

SYNOPSIS

You know Godard, Chabrol, Rohmer... Not Moullet ? «The great-great-nephew of the great-grandfather of my great-great-grandmother one day took a pickax to kill the village mayor, his wife and the forrester, who was guilty of having moved his goat 10 yards away. It provided me with a good starting point... there have been other similar occurrences in the family.» Native from the Southern Alps, Luc Moullet, with his solemn gravity and his dry humour, studies the causes and consequences of these local psychic phenomenons.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1937 and a film buff from his younger days, Luc Moullet joins the Cahiers du cinéma at 18 with Truffaut, Rivette, Godard, Chabrol and Rohmer. He wrote Politique des acteurs and essays about Buñuel, Lang and King Vidor. He directs his first films in 1960. From 1966, he becomes an actor and a producer (for himself and also for Eustache or Duras). From this day, he signed 38 films of all formats, short and feature films, all categories (comedy, adventure, western, erotic movie, personal diary, road-movie, documentary, detective...) A long string of masterpieces characterized by one common point: comic. He appears as the only French new wave comical film-maker, he needs only to cast a glance on humanity and society around him to disclose its failings. Cinema has many historians but few geographers. Luc Moullet is one of them. Native from Southern Alps, he never stopped to shoot the relieves.

Luc Moullet is presenting *Land of Madness* in Quinzaine des Réalisateurs (Director's Fortnight) this year in Cannes.

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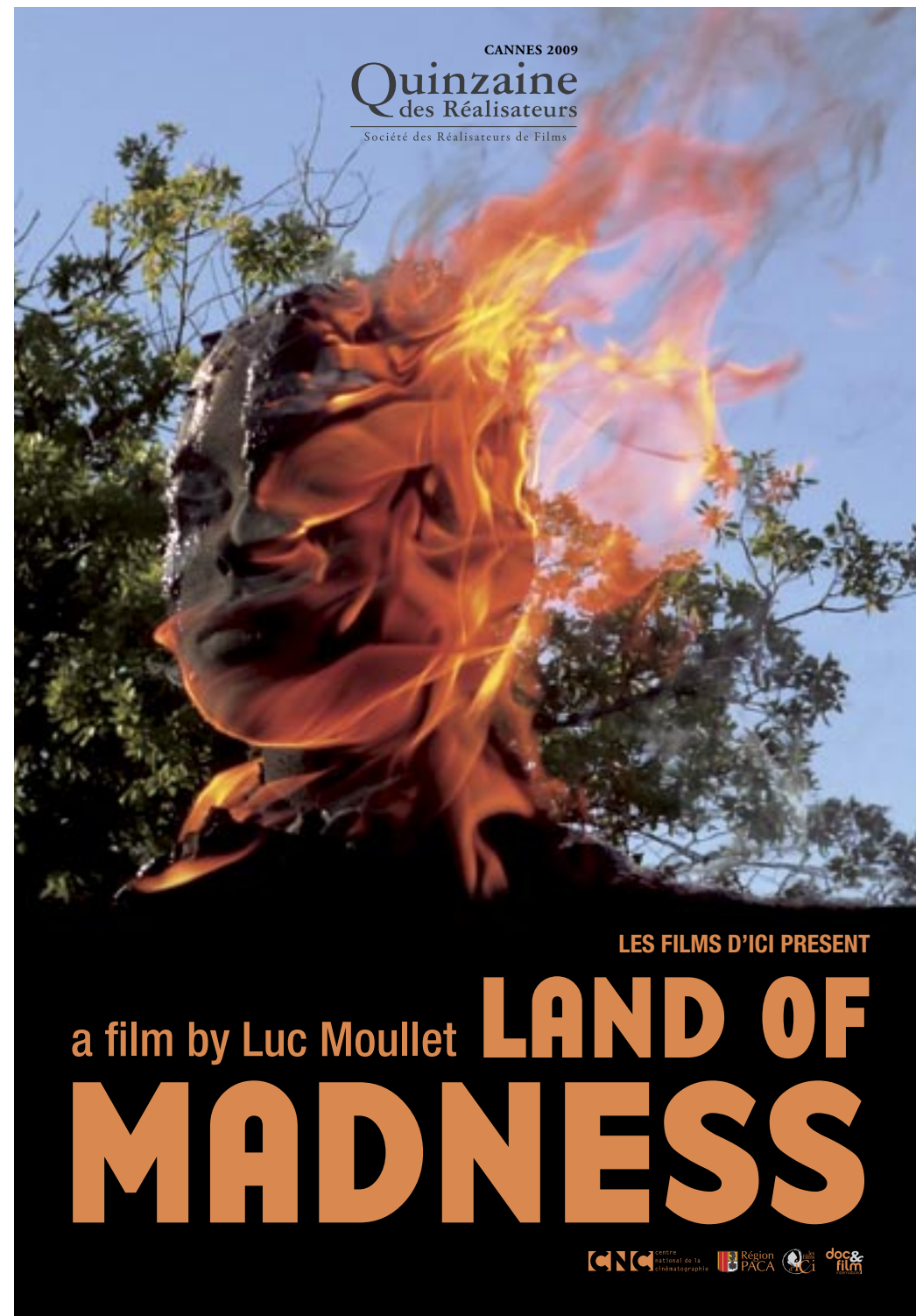
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INTERVIEW WITH LUC MOULLET

