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The Night of the 12th (15)

Dir: **Dominik Moll**

with: **Bastien Bouillon, Bouli Lanners, Théo Cholbi**

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Synopsis: Yohan Vivès--a young, recently promoted police Captain-- begins investigating the gruesome murder of a young woman named Clara in the town of Grenoble. It's clear that the attack was premeditated, and the violent nature of the crime suggests revenge. Vivès' team methodically digs through the details of Clara's life, uncovering her secrets in hopes of weeding out the killer. Certain their suspect is a scorned ex-lover, Vivès is confronted with another, more complicated question: which one?

Walking home one night in a sleepy French suburb, teenager Clara effusively FaceTimes a friend, hanging up shortly before a hooded assailant approaches her, addresses her by name, douses her in kerosene, and flicks a cigarette lighter her way. The image of her blazing, running body, streaking across the screen before crumpling to the ground, is one that colours and haunts Dominik Moll's sober, elegant new film *The Night of the 12th* as it shifts to the greyer, plainer visual language of the police procedural. In a film dominated by scenes of men in tough, testy dialogue with each other, this jolting tableau – both dreamlike and all too real – of feminine vulnerability meeting with extreme masculine violence never leaves our minds. The film proceeds as its male cop characters do: quietly, methodically, burdened by thoughts of worst-case scenarios they – and we – have already seen.

This is harder, heavier material than we've come to expect from Moll, a first-rate genre craftsman whose best work – notably 2000's mordant thriller *Harry, He's Here to Help* and 2019's neatly knotted mystery *Only the Animals* – has largely traded in sleek Hitchcockian gamesmanship with little in the way of a deeper social conscience, notwithstanding some surface-level class commentary in the latter. At first glance, *The Night of the 12th* might appear to be little more than a lurid true-crime exercise in the currently modish style, drawn as it is from a French non-fiction book, Pauline Guena's *18.3: Une année à la PJ*, that probed a year of activity in the national police force's serious crime directorate.

Filleting out and lightly fictionalising a single grim case from Guena's tome, Moll and regular co-writer Gilles Marchand don't stint on ugly details, as the long-term investigation gradually takes in a network of boys and men who have abused or exploited Clara in a variety of ways. But neither does the film revel in such ugliness: it imparts this information with a stoic sense of duty, not so much zeroing in on burnt or bloody wounds as assembling a bigger picture of patriarchal corruption and its consequences.



At its centre is an old-fashioned good cop/bad cop pairing that gradually evens out into systemic ineffectiveness. Young, brisk and controlled, Yohan (an excellent Bastien Bouillon) has recently taken over as the department's chief detective; he's paired on the case with Marceau (Bouli Lanners), a more hot-headed veteran whose marital woes keep spilling into his workplace demeanour. Every deadbeat man they question in connection with the murder seems, to the older man, a kind of analogue for disruptive forces in his personal life. Even without this hindrance, however, the case would be a confounding one, riddled with profoundly suspicious suspects and no smoking gun, or lit match.

"Any of them could have done it," Yohan despairs, as their efforts go in circles and the trail freezes over. That's the rub in *The Night of the 12th*, increasingly a *Zodiac* (2007)-style exercise in unverified gut feeling and elusive facts that ultimately identifies guilt in masculinity at large. One suspect composed a rap about immolating Clara prior to her murder; another may have raped her in the past; another responds to details of her death with a fit of giggles. Not all of them – or, perhaps, any of them – are the man the cops are seeking, but that's hardly to say they're in the clear.

Furthermore, *The Night of the 12th* assumes the perspective of the police without exempting them from its damning canvas; their cool investigative professionalism (and, in a sense, the film's) registers as its own kind of complicity in a wretched, man's-world status quo. Even the film's crisp, unshowy craft, from Patrick Ghiringhelli's muted, autumnal cinematography to Laurent Rouan's steadily ticking but unhurried editing, avoids extreme surges of feeling, exuding the patience of men who can afford to wait.

Moll and Marchand have a keen ear for the dispassionate ways in which men talk about women in their absence: even Yohan's department, oppressively a boys' club until a late female intervention, can't resist grubby, objectifying quips about the victim when they're letting off steam. Boy scout-like but not entirely empathetic, Yohan attempts to raise the tone, but with no vocabulary for female anguish and exhaustion. With the system this gender-rigged, this measured but tersely angry film asks, is it any wonder so many cases go cold?

Credits

Yohan	Bastien Bouillon
Marceau	Bouli Lanners
Willy	Théo Cholbi
Fred	Johann Dionnet
Loïc	Thibaut Evrard
Boris	Julien Frison
Jérôme	Paul Jeanson
Nadia	Mouna Soualem
Nanie	Pauline Serieys
Clara	Lula Cotton-Frapier
Mère Clara	Charlene Paul
Père Clara	Matthieu Rozé
Wesley	Baptiste Perais
Jules	Jules Poirier
Director	Dominik Moll
Screenplay	Dominik Moll, Gilles Marchand
Cinematography	Patrick Ghiringhelli
Editing	Laurent Rouan
Music	Olivier Marguerit

France 2022, 115 mins

Another View

At first glance, Dominik Moll's *"The Night of the 12th"* is a fairly routine albeit extremely well-crafted police procedural. There's a horrifying murder, a baffled police force, multiple potential suspects. It's loosely based on a real unsolved case, detailed in Pauline Guéna's book *18.3 - A Year With the Crime Squad*. But there's more going on here than meets the eye. *"The Night of the 12th"* runs deep. The film's effectiveness lies in its matter-of-fact surface and its roiling wordless interior, the stealthy way it makes its points (without announcing "This is The Point").

