film. When questioned by police as to why they attacked the couple, the caption notes the child as saying: "Because they wouldn't play with us". As West points out, the French couple are the "other, the intruder" (2016, P.138) in this country, living in a ramshackle but huge, almost bourgeois house, of course besieged by the youths (the lower class). This aspect of the film introduces lines of analysis based around class division and French national identity. West notes that *Them* depicts "the decadence of moral and social fiber through the underclasses" (2016, P.138) and ends up "attacking the bourgeoisie" (2016, P.138), presumably for their arrogance in trespassing on foreign land. Indeed, West says as much, noting that the film "can be read as a critique of complacency, of assuming too much from foreign lands, a spectre of France's colonial past" (2016, P.139). The main characters are 'other' in Romania,

and yet their fear remains decidedly French, a fear of encroachment by something 'other', quite an ironic fear given France's past, an irony that is evidently played upon by the directors choosing to set the film outside France. Their house acts as their own France, an isolated island in a foreign country. Again this acts as a soft allegory of French colonialism, of their refusal to adapt to other countries and cultures, taking over instead. This allegory is presented primarily as the character of Clémentine teaches at a local school, relying near exclusively on speaking in French to the students. Indeed, she cannot speak Romanian to a colleague, who switches to French to accommodate her. She also remarks consistently, along with her husband, Lucas, "how backwards the country seems to be" (West, 2016, P.138). This is an interesting observation for the two characters to make, given the ramshackle state of their own house. The commentary from this is easy to examine, as it speaks to a superiority complex felt by the couple, a metaphor for the superiority complex felt by some (mostly right wing) people in France. As West notes: *Them* "functions as an allegory in which a typical French couple cannot assume or adapt to their position in a new country; they continually try to encase themselves outside of the native society… Because they cannot adapt, they die" (2016, P.139). This is hammered home with the film's ending, in which Clémentine, trapped underneath a roadside grate, screams out to passing cars for help, in French.

There is also a useful comparison to be made between France's colonial past and *Them*'s depiction of its character's refused integration. Mission Civilisatrice, "one of the bywords of French colonial expansion under the Third Republic" (Burrows, 1986, p.109), was a goal best summarised by encyclopedia.com as an aim to "convert its

colonial subjects into French people" (2020). This resulted in a very hands-on approach to colonial rule, and can be directly corelated to *Them*'s depiction of Clémentine's classroom manner, where, as mentioned she relies on speaking French, in a foreign country. She is directly exerting her culture, language and personal wants over a foreign people, with little regard for her students/subjects' ability to adapt.

Repression of History in *High Tension*

Alexandra Aja's 2003 film *High Tension* (known as *Switchblade Romance* in the UK), marked the turn of New French Extremity from arthouse pseudo-horror to full blown horror with arthouse influences. Criticised for its supposedly nonsensical twist and its potential demonisation of queerness, the film has a complex legacy. The film follows Marie and Alex, as their quiet getaway with Alex's family turns violent with the introduction of Le Tueur, a vicious killer. Alex is captured and Marie sets out to attempt to save her. As West notes: "in the film's climax it is revealed that Le Tueur and Marie are the same person and that Marie has killed Alex's family in hopes of never being separated from Alex again" (2016, pp.118-119). Marie's inability to cope with her own sexuality leads her to "[manifest] a hulking male figure to carry out her secret desires of destroying everything and everyone that could possibly keep her and Alex apart" (2016, P.119). It is the film's focalization through the unreliable narrator that is Marie that renders its final twist so confusing. The only true way to rationalize it is to view the film as a product of Marie's "diseased mind" (West, 2016, P.120).

High Tension speaks to the explicit dangers of repression, opening up an interesting parallel with modern France and its implicit attempts to repress its own history of

violence and suppress notions of societal issues in favour of its progressive international image. West speaks to how the film “illustrates an internal trauma-or disorder-inflicting itself on the outside world” (2016, P.122). It is plausible to relate this point to modern French society, where the internal trauma could be regarded as being a leftover insecurity from the loss of its colonial reaches. The loss of the colonies, combined with an influx of refugees from those colonies has only served to exacerbate these insecurities for segments of French society. The infliction of this internal trauma could be equated with the systemic disadvantaging and stigmatisation of refugee-founded communities (often in the urban banlieues) propagated by senior powers such as Sarkozy throughout modern French times. A refusal to reconcile France’s current multicultural society with its outward facing, colonialist past indicates a refusal to accept their past as wrong, thereby indicating a further refusal to understand how their current treatment of disadvantaged communities is also wrong.

