

Les Films de Pierre and Maïa Cinema
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INTERNATIONAL
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“Believe only what your eyes see.”

Corneille, L'illusion Comique, Act V.

The Screen Illusion

a film adaptation by Mathieu Amalric
based on “L'illusion Comique”, the masterpiece by Corneille

Synopsis

The Screen Illusion follows a father seeking his long lost son which he hasn't seen in over a decade. The search leads him to a cave inhabited by a wizard with the power to make up for lost time, showing him everything he missed out on during his son's life.

Mathieu Amalric's film adaptation of Pierre Corneille's classic play is set in modern day France : in this adaptation, the wizard is a high end Concierge, and the cave where they meet is a luxurious hotel in Paris.



Director's Note

When I was little, I used to think the world was false, that everything I saw around me was a set built in real time by my parents. I thought they were imposing their version of the world to prevent me seeing mine. And I never caught them out, the swine! Even when I turned around quickly to catch a glimpse of a world that they hadn't yet had time to construct – whether mine or emptiness, a scary concept in itself – they were always quicker than me. It was always “real”, normal; the street, the chair, the mountain were the same. I studied the crumb of bread, the untied shoelace, a crack in a wall or a certain pine tree on a hill that they might have forgotten to put back. But nothing was ever out of place, nothing ever changed. They were really good.

So I told myself I had to be patient and grow up. That's what becoming adult must mean. At last being allowed to construct your own world.

All of this – which I'd forgotten – came back to me after several readings of L'illusion Comique by Corneille, and I realized with amusement that in the end, nothing had really changed. Of course, I know full well that my parents had nothing to do with it, but all the same, the “real” still remains just as difficult to pin down, doesn't it?

Already, in terms of the challenge to “invent something cinematic” from a repertoire text performed during the year, the Illusion struck me as a rich vein. Through its narration, its structure, its ruses and temporal shifts, it made me think of the devices that are particular to cinema. I felt a flash-back, then was caught up in a flash-forward; I thought of docu-drama, reportage, Bergman and his *Laterna Magica*, Watkins and his *Punishment Park*, Kiarostami's *Close-Up*, the series *Lost*, and so on. I immediately felt that this “strange monster” was going to inspire, to generate cinematic possibilities. It has a rapidity, a protean aspect, an elusiveness. (Louis Jouvet spoke of a “haunted text”; Georges Wilson in 1966 likened it to Godard; Jean-Marie Villégier called it “hallucination”; Brigitte Jaques evoked Fellini.) The incredible “film within a film” rivets us to the spot at the end. Put on a play. Cut. An energy of cuts and a wailing lament.

It takes place in our time. I admit that naturally I thought of today. It's silly, it's idiotic, it's simple, but above all it's only an impulse to try to make up for the incomprehension, the stupor that one feels for one's age.

Especially since no one believes in anything anymore.

Nobody is fooled.

An age of disillusionment.

Yet given the verse written in alexandrines and the language, how could this serve realism?

I read it, re-read it and read it again, and I succeeded in relating to it as the natural, organic music particular to verse.

And this disparity, between a wish for an almost raw realism and the fabricated language excites me. There's certainly a surprise in the beginning, but I'm sure this will fade then disappear entirely in the rhythm, the scanning, the monotonous chant, the brutality, the overlapping verses.

And then Muriel Mayette said to me, when I asked her if the text could be melded with another style of writing: “That would be a shame. Avoid it. It must remain Corneille. It could be a silent film, as long as it's Corneille.”

There will be cuts. Drastic ones. Overlaps too. Scene V, 3 comes to mind. Isabelle sees her suspicions confirmed: Yes, her husband desires another woman; she's caught him in the act. The scene is composed of a series of long tirades.

Together with the actors, I want to imagine a real domestic situation, as frenzied as in *Casino* when one party never listens to the other. The anger, the hurt, the hatred makes them scream at each other at the same time. The alexandrines overlap violently.

