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PRESENT



PAUL HILTON ~ ROMOLA GARAI ~ ALEX LAWThER

# EARWIG

A FILM BY LUCILE HADZIHAILOVIC

UK - FRANCE - BELGIUM ~ RUNNING TIME: 114' ~ FORMAT: 2,35:1 (scope) ~ DIGITAL 4K ~ LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

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## SYNOPSIS

Somewhere in Europe, mid-20th century.

Albert is employed to look after Mia, a girl with teeth of ice. Mia never leaves their apartment, where the shutters are always closed. The telephone rings regularly and the Master enquires after Mia's wellbeing.

Until the day Albert is instructed that he must prepare the child to leave...



# INTERVIEW WITH LUCILE HADZIHALILOVIC

## **The title EARWIG contains the word “ear“...**

This English word means the insect of course, but it's also old-fashioned slang for eavesdropping.

## **As early as the credits, EARWIG invites the viewer to slip gradually into a dream, as if beginning a session of hypnosis...**

I like to introduce my films with a title sequence that prepares the spectator. For EARWIG, we were inspired by the credits of the films of the 1930s and '40s for typography and texture, but instead of fixed cards, we used a slow roller, accompanied by the musical theme of the film. This immediately puts the viewer in a mental state receptive to the mystery that runs through this dream... or nightmare! This introduction is indeed like the light at which you're asked to stare at the beginning of a hypnosis session.

## **It is also a way to begin your story with an implicit “Once upon a time“...**

Yes, like a fairy tale. The opening credits allow us this passage to leave reality and enter the world of the film.

## **How did you discover Brian Catling's novel?**

Geoff Cox, who wrote the screenplay with me, is a friend of Brian Catling's. Brian gave him his manuscript and as he read it, Geoff immediately thought of me. Brian knew and liked my work, and so the idea that this novel could become a film I would direct was born. What's wonderful about Brian is that he's not only a writer, but also a visual and performance artist too, who started writing to extend the world of his imagination, and who is not so attached to his texts that he can't bear them being betrayed. The work of adaptation does imply a form of betrayal, but that didn't bother him, quite the reverse, he thought it was fun. Brian gave me complete freedom, which was very generous and very precious.

## **Do you know the genesis of this story?**

Brian says that he had a sort of dream in which a little girl came to bring him her teeth. This inspired him to write the story, the unfolding of which came in the wake of this dream. Which is astonishing because his novel is very complex and very structured.

### **How did you and Geoff Cox work on the screenplay?**

The novel tells the story of Albert Scellinc and little Mia, but other characters are also developed. Brian also pays great attention to Albert's past, as a child, then as a soldier during the war. We chose to tighten the focus of Albert's story and restrict the evocation of his past to the evocation of his dead wife.

In addition, I wanted us to be able to relate to Albert, despite his peculiarities and his silence; I softened some of his personality traits to avoid him being too unlikeable. The Albert in my film is quite different from the one in the novel.

### **This is the first time you've tell a story not from a child's-eye level...**

This is also something I liked about the novel. This portrait of a fifty-year-old man that I wouldn't have been able to invent myself and who is like the reverse angle of my film LA BOUCHE DE JEAN-PIERRE, even if of course Albert isn't a pathetic pervert like Jean-Pierre. The little girl is secondary to him. We are not in her head, but in Albert's.

### **How did you draw the enigmatic characters that surround Albert and Mia?**

Certain phantasmagorical characters appear during the course of the film: the one whom Albert meets twice, and whom we called The Stranger, is both a diabolical figure and the figure of The Master, as in Gothic tales – he is the one who pushes into crime. There's also the voice of the man who employs Albert and decides his fate. As for the dentist, he is the Master's emissary, and the black cat he brings to Mia belongs to the same Gothic tradition. Certain themes or motifs that run through the film too: the idea of obedience, of physical and mental constraint, the darkness in which the characters move... There's a nineteenth-century side that comes through in EARWIG, even if the action takes place after World War II.

### **Your cinema never closes doors, it allows the viewer a great freedom. In addition, it is very sensory, EARWIG in particular...**

That's what I like as a viewer: to feel sensations and emotions that excite my imagination. I think it's more stimulating to evoke rather than to tell or show everything. To have the audience guess what is in the shadows rather than to place things in full light. It's more engaging for the spectator and allows the film to resonate with them for longer.

### **EARWIG contains little dialogue, and the first appears after some twenty-three minutes. Was this a deliberate choice in the adaptation or is it faithful to Brian Catling's novel?**

As in the book, Albert barely talks to Mia, as if he has taken a vow of silence, or perhaps finds it difficult communicating with others verbally. Their relationship is purely functional: changing her dentures, serving meals...

