



LEOS CARAX'S MASTERPIECE

THE EMBLEMATIC FILM OF 1980s FRENCH CINEMA
BY THE DIRECTOR OF *HOLY MOTORS*



A FILM BY
LEOS CARAX

STARRING **JULIETTE BINOCHÉ, DENIS LAVANT,
MICHEL PICCOLI & JULIE DELPY**

IN THEATERS
PREVIOUSLY UNSEEN RESTORATION
ON NOVEMBER 29TH 2013

Distribution

CARLOTTA FILMS US

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**A GRANDIOSE WORK MIDWAY BETWEEN
A THRILLER AND A ROMANTIC TALE!
DISCOVER IT IN A RESTORED DIGITAL VERSION
SUPERVISED BY LEOS CARAX**

*M*arc and Hans, two old gangsters, are ordered by a rival, the American woman, to repay a debt. They plan to steal the vaccine for a mysterious virus, STBO, which affects those who make love without being in love and is wreaking havoc among teenagers. After the death of their associate Jean, the two accomplices call on his son, Alex, known as "Chatterbox", who is a talented conjuror. Alex, who has just left his girlfriend Lise, falls madly in love with a girl in a white dress he sees on a bus. Her name is Anna and she turns out to be Marc's mistress...



"Making a film is a secret, a secret which gradually evaporates but which tries to keep, come what may, the secret's power to the very end."

Leos Carax in *Les Cahiers du cinéma*

A SECOND FILM

Leos Carax began shooting *Mauvais Sang* at just 25 years of age. After the critical and commercial success of his first feature film, *Boy Meets Girl*, which came out two years before in 1984, the rising star of French cinema was offered unique conditions for such a young filmmaker. Once again financed by his friend and producer Alain Dahan, Leos Carax was given a rather substantial grant by the Centre National du Cinéma which let him make the film in the studio and have the sets built for his very unusual visual universe. For this film, he surrounded himself with a loyal cast and crew who had already taken part in *Boy Meets Girl* – the director of photography Jean-Yves Escoffier and the actors Carroll Brooks, Hans Meyer, and Mireille Perrier. He added prestigious new recruits, renowned actors such as Michel Piccoli and Serge Reggiani, and promising newcomers such as Julie Delpy and Juliette Binoche – who had been seen the year before in the film *Rendez-vous* by André Téchiné. Mention should also be made of the astonishing cameo by Hugo Pratt, the creator of the comic series *Corto Maltese*, as Boris, a mafia henchman.



A LOVE STORY BETWEEN A DIRECTOR AND HIS ACTORS



It was with *Mauvais Sang* that the unique artistic and emotional ties grew between the director and his favorite actor, the wonderful Denis Lavant, one year younger than him. A powerful physical actor with multiple talents – he is a mime artist, a dancer, an acrobat, and a magician –, Lavant has been Carax's comrade-in-arms and onscreen embodiment all through their careers, performing the roles of "Alex" – the director's real first name.

Leos Carax considers him to be a real source of inspiration for his films: "Denis is indispensable. (...) When I consider making a film, before the ideas, before the images, I get the urge to model something with him. (...) Denis is a sculpture, he's someone who moves, reels, dances like no one else in the world. I couldn't see him in *Boy Meets Girl*, so I had to make amends..." As the critic Serge Daney wrote in *Libération*, French cinema hadn't seen such a communion between a director and his actor since the duo formed by Jean-Luc Godard – Carax's idol – and Jean-Paul Belmondo. Another tandem also emerged from this film. Juliette Binoche became for Carax what Anna Karina was for Godard: his muse, his actress, and his partner. We've rarely seen a filmmaker direct such an alter ego and so light up his actress with his love for her. During the shoot, the trio forms an inseparable gang: they eat and sleep together at the hotel and build a very close relationship which heightens the emotion of the film and which lasted until they shot their next feature film, *The Lovers on the Bridge* (*Les Amants du Pont-Neuf*) in 1991, during which Carax and Binoche split up.

AN UPDATING OF THE MYTH OF LOVE

Love at first sight and wild passion are what prevail in Carax's films. Following on from *Boy Meets Girl*, *Mauvais Sang* renews a pure romanticism and lyricism in French cinema. The film's plot, which draws on the codes of *film noir*, actually serves as a pretext to create an absolute, impossible love story: as young Alex joins the robbery of the vaccine for a new virus, STBO – a direct reference to AIDS –, he falls in love with



Anna, the very young mistress of his partner, an old-school crook. *Mauvais Sang* evokes the myths of tragic love and particularly seems to play on the variation with the legend of Tristan and Iseult. Like Tristan, Alex falls in love with the partner of an older man – Piccoli's character is called Marc like the king in the legend –, and loved by her in return. The object of everyone's desire, the STBO vaccine, evokes the love potion, while Lise, Alex's ex-girlfriend, represents Iseult of the White Hands, Tristan's first love who comes to save him when he is close to death. Carax revives the medieval myth and incorporates his modern love story in the tradition of purity and fatality of the love stories of yore.

