



FOXFIRE

CONFESSIONS OF A GIRL GANG

A FILM BY LAURENT CANTET



Haut et Court and The Film Farm
present

FOXFIRE

CONFESSIONS OF A GIRL GANG

A film by **Laurent Cantet**

Based on the novel by Joyce Carol Oates "Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang"

France - Canada - Colour - 143 min. - HD - Scope - Dolby SRD - 2012

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Canada





**1955. A small working-class
American town.**

Five teenage girls seal a lifelong pact: they will live according to their own rules, and become the Foxfire gang. But freedom always comes with a price...

Interview

with **Laurent Cantet**

Interview by **Philippe Mangeot**,
with the help of **Martin Granger**

“FOXFIRE” is an adaptation of a novel by Joyce Carol Oates. To what extent does it remain faithful to the book?

The film is more strictly chronological than the novel. The structure of the book espouses the blurred logic of the memory: some years after the break-up of the gang, Maddy is trying to piece the story together. In certain versions of the script, and later in editing, Robin Campillo and I tried to reproduce this fragmented form. But we gave up on it, opting instead for a detailed reconstruction of the founding, life and then dissolution of a gang. I wanted to get as close as possible to the girls’ energy. That said, the Maddy character, during several passages of voice-over, evokes the dizziness she feels faced with the sometimes confused memories she has of this crucial period in her life.

Since “HEADING SOUTH”, all your feature films have been based on books.

Each case is so different, you can’t call it a rule. But I often find film scripts too “logical” compared to the complexity of the lives they are supposedly recounting. Much more than cinema, literature is visually abundant in the way it tackles the difficulty of untangling cause and effect. That is perhaps what I’m looking for in books. I always try to make sure that things do not just follow on naturally from what happened beforehand. And I want to avoid any scenes looking like they were thought up to “say” one single, precise thing. Meaning has to be constructed by juxtaposed elements, without this being made obvious. What is true during writing also applies during editing:

it's a question of reconstructing that illusion of real time which seems to dilute meaning.

Were you tempted to transpose the story to a contemporary setting?

We soon realized that would be a bad idea. The story of these girls is only possible in an age when the social control on teenagers was not as strongly exerted as it is today. The freedom of that period interested me not only for social and political reasons: it was essential for the narrative. It's hard to imagine in 2012 that some teenagers would buy a car, rent a house and move in without parents or social institutions being involved.

It nonetheless comes as a surprise to see Laurent Cantet making a period film.

That's the other reason I gave up on the transposition. I wanted to adapt the method of filming that we developed for "The Class" to another film, one to which it wasn't necessarily suitable.

I wanted to see if we could recreate a period – 1950s America – in a naturalistic way which, moreover, evokes for us a great many movie clichés which have left their mark on our imagination. Many historical films have a museum-like feel, especially in terms of the sets and costumes – every detail of which has to be strictly in keeping with the period –, or in language that strives to integrate expressions from the time. So we decided to handle the story by bringing it up to date: not by transposing it to our age, but by treating it in the present, without trying to demonstrate in each shot that we really are in the 1950s. The direction itself straddles a form of classicism in its way of approaching the narrative and a very rough treatment, with hand-held camera and documentary-style framing. As a result, both in its technique and themes, the film aims for a sort of timelessness.

We find the same split in the choice of music.

We worked on several types of time gap. The story of 1950s America is also that of pop music. The film underlines the clash between the syrupy songs played on the radio and the burgeoning rock 'n' roll scene which, in the wake of blues and jazz, conveyed the rebelliousness of a generation. The girls in "Foxfire" are split between these two styles of music; they daydream to "Moulin Rouge" in the car, but they dance to the most hard-edged rock of the day. I also asked Timber Timbre to compose an original song. Their music is very contemporary and yet raw, which to me seems quite close to the sound of the 1950s. Again, working with them was a question of seeking that kind of timelessness that I wanted for the film.

How would you describe your method of filming?

It's all about a way of linking the work on the image and the freedom for the actors. Pierre Milon and his crew used two HD cameras: that allows one to film the whole of a scene without having to do shot/reverse shot, and to allow the actors time to get into a scene and allow themselves some digressions. Of course, this method requires a certain type of work on the sets. There was no question, for example, of fixing up one side of the street and not the other. Franckie Diago, the artistic director, had to work as far as possible in 360°. That way, I was able to shoot a period film with the same kind of freedom I'd have had with a contemporary story.

