BRAGUINO
DIRECTED BY CLÉMENT COGITORE
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ZABALTEGI-TABAKLERA
FESTIVAL DE SAN SEBASTIÁN
2017

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MENTION SPÉCIALE COMPÉTITION INTERNATIONALE

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SYNOPSIS

In the middle of the Siberian taiga, 450 miles from the nearest village live two families: the Braguine and the Kiline. Not a single road leads here. A long trip on the Yenissei River, first by boat, then by helicopter, is the only way to reach Braguino.

Self-sufficient, both families live there according to their own rules and principles. In the middle of the village: a barrier. Both families refuse to speak to each other. In the middle of the river sits an island where another community is being built: that of the children. Free, unpredictable, wild.

Between the fear of the other, of wild beasts, and the joy provided by the immensity of the forest, a cruel tale unfolds, a tale in which tensions and fear give shape to the geography of an ancestral conflict.
I was struck by the power of the images in Braguino, the primitive force radiating from them.

For a film like this, when you’re in a position to capture things, the power of the images comes from the people and places in front of your camera. In Braguino, the power you mention emanates from the people of Braguino and the landscapes.

And then there’s the whole editing process. When an image no longer seizes me, I like for it to disappear. And then not necessarily replace it immediately by an even more striking image – that would lead to an escalation of authoritarian images – but rather allow it to not dissolve. I like to seize the intensity in a gaze, in the moment when you encounter a new face or a presence. As a Visual artist I’ve worked a lot with black and darkness, but in Braguino, I used it as a way of cleansing the eye. As a way of getting ready to welcome a new image.

I started working on Braguino quite some time before Neither Heaven Nor Earth (2015). In 2011, I had just finished my first documentary, Biélutine, about Russian art collectors. I had just shot, indoors, for a dozen days, in nothing but candle light, a film centered on speech. And I thought that for the next film, I’d like to go in a radically opposite direction from that suffocating shoot and film wide-open expanses. I had heard, like many have, about the Old Believers, a minority group of Orthodox faith in Russia.

As early as the Middle Ages, they slowly moved deeper into the forest to flee the persecution of the State and the Church. One thing leading to another, my investigation led me to Sacha Braguine who came from a community of Old Believers.

I was also guided by a desire to tell a story about childhood and forests. To me, forests
are symbolically the space of fiction, a space of contemplation and fear, where we imagine monsters, where epic tales come to life, where the first childhood homes are built, cabins and tree houses. I grew up in a valley of the Vosges Mountains, surrounded by a forest. That’s what nourished and built my imagination. I wanted to re-examine that. However, I wanted to address this in a more extreme situation than my own personal experience: how about a horde of children living freely, cut off from the world?

In the film, you barely hint at their religious origins.

The question of religion and worship is not, strictly speaking, the main subject of the film. And in fact, the more I researched these communities of Old Believers, the less I was drawn to them on this specific matter. I was interested in something of a different nature; it had to do with what stems from the building of a community, and what’s at stake when a group of humans gather in an isolated location. Braguino is in the middle of Russia, in the gulag Siberia, a climatic hellhole where temperatures drop to 40 below zero in the winters, where summers are suffocating, and black mosquitoes eat you alive. This harsh territory leaves you with only two options: live in the cities and villages, in a pretty violent Far West-like environment, abandoned by everyone and the State, or join the communities of Old Believers in the woods. Sacha Braguine wanted to escape from both alternatives. He left in the seventies to build his own world, with his own rules. Thanks to the Russian journalist Alla Shevelkina, I was able to learn more about Sacha. And then decided to take the long trip to Braguino.

How did your location-scouting trip unfold?

The trip was symbolically very powerful. Over the course of the four-day trip, heading in the opposite direction of the earth’s rotation, I saw nothing but sunset. I gradually witnessed myself moving past the markers of civilization: loss of Internet, then, loss of a phone connection. And then the last radio transmitter... Roads became dustier and dustier, then turned into tracks, and finally there were nothing but landing fields. We knew nothing, other than the GPS coordinates of this nearly inaccessible place that required several days travel by boat along the Yenissei River, or a long helicopter flight. We didn’t know if Sacha and his family still lived there, nor if they’d be there to welcome us when we arrived.

