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STRANGER BY THE LAKE

A FILM BY ALAIN GUIRAUDIE

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STRANGER BY THE LAKE

A FILM BY ALAIN GUIRAUDIE

DRAMA | FRANCE | 1H37 | SCOPE | COLOR | DOLBY SRD



Summertime. A cruising spot for men, tucked away on the shores of a lake. Franck falls in love with Michel. An attractive, potent and lethally dangerous man. Franck knows this, but wants to live out his passion anyway.

INTERVIEW WITH ALAIN GUIRAUDIE

The film made me think of Georges Bataille: eroticism, sexuality, pornography, the fascination of evil...

What a way to begin! I think it would be an exaggeration to say that Bataille was at the origin of the script. The famous phrase *eroticism is assenting to life up to the point of death* made a major impression on me.

I had forgotten it, and then we talked about it again during pre-production and I realized it had been in the back of my mind all along. And I realized there were other aspects of Bataille's philosophy that overlapped with my concerns: his way of superimposing issues of eroticism, politics, and economics in the broadest, most vital sense.

Eroticism, and not pornography, is the question at the heart of *Stranger by the Lake*, in which two men fall in love while having sex. Is *Stranger by the Lake* a continuation of the all-male sex scenes at the end of *The King of Escape*?

Let's just say it both surpasses and contradicts *The King of Escape*. In terms of sexuality, I have always beat around the bush. I have never really tackled the representation of my own sexuality.

The first scenes I filmed of sex, of two intertwined bodies, of loving embraces, of kisses, happen in *The King of Escape* between a man and a young girl. Perhaps it was time for me to deal with more serious matters. To represent the birds and the bees... Not just horsing around or friends-hip-love, as I've often done... But passion-love.

In *Stranger by the Lake*, I wanted to address what it means to have someone under your skin: how far can it go?

So I began with a world I knew very well and extrapolated on the elements that interested me: the sun, the water, the forest, which are all intensely erotic and poetic. Love and passion may be uplifting, but they're above all sexual. I wanted to confront that head-on, in a different way, by creating sequences that combined the emotions of being in love with the obscenity of sex, without pitting the nobility of feelings on the one hand, against the trivial function of sex organs on the other.

It also demanded a greater investment on the part of the actors and the question quickly arose of how far they'd go... But also how far I wanted to take them.

You place the same emphasis on dialogue, bodies, nature, the wind in the trees, a bird singing, and sex scenes.

In the script there were many more graphic scenes, described frontally and unambiguously. I had planned from the beginning to use body doubles for the non-simulated shots. In the edit, we only kept what was necessary. We had an hour of incredible sunsets, but we weren't about to use them all! It's the same with sex.

I wanted to include it, but without ostentation. In a world where 10-year-old kids have almost all seen pornographic pictures on the Internet before they have even begun their active sexual lives, it seems urgent to rediscover sex as an interaction that may also be based on dialogue, seduction and love.

In *The King of Escape*, a gay man who succumbs to heterosexual temptation raised issues of the couple and society, and not only social norms. In *The King of Escape*, homosexuality was in a sense “leftist” – in other words, anarchist, communitarian, orgiastic... Hedonistic...



Utopian. In *Stranger by the Lake*, the political question is far more complex. Sexuality (and not exclusively homosexuality, insofar as, for each human being, sexuality is its own puzzle and can't be reduced to the sheer fact of being gay or straight) is closer to the individual or individualism.

A lot has been made of utopian love, of the utopian cinema. I wanted to put that discourse to the test by filming sexuality in a more documentary way, rather than recreating a fantasy world that meshed with my desires. I wanted to film what happens within the gay microcosm, to represent this type of cruising spot.

For you, is this world a microcosm of society, or does it exist outside of society and the heteronormative family? Your film is cosmic: it paints its world using light, water, the elements. The characters exist in a closed universe. Do you feel like you've turned your back on a form of utopia, insofar as making films was initially connected to utopia for you?

Yes, it was a way of reinventing the world. But the reigning discourse on utopia annoys me a little because I get the impression that love utopias no longer bear any resemblance to utopia. Today, anything goes.

The term has now been co-opted by the language of marketing. And yet utopia is the place that doesn't exist, an invisible goalpost that each of us needs to live. And cinema deals with the reality, even if it's a sublimated reality. I don't make utopian cinema even if, when I conceive of a project, when I create interactions between characters, that's what I'm striving for.

***Stranger by the Lake* represents a formal departure in your work: it's a classical film, in the Hollywood sense.**

It also represents a departure in content...

Did you have some kind of aesthetic or existential crisis?

