

Critique

Pradip Biswas

**Palme D' Or Winner *Titane*: A Delta Film**

Julia Ducournau is more or less not a familiar name or a director who can be discussed metaphorically. The film where the woman f\*\*\*s the car. This is the way the director asks us to know *Titane*. Julia Ducournau's second feature was awarded the top prize at Cannes last year. Note that many a bizarre thing takes place which was never seen before *Titane*. The moment in question – which does indeed see Ducournau's protagonist writhe around nude inside a speed-oriented Cadillac; to complicate, she shows the automobile bouncing vigorously of its own accord in mutual ecstasy; it is played out in the film's first 15 minutes. We have 95 minutes to go. And as soon as the next scene starts rolling, the car sex becomes just one of many indelible moments, ridiculously. Topsy-turvy sex play is paraded to one's relish.

"I think that shock value is something people remember more easily," says Ducournau in a heavy accent over Zoom. The 38-year-old filmmaker is speaking from a dark, infamous room. Her face is illuminated eerily, so the white light of the screen takes a patchy look in front of her. She's wearing a plain black Prada shirt with a small triangular logo emblazoned on her chest. A lit cigarette surrounded by a garland of chunky silver rings is in her hand. In conversation, she wears an icy nonchalance that suggests very few things in this world can shock her.

With Ducournau, there is no eagerness to please – or pacify—the cinephiles.

*Titane* tells the story of Alexia (newcomer Agathe Rousselle), a killer on the run who is carnally attracted to cars. A funky subject indeed. That is scratching the chromatic skin of the surface, but, to be keen, no logline could do this film justice. *Titane* was born into headlines. Its release was accompanied by reports of people leaving the cinema in disgust and indignation. This has never been seen in Cannes with any films so far. Viewers were fainting and vomiting, nauseating sight. Director Ducournau says she's witnessed neither herself. *Titane* was deemed the "Most Gross Movie" ever. It was the "Most Shocking Movie" ever. It was the "Weirdest Movie Ever". Critics claim the fullness of *Titane* was in danger of being flattened by three-word superlatives.

Ducournau, as a maker, is not worried about that, though they said, "I expected it a little. But I can't dictate what people want to remember of my film or what they want to see in it. The way you make it yours is something I can't do anything about." Amazingly she sounds less welcoming of these other interpretations than she is resigned to their inevitable fallout existence.

“I think that shock value is something people remember more easily,” says Ducournau in a heavy French accent over Zoom. The 38-year-old filmmaker is speaking from a dark, nondescript room. Her face is illuminated, eerily so, by the white light of the screen before her. She’s wearing a plain black Prada shirt, the brand’s small triangular logo emblazoned on her chest. A lit cigarette surrounded by a garland of chunky silver rings is in her hand. In conversation, she wears a bemused nonchalance that suggests very few things in this world can shock her. With Ducournau, there is no eagerness to please – or pacify.

*Titane* tells the story of Alexia (newcomer Agathe Rousselle), a killer on the run who is carnally attracted to cars. That is scratching the chrome surface, but, to be truthful, no logline could do this film justice. *Titane* was born into headlines. Its release was accompanied by reports of people leaving the cinema in disgust and indignation. Viewers were fainting and vomiting. *Titane* was deemed the “Most Gross Movie” ever. It was the “Most Shocking Movie” ever. It was the “Weirdest Movie Ever”. The fullness of *Titane* was in danger of being flattened by three-word superlatives.

Ducournau wasn’t worried about that, however. “I expected it a little. But I can’t dictate what people want to remember of my film or what they want to see in it,” she says. She added: “The way you make it yours is something I can’t do anything about.” However, she sounds less welcoming of these other interpretations than she does resign to their inevitable existence.

It is gathered that the filmmaker is used to headlines by now. “To be perfectly honest, they’ve been going on since *Raw*,” she says, taking a drag on her cigarette and rolling her eyes. *Raw* was her debut feature, released in 2016. It’s a tender *bildungsroman* film about a veterinary student who develops a hunger for human flesh after ingesting raw rabbit kidneys as part of a hazing ritual. Cinemas are said to have handed out barf bags as a marketing ploy.

Said Julia Ducournau: “For me, sexuality is in the body. And you should certainly not be a victim. It’s not something you go through, it’s something you

are active in, and it’s perfectly okay. Your main aim should be to reach climax because if it’s not your main aim, you’re never going to climax. So, I wanted to show you: “ a sexuality that is not apologetic, shameless, in the body, in the now and aiming at the climax.” The film equally thus falls from liking from the general viewers. This is the sad part of the film *Titane*.

