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Review of Elevator to the Gallows

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Elevator to the Gallows
(Criterion Collection, 4.25.2006)

Louis Malle's 1958 film is notable for introducing many of the elements that would soon become familiar in the work of the French New Wave directors. *Elevator to the Gallows* conveys the sense of an artist trying to present a reality not previously seen in film, but a reality constantly touched by artifice. The film is also notable for introducing Jeanne Moreau to the international film audience. Although she had been in movies for ten years, she had not yet shown the distinctive Moreau persona.

Florence Carala (Moreau) and Julien Tavernier (Maurice Ronet) are lovers plotting to kill her husband, also his boss, the slimy arms dealer Simon (Jean Wall). The narrative's uniqueness comes from the lovers never appearing together. The film opens with a phone conversation between them, and there are incriminating photos of the once-happy couple at the end.

In between, Julien pulls off what he thinks is a perfect crime. When he forgets a vital piece of evidence, however, he becomes stuck in an elevator. Then his car is stolen for a joyride by Louis (Georges Poujouly), attempting some James Dean-like rebellious swagger, and his girlfriend, Veronique (Yori Bertin). Julien ironically becomes blamed for their crimes.

Elevator to the Gallows offers the disaffected youth soon to be featured in Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* and Godard's *Breathless*, criticism of consumer culture and political conservatism seen in many New Wave films, and an American-tinged mystery, as in Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player*, with which it shares a similar style and tone, and numerous Claude Chabrol films.

There is also the location shooting, handheld camerawork, and natural lighting associated with the New Wave. As Florence wanders around Paris looking for Julien, accompanied by Miles Davis's plaintive score, cinematographer Henri Decaë shot Moreau with a handheld camera being pulled in a baby carriage. Because no artificial lights were used, Florence's appearance fluctuates according to the surrounding light and shadows.

In her previous films, Moreau was always heavily made up. Here, with minimal makeup and the natural light, she shifts from ugly to beautiful within the same shot, establishing the Moreau mystique that helped her break away from mundane assignments to working with Truffaut, Godard, Antonioni, Buñuel, Welles, Demy, Losey, and Frankenheimer over the next decade. The remarkable Decaë shot Malle's first two films as well as Chabrol's first two, all released in 1958, and followed with *The 400 Blows*.

Criterion's restored high-definition transfer honors Decaë's achievement. The blacks of Florence's dress and Louis's leather jacket are luminous, as are the

drops of rain on a car's fender. The extras are among the best Criterion has done. There is footage of Davis improvising his influential score, recollections of his session pianist Rene Urtgeger, and analysis of the impact of Davis's music by jazz critic Gary Giddins and trumpeter Jon Faddis. Malle's 1954 student film "Crazeologie" resembles *Elevator to the Gallows* through its use of music by Charlie Parker. Also included are a 1957 interview with Ronet, a 1975 Malle interview, a 1993 session with Malle and Moreau, and a 2005 interview, in English, with the actress, who looks pretty damn good for 77. A booklet provides analysis of the film by Terence Rafferty, a long excerpt from a Malle interview, and a brief reflection by the director's brother, Vincent.

In the 1975 interview for Canadian television, Malle says that the film includes many of his later themes: night, solitude, characters on the fringe of society, and the paths of characters crossing. In Moreau's delightful 2005 talk, she discusses how she and the director "became involved." Through working with Malle, she discovered the "depth and beauty" of the cinema and realized that art is "truer than the truth."—Michael Adams