

Wasteland

Issue #19

Hidden Frights



Features

Repulsion

1965, Roman Polanski
Words by Emma Olsson

Let's Scare Jessica to Death

1971, John Hancock
Words by Jessica Moore

There Will Be Blood

2007, Paul Thomas Anderson
Words by Charlotte Mansfield

Dominion

2018, Chris Delforce
Words by Jonny Rogers



Repulsion

Words by Emma Olsson



Many everyday horrors can be attributed to life in London. Air quality is poor. People push and shove their way through the miserable circus of public transport. Rain causes leaks and floods in Victorian flats. Strangers appear at every corner, the threat of violence thick in the air. This is just to name a few grievances.

Carol, a young Belgian manicurist living with her older sister, tries her best to stave off the city's persistent intrusions. At home, she is safe. Curtains can be drawn, doors locked and later barricaded. Time passes with the ticking of a clock and the only outdoor noise that filters in is the ringing of church bells from a neighbouring convent; city sounds are not able to pierce the apartment's protective walls.

Repulsion shows us the pains of living in a big city through the eyes of one of its unwilling martyrs. Carol is not prepared for the mayhem, for the daily street harassment and lecherous landlords. She did not ask for it. She carefully creates her nest: a dark, cramped womb of a South Kensington flat. Outside threatens, but inside promises peace. When her sister's adulterous lover starts making regular appearances, the equilibrium she has worked so hard to achieve begins to

wobble. The man's razor appears in the bathroom. His foreign toothbrush becomes a weapon, threatening Carol with its otherness. Her sister decides to go away with the man on holiday and Carol intuits that she has already reached her own personal breaking point. When she begs her sister to stay, she is pleading for one last chance at stability, for the womb to remain intact.

Carol responds to her sister's departure by staying home for three days. When she eventually returns to work, her colleagues show concern. One recommends she go see a film to cheer her up, and in her sisterly presence, Carol even manages to laugh. Then the mention of a boyfriend pulls her back into a catatonic state.

Men. Their laughs, their comments. Hands reaching for something that isn't theirs. Ever present in Carol's nightmares is the reaching and grabbing, hands groping through the walls of her apartment like enemies advancing towards a fortress. A man has been pursuing Carol. The woman from across the hall catches them in a tense interaction and she lingers by the door. She senses the distress and is torn between intervening and walking away, minding her own business. In

the end, indecisiveness wins her over and she is stuck as a petulant eavesdropper.

This, the film posits, is another one of London's horrors: its inhabitants' perpetual bystanderism. Later, when Carol's sister arrives back from her trip to find the aftermath of her psychological demise, tenants waltz in and out of the flat without warning or welcome. They don't want to help, only observe the spectacle.

Repulsion is the first of Roman Polanski's Apartment Trilogy, a series of films that interrogate horror in confined places. The second film in the trilogy, *Rosemary's Baby*, also deals with the anxieties of city living, where nosy neighbours and apartment rubbernecks are given sinister motives.

In *Rosemary's Baby*, neighbours play a pivotal role in the breakdown of its protagonist, but in *Repulsion* they are just another facet to the quotidian horror. They are one with the leaks, the cracks in the walls, the licentious men and unwelcome visitors. They are part of what makes the city so inhospitable to someone as committed to her own preservation as Carol. The film ends by illuminating a darkened family photograph. In it, a young Carol gazes into the distance, her haunting glance suggesting that something—somewhere outside the safety of the frame—is looming. Something is about to make its way in.



Let's Scare Jessica to Death

Words by Jessica Moore

A blood-orange sun. The opening shot of *Let's Scare Jessica to Death* is not all that different from Toshio Matsumoto's *Demons* released the same year: a metaphoric image rather than an establishing setting. With both films, this infernal opening warns the audience. As the sun closes in, it burns with caution — it's a trap door.

Jessica, her boyfriend and their close friend arrive at a long-uninhabited house. It's their new home. 'Couple starts over and moves into a sepulchral property' was as much a trope then as it is now. Indeed, houseguest-horror was bounteous material for the twisted imagination; the erosion of domiciliary spaces symbolised how far paranoia infiltrated American culture. Following the decades-long accumulation of war, economic collapse, and social upheaval, as felt by a society trying to restore itself, the horror genre found its subjects closer to home; it saw realism for all its grit.

