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M A D S M I K K E L S E N

MICHAEL KOHLHAAS

A film by ARNAUD DES PALLIÈRES

PRESS

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M A D S M I K K E L S E N

**MICHAEL
KOHLHAAS**

A film by ARNAUD DES PALLIÈRES

*Based on « MICHAEL KOHLHAAS »
by HEINRICH VON KLEIST*



SYNOPSIS

In the 16th century in the Cévennes, a horse dealer by the name of Michael Kohlhaas leads a happy and prosperous family life. When a lord treats him unjustly, this pious, upstanding man raises an army and puts the country to fire and sword in order to have his rights restored.

INTERVIEW ARNAUD DES PALLIÈRES

Where does the story of *Michael Kohlhaas* come from?

Michael Kohlhaas is a novella by Heinrich von Kleist based on the true story of a merchant who was treated unjustly by a nobleman and went on a bloody rampage through a German province in order to obtain redress. With its theme of a lone man taking on the whole of society, *Michael Kohlhaas* foreshadows an entire genre of modern fiction. Franz Kafka stated that *Michael Kohlhaas* was his favourite work of German literature and gave him his first urge to write!

How did you first discover the book?

I first read *Michael Kohlhaas* when I was 25. Right from the start, I could see it as a movie but I didn't feel capable of making it. I was young and it looked like an expensive and complicated movie to produce. Also, I had three overwhelming models in my head: Herzog's *Aguirre*, Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* and Tarkovsky's *Andrei Roublev*. So I thought I should wait until I was older and more expert—which hasn't happened.





Eventually, twenty-five years later, I figured that if I waited for a gift from heaven, I could easily end up not making the movie. And that somebody else would end up making it instead of me. So I went for it.

What excited you most about the story?

The character, obviously. His dignity, his dazzling bursts of energy. Reading *Michael Kohlhaas* is like tracking a fireball. But most of all, it's the moment when, just as he is on the brink of overthrowing the whole country, he disbands his army and goes home. He agrees to become an ordinary man again, because he is suddenly granted what he has been demanding from the start : a judicial review of his lawsuit. This rigour, which is Kohlhaas's trademark, bowled me over and still does. That a man should earn, through courage and determination, the chance to take power but then forego it for reasons of moral rectitude, I think is one of the greatest stories about politics that anyone can tell.

Your *Michael Kohlhaas* is described as being “freely adapted” from Kleist’s novella. What liberties have you taken with the original story?

The most obvious liberty I took is that it's a German story. I love and admire German literature but I don't know German. I wanted to shoot in French, so my only option was to Gallicize the story. And I wanted to preserve the characters' connection with the beginnings of Protestantism, so the Cévennes area was an obvious choice of location as Catholics and Protestants shared that wild and beautiful region peacefully in the early 16th century. Another liberty I took was that Kleist's novella has a rather fanciful subplot which didn't fit in with the deliberate materialism of my film. Also, we developed several supporting roles in order to lift Kohlhaas out of his “heroic solitude”. His own daughter, the young preacher, Jérémie the farmhand, the one-armed convert, and others were invented from scratch. And lastly, the dialogues were entirely rewritten in a deliberately contemporary language.

Michael Kohlhaas is a story of its time, the Renaissance.

The story is set in the 16th century, on the dividing line between two periods of history. In the countryside, a small, impoverished aristocracy precariously clings on to feudal privileges passed down since the Middle Ages, while in the towns, a new world is taking shape. The townspeople are educated, often wealthy, but politically almost powerless. Three main characters clash with one another: the feudal, already somewhat spectral figure of the young nobleman who commits the injustice; Kohlhaas, a merchant with lawful rights, capable of rebelling when he suffers an injustice but limited by his individualism; and Jeremy, Kohlhaas's young servant, who foreshadows the revolutionary with the same utopian dreams of freedom and happiness that inspired the peasants' revolts in France and Germany between 1520 and 1530.

The story strikes powerful chords in the world of today...

Michael Kohlhaas looks forward to our times with amazing foreknowledge. How does a respected merchant, loving husband and considerate father

become a fanatic, a body filled with a single obsession? What power of death suddenly goes to work on this peaceful businessman who lived five centuries ago? These questions, unfortunately, contain many of our political anxieties about the world today.

Is Michael Kohlhaas a revolutionary?