There is also evidence of French repression of the poor/working class in *High Tension*. This is seen through a lens of class division brought about by Marie’s mind’s rendering of the killer. He drives a notably ramshackle Citroën H Van, a vehicle typically used by the rural working class. His outfit matches this: dirty overalls and a cap. His presentation is distinctly working class, rendered by a woman who is staying in a house plainly belonging to wealthy people. There is an element of class division at play in their dynamic, a dynamic in which the killer burst forth from Marie as a resultant representation of her fervent repression of her sexuality. Equating the killer with the lower-class, and Marie with those who choose to marginalize/render invisible those of little-means, a metaphor for France’s distinct oppression of the poor banlieue dwellers

emerges. Marie attempts to ignore or push away a key part of herself, just as France would prefer (at least as far as its presented self-image goes) to ignore the existence of communities and disadvantages populations that could threaten said image. Relying on historical fact, an equation can be made between the oppression/disregard of the lower class and a repression of history. Ignoring those that are disadvantaged deliberately represses the known consequences of such an action. These consequences are best illustrated by the multitude of class/culture-based riots occurring throughout the decades preceding the film's release. As Fabien Jobard points out in his paper 'An Overview of French Riots : 1981-2004' (2009), as far back as the 1980s "Riots involving sections of France's immigrant population and/or the inhabitants of deprived urban areas were not, strictly speaking, a new phenomenon" (p.27) and he refers to the 1990s as the "riots decade" (p.28). These disturbances were predominantly born of the banlieues and the inherent class division and disregard visited upon their mostly immigrant-founded communities. As noted, the result of this discrimination is a burst of unrest, a burst of violence. This is comparable to *High Tension*, where Marie's repression of her sexuality (represented by a working class man) causes a brutal outburst of violence.

Conclusion

New French Extremity is a movement born out of a tradition of unrest and bloodshed in France, where (as evidenced by numerous wars and revolutions), often the only way to be heard and to generate change is through violent outbursts. Gaspar Noé, widely accepted to be one of the key originators of the movement, began New French

Extremity with a distinctly political outlook, sympathising with the plight of the lower classes and analysing the destruction that society's contempt can lead them to. The films that followed on from these works examined themes around societal discrimination, 'othering', racism and classism. They probe the structure of French society itself, examining the criminalisation and victimisation of minorities, exploring ideas around an 'enemy within' before exposing the filmmaker's ideas on who the villains really are in the country. The picture of the movement that emerges is distinctly socially conscious, politically motivated and driven by a desire to shock the audience into receiving the message that the films convey. This message, a product of French history, points out that the country still has a long way to go to achieve a cohesive, safe and equal society.

Following this chapter's evaluation of New French Extremity, this thesis will use its final chapter to examine New French Extremity and the Grand-Guignol together, probing potential comparisons and differences between the movement and the theatre.

- A brief note must be made on *Inside*, the least-mentioned of the New French Extremity 'Fab Five' in this thesis. The film fits in with the movement and contains interesting commentary around the safety of the home and the monstrous feminine, yet is not as relevant to the above arguments as its contemporaries, hence its exclusion. Another curious case to briefly note is 2004s *Calvaire* (*The Ordeal*), a thought-provoking art film that is often included on New French Extremity lists. This thesis found it prudent to exclude from analysis as its primary country of origin is Belgium.

Chapter 4: Comparing New French Extremity and the Grand-Guignol

The theatre of the Grand-Guignol and the film movement of New French Extremity are separated by nearly a century of history, at least in terms of their emergence. The two movements are distinctive as important moments in French horror history, theatrical and filmic. They have similarities and differences that can be interrogated, thematically, visually and in terms of their origins. This chapter will aim to examine the violence of the theatre and the movement and the natural evolution of the Grand-Guignol vs the explosion of New French Extremity. It will also include a specific case study regarding treatment of the so-called 'other' in various Grand-Guignol works and the New French Extremity film *Frontier(s)*.

Smart Evolution vs an Inevitable Outburst

The Grand-Guignol and New French extremity began and evolved in different ways. The Grand-Guignol followed a carefully considered, commercially motivated pattern, evolving out of naturalism and shifting its style to offer a unique twist on the theatre productions audiences of the time sought out. New French Extremity was the sporadic result of angry creatives, expressing themselves through their art with impassioned outbursts of extreme filmmaking. From Noé's damning of society in *Carne*, *I Stand Alone*, and later *Irreversible* (2002) to Xavier Gens' pointed note on hidden discrimination in France with *Frontier(s)*, the movement lacked a centralised, coordinated message. The commonalities, aside from broad aesthetics, generally came through a clear damning of French society, yet the way this was achieved differed from

filmmaker to filmmaker. The Grand-Guignol was a carefully built business, New French Extremity an uncoordinated outburst.

The Grand-Guignol evolved from a distinct naturalist wave around Europe, one that went back further than the Théâtre Libre. The naturalistic style that had influenced both theatres is widely accepted to have originated with Émile Zola, the French novelist who "had called for a rejection of all artifice in the theatrical arts… demanding that plays be faithful records of behaviour—namely, scientific analyses of life" (Rea, 2019). As Rea states, Thérèse Raquin, Zola's 1873 dramatization of his 1867 novel "represents the first consciously naturalistic drama" (2019).

A brief note can be made on the relevance of Emile Zola's *La Bête Humaine* (1890) to the Grand-Guignol and New French Extremity. Zola's psychological thriller, featuring violent crimes occurring around a railway line, focuses on "the struggle between man's primordial instincts and the civilising veneer" (Hill, 2015). Roger Pearson, in his introductory remarks to his 2009 translation of Zola's novel, notes a translated 1890 review by Jules Lemaître, writing in *Le Figaro*: "In his latest novel M. Zola examines the most frightening and most mysterious of all primordial instincts: the instinct for destruction and slaughter, and the obscure connection between this instinct and the erotic instinct" (p.viii). The primary comparisons are obvious between Zola's book and the Grand-Guignol and New French Extremity; visceral violence and an examination of man's inner beast, yet beyond this it is mainly noteworthy that a book of this type came from one of the progenitors of the naturalist movement, a movement that would clearly influence the early years of the Grand-Guignol.

