



Custody

Director: Xavier Legrand

Country: France

Date: 2017

A review by Wendy Ide for The Guardian:

It starts in a family custody hearing, a Dardennes-style exercise in efficient naturalism. But the clipped, social-realist restraint gradually fractures into something brittle and breathless, something closer to pure horror. The blood ties are rent as thoroughly as the splintered wood of the bathroom door – the flimsy last barrier between Miriam (Léa Drucker), her 11-year-old son, Julien (Thomas Gioria), and the ferocious, relentless rage of her ex-husband, Antoine (Denis Ménochet).

And if that seems like an abrupt tonal shift, well, that's rather the point that actor turned first-time writer-director Xavier Legrand is making. For the women in France who are killed at a rate of one every three days by their partners, banal quotidian routines can coexist with paralysing fear and violence. The effect is wrenching. For all its stripped-bare economy and unsentimentality, this is one of the most emotionally devastating cinema experiences of the past year.



Legrand, who cites Greek tragedies, *Kramer vs Kramer* and *The Shining* among his influences, has explored domestic violence once before, in a short film. *Just Before Losing Everything* features the same characters earlier, when Miriam is poised to flee her marriage. But the films are independent entities. We are offered no flashbacks here to give weight to the claims and the counterclaims that are parried before the presiding judge. It's possible, given Antoine's air of solid dependability, that, like the judge, some audience members might be persuaded that the father should indeed have access to his son.

Any uncertainty swiftly evaporates as Julien is coerced into his first court-ordered weekend with his dad. First-time actor Gioria brilliantly captures the physicality of fear. Primal survival instincts kick in. The boy goes limp in the suffocating bear hug with which Antoine claims him; his eyes averted. The child has learned never to look directly at his father, mindful of what terrors he might rouse. Even so, it's the shadow of violence that we glimpse at first, rather than the act itself. But Antoine reveals himself to be an expert manipulator, fired by an aggrieved belief that his rights as a husband and father are somehow being trampled by his uncaring family.

He latches on to a throwaway comment from Julien's grandmother, upending the uneasy calm of a family meal to bully the details of his ex-wife's new home from his son. "Are you happy now?" he asks, laying the responsibility for his outburst on his child. And because he's a child, Julien miserably absorbs the blame, adding it to his own sickening burden of guilt at being unable to protect his mother.

Brisk, businesslike editing lends this unembellished storytelling an ominous momentum. The point of view is relayed from character to character, starting with the dispassionate gaze of the judge, followed by each of the children – Julien has an older sister, Joséphine (Mathilde Auneveux) – and from them to Antoine and finally Miriam.

The restless pace of the cuts relaxes into longer, fluid, single-shot takes as Miriam and the children let their hair down at a party to celebrate Joséphine's 18th birthday. Her tense mask discarded, her conversation unguarded, Miriam seems like a different woman. But Antoine stakes a claim even on this supposedly safe space, with a message to his daughter's phone that sucks the joy out of her face.^{fa}



Of all the roles, that of Antoine is the most challenging. He lacks the shape-shifting, ambiguous quality present in some of cinema's other spousal abusers – Luis Tosar in *Take My Eyes* or Ray Winstone in *Nil by Mouth*. He lacks any spark of the charm he must have once possessed. Once you see him as a threat, you can't unsee it. This is not a problem with Ménochet's performance necessarily, rather a consequence of the narrow timeframe that focuses on the final crash and burn of family relations. But it does become a challenge to see the man behind the monstrous grudge.

But then it's possible that the lack of redeeming features in Antoine's character goes hand in hand with Legrand's decision to cast such a physically imposing actor in the first place. Ménochet is formidable; his looming bulk dominates each shot, squeezing his wife and son tight against the edges of the frame. With this, and by placing a child in the no man's land of this domestic battlefield, Legrand punctures the whole idea of a "crime of passion", with its tacit suggestion of shared culpability. The guilt here lies with a man who, deep down, believes that his wife and children are his to own.

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