



VINCENT CASSEL

# THE MONK

A film by  
DOMINIK MOLL





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France, Spain / 2011 / 101 min. / 35 mm Shooting / 2.35 / DOLBY SRD

**WORLD SALES AND FESTIVALS**

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## SYNOPSIS

The rise and fall of a Capuchin Monk in 17<sup>th</sup> century Madrid.

Abandoned as a baby on the steps of a monastery and raised in strict Capuchin fashion, Ambrosio has become the most famous preacher in the country. While large crowds from all over the country come to hear his mesmerizing sermons, he's also bitterly envied for his success by certain fellow monks.

Convinced of his virtue and righteousness, Brother Ambrosio thinks he is immune to temptation...

Until obscure events start terrorizing the monastery. Could they be connected to the unexpected arrival of Valerio, an apprentice monk who has the miraculous gift to relieve Ambrosio's splitting headaches and hides his disfigured face under a wax mask?

Adapted from Matthew Gregory Lewis's eponymous cult classic Gothic novel.





## DOMINIK MOLL DIRECTOR

*As with many readers of THE MONK, did you first discover Lewis' novel as a teenager, reading it as a « forbidden fruit » ?*

No, I didn't read it as an adolescent, but about five years ago. I had heard of the novel and its sulphurous reputation; I knew that it caused quite a scandal when it had been published in 1796 – though I must say that today its scandalous aspect has faded. Incidentally, this is not the book's main draw ; today its subject matter seems much more playful and less shocking than for example certain of the works by the Marquis de Sade, one of Lewis' contemporaries.

*What exactly sparked your desire to make this into a movie ?*

First of all, the great pleasure derived from the narrative and its romanesque nature, relying on a mix of romanticism and the fantastical, with Faustian and Oedipal themes, its Spanish flavor as well as Shakespearian tones. Lewis mixes them all unabashedly and with such delight. One shouldn't forget that he was 19 when he wrote THE MONK ; and one can sense that he dives in headlong, no questions asked. It's this youthful passion that makes the novel so powerful, yet certainly also sets its limits.

Secondly, and just as important, is the visual force of the novel, or in the words of André Breton, « its power to conjure up images. » Lewis joyfully taps into English Gothic imagery, but also into that of Spanish Catholicism. In fact one can sense, despite his anti-catholic stance, a great fascination for such imagery. As if he were grateful to religion for providing such a wealth of both images and fiction. And I agree with him !

So one can say that I found in the novel the promise of both narrative and visual pleasure....In other words, the promise of true cinematic pleasure !

*It's the first time you try your hand at a period piece. Was it something you'd always wanted to do?*

I always told myself I'd never do a period piece. Too expensive – too restrictive,

too... everything ! Yet for quite some time, I felt like exploring things outside of the contemporary world. I'd thought about adapting Wilkie Collins' novel « Basil » – which is halfway between English Gothic and a detective novel, a twisted story of vengeance that is both terrifying and unsettling... Stories that held my attention had these kinds of elements.

And with THE MONK we're in a very particular kind of period piece – closer to Frankenstein or Dracula - a tale that ventures into both realms of dream and nightmare, and where mystery and imagination are more important than historical reconstruction and exactitude. In fact it is impossible to pin down the novel's timeline ; the book is teeming with anachronisms, unabashedly so. I appreciated this freedom, even if I did vast research about the Inquisition and Catholic Spain. I needed to immerse myself in historical fact in order to free myself from it. There are historical contradictions in the film such as Capuchin brothers living in a wealthy Cistercian monastery. But such choices serve the atmosphere of the film, which is more important than historical veracity. THE MONK is not a reconstruction of a real person's life. It is more « Don Quixote » than « Napoleon » ! That's precisely what drew me to it !

*Can the film be described as a Gothic drama ?*

One has to be careful when using the term « Gothic ». It's been used in so many contexts that it can lead to confusion. But in the sense of Gothic literature - the literature of terror fueled by dreams and nightmares – yes !

