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LA GRADIVA

Written & Directed by Marine Atlan

Starring Antonia Buresi, Colas Quignard, Suzanne Gerin, Mitia Capellier-Audat

Original title: La Gradiva **Director:** Marine Atlan **Year:** 2026 **Genre:** Feature film / Drama
Length: 145 minutes **Language:** French

Official screening: May 16th, 5:15pm, Miramar

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SYNOPSIS

A class of high school students travels to Pompeii to discover ruins and bodies petrified by Vesuvius. The trip becomes a rare moment when the force of youth meets a world frozen in time. Their desires start to surface with unexpected intensity, leading them toward an irreversible fracture.

INTERVIEW WITH MARINE ATLAN

Where does the title of the film come from?

The title comes from a short story by Wilhelm Jensen, which describes an archaeologist's obsession with a bas-relief representing a woman walking (Gradiva, in Latin). He imagines her as a Pompeiian and pursues this fantasy, to the ruins buried under the eruption of Vesuvius. I discovered it through Freud, who studied this short story while working on dream interpretation. For him, Pompeii became a territory conducive to representing the subconscious. So this mythological figure convoked the fantasy, the movement, and this movement ushers in something akin to an allegory for destiny. I liked this mysterious Latin resonance; I liked that it was in counterpoint to the realistic register of the film.

Where does your interest in Pompeii come from?

The ashes of Pompeii acted like a photograph capturing a moment. Filmmaker Gianfranco Rosi, who made *Pompei, Sotto le Nuvole*, compares Pompeii to a massive off-screen space. What is fascinating about the Pompeii casts is that, as with photography, this is what Barthes called the punctum: the detail that creates a dissonance and allows a truth to emerge. People need to compensate for lack through fantasies, stories – and there is something beautiful in this friction between an elusive reality and the human need to satisfy it. This fascination for photos, archives and all forms of remains is also due to what is morbid and transgressive about them – they are the imprint of these people's last moments. They pose the question of lies, truth and fantasy. There is also something akin to the scopic impulse: seeing that which no longer exists, that which is concealed. I maintain an ambivalent relationship with photography: convinced that it is lying, I nevertheless believe – almost mystically – that it always reveals something, that a secret is hidden inside it. Toni's grandmother's smile isn't really a smile. It was important to me that the film start with myth and that, gradually, lurking within photographs, the possibility of another truth reveals itself. Pompeii: this space resonates with the paradoxes of history that I want to describe. The violence of a world that promises children equality that is no more than a mirage, but also the capacity for resistance that every living body and every free mind possesses.

Did La Gradiva first arise out of your interest in Pompeii and its history or a desire to film a group of teenagers? In which order did things take place?

Both! It was precisely the collision between the snapshot of youth and the eternity of the ruins that interested me. I suspected that this held some strong dramaturgical and aesthetic promise. I was thinking of the Arte series *Tous les garçons et les filles de leur âge* – something made quite quickly, with a group of non-professional actors. The challenge was to direct twenty young male and female actors to try to precisely reproduce the collective dynamics – we prepared for this a lot, from the writing through to the casting, then in rehearsals. We had to take into account the plurality of representations within a group, to make a film about adolescence. I thought a lot about my feelings when I first read Rimbaud's poem, "Roman", and its famous line "you're not serious when you're 17". Taking seriously something that isn't serious: what is it that is so ephemeral and yet recurs in all of the younger generations, since time

immemorial? I'm no longer the same age as the characters in the film. So I had to do investigative work, to enter into discussions with young people to try to obtain that accuracy. I wanted a true sense of realism. For example, it was out of the question to have extras in the group. All twenty of them were considered fully fledged actors. That was a significant production commitment that enabled real synergy to form.

The idea of embarking on a remote film shoot with a group of amateur actors didn't represent a constraint or, at least, a fear in terms of the film's production?