Actually, at nearly 50, I realize I've been in perpetual existential crisis and, thus, in perpetual aesthetic crisis. I made off-beat films from the start, films that reinvent the world, that resist naturalism. *The King of Escape* followed this same principle: a middle-aged gay man falls in love with a teenage girl. It's entirely possible, but in this case it was a figment of my imagination. So I decided it was time to look at the world as it really is. I no longer wanted to sidestep it by resorting to fantasy, or transform it to fit my desires. At the point I'm at, and the world is at, it seems to me that cinema's job is no longer to represent another world, but to make do with the world as it is, to approach it from another angle and to present it differently. It's this world and not another that is in need of new horizons. And I also wanted to stop keeping things at a distance and to get to the heart of the subject... To experience the pangs of desire, to make them palpable. A real shyness hampered me in this quest: distance can also feel safe. Here I feel like I've finally given myself free reign. Until now, because of this shyness, comedy often overshadowed the sense of worry that pervades my films. Here, I was adamant about reversing that.

There is something theatrical about the decor, in that Greek tragedy sense, with its unity of place, and a story structured around light, the journey of day into night, variations in time that

create a sense of duration. The film is no longer formally utopian, but it has retained a fairytale element: the forest which hides an exciting secret. Sex, murder, blood, danger: each element is twofold, like the lake.

We thought about the film in terms of a simplification, a scaling-back – of geography first of all, then of storylines and camera blocking. With Roy Genty and Laurent Lunetta, who were with the project from start to finish, we were looking for an internal dialogue in the film between fantasy and reality. We carefully maintained a delicate balance between comedy and thriller... Between the everyday and the magical.

Were you thinking of genre films like *Creature from the Black Lagoon* or *Jaws*?

No. That's not my territory. At least not consciously. I thought it was funny to talk about a silurus in the lake. That feeds back into my games with truth, lies, and legend, which I had already introduced in my films with the *dooroot* (an imaginary root with psychotropic properties) and the *ounayes* (livestock animals that are part-sheep, part-vampire). The difference is that the silurus really does exist and has a truly ugly mug.

The lake is a central character in the film, a troubling, dual and deceptive element. It lends the film a horizontality and raises the issue of escape and freedom: can the characters escape via the lake? Or do they choose to go toward the forest?

I like to swim, but at some point it always occurs to me that there are 50 meters below me and I suddenly wonder if I could suddenly forget how to swim. I also think about all the things swimming around underneath me.



It's a calming place, and at the same time it can swallow you up forever. The good thing about a lake is you always turn to face it. You can spend hours just sitting and watching it. My films have a lot to do with the horizon, I'm always looking for new ones. In a lake, the horizon is both far-away and blocked by the hills.

The entire film is written in light and, gradually, twilight emerges—in other words the ambiguity of the human heart—not only the anxiety and fear of death, but also the thrill and anticipation of the night.

For Franck, it's above all a moment to be relished, because the man he loves will leave at nightfall. From the writing stages, I became obsessed by indications like “late afternoon,” “early dusk,” “middle dusk,” “late dusk,” which were real markers and also headaches in terms of the shooting schedule.

The passage of time is also expressed through sound. The sounds change depending on what time of day it is: birdsong, the lapping of the lake, the sound of the wind...

The presence of the outside world was essential in indicating that this idyllic cruising spot was in reality an island within a much larger reality. This presence is expressed almost entirely through sound. Since the ambient soundscape was extremely rich, we only used sounds recorded in situ. These included sounds that are often considered to be noise pollution, namely cars and planes. The question of music came up at the very beginning, but we quickly decided against it. It's all

of these ambient sounds (planes, wind, insects) that create a sort of symphony that undergirds the film.

When the sun goes down, there are fascinating transformations, at that blue hour when all the birds start to sing...

Dusk is one of the film's characters. There are rarely representations of dusk in the cinema, of its state of light and mind. In *Stranger by the Lake*, it appears over the line of mountains, or the lake, and the film often follows movements in the horizon.

Natural light often gives poor results on film. To get a richness, you have to seize those brief moments of the day, and that leaves little room for shooting an entire sequence.



With Claire Mathon, who was behind the camera, it struck us as essential to limit ourselves to natural light alone. We did everything we could to capture duration and fleeting light in the film. We would sometimes wait more than an hour for a suitable moment to shoot. When we needed shade the sun came out, and then it was the reverse. But Claire took advantage of those moments when the lake changes, and that greatly enriched the film's editing.

Dusk creates real states of anxiety in certain people.

A few years ago, I almost became alcoholic for love of the “aperitif,” that grand tradition which helps us combat the terror of nightfall and the sandman's arrival, with its obligation to sleep.

We find that terror of the sandman in *No Rest for the Brave*.