Throughout the 60s and into the late 70s, horror, whittled down to its essence, often equated to broken trust: a loss of sacred values. The stability of the nuclear family, if it was ever stable to begin with, became irrevocably disrupted, itself an object of fear. What were once conceptually familiar — children, husbands, homes — had the potential to distort into something sinister. Horror directors expressed this most imaginatively: innocent children could be possessed by psionic evils, ordinary men were capable of unspeakable violence, houses could devour their inhabitants.

Beneath the domestic paranoia it gives credence to, *Jessica* recognises the maladies of contemporary psychiatry. The plot hinges on Jessica's psychological vulnerability; it is made clear through exposition that she was recently a patient of a psychiatric ward. And yet, despite her release, and so confirming the oversights of the system at large, her madness lingers. Her waking moments slip into violent hallucinations — hallucinations

which are, at once, the film's horror and its social critique. They illustrate her navigation, or rather her failure to navigate, a society that disavows its accountability. Jessica stands for the culture's most alienated figures, those who survive at odds with a system that misunderstands illness, no less its treatment.

What specifically Jessica hallucinates plays into this same criticism. The first 'vision' takes place during the drive to their new home; the car (a black hearse embellished with a 'love' decal) is packed full; Jessica narrates her relief to be freed of the psych ward. Driving further into the bucolic countryside, the group pull up to a cemetery. Jessica goes in alone, the others hang back by the car. She traces the emblem and epitaph that decorate a tombstone. She glances up to see a woman stood by a distant grave, beside an American flag. Reminiscent of the white rabbit from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the girl gazes luringly at her. She looks real, though we assume her character serves a more psychic purpose. After looking away briefly, in a feeble attempt to call for the others, Jessica finds that the woman is gone. Only the American flag remains, waving to the sound of indecipherable whispers that taunt and call on Jessica.

The group soon arrive to an audience of suspicious townspeople — "look what they're driving" one of the locals disdainfully observes before another calls them hippies. Though not in direct dialogue with the locals, the group similarly remark: "look at those bandages. I think these guys are left over from the Civil war." Later, an antique dealer playfully calls them "refugees from urban blight." The generational-social divide between the old and rural and the young and urban is plain to discern; and, as the genre permits, where social relations expose their fractures, horror will soon materialise.

What's so remarkable about *Jessica* is that it swings between external and internal, between fantasy and subjectivity. This is



because film is able to disintegrate the line that separates hallucination and horror; surreal events *do* occur in horror, and in stepping inside a film theatre, audiences are encouraged to believe the horror they are presented with. Therein lies the difficulty of distinguishing between a character's perception and the film's reality, though it is precisely this uncertainty that drives *Jessica*. Jessica's hallucinations are as interpretative as her responses; her credibility is a source of speculation. As in many horror films, where psychic forces leave material evidence, their existence is qualified by their effects — thus the question is not so much “are these forces real?”, if they are not, they may as well be, but rather “how do I defend against them?”

As she continues to experience hallucinations, Jessica tells herself “don't tell them” — “them” being her boyfriend and their friend, or, realistically, anyone at all. She silences what she sees as proof of her insanity in the hope it will die of starvation, or believing at least the facade of wellness will keep her from rehabilitation. This impulse is unsurprising; the repressive and often unethical nature of psychiatry at the time saw patients (/mental illness) as incorrigible. Some were regarded as chronic and thus categorised as incurable; there for the long haul. Some were submitted to invasive psychoanalysis, others to the experimental whims of electroshock therapy. Exposing or concealing themselves entirely, ‘mad’ women are at home in horror. In horror, protagonists, who are typically women, are able to identify their trauma as external, as if offloading the burden of individual anxiety; it's the world around them that's disturbed, not they.

Outside the house, Jessica notices a woman on the porch; inside, the same woman appears at the top of the stairs — the latter incident witnessed by her boyfriend. “Don't worry, Jess” he tells her, “I saw it too.” Jessica is overcome with relief, amusement even. As they hurry upstairs to investigate, Jessica is exhilarated by the very idea of an intruder. Though she is potentially in physical danger, at least, for once, she is not alone — her senses were correct. She embraces the prospect; she smiles wildly.

However, this shared vision is but a fleeting illusion. The title suggests as much — it is a cunning imperative, them against her; an attractive dare that certifies the task of Jessica's alienation. We can assume the title is from the perspective of the mysterious intruder, a squatter named Emily.

The enigmatic and seemingly normal Emily reassures the group — she believed the house was empty, she tells them — before collecting her few belongings. She engages in a brief albeit intimate conversation with Jessica, revealing that she is a drifter. Perhaps envious of Emily's houseless liberties — and of her fearlessness for residing alone in an abandoned house, which seems implausible to Jessica who recently experienced a nervous breakdown — Jessica is evidently fascinated with Emily. She sees in Emily everything she is not; independence, solitude, a native to a world far removed from the haze of city life and psychiatric care; a siren of the earth.

