



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2024 OFFICIAL SELECTION
UN CERTAIN REGARD

THE STORY OF SOULEYMANE

a film by Boris Lojkin

UNITÉ
PRESENTS



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THE STORY OF SOULEYMANE

a film by
Boris Lojkine

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As he pedals through the streets of Paris to deliver meals, Souleymane repeats his story. In two days, he has to go through his asylum application interview, the key to obtaining papers. But Souleymane is not ready.

ABOUT THE FILM

BY BORIS LOJKINE

THE ORIGIN

For me, making films has always been a way of defying expectations about what I should be and what kind of stories I should tell, as well as a way of putting myself in other people's shoes. For a few years now, I have been wanting to make a film about the bicycle couriers who crisscross the city with their turquoise or bright yellow bags, branded with the app they work for, so visible yet completely clandestine - most of them undocumented.

Hope, my first fiction film, told the story of Léonard and Hope, a Cameroonian man and a Nigerian woman, who meet on their way to Europe. In the debates that followed the film's release, many people asked me whether I wanted to write the sequel and show what happened to them when they get to France. I really resisted this idea, because traveling has always been part of my desire to make films. I have shot all my films in faraway countries such as Morocco, Vietnam and the Central African Republic.

But I kept thinking about these cycled messengers, so I wondered: what if I filmed Paris as a foreign city whose codes we don't know, where each policeman is a threat, where the inhabitants are hostile, scornful, distant? From the suburban housing projects to the Haussman-style buildings in the center, from McDonald's restaurants to office blocks, from shelters to suburban train cars, I filmed my own city, sometimes a stone's throw away from my place, but from a radically different angle.

In the film, "the other" is us: the worker who orders a burger, the passer-by who's been bumped into and who curses on food deliverers, the civil servant standing in front of Souleymane.

THE SCRIPT

I wanted to base the writing of the script on a solid documentary foundation. With Aline Dalbis, a former documentary director turned casting director, we met many food delivery workers. They told us about the behind-the-scenes aspects of their work: the problems with their account holders, the scams they'd fallen victims to, their interactions with customers; they told us about their difficulties to find accommodation, their relationships with their fellow deliverymen, colleagues who aren't necessarily their friends. In all their stories, the issue of papers occupied a special place. It was particularly the case with the Guineans we talked to. Almost all of them were or had been asylum seekers, and they were obsessed with the application process, because being granted asylum could radically change their lives. The worst-case scenario if you are a deliveryman is no longer having your bike stolen as in *Bicycle Thieves* (if your bike gets stolen, you just buy a new one in Barbès – a neighborhood in Paris – the next day). The worst-case scenario is failing the asylum interview.

The film tells the story of the two days leading up to Souleymane's interview. I wanted the film to be fast paced. To achieve this, I decided very early on to keep the story short.

So, with Delphine Agut, the film's co-writer, we built a dramaturgy closer to a thriller than to a social chronicle. All through the writing process, I kept thinking about two Romanian films that have made a lasting impression on me: *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* by Cristian Mungiu and *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* by Cristi Puiu. Both recount in great detail, minute after minute, the efforts of a character struggling like a fly in a jar, prey to an oppressive system. Like Souleymane. During these two days when he should be resting before his interview, our protagonist doesn't have a minute to catch his breath. He runs around, trying to sort out problems that are piling up, grappling with the merciless system of a European society that we think is gentle, but which is terrible for those who aren't citizens.

I chose to tell the story of a man who has decided to lie. From a fictional point of view, the liar is often more interesting than the one who tells the truth. It is also a political choice. I didn't want to write an exemplary tale, showing a good guy who struggles with an ugly immigration policy. This is too easy and it doesn't make you think. I prefer to ask questions: Does Souleymane deserve to stay in France? Should he be granted asylum? Do you think that he is entitled to it? Does he deserve it? What would you want?

