

LOU De Laâge

BUZEK KULESZA

VINCENT **MACAIGNE**

AGNUS DEI

A FILM BY ANNE FONTAINE



SUNDANCE PREMIERES

Lou Agata Agata Vincent Kulesza Macaigne AGNUS DEI

(LES INNOCENTES)

A FILM BY
ANNE FONTAINE

FRANCE-POLAND / 2015 / 115 MIN / 1.85

International Sales
FILMS DISTRIBUTION
36 RUE DU LOUVRE
75001 Paris, France
Ph: +33 1 53 10 33 99
Info@filmsdistribution.com
www.filmsdistribution.com

INTERNATIONAL PRESS
MARTIN MARQUET
PH:+1 310 927 5789
MARTIN.MARQUET@ME.COM
KARA MACLEAN
PH:+1 310 254 4934
KARA@TOUCHWOODPR.COM



INTERVIEW WITH ANNE FONTAINE



Agnus Dei is inspired from a little-known true event that occurred in Poland in 1945.

The story of these nuns is incredible. According to the notes taken by Madeleine Pauliac, the Red Cross doctor who inspired the film, 25 of them were raped in their convent - as much as 40 times in a row for some of them - 20 were killed and 5 had to face pregnancy. This historical fact doesn't reflect well on the Soviet soldiers, but it's the truth; a truth that authorities refuses to divulge, even if several historians are aware of the events. These soldiers didn't feel they were committing a reprehensible act: they were authorized to do so by their superiors as a reward for their efforts. This type of brutality is unfortunately still widely practiced today. Women continue to be subjected to this inhumanity in warring countries around the world.

What was your initial reaction when the producers, the Altmayer brothers, came to you with this project?

I was immediately taken with the story. Without really understanding why, moreover, I knew that I had a very personal connection with it. Motherhood and self-questioning with regard to faith were themes I wanted to explore. I wanted to get as close as possible to what would have been happening within these women, to depict the indescribable. Spirituality had to be at the heart of the film.

Are you familiar with matters of religion?

I come from a Catholic family - two of my aunts were nuns - so I have a few connections in regards to the subject. But I can only work on a theme if I know it perfectly well and I wanted to experience what life in a convent was like from the inside. I felt it was important to learn about a nun's daily routine, understand the rhythm of her days. I went on two retreats in Benedictine communities - the

same order as the one in the film. I was only there as an observer during the first retreat, but I truly experienced the life of a novice in the second.

Tell us more about it.

Bevond life in a community, which impressed me a great deal - this way of being together, praying and singing seven times a day - it's also as if you were in a world where time is suspended. You have the feeling of floating in a type of euphoria and vet you are bound by a very strong discipline. I saw how human relationships were established: the tension and shifting psychology of each person. It's not a frozen, one dimensional world. But what touched me the most, and what I attempted to convey in the film, is how fragile faith is. We often believe that faith cements those who are driven by it. That's an error: as Maria confides to Mathilde in the film, it is, much to the contrary, "twentyfour hours of doubt for one minute of hope." This notion sums up my impressions after speaking with the sisters, and also after attending a conference about questioning one's faith given by Jean-Pierre Longeat, the former Abbot of Saint-Martin de Ligugé Abbey. What he said was extremely moving and has a profound echo within today's secular world.

Were the members of these religious communities aware of your project?

Fortunately, the people I met immediately had a favorable opinion of the project even if there were complicated truths revealed about the Church. We share, along with the sisters, the paradoxical situation that they are forced into as a result of being attacked: how to face motherhood when one's entire life has been committed to God? How to keep one's faith when confronted with such terrible facts? What to do faced with these newborns? What are the possibilities available?



Had these priests and nuns seen your previous films?

They had seen some of them, *The Girl from Monaco* and *Coco Before Chanel* in particular. One monk confided that one of his favorites was *Adore [Perfect Mothers]*. I have to admit that I was rather surprised.

This is the second time you have worked with Pascal Bonitzer.