Taking root in Sweden, the naturalistic movement experienced a lack of commercial success at its outset, yet spread throughout the continent with “sympathetic productions… made possible by a number of independent theatres” (Rea, 2019). One of these theatres of course, was the Théâtre Libre, with André Antoine enthusiastically buying into the potential of the naturalist model. By offering the opportunity for young playwrights to present their naturalist works, the theatre achieved “an international significance” (Rea, 2019) by the time it closed.

The naturalist model spread throughout Europe, manifesting in theatres such as the Freie Bühne in Germany and the Independent Theatre Club in England. It “reached its highest artistic peak in Russia in 1898 with the formation of the Moscow Art Theatre” (Rea, 2019), a departure from the traditionally sloppy, “stock theatrical pieces” (Rea, 2019) generally seen in Russian theatres. This theatre achieved its own distinct, acclaimed style, utilising “infinitely detailed production, the result of long and methodical rehearsals, to achieve an almost perfect surface naturalism with great emotional complexity beneath.” (Rea, 2019).

With naturalism reaching its theatrical peak around a year after the foundation of the Grand-Guignol, and subsequently tailing off, the theatre intelligently shifted its style as has been covered in detail in the thesis’ first chapter. Intelligent marketing was used to capitalise on the theatre’s unique proposition. Below are two examples of posters (Figure 2) advertising plays in the time period just-post Choisy’s ‘Golden Age’, when Jack Jouvin became a dominating factor.

Figure 2: (Posters by Adrien Barrère, featured in Feral House's edition of Mel Gordon's *Theatre of Fear & Horror: Expanded Edition: The Grisly Spectacle of the Grand Guignol of Paris, 1897-1962.* Retrieved from https://dangerousminds.net/comments/wonderfully_lurid_and_macabre_posters_from_the_grand_guignol)

These are important examples of the grotesque imagery the Grand-Guignol would use to generate interest and stoke its reputation as a theatre of terror. Figure 3, below, is a poster of poorer quality for one of the Grand-Guignol's most famed plays: *Un crime dans une maison de fous* (*Crime In A Madhouse).*

Figure 3: (Artist Unknown. Retrieved from https://steemit.com/history/@therick96/the-grand-guignol-theater-when-paris-created-the-gore)

Written by André De Lorde and Alfred Binet, the play concerns a young woman who, while awaiting her imminent release from a mental asylum, falls into the trap of three crones, with brutal results. The play achieved special notoriety with rumours of fainting audience members. This type of notoriety pleased the Grand-Guignol higher-ups, with Maurey famously hiring an in-house doctor to stoke the air of danger around the theatre. The combination of an intelligent capitalisation on the theatre's notoriety and a carefully varied program gave the Grand-Guignol the success it would enjoy over a lengthy period.

As mentioned, there was no emerging style that the early examples of New French Extremity capitalised on in the way that the Grand-Guignol evolved from stark naturalism. Instead, Gaspar Noé's *Carne* (1991) and *I Stand Alone* (1998) emerged as

viciously independent works, closer in style and message to *La Haine* (1995) than the full-blooded horror movement that New French Extremity would become. Horror films have an important place in French cinematic history: the first ever horror film is often considered to be Georges Méliès' *Le Manoir du diable* (*The House Of The Devil*, 1896) and films such as Georges Franju's *Les yeux sans visage* (*Eyes Without A Face*, 1960) hold an important place in horror canon. Yet in the decades leading up to the foundations of New French Extremity, French horror had become known for its dreamy, surrealistic qualities, spearheaded by directors such as Jean Rollin. The pseudo-horror of *Carne* and *I Stand Alone* brought the genre back down to earth in France, discarding the soft-eroticism of the Rollin era and grounding their violent stories in French society, damning it in the process.

Instead of calculated, shifting exploitation of, and unique diversification from, prevailing trends in entertainment, as with the rise of the Grand-Guignol, Noé appeared to buck the trends of French horror cinema, delivering an angry message to the state of society at the time. They were not traditional horror films, more dramas taking on the essence of horror due to their depiction of the everyday horror of the society that the characters exist in. They gave the appearance of an outcry: several pieces of artistic expression reminiscent of the previously explained concept of 'divine' violence: "a strike at power" (Kopin, 2015). These films would set the trend for the movement: viciously angry, downbeat, socially conscious films delivering stark messages in uniquely violent ways.

There is a clear comparison, however, to be made between the closure of the Grand-Guignol and the end of New French Extremity. As explained in the first chapter of this thesis, the Grand-Guignol closed due to a myriad of factors, most clearly the inability of the French public to reconcile brutal spectacle as entertainment with the horrors of two successive wars occurring on their soil. Combined with the advent of cinema, an art form proving more immersive than even the finest efforts of the horror theatre, the Grand-Guignol's slow decline was virtually irreversible. The aforementioned struggle to come to terms with the horrors of WWI and WWII, including the brutalities inflicted by collaborationist French, links in with the start of the New French Extremity, which, as noted in chapter two of this thesis, cried out against a society refusing to acknowledge the violence of its past (and present). The end of New French Extremity is generally accepted to have come with the release of the final film in the 'Fab Five' – *Martyrs* (2008). It exemplified the key aspects of the movement; unrepentant violence, repulsive cruelty, a nihilistic worldview and a potent message around class divide. It took the aesthetics of the movement to new heights, heights that few films throughout international cinematic history have reached. Strangely, Pascal Laugier rejects the notion that his film should be considered a part of the movement: "He says: "The film deals with human pain, the meaning of it, which is something completely different."" (Armitage, 2018). This is an odd claim, given that if analysed, his film perhaps best exemplifies the movement in terms of its extreme nature. Yet it perhaps speaks to the idea that he wishes for his film to stand apart from a movement with the pre-conceptions that New French Extremity carries with it. For this thesis and others' academic works however, and due to its inherent extremity and social commentary, *Martyrs* remains very much part of the movement.