Yohan Vivès (Bastien Bouillon), unit chief in the Grenoble police department, is new to the job when a harrowing case comes in. A young, vivacious woman named Clara (Lula Cotton-Frapier) walks home from a party. As she strolls through the dark empty streets, she makes a giggly video for a friend, blowing kisses. A figure emerges from the shadows, says her name, douses her with liquid, and then sets her on fire. Clara's half-charred body is discovered the following morning, curled up in the grass. Yohan and his veteran partner Marceau (Bouli Lanners) head up the investigation.

The cops suffer not from a paucity of leads, but too many leads. Clara had an active social life, and each man is sketchier than the one before. Clara liked "bad boys," apparently. Each man is a plausible suspect. One wrote an angry rap song about setting her on fire. One bursts out laughing when he talks about how she died. One has a history of domestic violence. These men are tantalizing as suspects but lead the detectives down a maze of blind alleys. The deeper they go into her life, the more mysterious the case becomes.

"The Night of the 12th," is one of those stories about an unsolved murder (the opening credits state this outright), the cases that haunt the detectives who worked them, and the murderer that got away. The gold standard of these stories is Bong Joon-ho's *"Memories of Murder,"* with David Fincher's *"Zodiac"* close behind. These films are frank in their interest in monomaniacal obsession, in their portraits of men driven to devote their lives to a lost cause and, in many cases, to trash their lives in the single-minded pursuit of truth. Nothing can top the final shot of *"Memories of Murder"* for expressing this idea. *"The Night of the 12th"* does not run as high a fever as *"Memories of Murder"* and *"Zodiac"*: its mood is chillier, its atmosphere bleak. The matter-of-fact-ness of the detectives working the case provides the

grim backdrop. There's despair present as well, but it's a low-humming buzz rather than a shrieking opera.

Very early on, it's impossible to ignore the fact that a young woman has been murdered and the entire police force is male. These are professional men who do their job and do it very well, but at a certain level, there is a disconnect. The men slip into moments of judging Clara for her risky behaviour. They don't call her a "slut" or anything, but the implication is clear. Yohan tries to course-correct these conversations, but he doesn't have the language to express the imbalance at work. Maybe somewhere, he, too, is judging Clara; maybe he wishes she was a "perfect victim." It is up to Stéphanie (Pauline Serieys), Clara's heartbroken best friend, to finally tell Yohan about the blind spots at work, blind spots he didn't even know he had.

This is where *"The Night of the 12th"* works. When a female judge asks for the case to be re-opened three years later and calls Yohan in to discuss, he says, confusedly, "Something is amiss between men and women." Such a simple word but so eloquent. He knows what's wrong. He can see it in front of him! He just isn't sure how it might apply. The screenplay is excellent (the film won six Césars earlier this year, including Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Director, and Best Film). When the script is "on the nose," as it is in the excellent scene between Stéphanie and Yohan, it can afford to be.

"The Night of the 12th" contains a pretty hefty critique of systemic issues, not just issues with systems but with people and how they think. The film's critique is devastating since so little of it makes it into the language. The characters don't have the language to address what is really going on, and if you don't have the language, then you don't have the thoughts and feelings either. In *1984*, George Orwell laid out this concept for all time: "Every year, fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller."

The case reveals cracks in the lives of the men working to solve it. Marceau's marriage is busting up, and he is sick of being a cop. He never really wanted to be a cop anyway. Yohan lives an ascetic disciplined life without any apparent personal or romantic interests. Every night he rides his bike around a track. He pedals furiously but doesn't really get anywhere. The metaphor is a bit obvious, but it draws us into the character's involvement. The men working on Clara's case want to solve it. They work round the clock. But "something is amiss," all right. That it takes Yohan so long to speak those words out loud—and that when he does so, it is to a woman he just met and not his male colleagues—isn't part of the problem. It is the problem.

Sheila O'Malley: Roger Ebert.com

Our next Screening: Friday January 26th, 7.30pm Typist Artist Pirate King (UK 2022, Cert 12a)

Carol Morley (*Dreams of a Life, Out of Blue*) turns to the story of forgotten artist Audrey Amiss who suffered from mental health problems, in this enjoyable film. Centred on strong performances from Monica Dolan (as Amiss) and Kelly MacDonald (as her social worker Sandra), the film follows the two on a road trip to Sunderland, where Audrey claims she will be able to exhibit her work - but in reality, she is heading for a showdown with her sister (Gina McKee).