

CHRISTMAS IN JULY
PRESENTS

QUINZAINÉ
DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT
CANNES 2022

THOMAS SALVADOR

LOUISE BOURGOIN

THE MOUNTAIN

A FILM BY THOMAS SALVADOR



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SYNOPSIS

Pierre, a Parisian engineer, goes up in the Alps for his work. Irresistibly attracted by what surrounds him, he camps out alone high in the mountains and leaves behind his everyday life. Up there he meets Léa, a chef of an alpine restaurant, while mysterious glows glitter in the deep mountains...



INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS SALVADOR

How did the project come about?

I have been fascinated by mountains since I was a teenager. It came on suddenly, without my ever having climbed or even visited the mountains before. I took out subscriptions to mountaineering magazines and thought of nothing else but climbing and the movies, and I started mountaineering. When I was at school, whenever anyone asked me what I'd like to do for a career, I'd reply, "Mountain guide, filmmaker, and mountain filmmaker." Indeed, my very first idea for a feature film was one about the mountains. I wanted it to star Patrick Berhault, a guide and mountaineer whom I adored as a teenager and someone to whom I'd grown close when I made a short documentary about him called, *Dans la voie*, portrait d'un guide au travail. He would have played himself as a guide, going in search of a young daredevil mountaineer played by me, who no longer wanted to descend. I imagined a rather silent, even mystical film, and I started to work on the script. But unfortunately, Patrick died on the mountain a few weeks before we were to meet to talk about the film. That was almost 20 years ago. It took me a long time to get over his death and to think about another film. After *VINCENT*, I decided to return to the project, adapting it to my current feelings and concerns. I soon knew it would also involve an element of fantasy, an encounter with the unknown, another form of life, and the genesis of a love affair.

Did you think of Pierre differently than your previous characters?

The characters I write and play are very much like me, or at least they have experiences that are similar to those I have lived or imagine living one day. The evolution of their relationship to the world happens naturally, without me having to think about it. During the writing process, I felt that the tone for this project would be more serious, even if there are still moments that make you smile. For *VINCENT* I subsequently discovered a burlesque element which often escapes me because I proceed intuitively and never force anything, neither in how I write nor in how I act. In *The Mountain*, the tone is more serious, which is also probably to do with it being a voyage of initiation involving a character who is running away from the world in a way, and who risks coming to the end of his life in order to discover who he actually is.





There is a gentleness in the film, an obviousness in the sequence of events yet somewhat paradoxically, what happens is kind of crazy. At the end, when the main character goes back down to the valley, you really feel the magnitude of what he has just experienced and the intensity of his journey. How did you develop that trajectory?

It does indeed follow a trajectory – Pierre is clearly not the same man at the end of the movie. Firstly, he learns to see things differently, or perhaps he simply learns to see. And it's this change of vision that sets him in motion. He then changes his rhythm and his relationship with time, rediscovering the power of the present and the beauty of impulsiveness. He sees a mountain and he decides to stay. He sees a poster and he buys a tent. He sees climbers and he hires a guide. He meets Léa, played by Louise Bourgoïn, and he offers her a ride. He witnesses a collapse and he goes for it... He makes his desires a priority once again.

We don't know Pierre's story; we just know from a postcard that he feels better than he did before. This is the only psychological dimension of the script. And when Léa declines his invitation to go for a walk, Pierre continues moving away, preparing to turn his back on society and the world he knows forever.

I tried to make this trajectory perceptible during shooting by choosing locations that were more and more disconnected from civilization. But it

was out of the question for me to make a film with the message that in order to be free and happy, one must die or disappear forever. And thanks to Léa, who encourages him to return to his family, he is able to come down from the mountain – which brings this fabulous structure that I hadn't even considered until I saw the rushes – and continue on this trajectory that brings him back to earth as a new person. He comes back serene, ready to share his rich experience.

To further strengthen the call of the mountain and Pierre's need for transformation, I made sure he was not an outcast. On the contrary, he has a "normal" life, with an interesting job and plenty of friends. I wrote the script before COVID and lockdowns, but I believe that Pierre's desire to take a step back and reflect on what is essential to him is very much a timeless one.

Pierre's journey implicitly involves everything he wants to escape; all the things you can imagine that I wanted to relegate to the off-screen space so we can feel his journey as one of positive desire rather than simple rejection. Pierre was condemned to normality, but he saves himself by shrugging off his many shackles and managing to open himself to others and to the unknown.



