

POINT DU JOUR · LES FILMS DU BALIBARI & ANORÁK FILM
PRESENT



POLARIS

A FILM BY AINARA VERA



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POLARIS

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2022 - 5.1 - 78 MINUTES
DOCUMENTARY - FRENCH & ENGLISH LANGUAGES
FRANCE - GREENLAND

SYNOPSIS

Hayat is a skilled seamoman who sails across the Arctic, navigating far away from people and her troubled youth in France. But when her little sister Leila gives birth to a baby girl Inaya, the promise of new beginnings is on the horizon. We witness how the sisters' worlds are turned upside down, each going on a deeply personal journey, guided by the Northern Star to overturn their family's fate.



INTERVIEW WITH

AINARA

VERA

What led you to make a film like POLARIS?

I worked on the film *AQUARELA* (Viktor Kossakovski, 2018) and Hayat was the captain of the boat in the part we shot in Greenland. We traveled on her boat between Portugal and Greenland. Our lives were in her hands. It was winter and the travel conditions were fairly extreme. We wore life jackets, of course, but we were also attached to the boat by harnesses. We even took on 10-meter waves! That crossing lasted twenty days, and Hayat and I got close. Once, we were both on sea watch all night. Radars don't pick up smaller icebergs... We were in the darkness and Hayat started to tell me about her past. She told me that her sister Leila was in prison, and that she didn't dare visit her. I wondered how it was possible for such a powerful woman to feel such a blockage. Subconsciously, I promised myself that I would go with her to see her sister in prison. I wrapped my arms around her. I quickly understood that this story was far from over. Two years later, Hayat called me to tell me she wanted me to make a film about a strong woman. And I told her I wanted to make a film about her!

How did you start working together?

One day, Hayat told me that her sister had just gotten out of prison. At the time, Leila was eight months pregnant! We went to the south of France together. That's when I met Leila for the first time. Hayat had to go back to Greenland and Leila was about to give birth. She was alone and we decided that I'd stay with her until she delivered. I asked her if I could film her, and she said yes. I didn't speak French well and we barely knew each other, but Leila and I got along very well. When she was about to give birth, I went to visit her. Twenty-four hours later, her water broke, and I took her to the hospital. We spent ten days together. It was a very moving moment. I was very touched by her trust. Both of us experienced something that transcended the project we were in the process of creating.



How did you think about the way you were going to film Hayat and Leïla?

I think the ethics and aesthetics have to be inseparable when you're making documentaries. By putting the camera in a specific place, you're exposing your point of view and the way you're approaching the people around you. It's a question of ethics. I'm always dreaming of a real encounter between the viewer and the people I film. As a director, it's very important that I become a channel that allows the people I film to show who they are. I'm supposed to protect them from the viewer's gaze, of course, but at the same time, it's important to give access to who they are intimately while respecting their words. I'd say it's a responsibility of an almost spiritual order. I have to give them space so that my gaze doesn't suffocate them. Making films is a way of hearing life for me. You have to observe and leave some distance. Time, for filming and editing, let you understand things better. I'd even say that this project enabled me to see life in a new way.

Was your approach to filming Leïla the same as the one for Hayat?

I'd say my way of filming one or the other was very different. For example, I realized that I tended to overprotect Leïla's character. It was very important for me to film her without condescension. She shows her intimacy in a very frontal way – generously and directly. I was afraid the viewers would judge her. I'm happy to have been able to count on help from Gladys Joujou, a French film editor. Gladys is a very sensitive person. Her advice allowed me to find a balance so I could reveal Leïla without overprotecting her. Hayat is very aware of the image she projects. I had to be sure to project what I was seeing, and not just what she wanted to show.



Your film is infused with a lot of notions and emotions, yet they're never emphasized by the filmmaking style. How did you work on the balance between dialogue and silence?

I always work from the standpoint that the viewer is very intelligent. I will never describe what you're already seeing on screen with a voice over, for example. I think a few words are enough to express very complex emotions. Overinforming the viewer doesn't strike me as the best approach, even if that's the current trend in documentaries. When everything is explained and emphasized, the information often seems pornographic to me... I share the idea explained by Byung Chul-Han in his essay *Saving Beauty* (2016): he affirms that art is linked to what isn't revealed, to everything that stays in the shadows. I didn't want to make a documentary that talked about the suffering endured by these two sisters. We needed to be able to look at their lives through a more spiritual and philosophical prism that shows us how love and the lack of it affect and orient our lives. To do that, the moments of silence were essential, as were each of their words. We took time deciding which of Leïla and Hayat's lines would remain in the edit. We tried to only include revealing moments - the ones that allowed the viewer to put the rest together on their own.

Which gives the impression that you assign an essential importance to your characters' voices...