Pascal wasn't any more familiar whathese themes than I was, but we had got on very well when writing *Gemma Bovery*, my last film. All of our work consisted in gradually merging the movie's two worlds: the materialist world of Mathilde, this rigid communist doctor, and the spiritual world of the sisters, in a traditional Poland upset by the war. How was Mathilde going to pierce the wall behind which these women lived, removed from society, not wanting anything to change or be revealed? In every situation brought to an extreme, human behavior can become subversive. Faced with this ideological questioning, Pascal and I tried to carve out each character's psyche and dark side.

Mathilde, played by Lou de Laâge, has an incredibly modern side to her.

She's a scientist, very much ahead of her time, not to mention that women doctors were quite rare then. She is young, has just completed her studies and is still only an assistant at the Red Cross. In a way, she's accomplishing an initiatory journey. It takes a lot of guts to take on the responsibility of delivering these women's babies, to keep such a weighty secret and take risks that include having to go through the forest at night to reach the convent, which means trying to bypass the Soviet roadblocks. She almost pays for it physically, moreover, which ends up bringing her closer to the sisters. Mathilde's world is very far from the nuns' world. She wants to heal people and for things to move forward. Yet, there's nothing Manichean about her: without adhering to a specific faith, she gradually glimpses what the mystery of faith might be.

She joined the French Red Cross, which is also a sign of courage. What was the role of this association in Poland in 1945?

Their mission was to heal and repatriate wounded soldiers and former prisoners of war, but only French citizens. That is why at the beginning Mathilde tries to turn away the novice Teresa when she comes to the dispensary.

Maria, played by Agata Buzek, is quite a revolutionary person herself. She also takes risks in allowing Mathilde to come.

Maria, just as Teresa, resolves to transgress the rules of the order; rules she was accustomed to and blindly obeyed. I have always been interested in the subject of transgression. At the heart of it all, this film is a more stylized extension of themes I have treated in the past, such as in *In his Hands* [Entre ses mains] or Dry Cleaning [Nettoyage à sec].

The friendship that Maria and Mathilde are able to build is quite fascinating.

These two women, who are diametrically opposed, invent something together that allows them to make something possible out of an impossible situation. The inner path they travel is also the path that will end up uniting them.

While sharing her doubts with Mathilde, Maria adds that without the war and the horror of the raping, she would have been completely happy.

Many people who have chosen this life are happy. I had long interviews with religious people whom I met about this subject. Their intelligence, their vision and sense of humor were fascinating. Some were going through very painful bouts of inner questioning. I'm thinking in particular about a sister whose story I was told by the order's psychoanalyst - yes they do exist. Having entered the orders at the age of 25, she spent the next 25 years asking God if he loved her without ever receiving an answer. She is still a nun today.

You also bring up the deviations that religion can lead to... an example would be the Mother Abbess' attitude, which, under the pretext of not letting anyone know what was occurring at the convent, prohibits the sisters from receiving proper medical care.

The film raises questions that haunt our societies, and shows what fundamentalism can lead to.

Yet you do not judge the Mother Abbess.

It was extremely difficult to construct and balance out this protagonist. We may deem appalling the acts she commits. But I quickly realized that, without toning down her actions, we had to try and understand her interior motives. I wanted her to explain herself with this ambiguous statement that she pronounces before the sisters: "I've damned myself to save you." When she begs for God's help, and when we see her ill in bed, without her veil, we can tell that she has been drawn into an abyss. This type of character role can easily become caricatured. Without Agata Kulesza, who



is exceptional, I don't know if the Mother Abbess would have had this interiority or brought this dimension, reminiscent of Greek tragedy.

Agata Kulesza is only 42. She is much younger than the character. What gave you the idea to entrust her with the role?

I thought she was remarkable in *Ida*, but I also thought she would indeed be too young to have the authority the role required. She's the one who asked if she could do a screen test. She put on a veil and without makeup - just by the force of her acting - she was able to project what we see on the screen.

Tell us about Agata Buzek...