No, I really went out there with a flower in my rifle, without letting any of the potential difficulties stop me and it's just as well. Inès Daïen Dasi, the film's producer, did that too. I deliberately put myself into an uncomfortable situation. I wanted to understand what it was like to film as a foreigner. When I went to Pompeii, I felt the poetic impact of this territory that maintains a very tangible rapport with death, which clearly and paradoxically produces a very powerful vitality. It isn't just Pompeii: it's also Southern Italy, a familial and festive land, with its relationship to rites, to faith. Naples is a city that's hard to film because it is dense and complex: it's a city of strata; there, all eras are visible. I felt vertiginous at the idea of having to apprehend it and understand it. Taking the measure of these difficulties, I chose a documentary method that resonates with the story of Toni, the main character: to observe, to try to understand what exile causes you to lose. In this sense, my foreigner's eye referred directly back to the story. I am myself from a Tunisian Jewish family, but, of Tunisia, I only have a few stories and secret traces of daily life: food, old photos... The silences and taboos grow charged with idealisation: that's what's left for these children who come from a country whose contours they've only ever been able to dream about... Toni, during the film, goes from a light-hearted and happy imagination, to a violent reality that he's felt welling up since birth, without understanding it.

In practical terms, how did you undertake the writing to be as faithful as possible to the lives of these teens?

For starters, we went to my suburban high school to meet a class. We did around twenty one-hour interviews, on very diverse topics – desire, high school, future hopes, mental health... That inspired the first draft of the script, with the dialogues later readapted according to their language habits. I then left for Italy with Anne Brouillet, the co-scriptwriter and we rewrote it. Then, we organised a real school trip in partnership with a Parisian high school, following the same itinerary as that of the film. We accompanied them, Anne and I, and that's how we found Colas, who plays Toni, even though that wasn't the objective of the trip. We wanted to be immersed, to observe. We hung out with the young people constantly and recovered a very strong sense of how it feels to be a teenager. Those five days felt like they lasted months. There were dramas, tears, fights. We witnessed the scene that gave rise, in the film, to that of Parcoursup (French university entrance platform). We saw teachers having logistical nightmares, exhausted, and the energy that it took to cope with so many students. Then we tackled the language, the relationship to alcohol and drugs. It also rid us of some preconceived ideas.

How did the casting go?

I approached Julie Sokolowski quite quickly. At the time, she had never been a casting director in the formal sense, but she'd been an acting coach and is herself an actor – she's very accurate in her relationship to

acting. She was a crucial collaborator. The casting took two years: we went outside high schools, to theatre schools. I wanted faces that we're not necessarily used to seeing in French cinema. It eventually struck me as unbalanced to consider using professional actors. I also had in mind the image of a suburban high school like my own, with a social melting pot. All of the actors have a very unique "cinematic" quality; I wanted this diversity of physiques. I had a lot more trouble than expected finding Toni: quite a lot of young guys didn't want to play a gay character. For Suzanne, it had to be someone capable of saying violent things about herself. We had to find young people who could inhabit their role without damaging themselves. We took time to find the three leads. Julie and I also knew that encounters would come to fill the roles. There was some rewriting done, depending on the actors, particularly in the scenes of intimacy. I didn't want to make the film without their full buy-in. Colas Quignard (Toni) didn't want to be an actor at all, but he'd practised dance and had quite a technical relationship to the body. At the time he joined the film, he'd embarked on a love of cinema that came from his family and his culture. He was immediately very relaxed, both for improvisation and more precise things. Colas, he's New Hollywood. Mitia Capellier Audat, who plays James, we met on a protest march. He's a very political person, who has a very free relationship to gender. With him, we worked on a very strong expression tending towards overacting: in the way he walks, in his final scream which breaks my heart. He's a character who creates himself and represents himself. There's something Pasolinian about Mitia, and by the way, he has seen *Teorema*. All of the complexity for this role was to find a face embodying fascination, sensuality and intelligence, all at once. Suzanne Gerin is not an actor, but she wants to work in film, to enter the Fémis, direct films. We worked hard on composition, she and I, and at the same time there are echoes between her and her character. She has a very Rohmerian diction: light, monotonous, musical; and a face, a gait that embodies many contradictions.

You immediately thought of Antonia Buresi for the role of the teacher?