Wanting to learn more about Emily's lifestyle, and in the hope that liberty is infectious, Jessica persuades her to stay the night. Over a bottle of wine, Emily tells the group of her scepticism of higher education, believing a degree is futile, and how she relishes the isolation of being a nomad; she tells them of the “voices” she hears, the “shadows” which come to life. Aware of Emily's sexual prowess, felt too by the men, Jessica's eyes dazzle at these confessions. What Jessica has been wrestling with, what would be described as symptoms of schizophrenia, becomes endearing table-talk, part of Emily's bohemian charm.

Bohemia is at odds with the capitalist air that the group brought with them to this rural town; to sustain themselves financially, they rely on the property's orchard and antiquities to sell back to locals. It is during the process of rifling through an attic's worth of portraits and trunks of miscellany, and then presenting such to a nearby antique dealer, that Jessica learns of the house's former residents, in particular Abigail Bishop. Abigail, whose photograph bears an uncanny resemblance to Emily, was a bride who drowned in the house's cove, and



has since, according to local folklore, roamed the grounds as an immortal vampire — a *fior di male*.

Put in motion by Jessica's discovery, the plot then rather coolly drifts along the course of a classical ghost story; both Jessica's husband and their close friend are seduced by Emily; the locals reveal themselves to bear vampiric bite marks; Emily's identity conflates with Abigail's. As we, alongside Jessica, realise the truth of the town's sinister mythology — this is made clear as those around her are bitten one by one — Jessica desperately tries to escape. And yet, despite the munificent evidence that the horror is absolutely external, she is still tormented by her initial paranoia: am I mad or am I sane? Is it a nightmare or a dream? Indeed, Jessica suspects the unreality to reside within; she believes the violence depends on or is at least related to her mind's volatility.

By the end, we arrive at the beginning. To the same natural image: the sun, this time pouring its rays onto Jessica paddling in a rowboat — traumatised and alone. It appears the lake itself is another rather exact metaphor for Jessica's indeterminate status; suspended in liminality between here and there, as a victim of the genre, and, more symbolically, as a relapsing patient.

Jessica is but a flicker in the canon of '70s horror. Its cultural burial is surprising. Much like its contemporaries of low-budget aesthetic who gained infamy and acclaim, the intrigue of *Jessica* lies in its decidedly human conscience; the treachery of envy and adultery, the ties that bind a demising culture and self-annihilation. *Jessica* demonstrates horror's efficacy at depicting personal and societal alienation. It is a monograph of connecting subjective turmoil to its secular source; an elegy of 60s counterculture in its decline; a faded decal on a black hearse. It is not simply a fable of exiling from the comforts of urbanity, or a classist spectacle of primitive rurality, it instead insinuates that modernity's afflictions shadow one's every move. Their scars reside beneath the skin. Of course, this reading of the film verges on anti-psychiatry — and yet it is not unreasonable to argue the

film adopts this stance. Against scientific reasoning, the haunting ambiguity of *Jessica* retains a more philosophical sensibility; it seems the somatic essence of horror, a genre so markedly visceral, was the perfect vehicle to express it.

Jessica recognises that to cross the lake and return to New York solitarily and blood-spattered is no more appealing than surrendering to the vampiric cult. One could argue that the film's end is a nightmare realised — Jessica's metaphoric paralysis the bleakest of conclusions. Her ambivalence is not necessarily a gesture of hopelessness, however. It leaves room for potential. Affirmed by the image of the cult and Emily/Abigail stood ashore spectating from afar, Jessica is offered an alternative.

The countryside's barbarity is not proof of Jessica's illness but of her insight. For once, disturbance cradles her rationality; the horror is outside. Her only option, which is arguably the most pleasurable outcome — one void of male doctors and husbands who infantilise her and worsen her condition — is to start life anew; to exist amongst the apple orchards, vampires and cemeteries, to exorcise the ills of modernity; to look outward; to follow white rabbits.



There Will Be Blood

Words by Charlotte Mansfield



Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* (2008) may not seek to challenge boundaries of genre, but expresses its tale in ways that elicit fright. Marked as a period drama, the film explores the life of Daniel Plainview and his adopted son as he grows his oil empire in early twentieth century California, making an enemy of local preacher Eli.

