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THE ART OF NOTHING

A COMEDY BY **STEFAN LIBERSKI**



THE ART OF NOTHING

A film by Stefan Liberski

With Benoît Poelvoorde, Camille Cottin, François Damiens, Gustave Kervern

2024 - Comedy - Belgium, France - 1h50

SYNOPSIS

Jean-Yves Machond (Benoît Poelvoorde), a conceptual painter whose career came to an abrupt halt following a series of setbacks, decides to leave Brussels and his job as a teacher to settle in Étretat (in French Normandy), the ultimate embodiment of Impressionism. Here he is seeking inspiration to create his major work that, once presented to the world, will finally earn him eternal glory and recognition. The problem is, he has no idea what he wants to paint ... There, between Bagnoule, a figurative painter and bon vivant, a naive, warm-hearted individual who will draw him out of his lethargy with his bonhomie, and the "charming" Cécile de Mauprès (Camille Cottin), gallery owner and manipulator who will disrupt his concentration, his meeting with the locals will prove decisive for the fulfilment of his plan. Reality can be a bitch.





INTERVIEW with STEFAN LIBERSKI

By Anne-Claire Cieutat

Your world and that of Jean-Philippe Delhomme seem closely related. What attracted you to his novel *La Dilution de l'artiste*, which you have loosely adapted, and its central character, Machond?

Since we've known each other (a long time), Benoît Poelvoorde and I have always talked about books and literature more than about cinema. We both love reading and discussing what we've read. One day, we realized that we both enjoyed the works of Jean-Philippe Delhomme, and during a festival in Namur, we happened to find ourselves standing around a cocktail table with Jean-Philippe. That's when we started discussing the possibility of adapting *La Dilution de l'artiste*, one of his novels, for the big screen. That's where it all began.

Jean-Philippe is French, but he shares with Belgians a very Flaubertian ability to imitate stupidity without it being too obvious—or barely at all—and to have a lot of fun with clichés of all kinds. Commonplaces are everywhere, you just have to look for them. The character of Machond intrigued me because he represents a very contemporary form of escapism from reality. It seems that, more and more, people are drowning in images or trapping themselves in meaningless chatter, in “ideas,” especially the ones they have about themselves. I wanted to freely draw from this novel to create the basis for a comedy about denial of reality, or unreality, which a character like Jean-Yves Machond, a conceptual artist, suffers from. We catch him at the moment when he seems determined to “heal himself” and change his lifestyle, or at least his artistic period. But even that decision—to “give it all up,” leave, go to Normandy, the land of the Impressionists to be infused by it—remains for him just an idea, a fantasy, a concept. Perhaps he has a real desire to evolve, but he struggles to free himself from the imagery he constantly cultivates. So it's primarily this character from the novel that inspired the film.

Like Krapp in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, Machond soliloquizes a lot. He pontificates, answers imaginary interviews, and seems haunted by the absence of his daughter, a character you invented...

Machond is a hero of nihilism, the kind we find everywhere in today's world. His obsession is emptiness, the emptiness that has become his work and from which he tries to escape—that's essentially what the film is about: Machond's great escape. But Machond remains deeply attached to this emptiness, filled with ruminations, self-interviews with sometimes different, but always imaginary, contradictors, quotations, attitudes that he attributes to an approved avant-garde, etc. Machond constantly chews on words and ruminates over ideas. In this absence of reality, which makes him suffer, I thought it was necessary to bring in elements from his real past. Hence, the idea of a daughter, his daughter, who lives far from him and whom he hasn't seen grow up.

Where does your interest in maladapted characters come from, those who, in some of your films or novels, flirt with the margins, are caught up in dreams, illusions, or nothingness?

Aside from a psychoanalytic explanation, which would surely contain some truth, I am often touched by the fragility of people who hide behind ready-made speeches but who also doubt, just like those who, in order to breathe, try to poke small holes in a world full of ready-to-use ideologies with no keyholes, where empathy is not always present. In those intermediate zones, between reality and obsessive thoughts, memories of old frustrations, etc., sometimes there is a way, a light...



