



PACIFICATION - VTIFF Monthly Screening April, 2023

Interview with Albert Serra

by Emmanuel Burdeau, May 2022

PACIFICATION marks a striking new turn in many respects in your work. It's a contemporary movie, not a period piece. It's an original screenplay, not an adaptation of a literary work. The leading actor is a French movie star who recently received a Cesar award. The narrative, more classic than in your previous films, steers its way between chronicle and political thriller. And last but not least, the plot takes place in Tahiti. How did such an unusual project come about?

To be specific, it isn't the first time that I've made a film taking place "in the present." I've already made several, to my great enjoyment, in connection with commissions for the contemporary art world. The original project for PACIFICATION was that of a film taking place in France. Yet, I didn't whatsoever want to film in Paris, the banality and dreariness of mainland bourgeois France with its streets and its cafés... I wanted something different, I wanted to go somewhere far away. Why not the French overseas territories? Little by little, a subject emerged, and I wrote a complete screenplay that is quite traditional in its construction. Contrary to what people might think, I enjoy writing screenplays. This one, in particular, is inspired by Tarita Tériipaia's memoirs. Tarita was married to Marlon Brando for ten years. They'd met while filming MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY (1962), in which she had one of the leading roles. In her memoirs, she talks about her life with the actor, but also about her childhood. I found the contrasts that she brought up very interesting, first of all between the pure innocence of her childhood in Papeete and the sometimes noxious presence of the Westerners, secondly between this pristine paradise on earth and the arrival of a Hollywood filming crew. The rapport between an ideal paradise and actual corruption, but also between a certain reality and cinema's make-believe appeared rather inspiring to me... As for Benoît Magimel, I met him in Cannes three years ago as he was presenting Rebecca Zlotowski's AN EASY GIRL, in which he is brilliant. We chatted informally; I instantly spotted in him a rarely found capacity to be both genuine and shallow.

In the end, how much of the initial screenplay is there still in the final cut of the film?

Both very little and a lot. Very little from a narrative point of view, but a lot from other perspectives. Indeed, the screenplay had a specificity which, in a certain way, is still there in the film—there is no dialog strictly speaking. However, all the characters' thoughts are re-transcribed with extreme precision. These are at the same time the thoughts that can be communicated to the people he meets and also the thoughts that can't be, which he must keep for himself like an inner monologue. I imagined that the part of it that can be communicated could feed into the dialog while the other, non-communicable part would enable the viewer to grasp what is at stake, what is brewing beneath the surface, in fact what truly matters...

A character akin to the high-ranking official interpreted by Magimel was already in the storyline, and appeared in a great number of scenes. Following someone, adhering to their every thought, knowing everything on their mind yet without knowing much more, seeing things through their eyes, having the impression that their speaking is an extension of their thoughts, or as though they're speaking to themselves... All of this appeals greatly to me. In Polanski's CHINATOWN, for instance, Jack Nicholson is present in every scene and the viewer discovers everything at the same time he does, having the same information as Nicholson's character. In PACIFUNCTION, it's the same thing, the viewer is always with Magimel's character, except for a short scene in a nightclub, which has no bearing on the plot. The viewer shares in real time this sort of paranoia that the character, while displaying an unshakable composure, drags with him everywhere he goes and whose object, to say the least, is far from clear.

Hence, I imagine, the play on words in the film's international title: PACIFUNCTION—the rambling, the speculating, everything churning in the head of a man living on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, all the stories he tells himself...

Yes. It's fascinating to film today's world and I do so without any ideology, without pre-conceived ideas or the wish to channel a voice and a stance on the era. Or if I do so, it's only on the slightest level. I'm only interested in pictures. In this instance, the depiction of a paradise which has us wondering whether it really does exist or whether it's only a mirage; whether the possible resumption of nuclear testing, the presence of French engineers, corruption, and real estate speculation—whether all of this isn't in truth the very opposite of paradise, a sort of continuation of colonialism into the 21st century. This contrast is what I'm interested in. Most of the film, however, happens essentially in the mind of this affable, enigmatic man that we follow for over two and a half hours. He imagines things, fears other things, but everything remains hazy. Everything is hazy in PACIFUNCTION!