*The book itself is quite dense and seems complicated to adapt to the screen. How did you go about this?*

In the novel there are two separate parallel stories : that of Ambrosio in Spain and that of Agnes and her lover in Germany. Even geographically they are distinct. I was interested in Ambrosio's story.... So I could easily get rid of the other half of the book. What remained was organizing things around Ambrosio. Rather quickly with my first draft I tightened the storyline, resolving problems of construction, finding solutions to elements that worked in a novel but not in a movie.



For example, in the book Valerio didn't wear a mask but rather - because of acute shyness - hid his face in a hood. This wasn't tenable in a movie. I also liked the idea of a mask because it added a strange and troubling visual element.

What I found more difficult to adapt was the way characters are portrayed in the novel. In the book Ambrosio is vile, vain, full of himself and cowardly in the face of danger. He gives in to temptation at the very first glimpse of a breast ! Ultimately he is all façade. Through Ambrosio, Lewis settles his score with the Catholic church. Ambrosio becomes a caricature, a puppet we follow with irony, yet it is hard to feel any compassion for him. It's a fun read, but while adapting it, his limitations became palpable. It was at this point that I asked Anne-Louise Trividy to become involved in the writing process. Thanks to her work the characters gained depth and soul.

*At the start of the film the dialogue puts things in place. Ambrosio has his own destiny and personal conviction. This is a far cry from the schematic determinism of the novel.*

The main difference is that in the novel, Ambrosio is the victim of his own arrogance, of his vanity. In a way, what happens to him serves him right ! In the movie we are much closer to him. And the first scene – magnificently written by Anne-Louise – establishes Ambrosio as someone who exercises his profession with conviction, sincerity, and integrity. There is nothing false about him. He believes in what he does, he believes what he says. Whereas in the novel he didn't truly believe.

*The film doesn't lose its playful aspect. One feels your delight in playing with elements of the genre...*

The challenge was finding the balance between the intimate and the more spectacular elements of the genre. Therefore giving depth and truth to the characters without losing the element of face value – whether visual or narrative - that I enjoyed so much in the novel. I wanted to fully explore the visual wealth of Gothic and Catholic decorum : the devil, processions, Inquisition, crucifix, ghosts, cemeteries, tunnels, crows, centipedes, magical myrtle... Folklore, with the situations and the archetypal characters to go along with it. Mother superior – portrayed by Geraldine Chaplin with such relish – is the archetype of the cruel and heartless Abbess. We savour and delight in her cruelty. I also took great pleasure in working on the procession : deciding in what order characters appeared, the penitents, the 'man-candles' etc...

And also imagining this procession cross-edited with Ambrosio making his way to Antonia's bedroom. Or to have Lorenzo's serenade as a humorous counterpoint to the crimes Ambrosio has just committed. Such back and forth between the intimate and the spectacular are what create the film's distinctive atmosphere.

*Can you talk about the camera work and photography? Your tastes seem to take you to both a certain kind of classicism as well as visual experimentation.*

Our motto was : Anything goes ! I went through all the different techniques that could be interesting for the movie to convey the atmosphere I wanted – mostly traditional techniques, used during the era of silent movies : iris opening, double exposure, monochromatic images, light changes within a shot, matte-paintings. Yet without renouncing on more « modern » techniques such as a thermic camera. We worked a lot on contrasts (from very bright exteriors to very dense interiors), all the while softening the image with diffusion filters. All of this in order to go towards the romanesque, the atmosphere of mystery and imagination. I accumulated lots of pictorial references, not to copy them but to immerse myself in a specific world. Of course there were lots of Zurbaran, Velasquez and Goya paintings, but also Fuseli (for his Nightmare paintings), Gustave Doré's engravings (his illustrations for the Bible or for Don Quixote), José Ortiz Echagüe's photos of religious motifs from the turn of the twentieth century. Not to mention the film references : Alfred Hitchcock's «Vertigo», Brian de Palma's «Obsession», Murnau's «Nosferatu», Powell and Pressburger's «Black Narcissus» ... I encouraged Patrick Blossier, the Director of Photography, not to be afraid of artifice, to accentuate the imaginary side of the story.

