

Memento Films International presents

CURIOSA

a film by Lou Jeunet



Directed by: Lou Jeunet

Written by: Raphaëlle Desplechin & Lou Jeunet

Cast: Niels Schneider, Noémie Merlant, Camelia Jordana, Benjamin Lavernhe, Amira Casar, Mathilde Warnier

Music: Arnaud Rebotini

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SYNOPSIS

Paris 1895. Pierre Louÿs is a Parisian dandy and poet on the verge of fame. Pierre and his friend Henri De Régner are both madly in love with Marie de Heredia, the cheeky daughter of their mentor. Despite her feelings for Pierre, Marie eventually marries Henri who has a better situation. Badly hurt, Pierre leaves for Algeria where he meets Zohra, a bewitching local girl with whom he shares a tumultuous relationship and a passion for erotic photography.

One year later, Marie still has weak feelings for her husband and Pierre comes back to Paris with Zohra. As soon as Marie hears the news, she rushes to see Pierre and confesses that she kept herself for him. They quickly start an affair and a game of cat and mouse between many players begins, full of desire, jealousy and photography. They will build their future selves by transgressing the established codes, how far will they go?

Q&A with Director Lou Jeunet

What were the origins of “Curiosa”?

As a female director, my encounter with Marie de Régner was like love at first sight. I remember my emotion when I discovered, among hundreds of poems, letters and other archives, photographs of this young woman, so modern in her nudity, staring through her dark eyes - as if demanding to become the heroine of a film, as talented in the realm of the body as in matters of the mind! I had access to all the letters and all the postcards sent to her by Pierre Louÿs and could measure the intensity of the passion she awoke in him.

”Curiosa” seems at first to be “Louÿs” story. But it becomes Marie’s. Could you comment?

Marie’s correspondence has disappeared (burned by Louÿs at the end of their liaison?). I started imagining their relationship. Detached from the biographical material, I was able to adopt her perspective. A few elements remained to establish her character tone: Poems she wrote Pierre when he fled to Algeria and her rival, Zohra. Touched with devastating humor, they always drew him back to Paris and to her.

So, yes, I wanted to make “Curiosa” to tell the story of Marie de Régner. How she evolved from victim to taking her destiny in her own hands. And how she discovers the power of the imagination and her sexuality through her relation with Pierre Louÿs.

“Curiosa” is not a biopic about Pierre Louÿs. I took a lot of freedom with the biography of the characters to refocus my story around the photography and the sessions that the two lovers organize. In a way, it's the story of her taking over of the story!

Yes, in a way, “Curiosa” traces a pivot in power, or at least creativity. Again, could you comment?

Unlike the photos of the prostitutes of the day, Marie doesn't hide her face. She invents poses and looks right into the lens. Who's handling the staging? Is it her? Or him? It is during their photo sessions that Marie goes from being a mere object of desire to progressively imposing her feminine perspective on erotic matters and sharing equally with Pierre the co-direction - so to speak - of their affair. The moment where she wants to photograph Pierre nude and asleep is the key point of her rebellion.

Marie de Regnier still seems ahead of our time...

Marie is all about provocation, and fantasy. She's not a conventional 19th century girl. Her boldness, her contradictions and her talent for freedom make her a very modern character. Her love experience resonates strongly with our own questioning about love today. It's time for women to consider their own sexual desires and not to be considered as sexual objects by men. With the #MeToo movement and so on, the next step is the right to our own eroticism, our own and completely free imagination about sex and love.

Louÿs' problem, when it comes to relationships, seems to be, rather like the protagonist of Luis Buñuel's "The Obscure Object of Desire," that he is so consumed by his own solipsistic passion that he's unable to recognize its object, empathize with Marie as a person....

Louÿs has a hard time considering women as people. That has to do with the mentality of these times of course. But especially since he has an obsession for collecting things, he sees women as objects to be pinned as trophies. What interests me is to show how Marie imposes herself as a person, until she makes him live, for the first time, the sensation of a lack of love. Marie herself understands that her rival is not Zohra but her photographic image that obsesses Pierre, to the point of distracting him from her.

The film is set at the dawn of amateur photography....

