

Critique

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ANATOMY OF A FALL



Justine Triet, born on 17 July 1978, is a French film director, screenwriter and editor. She is a graduate of the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts. [Her debut feature, *Age of Panic*, was presented as part of the ACID programme at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival. 2019, her film *Sibyl* premiered at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival, where it competed for the Palme d'Or. In 2023, her film *Anatomy of a Fall* was presented at the 2023 Cannes Film Festival, where it won the Palme d'Or, making Triet the third female director to win the highest honour/award. These days, Cannes Film Festival Jury members are more prone to nose out

cliffhangers or thriller films for Golden Palm, a subject more open to controversy. For the last two years, *Titane* and *Anatomy of a Fall*, both thrillers, at times looked too absurd, came to thrill the cinephiles rather than enriching them with the aesthetic arts of cinema. The film under review is a part thorny, part corny, family story, part whodunit, rest courtroom drama and part meditation on the nature of truth, faith and fiction; Justine Triet's *Anatomy of a Fall* takes two hours of conversations and makes them both provocative, mysterious and propulsive. It also sparks off disbelief. After Hitchcock's thriller films look very much

terminally boring, the society we live in is not habitable from the point of view of a universal socio-political scenario. How can filmmakers defy them? Now, even women filmmakers from many countries are manufacturing murders and killing issues to tackle digitally. Said my friend and eminent critic Peter Bradshaw: "I have been agnostic about Justine Triet's work in the past, but her courtroom drama murder mystery in this year's Cannes competition, with its ambiguous title and ambiguous dénouement, is very intriguing." Good to hear it; It reminded me of various stages of Billy Wilder's Agatha Christie. Sandra Hüller plays Sandra, a successful and fashionable author (that staple figure of French cinema), German by birth, but now living in a handsome chalet in the French Alps with her French husband Samuel (Samuel Theis), a former academic and author himself, who has now hit a career slump and creative block and is currently hoping to salvage the family finances by fixing up the chalet as an Airbnb. Sandra wearily attempts to take a nap while the couple's son, Daniel (Milo Machado Graner), takes their dog Snoop for a walk. But when he returns, his dad's corpse is lying on the snow chalet with a brutal wound on his head. Did he fall from the top window? Did his head hit something on the way down? Poor Daniel is an unreliable witness because he is blind, the result of an accident. It wasn't long before the cops snapped the cuffs on Sandra and charged her with murder. She employs as her lawyer an old friend (Swann Arlaud) who may be in love with her. Yet her fate may still lie in the hands of her blind son, who saw nothing at all yet might still remember. The film premiered in Cannes'

Main Competition isn't flashy, gaudy, or showy. Its pointed trajectory might even make it seem simpler than it is. Triet, whose previous films include "Sibyl" and "Age of Panic," does just enough to keep its characters and audience slightly off balance, unsure of what they think they know.

A Wonderful Girl (2023)

Copenhagen Does Not Exist (2023)

The Cow Who Sang a Song into the Future (2022)

The young woman's first question notes that Sandra draws from her own life and asks a question that seems to be simple but will prove to have reverberations throughout the film: "Do you think Sandra, who seems very nice but also very reluctant to give straight answers, parries the query and tries to turn the interview on its head by asking the interviewer questions about herself. She's aided in her quest to deflect. Before long, the interviewer and interviewee decide that the conversation is useless and agree to continue it at some point in Grenoble. Justine Triet, *Anatomy of a Fall* | Photographed with Michel Pépin by Kris Dewitte in Paris All of this has been intercut with flashes of a dog being washed, then taken outside by Sandra and Samuel's son, Daniel (Milo Machado-Graner), who appears to be sight-impaired to some degree. But when Daniel and the dog (Snoop, for anybody who wants to start handicapping the Palme Dog) return to the house, they find Samuel lying dead in the snow at the foot of the three-story chalet, blood spilt from a wound in his head. Gradually, we learn that Samuel was the person who played music at ear-splitting volume to disrupt the interview, that Sandra

and Samuel had a 10-minute conversation of some sort after the interviewer left, that Sandra had worked for a while in bed and then fallen asleep; and that she was awakened when her earplug fell out and she heard Daniel screaming for help. At least, that's how Sandra tells the story to Vince; Said my friend and eminent critic Peter Bradsahw: "I have been agnostic about Justine Triet's work in the past, but her courtroom drama murder mystery in this year's Cannes competition, with its ambiguous title and ambiguous dénouement, is very intriguing." Good to hear it; It reminded me of the various stages of Billy Wilder's film Agatha Christie adaptation *Witness for the Prosecution*. A lawyer friend advises her that she may be in big trouble. She seems incredulous, but he's right: In very short order, Sandra is arrested for killing her husband, with the police's theory being that she hit him with a blunt object while they were arguing on the second-floor balcony. The only other explanation, and the one that Vincent says they'll have to prove, is that Samuel killed himself. By the halfway point, the drama about a family coping with loss has turned into a courtroom drama — and while we're naturally on Sandra's side, some lots don't add up — on both sides. Triet withholds enough information to make it plausible that Sandra is a murderer and plausible that she isn't. Her style is to film things simply and let conversations play out in all their redundancy, false starts, stops, and ambiguity. The prosecutor may appear to be a stock villain at times, but he's got a point at other times — and though she can be a strong visual stylist, Triet isn't stacking the deck in how she approaches the courtroom scenes. The total