Yes, that film has a lot to do with childhood and the fear of going to sleep. If you sleep, you'll die.

Like in *Nightmare on Elm Street*. The fear of the dark, which is linked to twilight, ends up showing us the night within us. In *Stranger by the Lake*, is it the criminal who brings out the night in us? He appears out of the dusk, the twilight, in that ambiguous moment when human vision is the weakest.

It's a fragile moment. But even if it's anxiety-inducing, I always liked it a lot. And dusk is also a moment of cinematic fragility, when you only have 15 minutes to shoot a scene. I like that rushed feeling of having to wrap up a scene in two takes max. During pre-production, there was a lot of talk about shooting in perpetual twilight and delaying nightfall until the end of the film, when Franck is completely lost...

Franck, the main character, is closely connected to childhood.

This time I was less interested in emphasizing the link to childhood, and I tried to be serious and grown-up. But apparently even when I try to cast this issue aside and move on, childhood always returns. Perhaps because the gay world has a lot to do with childhood, with adolescence, with the fear of death and aging.

But I also have this childish link to sexuality: a laidback kind of sexuality, free of all pressures, of procreation, of marriage. I'm very flighty, I like to meet new partners, but it's kind of the general trend. In cruising spots, there's a very playful, very schoolyard attitude... and exclusivity has no place there. It's very “show me yours, I'll show you mine”... You mess around, as they say. And if it doesn't work out, it's no big deal.



There's no pressure. But it's not like that everywhere. After the sexual liberation of the 1970s, we now feel like we're legally required to screw, obligated to come.

Are you talking exclusively about the gay world?

No, I'm talking about today's world in general, straights included, even though there's more promiscuity among men in my opinion. Here I'm talking about a collective shift: at one time, everyone wanted sexual liberation. In the 1970s, the FHAR (Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action) had a slogan: "Workers of the world, feel each other up!" I love it. Today, we demonstrate for marriage equality. Something got lost along the way. Outdoor cruising spots are closing but they're being replaced by sex clubs with 40 euro covers.

Business interests have taken over free love. This obligation to get off is part of the consumer economy, which includes sexual consumption.

The rightward shift of society applies to homosexuals too. There is also a neoliberalization of sex.

If sexual liberation leads to an obligation to come, it can quickly become alienating.

I wonder where this quest for pleasure alone will take us. I created the character of Michel with these odd transformations in mind. Michel is a pleasure-seeker, a sexual consumer with a surfer's physique. He is strong, self-assured, emotionally detached, and once he's had his fun with someone, he gets rid of them.

You have to differentiate childhood and adolescence, hedonism being closer to adolescence. *Stranger by the Lake* is a classic film in the sense that it draws on a fairytale matrix. Franck is the child in the fairytale, the little girl or boy, Tom Thumb, or even Bluebeard's wife; and Michel is the ogre or wolf. Henri is perhaps the only adult character in the film, the only one who knows what he wants and accepts it.

The film is fairytale-like in its simplicity. That was there from the writing phase. I don't know if the idea of Bluebeard is accurate, but I like it a lot! The key stained with blood which won't come off. I started off with a trio of three male characters who might represent three facets of the same man, which they do for me: there's the flighty "cool" guy (Franck); the master seducer who disposes of his prey once it's gotten old (Michel); and the man who's fed up with all that (Henri). The other question is: how far do I let my desires take me?



You might say there are three attitudes: the guy who actually gets himself killed to fulfill his desire; the guy who realizes that hedonistic sex is more than he bargained for and has become dangerous; and the sexual neoliberal who desires a sexual object, and eliminates it when he's done, ad infinitum. Is this a critique of neoliberal sexuality addressed to the gay community?

It's not only for the gay community, but I do obviously start with my own experience, and I include myself in the community of humans, which manifests clear symptoms of this.

Thanks to the lake, we frequently change points of view. Sometimes we see the sky from the viewpoint of the person making love, sometimes we're in the water seeing things from the murderer's point of view... There's a fluidity here.

We worked a lot on the subjectivity of points of view. The question arose early on, what points of view are forbidden? We went so far as to imagine a film using only hand-held shots, where even the static shots are unsteady. And in the end I stayed pretty purist. I realized it was important that this subjectivity blend into an objectivity, that the characters' and director's points of view could overlap. The film's only true close-up is a shot of Henri that clearly represents Franck's gaze and yet is also a shot from my point of view as director.

AIDS is one of the dangers in the film before the murder, and the film raises the issue of whether or not to practice safe sex.