Did you choose the actors in "FOXFIRE" in the same way you chose the pupils in "THE CLASS"?

Casting for "The Class" depended on people voluntarily coming to take part in the workshop we set up. For "Foxfire" on the contrary, I went in search of the actors. I spent a winter in Toronto in all the locations where one might run into teenagers: schools, community centers and centers for





problem youths. The casting directors also made an internet appeal and auditioned some 500 girls. But it's one thing finding convincing actors, it's quite another to put together a cohesive group, capable of embodying a gang like Foxfire.

I saw lots of interesting actresses for the role of Legs, but they didn't all go well with the Maddy role: in one case, there was an imbalance, with one overpowering the other; in another the rhythms of speech were too similar.

Did you hold workshops for your actors, as you did for your previous film?

Yes, but on a smaller scale. As soon as the cast was chosen, I brought together all the girls for around 10 days. At the start, everything was very open and we played around with improvisations. Then gradually, things began to solidify, the actresses' performances were integrated into the script, the characters became what each girl brought with her own personality. In the film, the singularity of Legs, for example, comes mainly from Raven Adamson's restraint: that distance with regard to the group, which makes her a much more internalized character than she is in the novel.

How did you find the actress who plays Marianne Kellogg, whose character belongs to a completely different social universe from the others?

Of all the young actresses, Tamara Hope is the only professional. She had to have another way of moving and speaking in front of the camera. Unlike the girls in the gang, I wanted her to be ageless – for her to seem adult when she takes tea with her mother's friends and then become a young girl when she's with Legs. I was thinking about what Pasolini wrote on the

margin of the script for "Theorem", about the young bourgeois man in the house: "He has no age; he is as old as his class." Tamara has an amazing ability to take on a character. In fact, that to me is what characterizes North American actors. And I think it's got something to do with American culture and its taste for telling stories. These actors have a direct and literal rapport with fiction, they don't try to cheat with it or to be more powerful than it is. During a shoot, you can have doubts about all kinds of things; the only thing about which I was sure from the first day was the cast.

Did you take inspiration from American films from the 1950s?

The cinema of that period stylized reality and built an idealized iconography which I specifically wanted to avoid. I did however draw on documentary iconography, with from the start several reference points: photographer Joseph Sterling's sublime book "The Age of Adolescence" (1959-1964), and Bruce Davidson photos of teenage gangs in Brooklyn.

How do you view the 1950s? As an age of innocence, one of limited horizons, or the prehistory of what was yet to come?

I wanted to challenge the imagery of the "American dream", which proclaims that the future is bright and that everything is now possible. The America I'm interested in is much more that described by Howard Zinn in "A People's History of the United States": a history that is not reduced to an all-conquering America and the triumph of free-market economics, but one which is built around class struggle, the civil rights movement, strikes, pacifism and disobedience. Theriault, the old man who recalls the Communist congresses he attended, is the embodiment of this history: that of those left by the roadside, the forgotten ones, those who decide to build a life counter to everything mainstream. Showing the other side of the

American dream, is also about showing the emergence of rival dreams. On the one hand, the forced, consumer-driven happiness that Theriault decries; on the other, a gang of girls who, as Maddy puts it, want to “swallow the sky” and “open the horizon”..

What is the point nowadays of returning to that period?

The struggles of that time inevitably have an echo in those of today. The timelessness which the film strives for is based on this notion. The first days of filming coincided with the riots in England in August 2011 – I hesitate to use the word “riots”, which often serves to strip a revolt of its political dimension. Reading the newspapers, I felt that today, Legs and the girls in her gang would have been on the streets of London. One struggle echoes another, and follows a succession which reaches us.

The girls in the gang first kick against machismo attitudes.

The machismo crystallizes other forms of social oppression, but their experience of it is in fact fundamental. The apparent generosity of the boy who initially pretends to be protecting Rita; the ostensible good-naturedness of Maddy’s uncle; and the gentle mask worn by the man she meets on the bus all hide the same violent archetype, which being in Foxfire allows them to escape from. This aspect is also underlined by the arrival in the gang of Agnes, an older woman, a domestic slave to her husband and her family, who reflects back to these very young women the image of what they could have become. I also liked the idea that Foxfire at one point transcends generational barriers. This community of sisters also thinks of itself as a refuge, where age no longer matters.