absence of score in the scenes is telling: Without musical cues to underline any points, we're put to conjecture though the horror of murder in court trial seems too long spun. If *Marriage Story* (2019) were a murder trial, it might look a little like *Anatomy of a Fall*; Triet's gripping vignettes appear to be a sharply intelligent psychological drama, which collects itself in fizzing arcs of strange electricity around a brilliant, edgy but elusive Sandra Hüller. A woman stands accused of killing her husband. Her 11-year-old son, a key witness who was blinded in an accident some years prior, listens in the courtroom. Lawyers rant, theorise and nitpick (after Alice Diop's peerless *Saint-Omer* (2022)). This is an equivalently forensic depiction of the French player. But what is being dissected is the mystery of other people's passions. Where does responsibility lie when a marriage sours? Did love fall away, did it jump, or was it pushed? Sandra (Hüller), a successful novelist, is being interviewed by grad student Zoé (Camille Rutherford) in the partially renovated chalet in the French Alps that Sandra shares with her French husband Samuel (Samuel Theis) and their son Daniel (Milo Machado Graner). Despite the domestic setting, the interview is part seduction. Sandra's gaze is flirtatious. She is quick to bounce questions back on her pretty interviewer — especially those ethical inquiries about an author's right to repurpose real life as fiction, which she wants to shrug away. Suddenly, music blares out at the ear-splitting volume from upstairs. It is, as a bitter in-joke, a steel-band cover of 50 Cent's misogynist classic P.I.M.P., and though Sandra first ignores it, then feigns exasperated amusement. Eventually, it forces her to halt

the interview. As Zoé leaves, she passes Daniel, taking his dog Snoop for a walk in the dazzling snow, the border collie's pale blue eyes uncannily evoking the boy's impaired vision. When Daniel returns, his father lies dead beneath the attic window where he is working, blood staining the snow. A year later, Sandra stands in the dock. A native German with fluent French but even better English, she code-switches in fascinating ways: does her reversion to English at key junctures signal better communication of the truth? Or is it the language in which she can more easily lie? As the ruthless prosecution advocate (Antoine Reinartz, a cleverly counterintuitive casting choice) locks horns with Sandra's lawyer and old friend/flame Vincent (an excellent Swann Arlaud), every piece of evidence is opened to opposing, equally plausible interpretations, and the credibility of each witness, especially Even when the prosecution deploys its smoking gun, a riveting taped argument between struggling writer Samuel and his more successful wife, in which he accuses her not only of cheating but of "plung" from him the novel that made her name, the Samuel, recording Sandra without her knowledge, was potentially gathering material for his own stalled literary career and therefore may have engineered the fight. It pivots on the hot-blooded drama of violent death. Anatomy of a Fall's searing screenplay – co-written by Triet and her husband Arthur Harari – also takes a scalpel to professional jealousy and pricking ego. Along these deep incisions, Sandra and Samuel's marriage splits open, its ugliness spilling like viscera. Can we mutually agree? Sitting in the courtroom, there's a grieving boy. Daniel does not fit into the scheme. It is

felt that 'facts don't care about your feelings have become a catchphrase in our spiteful age, but here, feelings are the only facts that matter. Simon Beaufile's restless camera constantly shifts our vantage, at one point swinging from left to right to witness Daniel as questions volley in from opposing sides. Usually, this kind of mobile, participatory camerawork is used for florid, emotive effect. Still, the Anatomy of a Fall is as puerile and ambivalent as its central turn from a caustic Hüller. Sandra maintains her innocence but is such a shrewd, worldly woman that 'innocent' is not a label that suits her. In every sympathetic reaction, a contrived manipulation gets manifested. In every flash of hot temper a glimpse of something cold. Yet in the rare moments when Sandra is alone, away from anyone's judgemental gaze, she is neither monstrous nor pitiful. She's an empty outline on an anonymous hotel bed, methodically eating a supermarket sandwich. Between the absolute poles of 'guilty' and 'not guilty' lies a many-shaded spectrum of culpability and complicity. In vivid, clean lines. Anatomy of a Fall navigates this moral morass and exposes the absurdity of trying to pluck from it a simplistic, binary verdict. Is Sandra a loving mother, a murderous wife, an egotistical creator, a guilt-ridden destroyer? Tick all that apply. Triet handles with a smart feeling/fact that none of the great three-word statements – "I love you, I hate you, I forgive you, I am sorry – exists to the exclusion of any of the others". But the deliberate flatness of the courtroom scenes is knocked for a loop when the prosecutor plays an audio recording of a fight that took place between Sandra and Samuel the day before he died. But at a crucial moment, when the verbal argument turns

physical, we're suddenly back in the courtroom listening and then deciding whether or not to believe Sandra's narrative of what happened at the end of the fight. In a way, the ambiguity is the point, but so is the individual decision of what and whom to believe. That comes to the forefront when Daniel takes his second turn on the witness stand at the end of the case, an 11-year-old boy who lost graphic detail. Anatomy of a Fall is straightforward in style but sophisticated in how Triet doles out information. It's tense, unbearably so at times, and Hüller, who was nonplussed. Poor Daniel is an unreliable witness because he is blind, the result of an accident which Sandra always blamed on Samuel, who was supposed to be looking after him at the time, and which caused Samuel to spiral into depressive anger;

he hated Sandra for her affairs and for plagiarising what he felt was an idea of his — Sandra perhaps still blamed him for their son's condition. Sandra Hüller's calm directness as an actor gives the film texture, substance and emotional force. She anchors it in a kind of accessible reality: we naturally sympathise with her, but with spleen, yet Triet shows us that she is capable of transparent lies, which are almost credible because Hüller is such a plausible personality. The men surrounding her seem to be over-emotional, more emotional than her — odd, as she is facing a prison sentence. Murder thriller in a universe of anger and hunger is a non-entity!!! We don't need a thriller but a grim, grimy, restricted reality in post-modern Cinema.

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