

"A VISUALLY STRIKING HEIST THRILLER." *Hollywood*  
REPORTER

LES FILMS PELLÉAS, SAVAGE FILM AND FRAKAS PRODUCTIONS  
PRESENT

NIELS SCHNEIDER  
AUGUST DIEHL

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A FILM BY ARTHUR HARARI



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## LOGLINE

Pier Ulmann blames his family of diamond dealers for his father's tragic life – and death. To take revenge, he returns among them, in Antwerp, with a robbery plan in mind.

## SYNOPSIS

Pier Ulmann lives from hand-to-mouth in Paris, between construction work and petty theft that he commits on behalf of Rachid, his only “family.” But life catches up with him the day his father is found dead in the street after a long decline. The black sheep of a rich Antwerp family who deals in diamonds, he has left his son nothing, apart from the story of his banishment from the Ulmann family and a thirst for revenge. At his cousin Gabriel's invitation, Pier goes to Antwerp to renovate the prestigious Ulmann family firm. Rachid's instructions are simple: “Go there at first to see; then to take.” But there are many facets to a diamond...

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Dark Diamond is the story of a family revenge taking place in a milieu that has surprisingly never been exploited as the main backdrop for a feature film: the Antwerp diamond district. The discovery of this milieu was a powerful trigger, for I found an unexpected wealth of elements there, mixing cosmopolitanism with complex family stories, capitalistic and traditional craft sagas and above all a passion for an utterly fascinating object: the diamond. I relied upon this realistic raw material to try and make a rich and lyrical film using genre film codes all the way through to its tragic echoes.

Film noir is an exciting way to depict both a specific reality and an individual's tragic arc. I rooted the narrative within the framework of a family in order to focus on the central question of mythical imagination, which fascinates me. Each family produces a storytelling that has the value of a myth for those who inherit it. Seen from this angle, a family isn't simply a closed unit with its own codes and neuroses as sole horizon. On the contrary, it maintains an exciting and complex relationship with the world. For Pier Ulmann, the film's hero, the myth he is struggling with represents alienation as much as it represents a potential strength. It is this struggle, combining blindness and liberation, that I wanted to recount in Dark Diamond.

# INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

*Interview lead by François Guérif, film critic and publisher*

## **How did you get the idea to make a movie set in the world of diamond merchants?**

The original idea for the project came well before choosing the story's backdrop. The idea came from the producer Grégoire Debailly who had read an article in the newspaper *Liberation* about a new wave of hold-ups in Europe. With the director Olivier Séror's help, as well as that of the screenwriters Vincent Poymiro and Agnès Feuvre, we came up with a variation on the theme of Hamlet: the story of a young man who wants to avenge his father by destroying his family, and, in order to do so, enters a milieu that is thoroughly unknown to him. We had first thought about the town of La Chaux-de-Fonds in Switzerland, where high-end watches are manufactured, and whose scenery and social standing are quite surprising. Yet in the end the film takes place in Antwerp...and I made it with another producer, David Thion from Films Pelléas.

## **How did you happen to choose Belgium over Switzerland?**

Starting from the idea of a variation on Hamlet, I was also very influenced by my interest in Pierre Goldman, a far-left guerrilla activist and adventurer, who held-up pharmacies in the 1960s. My Pier Ulmann would be his distant cousin. They have several points in common: both Jewish, overshadowed by the myth of the father, mixed up with crooks and committing acts of robbery. After reading the first synopsis,

G. Debailly brought up Antwerp's diamond district, which is mostly Jewish. We realized that this area had never been used for a fictional film. And I was lucky enough, very early on in the project, to be introduced by two friends to the right people, in particular the family of the greatest living diamond cutter, Gabi Tolkowsky, from which we drew part of our inspiration for the Ulmann family. The other part came from a young merchant from the milieu, whose father was a communist worker in the diamond industry, known to everyone in this district as the "white wolf," a unique character in this world. The milieu and the city did the rest; it's a place that readily lends itself to fictional stories and inspired cinematography.