*I would like to come back to the idea of restraint. It is also present in the acting, and we discover another side to Vincent Cassel, one that we hadn't suspected. He has a kind of touching candor, portraying Ambrosio with a deep inner life. Was Vincent Cassel as Ambrosio your idea ?*

The idea came from Michel Saint-Jean, the film's producer. Right away Michel said, « I only see one person who can play THE MONK – it's Cassel ». I was a bit reticent. First I was worried that Ambrosio had to be much younger. Today I don't know why I was so stuck on the age issue : I can't imagine anyone else but Vincent in the role ! And I probably was a little bit afraid of Vincent's status as well. But then again I found the idea of Vincent quite intriguing and challenging, and so we met. He had read a

rough draft, before Anne-Louise came on board. And he said he would like to do it. I let a year go by – the time it took for the rewrite – before getting back in touch with him. And again he said yes. And so I understood that he was ready to just go with it. That he trusted me, that he realized I was offering up something different than what he'd done in his previous work. And from the start our collaboration went extremely well. He really went in the direction I asked him to.

*How does one ask Vincent Cassel to act with restraint ?*

I remember that at our very first meeting, I asked him what he thought about the fact that most roles he had played were characters who didn't seem to ask themselves many questions. And all smiles, he replied « So you're asking me if I can doubt ?! » We laughed and we took it from there....

Very quickly he gave a name to the acting style I directed him to do : « German-Japanese minimalism » ! Because most of the time when he suggested a movement or gesture, I would answer, « No, don't move ! ». It was almost like a game between us. He would say that sitting motionless for three minutes was much more trying than very physical scenes. And to a certain extent that's what interested me : what happens when a ball of energy like Cassel is forced to stay still ? It has to generate internal tension, the controlled madness we referred to earlier. That is what I was seeking for Ambrosio. And in the scene where Vincent recites the psalm to Antonia – which is perhaps my favorite scene in the film. I find it is exactly this internal tension that renders him so deeply moving.





## VINCENT CASSEL AMBROSIO

When Dominik spoke to me about THE MONK I had two films to shoot and so couldn't imagine how I would be able to dive into such a project. But I'd seen his films and found them really fascinating. I had never before played a member of the clergy. It seemed obvious that I had to do it. I don't always have very good reasons to say yes or no to a film — it's a matter of desire. And in this case, I wanted to go for it.

*Did you know the novel ?*

I'm not an avid reader of Gothic literature. But I discovered the aura surrounding the book. I realized that many people had read it when they were young and had never forgotten it. . Buñuel had been interested in it. While I was shooting THE MONK I was also working with David Cronenberg [on «A Dangerous Method»] who said to me : « I love that book ! How fantastic to make it into a movie ! » And the character I was playing — Freud's student Otto Gross - was the exact opposite of THE MONK ; his motto was « Never repress anything ! » And so I had to play both characters at the same time : on one hand a monk who denies himself the pleasure of flesh and on the other hand a cocaine and sex addict. It was very interesting because for me it was the same subject : can you restrain yourself , can you hold yourself back ?

*How did you approach Ambrosio ?*

It was strange to interpret the main character yet at the same time feel like you're not the driving force behind the story. Ambrosio is constantly observing what's happening around him. He is victim of the supernatural, of destiny. It seemed to me that the story didn't come from him. Yet in the finished film that's not what happens,... Actually Ambrosio takes quite a bit of action. We just don't see him make the decisions. It's as if he was driven by some internal force.

*You talk about a character who is restrained, inhibited.*

Fortune hasn't favored Ambrosio: he never knew his parents, he was raised by Monks.... That's rough! He discovers sexuality at age 40 ! That can't make you a very balanced person !



I am convinced that the effect a film has on the audience is something that escapes those who make the movie. Yet in this case I realized that in heightening the asexual nature of the character, in keeping him withdrawn, the result is quite disturbing. It's a question of the gestural and non-gestural.... My arms never move... I am always speaking in whispers, or else in a learned softness compelled by the monastic system. It's much too constrained and ultimately has to explode.

*Do you feel that Ambrosio is a realistic character ?*

I find him much closer to reality than many 'hero' characters. He is very human. In the end, it's not about god or the devil, but just about life. Ambrosio has to face his own inner dialectic. He has no choice. And when he finally decides to act, he goes a thousand times further than any other - from the moment he first tastes flesh and thereby understands that his self-imposed religious regimen has failed to fulfill his life. Perhaps he could have been able to live this love more serenely.

