



3B Productions presents



The Ice Tower

A Film by Lucile Hadzihalilovic

Starring Marion Cotillard, Clara Pacini, August Diehl

France / Germany – 2025 – 2.35 – 117min

INTERNATIONAL SALES

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Synopsis

Colder than ice, her kiss pierces the heart...

The 1970s. Runaway Jeanne falls under the spell of Cristina, enigmatic star of *The Snow Queen*, a film being shot in the studio where she has taken refuge. A mutual fascination grows between the actress and the girl.

Q&A with Lucile Hadzihalilovic

Can you talk about the genesis of the film and its relationship to Andersen's tale "The Snow Queen"?

I was lucky enough to discover Hans Christian Andersen at the age of five, when my mother would tirelessly read me the unexpurgated versions of his fairytales. They have continued to enthrall me ever since, as much for their human complexity, their sensitive and non-moralistic portrayal of our fears and desires, as for their rich poetic imagination.

"The Snow Queen" is one I particularly like, but I was only very loosely inspired by its main theme: a young girl goes in search of the person she loves, who has been kidnapped by the Snow Queen, and reaches her realm, the frozen kingdom of the dead. The Snow Queen herself particularly fascinates me: a figure of perfection and knowledge, inaccessible and mysterious, simultaneously attractive and terrifying.

It was the encounter of the young girl and this Queen that gave birth to this film.

How did you work on the script?

Initially, I worked alone to find the material that interested me most in the tale. From the beginning I chose to transpose it into reality, as well as to construct a classic, linear narrative. But you can't escape yourself, and at some point, the narrative and timelines of "The Ice Tower" grew blurred, as in a dream.

Together, screenwriter Geoff Cox and I built both the emotional journey of the characters and the structure. We have an oblique approach to storytelling that doesn't rely heavily on dialogue. We try to tell the story through details, and to convey characters' experience through visual elements (lighting, atmospheres, colour, details of the sets, accessories and costumes...) and sounds, as well as through connections between these elements... a bit like a poem.

Producer Muriel Merlin read an early version of the script and was excited by the project.

This is your second film with Marion Cotillard...

I was so happy to find Marion again, twenty years after "Innocence", to play the dual role of a movie star (Cristina) and the character of the Snow Queen.

Marion possesses an aspect both modern and timeless that I look for in my films; a face that has the expressive quality of actresses from the 1930s - the era to which the film within the film refers. But her performance is also very modern, with an energy recalling that of the actors of the 70s, an era of cinema which - implicitly - feeds this film.

Her intensely cinegenic quality, her somehow Hitchcockian beauty and sophistication, would be absolutely captivating for a teenager. We didn't need to discuss or rehearse much, perhaps because "Innocence" had somehow bonded us, and Marion knew I was looking for a restrained performance. She's playing the same type of character: a feminine ideal (the dance teacher in "Innocence", and now the movie star) but with a hidden wound. In both cases, this character finds herself confronted by young girls, reflections of what she could have been, who bring her face to face with what she has become.

In "The Ice Tower", the ambiguity of her performance expresses that of her character. We never know whether Cristina's emotions are heartfelt or feigned, nor to what extent she is or isn't "possessed" by the Queen. Marion knew very well how to display her character's at times paradoxical faces: cold, distant and imperious, but also impulsive, passionate, deeply carnal, finally fragile and profoundly melancholic. She moves subtly and believably between seduction and threat, and the disturbing side that she reveals in the film is something I had rarely seen in her, and which made me shiver.

You mentioned your first feature, "Innocence". Is there continuity from one work to another in your filmography?

I notice that, despite myself, the same motifs and narrative structures recur from film to film: the "fairytale" form; the maturation of a young protagonist exploring a mysterious world populated by more or less phantasmagorical adults; the figure of the toxic mother - whether through her actions or her absence.

Also, confinement; empty, labyrinthine spaces. And on the other hand, nature linked to female characters, with water as the principal element in all its forms: rivers, lakes, fountains, waterfalls, rain, snow and ice... An incredibly cinematic element.

The film continues the meta-cinematic form seen in major works like Fellini's "8½" (1963) and Truffaut's "Day for Night" (1973). How does "The Ice Tower" fit into this tradition, almost a sub-genre?

There's a very important element in Andersen's tale: a mirror that gives a distorted reflection of the world. I thought that the real-life equivalent of this mirror could be both the camera lens and the cinema screen.