Around Machond are characters, some of whom seem straight out of a comic strip, like Le Homet and his partner, or a fairy tale, like the man on the bus who says he has a “wolf in his heart”...

For the character of Le Homet, who appears in the novel, I started with his name to build him: is he a man or a woman? Or both? The film plays with this rather current ambiguity, but one that I wanted to portray as already mundane, something that has been accepted by the world, so to speak, and can be gently caricatured without causing discomfort.

The bus scene is indeed like a fairy tale. I love its tone. It might be a dream, it might be reality. A dream or reality whose meaning eludes us. In other words, this enchanted parenthesis cannot be closed on a single interpretation. Everyone will perceive it in their own way. It's a kind of metonymy for any work of art.

The power of the group as a remedy for melancholy is at the heart of The art of nothing. Your film, in fact, ends on an ascending, choral movement, unlike the novel, which ends with Machond going down a staircase. Is The art of nothing a manifesto in favor of the collective?

Of course! It was important to me that Machond gradually move towards better listening to the world. In a way, the painter Macha Moniak urges him: “Listen to the world, that way you'll see it better!”. Machond and his inner voices fall silent, Machond listens, lets go of some of his all-consuming concepts, and finally accesses a bit more reality, that of others in their otherness, and incidentally, beauty. It's in this dynamic between his “self” and others, whom he finally reaches, that Machond will be able to experience joy—a joy of reunion—which will be the end of the film. The film is meant to be light: it's a comedy, after all, and I wanted it to move towards this optimism, towards joy, partly to contradict the affliction of our age, namely withdrawal into oneself and the identity syntheses that lead to isolation and loneliness—whether alone or in groups of “likeminded” people. The conformity of “different” people today is bewildering. Art is meant to draw us out of ourselves, out of our repetitive thoughts; it invites a healthy shift. In my humble way, I wanted to point in this direction with a nod and a wink.

Several metallic elements bring Machond back to materiality, to something concrete: his car being hit by the doctor, his mushroom house slipping and becoming a character of its own, the outsider art in Le Homet's garden...

Yes, it's all constructed that way. This mushroom house, or flying saucer house, designed by Georges Mouton, a conceptual architect from the 1970s, is fragile. In reality, it creaks, it moves, it trembles. The bumper of Machond's car (an “antique” whose choice is very likely another one of Machond's conceptual deliberations) collapses. All these elements contrast with the ideal world of concepts in which Machond has trapped himself. Reality bumps up against this utopia of the mushroom house where he lives, which is why this house is so important in the film. In my film Bunker Paradise, the house was also a character. I like giving locations this kind of status.

Your characters seem to exist in a separate space-time, at the interface between East and West...

This is likely suggested by the mention of China through the character of Déborah, by Machond's cyclical repetitions of the same mistakes, by the house's round shape, symbolizing perhaps a circular time, but one that slips. Its spaces are shaken, mixed up—then they return to their place, but transformed. This is also part of the fairy-tale-like space-time. Cinema, like art in general, allows us to create and experience a different relationship to time than what ordinary life offers.

You also break up the narrative by punctuating it with paintings by Monet, Courbet, or Constable...

The presence of these paintings as still images does indeed interrupt and slightly disrupt the flow of the story. Each time, it's like a short pause. Sometimes, the paintings echo the locations depicted. Once glorified by great painters, the film confronts them with the present of what once served as their model. Other times, the painting interacts with the narrative and Machond's emotions, like the one of the shipwreck. It prompts the viewer to take a step aside, a moment of subtle contemplation, and a shift, I think, in relation to the film's time and space.

How did you conceive your framing, the lighting, and the soft tones with your cinematographer Hichame Alaouié, whom you reunite with after Tokyo Fiancée?

I wanted static, fairly composed shots, mostly wide shots that could encompass the sky, roads, the sea, the horizon. Few close-ups. And I wanted a range of pleasant colors. Hichame Alaouié and I worked very well together on Tokyo Fiancée. We share the same vision of a film, we instinctively know what it should feel like. Of course, we set an overall aesthetic line, and then there's the reality of the shoot. But the choice of lenses, lighting, and shot values always comes about very naturally between us. For me, one of the risks with this film was that it could come across as harsh, that Machond might seem unpleasant, which I didn't want at all. With Hichame, we approached him with a tender camera, and this tenderness extends to all the characters. Hichame's lighting played a big part in that.

