

Anthracite

France : 1980 : dir. Edouard Niernans : Rush / Antenne 2 : 90 min
 prod: : scr: : dir.ph.:
 Jérôme Zucca
 Bruno Crémer; Jean-Pol Dubois; Jenny Clève; Jean Bouise; Roland Bertin

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To paraphrase an old axiom among poker players – if you're a pupil at a boarding school and you can't identify the "sensitive" boy of the class, it must be you. Uh-oh!
 Source: International Film Guide 1981

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review:

"A Jesuit internate circa 1952. In this constricted environment, contact between a sensitive pupil and an idealistic priest/teacher is made suspect and impossible. Sobre and sombre variant on an oft-filmed theme, but nonetheless a promising directorial debut from stage actor Niernans. **½"

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"An interesting film on familiar French themes: the cruelty of school-life and the underlying tensions. The title refers to the nickname given to Father Godard (Jean-Pol Dubois), who is as much despised by his

colleagues as is Pierre (Jérôme Zucca) by his fellow-pupils. It is the tragedy of these misfits that they cannot help each other. **"

International Film Guide 1981 comment:

"For his first film, "ANTHRACITE", Edouard Niernans has chosen to describe the schooldays of a group of kids in a French pension around 1950. From Vigo to Bellocchio the theme has inspired great films and Niernans has managed to sustain it by the precision of his actors' playing, the cold, clinical look of the photography, and a fine sense of ambiguity to characterise his protagonists. His film is a good example of a

new trend in French cinema, a return to classicism.”

[no listing in "Halliwell's Film Guide", "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001", "The Critics' Film Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Gloomy, depressing tale in which young idealistic teacher is drawn to a delicate, bullied, and of course attractive boy in his class (about 14/15) who is at first puzzled by and finally resentful of his obsessional coddling. The headmaster (or whatever they call them at Jesuit schools) attempts to caution the teacher against this fixation but to no avail, and in the final scene looks on resignedly from his study window as the dismissed teacher is pummeled to the ground, and presumably kicked to death, by a mob of angry boys in the schoolyard. The boy who was the object of his concern and affection is well to the fore of his assailants.

"**ANTHRACITE**" paints a repressive and oppressive catholic school even more dour than the ones we saw in "**THE DEVIL'S PLAYGROUND**", "**CATHOLIC BOYS**" or "**LES AMITIÉS PARTICULIÈRES**" (which superficially it most closely resembles). The film is replete with the usual observations on the eccentricities of boarding school life: a boy reports to the one-armed housemaster in his bedroom to be beaten, is flailed rather nonchalantly across the back a few times with a sort of fly-whisk, then retires while the housemaster lights up a post-coital cigarette and relaxes to the strains of Wagner.

The delicate Pierre's reactions to his young teacher's unwanted attentions have the ring of truth about them – Godard's attempts to shield him from bullying only make him all the more a target for scorn and hostility – but it's hard to see quite what the film means us to conclude from it all. That a suffocating affection is even more unendurable than a good Catholic renunciation of affection? That conformity compels us to destroy that which would make us stand out? Or just that celibate teachers running boys' schools are like reformed alcoholics running breweries?

The underlying homosexual tensions are treated far less overtly than in two of the above films ("**CATHOLIC BOYS**", made in the US, sidestepped the question altogether of course – they never had embarrassments of **that** sort in America's Catholic schools and boys' homes, as we know). But Jérôme Zucca looks so much the young gay boy in hiding that the theme is implicit, from which the audience is free to conclude – if it so chooses – that these hermetic all-male environments are actually an **ideal** place to park an adolescent homosexual if one wants to snuff out his inclinations before they begin to smoulder. It worked a treat on Pierre.

Zucca, exact age unknown, was seen previously in Truffaut's "**BAISER VOLÉS**" (68) and in "**UNE BELLE FILLE COMME MOI**" (72). Nothing else is known of him.

See subject index under **BOARDING SCHOOL / PUBLIC SCHOOL, BULLYING** and under **SEX & SEXUALITY** for other pederastic themes. The mood and resolution of this film in some sense resembles "**THE SAILOR WHO FELL FROM GRACE WITH THE SEA**" or even "**LORD OF THE FLIES**". Both record the escalating brutality of young boys in their urgency to remain a member of the pack.