While the Grand-Guignol suffered a slow decline over a lengthy period, New French Extremity came and went in a shorter period, ending with the purest expression of the movement possible, a film that could not be topped. *Martyrs* perhaps even signalled the end of the movement by its director's disassociation from it. This disassociation came as the film rendered any that would attempt to follow it as unnecessary. It had demonstrated the zenith of New French Extremity, even against its director's wishes.

The Grand-Guignol and New French Extremity's Allying with the 'Other'

The Grand-Guignol was by no means a consistent ally to the so-called 'other'. In fact it often demonised and exploited those who would typically be 'othered' and looked down on by French society. A key example of this would be André de Lorde and Eugène Morel's 1904 play *La Dernière torture* (*The Ultimate Torture*). Set in a fortified French Consulate during the 1899-1901 Boxer Rebellion in China, the play is filled with racist descriptions from the French staff/soldiers of the Chinese, those that a typical colonialist mentality would consider as 'other', or a non-European and potentially barbaric threat. This brings up a brief comparison with *Them*; the French characters of both the play and the film consider the non-French inhabitants of the land they are in to be beneath them, to be 'other' to them. Yet, as noted, this colonialist-reminiscent attitude ignores the plain fact that they are the visitors, or even the intruders in *The Ultimate Torture*'s case, on foreign land.

Yet, as previously noted, the theatre was one of contradictions, and hence occasionally revealed an affinity for the plight of those 'othered' by society. Demonstrating this was Paul Cloquemin and Paul Autier's *Gardiens de phare* (*Lighthouse Keepers*). The play

focuses on the struggles of a father/son (Bréhan/Yvon) duo of lighthouse keepers, the younger man having been bitten by a rabid dog. It evoked a clear fear of the times, fear of infection. Hand and Wilson quote a Pierron translation, stating that, despite the discovery of Pasteur's vaccine for the disease, "rabies had lost none of its immediacy" (1995, p.119). This was likely due to the complexity of the disease and a complete lack of infrastructure to widely disseminate a cure. As Fielding D. O'Niell points out: "In modern day India, rabid dogs still cause the death of 20,000 people each year" (2011), reinforcing that the advent of a cure would not dispel the danger (and therefore fear) of rabies. With the earlier notes in this thesis on the working-class audience the Grand-Guignol embraced, it is perhaps no surprise that it offers a sympathetic portrayal of characters such as those in *Lighthouse Keepers.* The suffering of the rabies-stricken Yvon is, perhaps counter to the Grand-Guignol's reputation, predominantly examined in a psychological context: "as far as Yvon is concerned there is more horror in imagining the progression of the disease" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.110). The play also overwhelmingly concerns itself with the dire predicament of Yvon's father, Bréhan, who is faced with an unimaginable choice: "becoming the murderer of his own child or leaving him… to face an even worse fate… he chooses to kill" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.110). The moral dilemma Bréhan faces, and his ultimate decision leaves him with the prospect of spending a month alone at the lighthouse with his son's corpse, ravaged by his conscience.

Despite the play's horrific content, it does not damn the men; it instead portrays Bréhan as a character motivated by a strong sense of duty. In fact, "it is out of a sense of duty to his son that he commits filicide" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.110). He makes

the merciful decision, choosing to spare his son the horrific death ahead of him, trapping himself in the aforementioned horrible situation in the process. As noted in the Grand-Guignol chapter of this thesis, those harbouring infection, or those perceived to harbour infection, were stigmatised and 'othered' in 19th/20th century France. The play does not focus on the physical deterioration of Yvon; it does not delight in his suffering or exploit the visceral aspects of the disease for gory thrills. Instead, the Grand-Guignol humanises the infected, again portraying characters bound by honourable duty. This allying with the other that the Grand-Guignol occasionally demonstrated is clear to see from *Lighthouse Keepers*.

The Grand-Guignol's allying with the 'other' is comparable to several films that fit with the New French Extremity. Most notable is *Frontier(s),* which makes a point of centring its story around minority characters that would often be depicted as 'other' in a France ravaged by fringe right-wing ideology. The film re-focuses its own message, which seemingly initially adheres to stereotypes with its unlikeable characters, to that of a vicious diatribe about the true dangers in modern France: the right-wing ideology hidden in society. In doing so, it essentially exculpates those that would be considered 'other' in what is perhaps commonly regarded as typical French discourse. This leads to an evident demonstration of allying with the 'other'. Similar to examples within the Grand-Guignol's repertoire, *Frontier(s)* takes its characters and presents them as human; they are flawed, unlikeable even and yet are not the true problem. Just as the sufferers of diseases were unfairly stigmatised in 19th/20th century France when a lack of healthcare and education was perhaps the more pertinent issue, the minority characters in *Frontier(s)* are unfairly stigmatised based solely on their status as

minorities, the true issue is the wider societal issues of prejudice and a lack of education, fostered by the rise in right-wing rhetoric that this thesis has analysed.