Quite quickly, yes. I knew Antonia through Thierry de Peretti's cinema and in the theatre, through the work of Louise Hémon and Émilie Rousset. I adore her diction, her voice: she's a great orator. I wanted a professor with humour, very in touch with her body: Antonia has a precise relationship to her gestures, a tonicity, something quite firm. I was also looking for someone who the general public would not immediately identify, so that the character would be credible. She does remarkable work: she came with me to observe History-Geography and Latin classes at my old school, and chatted with the teachers. A teacher is clearly an actor during their class; there is pleasure in being listened to, creating the show. I knew Antonia would have this energy. She comes from the stage and is very troupe-orientated, which is essential: this film was made as an extended family, in a collective spirit that pervaded all of the creation.

We sense in Toni and Professor Mercier a real pleasure at storytelling. What are the stakes involved in that?

The character of Toni really enjoys telling his story – adolescence is specifically that period when people invent themselves as a character, within a group. In the film, there's what is done by the light of day and what is done by night, what is said and what is experienced. This pleasure of stories also posed a challenge in terms of *mise en scène*: how do you film a story as it's being told, how do you convey images? Professor Mercier describes things that we do not see. It was a matter of drawing us into her tale and into the pleasure she has in telling it. There is something tragic, almost sadistic about the characters in their

relationship to catastrophe. We are living in an age when these images of disaster are close to us; it's a sad passion, and yet deeply human, to want to delve into it. Suzanne's text is actually borrowed from Pliny the Younger, who observed Pompeii and talked about it as though about a vision at once consoling and deplorable – a formulation that strikes me as a perfect summary. Resisting disaster, not seeking refuge in it, requires genuine effort; fiction offers us the possibility of it, it is the very principle of catharsis. There was something playful in this idea, but that becomes, throughout the film, a dramatic irony: all of the characters end up confronted with tragedy.

Toni and Suzanne are connected in various ways, by their writing talent, by the opening scene where they are both voyeurs. It's like a secret pact.

Yes, Toni and Suzanne are linked by a secret pact – from the opening scene, they each enjoy watching someone else. It's both shameful and a delightful feeling. There are many echoes between them, but they do not have the same tools. Toni takes up space, attacks, retorts – he's a smooth talker. Suzanne struggles to speak out, then explodes. I like her awkwardness. What saves her, and that Toni doesn't have, is art: she draws, she writes, she has a cultural capital that will allow her to liberate herself. Both suffer from social norms, but their fates are not symmetrical. Anne and I had some fun with adding nuance to some teen movie archetypes. For instance, Jean-Eude, the intellectual, the "Mr. Know-it-All", we had to love him too. Everyone knows those figures. We wanted to look at them with tenderness and humour, because the film had to be funny, at least in the first part. Characters who hate each other and come together at the end is a very well-known structure and that's what we thought was funny about it. Suzanne also has a great deal of humanity. She sees the relationships of domination that James sets up perfectly, his privileges and yet she can't stop herself from saving him.

In terms of acting, how did you manage to pass from one register to another?

First, we worked a lot beforehand. Rehearsals took four to five months, with the main actors, then two weeks with the whole class. We kind of invented our method: a clown guided them to get them to express things in exaggerated ways, and to help them understand that in something fake there can be truth, but also to protect ourselves from powerful emotions, we can play, without inviting painful elements in. The question of intimacy really did the rounds. In the scene with the Pompeii fresco, the work was done in long takes. The young people knew the structure, their lines, but also knew that they could overdo it. This created a very free relationship with the text, even if certain words were important to me. For the second half of the film, we worked on vocal clarity. These rehearsals allowed me to arrive in Italy with a group that already existed and the shoot only deepened this complicity.

The question of beauty is central in the film.