Would you say there’s lesbian dimension in “FOXFIRE”?

Desire, tenderness and even jealousy circulate between these girls,

naturally enough. That is especially the case between Maddy and Legs. But each of them is, in her own way, under the spell of Legs’ charisma. Each of them is seeking a close relationship with her, even to the point of claiming the place of favorite, a sort of exclusivity that goes against the collective sentiments inherent in the gang. Does that mean one has to consider it as homosexuality? I see it more as the aspiration for a total communal experience in which the political and sensual would coincide. These adolescent girls are dreaming of a world without men, but they do not want to deny their own sensuality.





Often in your films, the main theme – here, the feminine condition – is complicated by other power relationships: the class struggle with the Kellogg family; inter-racial relations with the two black girls, and so on.

The racial dimension can seem more discreet than others, but this discretion reflects the reality. At the time the question of racism was not raised, simply because for the whites, the blacks were not even seen as a “problem”: it was unthinkable that they could be part of their history. The girls in Foxfire, despite being so oppressed themselves, could not see beyond this. Difficulties arise from the moment when Legs decides that things could be different, suggesting that her black friend Marigold join their community. She then makes it thinkable, and therefore a subject for discussion, which previously wasn’t imaginable. Hence the voting session when she is rebutted. That is in fact the moment when her authority is most directly challenged. But this dispute, however unjust it may be, underlines just how much Legs is attached to the gang’s democratic rules: she accepts the result of the vote.

The question of inter-generational relationships, which has been central to your previous films, here seems secondary.

Joyce Carol Oates has compared Legs to Huckleberry Finn, for whom parents barely counted for anything. Their parents have got too many problems of their own to do anything but leave them to live as they see fit: Maddy’s mother counts on financial help from her daughter; Legs’ father is on welfare and is probably an alcoholic, and so on. The girls in Foxfire are in some way the outcast offspring of outcasts. In that situation, the parents are no longer really a problem for them: they don’t need to butt heads with them, because to the girls, they don’t exist.

The high-school boys also make up a gang, but they are treated as dolls in leather jackets.

There is in fact on the one hand a conformist gang, who reproduce the social code by adopting its uniform and its attitudes, and on the other hand, a gang which sets out to create something else. This distinction ties in with the swagger of the one and the invisibility of the other: the boys are all show; the girls are smarter and chose to keep out of sight. For them, it’s not about playing a role, but on the contrary, it’s about escaping the roles that have been assigned to them by inventing other ways of leading their lives.

They opted for invisibility in order to be more effective, because this allows them much greater freedom of action. They discover this dimension which is central to many contemporary protest movements, from the masks of Anonymous, to the Invisible Committee, which penned “The Coming Insurrection”, and movements like the Weather Underground, an American radical leftist collective, which also happened to be mainly made up of women, and which in the 1970s favored a culture of invisibility – “We’re not hiding, but we’re invisible” – before going fully underground and being pursued for terrorism.

How would you describe the politics invented by the girls in “FOXFIRE”?

Claire Mazerolle, who plays Goldie, used the word “empowerment” to describe this type of politicization. We don’t have a French equivalent to designate that way of reclaiming power over your own life, and collectively developing one’s power to act. The girls in Foxfire are repressed threefold: as members of the underclass; as teenagers; and as females. When the group formed, they had the feeling they could no longer put up with the mother’s depression, the humiliating behavior of a teacher, harassment

by boys, and the permanent requirement for justification: all things which diminish life. Through the intermediary of Theriault, the film connects this empowerment with a reference to the proletarian tradition.

The girls don't have any structured political culture. Theriault provides Legs with some ideological baggage, a semblance of discourse that she sometimes employs without believing in it much, and without grasping its true import.

But in her way of referring to it, there is above all a desire: when you have a hard time explaining things because you don't have the necessary tools or maturity, it feels so good to have the means to structure one's actions. The politics of Foxfire thus boils down to the two or three formulas suggested by Theriault, which the girls try to apply to their daily life: deciding their own laws, redistributing wealth, stating that from each according to their means, and to each according to their needs.

Their brand of communism finds its identity and develops through experience. Legs illustrates this when she gives her money to the group, saying, "No one has to account for their share," and "Put in whatever you can." The girls reflect this philosophy in their wish for a communal life.

