

EX NIHILO PRESENTS



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
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UN CERTAIN REGARD

CLAES BANG

SIDSE BABETT KNUDSEN

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SWANN ARLAUD

MICHEL FAU

THE GREAT ARCH

A FILM BY STÉPHANE DEMOUSTIER

WRITTEN BY STÉPHANE DEMOUSTIER

BASED ON THE NOVEL BY LAURENCE COSSE « LA GRANDE ARCHE »
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This film is a creation freely inspired by real events that occurred between 1983 and 1987. The role attributed to the architect's wife, the private life situations and the dialogues are fictional.

Format : 1.37 – Duration : 1h46

DISTRIBUTION

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SYNOPSIS

1982. French President François Mitterrand decides to launch an international architectural competition for the flagship project of his mandate: the Great Arch of La Défense, aligned with the Louvre and the Arc de Triomphe.

Against all odds, Otto von Spreckelsen, a Danish architect, wins the competition. Overnight, this 53-year-old man, unknown in France, arrives in Paris where he is propelled at the helm of this pharaonic project.

While the architect intends to build the Great Arch exactly as he envisioned, his ideas quickly clash with realistic constraints and the vicissitudes of politics.



INTERVIEW WITH STÉPHANE DEMOUSTIER

The origin of *THE GREAT ARCH* lies in Laurence Cossé's book dedicated to the creation of the Great Arch at La Défense.

For over ten years, I made a living by directing commissioned films for the Pavillon de l'Arsenal and the Cité de l'Architecture. That was my training as a filmmaker: I didn't go to film school, but I learned a great deal by filming buildings—sometimes entire neighborhoods—and interviewing architects. I developed a real interest in architecture and the aesthetic and social questions it raises. Architecture shares with cinema the quality of being a prototypical art form, brought to life through collective and industrial means.

I came across Laurence Cossé's book when it was published in 2016. The rights had already been optioned, so I read it purely for pleasure. A few years later, during a conversation with Muriel Meynard, she told me that the adaptation rights were now available. Laurence Cossé's book covers the entire history of La Défense, from the 1970s to today, but what interested me most was the architect, Johan Otto von Spreckelsen—a near-blind spot in the book, as so little is known about him. I wanted to get closer to that mystery and pay tribute to him.

THE GREAT ARCH addresses many of the connections between the collective and the individual.

Architecture is inevitably a collective adventure. Even more so in this case, as it is a public commission that thus engages the community. But nonetheless, at the start, there is the gesture, the vision of a single man. I believe in both equally: the power of that vision and the strength of the collective. With *THE GREAT ARCH*, I wanted to highlight these two dimensions and show how much the inspiration of a creator can clash with the constraints of reality. Ideally, constraints should be fertile; they can spark ideas. What interests me about Spreckelsen is that he fights for his ideas. I admire the extent to which he defends what he considers to be essential. But he is unable to come to terms with reality. How far can we go in making compromises? At what point do they become compromises? It's this tension that interested me; it lies at the heart of every creative process.

THE GREAT ARCH takes place during François Mitterrand's first seven-years term, he plays a significant role in the film.

Spreckelsen was initially carried by Mitterrand's ambitious project to "change life." A wild hope and an air of optimism accompanied Mitterrand's rise to power, and the Great Arch became part of the Socialist President's policy

of major public works. The scale and ambition of La Défense construction site reflected both the era's powerful public authority and Mitterrand's broader vision. While the film does not shy away from the setbacks that marked the project, it also emphasizes the beauty of Mitterrand's ideal and the boldness of his leadership: at the end of an anonymous, international competition, he chose a complete unknown—a Dane—recognizing in him a vision based solely on a single drawing, and placed his full trust in him to carry out the project.

