



OFFICIAL SELECTION
UN CERTAIN REGARD
FESTIVAL DE CANNES

GRAND CENTRAL

DIRECTED BY REBECCA ZLOTOWSKI

94 minutes

CAST

Gary
Karole
Gilles
Toni
Tcherno
Maria
Isaac
Géraldine
Bertrand

Tahar RAHIM
Léa SEYDOUX
Olivier GOURMET
Denis MENOCHET
Johan LIBEREAU
Nozha KHOUADRA
Nahuel PEREZ BISCAYART
Camille LELLOUCHE
Guillaume VERDIER

CREW

Directed by	Rebecca ZLOTOWSKI
Written by	Gaëlle MACE Rebecca ZLOTOWSKI
Original Idea	Gaëlle MACE
Revisions	Ulysee KOROLITSKI
Produced by	Frédéric JOUVE
Associate Producer	Marie LECOQ
Co-Producers	Gabriele KRANZELBINDER
Director of Photography	George LECHAPTOIS
Edited by	Julien LACHERAY
Original Music by	ROB

(Extended credits available upon request)

GRAND CENTRAL

Synopsis

Gary is young, agile, a quick learner. He's one of those who's never been promised anything. After a succession of odd jobs, he's taken on at a nuclear power plant.

There, amongst the reactors and their high doses of radioactivity, he finally finds what he's been looking for: money, a team, a family.

But the team also includes Karole, Toni's wife, with whom he falls in love.

Forbidden love and radiation slowly contaminate Gary. Each day is menacing.

Q&A with Rebecca Zlotowski

How did the project for GRAND CENTRAL come about?

The idea for the film originated with my screenwriter Gaëlle Macé. She had read *La Centrale*, a novel by Elisabeth Filhol, which painstakingly documents the life of the people working as sub-contractors in the nuclear industry. The subject had scarcely been touched upon before Filhol's novel was published. This was before the Fukushima disaster in Japan, that was both eye-opening and shocking, shone the spotlight on the brutal reality of the nuclear industry. I read the book one night but it didn't really cross my mind that it could be made into a film— the story didn't seem that visual. It seemed more literary to me. To help the filmic narrative, we made the decision to add in a love story between co-workers in that hostile environment, but we remain very indebted to the author for her original inspiration.

Then we hooked up with Claude Dubout, who worked in the nuclear industry and who had self-published a fascinating autobiographical account, *Je suis décontamineur dans le nucléaire* (*I am a nuclear decontaminator). He became our sounding board while we prepared the film for production, and then our technical consultant during filming.

Why did you choose a nuclear power plant as the setting?

It was the perfect environment in which to set this fiction. Makeshift camps for the workers to live in surround most power stations. The camps are stuck out at the end of a strip of motorway, which are never used by other vehicles. The nuclear workers live out there in mobile homes for a few months at a time before moving on. Extraordinary passion thrives in this extraordinary environment, a sort of no-man's land. This is not uncommon in places where people are confronted on a daily basis with the fear of danger and death. I wanted there to be powerful, noble emotions in the film and I wanted to tell the amazing story of these workers who we rarely consider. That was the real idea for the film.

The nuclear industry isn't simply a backdrop for the story. It is essential to the film's air of mystery and reinforces the analogy of love at the heart of the film. Like the feeling of being in

love, the power station is a dangerous place leaking contamination slowly and silently, which goes unnoticed. Like mankind, the station is built around an unpredictable core which is difficult to tame once awoken. The disastrous events at Fukushima showed just how hard that 'heart' could be to control and extinguish. It was like fighting a dragon, and those who took up the challenge were ill-equipped. The film script gave me the chance to explore some really heroic characters, who were capable of giving in to love.

We had been working on the film for a few months when the disaster at Fukushima struck. I was on the West Coast in America. The forecasts were scary, predicting a huge radioactive cloud heading our way. Friends were leaving town, it was surreal and very frightening. Suddenly I was living the film. Dozens of articles appeared in the press in both Japan and in France about the everyday lives of nuclear workers who were on the front line. It was a tragic coincidence but it made us more convinced that we should make the film.

Did you want to film a group of men after having just done *Belle Épine*, the portrait of a young woman?