Or when Pridamant in Act I – who has lost his son, who's looking for him, and who feels guilty – listens to the account that Alcandre gives him of his son's past debauchery, it seemed rather uncinematic to discover this only through words. Instead, let's imagine a wide shot of a suburban house. A motorbike goes by, the rider tossing a package on the doormat. An anxious looking man opens the door, picks up the package and goes back inside. The interior is gloomy, rundown, strewn with beer cans.

He tears open the package. Two DVDs. No labels. (Or just with dates written on them: 2007 on one, 2008 on the other.) Still wearing his pajamas, he goes over to the home cinema. He dares to slide in a DVD, puts on his glasses to operate the remote control. We see family photos of a woman and a boy in dusty frames on a low table. He finds the play button and looks up eagerly. Various documents appear on the television, scraps of images: A young man with long hair strumming a guitar in the metro, an amateur recording of the young man on stage at a tiny café-theatre, a photo of an arrest on the sidelines of a demonstration with the blurry silhouette of the young man shouting, ringed in red pencil, an internet porn site (yes, it's him), and so on. Then comes the shame, the anger of the father who dashes to the room the son had as a teenager, left untouched, and smashes everything up. Not a single alexandrine has been spoken and yet, through the grammar particular to cinema, the whole first act is portrayed in this fashion.

We have to raise anchor, leave theatre behind; forget the stage and seek out the magical devices particular to cinema.



There will be, for the three acts (II, III, IV) that Corneille called "imperfect comedy", meaning the evocation through "living specters" of the picaresque adventures of Clindor, one single, albeit labyrinthine setting: A grand Parisian hotel. Its rooms, its corridors, its laundry, its car park, its bar, emergency exits, smoking terrace and elevators. This place will lend itself marvelously to the "rules of the game", the wafts of desire, the scheming contained in those three acts. And there will certainly be a role for surveillance cameras and detective work.

And for Act V, I envision a nightclub.

I see youth, oblivion, the absolute and successive sincerity of nocturnal passions. Living life to the extreme, for the moment. It's a play about youth, about sincerity, about love in all its forms (passionate, adulterous, social, sexual, denied, refused). Corneille was 28 years old.

A young man, a provincial, a mad dog excited by his own talent, his initial success, his confusion about which direction he is taking, hence the hybrid, subconscious aspect of L'illusion. An energy which crashed over him, carried him along, mixing with assimilated fashions. And what if Alcandre, the magician who "with one word can overturn Nature", was Corneille himself. He's the writer, the dramatist. He's the man in front of a blank page, carried wherever he likes by his imagination. There is, it is certain, the cruelty of a god, the pleasure of a playwright, the animalism of a child who is pretending. The feeling of magic comes when the characters slip out of your control. The magic wand is the pen. It is the author's right that Corneille invented in his day.

Things are in the process of being written, taking into account the actors involved.

L'illusion erases the line between the real and the false: Everything is porous. Retrospectively, we no longer really know when all that began. Since when are they actors? Are they acting? Everything is blurred. Yes, they are acting. This is clear when we see them being paid in the fifth act. But they seemed so real! As Corneille summed up in his poem Examen: "Clindor and Isabelle, having become actors without anyone knowing, act out a story which is related to their own, and seems to be the continuation of it."

It's like a hop between Truffaut's Baisers Volés and Domicile Conjugal!

In short, it's cinema.

The Screen Illusion

based on Pierre Corneille's masterpiece L'illusion Comique

Cast:

ROSINE: Muriel Mayette

GERONTE: Jean Baptiste Malartré

PRIDAMANT: Alain Lenglet

MATAMORE: Denis Podalydès

LYSE: Julie Sicard

CLINDOR: Loïc Corbery

ALCANDRE: Hervé Pierre

ADRASTE: Adrien Gamba-Gontard

ISABELLE: Sulfiane Brahim

THE JAILER: Nicolas Wansycki

THE BODYGUARD: Cyril Hutteau

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