Just like Agata Kulesza, Agata Buzek is a very well-known actress in Poland. We spotted her in a Jason Statham film and I thought she had this incredible physical presence - it was staggering - very spiritual in fact. Krzysztof Zanussi had also spoken very highly of her. Agata worked tirelessly for months in order to become accustomed to the refined and sophisticated French that her character spoke. Every evening during the shoot, she listened to Victor Hugo to better familiarize herself with our language.

You have given Lou de Laâge her first adult role with the character of Mathilde.

The entire story is told from Mathilde's point of view. She is the one who takes us into the nun's world and she is witness to the terrible, unheard of events that happen there. She couldn't be bland: her profession alone required her to have a strong character with a touch of virility. Here is the key problem for this type of role - if the actress grows too soft, the film is over before it has begun.

I was very impressed by Lou's work in Mélanie Laurent's film *Breathe [Respire]*. She is graced with a strong, distinctive beauty. I sensed that this grace, combined with her slightly stubborn side, along with her freshness and a fragility that lie just

beneath the surface, would well serve the film. Lou is never insipid: she can sometimes be harsh. It was important to feel how pervious she became to the situation she discovers during her journey and that we perceive something that lights up within her, on her face, without necessarily thinking: "She's become a believer." That wasn't the point. What was important was to feel the metaphysical questioning that is experienced by the protagonist and how it changes her. How does one understand life's meaning in the midst of such chaos? How does one survive the violence that has so strongly marked the flesh of these Polish nuns? How does one judge their faith, which appears to have survived this harrowing ordeal? Lou's dramatic insight is impressive; she doesn't set boundaries - she is courageous and hardworking, a bit like Mathilde. It wasn't easy for her to end up deep in Northern Poland surrounded by Polish actresses whose language she didn't speak.

The unconventional couple she makes with Samuel. the Jewish doctor played by Vincent Macaigne, adds another facet to her non-conformist character. Samuel casts a different light onto Mathilde in an original way: he is not a classically handsome man and I find that Vincent Macaigne brings a great deal of humanity to the character's dark sarcasm. It always pays to start off with a couple who sleep together without any obvious commitment, vet whose feelings for each other rise to the surface unbeknownst to them. Moreover, it is quite easy to imagine the medical personnel in these units having these types of relationships in order to evacuate stress. Pascal Bonitzer and I really enjoyed ourselves while creating this character. We thought he would give the audience some comic relief before returning to the convent. And also, it was a way to tackle the war from a different angle and to underscore what had just happened in Poland: Samuel is Jewish and his family died in the camps.





This is the third time you've worked with Caroline Champetier.

Our working relationship goes back to 1996, since our first film together. Drv Cleaning [Nettovage à sec1. Caroline is fantastic when it comes to radical topics and my feeling was that there was potential for thorough visual work with Agnus Dei. The commitment of the director of photography to a film is akin to that of an actor. I knew that she would bring the fervor that the project needed. We began our work well in advance of the shoot and worked very closely together. We researched iconography and conducted a thorough study of colors. We wanted to give the impression of being in a painting - we were thinking, naturally, of the Quattrocentro period Madonna with Child paintings - while breathing life and movement into the scenes. The air had to be palpable.

It's the second time you've shot a film in a foreign country.

It's not that I'm attracted to other countries in particular; it's the subject that leads me there. Of course, when I found myself in Poland, directing actresses and a crew whose language I didn't speak, It occurred to me that I was nuts. Thankfully, the Polish actresses were exceptional. That was a great help.

A quarter of the film is in Polish. How did you work with the actresses in spite of the language barrier?

I had an interpreter with me of course, but all the back and forth could become grueling. We mostly relied on English to communicate. The rehearsals we conducted a month and a half before the shoot were paramount. They were true rehearsals, like in theater. This allowed the actresses to appropriate the subject and the physical place, make it their own. It also provided the opportunity to bring up issues that had been oversimplified at times. They were very reactive and I even modified some scenes as a result of comments they had made.