Another New French Extremity film of note in this comparison is *Martyrs* (2008). Laugier's film features moral choices similar to those of *Lighthouse Keepers*. The character of Anna's decision to help her best friend Lucie on her path of vengeance, the choice she considers most moral, ends up damning her to an incredibly slow death at the hands of the secret society in the film. While she surely could not be consciously aware that that would be her fate, her decision echoes that of Bréhan, in that she knows that her future will certainly hold pain after what she does. She knows that she will suffer guilt for aiding (however passively) in Lucie's vengeful murder of an entire family, including young children. The decision she makes, to follow through on this plan, makes her comparable to Bréhan, although, as with *Lighthouse Keepers*, *Martyrs* does not damn Anna. The film's shift into its grotesque third act helps to illustrate that perhaps Anna was justified in helping Lucie pursue the people that had so harmed her early in her life. The murder of the children of the family is never addressed unfortunately, and so commentary on this aspect is not easy to make. The film seems to leave that deed specifically with Lucie, indicating that Anna perhaps did not know the full extent of the violence she planned on unleashing.

The introduction of the society in *Martyrs* brings up the film's treatment of the 'other' in contemporary French society. Anna, and most clearly Lucie, are the cast-offs from society, the mentally disturbed, abused, orphaned and unwell, those who an outward facing French society would prefer to hide, or, to take a more benevolent view,

perhaps simply lacks the ability to care for. The 'othering' of Lucie is presented clearly at the beginning of the film, in brief grainy footage from the orphanage. She is framed as frail and unsure, a nun offering her a bicycle as a host of doctors and nurses gawk at her. She is distinctly outcast from society, pushing away those who try to friend her (bar Anna), harming herself and crying alone in a stairwell while the camera watches, treating her as an object of intrigue, not a human being. Anna is her only friend, her only comfort, and almost becomes 'othered' by association, best indicated by when her mother, who she has not spoken to in two years, asks during a phone call is she is still "under her influence" before describing Lucy as "a bitch, a pervert, a loser". The two have nowhere to go, and are virtually never depicted in wider society, only in the orphanage or the society's various lairs.

At the time that *Martyrs* was made, despite France having a very high density of psychiatric workers, Hélène Verdoux, in the abstract for her article on French psychiatry, stated that: "French psychiatry has currently to face a structural crisis due to the reduction in public health budgets, as well as to the reduction of 30% in the number of French psychiatrists over the next two decades. The numerous national programmes aimed at renovating French mental health services… have not yet kept their promises." (2007). The issue remains, as Julia Beurq's article: 'France's mental health professionals are on the verge of a breakdown' (2018), explains: "Psychiatric care, once the pride of France… now finds itself decimated". She also describes "shortages of staff, hospital places and resources" (2018). This systemic failure to find the necessary means to care for France's disadvantaged population indicates an uncaring attitude, if not worse, at the higher levels of France's government. There is

often a societal temptation to ‘other’ those with mental illness, for several reasons covered by Lauren Aldrich in her article ‘When People With Mental Illness Are Made the Dangerous 'Other'’ (2017). Aldrich points out that, as with most situations of ‘othering’, fear is the primary motivational force. She notes that mental illness involves “being sick in a way that is, despite all our efforts… to end the stigma, still unrecognizable and even less understandable to the greater population”. It can be harmless, or it can involve being dangerous, to self and others, as is the case with Lucie in *Martyrs*, who is tormented by not only guilt and childhood trauma, but the manifestation of her illness in the creature she sees.

This temptation to ‘other’, and to cast as villains those who are different, informs *Martyrs* sympathetic view of the tormented and downtrodden. Laugier’s writing gives Anna and Lucie an inherent tragedy, an inevitability of their downfall, yet as noted he casts them in a sympathetic light. Lucie is trying to take control of her life back from those who abused her, preventing them from continuing their horrors and Anna is trying to aid her best friend, whilst maintaining some semblance of a moral compass (she attempts to save a mortally wounded victim of Lucie). The villains of the piece are those who take advantage of the girls, the society in the film that exploits them for their unique reaction to suffering and death, a further parallel to the class issues that the Grand-Guignol occasionally picked up on. Laugier is almost lionising his ‘othered’ protagonists, painting them as uniquely disposed to seeing beyond what any other human can. It is this gift that he places upon them that leads them down the hellish path the film takes, yet it is also what enables Anna to have her final victory, just

before her death. *Martyrs* inherently lionises its complex characters, characters that are so evidently 'other' in a world that has no true place for them.

Certain films in the New French Extremity movement may have divergent reasons for their allying with the 'other' than key plays of the Grand-Guignol. It is arguable that the perspective of the theatre was shaped by the audience it was aiming to cater for, and the unique space it was trying to occupy within the theatre of the time. Yet there could be a common viewpoint discernible between the elements of the two subjects of this thesis. The playwrights could have perhaps put the aforementioned effort into sometimes portraying typically 'other' characters as sympathetic in response to the times, in response to an audience familiar with their struggles, giving them not just sympathetic characters, but characters they could relate to. This is comparable to the anger clearly demonstrated by the filmmakers behind the New French Extremity films; their disdain for the right in France and their realisation that those portrayed, regarded and depicted as 'other' are a lot more admirable and inherently human than they are often given credit for. It is here that a commonality can be discerned between the theatre and the film movement.