The fact is Julia Ducournau, a woman director from France, has come to bag the highest honour, i.e. the *Golden Palm*, for her second film *Titane*. Anyone desiring to hook on to a freaky, shock blast from this film can finally revel in the radical weird-out of Julia Ducournau’s work. The long-awaited second film from the director of the 2016 French horror hit *Raw*, the *Titane*, is out there under strict scanner as the film shows too many sex orgies and sex delta, which is likely to bruise many film buffs attending the movie. Julia is not Clare Denis and therefore is not expected to weave the film subtly, marking it with topical sensibility. *Titane* is just a sexually schematic film, often scatological, running through contrived and cunning corridors; it shocks the film buffs to terminal boredom.

*Titane* is only good, like the proverbial curate's egg. The rest is to be understood. Julia Ducournau goes amok to present anything and narrative that only talks of sex and sexual posers with shocks. Unfortunately, it’s in so many hexagonal directions that viewers may quickly give up on gleaning any logic and just go with its increasingly febrile dream-like flow. The film is so crammed with undeveloped possibilities, mock-bold as they all are, that it makes for a frustrating spectacle. In many a way, although one you can never take your eyes off, *Titane* gives nothing in terms of cinema and sensibility. Following *Raw*'s female perspective and confrontational intensity, *Titane* is bound to find an avid following among fans of extreme cinema, lovers of hyper-icky body horror and adepts of post-modern theory alike. At the same time, a lead role from stalwart Vincent Lindon should ensure his popularity.

There is another story here for us. French writer-director Julia Ducournau’s debut feature, *Raw*, is set to enthrall and shock viewers with its darkly hilarious tale of cannibalism and sex orgies among

trainee vets. The film, which won the Sutherland Award for best directorial debut at 2016's BFI London Film Festival, follows 17-year-old vegetarian Justine as she navigates her first week of veterinary college.

Aside from the regular teenage traumas of meeting new people and grappling with her harp sexuality, Justine finds she has an unexpected taste for flesh. She has a mischievous older sister Alexia (Ella Rumpf), to guide and sometimes hinder her progress.

The coming-of-age trope may have been done to death on screen. Still, this vital and meaty film is invigorated by some powerful and occasionally stomach-pinching scenes of carnage, a vibrant take on teenagers-away-from-home unit days and a rough depiction of bourgeois sexuality. This is how her film *Raw* was consumed by the film buffs of 1916 in London. Award or no award, *Raw* does not transcend the time bar; its fate is somewhere sealed.

A narrative that seems like a musical *fugue* through serial killer tropes and the Cronenbergian gynaeco-Gothic, *Titane* takes its name from the metal *titanium* used in surgical prostheses. A prelude shows a car crash involving a young girl named Alexia and her father, after which he requires the implantation of a metal plate in her head.

The director goes flash-forward a few years, and the metal seems to have had an odd effect on her. Played as an adult by strikingly uninhibited newcomer Agathe Rousselle, Alexia now works as a dancer at motor trade shows, one of several young women who do cheesy, cheeky, erotic dances over the bonnets of still cheesier cars. Heavily-tattooed tough girl Alexia – on her chest, 'Love Is a Dog From Hell' – is soon shown as she has a way of dealing with unwelcome male attentions, while a sapphic moment with a fellow dancer also brings out her spiky side.

Meanwhile, Alexia's most intense physical relationship is with one of the showroom cars, a flashy confection with flames, and a backseat night of mechanical passion leads to strange transformations in her body.

Julia Ducournau is a little crazy to structure an odd build-up – and a perhaps emotional shift of

tone into homicidal farce with a dash of De Palma;– Alexia goes on the run and decides to change her identity. Cutting her hair and performing a radical act of impromptu auto-rhinoplasty. She does not stop here and presents herself as a boy; she again forms an increasingly perverse father-son bond with Vincent (Lindon), the troubled, body-pumping, steroid-shooting den daddy to a squadron of firefighters – whose all-male dance sessions suggest a flashier tribute to Claire Denis's homoerotic images of the Foreign Legion in *Beau Travail*.

The film gets madder and out of decency as it proceeds; Alexia and her daddy are ever more wild-eyed – and overall, there's not much of what you'd call a recognisably human touch. Although a brief appearance by Myriem Akheddiou, as Vincent's ex, brings a welcome breath of emotive nuance. But looking for realistic character representation is nowhere to be found. The film takes the viewers for the ride; it topples at many points and yet is made to overshadow us.

