Les Films du Poisson
presents

Marion Cotillard
little girl blue
a film by Mona Achache

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After her mother’s death, Mona Achache discovers thousands of photos, letters and recordings, but these buried secrets make her disappearance even more of an enigma. Through the power of filmmaking and the beauty of incarnation, she brings her mother back to life to retrace her journey and find out who she really was.
Mona, what led you to bring back your mother, Carole, to life through Marion Cotillard?

**Mona Achache.** My mother, Carole Achache, committed suicide on March 1st, 2016, without leaving a note. In her cellar, she had stored 25 plastic crates with thousands of letters and photos, filed correspondence, notebooks, and annotated diaries: the colossal archives of a family she had already done research on when she was writing a book about her mother... who had herself written about her own mother. That repetitive past was weighing on me. The boxes were there, offered up as if by design. I could imagine all the fascinating potential there, but above all, I knew how deathly it could be. I didn't want to open them. I rejected everything that linked me to my mother. But when I moved them, I couldn't resist opening one. I came across a folder - had it been put there on purpose? My mother could have staged the whole thing! Inside, I found photos of a young woman, sublime, free, and racy, a young woman whom I didn't recognize, but who immediately fascinated me, because she was the opposite of the tortured, painful woman I knew, and of the vague stories she had told me about her “delinquent” youth. I wanted to understand what could have led my mother down the path of deterioration. Very quickly, I discovered an incredible life and character, and it became obvious that I wanted to make a film about her.

So, you decide to open these boxes and follow in your mother and grandmother’s footsteps, by conducting your own investigation?

**M.A.** My mother’s suicide left me with an enigma that I needed to understand. At first, it was like torture, because her death was dragging me down. But it gave me the illusion of freeing myself from something. Except that you can’t rid yourself of your origins, and I felt deep down that I had to confront my history. That, in spite of myself, my history had left its mark on me, and I had to face it in order to liberate myself from it, so as not to make the echo of that past a burden for my own children. So I went through this material that repelled and obsessed me. I searched, and one day, I found some audio recordings with my mother’s voice. The discovery was overwhelming and fascinating. Since then, the impossible fantasy of a post-mortem conversation never left me: to resurrect my mother so that she could explain her suicide to me; to give her a body, in film, and make her the heroine of her own story. So, to me, it didn’t feel as though I were following my mother and grandmother’s footsteps, but rather that I was transforming what they had done into something new.

Marion, what was your reaction when you first learned about Mona’s project?

**Marion Cotillard.** I immediately wanted to be a part of it. It was a unique, special script, one that was perfectly fluid and simple in spite of being composed of so many different things, with all these photos, too. Was it fiction? Documentary? Dreamscape?... I devoured it like a novel. I was completely absorbed by the destiny of Mona’s mother and that of the women in her family. So many aspects of my own lineage resonated with hers. It was obvious to me. I’m lucky to have read stories and to have known without a doubt that I would be right for the part. It’s one of the most profound and joyful things about my job: reading a script and thinking, “There’s nothing that could happen that would stop me from being a part of this movie.”

Mona, you’ve said that Marion was the obvious choice. Was it her, and no one else?

**M.A.** Initially, I was just blown away when I looked at this picture of my mother when she was younger. She looked so much like Marion, with her insolent beauty, her charisma, and her freedom. And I have so much admiration for Marion Cotillard as an actress. Also, because we knew each other a little, I felt that she would understand Carole. That something connected us with respect to her story, something that could be the starting point for the role. My mother’s life path is marked and fractured by the paths of powerful, famous writers. I wanted to respond to that with a different cinematographic gesture and to give Carole the aura of an iconic actress. I wanted to counter Carole’s darkness with that light. I knew that the character required a lot
of work and talent. Carole is the main character, the only character in this film. I needed an actress who could rise to the challenge of being omnipresent. Marion is able to transform herself. Watching her is always absolutely fascinating. For all those reasons, she's the actress I wanted to make this film with.

Marion, from the very first scene in which you appear, Mona, who plays herself, entrusts you with her mother's clothes, jewelry, identity papers, and even perfume, and she asks you to make them your own. It's rare to see an actress transform herself into a movie character on screen.

M.C. Yes, you rarely witness the process. But there was something even more unsettling and intimidating about Mona's gift to me of becoming her mother. I didn't know this woman: I had to take ownership of her and make Mona believe in her. Knowing the tumultuous relationship between the two women, I was afraid of the emotional turmoil that metamorphosis might produce in her. Mona and I shared some very intense moments while preparing for the film. I was shaking with apprehension the first time she saw me in Carole's clothes, wearing contacts the color of her mother's eyes, and my hair styled like her mother's. I wanted to see in her face that it was working, that I had completely fused with Carole. But I was worried that it would bring up painful emotions for her, and that tension lent itself to dizzying limits.
Mona, how did you experience these scenes with Marion?