Interview by mail by Richard Copans, May 2009

Is madness a recurring theme in your film? The madness that threatens a character who's not like other people, who can't swim, has 25 different ways of opening a bottle of cola, and wonders where the centre of France is... Is it different? Is it worse, more serious, more threatening, more criminal? Is the mood of your madness the bright side of a hidden criminal madness?

Luc Moullet: Maybe I am a bit mad (that's if being mad is not being able to swim or looking for a new capital for my home country – in that case every single Brazilian would be mad – or studying the 25 different ways of opening a bottle of cola). But it's a very gentle form of madness. In fact, it has more to do with difference. It's true that many people think of any difference as the same as madness. This difference is connected with apraxia, maladjustment, and my autism. I'm (just about) all brain. I can't tie my shoelaces or hold my spoon while I'm eating; I can't ski or dance (or at least I dance very badly) or march. But difference, which either includes or seems like madness, can be the foundation of artistic creation (Fuller, Gance, Japanese filmmakers, Maupassant, Poe, Hölderlin, Walser, Nerval, Althusser, Hedayat, van Gogh, Pollock and so on). In the same way, many great artists are criminals – either political criminals (Dostoyevsky, Céline, Voltaire, Hugo, Brasillach, Chénier, Solzhenitsyn, Drieu) or plain criminals (Villon, Malraux, Genet, Chessman, Godard, Truffaut and even Scorsese) – who have been revived by art. People often think I'm mad because I've never wanted a stable job or a good pension. Then again, people who haven't got a little grain of madness in them are pretty unsavoury characters really, aren't they? Madness, madness... I think that all these people who are in a hurry to buy a car or a microwave or to earn as much money as possible are completely nuts.

In your last film, you filmed your own funeral? What have you filmed in this one? What might have happened to you if you'd stayed in that fatal region?

L.M.: What do I film in *Land of Madness (La Terre de la Folie)*? Certainly not what would have happened to me had I stayed around there. Firstly, I hardly went there before the age of 14 – so it's a country of choice, not my country of origin. And then you don't automatically get rid of that madness for good just by leaving. I've got a cousin whose parents are from the foothills of the Alps but who hasn't been to the Pays de Gavot area near Evian very much. He's lived shut away in his room in Paris for the last 50 years, he's never had much of a love life or career or any hobbies, and he gets by thanks to the medicine he's on

after spending quite a lot of time in psychiatric institutions. In this film, Luc Moullet is a MacGuffin, a narrative thread that was imposed on me by my producer and the people I was working with (I've got nothing against impositions). They thought it'd be better for the film. The most important thing in the film is to describe the facts and the causes of madness in that particular area. It's the first time in the history of cinema (of writing even) that someone has tried to make a summary of the subject. This madness is linked to the fact that the southern part of the Prealps is an isolated and fairly inaccessible area. The cretins of the Alps... It's the same in all the mountainous areas in France apart from the Pyrenees. Why are the Pyrenees different? Because they aren't really isolated mountains... They're a very short barrier that's only 30 kilometres across. So they're not isolated. Whereas the Alps and their Prealps are two hundred kilometres wide. Anyway, why is there still such madness there today even though, thanks to cars, this isolation is a thing of the past? First of all because there's no mountaineering or skiing there, so there aren't many people, not many witnesses and people to intervene. And secondly because there's a tradition here, a system of emulation (such-and-such killed someone so why shouldn't I?). And also because this desert attracts dropouts and so there are conflicts between dropouts and the down-to-earth locals. There's also the Tarifa syndrome. Tarifa is this town in Andalusia where there's lots of wind and therefore lots of mad people. Anyway, there are hundreds of different reasons. I list them all without touting any one in particular. The interesting thing about it is the investigation and the search for the truth. Comic and tragic. Some people might be surprised at the comedy in all these tragic real-life stories – more than forty deaths. It's because this wave of horrors provokes laughter as a defensive reaction. And then the reactions of the mad murderers are so unusual and so ludicrous that you just have to laugh. In real life, comedy and tragedy are intimately linked. I remember my mother when she was 79 and nearing the end of the road agreeing to leave hospital and go into an old people's home. She was due to leave on Monday. But she said that the hospital still had to carry out a very special and very difficult operation. It was in fact an enema... They wouldn't make her leave like that, she said. But the stretcher was already there. She was presented with a *fait accompli*, or almost. She then said to me: "I'll remember this, I will..." It was a comical thing for her to say because I knew that she didn't have long to live: she died twenty-one days later. It was also a very tragic thing to say in the circumstances.

