



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2024 OFFICIAL SELECTION
UN CERTAIN REGARD

HOLY COW

a film by
Louise Courvoisier



EX NIHILO
PRESENTS



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1ST FILM
COMPETING FOR THE CAMÉRA D'OR



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HOLY COW

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Louise Courvoisier

FRANCE | 2024 | 1H30 | DCP | 5.1 | SCOPE | COLOR

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Totone, 18 years old, spends most of his time drinking beers and partying in the Jura region with his group of friends. But reality catches up with him: he has to take care of his 7-year-old sister and find a way to make a living. He then sets out to make the best Comté cheese in the region, the one that would win him the gold medal at the agricultural competition and 30,000 euros.

INTERVIEW WITH LOUISE COURVOISIER

Your film opens with a rather odd image - a calf in a car - and continues with a long, flamboyant sequence shot. Your short film *Mano a mano* began with the same cinematic gesture. Is it your own way of saying: “Once upon a time...”?

For me, it is a way of taking the viewer behind the scenes of my own world. In *Mano a mano*, it was the circus world, in which a part of my family is immersed; and *Holy Cow* explores the rural environment of Jura, where I grew up. The opening sequence shot introduces the main character of the film, Totone, who is dancing on the bar counter.

How did your desire to make films come about? And how did the characters of this first feature film come into being?

My desire to make films came about a little by chance. I grew up in Cressia, a small village in Jura. One day, I felt the need to leave, so I chose to take a film class in high school, because it meant I would have to go to boarding school. Little by little, I developed a taste for it, I felt that I had stories to tell, and eventually, this led to film studies at CinéFabrique in Lyon.

To create the characters and the story of *Holy Cow*, I drew inspiration from the community I have been living in and observing since I was a child. Totone and his friends are like my village “colleagues.” Most of them left school early to work on farms with their parents. Many of them are in difficult family situations. I wanted to film these young people who are seldom represented in films, who have had a bumpier start than many others, and to paint a positive and nuanced portrait of them, “from the inside.” All in the land of Comté cheese!

How did you write the script, in which every element you introduce reappears at one point or another in the narrative?

I let my taste for details guide the writing of my characters and situations. I like it when things seem trivial, when elements all have a purpose, without overemphasizing them or turning the film into a chronicle. I had a real desire for fiction rooted in documentary reality. I wanted to tell my story within a realistic environment.

I began to write on my own, starting with the characters, who evolved over time. Then I co-wrote with Théo Abadie, a student in my class at CinéFabrique. And screenwriter Marcia Romano helped us throughout the process.

Your film has a western feel to it – in the way you deal with space, the conquest of territory, adversity – and some of the twists and turns are reminiscent of hopeless yet funny slackers, like the characters in the *Pieds nickelés* comic book series, which keeps gravitas at bay...

Indeed, I have imagined my film as a western, yet without borrowing all the codes of the genre. That is why I chose the Scope format. I also liked the idea of filming weathered faces telling tales of a life well-lived. The fear of the unknown, the conquest of territory, all this went hand in hand with a certain awkwardness typical of my characters and their behavior. The *Pieds Nickelés* aspect is apparent in the way Totone and his friends act. They try things, and they support each other in the face of adversity. Awkward as it is, their group pushes them forward.

You take a tender look at your characters.

I am very fond of Totone, even though he is not a hero and he is full of flaws. I wanted to show his imperfections as much as his strengths. Totone is like a clumsy and overexcited puppy, who may dance half-naked on a bar, or fail to help his father when he needs it, but is sweet and lovable all the same. Totone is also a force of nature, with a unique way of reacting to events, and a sense of community.

There are three courageous female figures in your story: Totone's little sister, the farmer Marie-Lise, and the cheesemaker.

Marie-Lise and the little sister are characters I wrote against the stereotypes of femininity. Marie-Lise isn't seductive, she is straightforward, which doesn't stop her from being sexy. I wanted to avoid the cliché of the farmer and put a very capable, confident young woman in that position.

For the little sister, we needed to feel her intelligence in her presence and in her eyes, her maturity through such circumstances, and her complicity with her brother, which is a bit clumsy at first and evolves as time goes by.

As for the cheesemaker, I didn't want to make her a too positive mother figure. I wanted her to be very charismatic, and the actress who played her, a woman from my village who works as a prison guard, and whom I know very well, gave her this strength.