M.A. I wasn’t acting them, I lived them. The filming was done chronologically, and it was an insane, extremely intimate experience. Every day, her body, her face, and her voice were transformed. As the days went by, that confusion became more and more complete. Carole and Marion were merging. It was overwhelming, not just for me, but for the whole crew. By the time we were done filming, a resurrection had taken place.

Carole was brought up by your grandmother, Monique Lange, who was also a writer, in the literary milieu of the post-war period. Carole gets completely swept away, and eventually destroyed, by this dazzling, intense environment. The women in this milieu are mistreated and abused, but they also get the opportunity to be educated and share the thought process of the era’s intellectuals. Jean Genet played a critical role in your mother’s downward spiral.

M.C. Jean Genet took advantage of his fame and influence on a child who was between eleven and thirteen years old. So great was her mother’s fascination with Genet that she didn’t take issue with this. All Monique could see were the benefits. How lucky her daughter was to grow up in contact with such a powerful and talented man! What a formative experience this would be for a child! But before long, Carole was torn, aware that her relationship with Genet — her mother’s god — was a privilege, but also aware of its transgressive dimension.

M.A. Genet’s behavior towards my mother reflects how he saw the world and his relationships with others. In his literature, it’s beautiful. Revolutionary, even. But for my mother, it’s a tragedy. She used to say: “I hold a bitter grudge against Genet, but he forged my mind. I’m conflicted.” What do you do with that? You can’t reject everything. Carole’s mother and those around her failed to protect her, but her admiration for them was always stronger. Those who did her the most good also did her the most harm. Those contradictions are inseparable. Humanity is complex, with ambiguous complicity and a great imbalance between men and women. Our concept of genius has always been imbued with a sexism that nourishes a culture of sexual abuse.

Through Carole’s writings and recordings, we learn that for a long time afterwards she sought explanations from the intellectuals who witnessed what happened between her and Genet. She also wanted them to explain to her why her mother had been so complicit.

M.C. Why did Monique Lange push her daughter to such destructive places? Carole is faced with people who, for the most part, sit idly by, and who are therefore also complicit. They might feel some guilt, but they exonerate themselves and relativize Carole’s sufferings. “It was a different era,” they tell her. And Carole agrees! But by revealing too much, by asking too many questions, she starts to become a nuisance. And, with a handful of exceptions, she receives very few answers and little acknowledgement for her story. In the film, the conversation with Nico Papatakis is deeply moving. At last, someone is looking at her and listening to her. I think about how lonely Carole was, and how far things have come since the #MeToo movement. She didn’t get the chance to hear those words that could help start the healing process: “We believe you.” It’s heartbreaking that she took her own life just one year before women were finally being listened to.

M.A. In one of her recordings, Carole says to her interviewer: “I would like to put my pain into a story.” As Marion says, my mother didn’t get to live through a time when she might have felt less alone. Of course, I often wonder whether that would have changed anything for her. For me, #MeToo was an upheaval. Adèle Haenel’s testimony, Camille Kouchner’s and Vanessa Springora’s books, among others, moved me deeply. I suddenly became aware how universal my story was — and how banal it was, as well. I found it terrifying, and yet reassuring. What I had thought was a familial neurosis was in fact a collective one. It’s political and cultural. I grew up with the idea that the women in our family were cursed. I
Mercredi 7 mars 1972 :
On parle un peu de tout.
J'ai peur qu'il s'ennuie et me trouve bête.
came to understand too late that we were simply the reflection of a general conditioning. That's an important distinction.

Carole's account of the suicide of Abdallah, Genet's young lover, is chilling.

M.A. At that time, the place given to women resonates with that of young, mostly illiterate Arab boys. My mother always identified with this young tightrope walker, whom Genet was infatuated with and then tired of, whom he provoked and then destroyed, to the point of suicide. And Carole hanged herself, like Abdallah.

Mona, you were also a victim of abuse. And like your grandmother before her, Carol did not deal with it well.

M.A. Abuse is often not talked about or denied because it involves accusations that destabilize the balance of a family, of an environment. Confessions can destroy certain privileges. My mother wanted to protect me, but in spite of herself, she repeated her own mother's failings. Sexuality played a determining role in my genealogy of women. My grandmother abdicated her sexuality. My mother sold herself. I built my femininity between these two extremes. Sexuality and abuse are decisive issues in my family. We even talked about a “curse of the women.” It was this disastrous myth that prevented my mother from facing what I was going through with common sense. It was stronger than her.