It's a kind of Stendhal syndrome. With Pierre Mazoyer, we talked a lot about that nauseating feeling before the grandiose, the sublime. What interested me was this biological injustice – all the while knowing that it is also constructed – and the way in which faces are transformed depending on how they're seen. Suzanne feels desire and jealousy in this respect. What is monstrous? What is sublime? Ugliness and beauty ultimately come from the same source. Naples incarnates exactly that. Maradona is a saint there; the most

popular figure elevated to the ranks of a divinity. It is a city of absolute contrasts: disorder and baroque ornaments, sun and dark, ugliness and beauty side by side. We talked a lot about realistic baroque; we just needed to install the camera for baroque touches to show up. Adolescence has something similar about it: bodies aren't entirely complete; faces are still growing. In the framing, it was about being attentive to the photography without ever being too precious about it, retaining a sense that things are beautiful almost de facto, without forcing them. By dint of accumulating the sublime, you wind up finding it nauseating. It is that engulfment that interested me.

For instance, the question of homosexuality, which isn't really at stake in the film, did that create any conflict?

That was really something that mattered to me. I really wanted this singular character, who would be virile and love football. We talked a lot with Colas Quignard, who plays Toni. I told him about Sidney Lumet's *Dog Day Afternoon*: the more unique a character is, the more it exists, the more powerful it is. In our discussions with the teenagers, there was both a great awareness of gender relations and, sometimes, a dissonance between that discourse and what was actually experienced. They were still wrestling with deeply ingrained representations of misogyny and power relations. They have more tools than we did at their age, but are still grappling just as much with different forms of violence – they just give them different names. Many young women call themselves homosexual or bisexual, much more so than in my day. I was interested in representing a more fluid youth in terms of its gender relations, and of making James an unsettling androgynous figure, offside with power, but far from any archaic virility. The dynamic of oppression within the group does not just focus on sexual orientation, but on what is cool, what isn't, who has the codes. It never goes out of style. It's an age where you simultaneously feel like everything is predetermined and that anything is still possible. That time is short, and it is very moving to observe. We also witnessed a political discussion between students, and what struck us was the way they talked about things that directly concern them with such distance, almost an arrogance and a kind of naivety that befits their age, as if they weren't yet completely part of the world.

In the bedroom scene, Suzanne takes out a book she's reading, to learn about the story that is being told. Is the idea there also to place on an equal footing a so-called "legitimate" culture, falling within the history of literature, and another, contemporary one, as it unfolds?

This scene is very important to me; it pays tribute to the intelligence of young women. I learned a lot in my formative years by talking with my female teenage friends. Girls' bedrooms are spaces where things are said and revealed. I'd like to take the counterpoint of what you'd imagine as simple, rather pointless discussion, and show its depth. The official culture evoked in this scene is also a culture of rape and murder, steeped in misogyny. What is built up in this bedroom are the different facets of the patriarchy and the pathways towards emancipation. They each have their point of view but are united in the same oppression. Sharing unspoken things makes you more intelligent and sensitive, elicits empathy and is still something highly gendered. There has always been a disdain for these stories. In the scene, girls are talking about a boy. Obviously I questioned myself about that, I thought about the Bechdel Test. But I wanted to show that when girls talk about a boy, it's different, it's complex. Formally, I didn't want to show

them in close proximity, intertwined with music. I wanted to take the opposite approach to what you might expect. Each of them is in their own bed, there's some distance, the words are measured and clear.

Did you ever imagine a different ending for the film?

No, because I wanted to tell the story of a suicide, to try to understand something that struck me as both terribly common and profoundly absurd.

At first, it was the principle of trial by ordeal that guided me: in the Middle Ages, the accused were made to walk through fire so that the gods could decide their guilt. It's the same principle as Russian roulette. Adolescence is full of these ordeal-like behaviors, which are a way of testing the limits of one's own existence and of society.

Durkheim speaks of suicide as a sociological phenomenon that partly escapes the individual's freedom, caught up in social forces beyond their control. There is something unfathomable about this act, and the causes are merely there to push an individual into assuming their social role. Toni has reached such a point of illegitimacy that he calls upon other forces to decide for him. What is tragic is that they come to confirm that he has no right to exist.

There is a wide range of music in the film, from Satie to Neapolitan songs, to Théodora.