Spreckelsen, for his part, earnestly declared that he intended his Arch "for humanity." The era was imbued with a delightful romantic spirit. Until the liberal order asserted itself. Spreckelsen then experienced firsthand the neoliberal turn of the 1980s. He was hit hard by the political shift and the onset of austerity, as the new economic order modified—he would say distorted—his project for La Défense. Where everything once seemed possible, where Mitterrand had set a great movement in motion, a new capitalist and pragmatic discourse came to stand in the way. Underlying the film is the thread of a powerful encounter between two strong personalities, two egos—each perhaps seeing in the other a reflection of his own genius. Mitterrand was a distant man, yet he maintained a kind of quiet intimacy with Spreckelsen. All the witnesses of the time spoke of a sincere admiration from Mitterrand—the builder-president—for the man he called "Mister the architect." Until the shifting political landscape inevitably damaged that relationship.

THE GREAT ARCH indeed portrays Mitterrand as a monarch. The allusions to subordination and courtly behavior make this film more timeless than expected, as it also tells the story of a court and its unraveling...

In France, we have a court-like system that is consubstantial with our Fifth Republic, itself inspired by monarchical order and the cult of the Great Man. We often struggle to be clear-sighted about what shapes our daily lives. One of my motivations for making this film was that its main character is a foreigner, a Nordic man. From his perspective, our court system seems like an oddity (which can lead to some comical scenes). Through this character, I was able to adopt a different, more distanced point of view. Cinema reveals its power when it allows us to explore other perspectives, other ways of seeing.

This idea of perspective is physically embodied by Spreckelsen — from his height to his single, unchanging suit...

It was important that we immediately spot that Spreckelsen comes from elsewhere and thinks differently. In cinematic terms, that meant showing someone who doesn't quite fit in the setting, who stands out. The fact that he's very tall was a stroke of luck — you instantly perceive that he isn't on the same scale as the others. He physically expresses a kind of disconnection from his French counterparts.

His suit also contributed to that effect. He's elegant, and he wears his sandals beautifully — I never wanted him to look ridiculous — but this outfit sets him apart, even isolates him. He's a character we first see naked, feet in the water, in Denmark. He is torn from his own world and thrust into the frenzy of Paris. I wanted there to be traces of the elsewhere he comes from, which is reflected particularly in his dress code, his posture. I also wanted his obsession — the desire to complete his cube — to be palpable. And the most obvious way to make that obsession felt was to adopt the 1.37 aspect ratio. It evokes Spreckelsen's vision of the world.

This also introduces a layer of irony, which is very present throughout: THE GREAT ARCH opens with a sequence in a comedic tone before shifting toward something more tragic...

Spreckelsen moves from glory to tragedy in a very short amount of time. I wanted the film to express this blend of genres. We witness the impossible encounter between Spreckelsen and his counterparts, despite each of their efforts. This results in misunderstandings and mismatches, which are inevitably funny. And since we were talking about the court surrounding Mitterrand, showing it with humor was also a way to highlight certain excesses, certain tendencies, with a sharp gaze but also with tenderness.

One character, however, stands apart: Spreckelsen's wife. If for no other reason, because she is the only woman in a male-dominated world.

If we look at the archives from that time, there are only men. Women are entirely absent from the official narrative, which celebrates a completely male order. However, through the interviews with architects that I conducted for the institutional films I worked on for many years, I noticed the recurring presence of a figure: that of the woman — wife or long-time collaborator — who is constantly by the side of the illustrious architect. Their presence is so essential that they were always physically in the same space as the architect. I often thought, «If their wife isn't there, they fall.» It was clear that they played a decisive role, a role far beyond that of a mere secretary or protective presence. I wanted to draw inspiration from these women by making Liv — a totally fictional character — a figure who, though discreet in public, is nevertheless a strong, assertive personality, probably even stronger than her husband. In fact, it is when he loses the connection with his wife that Spreckelsen begins to crumble.



Another essential element in telling Spreckelsen's trajectory is the recreation of the 1980s.

