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13 going on 30: Decades later, *Precinct* scenario still cuts

ASSAULT ON PRECINCT 13

Directed by Jean-François Richet
Rogue, opens January 19

A remake of a stellar '70s recombinant that has already served as the basis for a Tarantino script, Jean-François Richet's *Assault on Precinct 13* is a surprisingly credible action flick—even with Ethan Hawke in the role of a neurotic hipster police sergeant.

The original *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976) established its writer-director, John Carpenter, as a shrewd genre artist, two years before *Halloween* made him a rich and famous one. Basically, Carpenter took the besieged jailhouse of Howard Hawks's 1959 John Wayne western *Rio Bravo* and, in transposing it to deepest Watts, gave the bad-guy attack the implacable quality of the original *Night of the Living Dead*. (Decades later, *From Dusk Till Dawn* would put a similar zombie story in a western landscape.) The new *Assault* reurbanizes the setting to Detroit; it adds



Rogue Pictures

After sunset: Hawke

a crippling snowstorm, and as the force-of-evil attack mob enlists . . . well, you'll see (or not).

Carpenter's *Assault* was pure thrill machine and, for the time, an astonishingly violent movie. The big shock of having an eight-year-old girl shot while enjoying an ice cream cone is mercifully not repeated in Richet's remake. Nor does Richet share Carpenter's

mordant humor and taste for lovingly choreographed mayhem. Too much relationship-establishing blather slows down the action—at times the shifting alliances and staggered casualties within the beleaguered station house suggest an episode of *Survivor* with everyone armed. But the situational mechanism still works; save for a self-regarding tendency to stop the show to dwell on the rivulets of cosmetic blood coursing from the many casualties produced by continual shooting at very close quarters (even in a crowded church), the new *Assault* is pretty darn snappy.

In *Rio Bravo* terms, to return to the source, Hawke is both Dean Martin and John Wayne. Maria Bello brightens the night as an improbably beautiful police psychologist who goes to work in a skimpy disco dress. John Leguizamo plays a gabby class-conscious junkie whose constant babble is amusingly bounced off Laurence Fishburne's gangster kingpin's Morpheus cool. In fact, *Assault on Precinct 13* inadvertently suggests *The Matrix* when, for reasons never explained, it sets its final reckoning in a foggy wood somewhere in the middle of derelict Detroit. **J. HOBERMAN**