*Are you sure of that ?*

Ok, fine, she was his sister.... But he was in love. In any case, it was all their mother's fault.

*... And he kills her !*

Yes.... It's all inextricably linked in such a way that it can only be a tragedy. The true moral of this story should be : « You cannot abandon your children ! » Seriously though, it ties up with something that I truly believe in : the only real duty that exists is neither religion nor politics. It is first and foremost to take care of your children ! The film therefore relates to something so simple, so accessible.

*In this film you have such new-found control and intensity.*

It was not easy at all. I'd previously acted in much more contemporary stories. Even in foreign languages I was able to have a certain kind of freedom. With Dominik it was much more complicated that I thought it would be. He was very attached to his text. Everything was very precisely written. He wanted to keep even the most convoluted lines exactly as scripted. I'd gotten out of the habit of doing that. In film we rarely have lines that merit being memorized down to the last comma. Often we energize and adapt lines to make them sound more natural, less written.







Dominik didn't agree with this at all ! He immediately told me and of course I corrected myself. I recited my lines with precision. I completely gave into his way of doing things, to draw out each moment. In the beginning, he forced me to do so. Then I let myself go in that direction – towards something extremely minimalist.

As soon as I would cast a glance he would say, « What're you doing there ? » « I don't know... » « Well don't do it, it's better without it ! » I tried to draw things out so he'd be pleased, but he always would say, « You turned your head too fast and you picked the object up from the table too quickly ». Nothing was done without thinking about it first. I felt like I was doing tai-chi during each take !

He completely slowed down my natural rhythm. I was forced to repress my natural acting style. But it was quite nice actually. At the end of the shoot I told him « I think I learned something with you. I learned to stretch out time. I discovered areas of acting that I didn't even know existed. » That's what he did in his other films, with Laurent Lucas for example, and the result on screen is magnificent. I learned to give into a style of acting that at first I wasn't too comfortable with.

Dominik has a very personal way of working - which is often the case with quality directors. I am not comparing Darren Aronofsky, Jan Kounen, David Cronenberg or Dominik. But he has a unique way of working. It's funny... he's a big guy, with a good sense of humor, he's always laughing. When he works, he's always very nice but at the same time he is very concentrated... When he's doing his thing, he can be quite formal. I would make fun of him while we were shooting : « German style ! let's do it German style ! » During the shoot we were so immersed in Gothic – with all the cemeteries and crucifixes - that at a certain point I couldn't take it anymore and I had to laugh. They're all just abominable symbols. The cold, the stone, crucified bodies, praying in pain... everything is so strict, so dry. But Dominik was the first one to crack up. I found that he was always ready to have a laugh.

*Interview by Harold Manning*







## DOMINIK MOLL

 DIRECTOR / WRITER

- 2011 **THE MONK**  
2005 **LEMMING**  
*Cannes Film Festival – Official Selection – In Competition*  
2000 **HARRY, HE'S HERE TO HELP**  
*Cannes Film Festival – Official Selection – In Competition*  
1993 **INTIMACY**  
1987 **THE GYNAECOLOGIST AND HIS SECRETARY** (Short)

 WRITER

- 2010 **Black Heaven** by Gilles Marchand



## FILMOGRAPHY

### VINCENT CASSEL

 AMBROSIO

- 2011 **A DANGEROUS METHOD** by David Cronenberg  
**BLACK SWAN** by Darren Aronofsky  
2010 **OUR DAY WILL COME** by Romain Gavras  
2009 **ADRIFT** by Heitor Dhalia  
**MESRINE : PUBLIC ENEMY NUMBER ONE**  
by Jean François Richet  
**MESRINE : DEATH INSTINCT** by Jean-François Richet  
2007 **EASTERN PROMISES** by David Cronenberg  
**OCEAN'S 13** by Steven Soderbergh  
2006 **SHEITAN** by Kim Chapiron  
**DERAILED** by Mikaël Hafstrom  
2004 **OCEAN'S 12** by Steven Soderbergh  
**SECRET AGENTS** by Frederic Schoendoerffer  
**BLUEBERRY** by Jan Kounen  
2002 **IRREVERSIBLE** by Gaspard Noé  
2001 **READ MY LIPS** by Jacques Audiard  
**BROTHERHOOD OF THE WOLF** by Christophe Gans  
2000 **THE CRIMSON RIVER** by Matthieu Kassovitz  
1997 **DOBERMANN** by Jan Kounen  
1995 **LA HAINE** by Matthieu Kassovitz