Pierre Louÿs was the first man in Paris who bought a Kodak box camera which allowed people to develop their own photos, key in his case because his photos were so erotic. "Curiosa" is set in a literary world. Marie's father is a poet, José María de Heredia, her husband, Henri de Régnier was French symbolist poet, Pierre wrote. Portraying such a literary world, I wanted to make as visual a film as possible, to make it accessible.

Photography also helps derive the plot....

Yes, many dramatic moments are triggered by photo sessions, by Pierre's sudden departures and their cards and letters - they write to each other as much as seven times a day. The photo of Pierre's friend Jean, left "forgotten" by Marie in his bachelor pad, is one example. This is the beginning of an era in which we are still totally immersed today. What is extraordinary about this story is the peculiarity of the romantic passion. I didn't want to make a film about people making love. It's because photography is the medium through which they love each other that their desire becomes heated to incandescence. One century later, when we see the real images they made together, we can explore the mystery of it but can't resolve it. It is this mystery that I have tried to bring to the screen.

The film seems part-period, where you set out to capture some of the color, artistic vitality and sheer energy - visible in early Lumière films - of the Belle Epoque: Is this right?

Exactly, these are relatively happy, sunny times, the Belle Epoque. But of course, "Curiosa" is not about historical reconstruction. There are no horses, no carriages! I've worked toward a more stylized rendering. It should feel like the interpretation of an era. For example, with Yann Mégard, the decorator, we created a single set for the film. We made a film of wallpaper which was like the mental landscape of the characters. Yann enlarged photographs of Louÿs with the background of the famous wallpaper against which the models pose, researched with the Museum of Rixheim, and remade the wallpapers of the film. We also found 19th century-patterned scrolls to paint his bachelor flat, all the sets being in the 9th arrondissement and Avenue Kléber, almost in the real settings.

Costume seems key to character.

We tried to flag the modernity of the film with the Eiffel Tower disco ball and also in the Azzedine Alaïa dress that actress Camellia Jordana, who plays Zohra, wears to the opera. Regarding costume, with Valentine Breton Loÿs, the costume designer, we reproduced only two costumes of Marie, one from her Parisian tailor laced like a “saharienne” by Yves Saint Laurent, and the white outfit at the end of the film. Marie’s costumes, beyond being coherent with the fashion of the time – among others, the fascination for things Japanese, with Marie wearing kimonos – had to reflect the evolution of her feelings. The men dress in black and white: Marie appears like a multicolored butterfly in the middle of this masculine, old-time photographic palette. But all the costumes are really old clothes, vintage, borrowed, but employed for the most modern effect possible. With Véronique Boitout, instead of the invasive hats of the time, we preferred to work hair in an Art Nouveau spirit with hulls, feathers and jewelry. The actors grew real mustaches like modern-day hipsters.

“Curiosa” is a film about the male and female gaze, where visual appeal is paramount to plot from the very first scene of Pierre, who’s not talking to Marie, but spying on her, while she consciously acts with her sisters? So how did you approach its cinematography?

Simon Roca, the DP, shot with two digital cameras to encourage actors’ spontaneity. He shot the entire movie with old 50mm and 85mm Leica lenses. He also used an old camera for the black-and-white photos taken during the emotion of scenes. We had a library of images which we wanted to pay tribute to, without any constraint of the time. The frames were inspired by France’s cult of Japonism and the Nabis group of French artists. So, in the scene where Henri listens to Pierre and Marie making love, I have close-ups of their feet and Marie’s hands, a very Japanese style.

Again, the music is inspired by the period, but modern....

Arnaud Rebotini, who admires Debussy, Louÿs’ best friend, created a playful, joyful electro soundtrack that connects right away with the youth of our actors. The music also reflects characters’ feelings and melancholy.

How did you develop with Raphaëlle Desplechin the screenplay for “Curiosa,”

I wrote a lot until I came across the photos and correspondence. I researched for a long time. With Raphaëlle we worked on how to translate into dialogues all the poetic exchanges, to create the most modern and intelligible language possible. We laughed a lot with the terms of the time used by Louÿs in his correspondence: “Make pussy,” “rose leaf,” and so on.

By using modern dialog, yo also wanted to make te pit that these are modern people.....

Yes. As for visual writing, I learned that from Gérard Brach, the writer of Roman Polanski’s “Repulsion” and “The Vampires’ Ball.” The film aimed at reflecting Louÿs’ impulse in writing, as a director I am as fascinated, like he was, by photography.