Also, from the start, I wanted a film within the film, one being the double of the other, one realistic, the other fantastic. And then, of course, came the desire for the two films to fit together like a Russian doll, to blend... All the more so since this film within the film is seen through the eyes of the young girl like a dream: her dream.

This possibility was very inspiring.

On another level, the poetic world of the film within the film "contaminates" the real world, starting with the studio where the story takes place, and which becomes an extension of the Kingdom. It even spills over into the city, crystallizing in the ice rink, a portal to a magical realm.

Finally, the film studio allowed me to show the images on the screen in the projection room with an exciting effect of duplication and repetition. Because "The Ice Tower" isn't so much a story about the making of a film as about the fascination exerted by projected images, their hold on the spectators.

Might the 70s setting be considered a kind of secret autobiography? I'm thinking of a teenager's discovery of, and fascination with, cinema. And how did you approach the representation of the figure of the director?

This era in which images and information were infinitely less omnipresent was more favorable to Jeanne's innocence and to the seductive mystery and power of a film star. But there is obviously an autobiographical aspect in the choice of the teenage protagonist, and in the fact of setting the story in the 70s. It's the decade of my own adolescence as well as my discovery of cinema and the beginning of my attraction to it.

If there is a self-portrait in the film, it is of course through the young girl, and not the character of the director, who is quite passive and withdrawn from the story. All the more so since it is Jeanne who, as it were, dreams the film within the film and is its author.

To embody this director - whose name, Dino Dorato, is an allusion to Dario Argento whose films had such an impact on me, even if the type of fantasy that Dorato makes refers more to German or French cinema - I thought that it would be very pleasing to have a real director. I ended up choosing someone very different from the character. Gaspar Noé had fun transforming himself into a director like those we see in certain films from the 60s and 70s, but who is neither him nor me.

Let's talk about the direction, the style. What were your primary choices regarding the image and cinematographic language? We notice a particular, almost expressionist, attention to the use of light, shadows and especially reflected light...

To talk about cinema is to talk about shadows and light. Cinematographer Jonathan Ricquebourg played on oppositions: the darkness of the projection room and of the studio corridors at night set against the lights of the set; the brightness of the mountain in daytime, the darkness of the mountain at night...

And of course, there's the crystal that Jeanne steals from the Queen's cloak, and its reflections, like a metaphor for the camera lens through which light passes, and with which she plays like an apprentice magician... This crystal which has the power to reveal "the Queen's kingdom in all its splendour", but also "a thousand other kingdoms". It's an obvious metaphor for the essence of cinema.

German expressionist cinema was a reference during the preparation. Nonetheless, "The Ice Tower" is set in a more realistic environment than my previous films, one in which Jeanne alone summons the marvellous. In this, the film is undoubtedly closer to poetic or magical realism.

I employed stylistic choices similar to those of my earlier films: fixed shots, the use of a single focal length, natural lighting or using elements present in the decor. Only Dino Dorato had the right to deviate from these rules and he used tracking shots and an anamorphic lens, just as a filmmaker from the 70s would have done!

And for the work on color?

We worked with the DP, production designer Julia Irribaria and costume designer Laurence Benoit, starting from the white of the snow - real or fake - and the movie screen, and a color that is of course found in the Queen's dress.

In contrast, the color palette of the costumes of the extras, the skaters at the ice rink, the film crew and the studio decor - notably Cristina's dressing room with its warm browns and bronzes - all evoke the 70s. Finally, we assigned an expressive color to each main character: a disquieting purple for Cristina, Jeanne's dramatic red, a reassuring yellow for Bianca...

The film also has a very rich sonic universe. What is your approach to sound, to music and songs?

Sound is really the interiority of the characters. But instead of rendering it primarily through music, Ken Yasumoto, who is both the film's sound editor and mixer, played with sound effects, ambiances, reverberations, the very texture of the sounds.

We also worked a lot on silence. By eliminating as much as possible any extraneous sonic interference, we wanted to create a feeling of strangeness, of derealisation, in the real settings too (the city, the studio, the mountain), and to give the impression of a mental, "interior" world. We reconstructed a lot of things in post-production, while remaining sparing with the elements we used.

From the start of the editing, editor Nassim Gordji-Tehrani asked me for music, and even if there isn't so much in the end, I used more than in my previous films.