A DISENCHANTED ERA



Although Leos Carax reworks a classical love story, he sets his film in the atmosphere of his era. It is set in the 1980s, the decade when France came back down to earth with a bump. It was a time when political ideologies changed, the world order crumbled, and people became aware of the far-reaching ecological dangers – *Mauvais Sang* was made the same year as the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. The 1980s were a time when young

people lost their bearings and felt skeptical about the future. Even the sexual freedom they had achieved in the years before was curbed by the discovery of AIDS in 1983, to which *Mauvais Sang* was one of the first films to allude. The young generation of the 1980s was a disenchanted generation, tormented by the loss of a carefree life: unemployment was affecting more and more people, the population was growing poorer, and the suburban sprawl was spreading... Young people doubted their future prospects and the world seemed submerged by a *fin de siècle* anxiety and by the fear of imminent catastrophe.

CHARACTERS TRAPPED IN AN INHOSPITABLE WORLD

Mauvais Sang presents characters living in an environment which seems rather hostile to them. They are solitary beings, without ties, left to their own devices and subjected to their malaise. They don't belong to any particular social group, they're dropouts, society's rejects living outside the reassuring cocoon of family or community. Indeed, the orphan figure is very strong in Carax's films: Alex loses his father at the start of the film – he hadn't seen him since his mother died –, Lise lost her father, and Anna seems to have stopped



seeing her father. These tormented souls then recreate an adopted family unit: Marc becomes both Anna's father and lover, and Alex the youngest in the gang of crooks. This group lives in a disused world, a studio-built neighborhood reminiscent of the outskirts of Paris. The locations are ghostly, like the former butcher's shop where the characters live. Grayness is dominant; the sets are designed to look narrow, further reinforced by Carax's tight framing, expressing the feeling of the characters' confinement, trapped by their gloomy destinies. This world isn't portrayed realistically – it's stylized and poetized to create a particular atmosphere which is both familiar and naive – evoking the working-class neighborhoods in the films of French poetic realism – but also serious, dreary, and somewhat metaphysical. This world which is both close and distinct from reality gives the film the feel of a modern fairytale. Caught in this sluggish, inhospitable world, Carax's characters are on a perpetual search for the absolute and try to extricate themselves from the inevitability of their condition to attain wellbeing.

THE SEARCH FOR WEIGHTLESSNESS



The characters of *Mauvais Sang*, in particular Alex, try to live their lives and loves to the full, and to attain a state of wellbeing. Alex is living his last days as if he could foresee his imminent death, loves Anna madly and tries to get her to love him passionately. The character possesses a hard-line element which is in keeping with his heightened feelings, as expressed in rapid, curt, literary and lyrical bursts of dialogue. Alex's malaise, as Serge

Daney pointed out, is portrayed onscreen by physical suffering: he has stomach aches "as if he had concrete in his gut" and feels unbearable heaviness and sluggishness. Only the quest for speed, the desire to soar, and the appeal of weightlessness can enable him to escape this pain, as it is magnificently portrayed in the desperate race during the song *Modern Love* by David Bowie, in which his moving body outstretched to the sky transcends through dance the pain which causes him to punch himself in the abdomen. This motif returns at the end of the film when Anna runs as fast as she can, as if she were trying to fly away – opening her arms like

the wings of a bird or an airplane on a runway –, or in the shots of Lise seeming to float on her motorbike. The film is thus full of an opposition between motionlessness and speed, only finding balance during the sublime moment of the parachute jump. The sensation of the fall is resolved in weightlessness, in the suspended moment of Alex embracing the unconscious Anna.

ADVERTISING ESTHETICS?

When the film was released, Carax's visual style was likened to a so-called aesthetic common to young 1980s French filmmakers who were pejoratively known under the labels, "style cinema" and "advertising esthetics". Carax was thus compared to Jean-Jacques Beineix or Luc Besson, like whom he also made somewhat futuristic detective films which stand out thanks to highly polished images and a unique use of color.