You are working with four of France’s most laureled young actors, two winners of César Awards for most promising actress or actor - Niels Schneider (“Dark Diamond”), Camelia Jordana (“Le Brio”) - and two nominees in the same category: Noémie Merlant (“Heaven Will Wait”) and Benjamin Laverhne (“C’est La Vie!). How did you work with them and elicit such sexual candor?

Sexual candor is what I wanted to suggest in my film. This first love for Pierre and Marie is quite mystical: They will never forget the intensity of their passion.

It was a very long casting process. I chose Noémie Merlant after filming her in a studio model-pose session. She could go from innocent girl to perverse woman, knew how to play with her body. But her nudity provokes a reaction that is neither sexual nor of curiosity, and her poses are not about exhibitionism. I did the same session with Niels Schneider. He's a very generous actor, who chooses complex roles with characters that are a priori hateful, giving them humanity and depth. It had to be Niels, who has the beauty of the devil, to play this insatiable Louÿs, who yet touches us, allowing us especially not to judge his character with modern-day criteria.

And Jordana and Laverhne?

For Camélia Jordana's scene where she's with three men, we encouraged her to play it like Rihanna and Beyoncé, Afro-American female power. Camélia endows her fall from grace, from an icon to nothing, with a lot of emotion. Benjamin Laverhne's role as the cuckold husband is undoubtedly the most thankless, but Benjamin turns him into the greatest of lover of the film, who loves Marie despite everything. It's very moving when she says she wants to become a writer and asks him if he'll read what she writes....

What are you working on now?

I've started to write a contemporary story, about beauty. The story of an actress who attempts a comeback. I also thinking of working in English with a film about cooking, a sentimental education by "taste." A film where Europe and America meet.

CURIOSA FILMS, producers

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LOU JEUNET, Director and Screenwriter

If "Curiosa" is Lou Jeunet's first feature-length film, she has written and directed four award-winning TV movies, as well as a short film "Le Beau Pavel" with Jeanne Balibar, selected at the Clermont Ferrand festival, which was already a reflexion on sexuality. A graduate of Idhec (Femis) in 1986 in directing and editing, Lou Jeunet meets writer Gérard Brach on "Frantic" by Roman Polanski, where she is a script trainee, which encourages her to write. She gets a grant from Villa Medicis Hors les Murs in London for a documentary about Bloomsbury.

It is Claude de Givray, screenwriter of François Truffaut, who gives her a chance to write and make her first TV movie "Tout ce qui brille" with Annie Girardot and Isabelle Carré. Lou Jeunet was honored with the SACD Talent Television Award. "The Favorite Girl" is nominated for the International Emmy Awards and honored with two awards at the Monte Carlo Television Festival.

After ten years devoted to screenwriting projects for television, it is her passion for photography, which makes her want to write her first feature film "Curiosa".

A singular project built from the discovery of erotic photos by Pierre Louÿs and Marie de Régnier, a project conceived from the start with a debut film budget, without a heavy reconstruction. With the desire to tell a love story in a raw way, between romantic love

and transgression. Faced with a seducer, Marie becomes libertine and take the ascendancy on Pierre.

Lou Jeunet is part of the board of the FERA (European Federation of Audiovisual Directors) and has brought the issue of female directors representation to the group 25 Images.

CAST

Noémie Merlant (Marie)
Niels Schneider (Pierre Louÿs)
Benjamin Lavernhe (Henri)
Camelia Jordana (Zohra)
Amira Casar (Mrs de Hérédia)
Mathilde Warnier (Louise)
Mélodie Richard (Hélène)
Scali Delpeyrat (Mr de Hérédia)
Emilien Diard-Detoeuf (Jean de Tinan)

CREW

Produced by	Curiosa Films
Producer	Olivier Delbosc
Associate Producer	Emilien Bignon
Director	Lou Jeunet
Screenplay	Raphaëlle Desplechin, Lou Jeunet
Editing	Anitha Roth
Director of Photography	Simon Roca
Art Director	Yann Megard
Costume	Valentine Breton Des Loÿs
Makeup	Nathalie Tabareau-Vieuille
Sound Design	Rémi Daru
Original Sound Track	Arnaud Rebotini