Yes, I wanted the invisible to become visible. To try and show the forces that gravitate around us. There are certain people who welcome the energies we inherit at birth. Others do everything they can to repress them throughout their lives. Leïla and Hayat experience their past like a kind of enchantment, a bit as if they had been bewitched. They describe the most difficult moments of their childhood in a way that's both realistic and magical. For me, it was very important to bring that invisible reality to the film. I was determined to give Hayat a voice. When she speaks, it's a bit like she's addressing the cosmos.

I really like *The Brothers Karamazov* (Fyodor Dostoevsky). During filming, I thought *The Mokhenache Sisters* would be a good title for this film. I was always deeply moved by the episode in the book that tells how a group of children throw rocks at a dog. When the bird fell from the nest, I felt the same thing I did when reading Dostoevsky. From then on, making the invisible visible was my central theme and I tried to achieve that through the voice, sound processing and editing.

How did you film the sequence of the bird falling from the nest?

Throughout the filming process, I relied on the bond between my two protagonists. Hayat found the bird while out collecting firewood. I asked her to wait for me. I was determined to film that moment. I never could have done it if she hadn't waited for me. I love nature and enjoy birdwatching. I immediately wanted to create a metaphor using that sequence, but then I thought it wasn't a good idea. The sequence needed to exist on its own. It was initially very long – almost a short film! I spent a year editing it to find the right length. When you make a documentary, you never know if you'll end up with a film at the end of the process. The bird episode gave me the certainty that I'd found my film!





How did the filming and editing go?

Filming lasted around two and a half years. I filmed Hayat or Leïla four or five times. Each of my shoots lasted for ten days.

As soon as something interesting happened to them, I'd come running. I'm used to editing my sequences right after filming. I've always worked that way.

Then, the pandemic prevented me from filming them for an entire year. I used that downtime to record Hayat's voice. I asked her for authorization to record our conversations via Zoom and she agreed. She was feeling very alone at that point, and very isolated. She told me she'd been abused by one of her co-workers. That terrible event led to her losing her job. I would have liked to be with her and take her in my arms, but the Zoom did allow us to be together and talking helped her. The sound quality of those recordings is far from ideal, but it was a unique moment that's obviously impossible to recreate. We improved the sound in post-production, but you can still detect the technical imperfections. That's okay. After all, documentary films are built from a multitude of imperfections, aren't they?

On that note, could you tell us more about the film's sound editing? We can tell that music plays an essential narrative role in the story.

We tried to create a sound layer that connects the two sisters' worlds. It was about creating poetic links that take us closer to a mental dimension than a naturalist soundtrack. I was fortunate to work with Amine Bouhafa, a very talented Franco-Tunisian composer. I could instantly tell that his energy suited the film perfectly. Amine is such a bright person. We made sure to never use music as an illustrative element. I wanted to give the music a worthy place of its own.

We also worked with Cocanha, a female duo who sing in Occitan. They're extremely committed and joyful at the same time. Occitan is spoken where Hayat and Leïla grew up, near Montpellier. The two sisters suffered from their uprooting. Including Cocanha's music in the film was a way to accompany them. I wanted them to know they weren't alone. Cocanha brings both a territory and a sorority of struggles.

Beyond the portraits of these two women, what does the film say about you?

Ah, Hayat's life philosophy is very present, of course, but you can detect mine, too! It was important to me to show that the way I see Hayat is very different from the way she sees herself. It was imperative that the film show that difference. Like a matryoshka, inside my vision of the world, you can find that of Hayat's. I needed time, distance, and reflection to go beyond what Hayat was telling me. I was between the two sisters, and it was vital that I remain myself. I often had more information than they did: Hayat got angry with Leila because she wasn't answering the phone, but I knew why the latter was acting that way. I understood both points of view and I wanted act as a mediator between them. Hayat sometimes got upset with me because she thought I was being overprotective of Leila. After a year and a half of filming, I found a new position that helped me a lot: I listened to them and was with them, but I only intervened when it was absolutely necessary. I'd say that moment was key to finishing the film.

In documentary filmmaking, the director has to find the right distance between themselves and their characters. Finding the exact place that allows me to watch them without being blinded by life. When you're too close to them, you lose sight of them. The reality is much too noisy.



BIOGRAPHY

AINARA

VERA



Ainara Vera was born in Spain in 1985. After studying cinema, her first short documentary *Sertres* premiered at Locarno in 2014.

She then directed a medium-length film *See you tomorrow, God Willing!* which premiered at IDFA and was selected in a many festivals including Doc NYC, DocsBarcelona.

She worked for as First Assistant Director and editor on Victor Kossakovsky's films *Varicella*, *Aquarela* and *Gunda*. *Polaris* is her first feature doc.

FILM CREW

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PHOTOGRAPHY IN ICELAND **AINARA VERA, INUK SILIS HØEGH**
PHOTOGRAPHY IN FRANCE **AINARA VERA**
SOUND **AINARA VERA, JÉRÉMIE HALBERT**
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