In the days of the rise of advertising and the video clip, in which each frame is made to be as effective as possible – producing a strong visual effect without an overall consistency to mark the audience –, Carax's visual pursuit can be called formalistic and indulgent for being a repetition of shocking images with no other merit. But the director's ambition cannot be considered a mere exercise in virtuosity as the concern for emotion prevails in each of his shots. As is clearly stated at the start of *Boy Meets Girl*: "First came words. No, emotions..." In *Mauvais Sang*, the sets are very stylized and expressionistic and bring out the impression of Alex's confinement. In this film, particular attention is paid to the opposition between black and white and color as well as touches of primary colors which contrast with the grayness of the images, scattering vitality in the film's gloomy world and sometimes bringing up traditional symbols: the chaste blue of the two girls, the yellow of misfortune on Alex's jacket. Carax has a very virtuoso approach to directing, presenting himself as a "conjuror of images"; he conceives his film in vignettes, which gives it a certain freshness, but also make it overflow with directing ideas without concern for economizing effects, as if Carax wanted to use up all his artistic vision in one film which is presented as a veritable firework display of inventions. But Carax's work on emotions, which can be seen in the predominance of close-ups on his actors' faces, goes way beyond a purely flashy ambition that was attributed to *Mauvais Sang*: as Serge Daney says, Carax doesn't try to create "just an image", effective and shocking as in an advertising perspective, but rather a "just image". This integrity to the image is expressed in an extreme meticulousness which caused the shoot to go on for thirty weeks, during which time Carax multiplied the takes and ideas, never compromising on details of acting and the need to capture the right emotion.

"A FILM WHICH LOVED CINEMA"

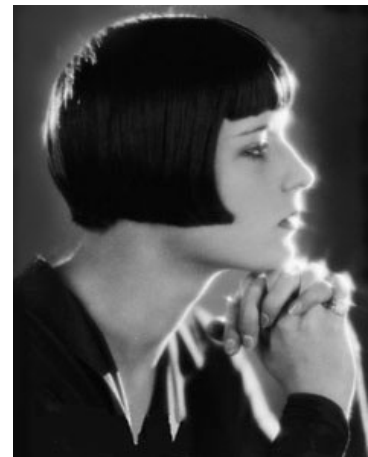
Carax has a very special relationship with other filmmakers. He is considered by many as the Arthur Rimbaud of French cinema – indeed, he borrowed the title *Mauvais Sang* from the



opening poem of *Une Saison en Enfer* – due to his youth and his position as a tormented soul – an artistic stance which can be as annoying as it is appealing. Carax has a rather caustic view of cinema, past and present. In an interview he gave to *Les Cahiers du cinéma* in 1986, he said: "I don't know what the film, *Mauvais Sang* is... But from the adventure I experienced with others, I don't accept that the film be associated with another just

because they are contemporaneous. I in no way feel contemporary with the films which are coming out. It's a painful yet normal feeling. (...) But I think it's important to say that I don't like other films. There are so few exceptions that it's true. *Mauvais Sang* is a film which loved cinema, and which doesn't love today's cinema. And that's important to me. Not to isolate myself or to be badly thought of by other filmmakers, but so that it is seen for what it is by the people who will love it."

Carax tries to create innovative, personal films which draw heavily on his movie buff influences to which he nevertheless only partly owns up. It is worth noting that to direct his actors, Carax tends to show each of them different films: to prepare Denis Lavant for the shoot, for example, he showed him Lubitsch's works. The main influence we can see is, of course, Jean-Luc Godard, as seen in the film's genre – evoking his romantic, poetic detective movies –, and the presence of long, carefully crafted love dialogues and the treatment of color which is somewhat reminiscent of *Pierrot le Fou*. The film sets evoke the poetic realism of the French films of the 1930s and 40s, the confined working-class neighborhoods rebuilt in the studio inhabited by Parisian dropouts, prostitutes, and crooks. Certain poetic images are particularly reminiscent of the world of Cocteau, notably the almost dreamlike vision of Lise gliding on her motorbike, named Lise after *Little Lise (La Petite Lise)* by Jean Grémillon (1930) of which we see an excerpt on a television in the film. Another very visible element is the homage to silent movies which is certainly Carax's favorite period of cinema. Also, the burlesque of Chaplin particularly in the fight scene between Piccoli and Reggiani, and above all in the baby scene in which Mireille Perrier appears with a Lilian Gish-style hairdo. Anna's bob also reminds us of Louise Brooks, which is explicitly brought to light in the presentation of Alex's mental image in which Juliette Binoche appears like in an old black-and-white movie, made up and dressed like the actress in *Pandora's Box*. But despite these obvious references, his love for cinema clearly exposed, Carax does not like to consider himself as, strictly speaking, using references: "We weren't around for these eighty years of cinema, we don't have time to go to the movies when we're making films, so we summon up things. (...) It's the word 'reference' which is terrible, because we only use it in terms of art. Whereas it's obvious that in a film, everything refers to emotions we've experienced. If I film someone eating a croissant, no one will tell me I'm making a reference to my baker. But if it's a film or a book, people ask you what the real issue was when we've known for centuries that art feeds on the love of art,



