



## Cannes 2016 – Raw (Julia Ducournau)

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Sometimes it's just better to be a vegetarian.

*Raw*, playing in Critics' Week, opens with an eerie scene: a girl walks along a quiet country road. As an oncoming car reaches her, she steps onto the road. The car veers, hits her, then crashes into a tree. The girl gets back on her feet, the music swells ominously as she walks towards the car, and then...

Cut to Justine, the protagonist of Julia Ducournau's sophomore film *Raw*. Raised strictly vegetarian by her parents, things are about to take a strong left turn for her when she enrolls in veterinary college, just like her parents and her older sister Alexia (Ella Rumpf), who is still a senior there. During a freshman hazing ritual, she is forced to eat a raw rabbit kidney, and soon after she starts noticing behavioral changes in herself. Meat certainly looks better all of a sudden. Any meat...

*Raw* is a coming-of-age story at its heart. In her first weeks at college, Justine changes from an innocent, reserved girl to a self-confident young woman who isn't afraid to bite back a little when pushed. That she takes 'biting back' quite literally doesn't change the fact that the film is mainly about this transformation. Played with confidence by Garance Marillier, whose small physique helps her in portraying Justine's early almost-childlike appearance, she gets feral rather quickly after her first taste of meat, and Marillier manages the change on body language and piercing glances alone in a very physical role.

What makes *Raw* stand out from your average gory horror flick is its morbid, dark humor and its willingness to not shy away from morally ambiguous, to say the least, actions by its protagonist and her friends. About halfway through the film, the audience will realize just exactly what happened in that opening scene, and no matter how sweet and desperate the frail Justine may be, her actions aren't always justifiable. It gives *Raw* a sharp edge, and precisely because it wraps this edge in ink-black humor, the film will leave its viewers uneasy when they step back and think about what they are watching. *Raw* is an amoral tale that dares you to root for a dubious protagonist. Films like these are rare (an example would be *Alléluia*, in the Quinzaine two years ago, which incidentally also starred Laurent Lucas, Justine's father here) and should be cherished, because they let us explore our darker side.

On the side, *Raw* manages to tackle some other themes as well. Its atypical portrayal of Justine's gay roommate Adrien (Rabah Naït Oufella) is refreshing. The practice of hazing, here smartly used as a tool to instill sympathy for Justine in the audience, is effectively criticized. *Raw* is smarter than it looks at first glance, and Ducournau's sharp writing keeps the viewer on edge, as she pushes her audience towards Justine every time she threatens to lose our sympathy.

Owing a lot to other directors who do not shy away from a little body gore from time to time (think David Cronenberg, a big influence for Ducournau), the film wears its heart on its bloody sleeve. Shot for a modest budget, the makeup work is as impressive as it is gruesome. DP Ruben Impens (probably best known for his work on Felix van Groeningen's *The Broken Circle Breakdown*) keeps the lighting hard most of the time, providing for deep shades and an eerie, cold look. His work in an early party scene, where the camera is constantly on Justine's tail as she searches for her sister, is impressive and immersive. The music by Jim Williams (who has worked on several Ben Wheatley films) is effective in conjuring up foreboding dread and raw carnality.

Though the language barrier and its straight genre upbringing will prevent this from breaking out beyond francophone territories, *Raw* might be a good bet for festivals with more adventurous programming. Places like TIFF or IFFR should take note, as this has all the makings of a breakout hit with their audiences. In the meantime, Ducournau presents herself as an assured directorial talent whose entry in this year's Critics' Week is a nice stepping stone.



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