'Grand-Guignol Violence' and the Violence of New French Extremity

"These scenes of Grand Guignol violence are accompanied by a nihilistic atmosphere and well-crafted moments of genuine tension" (Welsh, 2018). So states Andrew Welsh in his review of *High Tension*, drawing an immediate parallel between the gut-wrenching violence of Alexandra Aja's film and the theatre movement that preceded it by 100+ years. This segment of this thesis' comparison chapter will aim to interrogate

the aesthetic and thematic qualities of the violence of the Grand-Guignol and the violence of films of the New French Extremity. It will probe whether they have such blatant similarities as Welsh would suggest or whether they are divided by a thematic gap wider than their simple visceral similarities can bridge.

Beginning with pure aesthetic qualities, obvious similarities lie between the idea of 'Grand-Guignol violence' and the violence of New French Extremity. 'Grand-Guignol violence', as noted in the first chapter of this thesis, is described by Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson as encompassing "grotesque displays of violence within performance media". On this level, it certainly fits with the violence depicted in New French Extremity, which surpasses the typical levels of viscera seen in horror films. As a direct comparison, the almost medical violence of the latter part of *Martyrs* can be compared with Jean Aragny and Francis Neilson's brutal play *La Baiser de sang* (*The Kiss of Blood*), which premiered in 1929 to controversy and fainting audience members. As the character of Anna is clinically skinned, a comparison could be drawn to the opening of *The Kiss of Blood*, a brutal surgery scene where a stirring patient has the skin on his forehead peeled down and his skull drilled into. Different purposes for the violence, and yet similar surgical aesthetics can be seen, including the effects used to create the scenes; makeup on the head/body, stage/screen blood and clever angles. There is also a comparison to be drawn between Anna's skinning and a scene in Pierre Chaine and André de Lorde's 1922 Grand-Guignol play *Le Jardin des supplices* (*The Torture Garden*), in which a woman has a strip of skin graphically removed by a torturer. Although, while the scene in *The Torture Garden* serves to help illustrate the perversion of the character of Clara, it is also likely designed to thrill/horrify the crowd,

evidenced by the highly theatrical build up to the event and the character of Han's elaborate monologue describing what is to come. *Martyrs'* skinning scene exercises more restraint, especially when compared to the rest of the film, and indeed, when compared to the scene in *The Torture Garden.* It is setting out to achieve a different purpose, even if the action occurring is not drastically different to it's Grand-Guignol counterpart.

It is here that these divergent purposes for the Grand-Guignol's violence and New French Extremity's violence should be examined. They may be aesthetically similar, but the calculations behind them appear different, that is, the creative teams involved in New French Extremity and The Grand-Guignol were working to different goals. The revolutionary naturalistic ideal that ran through the Théâtre Libre to the early years of the Grand-Guignol was tempered by less revolutionary directors of the theatre, focused more on maximising the Grand-Guignol's unique selling point than instigating and continuing formal reinvention. This led to a focus on a violence designed both to repulse, but also to entertain, as discussed in the segment on morbid curiosity from chapter 1. The audience was supposed to have a good time, enjoying the 'hot and cold showers' of the Grand-Guignol's divergent programming. In essence, they were supposed to want to come back. The violence of the Grand-Guignol was a tool of entertainment. The same cannot be said of the violence seen in the films of the New French Extremity. It is very notably bereft of any indulgence or delight. Take the sterile and mechanical environment in which Anna is systematically beaten during the third act of *Martyrs*. There is no voyeuristic thrill captured; more the hopeless atmosphere of the setting, the clinical and inescapable place she finds herself being ground down

in, with only a bucket to relieve herself, a steel chair, a filthy mattress and a chain anchoring her to a wall. Or for instance, the graphic impromptu caesarean section performed on the character of Sarah by her aggressor in *Inside*. This sequence, coming after the audience is dragged through 70+ minutes of a brutal and gory cat and mouse pursuit, moves past any notion of a cheap, gory thrill. Instead it acts as the crushing narrative conclusion to a truly hopeless story, one where Sarah's almost-omniscient aggressor, hellbent on taking her soon-to-be-born baby, is never anything less than terrifying and inhuman. The films of the New French Extremity seemingly have no interest in encouraging enjoyment. They are, more often than not, gruelling and depressing works of art by creative teams with distinct messages to deliver, as explained in the previous chapter of this thesis. A clear example of this is *Martyrs*, which was written by Laugier in a fit of deep depression. Commercial aspirations were likely far from his mind:

> What I can tell you is that I felt very, very dark when I wrote the film and I thought that the world was so brutal. I saw in the horror genre the opportunity to put my inner feelings directly into the screen. I certainly didn't want to do an existential style, or a fans film for fans… I wanted to do something as unexpected as possible. (Laugier, quoted in R. Carnevale, 2009)

For a very simple conclusion to the differing intentions of the violence exhibited by the Grand-Guignol and the violence shown in New French Extremity films: one is designed for fun and thrills, the other for effect, messaging and emotional impact.