THE CASTING

Almost all the actors in the film are non-professionals with no acting experience. With Aline Dalbis, we did a long open casting call, wandering in the streets of Paris to meet food deliverers. We immersed ourselves in the Guinean community, and it was finally in Amiens, through an association, that we met 23-year-old Abou Sangare, who had arrived in France seven years earlier, when he was still a minor. His face, his words, the intensity of his presence in front of the camera immediately stroke us. It was him.

Over a period of several months, we had many rehearsal sessions with Sangare (Guineans usually call each other by their surnames rather than their first names), and then with the other actors. Sangare had a huge weight on his shoulders. He is in every scene, almost every shot. In real life, he is a mechanic, not a delivery boy. For several weeks, he did delivery work, to familiarize himself with everyday gestures, the bike, the phone, the app, the bag, the way to introduce himself to customers and restaurant staff. Little by little, he got into character. This rehearsal time allowed the actors to prepare themselves. It also allowed me to rewrite the script, adapting it to their unique ways of speaking and to details about them. This is what I like about working with non-professional actors: they come as they are, carrying their own world with them. It is up to me to welcome their singularity.

During the forty days of shooting, Sangare blew us all away. Sometimes breathtakingly beautiful, with a changing, highly expressive face, showing a whole range of emotions, he was always convincing, and often deeply moving.

THE INTERVIEW

In order to write the long final scene, I asked Guineans to tell me about their own asylum interviews. I was also granted authorization by the Ofpra (the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons) to attend interviews, and I spoke to the protection officers who conduct them. I wanted to show both points of view in the scene. Then I had to create a special dramaturgy for it, because this part is almost a film within the film. I wanted the interview to be like a duel, with Souleymane fighting tooth and nail to the bitter end, and with the viewer embracing his cause, up to the moment when everything falls apart. When Souleymane finally explains why and how he left Guinea, he may have lost everything, but at



least, for the first time, he has spoken the truth. He is himself again.

That scene was a considerable challenge for the actors. Twenty pages of dialogues to learn, but also an emotional intensity that just couldn't be feigned. I asked Nina Meurisse, with whom I had made *Camille*, my previous film, to play the protection officer (this is how the Ofpra agents who conduct the interviews are called). I didn't want her to be the villain of the story, but rather a committed young woman caught between her empathy for Souleymane and the rules of the institution she represents. She embodies France. And us as well, in a way.

I knew that Nina would be perfect for the part, and that she would be generous enough to help Sangare get through this extraordinary scene. We rewrote the scene after the rehearsals, intertwining Souleymane's story with many details from Sangare's own life. It took a lot of courage for him to do it. He went for it and gave us all goosebumps. That day, I had the feeling that he had become the great actor we had felt he could be when we first met him.

BIKES AND THE CITY

For me, the cycling scenes are much more than mere rides. On a bike, you are immediately immersed in the chaos of the city. During these intense scenes, we get to feel its intensity, absorb its energy, and have a constant sense of danger. To film Souleymane's bike we used other bikes. It was the only way for us to slip into the traffic. One bike for the image, another for the sound. Most of the time, I rode the sound bike myself, to stay fully engaged in the shooting.

I wanted to keep the shooting device light, so as to slip into the city without interrupting its bustling life. To imbed the cinematic device in reality. And bring as much reality as possible into fiction. I even wanted the complex dialogue scenes to be set

at the heart of city life: in the train, in the middle of traffic, in a crowd, in the heart of the bubbling cauldron. My sound engineer (Marc-Olivier Brullé, with whom I worked for the third time) had to invent new ways to record sound, to meet the challenges of shooting in the midst of the city's hustle and bustle.

It was also a challenge in terms of location management. Apart from the accident scene, we never blocked the streets. We made do with the pedestrians and cars coming and going... It allowed us to give a strong sense of the intense, chaotic and suffocating presence of the city, to immerse the viewer in reality while using all the resources of cinema and fiction.