## DEBORAH FRANCOIS

 VALERIO

- 2011 **MEMORIES CORNER** by Audrey Fouché  
2010 **LONDON NIGHTS** by Alexis Dos Santos  
2009 **PLEASE, PLEASE ME !** by Emmanuel Mouret  
2008 **THE FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF YOUR LIFE**  
by Remi Bezançon  
**FEMALE AGENTS** by Jean-Paul Salomé  
2006 **THE PAGE TURNER** by Denis Dercourt  
2005 **THE CHILD** by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne

### SERGI LOPEZ

 THE DEBAUCHEE

- 2011 **DUBAÏ FLAMINGO** by Delphine Kreuter  
**THE PREY** by Eric Valette  
2010 **POTICHE (TROPHY WIFE)** by François Ozon  
2009 **HAPPY END** by Jean-Marie et Arnaud Larrieu  
**MAP OF THE SOUNDS OF TOKYO** by Isabel Coixet  
**LEAVING** by Catherine Corsini  
**RICKY** by François OZON  
2007 **THE HOUSE** de Manuel Poirier  
2006 **PAN'S LABYRINTH** by Guillermo del Toro  
2005 **TO PAINT OR MAKE LOVE** by Jean-Marie and Arnaud Larrieu  
**SOME KIND OF BLUE** by Alain Corneau  
2003 **JANIS AND JOHN** by Samuel Benchetrit  
**DIRTY PRETTY THINGS** by Stephen Frears  
2002 **HAIRSTYLIST WANTED** by Claude Duty  
2000 **HARRY, HE'S HERE TO HELP**  
1999 **AN AFFAIR OF LOVE** by Frédéric Fonteyne  
**EMPTY DAYS** by Marion Vernoux  
1997 **WESTERN** by Manuel Poirier  
1992 **ANTONIO'S GIRLFRIEND** by Antonio de Manuel Poirier





## THE NOVEL

It's in The Hague, at the age of 19, that Matthew Gregory Lewis wrote THE MONK in the space of 10 weeks - allegedly with the purpose of entertaining his mother. Published in March 1796, it caused strong indignation: the conservative critics lashed out, calling it blasphemous and immoral. The poet Coleridge declared that « if a parent saw THE MONK in the hands of a son or daughter, he might reasonably turn pale. »

The public ignored these warnings and THE MONK became an immediate success. It was reprinted in succession until 1798 when Lewis was forced to purge it of its most controversial passages. As a result, the uncensored first editions became much sought-after items and sold at high prices.

THE MONK's success was just as dazzling on the Continent as in England. In Germany, Hoffman was largely inspired by it to write THE DEVIL'S ELIXIR. In France, the Marquis de Sade sang its praises in his essay «Reflections on the Novel » in 1800. His influence on French Romantic writers such as Hugo, Balzac, or Mérimée is undeniable. The archdeacon Frolo, in Victor Hugo's THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE-DAME, is the spiritual son of Ambrosio.

THE MONK holds a special place in the English Gothic novel, a genre that had made the supernatural very popular, starting with Horace Walpole's THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO in 1764. Writers like Ann Radcliffe made her readers tremble at the depiction of chaste young girls fainting at the sight of ghosts in haunted Gothic castles. But in the end, the young girl always survives, the supernatural disappears and a rational ending prevails. With THE MONK, Lewis goes much further, bringing in the German influences : the supernatural is no longer an optical illusion – it truly exists. Satan becomes a real person and it is his direct intervention that causes the hero to turn to blasphemy and depravation. This leads to an even more revolutionary change : the explicit evocation of sexual impulses. Prudishness and chastity are tossed to the wind. And rather than concentrating the narrative on the innocent victim, Lewis focuses on a man too dark and too weak to foster any hope for redemption, be it from God or from the reader.