One of the key challenges was to make the story feel authentic to the 1980s. But without falling into fetishism. I didn't care at all about achieving a perfect reconstruction, but it was crucial for the depiction of the era to be accurate. It's about finding the right balance, pinpointing the elements in each location that would express the time period. If we look at the offices, for example, we can distinguish Subilon's office, which, with its retro-futuristic style, evokes the modernity of the 80s. For the President's office, we were able to film at the Élysée in this timeless palace, where Mitterrand had, after all, installed modern armchairs that we used in the film. It's a small detail, but if Mitterrand chose that furniture, it was precisely because it expressed his desire for modernity and rupture. Then there's Andreu's office, which had to embody a sort of anthill. Spreckelsen had to immediately feel the mass of people working. That's why we chose a mezzanine overlooking an open space where the crowd of draftsmen is at work. Spreckelsen discovers a beehive, whereas he's only ever known solitary work. It's interesting because all the architects who watched the movie mentioned the drawing tables, as they were, at the time, their indispensable work tool. Today, in architectural offices, draftsmen face rows of computers.

Another major aspect of the reconstruction concerns the construction site of the Great Arch. This project, this ideal image designed by

Spreckelsen, had to be made tangible. I wanted the scale of the site to be felt, the dominance of the materials — you can see there's a lot of mud on the site, far from the gilded halls of the Republic — and the monumentality of the work. The Arch, in its disproportion, ultimately crushes Spreckelsen. It's also a physical sensation that we wanted the audience to experience. To make this construction site tangible, we did a special effects job that I found fascinating. With Lise Fisher, the VFX coordinator, and David Chambille, the director of photography, we chose, after looking at many reference photographs, to animate these photos. Our approach was to bring the film into the archival images, the opposite of what is usually done. This created a striking sense of reality, which, despite being realistic, also carries symbolic and poetic force.

In general, there are frequent references to the transition between the old and the modern, and how this shift can lead to the loss of ideals.

Cinema is an art in constant technological evolution, and this reality is stimulating. In fact, I just celebrated the power of VFX and the pleasure I had working with them. The Great Arch was the first French construction project to be assisted by computers to handle the complexity of the calculations required for such a monumental building challenge. The question is this: can technology and its processes eventually diminish the content? And beyond that, what is a creative act? Spreckelsen emphasizes the importance of his vision and his fear: he is afraid that machines will end up shaping thoughts. In saying this, he is visionary. Because, in the age of AI, this is a question that we have not finished untangling.

In this case, can Spreckelsen's journey be compared to a filmmaker's journey, in the sense that the industrial nature of cinema can have an impact on artistic or intellectual creation?

Malraux had already said it: «Cinema is an art, and at the same time, it is also an industry.» Both dimensions were present from the very beginning of cinema. The Lumière brothers were, after all, both brilliant inventors and seasoned entrepreneurs.

THE GREAT ARCH is the portrait of a creator, and this creator could indeed be a filmmaker. If the filmmaker carries a vision, the collective nature of cinema is just as significant, much like in architecture. I firmly believe that every technician should make the director smarter than they are. There is, of course, an initial idea, but that idea reinvents itself through the making of the film, and the creative movement then takes place collectively. In any case, that is what I love about the practice of cinema.

This idea of creating together inevitably involves the crucial step of casting. How did you choose the actors for *THE GREAT ARCH*?

I like the idea that actors bring a world of their own, and I also wanted energies that would complement each other. I chose Claes Bang for his precision, his rigor, and his obsession with his work. From our first meeting, I felt like I was seeing Spreckelsen: he immersed himself in the role. He learned French, a language he only knew a little, and his work impressed me because he didn't just learn the language phonetically. He knew how to bring nuances, and he managed to feel free even

in a language he had just learned. In contrast to Claes Bang, Xavier Dolan acts like a kind of troublemaker, with his energy, speed, and mischievousness. Casting a Québécois to play a high-ranking Parisian official might seem like a contradiction. But Dolan embodies the intelligence and ambition that perfectly matches the role. I knew that Paul Andreu was a direct, fast, concise, and often angry man. I saw in Swann Arlaud this combination of sobriety and character. I knew he would immediately bring all the verticality needed to the character. As for Michel Fau as Mitterrand, I was certain that he would avoid the trap of imitation and that he had enough wit to embody the character. He wisely sought, once again, the evocation of Mitterrand. Michel did this without abandoning his eccentricity or his sense of humor, even though it was entirely contained here. The shot where he places his round face inside the square of the Arche model is one of my favorite shots! Finally, I was very happy that Sidse Babett Knudsen played Spreckelsen's wife. I wanted this character to leave an immediate mark. Sidse brings personality and brilliance to Liv. Thanks to her, we quickly become attached to the character, so that when she disappears, we better understand Spreckelsen's despair and suffering.