This silence is also that of the apartment: we never hear neighbours, the outside is reduced to the sound of church bells and passing trains, sounds that also belong to Albert's mental world, and which will become elements of the story.

As the beginning of the film follows the stages of a day in the life of Albert and Mia, we find ourselves without words, whereas the novel immediately evoked the character's past.

### **This silence highlights your characters' solitude...**

Yes, a shared solitude in perfect harmony, until the day when...

### **In fact, the viewer tracks down the slightest noise, however tiny, in a state of hyper-alertness at what is being played out on the screen...**

Yes, this silence places the viewer in a state of expectation and generates tension and mystery.

### **A number of the shots in Albert and Mia's apartment are reminiscent of the work of Vilhelm Hammershøi, the Danish painter...**

It was one of the references for the film, with its stripped-down, almost abstract interiors, sometimes inhabited by a lonely figure, as well as its poetic and enigmatic atmosphere.

With Julia Irribarria, the production designer, I sought a balance between realism and abstraction. One of the watchwords was to keep things to a minimum, both for interiors and exteriors. We stripped the rooms of furniture and accessories as much as possible, and the streets of extras and vehicles, leaving only what was essential. This ultra-minimalism created a strangeness and a 'mental space' aspect. Moreover, I imagined Albert's apartment as a little labyrinth, where the viewer never manages to fully grasp the layout of the rooms. This also contributes to the dreamlike aspect of the film.

### **How did you work with Jonathan Ricquebourg, your DP?**

Jonathan has great sense of framing and lighting and brings many ideas on board. He is very close to the mise-en-scene.

We decided never to use lights, only daylight (knowing we were filming in an apartment with closed shutters, it was a challenge to which he rose very successfully) and the lamps of the set, which meant Jonathan and Julia had to work closely together.

We had two very different films for reference: THE EMBRYO HUNTS IN SECRET by Koji Wakamatsu for its empty apartment and inventive Scope framing, and JEANNE DIELMAN, 23, QUAI DU COMMERCE, 1080 BRUXELLES by Chantal Ackerman, for the domestic scenes, the repetition of situations and shots with variations, the importance of details and rituals being disrupted...

### **Ice and glass are dominant materials in your film, which opens the range of aesthetic possibilities...**

Mia's ice teeth are one of the major elements of the novel that made me want to make this film. It's a magnificent image that resonates deeply in the unconscious. But to our surprise and even disappointment, once the prosthetics designer had made them, they looked almost like normal teeth. Then I realized that what was important wasn't the spectacular effect, but the fact that Albert wanted to "complete" this toothless child. And because the teeth keep melting, he must continually make new ones. It's his purpose... or his burden. I found this idea very touching.

As for glass, which is also very present in the film, it allowed us to play with reflections, as well as acting as a support for reverie, for memory. The cabinet of glasses is Albert's escape route, a window that opens onto his memories and fantasies.

### **The glasses, like the paintings that represent the same white building in Albert's home and in Celeste's, evoke passages from one world to another, as in fairy tales...**

To enter a painting or an image is a classic fairy tale trope, although Brian's novel didn't have those paintings – zones of transition like the rabbit hole in ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND, like the glasses...

When he looks at his glasses, Albert experiences moments of trance that I wanted to develop after Warren Ellis, to whom I had proposed writing the music, gave me some very "trippy" pieces. This introduced movement to Albert's practically motionless world. In the end I only kept one piece, a melody by Augustin Viard arranged by Warren. This piece was composed on the ondes Martenot\*, which gave a more organic than an electronic sound, also out of time, which was ideal for the film.

In order to stay in Albert's world, we also used sonic textures played on the Cristal Baschet\*\* by Nicolas Becker. Their vibratory aspect goes perfectly with the ondes Martenot.

### **Albert's trances, the narrow portals to other existential dimensions, the same sequence seen from two different angles and at two different points in time, various elements suggest that time is disrupted in this story...**

Geoff had this idea of one scene that we see again from a different angle and at a different moment in the story, and I really liked it, because this repetition breaks the chronology of events and makes us doubt the order of things.

The clock is omnipresent in Albert and Mia's life, its ticking by turns reassuring or oppressive, also hypnotic. But from the moment the Devil invites himself into the story, as everyone knows, the clocks go away! And like time, Albert's world is disrupted; the past insinuates itself into the present without warning, and hallucinations invade reality with no means of telling one from the other.