How did you cast your actors?

Benoît Poelvoorde became Machond as soon as we met with Jean-Philippe Delhomme. Benoît brings so much truth to his acting, and he exudes such humanity that his Machond immediately became endearing.

I've known François Damiens for a long time, and I wanted him to be part of this adventure. I love his presence, his spontaneity, and his ability to bring a character to life in one or two shots, in just a few seconds.

I admired Camille Cottin a lot without knowing her personally. I sent her the script, and two days later, she told me she was in. Besides being delightful, she has an instinctive, immediate understanding of characters, which is obviously a joy for a director.

Lorella Cravotta, I've followed since Les Deschiens. One day, I saw her in Oranges Sanguines, and in that instant, I thought she'd make a perfect Macha Moniak. I can't explain these things.

I've known Laurence Bibot for a long time; we've worked a lot together for TV, back when we did Les Snuls or JAADTOLY. For me, there was no one else who could play Le Homet. I never thought of anyone else. She accepted right away and brought all her talent to the role.

I've also known Gustave Kervern for over thirty years, although not well. We'd cross paths from time to time, but it wasn't until this film that we really connected! He was born to play Bagnoule. Gus has a unique, indefinable presence on screen, and I love it.

Marine Dandoy, who plays Déborah, is a non-professional actress. I love directing beginners—just as much as I love working with experienced actors. Sometimes they bring unexpected, fascinating nuances. I sensed that Marine would be perfect for the role, and as I hoped, she brought freshness, sparkle, and enthusiasm to it.

How did you write your dialogues, which are sometimes cruder than in the novel?

I thought it was interesting that a character who's immersed in fantasy and endless internal repetition would be confronted with crude words. These words interrupt and crack the continuum of his rehashing and pasteurized concepts. They shock him a little, this man who thinks he controls all his emotions. And it's very funny, especially when those words make Benoît jump. In any case, shifts in language registers are always great comedic tools.

How did you approach the set design with Maude Piette? And why did you choose Mers-les-Bains as the setting for this story?

Maude was one of the great encounters of this shoot. Building that mushroom house was a real challenge, practically an impossible task given our constraints. What she achieved amazed me. I also wanted the other sets to be pictorially beautiful, like Bagnoule's home or Macha's studio. All these places allow Machond to gradually open up to the world. It was important to me that they be welcoming and warm.

While scouting locations with my first assistant, Dimitri Linder, we drove around the Bay of Somme from the tip of Houdel down to Normandy. That's how we discovered the cliffs of Mers-les-Bains. We were already in Le Tréport, right across from it, when we saw the cliffs from afar. Right away, it struck us as the perfect setting for the film. When we got there, on the way, the more we approached, the more obvious it became.



On the very spot where we built the house, there was a sheep grazing, staring at us. The (fictional) architect of Machond's house is called Georges Mouton (mouton means sheep in French). So, clearly, it was the right place to film! I'm not making this up. It's pure chance, of course. But I've often experienced this in "my life in cinema." When you're in good spirits, surrounded by good spirits, reality (chance) becomes generous. It brings about little miracles. Finding that location was one example, as were the many happy accidents that happened during the shoot and its preparation. That's why I love making films so much and working with the teams who make them with me. Groups united by a common goal, with positive energy, as they say, are incredibly powerful.

For the music, you worked once again with your son, Casimir Liberski...

Yes. We're very close. He's a composer and loves cinema. I didn't want "French comedy" music, nor a little Debussy-like score, for example, that would fit with Monet's paintings. I wanted something more unexpected. So, we played with a palette of electronic sounds and rhythms, blending them with acoustic piano sounds, a "real piano," to echo, once again, the meeting of two registers of the world.

Is there, for you, an art of being happy?