There is something quite political in it, along with an environmental dimension...

Where politics are concerned, I leave that to everyone else to decide. But as far as the environment goes, it's undeniable and I don't have a problem with that. For a long time, it was seen as at best naïve to focus on ecology in cinema, but fortunately, this is no longer the case.

The mountains are crumbling. We are in denial about it in France and don't talk much about it because they are such an important part of the economy. It began with the 2003 heatwave. Three hundred thousand cubic meters of rock fell from the west face of the Drus, which is the emblem of the Chamonix guide company. And since then, huge volumes have continued to erode every year across all the Alps. As the nurse explains to Pierre in the film, the mountain is a stack of thin layers of rock, held together by the ice, which acts like cement, and which is melting due to global warming. It would have been unthinkable for me to make a film in the mountains today that did not explore the reality of what is happening and the changes that are taking place, altering people's lives forever. The melting of the glaciers is one of the most visible indicators of climate change. This environmental dimension was naturally imposed on the project in a way that I hope is organic rather than theoretical.

Why does Pierre meet the creatures that inhabit the mountain?

I call them “glimmers”. Straight from the writing process I called them that rather than “creatures” in order to free them from the connotations associated with that word. Pierre sees them because he is first “called” and then affected by the collapsing mountain.

These glimmers were there long before human beings, like a primitive form of life. For me, they live in the mountains until they are dislodged during rockfalls. They appear at the foot of collapsed rock faces, but nobody sees them because nobody stays at the site of a collapse. Except Pierre. He feels a kind of empathy for these glimmers because he understands their distress. He even tries to save one of them by freeing it from under a rock. Then he follows them home, into the heart of the mountain, until he almost becomes a glimmer himself. They would welcome Pierre if he decided to disappear, just as they would bring him back to earth if he wanted to return to the world. They are perhaps less dumb than we are; they do not seek to possess, to dominate, and even less to conquer.



How did you visualize the glimmers when you were writing the script and what was the process of embodying them?

I wanted them to be very simple, very raw and mineral. And I definitely didn't want them to be anthropomorphized to make sure they would come over as another form of life as much as possible. I thought of lava, too. And besides, granite is a volcanic rock.

To represent them, I thought about using reflective materials that can be illuminated to give the impression that they are producing the red and white flashes. But it was difficult to do that in the mountains. To create the luminous interaction with the set and the character, we created illuminated red balls that we moved around with cables and string. Once the set-up was complete, we filmed the glimmers in the studio, using a puppeteer to move them which allowed us to create living forms with a random movement and swarming light that would have been impossible to produce with 3D. Then we integrated them into the shot with VFX.

And what about the first glimmers that Pierre discovers under the snow?

We buried transparent pipes in the snow and pulled lights through them using wires. This was the only artificial lighting we used for the night sequences, that and my headlamp. We took the risk of not being able to see the set we were shooting in very well, but I think that increased the realism of the scenes. Moreover, when a movement of the head reveals the depth of the scenery, that definitely reinforces the sense of what is off-camera.

And how did you make your body flicker?

I realized pretty quickly that we would need VFX techniques for this effect. On set, we used fairy lights wound around parts of my body to ensure that luminous interaction with the environment. Then we did a 3D scan of it so that the animation of the lights would follow the movements as simply as possible. Then for the rendering, we found an effect that recalls the shimmering of Pierre's body and the glimmers in the ice.

The scene where you go into the heart of the mountain is visually extremely impressive...

His entry into the ice was shot with mechanical and "natural" special effects. The ice was made from a mixture of silicone, plexiglass and ultrasound gel. And we shot the scenes where Pierre is totally immersed in the village hall in Servoz, near Chamonix. I shouldn't say this, but I'm pretty proud that we shot these sequences without any digital effects. Everything was done on location, in the old-fashioned way as some might say. To make it look like I was floating, I was suspended from a harness and moved around among big blocks of polystyrene and painted canvas. I was covered with glitter and lit by followspots. And the whole thing was shot through blocks of ice whose texture we worked on to find a balance between the abstract and the real. I wanted to make sure that the audience wouldn't always know what they were seeing, but without losing sight of Pierre. The diffraction of light through the ice produces these optical effects.

Was it intentional to maintain a handmade feel to the effects?