Kohlhaas suffers an injustice and demands his rights, but society lets him down. He reacts by suddenly, brutally declaring war on society. He chooses the path of violence, with a razor-sharp sense of justice as his only moral guideline. Kohlhaas leads his band of men in acts of brutality with no political strategy. Obtaining redress is worth more to him than life itself—his own life or anyone else's. His is a personal vendetta. He is not a revolutionary.

Would Kohlhaas be called a terrorist today?

Kohlhaas is an ordinary person who, in the name of justice, becomes the absolute enemy of a whole society. His relentless slogan—*"I want my horses*





back the way they were”—displays his utter inability to compromise. So perhaps yes, Kohlhaas is a kind of terrorist. But I always remember the view taken by the German philosopher of law, Rudolf von Jhering, which was that Kohlhaas is a forerunner in the fight for the rule of law, a kind of pre-revolutionary taking up arms against entrenched privilege. For Jhering, it is unfair to accuse Kohlhaas of individualism because in standing up for our own rights, we are always standing up for other people’s. To Jhering, Kohlhaas is a “*hero of the law*” who sacrifices his life for an idea. Judging Kohlhaas is a complicated business.

What is your attitude to violence in your film?

Being a Romantic, Kleist was fascinated by violent characters and situations. Massacres, lootings and executions are described in the novella in much the same way as spectacular movies show them nowadays, where the violence is always frenetic and often quite lyrically dizzying. Fires and explosions always seem to be the ultimate symptom of this idealization, this spiritualization

of violence. I preferred to treat violence more coldly—to show the fear, the pain, the fear of pain, and the attackers being as scared as those they attack, to bring out the true ugliness of violence in an age when treating wounds was difficult and relieving pain was impossible.

Michael Kohlhaas is a historical film. How did you handle the codes of the genre?

Historical films often suffer from a kind of academic stiffness, partly because they cost more to produce than contemporary films, but also because there is a fairly widespread fantasy that a historical film or “costume drama” should be more “arty”, and therefore more beautiful, than a modern drama. I wanted the sets and costumes to be unobtrusive, almost invisible, more suggestive than faithful reproductions. Similarly, in order to make this depiction of a corner of 16th-century Europe as lifelike as possible, to make it touch us more by the essence of its characters and their feelings than by the costumes and scenery they move around in, I wanted the cinematography and sound



to be unsophisticated. I wanted to make a film that breathes in the present. A documentary about the 16th century.

What choices did you make in terms of set design?

With cost being an imperative, I always preferred outdoor locations, which are historically more accurate and also put the actors—and the audience—in a familiar contemporary environment, i.e. nature. Interior sets, no matter how minimally reconstructed, are never as natural: they always need to be dressed and lit. Whenever I could, I took scenes originally written for indoors and shot them outdoors. From early on, I wanted these outdoor locations to be mountainous, partly to guard against contamination by modernity, but also to reflect the nature of the character. If Kohlhaas were a landscape, it would be mountainous. Austere. Magnificent. Like Mads Mikkelsen's face. We chose the Cévennes and Vercors areas. The Vercors brings back memories of the French Resistance in WW2, and the Cévennes mountains connect with another kind of resistance which underlies Kleist's story: the Reformation.

Kohlhaas is a Protestant, a man who reads the Bible in French without the mediation of a clergyman, and has grasped the law so thoroughly that one day, he claims to be in the right against the whole of society.

How did you work on the costumes?

When I met Anina Diener, the costume designer, I told her to be inspired by the fashion in Germany depicted by Urs Graf and Holbein because it was more modern. Stylized, it would bring to mind a western. I didn't want the costumes to stand out from the scenery. Anina Diener painstakingly dyed them in the same colours as the landscapes in which we were shooting. I also insisted on having costumes which made no noise. I wanted the audience to forget the period.

How soon did you know what sort of film you wanted to make?

I wanted to make a kind of western. A movie in which the story, the characters, their emotions, the way they fit into nature, and the presence of animals are



what matters. Thanks to Kleist, I had a strong main character and a story with the breadth of a legend. All I had to do was put life in front of the camera and tell the story without effects. Not too many preconceived ideas about the mise-en-scène or clever camera movements, no big ideas about sound... only what was necessary to bring the characters alive and tell the story.

The choices of pictures are powerful. How did you work with Jeanne Lapoirie?