The violence seen in the theatre of the Grand-Guignol and the films of the New French Extremity may differ in their purpose, execution and exhibition, but there is one potentially binding aspect that is worth investigation. The chapter of this thesis that is dedicated to the Grand-Guignol attempts to draw parallels between the idea of so-called 'Grand-Guignol violence' and violence against women, noting that the premier star of the day: Paula Maxa, who came to symbolise the Grand-Guignol, was predominantly known not for the heroism of her characters, but the brutal ways she was killed. As noted, if Maxa was indeed "synonymous with Grand-Guignol performance" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.18), at the height of the violence, titillation and exploitation of the Grand-Guignol's unique selling point under Choisy, then she must be synonymous with 'Grand-Guignol violence'. The previous chapter draws parallels between this idea and the term 'Grand-Guignol violence', relating it plausibly to a concept of violence against women. It is here that a genuine parallel can be drawn between the Grand-Guignol and New French Extremity. Looking at the key films of the New French Extremity, the fab five (*High Tension, Frontier(s), Them, Inside* and *Martyrs)*, a key commonality is the fact that they are all female led. Despite different plots and endings, they all have, to varying extents, extremely negative outcomes for these characters. *High Tension* ends with the monstrous and disturbed Marie confined to an asylum while Alexia tries to reconcile her experience and find a way forward in her life. *Frontier(s)* ends with Yasmine emerging blood-soaked but triumphant from the grips of the Nazi aggressors, only to find herself arrested by French police for the crime that begins the film, reinforcing the message that she will never be safe. *Them* ends with the offscreen murder of the main character as she remains trapped in a drain, inches from freedom. *Inside*'s ending features the vicious female aggressor

carving out Sarah's baby as she bleeds out. *Martyrs* is potentially more conflicting as it ends with the possibility that Anna achieves a final victory over her captors, passing on information that causes the suicide of the woman behind her torment. Yet on a base level, she has been brutalised for the latter part of the film and, after being skinned alive, dies a presumably excruciating death. The films all have different points and messages behind these endings, and some are less spiteful than they appear on the surface. The overwhelming point is clear however: the key films of the movement feature plotlines that drag their lead female characters (and often female support characters) through graphic violence, trauma, torture and killings. New French Extremity has a complex relationship with the female. They are rarely one-dimensional horror stereotypes (the screaming woman chased by the chainsaw wielding killer); they are fleshed out, complex characters with hidden tragedies, repressed sexualities, binding loyalties and human flaws. In the case of *Martyrs, Inside* and *Switchblade Romance*, they are even the villains, driven by wretched pasts, fears of mortality or mental illness. Yet, hero or villain, the violence consistently inflicted upon them renders New French Extremity as often related with the general concept of violence against women: they are the most consistently brutalised characters. It is therefore possible to compare New French Extremity to a theatre whose main draw throughout its most successful period was the dissection, dismemberment, rape, torture or murder of its premiere star: Paula Maxa.

The idea of a threat against women in the Grand-Guignol goes back to its roots, and some of the first plays written for the theatre by Oscar Méténier. This is clearly evidenced in his 1897 play *Lui*, or *Jack*, which features prostitutes being targeted by a

killer in the naturalistic setting of a brothel. The inherent threat against these notably working class women parallels New French Extremity films such as *Martyrs* and *Frontier(s)*, where working class/lower class/minority women are consistently victimised. The key difference between the examples is that Méténier's play ends with the killer being arrested. No such comfort is provided in the New French Extremity films. Ultimately this could be drawn back to the differing aims of the two art forms. Méténier may have had a desire to further the naturalist cause with the Grand-Guignol, yet he was still providing an experience designed to manipulate "the audience into feeling simultaneously titillated and at risk themselves" (Hand & Wilson, 2002, p.83). As Hand and Wilson go on to explain: "The cathartic experience of watching something terrible happen to someone else is always tempered by the fact that 'next time it could happen to *you*'" (2002, p.83). The films of the New French Extremity typically have no interest in such titillation or catharsis. They are, more often than not, indicting society, proffering the idea that the sort of violent acts they depict are correlated with wider societal issues. Méténier, and the Grand-Guignol itself, was not immune to societal commentary, indeed his focus on the working class is laced with the typical trappings of naturalism – a more neutral view, free of indictment. Yet the story he plays out around this setting is designed to entertain, perhaps unlike the films of the New French Extremity, which, more often than not, are more geared towards provocation.

Conclusion

Both New French Extremity and the Grand-Guignol theatre are key moments in French horror history. They both began with a dedication to their ideals; a commitment to a radical naturalist model in the case of The Grand-Guignol and a commitment to unflinching social messaging in New French Extremity. Yet as the theatre and movement progressed, their paths diverged. The Grand-Guignol's theatrical form evolved to encompass more melodramatic elements of its contemporaries, building its commercial appeal and leading to its post-WWI 'Golden-Era'. New French Extremity for the large part remained rigidly anti-commercial, with filmmakers making their works for their own reasons, be it a seemingly cathartic response to depression with Laugier's *Martyrs* or a response to fears of a right-wing takeover of France in Gens' *Frontier(s).* The films regarded as part of the movement are the key horror films from France of the time, and all of them essentially demonstrated a continued dedication to the ideals upon which New French Extremity emerged, a notable difference to the far more fluid and evolving Grand-Guignol.

