



Heartbeat Detector (La Question humaine) is a radical and unsettling new French feature that explores the current political, economic and social landscape at a level way beyond the tired analyses of majority commentary. Seeking to understand the psychology at work in corporate thinking, it uncovers a continuity of behaviour that ties the present all too closely to past extremities. Director Nicholas Klotz and writer Elisabeth Perceval explain below their intentions for the work.

THE HISTORY THAT KEEPS COMING BACK

HEARTBEAT DETECTOR AND THE MAKING OF AN ETHICAL CINEMA
NICOLAS KLOTZ AND ELISABETH PERCEVAL IN CONVERSATION

Interview by Antoine de Baecque

Nicolas Klotz: I was location scouting for *Paria* in January 2000. I was listening to a radio programme in my car and the writer François Emmanuel was talking about his book *La Question humaine*. I felt like something was going to happen with this book, something underground that I had been waiting on for a long time. I bought it that evening and gave it to Elisabeth Perceval. I asked her to read it and tell me about it. I was so worked up about what I'd just heard that I was scared of being disappointed.

Elisabeth Perceval: I think you were also scared of diving into the book. You knew François Emmanuel's story was going to draw you in, touching something very personal and deep-rooted in your past. Simon's investigation ends up leading him to his own flaws. He throws himself into the job with a sort of unbridled curiosity. It's exactly what happened to you when you decided to make the film. We'd been looking at certain questions for over ten years. This story brought us the angle we needed. It was an extension of

themes already in *Paria* and *La Blessure* that show how hard it is to understand today without keeping in mind the events of World War Two and History in general.

NK: *La Question humaine* is a film about perception. I wanted to film Simon's experience like an almost hallucinogenic experience. During his investigation, the past filters up. Images of mass extermination during the war gradually emerge and blur his perception of the present. We

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THE YOUNG PEOPLE WE SHOW IN THE FILM WOULD HAVE BEEN ON THE BARRICADES IN MAY 1968. THEY ARE RADICAL, UTOPIAN ROMANTICS WHO ARE UP FOR ANYTHING BUT NOW THEIR UTOPIA FINDS FORM IN THE BUZZ OF THE CORPORATE WORLD.

had finished *Paria* and *La Blessure*, in which we filmed weak, almost neglected bodies on the edge. With *La Question humaine*, we filmed the world of the rich: executives from the high-performance free-market machine. We showed bodies as the cogs in a machine that formats and eliminates as well as eroticizing relations and exacerbating appearances. *Paria*, *La Blessure* and *La Question humaine* make up a trilogy on contemporary life. They look at certain aspects of the machine we live in. While *Paria* and *La Blessure* work on empathy with characters who are ejected from the machine, or people who come from Africa to try and join it, *La Question humaine* is in some ways the more disturbing film because it questions 'us', those who make the machine work.

EP: The film is also partly a study of young executives. When we met them, I was surprised by their vitality, their health and their beauty. Everything in their attitude, appearance, rivalries and attractions makes you feel these young men belong to a professional elite. Free-market competition is also expressed in their bodies. Sexual ambiguity is always present in the corporate world. Between colleagues, this state of arousal produces a whole range of rituals involving humiliation, brutality, a coming together and pulling apart. It formats a uniform mass that loves and hates within itself.

NK: The young people we show in the film would have been on the barricades in May 1968. They are radical, utopian romantics who are up for anything but now their utopia finds form in the buzz of the corporate world. They're lovers of free enterprise, giving it incredible energy and a form of disposable, instant, vital youth that wants to get its kicks, enjoy, compete and even die on the battlefield. In some ways, it's like China's youth as filmed by Jia Zhang-ke in *The World*. But in a company and in the free market, power is always in the hands of the old: those who have a past, History's killers with blood on their hands who get their power from murder and elimination.

EP: Simon, the ordinary executive, slowly realizes that there are two men inside him: on one hand

the rational technician and professional killer that he didn't know was there and on the other a human being who gradually takes over when everything goes haywire: when he becomes aware of history and gets sentimental – in fact when he gets sick. When he suffers from History and the repressed past that affects his present, the calm assurance that made him such a rigorous technician starts to falter.

NK: Simon starts hallucinating about his role in the free-market system. He is shaken and asks himself, "am I today's Fascist when my job is to eliminate, liquidate, downsize and turn other people into waste?"

EP: We can say that History and the present interact like shot and reverse shot in the film.