among other things... The longer ago people died, the less the references bother the critics, and when they're still alive, they call it copying. It's all so stupid." The director clearly has an ambivalent attitude to his references which are explicit but that he considers more in terms of echoes of emotions of films he loved than a quotation and a stylistic takeover.

A RESOUNDING SUCCESS



Mauvais Sang was very successful with audiences and critics alike – *Les Cahiers du cinéma* in particular commended the film. Its theatrical success was boosted by the 1986 Louis Delluc Prize, which enabled it to be shown in a lot of foreign festivals and acquire international renown. Today, *Mauvais Sang* has become a cult movie, the film of the 1980 generation in France, for young people striving to live life at full speed, as if each day were their last. *Mauvais Sang* thus reflects this lust for life and proved to be the last great poetic French film before the naturalist trend of the generation of filmmakers after him in the 1990s.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

All the quotations come from the interview 'La Beauté en révolte: entretien avec Leos Carax' ('Beauty in Revolt: Interview with Leos Carax') by Marc CHEVRIE, Alain PHILIPPON and Serge TOUBIANA in *Les Cahiers du cinéma* n°390, December 1986.

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THE PRESS IS UNANIMOUS!

"In his second feature, (...) **Carax** lives up to his billing as 'the natural heir of Jean-Luc Godard'."

THE NEW YORK TIMES

"A phenomenally successful new cult thriller."

THE INDEPENDENT

"Hot stuff... Sheer style... clearly puts **Carax** in the same league as Beineix and Luc Besson."

THE GUARDIAN

"**Carax** is a blast of fresh air."

ARENA

"See it and be seduced."

Q MAGAZINE

"One of the most sensuous film stylists to emerge in the last few years, this startling haunted film...
Searingly memorable, this is cinema resonantly taking wing. A must."

NME

"An atmospheric thriller/rebel romance... Stylish, riveting."

RECORD MIRROR

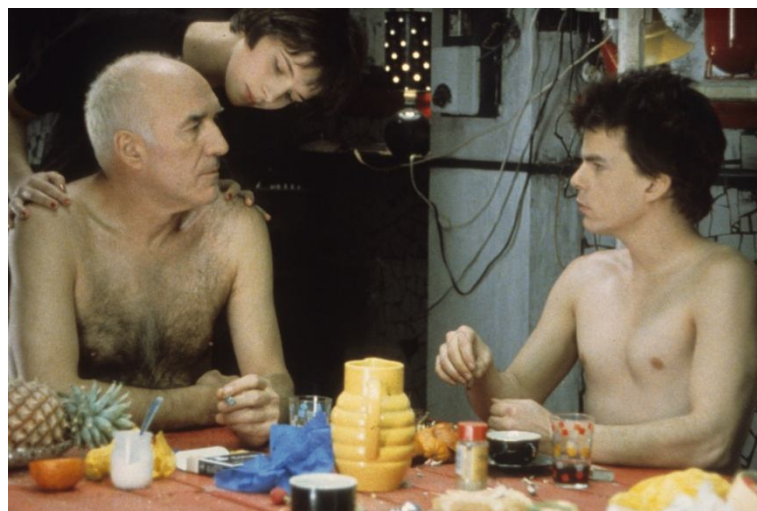
"Exhilarating, electrifying. A real film."

TIME OUT

"Let's say straight away that *Mauvais Sang* is absolutely dazzling."

LES CAHIERS DU CINÉMA





MAUVAIS SANG

(1986, France, 110 mn, Color, 1.85)

Philippe DIAZ and Denis CHÂTEAU present
a film by Leos CARAX

starring Michel PICCOLI, Juliette BINOCHE, Denis LAVANT, Serge REGGIANI
Hans MEYER, Julie DELPY, Caroll BROOKS, Hugo PRATT and Mireille PERRIER

director of photography Jean-Yves ESCOFFIER

line producer Alain DAHAN

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