What part do lists (for the script, the list of shots, the editing plans) play in your work?

L. M.: Lists are very useful when you're preparing a film. Everyone makes them. In my case, I use them for the body of the film as well. I believe that all art, especially modern art, is based on lists and enumerations. Look at Homer, Joyce, Dos Passos, Elroy, Solzhenitsyn, De Mille, or Hitchcock. Of course, they can be fake lists. The poetic epithet, the fussy and the decorative are fake art. And whoever makes the longest list is the best. It's true; it's an utterly non-exclusive principle. It's not the art of Henry James, Nick Ray, Pialat, Cassavetes and Visconti. The list is also the sign of a certain inability to adjust to the world; it's a way of compensating for it. It also expresses a desire to assimilate the immensity of the modern world.

Is cinema a catharsis for your fears?

L. M.: Of course cinema is a catharsis for my fears and for my problems. But that's been the case for many filmmakers: Hitchcock, Brisseau, Nick Ray, Welles, Chahine...

Are you capable of improvising?

L. M.: It's true, I don't improvise much. In that sense, I am in the tradition Rohmer and above all Hitchcock, albeit several ranks below them. I'm maladjusted and I try to compensate by over-adjusting without much imagination. I'm not very sure of myself; I feel like a usurper, a waverer. And I like to have everything prepared on sheets of squared paper. But I'm aware of this weakness. Cinema (and art in general) has reached a stage where everything has already been said and done, where you can't progress simply by chance and uncertainties. But as I put everything down in black and white, I can also allow myself a few blank spaces that I can fill in or skip. It has to be like that in documentaries of course. The best moment in *Genèse d'un repas* is the moving shot of the kids carrying 40 kilos of bananas on their backs and shouting for joy. I didn't know, five minutes earlier, that I'd be filming that. In *La Terre de la Folie*, I didn't had no idea how it would turn out when I was filming the old woman who talks really fast – it was like putting a message in a bottle.

You're known as a 'poor' filmmaker, meaning that you work on small budgets... Is it a good thing to have lots of money to make a film?

L. M.: I am a filmmaker of low birth. My great-grandfather Fortuné Moullet (1860-1945) kept chickens and a few sheep, and had a small garden and a pig. My grandfather was a postman. My father was a sales rep... I had one grandmother who was a concierge and the other who was maid to a priest. So you can see they weren't awash with cash. Until I was 32, I lived in a bed-sit with one tap and no fridge. That never bothered me. So my needs aren't great. I don't have a clue what new things I should buy. My films are of the same ilk. Anyway, a filmmaker's most expensive film is generally his worst or in any case pretty disappointing: *Cleopatra* by Mankiewicz, *55 Days at Peking* by Nicholas Ray, *Topaz* by Hitchcock, *The Messiah* by Rossellini, *Land of the Pharaohs* by Hawks, *French Cancan* by Renoir, *The Blood of Others* by Chabrol, *The Siren of the Mississippi* by Truffaut, *All's Well by Godard*, *Ali Baba* by Becker, *The Bible* by Huston, *Solomon and Sheba* by Vidor, *A Bag of Marbles* by Doillon, *Army of Shadows* by Melville, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* by Mann, *Leaves out of the Book of Satan* by Dreyer, *The Dirty Dozen* by Aldrich, *Casanova* by Fellini, *Napoleon* by Guityr... *The Ten Commandments* by De Mille cost 13 million dollars and is very, very inferior to *Kindling* by the same director, which was made for \$ 10,209 (let's say \$ 300,000 adjusting for inflation). It's normal; a big budget is difficult to control and then there's always a whole load of requirements. There's an exception to every rule and here it is Max Ophuls. I recall that Doillon said to Brisseau: "Never make a film that costs over 10 million francs. If it's more, they'll bug you to death." It's so stupid all this stuff about money. One of my films was a real hit at a festival and it cost 56,000 francs, next to nothing. And no one had liked a film by a fellow director. One of his friends criticised him and the director replied, "Phhh! What am I supposed to do with only 300,000 francs..." Lack of money is a dunce's alibi.

Is *La Terre de la Folie* a moral film?

L. M.: *La Terre de la Folie* is a moral film in Rohmer's sense of the word, 'relating to the mind' (the mind of the mad).

Interview's download available on www.makna-presse.com