Holy Cow is a coming-of-age story.

Indeed, Totone is forced into adulthood. The film's story takes place over several months. It follows the time it takes to make cheese: the maturing period for Comté cheese, but in a way for Totone as well! He manages to cope with his father's passing without ever talking about it, always keeping his

feelings to himself. Growing up in the countryside, I realized that I was much more exposed to death than young people living in the city. Many people had road accidents and died very suddenly. I observed a lot of emotional restraint around me. In the countryside, unlike in the city, it is not common to see a shrink. People lack the tools to analyze their emotions. If their issues are not processed through words and tears, how can they express them? While avoiding a form of pathos that would not suit them, I wanted to show the roughness of my characters, without concealing their sensitivity or their flaws. What I find so touching about them is the fact that they don't fall apart when they are grieving, for instance. Yet in the face of heartbreak, they will be devastated. I have often noticed this contrast in people around me between their strength, their ability to take a blow, and their fragility when you least expect it.

Movement runs through your film: there is a lot of driving and moped riding; we come across cows and galloping horses; your characters dance... They don't talk much, but they are really expressive.

People move a lot in this rural environment because everything is so vast. And my characters are anything but static. I wrote the script with all the locations in mind. I felt the need to tell the story of this landscape, to film it at specific times of the day, without being engrossed in contemplation either. I wanted viewers to stay focus on Totone and his story, and not stray into a bucolic film. I needed to strike a balance between a raw, head-on look and a poetic approach, because I didn't want to be too harsh either.

As for bodies, I like to film them because gestures and gaits say a lot about the characters and their inner selves. All the more so as these characters are rather quiet. Besides, I love what is at play in silences, and the discrepancy between words



and deeds that is noticeable in some scenes. I also like to see sensuality emerge elsewhere than in love sequences, which are not particularly sensual. In the dance or fight scenes between the boys for instance, sensuality arises because they know each other so well.

You make Comté cheese a character in its own right in the film!

It was a real challenge. First of all, we had to make cheese cinogenic. Then, in terms of storytelling, we had to make clear that the characters' mourning journey was intimately linked to the making of this cheese, which is so central to the region where the story takes place. One of the difficulties was to show the real making of the cheese, including the tricky parts – this is the documentary aspect of the film, which becomes part of fiction. Similarly, the calving sequence also had to be authentic. It was a genuine challenge for the crew, for the actress (even though she is a farmer), and for the veal, as we didn't want to put it in harm's way.

Both the cheese-making and the calving contribute to the suspense that runs through your story...

It is mainly because we were dealing with living things. We could have recreated things artificially, but it wouldn't have been congruent with how the scenes were written in the script. We had to feel that life, through looks, gestures, and everything that happens between the characters at those moments. Tension really built up when we shot these scenes, and we made sure it was felt through the editing process.

Another character is the cauldron, this shiny and almost magical pot!

Even religious! I like the idea that a seemingly unimportant tool can turn into an object full of promise. In the same way, my characters, whom some might consider misfits, turn out to be beautiful and capable. This is also apparent in their gestures, which are increasingly assured and precise. With my cinematographer, Elio Balézeaux, who studied at CinéFabrique with me, we tried to confer a form of sensuality and solemnity to this cauldron. We cannot really see what is going on inside, until we get close to it. We had to come up with different ways of showing it from one scene to the next, progressively, up to the moment when we discover what is inside.

You use all kinds of camera shots. What were your directorial choices?

Elio Balézeaux comes from the Alps, and he also grew up in a rural environment. Together, we worked a lot on contrasts, by alternating between very tight shots and very wide shots. I chose to use mostly sequence shots and to stay as close as possible to my character, to use panoramic shots rather than dolly shots, and to aim at a rather stripped-down style. Sequence shots, such as the one in which Totone is chatting with his friend on the roof of a car, also allowed us to play with silences and build rhythm from within the scenes.

How did you work on light and colors?

He wanted an image filled with colors, sunshine, and luminosity. The film had to have a raw yet sensual vibe.

We mainly used natural light, even for the interiors, in which

the aim was to capture and magnify it without aestheticizing the incoming light.

How did you cast the film and direct your actors?

All the actors in the film are non-professionals. We did an open casting call in the Jura region, visiting motocross races, stock-car races, agricultural shows, etc.