And they embody it again in their ferocity in beating up the men who oppress them. No doubt they don't have the conceptual grasp to put into words what they are experimenting with. "Feminist", for example, is a word that simply does not exist for them, and yet, that's what they are from the outset when they explain to Rita that crying means letting men win. This question is key in my films: before arriving at thinking things, before theorizing them, how do you experience them? Legs is no doubt incapable of precisely pinning down Kellogg's discourse against the welfare state. But the look she gives him across the table says clearly enough what she's feeling at the exact moment. In the way she studies him, she experiences something fundamental: she recognizes her enemy..

The forms this takes change through the course of the film.

The utopia of Foxfire begins as a playful adventure. They are still quite young girls, they operate through games, through challenges, each time pushing back the limits: swearing membership of a secret society, putting graffiti on the town's shop windows, commando raids, and so on.

Then, after some of them are convicted, a period of withdrawal begins. They embark on a communal life, until the decisive moment when Legs decides to have done with the crippling worries about lack of money and the fear of punishment. We will go find money, she says, where it is to be found; in men's pockets, because it belongs to us. This is the communist period in strict terms, the Robin Hood side of the gang. In the novel, there's a lovely passage in which Maddy realizes they have become adults. Until then, their inability to project into the future gave them a license for everything. And now, here they are confronted with adult issues: material problems and worries about what they will become. The change they are going through is also an emergence from childhood.

It's a very dark vision of the passage into adulthood.

Somewhere deep inside me, I must have a nostalgia which explains why I have often dealt with adolescence, since my very first short films. It's impossible for me to shake it, despite the fact that I've got enough distance on it to know that this period is one of the hardest in our lives. Because you have the feeling of not yet being altogether in control of your life. Because you're supposed to be as gentle as a lamb but you're not at all. Because the worries you're supposed to be escaping from torment you from the inside. The adolescence that I film is anything but innocent, yet it is also that moment when





you think you can pull yourself out of what determines you socially. Perhaps my wish to adapt Oates' novel owes a lot to my desire to continue making films with teenagers, after the experience on "The Class": to observe again this moment in life when so many things are decided without us knowing much about it, when we have a certain ignorance of what is at stake and the implications of each of our actions.

Isn't there a final stage in the communal adventure, heralded by the growing power of the VV character: that of terrorism, through the kidnapping of Kellogg?

I don't think that terrorism is the logical next step of the Foxfire adventure. It's more the failure of it. It is disillusionment which makes everything possible, including the drift towards terrorism.

What do you conclude from this failure?

It comes from multiple elements accumulated in communal life. But the primary reason is the brutal return of the real, in the dual shape of the need for money and social pressure. I have a vague and very uncomfortable feeling that it is impossible to genuinely withdraw from society, and to break the social pact. The world and its laws will prove to be stronger than any utopia.

Moreover, that's what I find interesting in Kellogg's abduction: what lies behind it, its precise method. The very straightforward scenario that Legs dreamt up runs into the very solid resistance put up by Kellogg, and the reality of a body that refuses to eat and refuses to move – this body too heavy even for the girls to lift. And once again, it's the real in all its complexity which turns out to be stronger than fiction.

We see in "FOXFIRE" the fundamental impulse of your filmmaking. The film suggests through its staging that a great escape took place; but the narrative turns it into a disaster.

Like my other films, the construction of a utopia comes up against its own limits and the cruelty of the world.

People have often said that my films subscribe to a sort of social determinism: at the end of the day, the inertia of the real wins out. The hostage-taking goes wrong, the girls lose touch with one another, and in one sense, everyone seems to find the place that was assigned to them. Nonetheless, I wouldn't say it is a disaster. I agree with what Maddy says: "Legs was our shooting star." The shooting star slips through their fingers, but Rita and Maddy discover her in a photo, somewhere in the Sierra Maestra, alongside the Cuban revolutionaries.

The film doesn't make clear whether that really is Legs.

Doubt can remain. The degree of blur on the photo was in fact quite problematic for me. Should it really be Legs in that photo, or just someone who you might think resembles her? What was important was that Rita and Maddy want to see their friend in it. That is the indicator that the flame which was lit has not been extinguished in them, even if it burns more intensely elsewhere.

Doesn't this idea find a visual equivalent in the sequence in which, after VV has shot at Kellogg, Legs gives the order to all the girls to get out of there?