## **Thus choosing Antwerp dictated the idea of the amputated hand?**

That was, in fact, a crazy coincidence. Vincent Poymiro, my co-screenwriter, remembered that there was a guy in his wife's family who had lost his arm in the family brickyard and that, following this accident, not only did he start hating the family, but he transmitted this hatred to his son. We were searching for what the father's suffering, transmitted to the son, could have been to begin with, and we had this idea of the mutilated hand. It was only once we were there that we discovered the legend of the founding of Antwerp. On the banks of the Scheldt River, there was a giant, Druoon Antigon, who exacted a toll from passing boatmen and would

cut off the hand of those who couldn't pay. The Roman soldier Silvius Brabo killed the giant, cut off his hand and threw it into the river. This hand became the island on which the first Antwerp Castle was built. Antwerpen comes from the Dutch hand werpen or "throw the hand". Antwerp's founding myth is thus a story of reparation for injustice; an injustice righted. And when you see the statue of the hero Silvius Brabo in the main square of Antwerp, his face has a troubling resemblance to the hero of our film, Niels Schneider!

## **There's a documentary-like aspect to the film...**

That was important to me. Thanks to the "right people" I mentioned earlier, I was able to visit one of the world's most prestigious diamond cutting workshops, take notes and record the accounts of people who work there. This nourished the story in a very organic way. The heist had to be somewhat realistic and be shown as a form of traditional craft, or trade, if you will, rather than a high-tech feat. One of the rare films where I found this dimension was Michael Mann's *Thief*, which brings to light a wonderful down and dirty realism. The perfect blend of formal stylization with crude realism is, historically, one of film noir's specificities. And it is not exclusive to American film noir: this dimension is brilliantly demonstrated in Renoir's *La Bête Humaine* [*The Human Beast*], which I believe to be the greatest French film noir. I dreamed of following these exciting examples, and I was lucky enough to have the opportunity of shooting one



of the last (if not the last) diamond quarter workshops outside of the high-security area. We were in direct contact with the local powers that be without having to go through the district authorities, who were naturally not thrilled with the idea of such a film shoot. This immersion was precious for us to achieve the concrete realism with which I was hoping to infuse the purely fictional side of the film.

**The film has a unique visual atmosphere, in particular in terms of color. Did you have specific references in mind?**

Yes, my brother, and cinematographer, Tom Harari and I wanted the image to have something crisp about it, both lyrical and tangible. We watched a lot of classical American films, Vincente Minnelli in particular (*Home from the Hill*) and Elia Kazan (*Splendor in the Grass*). And we realized that even with someone we admire greatly like John Cassavetes, in *Opening Night*, *Love Streams*, or *The Killing of a Chinese Bookmaker*, for example, there is a strong and lasting legacy derived from this formal movement in American melodrama, where the contrasts are striking, the lighting is assertive and the colors are radiant. In my mind, there is no contradiction between a sort of inspired realism and unabashed stylization. Yet, the lyricism we were looking for was also nourished by other influences, from De Palma to Sergio Leone, not forgetting Verhoeven and Fassbinder.

The search for a lyricism that would help the audience enter this fictional world naturally came about through the music. I wanted an insistent theme, however, making sure that the orchestration didn't resemble something operatic verging on bombastic. I had the seed of an idea in mind since the writing

stage of the screenplay, which I transmitted to the composer, Olivier Marguerit. He developed the idea and brought in two other themes, and he chose an orchestration with things that we don't hear anymore, like the flute or violin, but used in an almost dissonant manner. I was very enthusiastic about it all. It greatly lent to the film's emotional and cerebral dimensions.