Yes. I hadn't really enjoyed having to put male characters aside, while I was filming *Belle Épine* which was a very intimate portrait of a young woman. We had taken a very narrow viewpoint and because of this we couldn't include the circle of daredevil bikers who rode at night on illegal circuits. They were suicidal but so brave. I would have liked to have spent more time with them, to have understood them better and to have given them a voice in *Belle Épine*. In Grand Central, I had a feeling that something unjust was taking place. By following the lives of these sacrificial nuclear workers, I felt that in some way I was righting a wrong. These workers were like conscripted soldiers at the beginning of a war who we know little about. What really mattered to me was putting together a team of men who dealt with the issues of sacrifice and courage.

What choices did you have to make when putting together your team?

Straight away I thought of Tahar Rahim as one of the main characters. I'd met him and decided I wanted to work with him even before the screenplay was written. He agreed to be the main character of a film that hadn't been written yet, and later on he carried over this fearless quality to his character.

Tahar was the central character, and the rest of the team had to be built around him. Johan Libereau, Olivier Gourmet, Nahuel Perez Biscayart and Denis Ménochet were each selected in turn, in accordance with the idea that actors, are what critic Alain Bergala calls, 'channeling bodies'. Each actor's performance resonates and makes invisible links between a number of films. Tahar's first film was set in a prison, but then he played in an amazingly sensual film *Love and Bruises* directed by Lou Ye, which really impressed me. I liked the idea of playing with these 'layers' created by previous characters and I used them to create Gary. I wanted to go beyond the boundaries of ethnic and social origins and join forces with a great actor. Olivier Gourmet's abilities reminded me of the great Dardenne brothers' films, and we used this reference to reinvent the idea of masculinity, of the working class, changing the goalposts, in a similar way that the director Pierre Schoeller did when Olivier played the head of a ministerial department. What has gone before has to be taken into account when you take on an actor who has already played memorable characters.

Then there is also the previous story to consider. Denis Ménochet, whose acting is amazingly powerful, had played Léa's father in Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* and in our film he marries her. Nahuel Perez Biscayart from Argentina came on board from a faraway country not

speaking the language, which made his character all the more interesting, while Johan Libereau built on the role he created in *Belle Épine*.

Then there were the girls. Léa of course. I never imagined anyone else for the part. Margaux Faure and then also Marie Berto, whose character was originally written as a male part. And Camille Lellouche who plays Géraldine. Camille was the waitress in the café I went to each day to write the film. She was so confident and fun and I loved it. It gradually occurred to me that I was writing a role so like her that I ended up simply offering her the part.

For me all these actors came together like a sort of wild horde.

***Grand Central* found some inspiration in Westerns, with a lone man, who arrives from nowhere, to challenge a group of ‘professionals’...**

Yes there was that influence in *Grand Central* although I'm in no way an expert on Westerns. Perhaps it is more akin to a western fantasy or a caricature of a western, influenced by the clichés I am familiar with: a stranger arrives in town on the train and finds a new land to invest in and defend. There are strong emotions, heroics, a clash between men, and of course the bar, which we immediately dubbed ‘the saloon’ both in the script and on set. Here, they drink themselves stupid and go wild on the rodeo machine.

When I see Denis Ménochet, I think of Robert Mitchum. Denis told me that Tarantino had said the same thing. If I think of Mitchum then it's because *Grand Central* has the air of the great American ‘teampayer’ films, such as *The Lusty Men* (Nicholas Ray, 1952) and *Parrish* (Delmer Daves, 1961), with its band of rodeo champions. Or is reminiscent of *Manpower* (Raoul Walsh, 1941), the story of a road crew working on power lines. There is also *The Gypsy Moths* (John Frankenheimer, 1969) a film about parachutists who put on shows across the country. All of these films are characterized by their harsh environment and have elements of danger and showmanship, and a complicated love scenario, in which a woman – who is neither saint nor sinner – has to choose between two men.

We created a sort of open-air prison, like the featured in *The Wages of Fear* (Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1953). We also decided to create true heroes, out of both the men and women and not just portray a group of ill-disciplined hotheads.

Talking of heroes, while you maintain a very modern approach, in *Grand Central* you also take us back to the Golden Age of the 1930s in French cinema, and to its flamboyant working-class heroes. Was this a conscious decision?