Firstly, for Jeanne's theme, an extract from Messiaen's "La Fête des Belles-eaux", a piece that's both melancholic and dreamlike and which gives, in the composer's words, a feeling of "grace and eternity". As an extension, and to stay with Jeanne during the credits, we used an extract from "Turangalîla-Symphonie", also by Messiaen. Both pieces feature the ondes Martenot, this early electronic instrument whose unearthly character conjures ghosts and dreams.

The Queen's theme, which was intended to convey the power and threat she represents, uses strings that evoke Ligeti or even Bernard Hermann, but reworked in a more contemporary way by the music producer Lexx.

We used pieces integrated into the story and which reflect the era in which the film takes place: "It's Five O'Clock" by Aphrodite's Child for the ice rink, as well as Italian and psychedelic pop music heard on the radio in the studio.

It's the first time I've used well-known songs in a film. A song is like a mini-story within a story; even if the lyrics do not reiterate the film's narrative, they somehow echo it.

Can you talk about the importance and expressive power of the close-up - we are reminded of Dreyer - in relation to the establishing shot?

In "The Ice Tower" as in all my films, we used Cinemascope framing which gives a real expressive power to both close-ups and wide shots of the landscapes. I used numerous close-ups of the young girl whose gaze is in some ways the common thread of the film. Jeanne looks and we watch her looking.

Throughout the film, the gaze of the young girl, played by Clara Pacini, makes us perceive the very idea of death, which brought to mind the words of a poem by Cesare Pavese: "Death will come and it will have your eyes."

Alongside cinema - and surely because they are intrinsically linked - death is the other major theme of the film. In Andersen's tale, the child imprisoned by the Snow Queen must compose a word to free himself, and the word is "Eternity". The eternity of images projected on a white screen. Or to put it as Jeanne does: "The Queen has her realm, and it is there forever".

Moreover, as we learn during the course of the film, Jeanne is haunted by a dead woman. Without knowing it, she is going to meet her when she leaves the children's home. It is she whom she summons and finds in the Snow Queen who passes through the film like a ghost.

Clara Pacini, who plays Jeanne, is a student at the Conservatoire national supérieur d'arts dramatiques in Paris and had only made one short film before starring in this one. But during the tests, I was captivated by the subtlety of her acting and by her maturity. This certainly helped her navigate the character's varied emotional states.

Her grace, alongside her strength and determination, as well as an underlying melancholy, also pushed me to choose Clara to embody this troubled and complex teenager: liar, thief, voyeur, manipulator... and at the same time totally sincere and ingenuous.

Generally speaking, in the actors in my films, I'm looking for a sort of interiority, a neutrality. A presence rather than a performance. Clara possesses this presence and this interiority, absolutely.

Another important character in the story is Max, played by August Diehl...

August Diehl is a wonderful actor, simultaneously seductive and disturbing, with a powerful charisma. I'm delighted that he agreed to appear in the film. Despite his character having only a few scenes, he was able to give a striking presence to Max, Cristina's troubled white knight. His performance is both subtle and complex, and his inventiveness and commitment are a director's dream!

Are obsession and sacrifice among the main themes of the film?

Absolutely. They are also recurring themes in Andersen's tales which make them not at all stories for children! For him, as in the film, sacrifice is an intimate act which doesn't serve to save the world or anybody, but to prove one's love to another. In this case, an act inextricably connected to guilt and the transmission of trauma.

As for the mutual obsession between Jeanne and Cristina, as well as the obsession with images, they go hand in hand with the themes of enchantment and the hold that the two women exercise over each other.

Landscape is another important element. The mountain as an echo of an interior landscape.

Landscape, in this case the mountain and glacier, reflects the interiority of the characters in an expressionist or symbolist way: the frozen, isolated and austere mineral world which surrounds Jeanne at the start of the film; then its softened, refined manifestation in the painted decor of the film set; and finally the mysterious heights, both real and artificial, at the end of the film and deeply linked to Cristina.

What, if any, were the main influences on this film?

Apart from the films of Powell and Pressburger, the magical and sculptural aspect of their work in films like "Black Narcissus", The Red Shoes or "The Tales of Hoffmann", I had no precise conscious references, but I'm so steeped in certain films that they may have come to haunt "The Ice Tower" without me summoning them: Italian cinema of the 70s, starting with *gialli* and fantastic films for their atmosphere and their hunger for sensation, their visual extravagance and mystery. But also Hitchcock, Sirk and Fassbinder, each in their own way, for the mix of realism and artificiality, beauty and cruelty. A cinema of fascination and obsession...