NK: The Shoah is one of the founding acts of modernity. It revealed the curse that is an integral part of industrial society. The question is whether its borders are contained in time and space. I feel like the Shoah is *fossil* light. It is a light that was projected even before 1940. It keeps producing effects on contemporary society and creating the future. We're not using the Shoah to explain contemporary society. We're trying to catch sight of reappearances and projections that are part of today in strange manifestations that are no longer like those from the 1940s.

WORKING WITH ACTORS

NK: We worked on a different territory with each actor. I didn't want them to meet before the final preparations for the film. I wanted them to stay enigmatic and elusive for each other. I wanted them to meet when we were shooting.

EP: I had written the first version of the screenplay before I met Mathieu Amalric. Nicolas talked about him without really explaining why he saw him as Simon. He is always very reserved and secretive about his intuitions but I could tell it was serious. I always thought there was something tormented about Simon's desire for women. I imagined a fiery, even brutal relationship with women's bodies. Mathieu has that tormented agitation and impatience in his body. At the same time, the way he looks at you is incredibly welcoming. He opens up and listens to people, which is rare. Mathieu is also curious and focused. He is always doing research, not only for his character but also for the film.

NK: I didn't imagine anyone else but Mathieu as Simon. Maybe it's also because he is a filmmaker. I felt he had reached a time in his life and career

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when he was shifting to become the man he is today. I wanted to film the tragic, lonely side of him. I think that's what he wanted too. He needed to express that kind of humanity. We soon worked with a sort of complicity and light-heartedness that is surprising for a film like this.

EP: Michael Lonsdale, who plays the boss, *Mathias Just*, is the supreme father figure. That's what he represents for us in cinema. He could embody insanity and the return of the past. He has the extreme lucidity that can drive you crazy. He incarnates that sort of flaw. It's inside him.

NK: He is an aristocrat. Michael makes no effort to feel comfortable in front of the camera. He gives the role incredible ambiguity. He inspires human tenderness as well as unsettling fear. He doesn't try to disappear into his role or build things as an actor. He becomes the character but remains himself. Maybe it comes from his past, from his career in cinema and theatre, especially with Beckett and Duras. Michael Lonsdale, Lou Castel and Jean-Pierre Kalfon are actors from the fringe. Cinema has invented a lot with these actors and big names have called on them: Luis Bunuel, Marguerite Duras, Philippe Garrel, Jean Eustache, Jacques Rivette and Robert Kramer... When Jean-Pierre Kalfon plays *Karl Rose*, he is a razorblade. He cuts but the blade is so fine and incisive that it only starts bleeding an hour later. He is absolutely sharp and precise. His decisive power gives him a jubilant cold-blooded thrill that is almost sexual.

EP: Lou Castel is there at the end of the film. He incarnates a sort of gentle dream that is an end in itself. Whenever he is on screen, his face, his blue eyes and his accent give a sense of humanity. He floats in the scene and makes time stand still. He is also a loner, a stranger to himself, to the world and to History. He drifts. The past comes back through him but without any pathos, like a return or a mild curse. Only Lou could speak out of the deep solitude of time.

NK: Lou is capable of incredible tenderness and absolute radicalism. His sensibility and presence really challenge a director to be worthy of his humanity and love of cinema. We could talk a lot about the women in *La Question humaine*. Dark

or radiant, each woman is a heroine, a threshold and a doorway to other worlds or other zones of the film. Valérie Dréville is a great theatre actress who is rarely seen in films. There is something elegiac about her. She could be in Jacques Tourneur's films. Simon is haunted by Edith Scob and Delphine Chuillot, two almost Hitchcockian blonds. Laetitia Spigarelli is the brunette from elsewhere whose voice, face and body turn his life upside down.

EP: In the film, the eerie atmosphere is mainly due to the women. The fathers incarnate sin and History, power and murder. The women don't. But each of the women Simon meets gives him the keys to the fathers' past. They serve as enlighteners. They are connected by a black dress that travels through the film, from body to body, marking a fetishistic relationship to the world.

ROCK, FROM SCHUBERT TO IAN CURTIS

NK: *La Question humaine* is a musical film. It was clear to us from the outset. As soon as I heard the group Syd Matters, I wanted to work with them. We went to their concerts for two years. I filmed them several times. We talked a lot and swapped records. Jonathan, the group's leader, came to the cutting room to see an off-line edit of the film. Three days later, he came back with sounds, fragments, a song for the opening credits and loops. We ended up renting a studio for five days and five nights and they did all the music by improvising over the footage. They took the film's dialogues and sampled them. It's their first film soundtrack. It's a series of meteorological and atmospheric states. A psycho-chemical vibe infiltrates the whole film.