Yes. These films from the 30s drew on the harsh and dark realities of society, but tried to bring in an element of romance. In a way *Grand Central* is in keeping with this tradition, along with the idea that realism can be naturalistic but also stylized. In the 1930s films, the men have jobs and we see them working, on railways, in factories and woodworking. The contrast between their great manual skills in the workplace and the chaos of their desires in their private lives is what inspired me most of all. I wanted to see the characters' profession as something more than just a backdrop, more like the driving force in the screenplay, since what most of us do for a living is a very important in our lives. Gary is called Gary Manda in tribute to Jo Manda in *Casque d'Or* (Jacques Becker, 1952). Toni's name comes from the great deceived lover in Renoir's film.

The setting of the film in the nuclear power plant was a chance for me to bring all of these themes in French Cinema up to date. I wanted to reinvent these heroic figures, who have strong values and face obstacles, whilst suggesting a new relationship between them. A nuclear power station is not just a factory or a stone quarry where the work is grueling and poorly paid. It is a strange place where the need for the constant monitoring of radioactive contamination is a team effort. This solidarity brings about a new concept of virility, that I wanted to triumph.

So how did you go about finding the setting for the film? Did you film in a real nuclear power station?

That was the main concern we had before we started filming. Building a set would have been far too expensive, while the possibility of filming in a real nuclear power were limited by the real risk of radioactivity, and the unrelenting pace of the work there, which is 24/7. We searched for any disused power plants as a possible location, and found one in Austria on the outskirts of Vienna in Zweterndorf. It was a complete nuclear power plant, which had never been put into production. The day we found Zwetendorf was the day I knew we would really make the film.

A few days before the plant was due to open there was a minor incident in the US, which got people talking about the dangers of nuclear energy. The Austrian State held a referendum, for or against nuclear energy. The result went against. So this Austrian nuclear power station that was ready to go into production suddenly became redundant but too expensive to take down. It is still there, somewhat doomed, deserted and watched over by a guard who doesn't speak a word of English and who lives on site like a hermit. The plant is now used by people undergoing nuclear training and also by members of anti-nuclear environmental NGOs. No one had ever filmed there before and so we had the opportunity to make the film in a spectacular and real-life setting, sometimes bordering on the fantastic. The fact that people know little about the appearance of the inside of nuclear power stations means that we could have done almost anything— but at least with this resource to film in, no-one could say that our film wasn't realistic. It really mattered to me that we showed this unknown place, and created all the excitement that comes with the unknown, inside a real power station.

The film location included both the power station and the surrounding landscape with its hot springs cultivating strange and luxuriant plants. The luscious, green countryside could almost have been dreamed up and was a perfect setting for this story of passion and compulsion.

Léa Seydoux has quite frankly never been more erotic or voluptuous in a role. She reminds me of Isabelle Adjani in *Ete meurtrier* or even Marilyn Monroe in *Clash by Night*, in which she plays a woman working in a fish factory.

Clash by Night by Lang is another film which features a female character torn between the love of two men. The behaviour of Monroe's character was ambiguous, which was particularly modern at the time. I did actually ask Léa, in one of the final scenes which in the end we edited out, to reenact the sequence where Marilyn comes out of the water and her lover shakes her by the feet to unblock her ears. I loved that scene. Not only because we saw Léa in all her sensuality but also because it was just right for the character who ends up trapped by her own erotic game-playing.

As for Léa Seydoux, there's not much that needs doing to make her appear erotic - she just is, absolutely from head to toe - even if she is very different from Belle Épine, where we played out a different sort of blossoming femininity. While, to produce the opposite effect would be a full-time job, to *uneroticise* Lea.

In the film Léa has short hair – Abdellatif Kechiche had asked her to cut her hair and I inherited this hairstyle from him – I didn't want to ask her to change it, or to wear a wig. The overtly sexual costume that Chattoune, our costume designer came up with, probably evolved to counterbalance the short haircut, and to maximize her femininity – short cut-off jeans and a vest top with no bra – knockout!

Her physique underlines the cliché of life on a campsite - the pretty girl at the camp who has no qualms about her libido, and who is pivotal in the film. The more sexual and sensual she is, the

more the feeling of being in love, which is what ultimately overcame her, troubled me. The subject of the film is not sex, but the possibility to love.

