Anatomy of a Fall: “Forcing the game”

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Anatomy of a Fall (by French writer-director Justine Triet) has already won dozens of prizes at this season’s awards programs, including best non-English language picture and screenplay at the Golden Globes, best direction, lead actress and original screenplay at France’s Césars and the Palme D’or at the Cannes Film Festival. The film is nominated in the best picture category, along with nine others, in this year’s Academy Awards sweepstakes.

In this case, the accolades need to be taken with a grain of salt, as they reflect more of the pressure of identity politics—and overall artistic and social confusion.

Triet’s drama opens in a remote area in the wintry French Alps, somewhere near Grenoble, in the chalet of successful novelist Sandra (Sandra Hüller), her teacher-writer husband Samuel (Samuel Theis) and their 11-year-old, visually impaired son Daniel (Milo Machado-Graner).

One afternoon, returning from walking the dog, Daniel finds Samuel’s corpse lying in the snow outside the chalet, dead from a fall out of an upstairs window. An autopsy determines possible third-party involvement, and Sandra is identified as the prime suspect, although without any direct evidence. She insists on her innocence and her longtime lawyer friend Vincent (Swann Arlaud) takes up her legal defence.

> Sandra: I did not kill him.
> Vincent: That’s not the point. …
> Sandra: But I think he fell.
> Vincent: Yeah, but nobody’s going to believe that. I don’t believe that.

Details emerge about the days leading up to Samuel’s death that cast doubt on Sandra’s innocence, and she is indicted for her husband’s murder. The remainder of the film centres on the court proceedings, in which the difficulties in her marriage are heavily scrutinised.

Anatomy has certain positive attributes. The script is decently structured and the dialogue sharp. The melodrama and contrivance often found in the legal drama genre are carefully avoided, allowing the actors to perform their roles seriously and honestly. The nuanced argumentation on both sides in the courtroom is also ably handled. Moreover, the quasi-documentary format, with its understated production design and cinematography, although not especially striking, works effectively. These qualities form the basis of the film’s initial appeal.

However, the detached tone and overall frigid atmosphere of Triet’s film work against the grain of its better elements. There are too many dry forensic details in *Anatomy of a Fall* that seem incidental, if not inappropriate. One gruesome scene in which police reenact Samuel’s death at the family home by plunging a dummy tethered to a rope from the attic window feels gratuitous, if not dehumanising. The piling up of accurate detail does not by itself lead to compelling drama.

Although Samuel is the obvious victim, his voice is absent for the most part and his life and marriage are largely constructed through Sandra’s defensive arguments against him. These creative decisions result in a narrative that ends up conveying relatively little sympathy for the unfortunate man.

As the protagonist, Sandra—given the tragic circumstances—comes off, in turn, unsuitably self-pitying or self-satisfied. In one scene, she tells her lawyer, “I left my shithole in Germany and ended up stuck here in *his* shithole. It’s fucking absurd isn’t it?” In another scene where they rehearse her trial testimony, Sandra tartly says of Samuel, “I came to realise that his relationship to time, with work, was

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complicated. Unlike with me, for example."

Sandra's persistently chilly persona, aloof demeanour and wordy explanations begin to rub the viewer the wrong way. During her trial testimony, when pressed on her marital issues during cross examination, she responds, "Sometimes a couple is kind of a chaos and everybody's lost, no? And sometimes we fight together, and sometimes we fight alone, and sometimes we fight each other."

When Samuel's combative state of mind prior to his death is described by his therapist on the witness stand, Sandra responds in her typically elliptical manner, "I think it's possible he needed to see things as you describe them, but if I were seeing a therapist he could stand up here and say some very ugly things about Samuel, but would they be true?"

Sandra's personality comes out most clearly in a candid flashback scene in which the simmering discontents in the couple's relationship come to the surface explosively on the day before Samuel's death. When Samuel raises the issue of how domestic responsibilities are divided between them, Sandra retorts, "First of all, I don't believe in the notion of reciprocity in a couple. It's naïve and frankly it's depressing."

Triet, who co-wrote the script with her husband Arthur Harari, asserted a little smugly in an interview with the *New Yorker* that Sandra makes for an unconventional victim because she is "too intelligent and too complex" to be believed. This reviewer would tend to disagree. Sandra's somewhat callous comments and generally entitled behaviour may elicit little sympathy from the viewer, but they do not in and of themselves, even with the prosecution's skewed interpretations, provide motive for cold-blooded murder. (Whether the notion of an individual committing suicide by jumping out of a window into the snow makes much sense is another issue.)

At any rate, Trier admits that the logical facts are really beside the point. She explained that Sandra "wants to tell the truth, and it's very hard for her to understand that it's not a question of truth; it's a question of convincing."

In any case, behind Sandra's behavior and testimony something else is at issue. According to Triet, the notion of "reciprocity in a couple"—or rather a perverse argument against it—forms the fundamental axis of the film. Throughout history, the director points out, women have borne the brunt of domestic burdens while men have "gone out into the world and have had the time to think, to reflect, to have ideas … And so the fact of having a female character who's a creator, who writes books, who is in the position, at last, of taking time to write, means that it's the man who suffers." So, Samuel more or less deserves comeuppance on behalf of his entire gender?

Such is the outlook that pervades the competitive world of the affluent middle class, that social layer dominated by money and self-interest, who are inevitably driven into battle against one other, along gender, racial and many other lines. The film is a hymn to the absence of solidarity among such people.

On the lack of representation of women in the French film awards, Triet acknowledged that in "the beginning, I wasn't for quotas. But now I am, to force the game a bit, to put women on an equal playing field with men. We have to do it, because it won't get done naturally."

Unhappily, this sums up the cold calculus behind *Anatomy* on which Triet and those spearheading the #MeToo movement are staking their careers—their right to "force the game" in pursuit of social advancement to the detriment of the male competition standing in the way. In truth, a good deal of the intellectual fancy footwork in the courtroom and the film's goings-on as a whole turn out to be a scaffolding for this cynical agenda.

This dog-eat-dog condition in the upper layers of the petty bourgeoisie contrasts with the circumstances in the working class, where the pressing concerns of life do not lead to battles between the genders or races, but objectively create the conditions for unity in the life-and-death struggle against the entire capitalist setup.

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