**In several scenes, the shape suggested through the cutting of a diamond seems to outline a metaphor about cinema. The value of the stone is in fact arbitrary; it's the lighting that gives it life. Thus a path has to be traced to bring the light into the stone. And you drive the point home: technique is quickly learned, "...anybody can master it. What makes the difference is the eye of the person cutting it." In other words, the director.**

I wasn't aware of this from the beginning, but the metaphor became obvious as we got deeper into the writing process. It was the same thing with the talk about views on beauty: it's not standard criteria that define beauty, but divergence. It's what makes something singular and unequalled: there is always a dimension linked to the origin of things, its raw beauty, and this origin has to be perceptible, as elaborate as the final shape. It's practically an aesthetic versed in morality. That goes for the scenery, lighting, sound and casting as well.

**Since you brought up the casting, it is quite surprising for a French film.**

It's the result of a great big melting pot. Not just in terms of nationality, but also life experience. For the leading role, there were very few well-known French actors (meaning actors who would be reassuring to investors) aged 25 to 30 who seemed convincing enough to me and able to handle the different social milieu that the film required. Using Niels Schneider was Cynthia Arra's idea. She is my head of casting and also directed the actors. Niels was in fact the exact opposite of what I had in mind, but Shanti Masud, a friend of mine who is also a director, showed me a sequence with Niels where he had this unsettling intensity that greatly surprised me. And during the screen tests, his presence was so striking, especially concerning something that is key to Pier's character: his childhood. He went to great lengths to construct the character incorporating this perspective and he truly accomplished a metamorphosis. There is a disconcerting violence within him that has rarely been exploited in his roles up until now. As August Diehl says, Niels is among those rare actors who have "a story to tell." And speaking of August Diehl, the German actor who plays the epileptic cousin – whom I had noticed in Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, where he plays in an exhilarating scene – he comes from the theater. He's a true virtuoso, who has such great generosity that he derives as much joy from playing with professionals as he does with intuitive non-professionals. He's a true tragedian, who fearlessly goes from the grotesque to the pathetic.

Jos Verbist (the gem cutter) and Hilde Van Mieghem (the aunt) are two amazing Flemish actors from the stage and

cinema. Hans Peter Cloos (the uncle) is a German stage director who has been working in France for 30 years, and was close to the Fassbinder gang in the 1970s. It's the first time he's played such a big role in a film (even if he's made a number of appearances in Otar Iosseliani's films). Despite his character role of an authoritarian person here, he is the sweetest man in the world and the work he accomplished was quite impressive.

And then Raphaële Godin. Brisseau made her famous in *Les savants du bon Dieu [Workers for the Good Lord]*, where her cutting edge presence already made a great impression. She hardly works in film anymore. She's a photographer's agent and an editor. She is "rare" in both meanings of the term: we seldom see her and when we do, she's all we see. Raghunath Manet (the Indian diamond merchant), is a famous singer, dancer, and musician from Pondicherry. It was his first time in a fictional feature, and he brought something precious to the role, a sort of shaky magnetism that I love. Guillaume Verdier (the young accomplice) is a very touching actor that we've watched grow up from adolescence. He was in Jean-Paul Civeyrac's *Ni d'Eve, ni d'Adam [Neither Eve nor Adam]*.

Finally, Abdel-Hafed Benotman came on the advice of Abdelatif Kechiche, to whom I'd initially offered the role, after I had described the character as "gentle and worrisome." Hafed was a fascinating man; he was a writer whose life could come right out of a book. We became fast friends when we first met. Of course, you as his editor already know all that! I think he had great potential as a film actor. Meeting him was one of the most incredibly powerful encounters of my entire life.