Satie came early on, from the writing phase. The interpretation on the trumpet evoked a novelistic mood, an imaginary from Italo-American cinema – Scorsese, *The Godfather* – like a promise of a story to open the film. Paul, the sound engineer, Hippocampus the musical supervisors and I built the soundtrack together. I wanted Neapolitan music; over there, everyone sings in the street, it's fundamental. I also wanted contemporary music; the stuff young people actually listen to. We got lucky with Théodora: it was a year and a half ago, she was only famous on TikTok. Some musical choices are linked to the characters: Maria Violenza, Sicilian punk that I really like, is the music Suzanne listens to on the bus – something enraged, chaotic, that expresses her inner life very literally. The dream music was composed by my brother: a long lament on cello and viola da gamba. I loved the fact that the musical range went from secular to sacred, baroque to very contemporary, and the film was anchored in a specific temporality. In twenty years, people will say it's a film from 2025 – because there's Théodora and Meryl. This idea came from the collection *Tous les garçons et les filles de mon âge*, with its constraint to only use music from the period in question.

How do you navigate between your films and those for which you work as DP? How do these two activities feed into one another?

My role as a director of photography adds so much. It's practice – playing scales – but also a different temporality, a way of understanding how film works from the inside, by encountering very different modes of production. Directing is so joyful, but there is also a lot of doubt and suffering. In my practice as a DP, there's a lot more light-heartedness, a more playful side, that allows me to reflect on how to articulate a vision through images and sounds. Immersing myself in other people's stories is a real pleasure, which I don't want to give up. It also allows me to deconstruct the notion of genius. Virginia Woolf said that when a

woman starts to write, it's because another woman wrote before her, that a text contains all of the history of the ones who wrote before, and so genius does not exist. I have a profound belief that the nature of the work of art is always fundamentally collective. I love not always having the same role, not staying in my comfort zone as a filmmaker.

MARINE ATLAN / BIOGRAPHY

Marine Atlan is a cinematographer, screenwriter, and director. She notably served as director of photography on *Jessica Forever* by Jonathan Vinel and Caroline Poggi, *Nos Cérémonies* by Simon Rieth, *Le Ravissement* by Iris Kaltenböck, *Les Reines du Drame* by Alexis Langlois, and *L'Engloutie* by Louise Hémon, which earned her a César nomination in 2026.

After two award-winning medium-length films, notably recognized at the Berlinale, Clermont-Ferrand, and Brive festivals, she has just completed her first feature film, LA GRADIVA, which will premiere at the Cannes Film Festival 2026.

Link to headshot [here](#).

CAST & CREW

Protagonists: Antonia Buresi (Madame Mercier), Colas Quignard (Toni), Suzanne Gerin (Suzanne), Mitia Capellier-Audat (James)

Cast: Rouge Isaac, Hadya Fofana, Lou-Ann Le Glorennec, Chamathka Warahena, Cherazade Hammedi, Camille Ménard-Harnish, Gustave Tersiguel, Mathéo De Carlo, Alma Polgar, Mariam Bouras, Léonilde Moucheroud, Emmanuelle Lafon, Lila Latronche, Anna Heckel, Romaïssa Taleb, Djimo Salim Nassokho, Kessy Mendy, Youssef Ben Hadj Amor

Director & Screenwriter: Marine Atlan

Co-Screenwriter: Anne Brouillet

Directors of Photography: Pierre Mazoyer, Marine Atlan

Editor: Guillaume Lillo

Sound: Paul Guilloteau

Sound Editing: Paul Guilloteau, Grégoire Chauvot

Mixing: Clément Laforce

Art Director: Anna Le Mouël

Costume Design: Francisco Terra

Colour Grading: Gadiel Bendelac, Pierre Mazoyer

Casting: Julie Sokolowski, Alicia Cadot

Music Supervision: Hippocampus

Produced by: Inès Daïen Dasi

Co-produced by: Angelo Barbagallo

Associate Producers: Yaël Fogiel, Laetitia Gonzalez

Production: Les Films du Poisson

Co-production: Arte France Cinéma, Bibi Film TV

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