LOOKING FOR HER

Céline Sallette  Anne Benoit

20th BUSAN International Film Festival

LOOKING FOR HER

A film by Ounie Lecomte
Laurent Lavolé presents

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JE VOUS SOUHAITE D’ÊTRE FOLLEMENT AIMÉE

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France - 2015 - 104min - 1.85
Elisa is a physical therapist. With her young son, Noé, she moves to Dunkirk, the city where she was born and given up for adoption, 30 years earlier. Elisa is determined to pursue the impossible task of finding her biological mother in order to understand her past and their story.

A twist of fate is going to upend her expectations.
DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT

After completing my first film, which was openly inspired by my personal experience with abandonment in Korea, and as I wondered what making a film in France meant to me, I grappled with the question of personal identity in adoption. A question which remained unresolved, much like the reconciliation in A Brand New Life.

Through this account of anonymous childbirth and its consequences, I have attempted to explore these questions following a very specific work process, starting with documentary research, seeking material that would flesh out the fiction. Looking for her is thus the continuance of A whole new life, as well as an endeavor to make up for its lack of resolution.

RECONCILIATION WITH ONE’S BIOLOGICAL PARENTS WHEN BORN ANONYMOUSLY. THE ISSUES AT STAKE IN THE NARRATIVE FALL UNDER THREE MAIN THEMES: DENIAL, IDENTITY AND RECOGNITION.

The question of her identity and true background is what sets Élisa off on this quest, seemingly made impossible by her mother’s unequivocal denial of Élisa’s existence. The possibility of being reunited with her mother is first a matter of recognition, for above all it means the recognition of Élisa’s existence.

The remote likelihood of an “incognito reunion” – a hypothetical possibility which I believe, consciously or not, haunts every abandoned child, biological parent and even adoptive parents – thus became the screenplay’s premise: Annette and Élisa, mother and daughter, are placed in each other’s presence without being aware of the bond connecting them.

It is a premise which, with the definite irony of fate – placing the mother “in the hands” of her daughter – makes recognition the story’s dramatic focal point.

RECOGNITION AND PHYSICAL THERAPY

Two comments that were made upon reading the previous version of the screenplay made it clear that we hadn’t fully explored the premise of recognition through the physical intimacy that would necessarily be involved with the physical therapy sessions.

Was it possible for Annette and Élisa to recognize each other merely through physical contact? How? Through which tangible signs? Have their bodies kept the memory of their original bond? And if so, what path would it take to unearth this memory? How can the way out of denial be found?

Thus at the rewriting stage, we made the physical therapy sessions the “backbone” of the recognition process, the path that leads from the “unconscious” to consciousness. The sessions are markers for each stage leading to this awareness, like knots that need to be untangled, one after another, to reveal their connection as it had once been between them, but also as it could be thirty years later.

Yet the physical therapy sessions aren’t the only place where the recognition process unfolds. There are steps that Annette and Élisa take
towards each other, on their own, together, and through others. There is also Noé’s perspective. Having inherited the features of the Arab man who was Élisa’s father, his identity also plays a role in this journey towards recognition. In addition, with his appearance that seems so familiar to Annette (although she cannot quite identify it) he provokes in her an attraction that upsets the course of events.

The film’s French title, I hope you will be loved madly, are the last words that André Breton writes to his daughter in Mad Love. The poetry slam which closes the film uses the very words from this letter, evoking the idea of an idealized recognition.

IMPRESSiONiSM AND REALiSM: privATe BODY AND sociAL BODY

The unusual encounter between Élisa and Annette reveals an indescribably intimate territory as well as sensations and emotions around healing rituals that are part of a multifaceted pattern (return, repetition, reminiscence) that punctuates the film. The idea of impressionism may seem overdone to some. The source of inspiration was Monet’s working process. He painted the same places at different moments of the day – sometimes at intervals of several years – from viewpoints that were practically identical.

In the course of the physical therapy sessions, the visits to the places where she was abandoned (former maternity ward, children’s home) and throughout the entire city where Annette and Élisa’s story took place - and where it is being written again - I wanted to use the same idea of repetition of viewpoints (frames) and paths (rhythm and movement) to suffuse the images and sound with the characters’ emotions. Through the use of color, lighting, and contrasts, I tried to capture their nuances and variations in order to create an explicit tension that reflects the emotional tension.

Yet, what is being played out in private for these two women takes place within a very ordinary social framework. While scouting possible locations in Dunkirk, I realized that I wanted the scenery to be more than the story’s contextual backdrop; I wanted the film to be a precise and realistic reflection of the city. That was already an intention at the writing stage, but this was confirmed at the sight of these places teeming with economic and social history, laden with so many symbols (the sea, bridges, canals...heavy industry, urban restoration and town planning, the association of communities into a greater urban agglomeration, immigration, etc.).

