

SUPERSTAR

THE MAN WHO DIDN'T WANT TO BE FAMOUS



RECTANGLE PRODUCTIONS, WILD BUNCH, STUDIO 37, FRANCE 3 CINEMA
AND SCOPE PICTURES

present



SUPERSTAR

A film by **XAVIER GIANNOLI**

Freely adapted from the novel *L'idole*
by Serge Joncour (Flammarion)

Starring

KAD MERAD & CECILE DE FRANCE

2012 • 1H52M • SCOPE • DOLBY DIGITAL • COLOR

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Synopsis

Overnight, a complete nobody becomes a celebrity without knowing why.

A conversation with XAVIER GIANNOLI

How did the film come about?

In 2005 I read in a newspaper a brief summary of Serge Joncour's novel *The Idol* published by Flammarion... the story of a man who becomes famous overnight without knowing why. I read it a bit like an unsettling news item but soon felt it could be a starting point for me. I met the author with whom I got along very well and who encouraged me to feel free to make the concept my own, which is what I did with the valuable help of my accomplice Marcia Romano. We imagined another story, characters, scenes, a tone and, more importantly, a cinematic energy. In 2009 we bought the rights to the novel and were able to start writing.

What was your first instinct for developing this idea?

I thought about a man pursued by a situation both absurd and very real, as in Hitchcock or Kafka. An anonymous man who finds himself deprived of himself by an adventure that overtakes him. I also found something of what had appealed to me in the news story that was the idea behind my previous film, *IN THE BEGINNING* - a man about to discover who he is through being mistaken for another. I don't know why, but I often find myself working with themes of misunderstanding, deception or illusion. I'm drawn to the gulf between human truth and social misunderstanding, because I feel our lives circle in this tension, above the void.

Did the theme of celebrity interest you?

Only in so far as it's a sign of the state of our world. I find stories about people obsessed by celebrity corny and old fashioned. In fact, my story is exactly the opposite, since Martin doesn't want to be famous at all and it's precisely this refusal that will turn him into a contemporary icon. The theme of celebrity only serves bigger issues. Above all, it's what becomes an event that interests me. We love, we lynch, we celebrate, we forget, we discuss, we interrupt, we explain and we ignore during debates where we sometimes end wondering whether this debate wasn't

its own subject. The character of Louis-Do even ends up telling Cecile: *"It's you who invented everything by wanting to give it all meaning."* Even intelligence ends up trapped by this 'event culture'. You're never more of an actor in a show than when you judge it. It's an endless spiral. Martin isn't chased in the streets because he's famous; he's famous because he's chased in the streets. In the same way, previously you could be accused of being guilty, whereas now you are first guilty of being accused. So, far beyond simple celebrity, it's the question of 'meaning' in today's world that I wanted to explore. Martin and Fleur are simply trying to protect their dignity amidst this chaos, and this obliges them to go to the very depths of themselves.

How did you approach the situation?

Marcia and I wondered how our approach could be both modern and nonconformist. What we found amusing - our red line - was that for the first time a nice guy will refuse celebrity, with all its vulgarity, its fraudulence and event-based hysteria. And it's precisely because he refuses this vulgarity that he is going to be successful and become even more famous. Like Melville's Bartleby, he says: *"I would prefer not to,"* and gets *"That's why we love you"* for an answer, as in the scene in the supermarket. This situation of impossible refusal is really terrifying. You don't even have the basic freedom to stay "outside" the system. You get lost in it while believing you're escaping it.

'The Absurd' springs to mind...

Martin wakes up a celebrity just as Gregor Samsa wakes up an insect in *Metamorphosis*. This mysterious mutation and its social consequences lead to an existential vertigo and a fundamental fear: what has the world made of me and what can I make of it? A blind and paranoiac angst looms, fear of others and of oneself. The fear of the void in which an absurd laugh echoes - without that it wouldn't be funny. Yes, I find the world we live in frightening so I try to laugh about it. Human relations have never seemed to me so incoherent and violent, sacrificed to treachery, lies and accommodations with human values to which I am attached with the enthusiasm of an old boy scout!

Why the title *Superstar*?

It's the title of a song I love by the Carpenters; Sonic Youth covered it. But the song is about obsessive love for a real star. Precisely.