The differentiated purposes and attempts at commercial viability and artistic integrity respectively lead to fundamental issues when discussing the term 'Grand-Guignol violence'. As has been examined in previous chapters, there are aesthetic similarities in the violence exhibited by the Grand-Guignol and the films of the New French Extremity, simply in terms of its goriness and excessiveness. Yet they diverge in purpose. The Grand-Guignol was providing an experience, cultivating a brand and ensuring customer retention. If the violence was meant to repulse, it was also meant to appeal to a sense of morbid-curiosity, as mentioned in the first chapter of this

thesis. It is true that morbidly curious people would be likely in the modern day to seek out the sorts of films that New French Extremity offers. Yet they would find that, instead of an experience alternating humour and comedy (the 'hot and cold shower' of the Grand-Guignol), they would find an outwardly provocative and pointed use of violence. New French Extremity exhibits the political, social and cultural view of its directors, bolstered and illustrated by the violence they place on screen. This means that the term 'Grand-Guignol violence' has limited applicability as an aesthetic description, but the idea that it is a true thread of influence from the theatre to the film movement is misguided. Aesthetically similar maybe, but vastly different in purpose. Yet there remains the issue of violence relating to female characters. This is a true carryover from the Grand-Guignol to New French Extremity's plotlines, which more often than not focused on women in peril. Works such as Marc Bonis-Charancle's 1903 play *La Maison hantée* (*The Haunted House*), described by Hand and Wilson as "reminiscent, in its brutal entrapment of women, of the 'torture porn' genre" (2016, p.54), can be directly related to New French Extremity, a movement often saddled with that same 'torture porn' tag, for much the same reasons as Bonis-Charancle's play.

The term 'Grand-Guignol violence' deserves a re-codification, one that explicitly makes clear that its value as a term rests in comparisons about pure aesthetic violence or violence against women. The violence used in the Grand-Guignol is less directly aimed at explicit social commentary than the violence used in the films of the New French Extremity.

One truly comparable element of the theatre and the films of the New French Extremity is their radicalism (at least to begin with in the Grand-Guignol's case) and their reflection of contemporary issues in their stories/characters. The Grand-Guignol's delicate and humane treatment of syphilis in *The Lighthouse Keepers* for example and *Frontier(s)* exploration of prejudices and the dangers of right-wing extremism. Again, their purposes may differ. A concrete political/social outlook is difficult to glean from the Grand-Guignol due to its consistently shifting repertoire of directors and writers. Disease was demonised, and the afflicted 'othered' in some cases and sympathised with in others. Yet the fact that there are examples of an allying with the 'other' speaks to the radical nature of the theatre, born from Oscar Méténier's desire to explore the real plight of the lower class. As the theatre commercialised after his departure, these elements perhaps became watered down, but elements and examples of Méténier's initial, radical ideas stayed. New French Extremity, less concerned with commercialisation, acts as a clear example of different directors' social and political views being clearly depicted onscreen. This is most evident in the defining films of the genre, from Noé to the Fab Five.

In conclusion, these moments in French horror history are clearly disparate, separated by more than they hold in common. Yet, as has been explored, they often comment on similar societal issues, issues which evidently have not been solved in the near-century separating the theatre and the movement. Certain Grand-Guignol plays, allying themselves with an 'other', implicitly call for a more equal society, one less tainted by prejudice. They hark back to Oscar Méténier's ideals and his sympathy for the downtrodden, the social castoffs. New French Extremity, emerging from a vicious

history of violence within France, and motivated by late-80s-onward intolerance and 'othering', clearly notes that the divides illustrated by French history remain to this day. France is a country shaped by the turmoil of its history, and the films of the New French Extremity embrace this, and demonstrate that there is still a long way to go to a just and equal society.

A Note On The Future

French horror on the whole certainly did not end with *Martyrs*. In fact, several films released in the few years after Laugier's effort are sometimes thrown in with New French Extremity, dependant on who is reviewing them. Films such as *Mutants* (2009), *Vertige* (*High Lane*, 2009) and *La meute* (*The Pack*, 2010) may contain aesthetic similarities in their excessive violence, and occasionally poke at broader societal questions, yet lack the inherent rebellion and cutting edge commentary of films like *I Stand Alone*, *Frontier(s)* and *Martyrs*.

The main thrust of New French Extremity, as noted, can be considered to run from the early-mid 1990s up until around 2008, depending on which films are considered to fit the umbrella term. In recent years however, a new wave of films has emerged that could be considered almost a revival of New French Extremity, and if not, something entirely new and exciting with full potential for further analysis. Films such as *Grave* (*Raw*, 2016), *Revenge* (2017) and even the horror-comedy *Girls With Balls* (2018) retain the female-driven aspects of New French Extremity, along with the movement's brutal violence, but deviate in ways that would make for a highly interesting follow-up

piece to this thesis. The veins of New French Extremity certainly run into these films. For example, director of *Girls With Balls*, Oliver Afonso, was art director on *Frontier(s)* and a special effects makeup artist on *Inside*. Regardless, with young and exciting directors such as Julia Ducournau, Coralie Fargeat and Afonso consistently emerging from France, and experienced hands such as Pascal Laugier still working, it is unlikely that this trend of unique French horror films will slow down anytime soon.

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