*Amer.* Dir. Hélène Cattet & Bruno Forzani. Perf. Cassandra Forêt, Charlotte Eugène-Guibbaud, Marie Bos. Anonymes Films/ Tobina Film/ Canal +, 2009, Film.

*Amer (Bitter)* is a great piece of overly stylized, giallo-inspired filmmaking, full of spirit and verve and almost entirely lacking in story. I cannot recommend it highly enough. *Amer* contains the best elements of the work of Dario Argento; of the atmosphere-rich horror films of the last ten years; and of high-gloss European art cinema.

Directors Cattet and Forzani display a huge amount of filmmaking acumen here, and yet they have dispensed almost totally with plot. Therein lays the joy of this gem, once you have come to terms with the film language at work. The first time I saw this film, I could not stand it because I was completely confused. But something about it nagged at me and several weeks later I went back and looked at it again, only to be bowled over by it, stunned that I had totally missed its joys on first viewing.

These joys include the audacious use of color, sound, and editing, alongside extreme close-ups, dizzying camera angles, and a complete refusal to make an "easy" horror film. The color palette shifts between the three sections of the film, dominated in the first section by blacks, whites, and browns; in the second by purples, reds, and blues; and in the third by deep blues and blacks. Color of course reflects mood and tone in this as in so many other horror and giallo films. The first section grapples with purity and youth confronted with sex, death, and decay, so the whites clash with the browns and the blacks. The bridge between the first and second sections is full of psychedelic splashes of color and then the revelation of brilliant sunlight outside Ana's (Marie Bos') family mansion. Section two, characterized by a fairly abstract (and largely benign) treatment of a teenage girl's sexual awakening, is full of lush reds (especially Ana's lips and her mother's hat), skin tones (often Ana's skin), complemented by the soft blues of the sea and the delicate purple of Ana's dress. Even in this part, however, black sneaks in to suggest decay and invasion, as when a black ant crawls from Ana's belly button. The final section circles back to the mood of tension, fear, and death from the first section, but here with deeper blues and blacks, enhanced by blue filters.

The satisfactions are different in each of the three parts. In the first part, the six-year old Ana (Cassandra Forêt) must deal with the darkness

and mystery of the family mansion. She encounters what seems to be the corpse of her badly decomposing grandfather and tries to avoid a hooded figure that roams the house. Images of eyes, especially Ana's, dominate here, and suggest not just her eavesdropping on different family members, but of her being watched, by the family, by the hooded figure, and by the audience. This section of the film ends with a dizzying and thoroughly disorientating psychedelic series of lighting effects. This is Ana vulnerable without a sexual dimension.

In the second part, visually the most straightforward of the three, the teenage Ana (Charlotte Eugène-Guibbaud) walks into town with her mother and then encounters a motorcycle gang. The camerawork is daring but not disorienting here. The viewer is also blasted by an idiosyncratic mix of Seventies music. Boys and men look at Ana throughout the sequence, reinforcing the theme of voyeurism. Even the breeze could be a sexual threat, continuously ruffling the bottom of Ana's short purple dress, revealing white underwear for just a few frames.

In the final section of the film, everything is over-the-top and Argentoesque chaos as the adult Ana (Marie Bos) first extricates herself from a claustrophobic train and then is driven to her abandoned mansion in a taxi by a leather clad driver. She wanders around the abandoned and crumbling place and takes a bath. She is attacked and murdered (maybe) by a mysterious man (maybe the taxi driver). All of the strands of the very slight plot unravel here, gleefully and mischievously, as all of the hints of sex throughout the film are finally sublimated by razor blades dancing on eyelashes and copious amounts of blood. After Ana is stabbed on a cliff overlooking the sea (has she stabbed herself?), the action cuts to her cold dead body, pale and full of gooseflesh, in a morgue.

The film is about more than sexual maturation and sexual threat. It is about the fetishistic gaze of the camera on women's body parts, but also the gaze on spaces like old mansions and even older walled towns. It also succeeds in demonstrating that the horror genre can move in a different and more abstract direction while still remaining entertaining. True tension and terror need not come solely from plot, but also from sound, color, and sheer overpowering style. Indeed, *Amer* is a film which may propel the horror genre onto a higher and more sophisticated plane.

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