### **The first shot of the film is an eye that is clouded over with a tear or drop of sweat. Is the intention that the sequence in of itself be a blur?**

The first shot is indeed an eye, but not the one you remember! It's a closed eye, making rapid back and forth movements, as if dreaming. The shot of the eye with the teardrop is the film's fifth shot...but that only confirms your interpretation: the sequence is such a blur that what we remember of it becomes a blur as well. So yes, absolutely, starting with two shots of an eye, one closed, then one that is unclear, suggests from the beginning that it is a story of blindness, that of a man who doesn't see things the way they are, but sees them in a distorted way. He sees everything with closed eyes. This pre-title sequence is neither a flashback nor a dream, but a memory that has been transmitted to him. And for the audience, the sequence plays – at least that was my intention by placing it at the beginning – the same role as it does for the main protagonist: a disturbing and unreal memory that you take as truth. It's like a film you saw long ago: we remember things about it that were in fact never there, and yet we are sure to have seen these things. We invent new images, another film. The impact of the moment when we are told a story can be of such strength that it profoundly alters our perception of things. The partially delusional construction of a narrative is a dimension I find fascinating. In my film, it concerns a family, but we can see this mechanism function on a cultural level as myth; a deceptive, mistaken myth that has influence over a culture, a war, a nation. In fact, it's the subject of my next film.

### **What story does it tell?**

It's the story of a Japanese soldier during WWII, Hiroo Onoda. He was trained in guerilla warfare and sent to a small island in the Philippines in 1944, when he was 22, with the order of resisting the American landing then holding the island until the Japanese troops arrived, which his superiors presented as an absolute certainty. He was forbidden to surrender, give up, or commit suicide. He categorically refused to believe that the Japanese had surrendered and led his guerilla warfare during a period of 30 years, at first with a few men, three, then two, and in the end all alone. He didn't lay down his arms until 1974.

### **Did you want to make a film noir?**

Yes. I became a film buff when I saw a retrospective of Warner Bros. films at the Beaubourg museum in 1990. I believe the first film my brother and I saw was *The Maltese Falcon* by John Huston with Humphrey Bogart (which I've since learned, strictly speaking, is considered to be the first opus of the genre) and I developed such a passion for film noir that for years I walked around with a list in my wallet of every film of the genre that I needed to see. I'd circle the film once I'd seen it. It's a category that has fueled my love for cinema, even if in the following years I broadened my cinematographic tastes. It's a childhood passion; and I believe that cinema firstly and lastly concerns childhood.

What I like about film noir is the ambiguity, which touches upon everything: the plot, the image, the acting, feelings, the meaning, and morals. It's another metaphor that the

diamond proposes: how reality entails multiple facets, and cannot be given a simple definition. When you see a cut diamond up close, it's striking: you don't know how to look at it. It's a strange paradox for a stone that is supposed to embody purity and clarity. In reference to film noir, if I pushed the idea further, I could say that ambiguity is part of the genre itself. It's in its DNA, there's an impurity that makes it particularly susceptible to mutation and fusion. There are constant bridges between melodrama and love stories or even westerns; political or social films and even comedy.

**We can see in your film some of this cross-fertilization, firstly with the family tragedy.**

Yes, it's a family tragedy that abides by the twists and turns of film noir. Something like Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is also a perfect film noir! The existential question that Pier faces is that of the father, of whom he knew so little, yet from whom he inherited something which weighs so heavily upon him. It's too "symbolic" for his shoulders, and is a yoke for him. He's practically controlled remotely, first by Rachid – who has concretely taken over the role of the father – and also on a more cerebral and symbolic level, by his actual father.

Is seeking reparation a wish or an obligation? He can't answer the question. What was at stake in the film was to sketch out a tragic but liberating path for him. Believing himself to avenge the wrongs done to his father, he makes amends for his own dysfunctional relationship with the father figure. And the cost is the lives of his friends, who have also played with fire. It's an impure tragedy in the sense that Pier isn't destiny's plaything fated for death or damnation. We can see

the workings of destiny in the film, or not see it at all. Other forces are at work: cultural and symbolic heritage, emotional immaturity, social humiliation, envy, desire...the libido in the broadest sense... all time bombs!