And it's important to raise that issue. I often see films where it's taken for granted. Guys put a condom on as though society had reached some kind of tacit agreement on the subject. I also

tend to dodge the issue, even though it comes up all the time in real life. It's not so simple. Some men are very hygienic, others very lax. AIDS brought death and sex a lot closer to each other. It has haunted and still haunts our sexual relations. Even if it doesn't pose the same threat it once did, it has changed sex a lot. We've lost something (and not nothing) in the way we make love, in the idea of abandoning ourselves completely to someone else.

Franck fits into this "romantic" tradition, he pushes sex to the limit. He acts out his desires, in the moment, and his only concern is having fun with another person. Wherever it may lead him. If he ever stops to think, it certainly isn't during these moments of intense sexuality. The project is so "love and death," it just worked.



Maybe by tackling your sexuality for the first time, you get each spectator to delve into the enigma of their own sexuality. Just as the lake in the film is the mirror of the human heart: it may be dark, cloudy, and reflect no light, or rather...

...Reflect the color of the sky. That's where the issue becomes political. You have to cultivate your own uniqueness to speak about mankind in general, to try to uncover a little universality. There are a lot of straight films that have become gay metaphors so let's just say that here I wanted to do the opposite – I wanted to make a film colored by homosexuality that could become a metaphor of society, desire, and humanity in general.



Does that happen through exploring the community?

If there's a form of gay community in the film, it's a community whose members are often alone when they're together. Is that really a community? If it is, it barely exists. All of that informs the Inspector's point of view. He finds this world strange, this way of making love until nightfall without even thinking of exchanging first names, let alone phone numbers. He points out a lack of solidarity.

But he doesn't make any moral judgment either. Instead he makes a very human remark about individualism.

The Inspector isn't trying to guilt-trip anyone, he means well. He shares more with the human community than with society. It may be within this idea of human community that we find utopia.

Your film, despite it's cruelty and darkness, remains within the horizon of humanism.

In any case, it's a real question for me: how are we alone together? The human community I dream of has struggled to exist. And, deep down, am I so sure I even want it myself? Am I willing to make sacrifices to bring it about? Yet I remain convinced that it's the only solution, in a world where the ideal seems to be to hide out on one's own property, surrounded by walls. As far away from one's neighbor as possible.

**Interview released by HÉLÈNE FRAPPAT
Translation David Pickering**



cast

Franck.....	Pierre Deladonchamps
Michel.....	Christophe Paou
Henri.....	Patrick D’Assumçao
Police inspector.....	Jérôme Chappatte
Eric.....	Mathieu Vervisch
Tuesday night man.....	Gilbert Traina
Philippe.....	Emmanuel Daumas
Eric’s boyfriend.....	Sébastien Badachaoui
Ladies man.....	Gilles Guérin
Pascal Ramière.....	François Labarthe

crew

Screenplay.....	Alain Guiraudie
D.O.P.....	Claire Mathon
Sound.....	Philippe Grivel
Art direction.....	Roy Genty
	François Labarthe
	Laurent Lunetta
Edit.....	Jean-Christophe Hym
Mix and sound mix.....	Nathalie Vidal
Director of post-production.....	Toufik Ayadi
Studio management.....	Vincent Léonard
Casting.....	Stéphane Batut
Script/First director assistant.....	Julie Darfeuil
Line producer.....	Sylvie Pialat
	Benoît Quainon
	Nicolas Leclère
	Arte France Cinéma
Région PACA	M141
Soficinéma et Cinémage	Films de Force Majeure
CNC	

ALAIN GUIRAUDIE

2013 - Stranger by the lake	Feature film Un Certain Regard - Cannes Film Festival
2009 - The king of escape	Feature film Directors Fortnight - Cannes Film Festival Athènes, Rio, Nouveau Cinéma de Montréal, Pusan, Vienne, Tokyo, San Francisco, Estoril, Turin, Gijon, New York, Melbourne, Buenos Aires Festivals
2005 - Time has come	Feature film Paris Cinema Festival Seoul (SENEF), London, Turin, Vienna Festivals
2003 - No rest for the braves	Feature film Directors Fortnight - Cannes Film Festival Festivals Yokohama (French Film Festival), La Rochelle, Vienne, Buenos-Aires, Montréal, Taipei, Brisbane, Beyrouth (European Film Festival)
2001 - That old dream that moves	Medium feature Prix Jean Vigo 2001 Grand Prix and Prix du Public - Festival de Pantin Prix Gérard Frot-Coutaz - Festival Belfort Directors Fortnight - Cannes Film Festival, Lisboa, Vienna, Buenos-Aires, New-York, Pusan, Montréal Festivals
2000 - Sunshine for the scoundrels	Medium feature Pantin, Belfort Festivals

SHORT

1997 - La force des Choses	1994 - Tout droit jusqu'au matin	1990 - Les héros sont immortels
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