It's with this perspective in mind that I suppressed, almost systematically, everything that could too explicitly refer to the island's social circumstances. There are only the faintest traces of this. I'm thinking in particular about religious puritanism, the sometimes restricted access to alcohol or casinos, colonial tensions, expats—people who leave Metropolitan France after a failure and discover an easy life that is, however, a bit dreary—obesity, which has become ubiquitous since fast-food restaurants have replaced the fishing industry, or also the dire state of health of the population in general... All these layers remain but are barely perceptible. This was our idea: suppress upon editing everything which, as it referred to a social issue, didn't fit in with pure cinematographic license. I therefore set corruption aside, as well as all other images already seen in TV series... for everything that relates to submarines and nuclear testing seemed for me, on the contrary, to better correspond with a more powerful fantasy. Besides, there's nothing real here, or at least for the time being, even though the war in Ukraine has once again placed nuclear technology at the heart of the matter.

When did you shoot the film?

In August 2021, for 25 days, while Tahiti was in complete lockdown. It felt as though we were on a deserted island, as if it had been turned into a film set for us. And as the cast and crew members all caught Covid at one point or another, this further emphasized the impression of haziness and emptiness.

Even if he remains an enigma, can you tell us in a few words who this high-ranking official played by Benoît Magimel is?

His name is De Roller, and he is the High Commissioner of the French Republic. In every region in France, there are Prefects, except for French Polynesia, where the title is High Commissioner. De Roller is both a senior civil servant and a politician; he is the highest ranking official of the French government in Polynesia. We actually met with the man who assumes that position today (he has nothing whatsoever in common with our character!) and the lunch scene was filmed in his residence, where the French president is also housed when visiting Tahiti. In fact, President Macron came to the island while we were filming.

We follow this man, on foot, in his car, in night clubs, everywhere, even in an amazing scene in the waves on a jet ski. It's really quite incredible how close the viewer is to him, the extent to which we feel we're actually in the film, moving about within the film by the character's side—rarely has the expression “entering into a film” been so relevant. On the other hand, we never see him at home or at the office.

This is something that was already in the screenplay: the viewer is not on intimate terms

with the character; once again, everything is happening in his head. I really liked the idea that De Roller was always on the move. And also I couldn't fathom going so far for a film shoot to end up filming in an office.

You've always filmed mythomaniacs, people who live wrapped up in their own legend or delirium, soliloquizing with great panache amidst a landscape while vaguely having the foreboding that the end of their glory is growing near... All the more so for De Roller, except for the fact that he isn't a historical figure or a universally celebrated name in literature. Is his character's origin to be found in the realm of literature, however?

It may seem strange, as we're referring to a great author, but I did have a character from THE CHARTERHOUSE OF PARMA in mind, Count Mosca: a somewhat cynical creature, a politician from the State of Parma who is always in a form of ambiguity due to manipulation... De Roller was like that at first—manipulating and cynical. In the end, he is less so, for everything remains hazy and unclear, the resumption of nuclear testing, this submarine he thinks he sees but which, seen from above, could very well just be a whale, this entire threat that never really unfolds into the storyline... Only the most important remains: the fundamental ambiguity of human beings.

I use the term "hazy" in a deliberately positive manner. I think that current films tend to be dreadfully explanatory and didactic. I feel as though they're addressing children who ceaselessly need to have everything explained to them. Conversely, mine seems perfectly normal to me. In my opinion, this comes from TV series, writing teams working from an initial screenplay which is analyzed, rewritten, etc. Films are often analyses of films. The exact opposite of what I'm striving for: pure creation, the risk taken by someone who takes a leap without knowing ahead of time what he or she is going to do next.

PACIFCTION is, in your filmography, the film where speech—often whispered, and even more often delivering brutality in the guise of courtesy—plays the greatest part. How did you work on the dialog? You usually allow for improvisation; was this also how you worked with Benoît Magimel?

I have always worked using the same method, but it has been refined and has become more sophisticated over time. I shot the film with three cameras, in this instance three Canon Black Magic Pocket cameras, which is the smallest model available and with which no film had ever been shot until then. I don't give the screenplay to the actors, or rather I don't tell them which scene we're going to film until the day before or the very morning of the shoot. This can arouse tension, but I believe that this way of doing things

places everyone in the right kind of energy. For each scene, I pick one theme or more, or variations on the same theme. For *STORY OF MY DEATH*, for instance, I'd put a certain pressure on the actor who played Casanova by blurting out sentences to him during the take. Here it was different. Benoît and I used an earpiece. As my French is still far from being perfect, I had an assistant with me, Baptiste Pinteaux, who played in my previous film, *LIBERTÉ*, and used to work for a publishing company—he is simply gifted when it comes to rephrasing things instantly as I say them.

Magimel is outstanding with an earpiece. I have never seen anyone able to repeat a sentence as fast as he does, let alone adapt it or even improve it. Instantly, without thinking or intention, in a completely organic manner. And yet, De Roller often finds himself in situations that are totally absurd and quite removed from everyday life. I watch Magimel on screen and see no trace of acting. It's tremendous.