New find Rousselle, who physically and emotionally pushes herself to audacious limits – and who and using a word throughout – is an extraordinary presence; her angular features and intense glare working to ferociously imposing effect, especially under the torrid expressionistic lighting of returning *Raw*. A physically and emotionally pumped-up Lindon, meanwhile, is the solemn monolithic presence we're used to; but where he usually uses his glowering looks and imposing bulk of reassuring effect. Here the film projects an entirely new disturbance in a way that proves both unsettling and oddly jumbled up.

*Titane* is thematically oddball and schematic; it is crabby and ludicrous. Indeed, fans and critics alike will have a ball picking over its themes of gender fluidity, toxic masculinity, female desire and the kind of trans-human-cyborg theory associated with thinker Donna Haraway. By the time we reach an apocalyptic *payoff*, *Titane* has skated on and off the rails several times with crude abandon. You miss the combination of bravado and control that made *Raw* work so well. Still, the deranged cocktail of outrage, excess, conceptual ferocity and sheer

silliness on display here would make you gasp – and occasionally petrify.

When it came to creating a morally disagreeable character, Ducournau wanted to find a way to keep audiences relating to her and engaged in her story. She uses *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* as an example, saying, “It is incredibly remarkable in the way it bends the audience’s morals. [...] Henry is a horrible character, a serial killer, and he doesn’t have any empathy whatsoever. Still, compared to Otis’ relationship with his sister, you root for Henry when he says, ‘Don’t touch her.’ And suddenly, as an audience, your morals are completely twisted.

She said: “Why a veterinary school? Because cannibalism in the medical school would have been too easy: Justine would have gone to the morgue every evening. And I didn’t want to show her eating corpses all the time. The veterinary school allows the parallel between the human being and the animal. My mother is a gynaecologist, and my father a dermatologist, which explains a lot in regard to the peeling of the plot.”

Julia Ducournau made waves when she became the second woman to win the coveted Palme d’Or at Cannes Film Festival. She was awarded the prize for her second feature, 2021’s *Titane*. After impressing critics with her debut *Raw*, a coming-of-age tale about a girl’s desire to taste human flesh, *Titane* received even greater acclaim.

The film follows Alexia, a dancer with a titanium plate inside her head from a childhood car accident. Frequently performing erotic routines at car shows, Alexia goes on a killing spree after a man makes unwanted advances towards her. This leads her to assume the identity of a missing boy, despite a growing pregnancy becoming increasingly hard to disguise.

As bizarre as the film sounds, *Titane* is one of modern cinema’s most jaw-breaking film horrors. Upon the film’s release, critics were quick to draw comparisons to the master of body horror, David Cronenberg, more specifically, his psychosexual drama *Crash*. However, Ducournau asserts that *Crash* was not an inspiration for her film.

The director shared, “I knew already when I was writing that this was going to happen, but at the same time, it’s so different; it’s not even the same POV and not the same energy, and that’s not even the same intention. Obviously, Cronenberg is someone journalists will always ask me about because of how foundational it has been for me. And it will always be. But simultaneously, you can’t make a good scene by trying to mimic someone else’s scene.”

Ducournau looked at films for technical inspiration instead of thematic essence. She told the *Los Angeles Times*. “With the forest scene, I knew I wanted a very artificial light to it. And we both had just seen *1917*, which is outstanding in terms of technique. It’s amazing, the lights and the camera movements in this. I love this film. And so, we decided to go for something artificial, like the burning city in *1917*.”

She also noted that she takes technical inspiration from paintings. When filming *Titane*, she looked to Magritte’s ‘*The Empire of Light*’, Winslow Homer’s ‘*Summer Night*’ and the works of Caravaggio.

When creating a morally disagreeable character, Ducournau wanted to find a way to keep audiences relating to her and engaged in her story. She uses *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* as an example, saying, “It is incredibly remarkable in the way it bends the audience’s morals. [...] Henry is a horrible character, a serial killer, and he doesn’t have any empathy whatsoever. Still, compared to Otis’ relationship with his sister, you root for Henry when he says, ‘Don’t touch her.’ And all of a sudden, as an audience, your morals are completely twisted. You feel empathy for Henry at this moment when you were horrified by him from the start. I think that’s brilliant.”

To help audiences connect to serial killer Alexia, the director decided “to make viewers relate to her body. [...] You feel her fatigue when she has the whole killing spree in the house. [...] It’s the first time that you can bond with her.

In a word, *Titane* sounds stilted, overdone to terminal boredom.

***Pradip Biswas is a Member of FIPRESCI-India.***