Genre not only concerns what a film is but the feelings it provokes; its essence may not adhere to tropes of horror but by instilling a sense of doom in other ways it may be defined by the term. *There Will Be Blood* does so affectively by incorporating familiar horror motifs, such as an ominous soundtrack and drawn out sequences, to introduce the drama-based plot. It is impressive in the fear it is capable of instilling, both in the daylight and in pitch black. Every sense is exhibited at extremes; both ceaseless sound and deadly silence induce terror, as do garishly light shots alongside absolute blackness and viscous oil fighting with fire. The thick ooze that covers Plainview in one sequence as a horrifying cloak is his fortune as well as his downfall. Sinister are his dreams of riches when seen from the backdrop of a desert ablaze.

Perhaps most frightening of all is the pure menace and violence of the American Dream brought to light; the failings of the ideology

and to all exposed to greed disguised as freedom may not provoke a jump scare, but linger in the mind long after the credits have rolled. The lack of classic horror tropes is not felt in the twisted heretical behaviour in *There Will Be Blood*. Through this storyline also involving Eli's climb up the clerical ladder, ideas of the supernatural permeate an already dangerous environment and further unhinge the community.

This area of dramatic horror is something that can be found in other films since its release, notably in the work of Ari Aster who, no matter his intentions for a film, ends up with a horror product. Perhaps indicative of the era we live in, no longer are unknown killers and otherworldly monsters the subject of terror. Instead it is familiar villains who truly threaten our sense of equilibrium daily. The lack of respite from dread in *There Will Be Blood* accumulates without release, ensuring a stressful and therefore immersive experience. With the "monsters" of this tale also being terrorised there is little room for escape or sympathy, freezing any chance of emotional connection, further alienating the audience and supporting the gruesome imagery that taints the beautiful landscape. In this way the film feels orchestral, and truly a modern nightmare.

Dominion

Words by Jonny Rogers

Sir Paul McCartney famously said that “If slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be vegetarian.” I have spoken to many committed carnivores who concede this sentiment, and yet are unable or unwilling to change their habits. For anyone who watches *Dominion*, however, apathy is no longer an option.

Compiled of footage from drones and hidden cameras, the documentary aims to expose the state of human-animal relations in the contemporary world, focusing on meat and dairy production, fashion, experimentation and entertainment in Australia. And yet, in a year that also saw the release of *Hereditary*, *Suspiria*, and *A Quiet Place*, *Dominion* is 2018’s most unsettling horror film -- and certainly its most convicting.

Of course, no description of its content could ever do justice to the depravity it depicts; it is relentlessly bloody and unapologetically brutal. Powerless to interject, I listen to the screams of tortured animals as they are separated from their offspring; to workers laughing as their victims flail on the floor. I watch as chickens trample on the infected corpses of their neighbours; as half-conscious cows are lifted over pools of their own blood. I weep as chicks are funnelled to their deaths moments after hatching.

If there is any major fault to the film’s format, however, it’s the 2-hour montage and how it can start to feel like a list, one that becomes more numbing with every successive execution. Then again, perhaps this is the film’s intention: the scale of violence committed to other creatures and the world around us exceeds all rational comprehension. As the conclusion points out, the amount of fish and other sea creatures killed each year is now so great it can only be measured in tonnes.

Nevertheless, *Dominion* shows us that horror doesn’t reside solely in our imagination: it is present in the systems and institutions that

feed the world we inhabit. The film tears down the curtain of civility to reveal the unspeakable violence playing out behind closed doors; it reawakens us to the absurdity of what we are expected to condone as normal, natural or necessary.

Many of us have no choice but to live on insipid food prepared months ago in squalid conditions on the other side of the planet. But we also cherish pets descending from animals who spend their entire lives being impregnated; we adore and praise celebrities brandishing the skins of animals that our grandchildren will only ever encounter in history books.