As we moved up through Siberia, there ended up being nothing but a couple rundown shacks, and men to drunk to stand on their own two feet. There was something very end-of-the-world-like. I was afraid of where we would end up. And even more so because I’d left on this trip with the idea of making a film that would bring me back to the joys of childhood in the forest... But my arrival in Braguino confirmed the choice I had made: I was facing a small paradise, perhaps the most peaceful place I’ve seen in my life.

And the encounter with the Braguine family?

They instantly welcomed us to their table as friends. But I was confronted with a problem of dramaturgy. I was facing the quiet life of people who go pike fishing and grouse hunting in a tiny paradise. But paradise has no stories to tell so I thought that I could maybe work on a series of photos that would tell the story of a possible paradise, of a utopia. But little by little, I observed the village organization. And most importantly, I understood that on the other side of the barrier that ran through the village, there lived another family: the Kiline’s. The Braguine’s really did not want to talk about them. I realized that something wasn’t quite right.

What exactly happened between them?

The Kiline’s settled down in Braguino fifteen years after the Braguine’s. They too wanted to escape from the Siberian Far West and the sectarian communities. They realized that Sacha had managed to build a small paradise and even grow watermelon... So they wanted to join them and participate in the utopia. But as soon as they settled down, they stopped getting along. They began to build barriers, to split up hunting grounds, to poison each other’s dogs, and eventually stopped speaking to each other. I had found my story: a story about the impossibility of building a community, the failure of a utopia, of sharing an ideal.
If you deconstruct this situation, as ordinary and as vertiginous as it is, you find every single possible layer of conflict. Neighborly rivalry, just like anywhere else, crystallizing irreconcilable stories and ideologies. A powerful conflict fermented in Braguino. At the same time, it’s almost a biblical conflict, like “Cain and Abel” — the Kiline and Braguine women are bound by blood: two irreconcilable sisters.

Sacha Braguine boils it down to “They occupy the territory; we’re here to live on it.” when talking about the Kiline’s...

Yes, the film takes on the shape of a western at times, especially from a political perspective, with a confrontation between two ideologies. Both families relate very differently to the rest of the world in terms of the use of resources and mankind’s position in the natural world. As I was leaving, I realized that the ultimate layer of conflict, in this story of otherness would lead to a Shakespearian tragedy, if the young Braguine girl fell in love with the older Kiline boy. And if it’s not them, it’ll be two other children. Inevitably, Romeo and Juliet are bound to arrive someday!

Why did you choose to only tell the story, and film, on one side of the barrier?

When I understood the reality of Braguine’s situation, I understood that I would need to choose sides, that it would be impossible to go over to the other side, and that I would have to film the Kilines as silhouettes only. I wasn’t sure how that would work out; reducing the Other to a ghostly figure in a film that’s fantasy or science fiction. But I had this intuition while we were shooting, and the editing confirmed this; those silhouettes allow us to project all the conflicts and troubles of the community. They absorb them all. Because of the isolation, the Braguines hold the Kilines responsible for everything, it’s as simple as that, and often in pretty crazy ways too.

Tell us about your second trip?

I arrived with Sylvain Verdet, my director of photography and Alla, not only as an interpreter and journalist, but also as a human connection with the family. She had the emotional and psychological intelligence of knowing where we could go, what we could say or not, and knew the ground rules. For a brief moment, they were curious about the camera, but then the Braguine’s quickly forgot about it. The relationship of power and of suspicion that sets in when you start filming didn’t occur because images aren’t relevant to them. Which was very precious, because in documentary we spend a lot of time getting people to reveal themselves, to feel comfortable in front of the camera, to not to be on show and open up.

Nonetheless, you don’t hide the presence of the camera: sometimes, people look at it, or speak to you...

Not only am I not hiding its presence, I’m attesting that it’s there and using it to film an encounter. You can see in the way that Sacha and his family eyes us that we live in different worlds. They’re not used to having visitors, it’s a notion that does not exist for them; others are inevitably experienced as a curiosity, something to examine.

As soon as we got off the helicopter, I tried to use the intensity of that gaze as a hook to get the story started. You can sense the astonishment, notably among the children. We didn’t look like Siberian people they run into, we spoke a different language... Some of them had never seen any other humans than members of their family. And me too, I was astonished to feel the children gazing at me. Me too, I was a curiosity to them; it was very strange. We needed to get acquainted and tame each other.