With THE MONK the novel of terror becomes a novel of evil.





## CAST

|                       |                 |
|-----------------------|-----------------|
| VINCENT CASSEL        | Ambrosio        |
| DÉBORAH FRANÇOIS      | Valerio         |
| JOSÉPHINE JAPY        | Antonia         |
| SERGI LOPEZ           | The Debauchée   |
| CATHERINE MOUCHET     | Elvira          |
| JORDI DAUDER          | Father Miguel   |
| GERALDINE CHAPLIN     | Mother Superior |
| ROXANE DURAN          | Sister Agnès    |
| FRÉDÉRIC NOAILLE      | Lorenzo         |
| JAVIVI GIL VALLE      | Brother Andrés  |
| PIERRE-FÉLIX GRAVIÈRE | Brother Iago    |
| MARTINE VANDEVILLE    | Leonella        |

## CREW

|                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| Director                  | DOMINIK MOLL   |
| Producer                  | MICHEL SAINT-JEAN  |
| Screenplay                | DOMINIK MOLL & ANNE-LOUISE TRIVIDIC  |
| Based on THE MONK by      | MATTHEW GREGORY LEWIS  |
| Original Music            | ALBERTO IGLESIAS   |
| Cinematographer           | PATRICK BLOSSIER   |
| Production Designer       | ANTXÓN GÓMEZ   |
| Costume Designer          | BINA DAIGELER  |
| Sound Engineer            | FRANÇOIS MAUREL  |
| Film Editor               | FRANÇOIS GEDIGIER & SYLVIE LAGER   |
| Sound Editor              | GÉRARD HARDY   |
| Re-recording mixer        | OLIVIER DÔ HUU   |
| Casting Director          | EMMANUELLE PREVOST   |
| 1st Assistant Director    | THIERRY VERRIER  |
| Production Manager        | STÉPHANE RIGA & JORDI BERENGUER  |
| Associate Producer        | ALVARO LONGORIA  |
| Produced by               | DIAPHANA FILMS AND MORENA FILMS  |
| In coproduction with      | EL MONJE, LA PELICULA, AIE, ESTRATEGIA AUDIOVISUAL<br>– RICARDO FERNÁNDEZ-DEU AND FRANCE 3 CINEMA              |
| With the participation of | CANAL +, FRANCE TELEVISIONS, CINECINEMA,<br>TELEVISIO DE CATALUNYA, SA   |
| In association with       | SOFICA COFICUP – BACKUP FILMS, SOFICA SOFICINEMA 6,<br>LA BANQUE POSTALE IMAGE 4, UNI ETOILE 8, A PLUS IMAGE 2 |
| With the participation of | EURIMAGES, CNC, RÉGION LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON,<br>ICAA, ICO, MFI, 120 FILMS                                      |



I AM WORN OUT,  
MY BONES ARE BROKEN,  
MY SOUL IS IN ANGUISH.  
TURN AND DELIVER ME,  
SAVE ME FOR THE SAKE OF YOUR LOVE.

ON MY BED I REMEMBER YOU,  
MY SOUL CLINGS TO YOU,  
YOUR RIGHT HAND UPHOLDS ME.

DELIVER ME FROM EVILDOERS,  
THEY LIE IN WAIT FOR ME,  
AT NIGHT THEY RETURN,  
THEY PROWL ABOUT THE CITY,  
GROWLING UNTIL THEY HAVE HAD THEIR FILL.  
YOU LIFT ME OUT OF THE SLIMY PIT,  
OUT OF THE MUD AND MIRE.

AND I WILL SING OF YOUR STRENGTH,  
OF YOUR LOVE IN THE MORNING.  
OH MY STRENGTH, I SING PRAISE TO YOU,  
FOR YOU ARE MY FORTRESS,  
THE GOD OF MY LOVE.

FROM THE BOOK OF PSALMS







NO ONE IS IMMUNE TO TEMPTATION.  
NOT EVEN HIM.

memento  
films