There is also a more documentary-style aspect to the soundtrack with music that young executives unwind to at night. There are cold wave tracks by *New Order* from the 1980s as if the ghost of Ian Curtis, who had already visited *La Blessure*, had come back to haunt the film. We've always been fascinated by rave parties. A community gives itself over to excess and self-destruction as a form of purge. These underground parties that have sadly disappeared were host to all kinds of rule breaking rituals. But young executives are sometimes the most hardcore in excess. Something very violent is unleashed. Elisabeth asked the group Los Chicos to sing a text by Sénèque - *Hercule furieux* - at a rave. It is about bloody battles where sons, brothers, cousins and uncles fight for power, cutting off the King's head to take his crown.

There is also the secretive musical world of Just / Lonsdale. It is Schubert, which is supreme elegy and absolute contemplation. This music is about the memory of classical music and how it is passed down by the fathers, who transmit two things: the violence of murder and classical culture. Distant History is in this music but at the same time, it is totally contemporary in its precision and romanticism. It is as if rock could go from Schubert to Ian Curtis: it is a particular state of expression that passes through bodies, from past to present, making emotions circulate. History moves through time, like ghosts.

Heartbeat Detector is released by Trinity in the UK this Spring. Thanks to Robin Grbich and Antoine de Baeque.

To the 'Birth Act' of EICTV - read on the twilight of the 15th of December 1986 in the presence of Fidel Castro, to all the film colleagues of the Fundacion del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano, honourable international guests and public, and exactly four years to the day later, during the graduation ceremony for the first promotion of "TeleCineastes", I followed the reading of the 'Confirmation Act' with this...

ATHANASIAN OATH

UNDER THE MAGIC LANTERN

WORDS SPRINKLED LIKE SEEDS FOR THE YOUNG TELECINEASTES THAT GRADUATE TODAY

If an engineer builds a bridge badly, that bridge falls; if a doctor fails to cure a sickness, the sick person dies; if a filmmaker, a videomaker or TV-maker makes a film badly, a video badly, or TV badly, apparently nothing happens; nobody dies. Tibetans, schemers and Jean Cocteau all said: "distrust the mirrors"; I say, distrust the impunity of the images. Because what are these images but the ephemera of the mirrors, the dangers of the mirrors, mirrors capable of reflecting dreams, able to evoke over a white screen the universal world and to make it vanish it again into a white nothingness without even shattering? I'm asking for your eyes and for your ears. Images can also kill by disintegrating the secret structures of the imagination, burying the conscientious neurons under the rubble of insensibility, venality and mediocrity.

Aware of their responsibility towards the physical body of the human, doctors - for several centuries now - in a moment like this one, made their Hippocratic Oath of initiation, in the name of the salutary proto-physician Hippocrates. In this twilight I propose - for the health of the audiovisual imaginary - this new oath in the name of father Athanasios Kircher; the 17th century inventor of the Magic Lantern (you don't need to reply aloud. For me it would be enough if you do it for yourselves):

Do you swear that you will not film a single frame that would not be like freshly baked bread; that you will not record a single millimetre of magnetic tape that would not be like clear water?

Do you swear that you will not let your eyes drift, that you will not close your ears to the truly beautiful and the truly horrible, from the soil of Latin America and the Caribbean to Africa and Asia, out of which you've been made, and of which you are its fatal expression?

Do you swear that, loyal to an irrefutable sense of liberating justice, truth, and beauty, you will not retreat from the ghostly threats, from anguish, from solitude, from madness, and that you will keep zealous allegiance to your internal voice in spite of everything?

If you do not, let the tiger and the eagle devour the liver of your dreams, let the snake wrap itself around the chassis of your camera, let armies of sparkling glow-worms short-circuit and interfere with your electronic recorders.

But if you do, as we trust you will, let hummingbird protection shield you with the delicate cuirass of a rainbow for the rest of your life and moreover, for the rest of your work.

Fernando Birri
Cuba, 1990

Birri is the founder and director of EICTV, The International Film and Television School, also called 'of the three worlds' - Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and Asia. Thanks to Pepe Petos for awareness of this and its translation.