

# Code Blue: Cannes Review

4:42 PM PDT 5/15/2011 by David Rooney



Cannes Film Festival

Urszula Antoniak's self-consciously dour mood piece centers on a terminal-ward nurse whose humane treatment of her patients contrasts with her own punishing self-denial.

An oddly translated notice posted outside Cannes Directors' Fortnight screenings of *Code Blue* warns that the film may "hurt audience's feelings." But while the final scenes erupt into explicit sex and ugly violence (or ugly sex and explicit violence), viewers are more likely to be numbed or exasperated than hurt by **Urszula Antoniak's** self-consciously dour mood piece. Its central figure is a terminal-ward nurse whose humane treatment of her patients contrasts with her own punishing self-denial.

A Polish director based in Holland, Antoniak's first feature, *Nothing Personal*, was set in Ireland and also dealt with solitude and emotional

withdrawal. This one takes place in the Netherlands but has a distinctly Central European flavor.

The behavior of ascetic Marian (**Bien de Moor**) is driven by personal ethics, rather than by social, spiritual or professional codes, which may be a nod to the typical **Krzysztof Kieslowski** protagonist. And the stark apartment complex where she lives could almost be a high-end -- though no more aesthetically appealing -- version of the Warsaw block in which *The Decalogue* unfolded. There's also a whiff of **Michael Haneke** in Marian's degrading sexual diversions.

The film's glowering intensity is evident the instant it begins, with a slow-motion close-up of a woman's face in what appears to be the agonized throes of death. While Marian clearly is accustomed to handling corpses, she lacks the brisk dispatch of her colleagues, performing her duties with solemn tenderness. She secretly takes small, worthless mementos from the deceased patients -- a pencil, a comb -- keeping a part of every death.

While institutionalized euthanasia is legal in Holland, Marian bypasses the bureaucracy by gently expediting deliverance for her suffering patients, sometimes without waiting for them to ask.

Antoniak gives the film a look as cold and clinical as the hospital in which Marian works. **Jasper Wolf**'s camerawork is measured and deliberate in its unfriendly angles, while **Vincent de Pater**'s production design is dominated by antiseptic whites and hard metal surfaces. All that chilly formality might have been atmospheric with a more involving central character, but Marian is, to put it bluntly, a boring downer.

When her rigid self-control starts giving way to suppressed desires, Marian's angel of death act starts to fall apart and the film becomes increasingly distancing. The more disturbing Marian's behavior becomes, the more studied and artificial it all seems.

Her sexual fantasies focus on a particular stranger (**Lars Eidinger**), who lives in the building opposite and spends an inordinate amount of time at the window. When they both witness a brutal rape happening in the adjoining field and neither of them does anything to stop or report it, an unspoken bond is formed. (What Marian does with her souvenir from the rape scene is probably the film's single most repugnant scene.) Given the grim tone, it's all too predictable that when the neighbors do finally get together, it won't be for an agreeable roll in the hay.

In a performance that's tightly wound but at the same time dazed and dreamy, Belgian actress de Moor holds nothing back. She lays bare the tortured inner life of a woman so removed from the fundamental

pleasures of life and social interaction that she relates only to death. Sadly though, that doesn't make the character interesting. The brooding film is a slow grind even at 81 minutes, too mannered in its high-art austerity and funereal chill to be in any way compelling or provocative.

*Sales: Bavaria Film*

*Production: IDTV Film, Family Affair Films in co-production with VPRO, Zentropa*

*Producers: Frans Van Gestel, Arnold Heslenfeld, Floor Onrust*

*Co-producers: Joost de Wolf, Marie Gade Denesen*

*Director of photography: Jasper Wolf*

*Production designer: Vincent de Pater*

*Music: Ethan Rose*

*Costume designer: Bho Roosterman-Vroegen*

*Editor: Nathalie Alonso Casale*

*No rating; 81 minutes*