Indeed, it's an art. A delicate art. It's an art of stepping outside oneself. It largely involves letting go, but not completely. On the path to being (happy), I know for sure that there's some self-forgetting. I think it's necessary to step out of the Machondian concept of self—the over-constructed self—without completely destroying it, as that would drive you mad. But alas, as soon as I declare "I am happy" or "I am joyful," I've probably already half-stepped out of happiness or joy. I'll tell you this: the best thing is to make a film with wonderful people. You're happy, but you don't have time to think about it.



STEFAN LIBERSKI'S BIOGRAPHY

Stefan Liberski was born in Brussels in 1951. Graduate in Art History from the Free University of Brussels, he lived in Italy from 1979 to 1983. He works notably on the set of Federico Fellini's "La Città delle Donne". He then lives in Rome. In 1985, he returns to Brussels where he first works as an advertising copywriter, then as producer, director and actor for television and cinema. Besides his work as a filmmaker, he pursues since then an activity as a writer.

FILMS

TOKYO FIANCÉE

Production Versus/ Les Films du Worso/ Forum Films, 2015 (Fiction feature)

Adapted from « Ni d'Eve ni d'Adam », by Amélie Nothomb

With Pauline Etienne, Taichi Inoue, Alice de Lencquesaing, Julie Le Breton

Photography : Hichame Alaouié

BABY BALLOON

Production Versus/ Hold Up, 2013 (Fiction feature)

With Ambre Grouwels, Philippe Rebbot, César Domboy, Pauline Parigot

Photography : Claire Mathon. Magritte de l'espoir féminin for Ambre Grouwels

EN CHANTIER, MONSIEUR TANNER

Production Chic Films/Saga Films, Canal +, 2010 (TV Film)

Adapted from « Vous plaisantez, monsieur Tanner » by Jean-Paul Dubois

With Jean-Paul Rouve, Anne-Lise Hesme

Photography : Vincent Muller

BUNKER PARADISE

Production Artémis, 2005 (Fiction feature)

With Jean-Paul Rouve, François Vincentelli, Audrey Marnay, Bouli Lanners

Photography : Jean-Paul De Zaeytijd

Emile Cantillon Prize at FIFF 2005





INTERVIEW with BENOÎT POELVOORDE

By Anne-Claire Cieutat

You share with Stefan Liberski a fondness for the literary world of Jean-Philippe Delhomme. What attracted you to *La Dilution de l'artiste* and the script of *The art of nothing*, which is loosely inspired by it?

La Dilution de l'artiste is the first book by Jean-Philippe Delhomme that I read. One day, Stefan Liberski, Jean-Philippe, and I found ourselves at a festival and talked about our mutual desire to adapt this novel for the screen. In the end, the film mainly retains the character of Machond, his circle, and the general spirit of the text. Jean-Philippe, Stefan, and I share a kind of critical and humorous perspective on the art world. We enjoy mocking people who strive to say very thoughtful things with utmost seriousness. I found it really fun to poke fun at the Artist with a capital A!

You all possess multiple talents: Jean-Philippe Delhomme writes and paints, Stefan Liberski is a director, screenwriter, and writer, and you act and draw...

It allows us to have one foot in and one foot out when we're doing something. When Jean-Philippe addresses the world of contemporary art, he knows what he's talking about. The three of us love to laugh at what we've observed in the artistic circles we've been part of. For instance, I remember some teachers from my graphic design studies, where I took contemporary art classes, who were almost caricatures, and it makes me want to laugh about it, without any malice. Just like if you took me to a water bar where people recite poetry while listening to jazz, my sense of irony would kick in immediately! That being said... We all have a little Machond inside us!

What touches you about Jean-Yves Machond?

He's a character I adore, a fool who breaks my heart. This poor guy is incapable of finding his place and takes refuge in words, in endless babble. He's the sum of all the annoying traits found in pseudo-intellectuals who are full of themselves with culture and analysis. But all his views are clichés! He says he "rejects the dictatorship of beauty," but what does that even mean? He embodies a kind of informed political correctness. Through him, we gently mock all those who resemble him. Machond moves me because, deep down, he's afraid to take risks and always hides behind conventional ideas. He'll be eco-conscious or woke when it suits him, trying to please everyone, and dissolves into that stance. So much so that he's incapable of standing up for himself when he suffers small humiliations in his relationship with Cécile. His friend Bagnoule suggests that he observe life, look at the world instead of trapping himself in his concepts, and that does him good.

