

DIAPHANA FILMS presents

FRANÇOIS  
DAMIENS

VINCENT  
MACAIGNE

# NEWS FROM PLANET MARS



66 ■ Internationale  
Filmfestspiele  
Berlin  
Out Of Competition

A FILM BY  
DOMINIK MOLL



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RUNTIME: 101 MINUTES



## SYNOPSIS

Philippe Mars, divorced father of two and IT specialist (senior computer programmer?), feels cramped by his daily grind and swamped by the world around him: his overambitious teenage daughter, his pubescent son who has decided to go vegetarian, his TV journalist ex-wife, his domineering painter sister, his elderly neighbour who's mentally stuck in the 1970s, his parents who died in a car crash, his falsely laid-back boss.... They all seem to have ganged up to make his world more complicated. When Jérôme, an infectiously insane co-worker, gatecrashes Philippe's life, it veers completely out of control.





## INTERVIEW WITH DOMINIK MOLL

**The film begins on Philippe Mars's (François Damiens) 49th birthday, which nobody else could care less about. A divorced father trapped in an uninspiring job and a humdrum home life, Philippe seems to have lost faith in the future. It sounds like the premise of a standard psychological drama... but the film is anything but that. How did it come about?**

I felt like doing a comedy, but a peculiar, offbeat kind of comedy about a person who tries his best to remain sensible in a world – our world – that is becoming more and more senseless, a character born and bred in the 20th century who feels out of

his depth in the 21st. At the beginning of the film, Philippe Mars feels trapped by his own self and his life, in which he finds it increasingly difficult to perceive any meaning. But a string of events leads him to see everything – his work, his children, his life – in a different way. Originally, I also intended to show the corporate world, with its pecking orders, powers and cruelties, and something of that remains in the film: for example, Philippe is a computer programmer in an IT company, doing work that few ordinary people could begin to understand, in an open-space world that is quite absurd but fascinating, like countless other offices today.

**With a boss who goes around handing out sweets to his employees...**

Yes, I lifted that straight out of a management tutorial!

**In his work and home life, Philippe tries to do the right thing, but he seems to find it hard to step out of his role as a sensible observer. It's as if he can't bring himself to engage fully.**

The issue of engagement is key. The characters who gravitate around Philippe are all committed to something or other. For Grégoire and Chloé, it's



vegetarianism; for Sarah and her mother, it's work; for Jérôme, it's love. Philippe Mars stands up for certain principles, including the principle of always being sensible, but he doesn't realise that he has become essentially static. Jérôme is the tornado that makes him move.

**Ten years after “Lemming”, you’re back with your co-writer, Gilles Marchand, with whom you also scripted “Harry, He’s Here to Help”.**

Between “Lemming” and “Mars”, Gilles and I never actually stopped working together. We had just finished writing a movie directed by Gilles, “Into the Woods”, when we started work on “Mars”. Very early on, Gilles and I imagined an alter ego for Philippe: Jérôme, a character with a radically different mentality than Philippe. Jérôme is a fly in the ointment, as Harry was fifteen years ago. While we were tossing ideas around, we had fun drawing parallels. “Harry’s back! He’s mad as hell and his name is Jérôme!” But Jérôme’s craziness is less threatening than Harry’s. There’s something more playful about it.

**But still, Jérôme goes around with a meat cleaver in his briefcase!**

True, Jérôme is pretty much over the top. He’s as OTT as Philippe is moderate. One guy has no lid on, the other is too screwed-down! But Jérôme is not just wacko; he also has a fragile, touching side. When he smashes up the computers with his meat cleaver, he’s expressing genuine despair. What



makes him different from Philippe, in particular, is his ability to marvel at whatever he sees as an ideal. Look at the way he talks about Chloé! Philippe has only one dream, and that is to float weightlessly in space, alone. It's a dream that gets more and more nerve-racking as time goes on, as if gravity is catching up with him.

**To everyone’s surprise, after the “accident” that costs Philippe half an ear, he lets Jérôme move in with him. His daughter Sarah accuses him of “indulging a death wish”.**

For once, Sarah gets it wrong. Philippe probably feels subconsciously that Jérôme’s craziness can bring him something beneficial. This is what stops him from throwing Jérôme out, even when Jérôme goes way over the top! Even François Damiens found the idea a little hard to take. He was afraid it would make Philippe seem too passive, but I’m certain that a character becomes really interesting only when he acts in a way that you yourself wouldn’t.