Here too, a whole set of choices was involved, mostly for budgetary reasons, but I knew they would help towards a truly economical mise-en-scène. We worked light, with almost no grip and very little lighting equipment. Watching *The Seven Samurai*, we were struck by Kurosawa's terse, dynamic use of panning shots. We made them the signature movement of our film. Other than that, we tried hard to shoot at the best times of day: dawn, dusk and twilight. Shooting outdoors in available light, the art is to make the best of the weather conditions. It is also important to try not to be too controlling.

A shadow, a reflection or a light loss can often be a miraculous accident. Jeanne and I liked to let luck play its part. The sun, the clouds, the wind, the mist are all worth treating as genuine contributors to the mise-en-scène.

Where did you get the idea of casting Mads Mikkelsen?

I couldn't visualize any French actor playing the role of Kohlhaas. I was looking for a Clint Eastwood thirty years younger. I don't think we have any of those in France.

One day Sarah Teper, the casting director, mentioned Mads Mikkelsen. I looked him up on the Internet and saw his face. How can I put it? At first I said no, I don't think it's a good idea for Kohlhaas to have such a—how can I put it? —face. So we went on searching for actors. English, Polish, Italian... Then this Danish actor's name came up again. I discovered the *Pusher* trilogy and was blown away by his resourcefulness but I wasn't sure he could play Kohlhaas, the God-fearing family man. Then I saw him play an ordinary man in *After the Wedding* and I was convinced.

We had the script translated and sent it to his agent. He liked the script and wanted to meet me. My producer, Serge Lalou, and I flew to Copenhagen to have lunch with him. Mads had his idea of the character. I had mine. We argued over it. When we got back, I observed to my producer that Mads and I had just had our first work session. *Valhalla Rising* came out in Paris two weeks later.

Was there a language issue?

Language is always an issue when you're directing an actor. Directors always tend to talk too much. I remember our first day of shooting. Mads and I already knew each other well. We had worked hard together in preproduction, horseback riding, working on the lines and relaxing together. But on the first day of shooting, he suddenly stopped understanding. He was at a loss—because I had started talking way too much, giving reasons and explanations. I was thinking out loud, in fact. And naturally, he didn't understand.

It took me a while to understand why. He was scared. So was I. It was the first day. We still had eight weeks of filming ahead of us. So I started doing what you should always do with actors, I asked him to do physical things—gestures, movements, talk loudly, softly, quickly, slowly, and so on—without explaining. He listened, thought, and then did as I asked. Even when he didn't understand, he was always game to try. And that's how we worked together, right up to the last day. ■

*Interview realised at the FILMS DU LOSANGE,
April 2013*





INTERVIEW MADS MIKKELSEN

What was it about the project that appealed to you?

I could see there was something radical and challenging about it. Not only the character, but the script itself. It's something we don't see every day in our line of business. A way of telling a story that is all about an idea, a character. When Arnaud des Pallières and I first met in Copenhagen, I knew nothing about him, who he was or what he'd done. Two hours later, I didn't know more about him but I wanted to find out and work with him. Arnaud and his producer, Serge Lalou, met with me in a café. Most of our conversation was in English, with Serge doing most of the translating. Arnaud has an odd but respectful attitude to languages, which means that although

his English is better than average, he doesn't like speaking it very much. *[laughter]* He was though very involved in the conversation, even if he didn't actually say much, so when he did say something, either in French or English, it really stood out. I could tell he was on a mission to make this movie.

Who is Michael Kohlhaas?

Kohlhaas is a unique person. He is not like you or me. Kohlhaas asks the world for the simplest thing—justice and equal rights for everyone—and triggers havoc all around him. Kohlhaas is a man whose ideals are bigger than himself, much bigger than his own life..

How did you prepare yourself for the role?

First of all, by working on the script. But the most important preparation is always the work you do with the director. I always ask as many questions as I can and try to get as many answers back, although I know I won't get all the answers before I jump in. I try to get right up close to the director's thoughts and feelings and vision, and not just of the part I've been given to play.

When Arnaud and I first met, I came out with all sorts of ideas about the character and suggestions for the script. All very sensible ideas, too! Arnaud waved them all away with a series of resounding “*Nos*”. [laughter] I wasn't very used to that! [laughter] But it didn't bother me because he expressed himself with such passion and enthusiasm, and because he explained to me from the start why this story had to be told the way he intended to tell it and no other way. Later on, during pre-production, Arnaud and I talked a lot. We covered all the angles, or nearly all, so we didn't talk half as much during the shooting. We worked together with fewer and fewer words as

time went on. It got more intuitive each day, because we'd already been over so much.