Today, we're sold any old stranger, starlet or publicity 'face' as a 'superstar'. The 'star' has been drained of its magical substance, its aura of singular talent. It has become like a luxury brand offering cheap products, a tune ruined by clumsy lyrics. In fact we speculate on these celebrities or these events as we do with shares on the stock exchange. It was predictable that this logic of "everything is an event" would become as crazy as it did in the financial world because both are based on profit, market share...

It's not passé to say that capitalism subjects all our values to its own interests. In human terms, it's a regressive dynamic; it gives us over to impulses that advertising executives and media know only too well how to whip into hysteria. It's the struggle of everybody against everybody, the reign of the irrational and the random where no one knows who decides what. I wanted this panic to come through the film, to exert a tension over it. It's a dark and troubling force, an ideological black hole that coils around itself like a hidden vortex at the core of my story, and draws all my characters in. Towards what? Perhaps nothing more than a tweet...

A 'superstar' is also an idol; there's a 'sacred' connotation...

When I was writing my short film *THE INTERVIEW*, in which a young journalist wants to meet Ava Gardner, I read Edgar Morin's essay *The Stars*, which demonstrates how a civilisation says a lot about itself by the way it chooses its icons. In my film, an ordinary man, without any particular talent, is chosen, elected. He's going to be loved, then hated, worshipped then burned like an idol, a messiah or a scapegoat. All human societies have experienced these sorts of impulses. It's a contemporary, media-centred issue but it's also anthropological and primitive. I've always read widely on these subjects which fascinate me, and which stare us in the face every day.

What does this improbable 'ordinary' idol tell us about the state of our society and its values?

I try to respond with what I have at my disposal: I'm in no way an intellectual... just an uneasy filmmaker who above all loves going to see a good show. And I don't forget that a film, however deep, will end up on a flat screen.

Your take on the subject is quite harsh, yet the film is often very funny.

With a comic genius like Kad, it was a real pleasure to work on a particular quality of humour. Not cheap farce, but the kind of comedy that doesn't insult the audience. Each gesture, each look, of Kad's, balances on a thread between the comic and fragility. The density of his emotion gives unexpected depth to the comicality of some situations, despite the fact they're quite cruel. I was very impressed by his expressions, his simultaneously droll and tragic confusion.

To whom is your anger addressed?

I didn't want to make a film against the media, the Internet or the blind masses. It would be stupid and too optimistic to point out a 'guilty party'. On the contrary, I wanted to show how everyone drags themselves into this mad race. To where? Towards what? A shopping centre, that's the one thing we can be sure of....

Certainly, all these supermarket interiors, TV production offices, parking lots and open-plan workspaces endanger the characters' humanity. They're often neon-lit and we sometimes get

the feeling that the camera is hanging onto Kad's face so as not to fall into the void, that it wants to fast-forward everything, as if it doesn't want to allow the characters a single moment's respite. For me, this sensation of racing out of control is another form of oppression for Martin: speed. I wanted to start the film at 1,000 miles per hour and never take my foot off the pedal.

We particularly worked on the part where Kad is furious at himself for not having rebelled. That's what makes me angry today, the growing inability to revolt and not to submit to things the way they're going.

And on this subject, I'm very happy to make an official announcement: Kad is at last becoming the 'face' of a perfume. It's only a home fragrance, mind you, all the others have already been taken. All of them.

You always want to give the audience a real show with your films.

I wanted this feeling of racing out of control to lend its visual energy to the film, like an animal, digital and primitive, closing in on this man's neck... this man who wants only to preserve his anonymity, his decency. I wanted to capture something electric, a tension, the movements of an invisible and menacing force.

I showed my DP Christophe Beaucarne a lot of references. We wanted the film to be formally controlled, unrelenting, but nonetheless affected by the violence and restlessness of this world. I asked him to bring out the character's dark side, to use a light with strong contrasts, glittering and threatening at the same time. It's a crazy challenge but I expect everything from cinema, from the narrative as much as from the cinematography. I often feel unfulfilled and powerless, and the film is also a product of this turmoil. I try to make direct, physical cinema.

