VINCENT CASSEL

THE MONK

A film by DOMINIK MOLL
The rise and fall of a Capuchin Monk in 17th 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 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?

SYNOPSIS

Adapted from Matthew Gregory Lewis’s eponymous cult classic Gothic novel.
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 first 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 it's 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 melancholy 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 both terrifies 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 brimming with anachronisms, unabashedly so. I appreciated this freedom, even if I did research about the Inquisition and Catholic Spain. I needed to immerse myself in historical fact in order to stay true to the text. There are historical contradictions in the film such as Capuchin brothers living in a wealthy Cistercian monastery. But such choices were the atmosphere in the film, which are more important than historical veracity. THE MONK is not a reconstruction of a real person's life; it is a 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 an oppressive story around Ambrosio. Rather quickly with my first draft I sharpened the storyline, resolving problems of construction, finding solutions to elements that worked in a novel but not in a movie.
deciding in what order characters appeared, the penitents, the 'man-candles' etc... with such relish – is the archetype of the cruel and heartless Abbess. We savour characters to go along with it. Mother superior – portrayed by Geraldine Chaplin crows, centipedes, magical myrtle… Folklore, with the situations and the archetypal so much in the novel. I wanted to fully explore the visual wealth of Gothic and Catho- without losing the element of face value – whether visual or narrative - that I enjoyed tatcular elements of the genre. Therefore giving depth and truth to the characters The challenge was finding the balance between the intimate and the more spec-
sincerity, and integrity. There is nothing false about him. He believes in what he
establishes Ambrosio as someone who exercises his profession with conviction,
destiny and personal conviction. This is a far cry from the schematic determinism At the start of the film the dialogue puts things in place. Ambrosio has his own
doors, it's too easy to fall into the trap of trying to un-wrap him. in the writing process. Thanks to her work the characters gained depth and soul.

The main difference is that in the novel, Ambrosio is the victim of his own arrogance,
of a mask because it added a strange and troubling visual element.
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 Vincent quite intriguing and challenging, and so we met. He had read a
and I probably was a little bit afraid of Vincent’s status as well. But then again I found
« I only see one person who can play THE MONK – it’s Cassel ». I was a bit reticent.

The idea came from Michel Saint-Jean, the film’s producer. Right away Michel said, "Can you talk about the camera work and photography? Your tastes seem to take
the idea of Vincent quite intriguing and challenging, and so we met. He had read a
motto was: Anything goes! I went through all the different techniques that
you to both a certain kind of classicism as well as visual experimentation. Can you talk about the camera work and photography? Your tastes seem to take
can be interesting for the movie to convey the atmosphere I wanted – mostly
danger. He gives in to temptation at the very first glimpse of a breast! Ultimately he
truth to the characters. This was a crucial decision. In the process, the atmosphere and the spectrum are what create the film’s distinctive atmosphere.

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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 even 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’s 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 movies. Yet in this case I realized that in heightening the asexual nature of the character, in keeping him withdrawed, the result is quite disturbing; it’s a question of the pastoral and non-pastoral. My arms never move…. I am always speaking in whispers, or else I talk without intentionally making the monastic sign. It’s much too constrained and ultimately has its epochs.

Do you feel that the Ambrosio is a realistic character ?
I find the film much closer to reality than many other characters. He is very human. In the end, it’s not about the devil or God. And what about 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 ever before - turns the moment he first tasted flesh and thereby understands that his self-imposed religious regimen has failed to fulfill his life. Perhaps he shouldn’t have been able to give his time more seriously.

Are you sure of that?
Oh, 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 inexorably linked in such a way that it can only be a tragedy. The true meaning of the story should be : « You cannot abandon your division ! » Seriously thought, it ties up with something that I truly believe in : the story really deals with this theme, and the kick is 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 I was much more complicated that I thought it would be. He was very attached to his text. Everything was very precisely written. We had to keep even the most convoluted lines exactly as scripted. I got used out of the habit of doing that. In film we always have lines that aren’t being invested down in the last corner. 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 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. After a while the directors told me I think I learned something with you. I learned to stretch out time. I discovered a sense 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 Daniel Aronefsky, Jean Klouzal, David Cronenberg or Dominik. But he has a unique way of working, it's unique. 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's very concentrated. When he's doing his thing, you can be quite formal. I would make fun of him when we were shooting – he's German style! I love it. I think that the director was very impressed with 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.
SERGI LOPEZ

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DIRECTOR / WRITER

2011 THE MONK

2005 LEMMING

Cannes Film Festival – Official Selection – In Competition

2008 HARRY, HE’S HERE TO HELP

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1987 THE GYNAECOLOGIST AND HIS SECRETARY (Short)

DEBORAH FRANCOIS

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MESRINE : PUBLIC ENEMY NUMBER ONE by Jean-François Richet

LEAVING by Jean-François Richet

2007 EASTERN PROMISES by David Cronenberg

OCEAN’S 13 by Steven Soderbergh

2006 SHEETAN by Kim Chapiron

DERAILLED by Mikail Hafstrom

2004 OCEAN’S 12 by Steven Soderbergh

SECRET AGENTS by Frederic Schoendoerffer

BLUEBERRY by Jean-Karim Hachem

2002 IRRESISTIBLE by Gaspard Noé

2001 READ MY LIFE by Jean-Paul Salomé

BROOKERWOOD OF THE WOLF by Christophe Gans

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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 successive weeks, a new edition issued 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, Hoffmann 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 Frollo, 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 depravity. This leads to an even more revolutionary change: the victim is no longer innocent. 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.

THE NOVEL
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 evil doers, 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.