Élisa’s quest would not be exactly the same without this absent father who is only mentioned at the end, by his first name. I wondered for a long-time how to portray this missing figure. He is of course partially there in Noé’s facial features.

Instead of a mental image or a fantasized representation of the father, I thought about sound, about music as a voice that hums a familiar tune. It’s the same pattern of return, of reminiscence that inspired me. I thought about Ibrahim Maalouf’s music, of the singular sound of his trumpet that is like a whispering voice. Jazz music with Arab influences, naturally, but also peppered with melancholy accents that would mark a difference with the “ordinary” scenery, architecture, the North Sea, and the industrial zones.

A discrepancy between genres and styles which I believe brings a romantic flair to this world.
Born in Seoul, Ounie Lecomte left Korea for France at the age of 9 when a French family adopted her. After studying fashion design, she worked on a number of films, as an actress with Olivier Assayas (Paris Awakens (Paris s’éveille)) or as a costume designer, notably for Sophie Fillières.

While working as a fashion editor, she enrolled in the Fémis Screenwriting Workshop to write her debut feature, A Brand New Life (Yeohaengja), loosely based on her own story, about a girl abandoned by her father in a Catholic orphanage. The film premiered at the Cannes Film Festival – Official Selection – Out of Competition in 2009 and won numerous awards, including Best Asian Film at the Tokyo Int’l Film Festival, Asia Pacific Screen Awards-Best Children’s Feature Film, the Palm Springs Int’l Film Festival-New Voices/New Visions Award and Berlin Int’l Film Festival-Generation-Kplus, Special Mention.

Looking for Her is her second feature.

CÉLINE SALLETTÉ (Élisa)

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

2016  
Saint Amour, by Benoît Delépine & Gustave Kervern
Tsunami, by Jacques Deschamps

2015  
Looking for her, by Ounie Lecomte

2014  
Vie Sauvage, by Cédric Kahn
Geronimo, by Tony Gatlif

2013  
A Castle in Italy (Un château en Italie), by Valeria Bruni Tedeschi

2012  
Capital, by Costa-Gavras
Rust and Bone (De rouille et d’os), by Jacques Audiard

2011  
House of Tolerance (L’Apollonide), by Bertrand Bonello

2010  
A Burning Hot Summer (Un été brulant), by Philippe Garrel
Here After, by Clint Eastwood
CAROLINE CHAMPETIER
(Director of Photography)

RECENT FILMOGRAPHY

2016  
*Agnus Dei (Les Innocentes)*, by Anne Fontaine  
*Looking for Rohmer*, by Wang Chao

2015  
*A 14 ans*, by Hélène Zimmer  
*La rançon de la gloire*, by Xavier Beauvois

2013  
*The Last of the Unjust (Le dernier des injustes)* by Claude Lanzmann  
*Hannah Arendt*, by Margarethe Von Trotta

2012  
*Holy Motors*, by Leos Carax  
*Silver Prize Winner, Camerimage Cinematography Competition 2012*  
*César Award Nominee, Best Cinematography*

2010  
*Of Gods and Men (Des hommes et des dieux)*, by Xavier Beauvois  
*César Award Winner, Best Cinematography*  
*European Film Award nominee, Best Cinematography*

IBRAHIM MAALOUF (Music)

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

2014  
*Yves Saint Laurent*, by Jalil Lespert  
*César Award nominee, Best Music*

2014  
*Smart Ass (La crème de la crème)*, by Kim Chapiron

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

2014  
*Au pays d’Alice*

2013  
*Illusions* - ‘Victoire de la musique’ (French Grammys), *Best World Music*

2012  
*Wind* – Jazz artist of the year, ‘Victoire du Jazz’
CAST

Elisa........................................... Céline Sallette
Annette........................................ Anne Benoit
Renée........................................... Françoise Lebrun
Noé............................................. Elyes Aguis
Alex........................................... Louis-Do de Lencquesaing

CREW

Director........................................ Ounie Lecomte
Producer....................................... Laurent Lavolé, Gloria Films
Screenwriters.................................. Ounie Lecomte
......................................................................... Agnès de Sacy
Original Music.................................. Ibrahim Maalouf
Director of Photography
& Artistic Director.............................. Caroline Champetier
Production Design............................. Sébastien Danos
Costumes........................................ Elfie Carlier
Film Editing..................................... Tina Baz
Sound............................................ Olivier Touche
......................................................................... Olivier Goinard
Production Manager........................ Karim Canama
French Distribution.......................... Diaphana
International Sales.......................... Films Distribution