The shoot took place after the demanding shoot of Neither Heaven Nor Earth...

Yes! A year later, I was back on a plane...But the most challenging thing for me was that nothing happened the first week; everything I had imagined, waited for, hoped for was
not happening. We were recording fragments of existence that were beautiful, that would allow to illustrate, make transitions and build characters. But nothing where I could say to myself: now that’s a scene, now there’s a story. And astonishingly, everything happened in the last three days: the bear hunt, the scene on the children’s island and the arrival of the helicopter. I knew, when we were filming them, that those three scenes would be essential moments in the film. From that point on, the characters just unfolded, a human breath arose, and the story took on a whole new dimension. During this shoot, I did nothing but capture, hope, and fear.

When the Kiline children arrive on the island, we get the impression of a highly organized army turning up on a battlefield. Did you provoke this?

That scene truly is a geopolitical class applied to 6-8 year old children! You get the impression of a laboratory test on how to invade someone else’s territory. I just hoped for that scene, and did what was necessary for it to happen rather than not happen... Usually, the Kiline and Braguine children each take turns playing on the island, but the Kiline children were so intrigued by the camera that they gradually came closer. And then that West Side Story scene unfolded, a battle without any fighting, rival gangs occupying a territory.

As in your previous films, we move in and out of documentary, tale and fantasy.

The situation and the material made this possible. The images were documentary, very close to the ground. Especially the bear cutting scene that is almost ethnographical cinema, where I’m filming men at work, in their daily life. But for us, the bear had the same impact as a monster in a fairytale and I tried to keep this near-mythological dimension. And then you have pure moments of escape into a fairytale world, like the moment when the little girl arrives with her pink dress and bear paws. In that kind of moment, all you need to do is be present to capture it. The bear scene was something I was not even hoping for because they only kill one or two bears a year. It serves as a counterpoint to the seemingly idyllic natural world and sends us back to the wilderness and its most brutal and terrifying dimensions. If the bear is respected, it is above all feared. Bears are the terror of the taiga, they can wreck a cabin, eat a man or a child.

And the scene where the poachers show up in the helicopter?

The helicopter scene is central. Not only was I not hoping for it, but I didn’t even know it was possible because of how difficult and expensive it is to travel by helicopter. The poacher’s arrival, the devastation they bring with their automatic weapons, sets up the imminent destruction, the end of Sacha’s dream of isolation, or simply the end of the possibility of living together. When the helicopter arrives, in a fury, we suddenly measure the greater danger that is threatening this place. The characters of Braguino, both the children and the adults, seem very fragile and unarmed in the face of the forces at hand. That’s when the story shifts to a tragedy.

Already in 2012, the Braguine’s told me that people were starting to come and devastate the area. I took that for something that was just part of their general paranoia. That scene raises the issue of the brutality of civilization, the rest of the world bursting in like a deus ex machina, and we can immediately sense that the battle is lost in advance. Confronted with the bear, the Braguine’s can put up a fight; it’s basically a ritualized battle. But in the face of the poachers, they have nothing to hold on to, whether it be weapons or words. What I once thought was paranoid delusion was actually a terrifying reality that I suddenly became aware of: the world had become too small.

This microcosm I had found was not only telling me its story of a mythological community, but the workings of the world. I was also stunned on a cinematic level: I was watching the scene coming to life right in front of my eyes, as if there had been a script somewhere. We were forced to cut the camera pretty quickly, but luckily we kept recording sound.
Just like in *Neither Heaven Nor Earth*, the focus on a defined and limited space ends up echoing with broader issues...

My way of making films is, to a large degree, haunted by the link between the smallest possible thing and the broadest. I like to choose a small community of people on a defined territory and say to myself: with this here, I’m going to try to tell a story about the world as I see it. I like to start with small stories, with small problems, and then hope that, through several events, the way they unfold, the power of the landscapes, the mystery and the fear of unresolved questions, that it will all gradually build up into a tension and lead us to broader questions that are nothing other than human experience.

The children brighten the film, but they also have this wild child side, left to themselves. We can feel that their relationship to language is limited, not to say inexistent...