And finally, the classic Japanese cinema of Mizoguchi, Naruse or Kinoshita is for me extremely inspiring in its formal aspects (notably the framing and editing), as well as its magnificent poetry and its search for purity. This is what I would like to aim for. I'm searching for a kind of minimalism and work by subtraction rather than addition. A cinema of distillation in a way.

In your work, there is usually little dialogue. What is your relationship to silent cinema?

It's the golden age of cinema! An era when the language of films was close to that of dreams.

One can also find in your work certain elements of Slow Cinema, for example, the fixed camera. Do you recognize yourself in this movement?

I don't know if I'm part of a movement, but I do in fact often find more inspiration and intensity in contemplation than in speed. And what I want is to make people feel rather than understand. I would like my spectators, as if hypnotized, to accompany the characters' physical and emotional experience. More than telling a story, what interests me is creating a universe, a world in which the viewer can live for the duration of the film.

Interview made by Michele Salimbeni

Director's Biography

Lucile Hadžihalilović spent her childhood and adolescence in Morocco, before moving to Paris where she studied art history, then film at the Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques (now la Fémis).

In the early 1990s she founded the production company LES CINEMAS DE LA ZONE with Gaspar Noé, with whom she worked on CARNE and SEUL CONTRE TOUS. Their collaboration continued with her contribution to the screenplay of Noé's ENTER THE VOID.

In 1996 Hadžihalilović produced, wrote, edited and directed LA BOUCHE DE JEAN-PIERRE (MIMI), a 52-minute film that screened in Un Certain Regard, at Cannes.

In 2004, she wrote and directed her feature debut, INNOCENCE, based on Frank Wedekind's "Mine-Haha", and starring Marion Cotillard. The film won the Best New Director Prize at San Sebastian International Film Festival, amongst numerous others.

In 2015, she directed EVOLUTION, co-written with Alanté Kavaïté. The film premiered at Toronto International Film Festival and won the Special Jury Prize and Best Cinematography Prize (for Manuel Dacosse) at San Sebastian International Film Festival.

In 2022, EARWIG, based on the eponymous novel by Brian Catling, co-written with Geoff Cox and starring Paul Hilton, Romola Garai and Alex Lawther won the Special Jury Prize at San Sebastian. Hadžihalilovic has also directed the short films GOOD BOYS (1998) NECTAR (2014) and DE NATURA (2018), all of which have been selected in numerous festivals.

Her fourth feature, THE ICE TOWER, co-written with Geoff Cox, which reunites her with Marion Cotillard, will premiere at the 2025 Berlin Film Festival.

Director's Filmography

La Bouche De Jean-Pierre / Mimi (1997)

Innocence (2004)

Nectar (2014)

Evolution (2015)

De Natura (2018)

Earwig (2022)

La Tour De Glace / The Ice Tower (2025)

Cast

Cristina / La Reine Des Neiges	Marion Cotillard
Jeanne	Clara Pacini
Max	August Diehl
Chloé	Lilas-Rose Gilberti
Stéphanie	Marine Gesbert
Dino, The Director	Gaspar Noé
1st Assistant	Dounia Sichov
Bianca	Valentina Vezzoso
Rose	Cassandre Louis Urbain
Narrator	Aurélia Petit

Crew

Director	Lucile Hadžihalilović
Screenplay	Geoff Cox and Lucile Hadžihalilović
with The Collaboration of	Alanté Kavaïté
DP	Jonathan Ricquebourg
Production Designer	Julia Irribarria
Costume Designer	Laurence Benoit
Key Makeup Artist	Vesna Peborde
Key Hairstylist	Cicci Svahn
Sound mixer	Etienne Haug
Casting	Lydie Le Doeuff
Editor	Nassim Gordji-Tehrani
Sound designer & re-recording mixer	Ken Yasumoto
Line producer	Serge Catoire
Postproduction Manager	Cédric Ettouati
Executive Production (Sud Tyrol)	Albolina Film
Producer	Muriel Merlin
Coproducers	Ingmar Trost
	Victor Hadida
	Olivier Père
	Rémi Burah
Coproduction	3B Productions
	Sutor Kolonko
	Davis Films
	Arte France Cinéma
	Bayerischer Rundfunk, with Arte
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	Cinécap 7
	Cinéimage 18
	Cofinova 20

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