How did you work with Arnaud des Pallières?

He never said a word before the first take. He always left me to come up with something. The instructions came later. There could be none or lots of them. We had some scenes in the can in just three takes.

Other scenes took a whole day. For example, we took a whole day to shoot the scene where Kohlhaas tries desperately to save his dying wife. It was an extremely tough scene, physically and emotionally, for both actors, in a sequence shot. We did it so many times, not because we were doing things wrong but because there were so many options which all seemed right and beautiful and terrible and it was hard to say, that's the one. We had a lot of freedom in the way the scene played out, and the tiredness we felt at the end of the day was the good sort. Arnaud's way of working didn't surprise me. We knew each other by then. Each of us knew what we

had to do to make the other one feel free. The work varied according to the specifics of the scene we had to shoot, but there was always a purity and intransigence about it.

Which scene do you remember the best?

The one I just mentioned, between Kohlhaas and his dying wife. But there was also the amazing scene where I deliver a newborn foal. We could only prepare the scene of the birth up to a point. Doing it for real, all by myself, playing the part of a man who was used to doing it as part of his routine, was a whole different matter.

You're only allowed a single take! Sanabra, the horse trainer who taught us all to ride properly for the movie, was beside me, out of shot. He whispered to me what I should do—and then suddenly the foal was there, in my arms. The moment was utterly magical. It was hard for me not to be overcome by emotion, but it was all in a day's work for Kohlhaas and I had to keep my feelings in.

What was special for you about the experience of making the film?

Horses played a big part in Kohlhaas's life, and so they did in mine. During pre-production, I stayed with Sanabra and his family. There, I learned how to live with horses and do everything for real. I was surrounded by magnificent horses, which were dangerous and crazy at first but behaved better and better as time went on, just like I did. I grew more skilled and relaxed, too. Arnaud was with us. He talked about his vision of the film. I was surrounded by actors who were there, like me, to work with Arnaud and the horses. Sanabra taught me alternative French in the evenings over a glass of wine. It was a very challenging time for me, workwise, but I have the happiest memories of it.

What was the hardest thing to do?

The hardest thing? The language! [laughter] As an actor, feeling myself live in another language is the hardest but most important thing. Not only making myself understood when I say my lines, but living and feeling in the language

of the film. Of course, even that is not enough. My lines have to be intelligible, too! It wasn't always easy to find the balance between feeling myself free to act without being fixated on my pronunciation, and saying my lines intelligibly. Arnaud and I invented a way of working. And above all, we never gave up—I think. *[laughter]*

What do you think Kohlhaas's story can teach us about ourselves?

I don't think a film necessarily has to teach us anything. If it does, so much the better, but it's not my main concern. If it were, I'd be a politician or a teacher, not an actor. But of course, the movie tells a story. It shows how an obsession with justice can lead to injustice and blindness. It shows a man who loses everything because of an ideal. Deep down, and I hope many people will see it this way, Michael Kohlhaas is a philosophical journey into the heart of man. ■

Johannesburg , April 2013

FILMOGRAPHY MADS MIKKELSEN

2013 – **Michael Kohlhaas** by Arnaud des Pallières • 2012 – **The hunt** by Thomas Vinterberg • **Royal Affair** by Nikolaj Arcel • 2011 – **The Three Musketeers** by Paul W.S. Anderson • 2009 – **The Door** by Anno Saul
Valhalla Rising by Nicolas Winding Refn • **Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky** by Jan Kounen • 2006 – **Casino Royale** by Martin Campbell • **After the Wedding** by Susanne Bier • 2004 – **Pusher II** by Nicolas Winding Refn
King Arthur by Antoine Fuqua • 2003 – **Torremolinos 73** by Pablo Berger
• **The Green Butchers** by Anders Thomas Jensen • 2002 – **Wilbur** by Lone Scherfig • **Dina** by Ole Bornedal • 1999 – **Bleeder** by Nicolas Winding Refn
1996 – **Pusher** by Nicolas Winding Refn