Their childhood is seemingly idyllic but in fact, there is a form of aimless wandering on that island that’s almost prison-like. The children are on the island because the parents, caught up in their daily survival in the forest, can’t always take care of them, and also because that’s where they’re safe from wild animals. The island is their childhood refuge. They’re free there – no school, no rules – but they’re left to themselves, both in joy and in cruelty. It is both a fairytale childhood and a shape of lost childhood in boredom. There is something extremely melancholic in that lost childhood.

The children are basically mute, sharing but a few words with each other, rarely speaking to their parents and never talking to any other adults: they’ve become a silent presence, they are the frightened witnesses of the conflict.

You put the children at the heart of the film. Where did that desire come from?

I knew from the start that I was going to build the film around the children’s point of view, that I would be on the same level as their silent presence. I wanted to film their games, their fears in the forest. That wasn’t easy because they are very shy and don’t speak to adults. We had to win each other over. In *Neither Heaven Nor Earth*, there is only one child, but his presence and words are crucial. To me, a child is a primordial figure because I think that a director, a writer or any other kind of storyteller is simply someone who won’t accept the end of childhood. The stories we tell to children or that they make up are a way of connecting with the world because they raise metaphysical questions in a very simple way. *Braguino* raises the question of otherness and of community. Are we happier in the world or outside the world? Together or alone? These are questions that arise in childhood, in the playground. In its own way, *Braguino* is a playground – starting with the island – where the rules of humanity are being written.

After the opening of the film in the clouds, the film is very bright.

Anxiety and something very crepuscular have always been part of my work, even if I’ve always looked for ways to escape into something more lyrical. Here, from the very beginning, I wanted to go towards something lighter: the forest, the children, and the light... The film leaves an impression that the light in *Braguino* is always beautiful, but that’s because I was uncompromising while editing. If the light in a shot was not beautiful and that I did not desperately need it for the narrative, I just took it out. And I worked towards shooting as much as possible early in the morning or at dusk, in order to fully use those moments when the light is at its softest. Sometimes, I even asked Sacha to adjust his work in order to benefit from better light.

At the end of the film, you play with darkness and the lights blinding the children in the night...

I had brought along a small system that allowed me to light scenes in a pretty brutal way. A light that carves out the faces and creates clear-cut shadows; this contrasts starkly with the rest of the film and creates a tension.
the civilization; fully participating in the movement that is driving them away. It's a very cruel ending but in the long run I think that will end up being the story of that place. We filmed a world that is going to disappear.

We really get the impression that you led us to the origins of a world, but with a feeling that it’s already lost...

Yes, we move back to the origins of a world, and we’ve barely had the time to tell that story that it’s already shattered, nothing but dust in the wind. That impression really struck us on our helicopter ride back. With the violent rise in temperatures due to global warming, the taiga was on fire and we couldn’t see anything other than the fog and smoke from the burning fires. For four hours, we sunk into a form of melancholy, were unable to speak, fully conscious that the world we had just filmed was going up in smoke.

Music contributes to the tension in the film.

I wanted something tense and lyrical, and yet to be minimalistic in its form: one or two notes, a little percussion. Without giving into film music that would crush them, I wanted the musical atmosphere to carry the people I was filming, give them the scope of fictional characters.

Sacha Bourdo is credited with additional voices...

Important things were said while the camera wasn’t rolling. A drunken poacher was reciting a lugubrious poem. Without revealing too much about the process, working with Sacha, based on my memory of those words, was a way of getting those words back into the film. The information is revealed piece by piece, and some things remain unresolved or almost unspoken. Sometimes it’s because of a decision while editing, and at other times, it’s just the way the information made its way to me. I like it when there’s a « missing piece », when information or an image leaves room for the spectator to fill it in. In my work, there are often elements from so-called “fictional” cinema that find their way into so-called “documentary” situations, and the other way around. In the end, I’m only capturing and building stories, trying to find the right shape and form for them; the issue of what type of narrative category I’m in does not really interest me that much.

Bruguino is being released in theaters but it’s not your second feature film. How does it fit into the early stages of your filmography?

Initially, Bruguino was a film for « La Lucarne » on Arte, one of the last creative documentary windows in Europe. Then the distributor, Saida Kasmi thought: this film can and must have a run in theaters. And I’m very happy about that. For me, a film is a matter of immersion that survives on a small screen but truly finds its breath on a big screen. But it’s true; the film is not my second feature film. Also just because it’s only 50 minutes long!