In *Grand Central* the western genre and romance genre are combined, with some discord perhaps, the individual and the collective, the social and the anti-social come together. It's very heterogeneous.

The feeling of heterogeneity that you get might be because we filmed in two different formats. We used 35mm for the exterior scenes, whenever there's natural light, and then we filmed with digital cameras inside the power station. I consciously chose to use this technique and was encouraged to do so by Georges Lechaptois, our Director of Photography.

Currently, we are still able to film on 35mm (but perhaps it won't be around for much longer but I'm sure I'll be able to manage without it). In the meantime we can exploit the best qualities of both formats. Digital for its sharpness and contrast in artificial light and 35mm to portray beautiful skin and sunshine, heat and atmosphere. Using both formats was a way of making the film quality suit the subject matter.

Although you're trained as a screenwriter – writing literature is still part of your life – it's as if you wanted to contradict the natural flow and move towards a more stylized image.

I really want the film to be visually coherent, with a real aesthetic beauty. With every project I do, I try and have an Art Director. The AD is often overlooked in France, or sometimes art direction is handled by the Production Designer. My P.D. Antoine Platteau, had already done a lot of Art Direction, in *Belle Épine*. In *Grand Central* it's was a key role during the actual filming. It's really important to have someone with an overall vision, and to avoid being too close to the subject which is what happens when you are directing. In *Grand Central* we asked Philippe Elkoubi, the Casting Director to do more than we usually ask him. For me it was a natural extension of the work he already does when casting. So I asked him to discuss references have a say on the acting, on the rushes and the music.

So just how did you approach the music? I know, the musical score was very important to you in *Belle Épine*.

Still just as crucial, narrative and cardiac, the way Rob composes - in between Phoenix tours. I asked Rob to work with us again. There were three big areas of the film which needed to be defined by the music: the power station, the site where the workers live and the saloon. I asked Rob to work with Colin Stetson an American saxophonist who he'd never met before, but whose solo work and circular breathing techniques had enchanted me. The tone he strikes is exactly what we wanted for the power station. Then we needed music for the love story in the film, which is filmed outside at night in the lush, warm countryside. We listened to a lot of Jonny Greenwood's work in *The Master* (Paul Thomas Anderson). The music in *The Master* is strangely lyrical, and indeterminate, and comes at unexpected moments.

For me, music in a film is successful when you can't immediately identify the overriding emotion behind it. For the saloon scenes, I asked Jérémy Jay. Rob and I had already worked with in *Belle Épine*. We used half of Jeremy's new album, a real gem, before it was even mixed.

So in all, very little extra music was commissioned, and almost nothing was used that wasn't composed specifically for the film. On a tight budget, the issue of musical rights can be a major problem and is best dealt with by making clear choices about the music being needed and working in close partnership with all the musicians involved. The soundtrack is a bit like a parallel script.

I actually had the idea, and I might do it one day, of asking for a soundtrack for the script, which we could use during filming and another one once the film is in the can. The film the way we imagined it, then the other film, the real one.

Grand Central definitely has a political angle to it, but not necessarily in the way one would expect. The film is more of a romantic western, a positive tragedy, a political romance or a pro-love movie than a militant tract for or against the nuclear industry.

Grand Central doesn't make a stand for or against nuclear power, and is more of a social film than a film about the nuclear industry. I wanted the feeling of being in love to appear subversive and to upset the microcosm of life in the power station in a similar way to Pasolini's *L'Accatone*. I talked a lot about this with my screen-writer. What was political perhaps was to choose these workers and make heroes of them. Tahar Rahim personifies a young man in his early twenties, trying to make amends for his mis-spent youth and be a good person, to make something of his life and earn a living. He would much rather have this group of fellow workers for a family than his own. But he is caught off-guard by love - terrified by it, like the onset of the symptoms of a new and rare disease. He has to learn the words for simple objects he comes across in his daily life such as the beer mat he shows to Olivier Gourmet in one scene, and that he has no words to describe.

I wanted the film to raise the question of courage – that's the political dimension. Going inside a power station, like falling in love, is like fighting against your own self-interest. The analogy between the contamination of love and that of radiation is perfect.

The characters in the film all seem to suggest that love, true love and living for love is heroic. In France in 2013 can this really be considered heroic?

Yes !

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