**Why are you so fascinated by disruptive characters?**

Perhaps I think I’m too sensible myself, which makes me enjoy imagining troublemakers... but one thing’s for certain: Gilles and I love dreaming up situations in which our protagonists’ excessively organized lives go off the rails.

**You have a lot of fun with that in “News From Planet Mars”.**

Yes. The comedic side of the film is based on the principle of build-up: the build-up of physical and mental blows inflicted on Philippe, the build-up of absurd situations, the build-up of intruders in his flat, etc. When Philippe wakes up at the beginning of the film, he is alone at home with his cat. Then his two children blow in, followed by Jérôme, followed by the frogs, followed by his sister and her dog, and then finally Chloé, the vegetarian activist. Not to mention his ex-wife on TV and the ghosts of his mother and father... It’s as if the film, like Philippe Mars’s brain, fills up until it overflows and tips over into another dimension.

**Dreams, and even fantasy, run all the way through the film. Philippe’s dead parents appear to him and talk with him, getting smaller every time! Also, there are the recurring shots of Philippe as an astronaut, and a quite surreal moment of communication between Philippe and his ex-wife through the television screen.**

Gilles and I enjoy films that have an “all in the mind” dimension, when you can imagine that everything is happening inside the protagonist’s head. We had a hunch that such an approach would lend a distinctive tone to this comedy. We wanted the audience to have doubts about how real what happens to Philippe really is, and to wonder whether the events that follow the meat cleaver incident might be purely imaginary. Is Philippe still alive? The appearances of his dead parents and his dreams add to this feeling.



**So it's like being swept up in one big nightmare, albeit a rather joyful one?**

It was to accentuate this nightmarish quality that I wanted the film to be very nocturnal. Almost all the action happens after dark, and during the daylight scenes, like the ones at the office, we seldom see the sky and hear no sound from the outside world. All we hear are the fans and the noise of the computers, which helps create a rather unreal and claustrophobic atmosphere. It feels as if we're going through a long tunnel with Philippe. Not until the end, when they set free the frogs, do we finally see the sun for the first time.

**The light at the end of the tunnel! So the ending is quite upbeat.**

Upbeat, yes. Philippe has changed. By risking his

life to rescue the frogs, he proves to his son that he has abandoned his sensible observer's posture and rediscovered a taste for risk and adventure, and therefore for life, however ludicrous his rescue mission may seem. As his parents say to him before they disappear for the last time, "What are you doing, Philippe? Are you off your head?"

**Philippe's 17-year-old daughter and 13-year-old son see him as a loser. "You're stuck in the 20th century", his daughter tells him. The film is very relevant and funny about parent/child relationships.**

Parent/child relationships are one of the film's key themes. Sarah, Philippe's daughter, is pretty ruthless in her judgments. She might seem unfair, given that Philippe does his best to be a considerate parent who tries to teach his children well. But like many

parents (including me), he often gets the wrong end of the stick. He wants his kids to share his tastes and concerns and ideals; he wants them to enjoy the Marx Brothers etc., but at the same time, he's no good at putting himself in their shoes. He thinks his son's vegetarianism is a "foible" and can't see why his daughter is so intent on being successful. We tend to forget that our children haven't had the same lives and experienced the same history as us.

**Like, for example, the idea of Europe and its present crisis, which Philippe's journalist ex-wife covers in her live TV reports?**

Precisely. I was born in 1962 and like Philippe, I'm still "running on Europe 1.0", as his daughter says. I grew up believing in the ideal of a united Europe that would take us away from World War Two, which my parents had gone through. In spite



of the Cold War, we felt we were moving towards a better world, with the fall of the Berlin Wall as its crowning moment. But it means much less to young people nowadays, who were born after the Wall came down. Their vision of the future is more confused and worrying.