Nonetheless, it’s been a very important experience for me. Neither Heaven Nor Earth was a financed feature film, where an author is expressing his desires, asking for things, and putting himself in a position of authority. It’s not Hollywood (!) but you do have a certain amount of power over reality, and this leads to images with a specific strike force. That power is a double-edged sword. On the other hand, for Bruguino, I basically started naked, without knowing if anything would happen. Being in a position of discomfort and uncertainty in the documentary process is perhaps where I learn the most because I learn to trust reality, and can truly comprehend that cinema sometimes stems from very little: a stare, a few words or a tension on someone’s face.

Interview by Claire Vassé
After graduating from the Strasbourg School of Art & Design (Ecole Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs de Strasbourg), and the Fresnoy National Studio for Contemporary Arts (Studio national des arts contemporains), Clément Cogitore developed his own artistic practice at the crossroads of cinema and contemporary art. Combining films, videos, installations and photography, his work explores the potent questions of how images are made as well as their active role in human constructions. His work revolves around the relationship we maintain with sacredness, particularly in its ritualized aspect, by looking at the world and its mysteries: the original darkness of cinema meets the nightly secrets of our actions and gestures. His thought-provoking work examines the visibility and awareness of mankind in the world he is building, and his political position in the spaces conditioned his existence. In 2015, his first feature film Neither Heaven nor Earth addressed, through fiction, the metaphysical quest for meaning in a world at war. With this in mind, he takes us on a journey to Braguino or the impossible Community where he describes the tipping point between the boundaries of civilization and faith.

A former resident of the Académie de France at the Rome Villa Medici, his films have been selected to several international festivals (Cannes, Locarno, Lisbonne, Montreal...) and won numerous awards. His work has been exhibited at the Palais de Tokyo, and the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris; the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, as well as the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the MoMA in New York. In 2015, his first feature film Neither Heaven nor Earth was awarded the Prix de la Fondation Gan at the Cannes Film Festival - Semaine de la Critique, and nominated for Best First Film at the César. The same year, he was awarded the Prix Le BAL for Young Talent in association with the ADAGP. In 2016, he was also awarded the Prix Science Po for contemporary art and the 18th Prix de la Fondation d’Entreprise Ricard for Contemporary Art.

Clément Cogitore was born in 1983 in Colmar. He currently lives and works in Paris. He is represented by the Galerie Eva Hober (Paris) since 2016, and by the Galerie Reinhard Hauff (Stuttgart) since 2015.
Braguino is a crosscutting artistic project by Clément Cogitore. He was awarded the Prix LE BAL for Young Talent in association with ADAGP. The project is comprised of material gathered during two trips to Braguino first in 2012, then in 2016 and takes the shape of an installation, a film and a book. In doing so, Braguino links cinema, photography and video art.

Simultaneously to the theatrical release of the film followed by a broadcast on ARTE (La Lucarne), the exhibition space LE BAL in Paris will host an exhibit of the project: « Braguino or the impossible Community » starting September 15, 2017. The installation invites the visitor to dive into darkness, and journey to the heart of a story in several acts, where each video expresses one part of the plot: the arrival in Braguino by helicopter, Sacha’s dream, the bear hunt, the mysterious island; and then the threat of an armed conflict.

France Culture, partner of the exhibition at LE BAL, will air the sound creation « Braguino or the impossible Community ON AIR ». Broadcast on September 28 between 11pm and midnight. Podcast available at: franceculture.fr.

In the context of the exhibition, LE BAL and Filigranes Éditions are publishing together Clément Cogitore, Braguino or the impossible Community.

Conceived by graphic designers José Albergaria and Rik Bas Backer (Change is good), the book strings together the chapters of this cruel tale, the images of the dream of isolation and of communion with nature slowly grow darker inevitably leading to images of a crepuscular world threatened from all sides. Texts by Léa Bismuth (interview with Clément Cogitore) and by Bertrand Schefer shed light on Clément Cogitore’s intent and reflect on the extent of the failure of the community idea.

