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## CINEMA

# French film reminiscent of 60's New Wave style

Review by Deborah S. McGee

### Scene of the Crime

*New York Times*' Janet Maslin called it an "elegant thriller." The *Willamette Weekly* said it's "monotonous."

*Scene of the Crime* is a cool portrayal of modern alienation, and tres, tres francais.

Director Andre Techine's work is reminiscent of the 1960s French New Wave films, with its somewhat glorified amoral characters, its fascination with movement, especially that of the automobile, and its challenge to established culture. It really does a number on the Catholic church. Set in a small town in southwestern France, *Scene of the Crime* is the story of Thomas, a 12-year old boy who stumbles upon two escaped convicts while exploring the countryside near his home. Blackmail and a murder occupy the next two days of his life, as well as his first communion and dealing with his divorcing parents.

Catherine Deneuve, a woman who has been called the most beautiful in the world, plays Lili, Thomas's mother. Again we see the stunning, mesmerizing face familiar from Polanski's *Repulsion*, Bunuel's *Viridiana*, and *The Hunger* (where she played opposite David Bowie). In over half this film, Deneuve is an expressionless, unfulfilled housewife, but later shows the truth of what she discussed in a recent interview, when she said she felt "there was

a danger of going crazy" in the more emotional scenes.

Techine's film, I think, would benefit by greater focus on the boy. Nicolas Giraudi is alternately charming, then repulsive, as Thomas, the archetypally spoiled kid of rich parents. The parents have a modern problem: they're divorcing. Life's been pretty lousy for Thomas. The bare, cold existence of his Catholic boarding school is expressed in a marvelous dolly shot of rows of cots next to rows of wash basins, the only movement other than the camera being the spasms of the sleeping boys' legs.

When Thomas does escape it all to do his very favorite thing—explore the countryside on his bicycle—he runs into escaped convicts. Pretty lousy karma. True to its French New Wave roots, though, the film steps back from giving us a totally sentimental portrayal of the boy. Right away we are tuned into the unreliability of his words due to his compulsion for lying, yet there's something intriguingly sad about that sweaty nape of his neck, when he has a nightmare flashback to almost being strangled to death, and calls his cloddish father. In a grown-up voice he shifts into *desinvolture*, as translated from the French, "disengaged," perhaps more an aspect of their culture than ours. The film explores a modern disconnectedness from the whole of life.

Some other of the film's plusses: The cinematography by Pascal

Marti is intriguing the way the landscape of southern France is always very subtly in the background. The contrast between the peaceful, bucolic existence around the characters, and the violent turmoil within their souls, is often painful.

Deneuve and Giraudi are great, and there's a fine performance by Danielle Darieux as the grandmother. Darieux is probably most known on this side of the Atlantic for her work with Max Ophuls in some of the classics of the French New Wave. Intense passion between male and female is well done, as only the French know how to do it. And I loved hearing the language again, remembering such things as the way the French deliver "Je m'en fou. . . ." or "I'm totally sick of. . . ." an appropriate refrain in *Scene of the Crime*.

What disappointed me was what I find disappointing in most films, wherever they are made: The woman is always at the mercy of the men in her life. Lili is victim with a capital V. Her father is a nasty sort, quick with harsh words. Her ex-husband still has the hots for her, but blackmails her emotionally with a threat he'll take the child and prevent her from seeing the boy. Her son lies to her, and manipulates her with, "If anything happens to me, you're the only one I'll miss." Then later he says he does not wish to see her, when she is in trouble. Along comes lover Martin, young man freshly escaped from prison, who asks if she's ready to "cut the moorings" and run away with him. I love opting for freedom, but in this film Lili is just doing what another man tells her to do with her life.

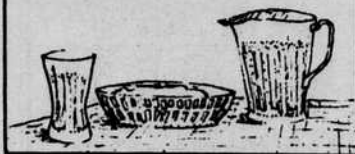
One asks, naturally, what is the crime of the film's title? Is it the more obvious crime of one escaped prisoner killing another, in a power struggle fist fight their first night of freedom? Is it the crime of an unloving old man (Lili's father) perpetuating a line of individuals unable to love? Is the crime the life led by the boy, for whom reality is always on the verge of a cataclysm? Psychological and physical crimes abound in this suspenseful drama from another representative of the often pessimistic French.

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