How did you create his look, with that unique hairstyle, and how did you develop his sometimes almost slapstick body language?

That haircut was the result of a happy accident. Just before shooting, I was filming *L'Amour ouf* by Gilles Lellouche, who insisted that I shave my temples. Stefan, on the other hand, wanted me to have a big beard and long hair, but there was no way I was wearing wigs given the high temperatures we'd be dealing with. During hair tests, with my shaved temples, I thought I should also clear the back of my head to accentuate Machond's foolishness, that I needed to play it full-on. This resulted in the monk-like haircut, and with those glasses, we had the character's silhouette, perfectly suited for a summer shoot! The body language naturally came together with the costumes chosen by Stefan and his costume designer, which are quite similar to what Stefan himself wears. It made me think that there's a bit of Machond in Stefan, or maybe a bit of Stefan in Machond!



And his voice, his diction, especially when he monologues in his house? We hear rhythmic variations in your delivery, but very few pauses...

As soon as I put on those glasses, I adopted the tone of a guy pontificating in his own corner. Just like how his raincoat and Japanese-inspired outfits shaped the way I moved. For this film, I loved working on the details, such as these slight variations, brief moments of stillness, and restarts in his speech, like those tiny head movements in the police station scene when the cop suggests he learn to shut up. During the self-interviews—since the man is vain—there are hardly any pauses. Machond never stops rambling until the end!

How did Stefan Liberski direct you?

Since we know each other very well, we didn't need to talk much. We understand each other and laugh at the same things. We did a few readings before filming; then, on set, Stefan made a few adjustments and had to calm my impatient nature—I hate waiting around on a set!

How did you work with your co-stars?

Most of the cast was Belgian, and we had a blast because it's clear that Belgian shoots are more relaxed than others. François Damiens and I are like brothers; we dive into scenes together wholeheartedly. Gustave Kervern is also a great companion—everything flows with him. Camille Cottin and I didn't know each other, but we clicked right away: she loves acting so much and approaches it with such finesse that it's a pleasure to be her partner. Everything feels natural with her. She can bring a different tone to every take. Camille was really born on the right side of the acting world.

To what extent did the filming environment, especially the mushroom house set, inspire you?

I loved filming in Mers-les-Bains. I really like the Opal Coast in general; the people there are so kind. As for the mushroom house, which looks like a spaceship, hats off to the set design team! But we shot during a heatwave, and it was like an oven! I remember sweating like an old sponge...

What I really loved about this shoot was that I had a dressing room that I could decorate with my drawings. Since I was playing a painter, I had a great time with it!

Is there an art to being happy for you?

I don't think so, or at least I think we're not aware of it. It's pointless to practice an art we know nothing about. The only way to try to be happy is to live in the present moment. Forget the past. Don't look toward the future. Just try to be here, hic et nunc!



INTERVIEW with FRANÇOIS DAMIENS

By Anne-Claire Cieutat

What do you appreciate about Stefan Liberski's world?

Stefan and I have known each other forever, but aside from a cameo I made in one of his sketches for Canal+ about twenty years ago, we hadn't worked together. I really like his universe. Stefan is a true Belgian in the sense that he doesn't take himself too seriously. I appreciate his way of telling stories, whether in Bunker Paradise, Tokyo Fiancée, or this film. There's something childlike about him, in the best sense of the word. I love his gentle temperament and his eclectic approach to artistic practice.

How do you see Claude Fouasse, this doctor character that you play straight?

Claude is married to a gallery owner, but he doesn't belong to the world of artists. He's not about appearances, he can be quite rough, but he's also a vulnerable and jealous man who feels his wife might slip away from him. So, he behaves like a bull in a china shop. I imagined him as a pragmatic practitioner, the opposite of a medical researcher. In short, a basic man! I enjoy playing this type of character, who reacts to the environment and knows how to break the rules a little.

How did you work with Stefan Liberski and your co-stars?