FROM REALITY TO FICTION: THE STORY OF MADELEINE PAULIAC



When she was 27 years old, Madeleine Pauliac, a doctor on staff at a Paris hospital, joined the resistance movement, providing supplies and lending support to allied parachutists. She then participated in the liberation of Paris and in the Vosges and Alsace military campaigns.

At the beginning of 1945, as a lieutenant-doctor in the French Interior Forces, she left for Moscow under the authority of General Catroux, the French Ambassador in Moscow, to direct the French repatriation mission.

The situation in Poland was dramatic. Warsaw, a martyred city after 2 months of insurrection against the German occupant (between August and October 1944) had been razed to the ground

causing the death of 20,000 combatants and 180,000 civilians. During this time, the Russian Army, present in Poland since January 1944 under Stalin's orders, remained armed and waiting on the other bank of the Vistula River. After a backward surge from the German Army and the discovery of all the acts of violence committed by the Germans, the Red Army and its provisional administration followed to rule over the liberated territories.

It's within this context that Madeleine Pauliac was named in April 1945 Chief Doctor of the French Hospital in Warsaw, which was in ruins. She was in charge of repatriation within the French Red Cross. She conducted this mission throughout Poland and parts of the Soviet Union. She accomplished over 200 missions with the Blue Squadron Unit of

women volunteer ambulance drivers for the Red Cross in order to search for, treat and repatriate French soldiers who had remained in Poland. It's in these circumstances that she discovered the horror in the maternity wards where the Russians had raped women who had just given birth as well as women in labor; individual rapes were legion and there were collective rapes perpetrated in convents. She gave medical care to these women. She helped them to heal their conscience and save their convent. Madeleine Pauliac died accidentally while on a mission near Warsaw in February 1946.

Agnus Dei recounts this episode of her fight as a woman to save other women.

ANNE FONTAINE (DIRECTOR)

FILMOGRAPHY



2014	GEMMA BOVERY Toronto 2014
2013	ADORE [PERFECT MOTHERS] Sundance 2013
2011	MY WORST NIGHTMARE [MON PIRE CAUCHEMAR] Toronto 2011
2009	COCO BEFORE CHANEL [COCO AVANT CHANEL] Academy Award Nominee (Best Costumes - Catherine Leterrier) BAFTA Nominee (Foreign Film, Leading Actress, Costumes) European Film Award Nominee (Music - Alexandre Desplat) César Award Winner, Best Costumes
2008	THE GIRL FROM MONACO [LA FILLE DE MONACO] Toronto 2009
2006	OH LA LA! [NOUVELLE CHANCE] Cannes 2006 - Out of Competition
2005	IN HIS HANDS [ENTRE SES MAINS] Toronto 2005
2003	NATHALIE Toronto 2003
2001	HOW I KILLED MY FATHER [COMMENT J'AI TUÉ MON PÈRE] Toronto 2001 César Award Winner, Best Actor - Michel Bouquet
1999	AUGUSTIN, ROI DU KUNG-FU [AUGUSTIN, KING OF KUNG-FU Toronto 1999
1997	DRY CLEANING [NETTOYAGE À SEC] Venice Official Competition 1997 Best Screenplay Award, Venice Film Festival César Award Winner, Most Promising Actor - Stanislas Merhar
1995	AUGUSTIN Cannes Film Festival, Un Certain Regard 1995

LOVE AFFAIRS USUALLY END BADLY

Cannes Critics' Week 1993

Winner of the 1993 Prix Jean Vigo

[LES HISTOIRES D'AMOUR FINISSENT MAL EN GÉNÉRAL]

1993

LOU DE LAÂGE (MATHILDE)

RECENT FILMOGRAPHY



2015 **THE WAIT [L'ATTESA]** by Piero Messina

14 BREATHE [RESPIRE] by Mélanie Laurent

Cannes 2014

Venice 2015

César Award Nominee, Most Promising Actress

2013 **JAPPELOUP** by Christian Duguay

César Award Nominee, Most Promising Actress

2011 18 YEARS OLD AND RISING [J'AIME REGARDER LES FILLES]

by Frédéric Louf

AGATA BUZEK (SISTER MARIA)