SHOOTING AND EDITING

Apart from the scenes at the emergency shelter, which required more technicians and extras, I insisted on having an extra-small crew. Most of the time, there were only five or six of us on set. Sometimes even just three. No lighting. No trucks. No catering. I wanted to get rid of all the heaviness of a traditional shooting.

As for photography, I chose to work with Tristan Galand, a young Belgian cinematographer who has a dual background in fiction and documentary film. I wanted someone who was capable, for some scenes, of working alone, of framing and operating the camera simultaneously, and improvising lighting solutions on his own, while maintaining a strong aesthetic direction. As the film's premise is to adapt the cinematographic device to reality and not the other way around, we spent a lot of time searching for locations that required little or no intervention on lighting, and that matched the aesthetics we had chosen for the film: a Paris with saturated colors and contrasting hues.

During the editing process (with Xavier Sirven, who also edited my previous film), we emphasized all the choices we had made during the shooting. We tried to create a sense of speed,

as if the two days leading up to the interview were just one long chase. We used contrasting rhythms between the delivery scenes in a frantic Paris, with Souleymane's racing non-stop from one place to the next, and the long interview scene, in quiet shots/ reverse shots, where words can finally unfold.

There isn't any music in the film. It was my decision from the start. No artifice. The point wasn't to stick to some documentary aesthetic, but rather to make the most of the city's sound score, the horns and sirens, the clatter of trains, the roar of engines. The absence of music forced us to be more radical when it came to editing - there was no room for empty, pretty, peaceful moments. We always move forward, shadowing Souleymane, holding our breaths, tirelessly, until the final scene that has us trapped in the small bare office of the Ofpra.





BORIS LOJKINE

Boris Lojkine, a graduate of the Ecole Normale Supérieure with an “agrégation” in philosophy and a thesis on “Crisis and History”, decided to leave the university after completing his thesis. He closed his books and left for Vietnam, where he had previously lived and learnt the language. There he made two documentary films, *Ceux qui restent* (2001) and *Les âmes errantes* (2005), both of which tell the Vietnamese side of the impossible mourning of men and women whose lives have been torn apart by war. With *Hope* (2014), his first feature film, he switches continents to immerse himself in the Africa of migrants. The film was presented at the Critics’ Week in Cannes and received dozens of awards in international festivals (including 2 Valois Awards at the Angoulême Film Festival). In 2019, *Camille* won the Audience Award on the Piazza Grande at the Locarno Festival, as well as the Valois and Lumière Awards for Best Actress for Nina Meurisse. Presented at the Cannes Festival 2024 in the Un Certain Regard section, *The Story of Souleymane* is his third film.

CAST

Abou Sangare
Nina Meurisse
Alpha Oumar Sow
Emmanuel Yovanie
Younoussa Diallo
Ghislain Mahan
Mamadou Barry
Yaya Diallo
Keita Diallo

**Souleymane
Agente de l'Ofpra
Barry
Emmanuel
Khalil
Ghislain
Mamadou
Yaya
Kadiatou**

CREW

Director
Screenplay
Image
Editing
Sound

Sets
Costumes
Production Manager
Set management
Post-production Manager
Casting

Produced by
Associate Producer
With the support of
With the participation of
With the support of

With the participation of

In association with

With the support of

French Distribution
International Sales

**BORIS LOJKINE
BORIS LOJKINE and DELPHINE AGUT
TRISTAN GALAND
XAVIER SIRVEN
MARC-OLIVIER BRULLÉ,
PIERRE BARIAUD,
CHARLOTTE BUTRAK,
SAMUEL AÏCHOUN
GÉRALDINE STIVET
MARINE PEYRAUD
DIMITRI LYKAVIERIS
ARMEL KOUASSI
ASTRID LECARDONNEL
ALINE DALBIS**

**BRUNO NAHON – UNITÉ
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CANAL+
CINÉ+
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ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMÉE
FONDS IMAGE DE LA DIVERSITÉ,
AGENCE NATIONALE DE LA
COHÉSION DES TERRITOIRES,
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