Yes. I have a very physical and sensory approach to cinema. What I recount has to be embodied and concrete. That's why I prefer to minimize the use of effects. My films involve a confrontation with the world which doesn't happen through dialog and psychology, rather through the relationship with the landscape, matter, and rhythm. That's also why physical performance is central to my work.

Is that why you act in your films?

Definitely. On VINCENT, I was initially hesitant but, in the end, it was obvious that I had to take on the role. Even before writing the script, I'd sketched out certain special effects and stunts. I need to do things and experience them to understand them, and I need to know how I'm going to do an effect before I can write the scene. It's a way of putting myself in the work. Shooting in the mountains was very physical and very trying. And experiencing it as an actor and director gave me direct access to what Pierre's character was going through. This way of experiencing my characters from the inside creates, I hope, a feeling of logic and reinforces the empathy one feels. The fissures I slipped into were real fissures in the mountains. I got stuck in one of them and hurt myself a bit to get out, but that was all part of the experience...

The mountain is more a character than a set in the film. It is a vector for the experience of encountering life and otherness...

Very true. The mountain is the theater for something of which it is also the driving force: its own collapse. One might also say that it calls out to Pierre. During the first reverse shot in the scene with the artificial arm, for example. I also wanted the ice to be almost alive, and not inert. Pierre interacts with it, goes inside it, and feels good in it. And of course, the



glimmers are part of it, making it feel even more dynamic.

In Chamonix, we enjoyed a very warm welcome because most of the time, mountain films are about exploits or catastrophes, and about surviving. But we didn't come looking for a sensational backdrop. We were looking to live an experience with the mountains.

How difficult was it to organize a shoot in the mountains?

We limited to crew to a maximum of five in order to be as mobile and reactive as possible. You have to be very humble in the mountains. You can't go there intending to conquer; you have to accept that it's the mountain that dictates its law and allow yourself to be invited in a way. When it rains in the city, you can adapt, whereas at over 3,000 meters, the rain becomes snow, and the wind and the fog can be very dangerous.

Off the mountain, we had a small team taking care of logistics, but on the mountain itself, we only had the director of photography, the camera assistant, the first AD, the chief sound engineer, and the guides who ensured our safety. And there were 10 days when there were only two of us; the climbing operator and me, because we were shooting in places where it was impossible to go with the crew. He operated the camera, and I recorded the sound, and all of this without location scouting. It was a little tense, but very exciting. And I always think it's a good sign when an artistic requirement, a shooting ethic, and an economic reality converge.



Did this pose any particular problems for the actors?

The restaurant was located at 3,800 meters, where you have 25% less oxygen and a good chance of altitude sickness. We were all very out of breath and suffered from severe headaches, but overall, everything went well. Shooting in conditions like these produced a multitude of small alterations to the actors' performances, such as deep breathing, slight shivering, and an alertness to the gaze. This fed into the characters and I think it reinforces the empathy one feels with them.

I wanted everyone to have an experience and to make the shoot a real adventure. It was tough in the beginning because of the weather. But after a month, the crew started saying to newcomers, "You're making a film called *The Mountain*; deal with it!". A miracle happened between the team and the mountain, and it was an extraordinary experience for us all. I am very grateful for how everyone invested so much in the project.

The viewer experiences the mountain in a concrete way: The immensity, the cold, the effort, the wind, and the silence. How did you develop the film's sensory dimension?

The mountain changes all the time, and I wanted the audience to feel that. I almost prayed that it would rain or snow, that it would be hot or cold, and that I would be able to convey this richness. I wanted the viewer to experience the mountain, to perceive the variety of light and the intensity of the wind, and to feel what it's like to be in the clouds. This "realism", this documentary aspect seemed important to me to anchor the fantasy dimension of the film and to make it emerge in an environment that seems concrete and authentic.



Was the love story with Léa made possible by the mountain?

Yes, and it's important to underline that the film is a love story! Pierre and Léa's paths intersect, intertwine, and end up converging in the same movement. The first time we see Léa, she looks at the mountains. She spends half up the time on the mountain and the other half off it. She's found a balance between her son, her job, and the mountains. In this sense, she is ahead of Pierre, who is seeking this very balance. Right from the writing stage, we wanted to make her life story real, even if she says very little about it. I hope that the viewer feels she has a strong relationship, even a passive one, with the mountain. I also wanted her to have an understanding about what Pierre is going through. When he disappears, there is a blackness, he is dead to everyone else but not for her, because she is living and thinking about him. She wants to see him again, and to do that, she has to get him out of where he is. There is something organic and almost magical about their reunion. Léa, like Pierre, goes back to following her instincts, and simply brings him back to life.