Clément Faveau, who plays Totone, is eighteen and he works on a poultry farm. I met him at an agricultural high school. It took me a while to convince him, but he eventually came on board. Clément understands everything. He manages to be really convincing without giving the impression that he is acting. His performance is so authentic, it is impressive. He was perfect to embody Totone's tough and fragile side.

For the role of the sister, I met a lot of girls through the casting process, but I chose Luna Garret, who I saw growing up in my village. I think she has a very strong presence and I really wanted to work with her. During the screen tests, she interacted with the boys effortlessly, as she does with her brothers in real life.

Maiwène Barthélémy, who plays Marie-Lise, was studying agriculture when she came to audition. In addition to her abilities as a farmer, she immediately showed an ability to fully immerse herself in the character with incredible spontaneousness. She was an obvious choice for the part.

I am passionate about directing actors. I drew my inspiration from who they were, how they talked, their looks, their mannerisms. We rehearsed a lot in the sets, and I also spent a lot of time with them individually. Throughout the rehearsing process, I rewrote the scenes so that they sounded as authentic as possible, and so that the actors could feel ready when they arrived on set.

Your sister, Ella Courvoisier, designed the sets.

And my brother, Pablo Courvoisier, was construction manager. I love to work with my family, and I need to be surrounded by people I can trust, with whom I can take all the time I need to find what I am looking for. We created and adjusted the sets down to the very last detail for months, thinking about what the interiors said about the characters. All this work contributed greatly to the aesthetics of the film.

In the opening sequence shot, each element was precisely placed. It is not a real party, everything was created from scratch, and the character's wanderings are precise to a fraction of an inch. The idea was not just to show things, but to make the audience feel them.

As for the editing, what pace were you looking for?

I wanted to play with contrasts, between moments that leave time to silences and looks, and moments that speed up. The story is peppered with sequences bursting with life, like those at the dance or at the stock-car race.

Within certain sequences, such as the one with Totone and Marie-Lise in the kitchen, we had to find variations in rhythm to convey the characters' mixed feelings. This search for the right timing was carried out during editing with Sarah Grosset, another former student of CinéFabrique.

What were your intentions concerning the sound and the music?

Sound gives density to landscapes, sometimes even more accurately and precisely than image. The characters' accents also play a part in the film. So, we made sure to highlight the voices. Each space, each setting had to have its own identity. Even the cheese had to sound right! The cauldron also had to have a precise tone.



As for the music, it was written by my other brother and my mother: Charlie and Linda Courvoisier. We searched for sounds together, especially those that are specific to the western genre. I wanted a music that was at once subtle and expressive. My family also performed the music and voices, my parents were professional classical musicians before they became farmers.

Why this title?

I chose it when I discovered how to spell the expression "*Vingt dieux!*" [literally "twenty gods," an equivalent of "Good God!" or "Holy cow!"], which is so widespread in my region. I really like this reference to the gods at the heart of the rural world!

Interview by Anne-Claire Cieutat







LOUISE COURVOISIER

Born in 1994, Louise Courvoisier grew up in the Jura region before studying cinema at the Cinéfabrique in Lyon. Her graduation short, *Mano a Mano*, won the first prize at the Cinéfondation in Cannes in 2019. *Vingt dieux* (*Holy Cow*) is her first feature film, a sentimental cheese epic set in the village of her childhood.



CAST

Clément Faveau – **Totone**

Luna Garret – **Claire**

Mathis Bernard – **Jean-Yves**

Dimitry Baudry – **Francis**

Maïwène Barthelemy – **Marie-Lise**

Armand Sancey Richard – **Cyril**

Lucas Marillier – **Pierrick**

Isabelle Courajeot – **Nadine**

CREW

Director
Screenplay & dialogues
Producer
Image
Editing
Sound
Sets
Production manager
1st assistant director
Set management
Costumes
Make-up
Mix
Music

LOUISE COURVOISIER
LOUISE COURVOISIER et THÉO ABADIE
MURIEL MEYNARD
ELIO BALÉZEAUX
SARAH GROSSET
FRANÇOIS ABDELNOUR
ELLA COURVOISIER
SALOMÉ FLEISCHMANN
LÉA GALLEGO, RENO EPELBOIN
EMMA LEBOT
PERRINE RITTER
CAMILLE BERLANDE
THOMAS BESSON
LINDA et CHARLIE COURVOISIER

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