CREW

Script **CHRISTELLE BERTHEVAS, ARNAUD DES PALLIÈRES** Based on **MICHAEL KOHLHAAS** by **HEINRICH VON KLEIST** • 1st director assistant **FRÉDÉRIC GOUPIL** • Casting **SARAH TEPER A.R.D.A., LEILA FOURNIER** • D.O.P. **JEANNE LAPOIRIE AFC** • Sound **JEAN-PIERRE DURET** • Costumes designer **ANINA DIENER** • Set designer **YAN ARLAUD** • Horse-training **PÉGASE PROD, FRÉDÉRIC SANABRA** Editing **SANDIE BOMPAR, ARNAUD DES PALLIÈRES** • Original Score **MARTIN WHEELER, LES WITCHES** • Mixing **MÉLISSA PETITJEAN** Unit Production Manager **CHRISTIAN PAUMIER** • Line Producer **FLORENCE GILLES** • Executive Producer **SERGE LALOU** Associate Producers **MARTINA HAUBRICH, GUNNAR DEDIO** • A France/Germany Coproduction **LES FILMS D'ICI, LOOKS FILMPRODUKTIONEN, ARTE FRANCE CINÉMA, ZDF/ARTE, RHÔNE-ALPES CINÉMA, HÉRODIADÉ, K'IEN PRODUCTIONS** • With the participation of **CANAL +, CINÉ+, RÉGION LANGUEDOC ROUSSILLON, CENTRE NATIONAL DU CINÉMA ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMÉE, FILMFÖRDERUNGSANSTALT, POLYBAND, MITTELDEUTSCHE MEDIENFÖRDERUNG, MÉDIA PROGRAMME DE L'UNION EUROPÉENNE** and **LA PROCIREP** • In association with **CINEMAGE 6** • French Distribution and International Sales **LES FILMS DU LOSANGE**



CAST

Michael KOHLHAAS.....	MADS MIKKELSEN
Lisbeth.....	MÉLUSINE MAYANCE
Judith.....	DELPHINE CHUILLOT
Clergyman	DAVID KROSS
Governor.....	BRUNO GANZ
Theologian	DENIS LAVANT
Princess.....	ROXANE DURAN
Jérémie.....	PAUL BARTEL
César.....	DAVID BENNENT
Baron.....	SWANN ARLAUD
One-armed man.....	SERGI LOPEZ
Abbess.....	AMIRA CASAR
Lawyer.....	JACQUES NOLOT
Manager.....	CHRISTIAN CHAUSSEX
Twins.....	RICHARD & NICOLAS CAPELLE
Giant.....	GUILLAUME DELAUNAY

FILMOGRAPHY ARNAUD DES PALLIÈRES

2011	POUSSIÈRES D'AMÉRIQUE / AMERICAN DUST
2010	DIANE WELLINGTON
2008	PARC
2005	LE NARRATEUR / THE STORYTELLER
2003	ADIEU
2001	DISNEYLAND, MON VIEUX PAYS NATAL / DISNEYLAND, MY OLD NATIVE LAND
1999	IS DEAD (INCOMPLETE PORTRAIT OF GERTRUD STEIN)
1996	DRANCY AVENIR
1994	LES CHOSES ROUGES / THE RED THINGS
1993	AVANT APRES / BEFORE AFTER
1989	LA MÉMOIRE D'UN ANGE / THE MEMORY OF AN ANGEL
1987	GILLES DELEUZE : QU'EST-CE QUE L'ACTE DE CRÉATION ? / GILLES DELEUZE : WHAT IS THE CREATIVE ACT?



HEINRICH VON KLEIST
**MICHAEL
KOHLHAAS**

In 1808, under the shock of Napoleon's military foray across Europe, which smashed the Germanic Holy Roman Empire, a young German playwright by the name of Kleist published, in serial form, one of his finest novellas: *Michael Kohlhaas*.

A political novel portraying the clash between two logics, two world views, that of the Middle Ages and that of absolutism (the modern State), which grind its protagonist between them, *Michael Kohlhaas* was one of Franz Kafka's favourite books.

In France, it is hard to imagine the importance of this essential piece of writing, which was inspired by a true story and stands as a masterpiece of German literature.

Influenced by Kant and rejected by Goethe, Kleist is "*Germany's true tragic poet*" (Marthe Robert). Bernd Heinrich Wilhelm von Kleist (1777–1811) was born into the Prussian military aristocracy and joined the army at the age of 22. His quest for the absolute led him to study philosophy and mathematics at university, where he soon learned that knowledge is not a passport to the truth. He committed suicide at 34, leaving behind an exceptional corpus of plays for the theatre and theoretical essays, such as his famous "The Puppet Theatre".

Among the many movie adaptations of Kleist's stories, Eric Rohmer's screen version of *The Marquise of O* won the Special Grand Prize of the Jury at Cannes in 1976. ■