This film was shot in a very playful, lighthearted atmosphere. Benoît Poelvoorde was in great form and would put on one-man shows between takes! He and I have worked together often. When we're in a scene, we like to go all in. We jump in without knowing where we'll land, and that feeds our mutual enjoyment. It's a lot of fun. It was the same with Camille Cottin, who is very professional, kind, a good team player, and funny. But between two mischievous animals like Benoît and me, she must have wondered where she had ended up sometimes... As for Stefan, he was thrilled to see all of us fully immersed in his comedy. He could sense that we were enjoying playing for him. He's someone who is precise, but who knows how to stay calm and reassuring.

Is being happy an art for you?

If there's one thing you can't fake, it's life... If being happy is an art, it's the art of a tightrope walker. You can't neglect any sphere: family, friends, work, health, passions... You have to be fully present in all of them, which can sometimes be quite a feat.





INTERVIEW with GUSTAVE KERVEN

By Anne-Claire Cieutat

What touches you about the intersecting worlds of Stefan Liberski and Philippe Delhomme?

I am very sensitive to painting and take a great interest in it, so the universe of this film had everything to appeal to me, especially since I had never played the role of a painter before. Films that highlight amateur painters are rare, and I love the perspective that Stefan brings to them. I'm moved by these men and women who live simply, who make small progress step by step, and follow winding paths that don't necessarily lead to fame. I love art in general and those who practice it, regardless of their level. The film questions the principle of creation, which sometimes plays out on a small scale. The people in this story uplift each other through the practice of painting. I've always loved artistic groups, like the surrealists or the dadaists. In a world as individualistic as ours, it's always nice to be able to support a sense of community. Moreover, with Benoît Delépine, we are very close to the Belgians. We love that spirit, full of originality and poetry, which often characterizes them.

Who is Bagnoule? How does he fit into this community in Mers-les-Bains?

Bagnoule is an idealist, a good-natured person who brings people together within this small group. He is a deeply humane and positive man, who manages to form a friendship with Machond, who doesn't have such an easy relationship with others. Bagnoule helps him find a bit of humanity and learn to relax a little. He is also someone capable of seeing reality before the painting. He doesn't forget to look at the world. He is a contemplative person, very sensitive to beauty, which makes him very touching.

How did you work with Stefan Liberski and your co-stars?

Stefan is a very calm and meticulous person, but he gives his actors freedom of movement, which is greatly appreciated. There was a relaxed atmosphere on his set. I've known Benoît Poelvoorde for a long time, and it's always a pleasure to work and act with him. He's strong, talented, and constantly inventive, whether in front of the camera or off set. He had even started decorating his dressing room, which became a true work of art by the end of the shoot! Benoît is always creating and remains attentive to everything happening around him. With the other actors, we formed a harmonious group, much like the one depicted in the film.

Is being happy an art for you?

Exactly! We try to move toward this art, little by little. Life is like pointillism... For a melancholic person like me, it's not always easy, but art, in particular, helps me a lot. I'm curious about all artistic fields. An exhibition can make me happy. Art in general contributes to my happiness.

CAST

Jean-Yves Machond	Benoît Poelvoorde
Cécile Fouasse-Demaupré	Camille Cottin
Claude Fouasse	François Damiens
Bagnoule	Gustave Kervern
Le Homet	Laurence Bibot
Macha Moniak	Lorella Cravotta
Deborah	Marine Dandoy

CREW

Director	Stefan Liberski
Script and dialogues	Stefan Liberski <i>based on the novel by Jean-Philippe Delhomme, 'La dilution de l'artiste' (Editions Denoël)</i>
DOP	Hichame Alaouié
Sound	Thomas Gastinel
Set designer	Maude Piette
Casting	Michael Bier
Prop Master	Nicolas Vrancken, Guillaume Duhoux
Costumes	Claire Dubien
Make-up Artist	Kill Wertz
Line producer	Marianne Lambert
Post-Production Supervisor	Julien Melebeck
Sound Mixer	Laure Arto
Editing	Frédérique Broos
Musical Composer	Casimir Liberski
Color Grading	Evy Roselet
Producers	Patrick Quinet & Bertrand Faivre





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