**Philippe's mother and father tell him it's the parents' job to give their children "ideals and something called faith in the future."**

And Philippe rightly answers that "faith in the future isn't easy these days." It's a very important theme in the film. Before you can pass on ideals, you have to listen to your children, which isn't all that easy. That, too, is part of Philippe Mars's journey: learning to pay attention to his children again and rediscovering a set of ideals.

**Even when dealing with these rather serious topics, the film never loses its sense of humour.**

Just because you deal with serious topics doesn't mean you have to give up being funny – thank goodness! Gilles and I had a great time persecuting good old Philippe Mars and dreaming up the characters who gravitate around him: Jérôme, of course, but also his children Sarah and Grégoire, his TV journalist ex-wife, his boss Gordon, Chloé the vegetarian, the ghosts of his parents, his sister Xanaé, the Ayou brothers, the elderly neighbour

obsessed with President Giscard d'Estaing, the man with the dog, Roxane's father, the school principal... They are the ones whose special energy carries us forward through the story.

**Where do all these wacky ideas that pepper the movie come from? For example, Chloé and Philippe's son's weird fixation with vegetarianism? Or the dotty old neighbour who claims to have been President Giscard d'Estaing's chauffeur?**

The bit about Giscard's chauffeur rings bells that are familiar and a bit absurd. They tie Philippe into the last century, which is so near, yet already so long ago. When Gilles and I write together, we have a lot of fun inventing these kinds of details and storing them up... and throwing most of them away, so as not to distract from the key dynamics of the story. Every single detail has to fit together in the end and serve the story – like the bit about vegetarians, which plays a key part in the plot.

**Why did you choose vegetarianism as Grégoire and Chloé's big issue? Are you a vegetarian yourself?**

No, I'm afraid I'd find it hard to turn down a good osso bucco. But I do try to be sensible about eating meat. Factory farming has ballooned out of all proportion. It will sacrifice anything for the sake of the bottom line. It's one of the signs that our

society has its head screwed on backwards. We can't brush these issues aside. They lie at the heart of what progress means, which Grégoire discusses in his talk. But one thing's for certain: by suddenly becoming a vegetarian, young Grégoire shows a kind of idealism, and idealism of any kind is what it takes to get things moving.

**Let's talk about the two main actors. François Damiens is stunningly convincing in the role of Philippe Mars.**

I really liked François Damiens' performance in Axelle Ropert's movie, "The Wolberg Family". He brought great humanity to the role, an understated funniness and a lot of emotion, in a very special way that was all his own. It was exactly what I was looking for in Philippe Mars. It's not an easy part to play because Philippe spends a lot of time taking things on the chin, reacting rather than acting. But thanks to François, we can empathize with him. François has a gift for endearing us to the characters he plays. One of my favourite moments is when he's watching the Marx Brothers movie "The Big Store" on TV with his children. The way the expression on his face changes from almost childlike joy to disenchantment when he sees how bored his kids are... I love it every time I see it.





**At the opposite end of the scale from Damiens' interiorized performance, Vincent Macaigne plays Jérôme, a character on the brink of insanity.**

Vincent has a naturally uncontrollable, excessive personality which seemed to me to fit the character. You find the same quality in the plays he directs for the theatre: an explosive mixture of excess, anger and emotion. Vincent has a fetish for reinventing a scene in every take, to surprise us – and himself – the whole time. His rhythm is very different from François', and although the difference matched their different characters, it took us all a lot of work to strike the right balance. They each have their own way of getting through to us and that was important to me.

**Emotion also comes out very strongly in Philippe's relationship with his children and the unlikely love affair between Chloé and Jérôme.**

I love the moment when Chloé and Jérôme first come face-to-face in the hall of Philippe's flat and can't think what to say to each other. Time seems to stand still – and Vincent Macaigne and Veerle Baetens occupy it to the full. There's also the rather crazy moment when they scream at each other in the car, with the rain pouring down outside and a Verdi opera playing on the stereo. Veerle bowled

me over in that scene. She's an actor who throws herself into her part, body and soul. She perfectly makes flesh the mixture of vulnerability and extreme determination that I had in mind for Chloé.

