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THE DAZZLED

LES ÉBLOUIS

A FILM BY SARAH SUÇO

SYNOPSIS

Camille, 12, passionate about circus, is the eldest of a large family. One day, her parents enter a religious community based on sharing and solidarity in which they fully invest. The girl must accept a way of living that questions her desires and her own torments. Gradually, indoctrination becomes sectarian. Camille will have to fight to assert her freedom and save her brothers and sisters.

Camille, 12 ans, passionnée de cirque, est l'aînée d'une famille nombreuse. Un jour, ses parents intègrent une communauté religieuse basée sur le partage et la solidarité dans laquelle ils s'investissent pleinement. La jeune fille doit accepter un mode de vie qui remet en question ses envies et ses propres tourments. Peu à peu, l'embrigadement devient sectaire. Camille va devoir se battre pour affirmer sa liberté et sauver ses frères et sœurs.



INTERVIEW WITH SARAH SUÇO

Les Éblouis is your first feature film as director. It is dedicated to your brothers and sisters. It is based on your own life?

Indeed, I have lived in a charismatic community with my family for ten years. I had been thinking about turning this experience into a film for a very long time, and once I got in my thirties, the need to do it got the better of me and I felt ready to have a go.

How did you handle the autobiographical material?

I knew right from the start that I would write the script with someone else, because I did not want to wallow in hatred or in rage. I needed to step back, especially from the parental figure. I wanted to turn this pile of memories into a fiction film, with relatable characters. I knew that distance and reserve were the right approach for such a violent subject.

Your story deals with indoctrination within a community...

I wanted the audience to follow the first steps of a teenager, Camille, and her parents in this community, without knowing straightaway how things work in this place and why people choose to come and stay there.

Contrary to popular opinion and clichés, most people who join this type of communities are intelligent and well-read, they find people to meet their aspirations there. These communities and their leaders are really good at highlighting your skills, and at infiltrating your insecurities and flaws. In the film, we can see how Camille's father is glad to

put his knowledge at the service of the Bible class, as he feels undervalued in the high school where he works. The same goes for Camille's mother, who finally feels considered and useful: she serves meals and keeps books for the community...

The film shows how simple it is to get enrolled when you have needs and when a group lures you skilfully.

Why did you decide to set the story in present time?

Because I didn't want the audience to think that things like that don't happen anymore. Each year in France, an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 children are victims of such communities drifting into sectarianism. Even though these communities are legal and well established. Defining sectarian drift or hold is really complicated. There are some criteria – psychological or financial indoctrination, abuse... - but they remain quite vague and hard to prove legally, and therefore hard to penalize, as long as no clearly reprehensible tragedy has occurred.

Can you tell us more about these communities?

These charismatic communities, imported from the United States since the 1970s, call for a spiritual renewal based on the Holy Spirit. People there have a personal experience with God, they receive various "gifts" from God and through prayer, like healing for instance. The communities are composed of priests, clergymen and secular families... They rest on basic noble intentions: vows of charity, solidarity, mutual assistance... They thrived everywhere in cities in the 1970s, and there are still going strong, especially with today's feelings of isolation, the growing values

of community harmony, of getting back to the land... The typical days of all members, including children, are interspersed with prayers and group rituals: forgiveness requests, singing, dancing processions, Holy Spirit blessing sessions. Outfits, hairstyles and life rules are controlled and very specific, and bit by bit, children cannot have a normal social life anymore.

It is a form of fundamentalism...

There are fundamentalist and sectarian drifts in all religions. I started writing in 2013, long before the attack against Charlie Hebdo and all the mix-ups with Islam that followed. I was glad that my film talked about the Catholic church, because I think it is important that we put our own house in order too. The film is not about the Order of the Solar Temple, or some jihadist cell, it is about a local church, in the heart of a small town.

Some scenes are incredible, like when members of the community start bleating to call their shepherd...

The film is well short of the reality. I have spent more than ten years in that community. We had no television, no radio, no cell phone. I learned who Michael Jackson was when I escaped, at the age of 18. Everything I show in the film has happened for real, even more violently. On Thursday nights, for instance, we had Lucernary dinners, when we served Jesus on an icon. We gave him food and waited for him to eat, if ever he came... We kept silent. We only spoke to Him. I have dozens of examples that I didn't put in the script... When I decided to make

a fiction film, I knew I couldn't tell everything. I had to choose, and from a cinematic point of view, it seemed essential to film scenes like the bleating session or the exorcism, to show that such ridiculous rituals didn't stop people from joining the community. The drift into sectarianism starts there. Such crazy scenes, disturbing as they may seem from an external point of view, are very real, unfortunately.