« The Braguine’s sought to be separate, to break away, to divorce from society. But when came the time to fight, civilization imposed their weapons. And the trivial means that the Braguine's have at their disposal, when the village turns into a trench camp, reveals the greatness of their struggle. »
- Bertrand Schefer

Texts: Interview of Clément Cogitore by Léa Bismuth and Combat dans l’île by Bertrand Schefer

Release: September 2017
FILMOGRAPHY
CLÉMENT COGITORE

THE WAKHAN FRONT (Neither Heaven nor Earth) fiction – 102 min – 2015
Prix de la Fondation Gan – Festival de Cannes – Semaine de la Critique 2015
Nomination César du meilleur Premier Film 2015
Nomination Caméra d’Or Festival de Cannes 2015
Nomination Prix Louis-Delluc du premier Film 2015
Nomination Prix Jean Vigo 2015
Best First Film Award - Colcoa Film Festival Los Angeles 2016
Jury’s Prize - Sarasota International Film Festival 2016
Prix Henri Langlois 2016
Prix du Meilleur Premier Film - Syndicat de la Critique 2015
2 Nominations Prix Magritte 2015
3 Nominations Prix Lumière 2015
Prix du meilleur Film - Obrero International Film Festival 2015
Prix du Meilleur Film - Motovun International Film Festival 2015
Prix du Meilleur Film - Festival International du Film D’Aubagne 2015
Prix Découverte – Festival du Film Francophone de Namur 2015
Prix du Meilleur Acteur - Obrero International Film Festival 2015
Prix du Meilleur Second Rôle - Festival Jean Carmet 2015
Prix de la Fondation Beaumarchais – SACD 2012

AMONG US - Fiction – 32 min - 35 mm - 2011
Grand Prix Européen des Premiers Films – Fondation Vevey
Prix de la Meilleure Photographie / Lucania International Film Festival

BIELOUTINE, IN THE GARDEN OF TIME - Documentary – 36 min – HD - 2011
Quinzaine des Réalisateurs, Cannes 2011
Prix FIDLAB – FID (Festival International de Cinéma de Marseille)

VISITÉS - Fiction – 20 min – 35 mm - 2007
Parlo di Domani – Festival International du film de Locarno
Prix du Jury - Festival International du Film de Vendôme
Prix de la Meilleure Photographie - Festival International du Film de Belgrade 2007

CHRONIQUES - Fiction/expérimental – 30 min - 35 mm - 2006
Grand Prix (Mention Spéciale) - « Entrevues » Festival International du Film de Belfort
Prix du scénario de film court - Fondation Beaumarchais Paris 2004
Prix du Centre des Écritures Cinématographiques - Les « Écrans Documentaires », Arcueil
SEPPIA FILM

TARZAN’S TESTICLES by Alexandru Solomon (Cinema)
DEMOCRACY (2016) by David Bernet (90 mn-Cinema)
LE GOÛT DU RISQUE (2016) by Benoît Lichté (52 mn-Television & VR Experience)
LE DIVAN DU MONDE (2015) by Swen de Pauw (90mn-Cinema)
LE SOUFFLE DE LA GUERRE CHIMIQUE (2015) by Fabienne Lips-Dumas (78 mn-Television & Webdocumentary)
QUAND LA FRANCE OCCUPAIT L’ALLEMAGNE (2014) de Tania Rakhmanova (52 mn-Television)
MAIS QUI ÊTES-VOUS M. COURBET ? (2014) by Isabelle Brunnarius (52 mn-Television)
LE ROI DU MONT VENTOUX (2013) by Fons Feyaert (75 mn-Television)
LE DÉFI DES BÂTISSEURS (2012) by Marc Jampolski (90 mn-Television) & a transmedia experience by Julien Aubert
JUNGLE D’EAU DOUCE (2012) by Serge Dumont (52 mn-Television)
BIElutine, in the Garden of Time (2011) by Clément Cogitore (36 mn-Television)
NOIRE ICI, BLANCHE LÀ-BAS (2011) by Claude Haffner (52 mn-Television)
KAPITALISME, NOTRE RECETTE SECRÈTE (2010) by Alexandru Solomon (78 mn-Television)

More information on: seppia.eu
CREW

Director Clément Cogitore
DOP Sylvain Verdet
Editor Pauline Gaillard
Music Éric Bentz
Sound Editor Julien Ngo Trong
Sound Mixer Franck Rivolet

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