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Review of *Anatomy of a Fall*

Anatomie D'Une Chute. Directed by Justine Triet. Screenplay by Justine Triet and Arthur Harari. 152 Minutes. Distributed by Les Films Pelleas; Released in France May 21, 2023

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Anatomy of a Fall premiered in 2023, winning the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and Best Original Screenplay at the Academy Awards. With the backdrop of the French Alps, *Anatomy of a Fall* highlights multiple themes of interest to forensic psychiatrists, including determination of manner of death, testimony in French courts, the treating psychiatrist as expert witness, cross-cultural examinations, child witnessing, and covert audio recordings.

The film begins as Sandra (Sandra Hüller), a successful author, is interviewed about her writing process. This is interrupted by her husband Samuel (Samuel Theis), announcing his presence through the chaotic melody of 50 Cent's "P.I.M.P.," halting the discussion. Soon after, their visually impaired son, Daniel (Michael Machado-Graner), walks their family dog and finds his father Samuel dead in the snow.

A forensic pathologist finds Samuel's death suspicious and asserts that a toxicological analysis is necessary to find the "truth." Although seemingly straightforward in the film, the medicolegal structure for determining the manner of death in France is complicated.¹ Backgrounds of French coroners are varied, coming from a variety of medical specialties.¹ Determining the manner of death is nuanced and may be complex, regardless of country, directly affecting investigations both in the movie and in the real world.

Sandra is propelled from the coroner's assessment into the French legal system. The French system is inquisitorial in nature,² in contrast with the adversarial American legal system. The investigating judge has the responsibility to question the witnesses, may question witnesses and the accused simultaneously, and has discretionary power to direct the course of the trial.² This is reflected in the film, where Sandra is often being questioned, including alongside witnesses, about statements of those witnesses. The system offers more collaborative questioning by the investigating judge, whereas the lawyers act only in an auxiliary manner, in contrast to the American legal system.² One poignant example is when Samuel's treating psychiatrist testifies. During a fiery back and forth between Sandra and the psychiatrist, Sandra's feelings about Samuel's partial responsibility for Daniel's blindness come out. Not only does this scene highlight the differing legal framework of witness examination in French courts but also the dilemma of the treating physician as expert witness, related to potential biases. Were Samuel to have died by suicide rather than homicide, the treating psychiatrist-expert may have had some stake in the outcome. It becomes clear that the treating psychiatrist heavily (or solely) has relied on Samuel's self-report. Coupled with the inquisitorial nature of French courts, this creates a sequence of heated dialogue when Samuel's treating psychiatrist testifies alongside Sandra.

Sandra is also an immigrant and, although an intelligent, successful immigrant, we are reminded of the potential biases of the criminal justice system. Cross-cultural legal system interactions are also highlighted. For forensic psychiatrists, a thorough understanding of the evaluatee's background is critical, and failing to appreciate the cultural context of words used by the evaluatee can result in misunderstandings.³ When reenacting the events leading up to Samuel's death, the judge proclaims the reenactment must occur in French, despite the fact that English was spoken during the event itself. Later during the trial, Sandra, without a translator, must speak French. She struggles to convey her side of the story, having to turn to her attorney to clarify words. Testifying as an immigrant without an interpreter may create a host of cross-cultural misunderstandings.³ The audience sees Sandra's words and phrases get lost in translation, creating dramatic difficulty in mounting her defense. To counteract this dilemma, conducting a thorough forensic evaluation with an interpreter provides a necessary solution when both language and culture affect information gathering during an interview.³

Another impactful moment in the film comes with the depiction of Daniel, child of the victim and defendant, as a witness. The film highlights the complexities involved when a child is in the position of recounting traumatic events. For example, Daniel heard his mother recount his father's alleged suicide attempt in court. This left an impression, altering interpretations of memories, including one when his dog was sick. Children's testimonies may be influenced by various factors, including suggestion and emotional distress.^{4,5} Furthermore, the stress of being a witness in a high-profile case, including the potential for retraumatizing the child, and the courtroom environment itself, can affect perception.⁶

The use of covert audio recordings is another example of controversy. Samuel recorded a fight he had with Sandra the day before his untimely death. This recording is used as evidence in court. Covert recordings specifically raise grave consideration of being exposed to unreliable context.⁷ In summary, more than a simple whodunit, *Anatomy of a Fall* is a

provocative multifaceted film with topics worthy of discussion.

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