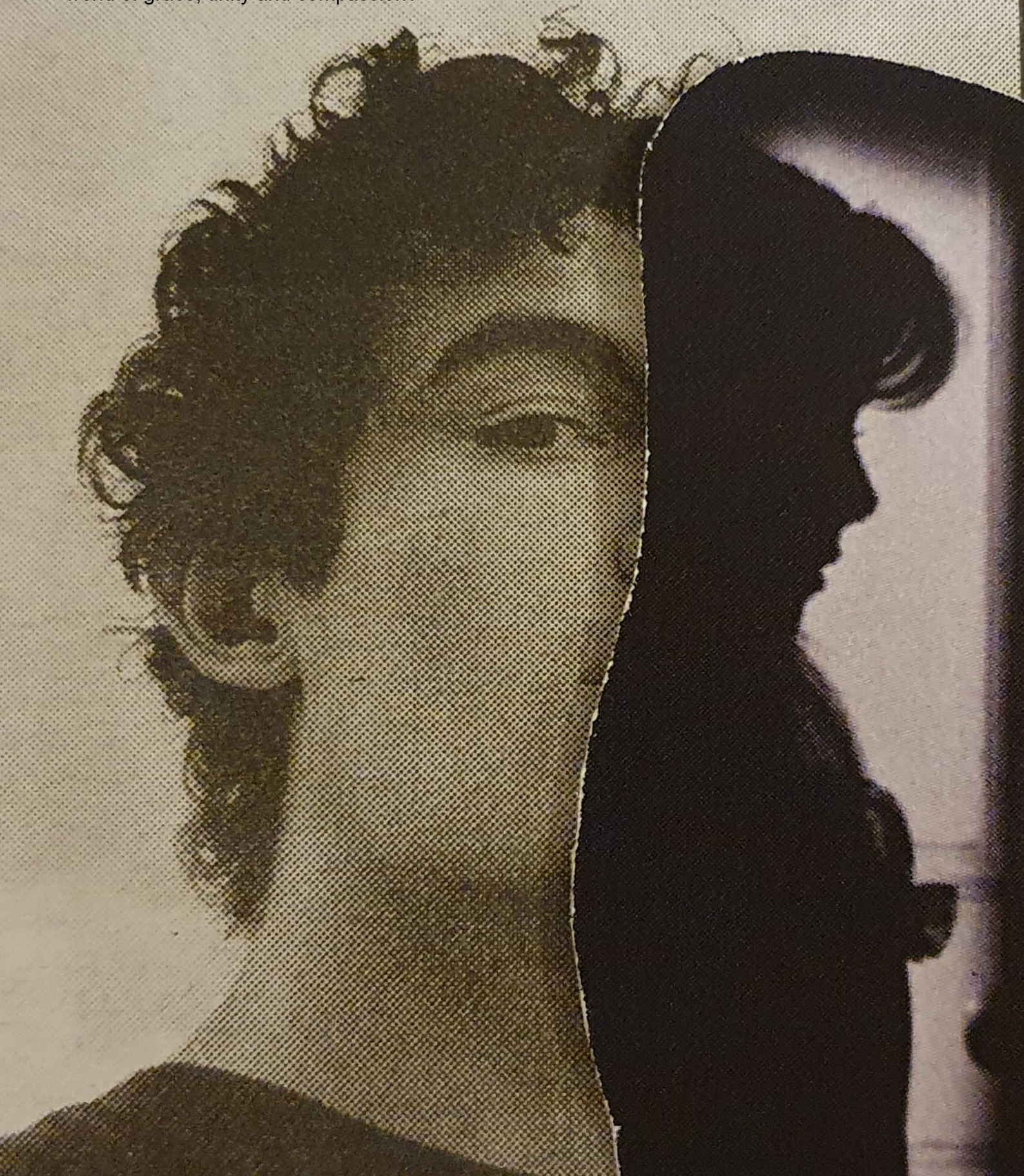
In fighting against an industry all-too-familiar with the power of blades, bolt guns and blunt instruments, cameras are the activist’s most powerful weapon. Earlier this year, the French government strengthened laws to prevent people from taking pictures and recording footage in slaughterhouses; in some US states, this activity is already criminalised. These ‘ag-gag’ laws -- those which enforce punishment for camera-wielding whistleblowers and activists -- testify, even if implicitly, to the power of horror to disrupt the powers that be.

Like its predecessors -- Shaun Monson’s *Earthlings* and *Unity*, Nikolaus Geyrhalter’s *Our Daily Bread* and Frederick Wiseman’s *Meat* -- *Dominion* wields the power of filmic realism to stir us into action; employing a sanguine aesthetic of disgust to upend our comfort with the way things are. Its noisy and low-resolution images do not detract from its message, but reinforce the hiddenness of the world it depicts.

Despite its harrowing content, however, *Dominion* is not overwhelmed by cynicism: the filmmakers are evidently motivated by a conviction that another world is possible, even yet lying just beyond our grasp. As the credits begin to roll, we are gifted a few more scenes: not of torture, but of mercy, as some animals

are rescued and rehabilitated by members of the production crew.

As such, *Dominion* leaves us at the crossroads: now apprised of the violence you once endorsed, can you continue in ignorance? Will you turn back to the horror of the world we have created, or towards a new world of grace, unity and compassion?



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