There is a joy so intense about the members of the community that it becomes slightly nerve-racking.

These people have decided to be joyful, but as they keep observing precepts and principles, they run the risk of not being able to think for themselves. The issue of free will is at the heart of the film. Our heroine is a teenager who, through this unprecedented experience, is in a quest for her own self and for the autonomy of her thought. It is always hard to think for oneself, and against one's parents. Within that extra-ordinary setting, this path is even more complicated.

Incidentally, Camille defends her parents when her classmates make fun of their lifestyle.

She defends their lifestyle because she lacks proper distance to explain what is going on and how she feels. Camille is a lively and passionate teenager, who is about to live her own life. Right then, her parents decide to join a fundamentalist community, as if they were going through a radical teenage phase, only in reverse. Camille will have to assert her freedom of thought against her parents, who are

giving up on theirs. She will have to become an adult and bear witness, when her parents become children again, and don't have the right to speak anymore. Above all, she will have to find the courage to turn against them. Beyond the topic of indoctrination, this is the main story I wanted to tell: the loyalty conflict of a girl against her mother.

To me, Camille is a little sister to River Phoenix's character in Sidney Lumet's *Running on Empty*.

Early in the film, Camille's circus arts teacher urges her to express who she really is deep down. His resoluteness foreshadows the girl's journey to come.

I wanted my heroine to have her very own hobby, one precisely that her parents will ask her to sacrifice. This behaviour is really typical of sectarian drifts and manipulation: they search for the good in you, they tell you that it's great, but at the same time they break it. Nevertheless, Camille's passion for circus arts lives on, no matter what. It even allows her to shape her personality, and then to liberate herself.

Camille has great inner strength, yet she isn't really acting out for a teenager...

One of the main traits of the character is that she fights above all for the others - and first of all, for her mother. But she is not alone. The bond between siblings is a central theme in the film. Camille draws the strength to fight from her siblings. By being in charge of them, she becomes more mature. And it is to save them from that dreadful situation that she decides to speak up. The children's point of view allowed me to address this serious topic with vitality

and joy. Their insolence before religious solemnity brings humour to the scenes. Their irreverence and unflinching solidarity also bring light to the film, I hope.

What were your goals, as far as mise en scène goes?

It seemed to me that the rightest and boldest move was to seek a kind of simplicity in frames and cuts, almost in a formalist approach at times, so that the audience could really experience the confinement. I didn't want the core of the story and the spiral to be underlined by over-insistent camera movements. I wanted the audience to feel what the characters are going through: since the camera isn't intrusive, you find yourself trapped within the frame, without you noticing. Both literally and figuratively. Photographer Gregory Crewdson was a major inspiration for me. His photos seem extremely natural at first sight, but supranatural elements always emerge eventually.

And what about the film's title?

Les Éblouis ("*The dazzled*") carries a double meaning that was congruent with my search for ambivalence. Community members are not the only ones to be dazzled. Camille is also dazzled by her love for her parents. Growing up and becoming an adult means accepting not to be dazzled anymore, getting rid of self-delusion and thinking for oneself.

CAST

Christine Lourmel	Camille Cottin
Le Berger	Jean-Pierre Darroussin
Frédéric Lourmel	Eric Caravaca
Camille Lourmel	Céleste Brunnquell
Mamie	Laurence Roy
Papi	Daniel Martin
Boris	Spencer Bogaert
Jean-Marie	Benjamin Gauthier
Marie-Laetitia	Suzanne de Baecque
Matthieu Lourmel	Armand Rayaume
Benjamin Lourmel	Jules Dhios Francisco

CREW

Director	Sarah Suco
Screenwriter	Sarah Suco et Nicolas Silhol
Casting	Elsa Pharaon et David Bertrand
Sets	Manu de Chauvigny
Costumes	Nathalie Raoul
DOP	Yves Angelo
Editor	Catherine Schwartz
Sound designer	Cyril Moisson, Guillaume d'Ham, Hervé Buirette
Music	Laurent Perez del Mar
Producers	Dominique Besnehard (Mon Voisin Productions) Michel Feller (Mon Voisin Productions) Frédéric Brillion (Épithète Films)

Production companies

Mon Voisin Productions and Épithète Films

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