**The two children are outstanding, too. There's the moment when the son (Tom Rivoire) reproaches his father for never listening to him. And the time when the daughter (Jeanne Guittet), who we thought was as hard as nails, breaks down after her boyfriend ditches her.**

Yes, the children contribute a great deal of emotion. I very much enjoyed working with them. And I certainly wouldn't want to miss out the other actors, especially the "seniors", Michel Aumont, Catherine Samie and Philippe Laudenbach, who all pitched in with youthful vigour and enthusiasm. They played their roles with enormous sincerity, which is what makes them so endearing.

**A word about the music: there, too, we find the playfulness you mentioned earlier.**

When defining the musical direction, Adrian Johnston, the composer, invented an expression which I really like: "deadpan playfulness." Pretty soon he was suggesting instruments such as the muted trumpet and the Vox Continental organ,

which can have that playful feel – and like Philippe, are very "20th century"!

**The song "Come Take a Trip in My Airship" also adds a certain irony.**

I was looking for an old song to go with Philippe's astronaut dreams and I eventually came across this one from 1904, about a trip to the moon and Venus – and Mars! It works well with Philippe Mars's beatific, weightless astronaut floating in space. For the end credits, we recorded our own version with two of our actors, Philippe Laudenbach (the old neighbour) and Veerle Baetens (Chloé) singing a duet.

**To sum up, how would you define "News from Planet Mars"? A private apocalypse? A comical nightmare?**

When I first started discussing it with Michel Saint-Jean, my producer, I used the expression "existential comedy". I still think it's a pretty good description...







A high-resolution photograph of an astronaut in a white spacesuit with red stripes on the sleeves, floating in space. The astronaut's helmet is reflective, showing a distorted view of the surrounding environment. The background is a solid, vibrant orange.

## FILMS BY DOMINIK MOLL

- 2016** NEWS FROM PLANET MARS
- 2013** THE TUNNEL, episodes 1 & 2
- 2011** THE MONK
- 2005** LEMMING
- 2000** HARRY, HE'S HERE TO HELP (UK title)  
WITH A FRIEND LIKE HARRY (US title)
- 1994** INTIMACY



## CAST

<b>Philippe Mars</b>	.....	François Damiens
<b>Jérôme</b>	.....	Vincent Macaigne
<b>Chloé</b>	.....	Veerle Baetens
<b>Sarah Mars</b>	.....	Jeanne Guittet
<b>Grégoire Mars</b>	.....	Tom Rivoire
<b>Le père</b>	.....	Michel Aumont
<b>La mère</b>	.....	Catherine Samie
<b>Le vieux voisin</b>	.....	Philippe Laudénbach
<b>Xanaé Mars</b>	.....	Olivia Côte
<b>Myriam</b>	.....	Léa Drucker
<b>Gordon</b>	.....	Julien Sibre
<b>L'homme au chien</b>	.....	Olivier Faliez
<b>Le père de Roxane</b>	.....	Eric Bougnon
<b>Clément</b>	.....	Gaspard Meier-Chaurand
<b>Le présentateur</b>	.....	Olivier Galzi
<b>Le proviseur</b>	.....	Mario Pecqueur
<b>Les frères Ayou</b>	.....	Olivier Faurcel
.....	.....	Hayssam Hoballah

# CREW

<b>Director</b>	Dominik Moll
<b>Screenplay</b>	Dominik Moll et Gilles Marchand
<b>Producer</b>	Michel Saint-Jean
<b>Co-produit par</b>	Patrick Quinet
<b>Cinematography</b>	Jean-François Hensgens AFC SBC
<b>Production Design</b>	Emmanuelle Duplay ADC
<b>Composer</b>	Adrian Johnston
<b>Editor</b>	Margot Meynier
<b>Sound recordist</b>	François Maurel
<b>Sound editor</b>	Loïc Prian
<b>Recording mixer</b>	Thomas Gauder
<b>Costume design</b>	Virginie Montel
<b>Effets visuels</b>	Mikael Tanguy
<b>Casting director</b>	Agathe Hassenforder ARDA
<b>1<sup>st</sup> assistant director</b>	Rafaèle Ravinet-Virbel
<b>Continuity</b>	Estelle Bonnet-Gérard
<b>Unit manager</b>	Philippe Morlier AFR
<b>Production manager</b>	Stéphane Riga
<b>Diaphana head of production</b>	Anne Mathieu

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