RECENT FILMOGRAPHY



2015 **11 MINUTES [11 MINUT]** by Jerzy Skolimowski

Venice 2015

PERFORMER by Lukasz Ronduda and Maciej Sobieszczanski

Berlin 2015

2014 **JEZIORAK** by Michal Otlowski

FOREIGN BODY [OBCE CIALO] by Krzysztof Zanussi

Toronto 2014

2013 **REDEMPTION** by Steven Knight

2011 **LENA** by Christophe Van Rompaey

Toronto 2011

2009 **REVERSE [REWERS]** by Borys Lankosz

Best Actress Award Winner, Polish Film Awards

AGATA KULESZA (MOTHER ABBESS)

RECENT FILMOGRAPHY



2014 ALL ABOUT MY PARENTS [PANI Z PRZEDSZKOLA]

by Marcin Krzysztalowicz

Best Actress Award Nominee, Polish Film Awards

2013 **IN HIDING [W UKRYCIU]** by Jan Kidawa-Blonski – Busan 2013

IDA by Pawel Pawlikowski

Best Foreign Language Film, 2015 Academy Awards

Best Actress Award Winner, Gijón International Film Festival

Best Actress Award Winner, Les Arcs European Film Festival

Best Supporting Actress Award Winner, Los Angeles Fillm Critics Association

Best Actress Award Winner, Polish Film Awards

Best Actress Award Nominee, European Film Awards

2011 **ROSE [RÓZA]** by Wojciech Smarzowski

Best Actress Award Nominee, Polish Film Awards

SUICIDE ROOM [SALA SAMOBÓJCÓW] by Jan Komasa

Berlin 2011

CAROLINE CHAMPETIER (DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY)

RECENT FILMOGRAPHY



2015 LOOKING FOR HER [JE VOUS SOUHAITE D'ÊTRE FOLLEMENT AIMÉE]

by Ounie Lecomte

 $\textbf{LOOKING FOR ROHMER} \ \text{by Wang Chao}$

BEING 14 [A 14 ANS] by Hélène Zimmer

2014 THE PRICE OF FAME [LA RANÇON DE LA GLOIRE] by Xavier Beauvois

2013 THE LAST OF THE UNJUST [LE DERNIER DES INJUSTES]

by Claude Lanzmann

2012 **HANNAH ARENDT** by Margarethe Von Trotta

HOLY MOTORS by Leos Carax

Silver Frog, Camerimage Best Cinematography Competition 2012

Best Cinematography Award Nominee, César Awards 2013

2010 **OF GODS AND MEN [DES HOMMES ET DES DIEUX]** by Xavier Beauvois

Best Cinematography Award Winner, César Awards 2011

Best Cinematography Award Nominee, European Film Awards 2010

CAST

MATHILDE
SISTER MARIA
MOTHER ABBESS
SAMUEL
IRENA
TERESA
ZOFIA

LOU DE LAÂGE
AGATA BUZEK
AGATA KULESZA
VINCENT MACAIGNE
JOANNA KULIG
ELIZA RYCEMBEL
ANNA PROCHNIAK

ANNA KATARZYNA DABROWSKA

LUDWIKA HELENA SUJECKA
WANDA DOROTA KUDUK
JOANNA KLARA BIELAWKA
BIBIANA MIRA MALUDZINSKA

COLONEL PASCAL ELSO

GASPARD THOMAS COUMANS
WLADEK LEON NATAN-PASZEK
ZOFIA'S AUNT JOANNA FERTACZ



CREW

DIRECTOR PRODUCERS

SCREENWRITERS

ADAPTATION AND DIALOGUES

STORY
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
EDITOR
SOUND

MUSIC
PRODUCTION DESIGN
COSTUMES
CASTING

1ST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR SCRIPT SUPERVISOR LINE PRODUCERS

POST-PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR CO-PRODUCERS

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