I hope so. Each of the girls is then like a shooting star disappearing into the night, propelled into a dark expanse without knowing what it conceals. In that instant, it results in a feeling of terrible solitude. But that solitude is not incompatible with the notion of passing something on which runs throughout

the whole film and which underlies Theriault's political mysticism. And it is implicitly present during the visit to the natural history museum, through this idea that nags at Maddy: inscribing her own experience in the history and the evolution of humanity.

Isn't Maddy's role also about the way she takes on the narration, testifying to what has happened?

Maddy occupies an ambivalent position in the group: she is both central and one step removed. She is the one who most needs the gang to exist and the one who feels she doesn't fit in. She is regarded as an intellectual, and as such, provokes a certain distrust. I really like the way Katie Coseni manages to give the impression she's really having fun in one scene, and that she's struggling in the next one. But Maddy really comes into her own through her ability to document the gang's adventures. In fact, Legs and she are the only ones who realize that if you don't write it down, things end up slipping away.

Because there is always the risk of losing the thread of one's own story, of forgetting the fundamental principles, of letting others speak for you. The task of recording this history is driven by a muddled intuition, making it a real struggle. In her dual position as protagonist and witness, Maddy takes part in the gang's political adventure, whilst affirming the need to produce her own account of it.

FEATURE FILMS

2012 **FOXFIRE**

SEVEN DAYS IN LA HAVANA

Official Selection – Un Certain Regard – Cannes 2012

2008 **THE CLASS**

Golden Palm – Cannes 2008

Best Script Cesar 2009

Best Foreign Film Award – Independent Spirit Awards

Academy Award Nomination – Best Foreign Language Film

2006 **HEADING SOUTH**

Official Selection – In Competition – Venice 2005

2001 **TIME OUT**

Don Quixote Award – Venice 2001

Louve d'Or – Festival International du Nouveau Cinéma de Montréal 2001

2000 **HUMAN RESOURCES**

Best First Work Award – César 2001

Best New Director Award – San Sebastian International Film Festival 1999

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CAST

Legs
Maddy
Rita
Goldie
Violet
Lana
VV
Marsha
Agnès
Marianne
M. Kellogg
Ms. Kellogg
Muriel
Father Theriault
Uncle Wirtz
M. Buttinger
Acey Holman
Ab Sadovsky
Car Park's victim
Violet's victim
Man on bus
Marigold

RAVEN ADAMSON
KATIE COSENI
MADELEINE BISSON
CLAIRE MAZEROLLE
RACHAEL NYHUUS
PAIGE MOYLES
LINDSAY ROLLAND-MILLS
ALEXANDRIA FERGUSON
CHELSEE LIVINGSTON
TAMARA HOPE
RICK ROBERTS
BRIONY GLASSCO
ALI LIEBERT
GARY REINEKE
RON GABRIEL
IAN MATTHEWS
JAMES ALLODI
BRANDON MCGIBBON
DAVID PATRICK GREEN
JONATHAN HIGGINS
ROB STEWART
NAKITA JONES





CREW

Director	LAURENT CANTET	D.O.P	PIERRE MILON
Screenplay	ROBIN CAMPILLO	Casting	JASON KNIGHT C.S.A.
	and LAURENT CANTET		JOHN BUCHAN C.S.A.
Based on the novel	<i>"FOXFIRE, CONFESSIONS OF A GIRL GANG"</i>	Production Designer	FRANKIE DIAGO
	by JOYCE CAROL OATES	Costume Designer	GERSHA PHILLIPS
Producers	HAUT ET COURT	Original Score	TIMBER TIMBRE
	Carole SCOTTA	Editor	ROBIN CAMPILLO
	Caroline BENJO		SOPHIE REINE
	Simon ARNAL		STÉPHANIE LÉGER
	Barbara LETELLIER	Sound Mixer	CLÉMENCE SAMSON
	THE FILM FARM		KELLY WRIGHT
	Simone URDL	Re-recording Mixer	NICOLAS CANTIN
	Jennifer WEISS	Sound Editor	JEAN-PIERRE LAFORCE
		1 st Assistant Director	VALÉRIE DELOOF
		Production Manager	AGNÈS RAVEZ
		Post Production Supervisor	PIERRE OUELLET
			DANIEL BECKERMAN
			STEPHEN TRAYNOR
			CHRISTINA CRASSARIS

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