Besides, feelings of powerlessness or of being misunderstood are both human experiences, much more so than success, which for me smacks of the inhumanity of magazine covers or winning awards. I'm tired of the race for success and recognition, everywhere, all the time. Everyone writes his playlist, his list of prizewinners, favourite restaurants or idiotic tweets. It's exhausting. As if you couldn't exist without everyone looking at you and evaluating you, on Facebook or in the street. It's also into this whirlwind of shamelessness and narcissism that poor Martin is thrown. We laughed so much during the shooting of the scenes in the street or in supermarkets when he's confronted by people who tell him: *"We're all like you!"*

The film works like a suspense story: you want to know who is hiding behind this conspiracy, who is pulling the strings and why?

I asked my composer for a tense, sweeping spy movie score, where you think the hunted man will find out who has been manipulating him at the end. But finally you discover that it's not a conspiracy after all, only misfortune. I like this suspense erupting into nothingness, a nothingness that nevertheless explains everything. I thought it was a really original cinematic and narrative

idea, a symbol of an era. The whole challenge was to make an absurd situation acceptable, partly because the madness that surrounds us makes it credible. At one point I wanted to put: '*Soon to be a true story*' on the poster. In our story, in the end there's no one pulling the strings of what looks like an incredible plot. It's the raging void of modern times. I hope commentators will keep this suspense under wraps.

You wrote the film 18 months before the presidential elections; today would you replace the world "ordinary" with "normal"?

It's not exactly the same thing but it's certainly amusing! I write my feelings about the world in which I live and it's disturbing that the concept behind a screenplay becomes reality. I've always thought that fiction tells us much more about the reality of the world than the news. This concept of a man who becomes even more famous because he's told he is ordinary was above all funny, and it revealed the relationship we have today with any ideas about elitism. Martin doesn't want to become a populist icon, but this theme certainly runs through the film. That said, I think "change" is no longer what we decide but what happens to us. That's also what I'm trying to depict in my film: a man who can no longer decide what his life is going to be.

Was Kad the obvious choice for the part of this 'face in the crowd'?

I met Kad 15 years ago. I was a trainee reporter and had been asked to write a report on the filming of an ad in which a D-Day scene had been reconstructed. There was this big guy in a barge, very charismatic, who made everyone laugh: it was Kad wearing a GI helmet. We became friends and at the time I was looking for an actor for one of the parts in my first short film. He agreed and I believe it was his first time in front of a movie camera. The film was a clumsy tribute to ALPHAVILLE and Kad's presence was the only memorable thing about it. We've remained friends ever since and I watched him become incredibly popular. And it so happens that the first film I make with him is a story where celebrity is a problem. It's a little as if I wanted to ensure I was working with my friend for very good reasons, not only because of the kind of actor he is. He has great presence and a fascinating ability to embody real life. I needed this quality to give credibility to the bizarre side of my story. I hope I gave him an original part, one that will be important for him - a role that displays the full extent of his talent. I really believe he has only shown a fraction of what he's capable of.

His character becomes moving very early on in the film

Because this is a man who is dispossessed of himself and who loses control of his existence. I believe that today a lot of people feel this way: they fear that their life no longer belongs to them, lost in economic disaster and ideological nothingness. Kad found the perfect tone, free of any complacency or easy pathos. He delivers a great performance, rich in nuance, humour and restraint. We worked very hard on the moment when the chaos surrounding him travels inside him. He ends up screaming and holds himself responsible for what is happening to him.

We feel he is lost but he keeps his dignity. That is what's poignant in his character: a man who tries to hold on to his dignity in the face of adversity. I wanted him to work with disabled people to suggest right away that this is a man who possesses a generosity and a humanity that are going to be torn to shreds by this pack of lunatics. A good guy who runs, hunted by this pack, without him knowing why.

And Cécile de France?

