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Author(s)	Pierre Greenfield
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COMMUNION (Alice, Sweet Alice)

Direction: **Alfred Sole**. Screenplay: **Alfred Sole** and **Rosemary Ritvo**. Production design: **John Lawless**. Production: **Richard Rosenberg**.

The players: **Linda Miller, Paula Shepherd, Mildred Clinton, Rudolph Willrich, Alphonso de Noble, Gary Allen**.

I don't know anything about Alfred Sole beyond the fact that he has described himself as "a good Catholic boy," and barely a single name on either side of the cameras in this extraordinary film of his was familiar to me (though I recognised baldheaded, bespectacled Gary Allen as having previously been one of the eight dead murderers making life tough for Cristina Raines in *The*

Sentinel). But I suspect we'll hear a good deal more of Sole in future. *Communion* is a classy chiller on a low budget, and a celebration of cinema at its *noirest*. The filmmaker Sole most obviously seeks comparison with is that other good Catholic boy named Alfred, but there are several other big names exercising a powerful influence, too. The main title comes up over a Bunuelian image of an angelic little girl holding a large cross which, a deft pullback reveals, is actually a huge, phallic knife. An amazingly fat pervert living in grotesque squalor despite possessing wealth could have provided a dandy part for Victor Buono in one of Robert Aldrich's further-out Gothic excursions. A child under suspicion of murder undergoes *Exorcist*-style humiliations at the hands of various uncaring adults representing the authorities. Above all, Roeg's *Don't Look Now* is heftily evoked via the presence of a face-unseen killer in a PVC raincoat (yellow this time), whom we are encouraged to think is a child but who turns out to be an adult. The killer wears a face mask, which could be an allusion to any number of movies—*The Phantom of the Opera*, *House of Wax*, or even *Duffy* or *Cool Breeze*. Hitch-

cock looms over all these, though. There's marital bickering filmed through a rainswept car windscreen *a la Marnie*; there's an agonisingly slow *Torn Curtain* death; there's a gruff-but-polite-but-terrifying *Wrong Man* police detective; there are *I Confess* priests, a faintly Mrs. Danvers-like housekeeper fixated on the memory of a dead female (in this case her own daughter, whose place the child at the centre of the movie symbolically takes, just as the second Mrs. de Winter did Rebecca's), and churchgoers as impotent in the face of sudden crime as those kidnap witnesses in *Family Plot*. Above all, the surprise which most filmgoers anticipate will come at the end comes instead a lot earlier, as in *Vertigo*, so that the suspense is based on our knowing what's what when no one in the actual movie does. And then there are the *Psycho* references; mainly to do with people getting stabbed, notably on a staircase, these are the most obvious parallels. Just in case we haven't got the reference, Sole (whose movie takes place in 1961, the year after *Psycho* came out) shows us a poster advertising the film, clearly still packin' 'em in at the Paterson, N.J. pic-

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ture palace. Mothers almost as lethal as (more so than?) Mater Bates figure prominently; and the central figure in the movie, the child Alice (significant name), might well grow up to be a female Norman . . . or perhaps a more lethal Marnie. Though innocent of the crimes ascribed to her by nasty, stupid or overly cynical adults, Alice is a disturbed kid, and the film's closing image offers us a stunning twist on the Hitchcockian transfer-of-culpability theme; cleared as the real killer knocks off one last victim, Alice, ignored by all the adults, purloins the murder weapon instead. She *is* innocent, but will she *become* guilty? Perhaps there was more behind the 1961 setting than allusiveness. The child of 1961 is now an adult. . . . *Communion* may have been made cheaply but it moves along with remarkable assurance. Sole's eye for a riveting image is pretty sophisticated; instead of the blood-mixed-with-shower-water you get in *Psycho*, he offers blood in a street-corner puddle, blood in an occupied goldfish bowl, blood being licked up by a hungry cat. His control over his array of horrors falters only in the fat pervert, Mr. Alphonso, played by Alphonso de Noble, who seems to have strayed in from a world rather too far away from that of the other characters. What are nice, prim, middleclass Catholic parents doing in any place owned by so transparent a creep? But if this particular example of Solean grotesquerie seems too conspicuously invented, nothing much else is. Only a good Catholic boy could have worked out so neatly-integrated a network of peculiarly Catholic fears and paranoias as forms the psychological substructure of this nightmare. Father Tom, the dashing young priest who asks children if they've made "a good confession," fails to confess his own sin, shared by all the grownups in the film—that of adult pride. Not one of them can penetrate the sensibility of confused, disappointed, tough and, perhaps, finally, lethal Alice. His punishment is literally what our punishment—the Hitchcockian emphasis on our own culpability—is only figuratively: he gets it in the neck.

Pierre Greenfield