**The end of the movie is surprising, with the main character who utters: "I would like to leave."**

What mattered to me wasn't only that at the end of his journey there should be no confinement or affliction, but that Pier would finally decide something for himself, and by himself. The end of the film is harsh, but it isn't a closed ending, or a dark ending. Pier will always carry a wound within him, but he escapes the new trap laid for him by his uncle (and doesn't every family, sooner or later, set a trap for its children?). He has to face the next stage of his life alone; without any sort of father or father figure, without the obligation to serve anyone. And in doing so, he has discovered the taste for, and the ability of creating something beautiful. That's what he takes with him on the train. This bitter deliverance is where I wanted to lead the audience; it is what I wanted them to feel, and share with Pier.

## ARTHUR HARARI

Born in Paris in 1981, Arthur Harari studied filmmaking at university. He directed several short and medium-length films, including *La Main sur la gueule*, in 2007, which received several awards and the Grand Prize at the Brive Festival and the Lutin for Best short film. More recently, *Peine Perdue* received the short film Grand Prize at the Belfort Entrevues Festival in 2013.

Occasionally, he is an actor (*Age of Panic [La bataille de Solférino]* by Justine Triet in 2013). *Dark Diamond* is his first feature film.



# NIELS SCHNEIDER

*Selected Filmography*

- 2015      **The Art Dealer [L'antiquaire]** by François Margolin  
**La voz en off** by Cristián Jiménez  
**Gemma Boveri** by Anne Fontaine
- 2014      **Quantum Love [Une rencontre]** by Lisa Azuelos
- 2013      **You and the Night [Les rencontres d'après minuit]** by Yann Gonzalez
- 2012      **Chaos [Désordres]** by Etienne Faure  
**Atomic Age [L'âge atomique]** by Hélène Klotz
- 2010      **Heartbeats [Les amours imaginaires]** by Xavier Dolan

# AUGUST DIEHL

*Selected Filmography*

- Post-prod.      **The Young Karl Marx [Le jeune Karl Marx]** by Raoul Peck
- 2015      **Come What May [En mai, fais ce qu'il te plaît]** by Christian Carion
- 2014      **The Disappearing Illusionist [Dirk Ohm]** by Bobbie Peers
- 2013      **Frau Ella** by Markus Goller  
**The Husband** by Bruce McDonald  
**Night Train to Lisbon** by Bille August  
**Layla** by Pia Marais
- 2012      **The Adventures of Huck Finn** by Hermine Huntgeburth  
**Shores of Hope [On voulait prendre la mer]** by Toke Constantin Hebbeln  
**Confession of a Child of the Century** by Sylvie Verheyde
- 2011      **If Not Us, Who? [Wer wenn nicht wir]** by Andres Veiel
- 2010      **The Coming Days [Die kommenden Tage]** by Lars Kraume  
**Salt** by Philip Noyce
- 2009      **Inglourious Basterds** by Quentin Tarantino
- 2004      **Love in Thoughts [Was nützt die Liebe in Gedanken]** by Achim von Borries  
**The Ninth Day [Der neunte Tag]** by Volker Schlöndorff
- 1998      **23** by Hans-Christian Schmid

## CAST

Pier

**Niels Schneider**

Gabriel

**August Diehl**

Joseph

**Hans-Peter Cloos**

Rachid

**Abdel Hafed Benotman**

Kevin

**Guillaume Verdier**

Luisa

**Raphaëlle Godin**

Rcik

**Jos Verbist**

Olga

**Hilde Van Mieghem**

## CREW

Director

**Arthur Harari**

Producers

**David Thion, Philippe Martin**

Screenwriters

**Arthur Harari, Vincent Poymiro**

Story

**Arthur Harari and Olivier Seror**

Screenwriting collaboration

**Agnes Feuvre**

Director of Photography

**Tom Harari**

Sound

**Ivan Dumas**

Costume Designer

**Sophie Lifshitz**

Editor

**Laurent Senechal**

Mixing

**Alek Goosse**

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