M.C. Because I didn't know Carole, and because working on a character sometimes alters your interpretation of it, certain things jumped out at me. I had a lot of material, a lot of texts, photos, and videos, to draw on, and one of the first things I noticed and mentioned to Mona was what I perceived as Carole's immense love for her children. I felt that this woman loved her children. Deeply. To which Mona would respond, “And yet she was so hard on us.” Sharing this feeling with Mona led to a very intense exchange, which had an impact on the rest of the shoot. Carole allowed me to confront a fundamental question: Is there such a thing as bad love -- a bad way to love?

Marion, in “Little Girl Blue,” you recite passages from texts in sync with recordings of Carole's real voice. Was that difficult?

M.C. There was the synchronizing work that had to be done, and then there was the work of finding Carole's voice, from monologues lifted exclusively from her writings. The transition from the synchronization to my voice had to be fluid. That's the whole point of incarnating a part. And that's what I enjoy: to succeed in disappearing completely behind a character, so only they are visible, until you believe, in this film, in a character with one voice, without seeing any artifice. I want the distinction to melt away.

Mona, how did you experience Marion's appropriation of Carole's voice?

M.A. With emotion and admiration for Marion's immense talent and the work she put in to achieve this. I knew those recordings by heart, but they took on another dimension through her incarnation. Marion's work was one of unbounded generosity. What moved me the most isn't visible in the film: every day, she perfumed herself with my mother's perfume. Every day she let me embrace her in a way I had never been able to, never wanted to, with my mother. She comforted me. She brought tenderness where there had been none. Beyond the work of the film, I see our experience together on this film as a singular, deep form of sisterhood. I owe Marion for giving me a great sense of peace.
Mona, you shot in an abandoned factory in Mulhouse. We can feel that the sets play an important role in this mingling of forms that you evoke.

M.A. Finding that place was a kind of miracle for both me and Hélène Cisterne, the head set designer, because our specifications were complex. We used the walls of this factory to cobble together the pieces of scenery we needed to reenact the conversations my mother had had with the witnesses of her childhood: a kitchen, a bar, an office, a radio studio, a living room. In the film, we realize that these seemingly scattered places are part of the same space. I conceptualized the set as a metaphorical extension of the maze of my own mind, occupied by my mother, and whose central pole would be my office, full of archives. The set allowed me — as I had been doing for years — to walk in circles around Carole... who ended up walking in circles around herself. We were very careful to consider how best to bring across this sense of inner confinement without making it claustrophobic. That issue extended to the work of Noé Bach, the cinematographer. The carnal, sensual dimension had to come through in the texture of the image and in the way he filmed us. It needed to be constantly intimate, but without being smothering or indecent. Direct, but soft.

Something else that’s charming about the set design is how dreamlike the atmosphere is, right down to the thousands of sheets of paper that flutter across the ceiling of the room where Carole writes.

M.A. My vision of things in real life is often dreamlike. In this family drama, I also see poetry and romance. There’s beauty in all this ugliness – beauty, as it exists in mythology. My mother lost herself in these paper archives to the point of insanity. I wanted to see her physically buried under the material, as though she were in a cave. The sound design also allows for that freedom of tone. Olivier Ronval (the sound engineer) and I worked on making the intermingling of Marion’s and Carole’s voices very precise and accurate. From that material, which aimed at a form of realism,
the sound editor, Joey Vam Impe, and I looked for the soundscapes that would work with this outside-of-time set design. Finding the right “silence” for the office was a lot of work. And then came the bad weather, the frogs singing... Nothing was off the table. Valentin Couineau found my mother’s music, the only side of Carole that was unknown to me. And Thomas Gauder, the mixer, brought balance to all these sources. I also owe him for guiding me in recording my own voice. What the film brings together has created a strong bond of intimacy among us all. I’m thinking of the delicate make-up and special effects work, led by Daniel Weimer and Pamela Goldammer, who accomplished the progressive resurrection of my mother without distorting Marion’s face. And Laetitia Gonzalez, the producer, who was at the same time protective and demanding. Inevitably, my emotions were a major feature of the filming process. That inner journey was often hectic. It had to be, but it couldn’t be allowed to get out of hand. Clothilde Carenco, the assistant director, also played a critical role in that regard... It makes me want to name all the members of this incredible team!

With all the material you had in your possession, in addition to the film itself, how did the editing process go?

M.A. When Marion was there, we filmed with two cameras. I wanted at least one of the two to never cut, and to film our backstage interactions. So, I was simultaneously daughter and director. Marion was my mother, the character I was directing, and herself, all at once. I wanted to capture that confusion. So then the whole thing had to be brought together through the editing process, with Valérie Loiseleux. To build a visual narrative, we had to find the right balance of film, photographic, pictorial, personal and historical materials.