I was so delighted to have Louise Bourgoïn playing the part of Léa. She brings light, and I teased her on set saying that she like a glimmer. And above all, she brings multiple facets to the character by being in turns soft, strong, intense and dreamy.



THOMAS SALVADOR

DIRECTOR

Thomas Salvador is a filmmaker, screenwriter, and actor in his own films. He has directed 6 short films that have been selected and awarded in numerous festivals, including PETITS PAS (Cannes Directors' Fortnight) and DE SORTIE (Jean Vigo Prize 2006). Hosted at the Villa Medici in Rome, he wrote his first feature film VINCENT, released in 2015 and selected in more than forty festivals in France and abroad. THE MOUNTAIN is his second feature film.

FILMOGRAPHY

- 2022** THE MOUNTAIN
- 2015** VINCENT
- 2010** LEÇONS DE CINEMA (short films for Arte)
- 2009** ROME (short film)
- 2005** DE SORTIE (short film)
Jean Vigo Prize in 2006
- 2004** AUTO PORTRAIT ROMAIN (short film for Arte)
DANS LA VOIE, PORTRAIT D'UN GUIDE AU TRAVAIL (documentary short film)
- 2003** PETITS PAS (short film)
Cannes Directors' Fortnight 2003
- 2001** HERE THAT DAY (short film)
- 2000** UNE RUE DANS SA LONGUEUR (short film)



LOUISE BOURGOIN

SELECTIVE FILMOGRAPHY

- 2022 THE MOUNTAIN by Thomas Salvador
- 2021 HIPPOCRATE by Thomas Lilti – season 2 – (TV show)
- 2020 DREAMCHILD by Raphaël Jacoulot
- 2018 HIPPOCRATE by Thomas Lilti – season 1 – (TV show)
THE FULL HOUSE by Emmanuel Gillibert
- 2017 IN AND OUT by Bruno Chiche
ROOM(H)ATES by Dominique Farrugia
- 2016 THE WHITE KNIGHTS by Joachim Lafosse
- 2015 I AM A SOLDIER by Laurent Larivière
- 2014 THE LOVE PUNCH by Joël Hopkins
GOING AWAY by Nicole Garcia
- 2013 THE NUN by Guillaume Nicloux
MISS AND THE DOCTORS by Axelle Ropert
- 2012 LOVE LASTS THREE YEARS by Frédéric Beigbeder
- 2011 A HAPPY EVENT by Rémi Bezançon
- 2010 THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF ADELE BLANC-SEC by Luc Besson
WHITE AS SNOW by Christophe Blanc
BLACK HEAVEN by Gilles Marchand
SWEET VALENTINE by Emma Luchini
- 2009 LITTLE NICHOLAS by Laurent Tirard
- 2008 THE GIRL FROM MONACO by Anne Fontaine



CAST

| | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Thomas Salvador | Pierre |
| Louise Bourgoïn | Léa |
| Martine Chevallier | Pierre's mother |
| Laurent Poitreux | Marc |
| Andranic Manet | Julien |
| Sylvain Frenco | The mountain guide |
| Catherine Lefroid | The nurse |
| Lucie Vadot | The mountaineer woman |
| Alexandre Marchesseau | The mountaineer man |
| Adam Pouilhe | Martin |



CREW

Director Thomas Salvador
Screenplay Thomas Salvador and Naila Guiguet

Cinematography Alexis Kavyrchine
Sound Yolande Decarsin, Benoit Hillebrant and Olivier Dô Hùu
Editing Mathilde Muyard
Music Chloé Thevenin
Special effects Jérôme Krowicki and Barthélémy Robino
1st assistant director Pierre Abadie
Costumes Dorothée Guiraud
Make-up Aurélie Cerveau
High Mountain Guide Denis Gonzalez

Producer Julie Salvador
Production Christmas In July

Coproduced with Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Cinéma
With the participation of Canal+, Ciné+
With the support of Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée
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With the participation of La Région Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, le CNC
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Photos © Christmas in July

CHRISTMAS IN JULY



CANAL+

CINE+



La Région
Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes

CINEVENTURE

SOFICA
Cinéma

INDÉFILMS

PROCIREP

ANGO A



Le Pacte