I've been waiting to work again with her since QUAND J'ÉTAIS CHANTEUR. I wrote this character for her, for her 'musicality' and the purity of her energy. The first idea was to have her talking alone, to convey her isolation and her turmoil, as if she was waiting for someone to listen to her or make her really talk about herself. And that will be Martin... To write her character, I had the help of a friend, Cathy Mespoulène, a great TV journalist. She was our guide to this world where we met and talked to dozens of professionals. This extensive research was invaluable for Cécile and me. If we employed satire from time to time, we never resort to caricature - in fact we often are conservative in our depiction of what I have observed. I'm not mocking this milieu any more than I mocked the dance hall world in QUAND J'ÉTAIS CHANTEUR, or the building profession in IN THE BEGINNING. Cathy often tells me: *"Tell whoever doesn't believe you to come and talk to me!"* Anyway I think it would be too easy to do pure satire. I always try to redeem the characters by giving them greater depth. It's not enough to put somebody down in order to understand him or her.

She has her own particular style.

Her appearance was very much inspired by Cathy and her red hair. But her look is first and foremost an expression of her being a nonconformist and free, only damaged over the years. She sold herself out to a routine that her encounter with Martin will derail. I love the turmoil this modern woman goes through while trying to regain possession of herself, and Cécile gave it a great deal of truth and energy. I think we've become close collaborators and she knows the tone I'm after, this feeling that the characters are always saying less than they think. Her character has things to say but things to keep quiet about as well.

I wanted to portray a professional woman whose life is turned upside down when she meets this stranger. She'll ask herself what has become of her, what her life has made of her. I don't believe she and Martin will fall in love. I just think there's a human bond between them, the melancholy of two people shipwrecked in a storm. After shooting with Cécile, it's her I see when I look back at the film. She's precious to me. Her involvement is complete and you can feel it in every look, in every movement. Never a painful lament or a cheap laugh. I love her elegance and her turbulent vitality. The defiance of youth and yet the shadow of maturity that enriches her presence.

And the other actors?

First, Louis-Do de Lencquesaing with whom I wanted to work for a long time. I love his physical presence, his way of moving and looking at you. There's something superior about it, someone who isn't fooled. Yet at the same time there's something melancholy about him, a sentimental depth that makes him disquieting. I know a lot of men like his character who play at believing in their success, but who know that it's not what life is about. I could also talk to you about all the other actors who we have never - or hardly ever - seen before and whom I'm happy to help the audience discover, like the brilliant Alberto Sorbelli, who tells you in the film what his real artistic life is like, his fascinating happenings in museums. I'd love to talk to you about Ben and Hervé Pierre, or Pierre Diot the lawyer, Garba the rapper, or the extraordinarily inventive disabled artist Mathias Camberlein. I love it when new presences give cinema this very special vibration.

CREW

Directed by

XAVIER GIANNOLI

Co-writer

MARCIA ROMANO

Freely adapted from the novel *L'idole*
by Serge Joncour (Flammarion)

Original Music

MATHIEU BLANC-FRANCARD

Production Manager

MEDERIC BOURLAT

DP

CHRISTOPHE BEAUCARNE - AFC-SBC

Production Designer

FRANÇOIS-RENAUD LABARTHE

Costume Designer

NATHALIE BENROS

Sound

FRANÇOIS MUSY
and **GABRIEL HAFNER**

Editor

CELIA LAFITE DUPONT

1st Assistant Director

ARNAUD ESTEREZ

Casting

SARAH TEPER
and **LEILA FOURNIER**

Unit Production Manager

THIBAUT MATTEI

Post-production Manager

MELANIE KARLIN

Producer

EDOUARD WEIL

(RECTANGLE PRODUCTIONS)

Coproducers

WILD BUNCH, STUDIO 37

FRANCE 3 CINEMA, SCOPE PICTURES

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THE FEDERAL BELGIAN GOVERNMENT

TAX SHELTER via SCOPE INVEST

CAST

Martin Kazinski - **KAD MERAD**

Fleur Arnaud - **CECILE DE FRANCE**

Jean-Baptiste - **LOUIS-DO DE LENCQUESAING**

Alban - **BEN**

Albert - **ALBERTO SORBELLI**

Morizot - **PIERRE DIOT**

Fabrice - **CHRISTOPHE KOUROCHKINE**

Edouard Laurence - **STEPHAN WOJTOWICZ**

Saia - **GARBA TOUNKARA**

Dr Barreinbhom - **HERVE PIERRE**

(member of the Comédie Française)

Artist Philomène - **ROMAIN MEDIONI**

Julien - **MATHIAS CAMBERLEIN**

wild bunch

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