You also included representations of the Virgin and Child?

M.A. I thought it would be interesting to show the beauty, the power, and the turmoil of the mother-daughter relationship through representations of the Madonna. I wanted to evoke the ancestral injunction to motherhood. Other paintings in the film show sexual aggression being exalted, the archetype of the dominant man and the contrite woman. That says it all. It’s cultural. I wanted the words to tell my story and to let the images bring across the more universal dimension of the story. Sharon Hammou, the archivist, was fundamental in this regard. This film is heterogeneous in content and in form. It’s a cross between fiction and documentary. The way the film gorges itself on imagery, its visual bulimia, brings across not just the freedom and effervescence of the eras and movements involved, but also their anxiety-inducing dimension.

Mona, as you said earlier, the film was shot with Marion in chronological order. You designed the plan for the film, and you played your own role while directing at the same time. Did you ever have to readjust scenes from the inside?

M.A. Of course. Being daughter, director, and director of photography all at the same time allowed me to have an organic sense of what was right and what wasn’t. The film plays on shifts of register. It starts out as a documentary and morphs, with Marion, into a fictional narrative centered on Carole. My gradual disappearance became increasingly clear as we progressed with the shoot. Sometimes it’s unclear whether Marion is still Carol, or whether she’s become Marion again. This is especially noticeable in this scene where you, Marion, are drinking tea, slightly slumped on a bench, and Mona says to you: “My mother slurped her tea, too.” And you, Marion, reply, “I thought we were taking five!”

M.C. It was a fake break. But you’re right – Mona and I had quite a few conversations about my reappearances as an actress. Those moments allow us at several points in the film to show what it can be like for an actor or an actress to merge with the character, and how difficult it can be to embody a character who is as
tormented and tortured as Carol. I'm reminded of the scene where I'm sleeping, and I speak while dreaming. Is it me talking? Is it Carole through me? I find it beautiful to have been able to integrate into this woman's story the potential inner struggle of the actress trying to embody her. It's like an offering made to the audience, a way of saying to them: "Here, I am this woman, Carole, for the duration of a film, but in certain places, I will offer her to you in a different way, because I, Marion, am also here." There's something profound and powerful about this process that offers the opportunity to discover a woman in a different way.

M.A. By taking hold of my mother, Marion relieved me of something, and that becomes an important feature of the film. On the one hand, there's the task I have with respect to my family history and the film I want to make from it. And on the other hand, there's Marion's task with respect to this complex character — complex both technically and emotionally. I wanted the film to bear witness to that. It's also a way of tacitly evoking the #MeToo era: Marion and I have joined forces and used our powers — her acting, my directing — to uplift Carole's story and words.

Indeed, Mona, by continuing to carry the torch that your grandmother and mother also carried, you are bringing a tragic story to its conclusion, by elevating it.

M.A. I needed to bring out its beauty - for myself. For my children. And to turn the tables. You can't escape where you come from, but you can transform things in order to better pass them along. It's all a question of perspective, too. I saw some light in all this darkness. There's a quote in the film by Marguerite Yourcenar that was a revelation to me during the writing process: "What would you take with you if the house were burning down? I would take the fire with me." Our house burned down, and my mother was taken with it. But it's that fire that I'd like to pass on to my children.
**crew**

**Director**
Mona Achache

**Produced by**
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Yaël Fogiel
Benoît Rolland
Valentin Coutineau
Noé Bach
Valérie Loiseleux
Olivier Ronval
Joey Van Impe
Thomas Gander
Hélène Cisterne
Thomas Stuck
Daniel Weimer
Pamela Goldammer
Clotilde Carecno
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Caroline Spieth
Hélène Defline
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Inès Diéron Dassil
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**Make-up Artist**
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Hélène Defline

**First Assistant Director**
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**Documentary Researcher**
Sharon Hammou

**Costume Designer**
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**Key Grip**
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**Chief Electrician**
Tom Porte

**Literary Director**
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**Executive Producer**
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**Production Manager**
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**cast**

**Carole Achahe**
Kathleen Evin
Florence Malraux
Nico Papatakis
Daniel Cordier
Jorge Semprun

**Marion Cotillard**
Marie Bunel
Marie-Christine Adam
Pierre Aussedat
Jacques Boudet
Didier Flamand

**with the voices of**
Monique Lange
Juan Goytisolo
Jean-Jacques Salomon

**Brigitte Sy**
Alex Brendemühl
Jeremy Lewin
Jean Achache

**and**