STÉPHANE DEMOUSTIER

DIRECTOR

Stéphane Demoustier was born in Lille in 1977. After several short films, in 2014 he directed his first feature film, *40-LOVE*, programmed at the Venice Film Festival, followed by the medium-length film *CLEO & PAUL*, selected at the Berlinale (Generation) in 2017. *THE GIRL WITH A BRACELET*, presented at the 2019 Locarno Film Festival, won the Cesar of Best Adapted Screenplay. In 2023, Stéphane Demoustier directed *BORG* which won Hafsia Herzi the Cesar for Best Actress. *THE GREAT ARCH* is his 4th feature film.

Filmographie :

2025 THE GREAT ARCH

2023 BORG

2019 THE GIRL WITH A BRACELET

2017 CLEO & PAUL (*medium-length film*)

2014 40-LOVE



CLAES BANG

ACTOR

Claes Bang is a critically acclaimed actor, trained at the National Theatre School in Copenhagen, with a renowned career rooted in Danish theatre and cinema. He first gained international recognition as the lead in the Swedish production *THE SQUARE*, which won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2017 and earned nominations at both the Golden Globes and the Academy Awards in 2018. Claes made history as the first Danish male actor to win the Best Actor Award at the European Film Awards. His dynamic talent and powerful screen presence have since secured him roles in a wide range of international productions, including *DRACULA*, *THE AFFAIR*, *THE NORTHMAN*, *BAD SISTERS*, *THE OUTLAWS*, and *THE NEW LOOK*.

His recent works include *BONJOUR TRISTESSE* and *THE EPIC WILLIAM TELL*, where he plays the title role alongside Sir Ben Kingsley and Jonathan Pryce. Both films premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2024.





CAST

CLAES BANG	Johan Otto Von Spreckelsen
SIDSE BABETT KNUDSEN	Liv Von Spreckelsen
XAVIER DOLAN	Jean-Louis Subilon
SWANN ARLAUD	Paul Andreu
MICHEL FAU	François Mitterrand

CREW

A film by	STEPHANE DEMOUSTIER
Written by	STEPHANE DEMOUSTIER
Based on the novel by	LAURENCE COSSE « La Grande Arche » © Editions Gallimard, 2016
Produced by	MURIEL MEYNARD
Co-produced by	MARIE GADE
Photography	DAVID CHAMBILLE
Editing	DAMIEN MAESTRAGGI
Music	OLIVIER MARGUERIT
Sound	JULIEN SICART TAN-HAM, SARAH LELU, EDDIE SIMONSEN, JOHANNES RASMUS ROSE
Calibration	YOV MOOR
Executive production	MARIE FREDERIQUE LAURIOT DIT PREVOST
Production manager	ISABELLE TILLOU
Location manager	CHLOE DAGONET
Postproduction	PIERRE HUOT, MEHDI SELLAMI VFX LISE FISHER, LORIANE LUCAS
Director Assistant	STEPHANIE TÉCHENET
Script supervisor	DIANE BRASSEUR
Casting	JULIE ALLIONE
Production designer	CATHERINE COSME
Costumes	CAMILLE RABINEAU
Props master	NICOLAS BACHELET
A production	EX NIHILO
in coproduction with	ZENTROPA, FRANCE 3 CINÉMA, LE PACTE
With the support of	CANAL+, du CNC, THE DANISH FILM INSTITUTE / CO-PRODUCTION SUPPORT, de LA RÉGION ÎLE-DE-FRANCE, du programme MÉDIA DE L'UNION EUROPEENNE, EVIDENCE, LA PROCIREP / ANGOA
With the participation of	CINÉ+OCS, FRANCE TELEVISIONS, DR / THE DANISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION
In association with	CINECAP 8, COFIMAGE 36, PALATINE ETOILE 22, CINEVENTURE 10
French distribution	
International sales	LE PACTE