There's something crucial about this approach that people sometimes find difficult to understand. If you shoot with three cameras, the actor can't position himself with respect to one of them and play as if he were addressing one of them. He has to turn his energy inwards, not outwards. The earpiece enhances that, creating a vertical and inner energy that I find unique. Instead of communicating with the camera and offering himself to it, the actor enters into a sort of trance.

Benoît Magimel is also surrounded by actors and characters who are quite unique... Can you tell us more about that?

Sergi Lopez plays a nightclub owner who is a man of few words but efficient nonetheless. Marc Susini, who also was in *THE DEATH OF LOUIS XIV* and *LIBERTÉ*, plays an admiral who is rather strange—especially when you think he's at the head of an entire fleet!—perhaps a drug addict, and who is the one who speaks the film's last line. The author who has come to take a rest far from home is played by a real-life writer, Cécile Guilbert, a Warhol and Saint-Simon specialist whom I met through a mutual friend, Catherine Millet. Lluís Serrat is also there, as in all my films since *HONOR OF THE KNIGHTS (QUIXOTIC)*. On the other hand, through a Facebook casting we found Matahi Pambrun, a local actor who plays the young clan chief with whom De Roller has stormy relations: he is extraordinary. Another local cast member is Pahoā Mahagafanau, who plays the splendid Shannah, whose importance kept growing as we were shooting the film. Shannah is part of what the local tradition calls RaeRae or Mahu, i.e. men who are raised like women and whom the families or society as a whole destined for "female-oriented" employment. Today, these persons have the possibility of going through gender reassignment surgery but for a long time it wasn't the case and made for greater ambiguity. I know that transsexuality is a subject widely broached today but this isn't

the reason why the character became so important; it just happened, because I really love Shannah. One of my obsessions has always been to create images or situations that are unprecedented in cinema. The bizarre and moving scene on the terrace in which De Roller writes in his little black book while speaking with Shannah, comparing her with a lioness, their smiles, the undefined relationship between the two of them, is I believe something that has never been seen in a film before.

With the lighting, the precision of the shots, the harshness of some of the enigmatic faces—I am specifically thinking of a man with an emaciated face sporting sunglasses that we often see in the background—PACIFUNCTION seems to allude to the codes of American thrillers.

I agree! While shooting, I thought of 1970s or early 1980s film such as Alan J. Pakula's THE PARALLAX VIEW or Ivan Passer's CUTTER'S WAY: films about paranoia, the end of a dream, about losing one's control or self-image. De Roller is all of that. He fails to manage and juggle things, he fears that his hierarchy—which, what's more, he openly challenges— might ostracize him, he seems convinced that he is soon to be dismissed... He imagines that things are decided in very high spheres of power, and in secret or hidden places, when in fact what we see is that it all comes down to rather small, rather basic things. It's as if we were missing the intermediate level, that of reality.

You were among the first filmmakers to take advantage of digital tools to amass hours of rushes? Was it the case here as well?

More than ever. We had over 540 hours' worth of rushes, or 180 hours per camera, bearing in mind that the three of them were filming at the same time most of the time. You can imagine the number of situations and characters who had to disappear at the editing stage! Here is how we handled it: to begin with, at the end of each day of the film shoot, the complete transcription of the dialog was sent to Paris. We thus ended with a PDF of 1,276 full pages without which we'd have been absolutely lost: how would we otherwise have found our way through this enormous mass of things said, which sometimes had no consistent connection? While editing, we worked as a team of three with Artur Tort and Ariadna Ribas. I first watched everything by myself—all the images from the three cameras running on one screen split into three frames. I remember I started on October 14th last year and finished the first week of January 2022, with an average of 8 to 9 hours a day, only taking a one-week break for Christmas.

So, I watched everything, noted down what I liked. Only what I liked and nothing else: a gesture, a reaction, a sentence, a three-minute dialog... In total, 300 pages of notes, which we made several copies of in order to make sure we wouldn't lose them. Then

the editing work per se could start. I asked my two editors to only edit what I liked. Forget the narrative. At any rate, my energy is never focused on the dramatic arc; it's always by chance—As in THE DEATH OF LOUIS XIV—that it ends up appearing. I ask the editors to bring the film into existence solely based on what I like in the rushes. In my opinion, part of the secret lies right there. What's the point of forcing yourself to do or take things you're not excited about?

And is there already something new and exciting on the horizon for you?

Yes. A film about contemporary art, if possible with a star in the leading role, and about which the only thing I can give you is the title: I AM AN ARTIST.