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Cannes 2016: Raw (Review)

A car drives quickly down a country road. A figure approaches from the opposite side. The camera looks back – she has disappeared. Not a moment later, the figure leaps from the roadside, sending the car and its driver crashing into a tree. The damage is fatal.

We revisit this scenario later in *Raw*, the buzz-laden, feature-length debut of the French/Belgian film's helmer Julia Ducournau. She's a director who Semaine de la Critique curator Charles Tesson described as the epitome of the festival's '50+5' edition, as she visited five years ago with her short debut *Junior* and returned to the same strand with her first feature-length. But to call *Raw* the epitome of anything is to do it a serious injustice. A deformed and caustic hazing movie, it takes the stereotypes of college education, hikes the tension up to one million and then splatters them like pig guts across the auditorium floor.

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als/) The film lets us follow in the blood-stained footsteps of Justine, a teenage girl who arrives at her first week of veterinary school a die-hard vegetarian. Having stemmed from a family of them (including her fellow vet-school-going sister), she's forced to turn her back

to her views when she faces her first-week initiation, chewing a rabbit's kidney served raw with a quick swig of vodka. It sets off a crimson red string of events that Justine can hardly control, forcing her cravings to turn towards raw uncooked flesh of *any* kind.

Almost from the onset, we lick sweat from the skin of the narcotised college kids in the scintillating underground party scenes. Lathered in nuclear shades of yellow and green paint, our protagonist dodges fornicating, full on party people; a carnivorous sort. It's head-thumpingly loud and borderline grotesque, but the definition of 'grotesqueness' is soon to switch. What starts out looking a little 'Spring Breakers' winds up resembling an intelligent, semi-subdued version of Mitchell Lichtenstein's 'Teeth'.

Ducournau refuses to let the camera shy away from Raw's most visceral, stomach-churning moments. Whether we're watching a girl's bikini wax go agonisingly pear shaped, or the skin peel from a human finger like a flimsy layer of cellophane between an eager set of teeth, everything is on show from start to agonising finish. The girl forced to confront these daring and disgusting scenarios is Garance Marelliel, a young French actress (and previous Ducournau collaborator) who too makes her feature debut in the film. There's no time for her to dip her toes in. Instead, she's thrown into the murky and mysterious deep end, faced with full frontal nudity, sex scenes and a lethal set of incisors that could tear the face off of the entire cast. With her poised, slightly smize-ready demeanour, she feels like a Continental version of 'The Diary of a Teenage Girl' star Bel Powley; a girl also destined for great things.

Strikingly original and teeming with talented performers, Raw carries a distinct air of being 'this year's It Follows', another horror that left the Semaine with huge praise. If all goes as it should, Raw has the potential to replicate that picture's runaway, sleeper success.



Raw premiered in the Semaine de la Critique during the 69th Festival de Cannes

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