*\*The ondes Martenot is an electronic musical instrument, invented by Maurice Martenot in 1928 and played with a keyboard or by moving a ring along a wire.*

*\*\*The Cristal Baschet is a musical instrument developed in 1952 by the brothers Bernard and François Baschet and played by rubbing its 56 chromatically tuned glass rods with wet fingertips.*

### **How did you find the rhythm of the film?**

In the first quarter of the film, as we are discovering Albert and Mia's slow and cloistered life, I wanted to convey the stretching of time, so that we could fully immerse ourselves in their universe. Hence long fixed shots, and actions almost in real time. Then, after the first half an hour, as soon as Mia breaks the glass, ruptures take place and the story gains density. Chaos sets in and the action accelerates, even if the shots remain static!

### **As with INNOCENCE and EVOLUTION, the place of captivity is a theme, a place where childhood is preserved from the world, with the difference that in EARWIG it quickly becomes a matter of getting out of it...**

In INNOCENCE, the young girls were living amidst a Nature not dissimilar to a lost paradise. Here too, Albert and Mia live in a cocoon preserved from the world, where the child, who has known nothing else, fits perfectly until she wants to break free once she has experienced the outside. But for Albert, to be expelled from this refuge is a threat that will generate chaos and bring out things he has repressed.

### **Were you thinking about Kafka and Freud during the writing of the screenplay?**

Yes. Brian Catling's novel is set in Liège between the wars, but I rather imagined Central Europe. We tried to find places to shoot the exteriors in Croatia, Hungary and finally further east, in Poland, but because of the health crisis we had to shoot the whole film in Belgium.

Due to the period in which the novel is set, as well as some of its themes, Freud was present in my mind (after all, EARWIG is a story of repression) but also Kafka and Bruno Schulz for their narrative use of dream logic.

Since it proved difficult with our financing to locate the film in the 1930s, we moved the story to after World War II. If we remained in a pre-modern period, Geoff and I thought the story also worked. But generally, we looked for a certain abstraction in the locations and sets, in order to remain in a past and a place that was somehow blurred, as in fairy tales.

### **The bodies of your characters have always been central in your films. Here, they are mistreated in part: Mia's missing teeth, or in the two sequences where flesh and blood become visible to the naked eye...**

The mouth and orality are important in EARWIG, and echo Albert's ear, this labyrinthine part of the body, a close shot of which begins the film. Mia's mouth, toothless or not, the mouth of Celeste's wounded face, mouths eating, biting...

In Albert's austere world, for him to experience something more carnal in the real sense, he must wait for the arrival of Celeste, who will bring with her something erotic that will cast him into an absolute confusion of the senses.



### **How did you choose your actors and how did you work with them?**

Even if my desire was to find faces that were little known in film so that they would blend as much as possible into the mysterious world of EARWIG, I chose well-known actors: Romola Garai, Alex Lawther and Peter van den Begin. As for Paul Hilton, who is primarily a stage actor, he is less often seen on screen. There is something expressionist about Paul which suited the film perfectly, with his almost mute character, and he was able to give him an awkward and lost side that I find very touching. Generally, I looked for actors with timeless look and a charisma that evoked silent movies.

In addition, I needed English-speaking actors because the film was largely financed by the UK. I was happy to shoot in English, because it allowed a less defined grounding of the story, but finding the right accents was a challenge. I wanted the characters to speak a European, continental English with slight variations of accent to stay with this idea of Central Europe.

We didn't rehearse a lot with the actors, except with Paul, who had to learn the routine with the machine that collects saliva, and the handling of the dentures.

As for Romane Hemelaers, who plays Mia and appears here in her first role, we spent time getting to know each other during the wardrobe and denture fittings, so I was able to explain to her how the shoot would proceed. I liked the classic beauty of her face, her dancer's bearing, her natural reserve, as well as the almost abnormal calm she emanates.

### **Was it important for you to have the words **THE END** at the end of your story, at a time when series spread an illusion of eternity in our collective unconscious?**

I wanted it, as the film ends abruptly with the refrain coming back, it gave the impression that Albert was recalled to his world, from which we thought he had escaped. I wanted to signify the end of the story in the same way you emerge from a session of hypnosis. This time is the time of the collective trance experience that cinema offers us. I like the notion of a defined duration for a film, whatever it might be, moreover since it's often the final image of the film that gives it its meaning.

### **In your opinion, does cinema help us conquer our nightmares?**

I don't think we can conquer our nightmares, but perhaps cinema can magnify them, sublimate them, and help us find pleasure in them...

*interview by Anne-Claire Cieutat*

## LUCILE HADZIHALILOVIC



Lucile Hadzihalilovic passed her childhood and adolescence in Morocco, before moving to Paris where she studied first art history, then film at the Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques (now la Fémis). Her graduation film was LA PREMIÈRE MORT DE NONO. In the early 1990s she founded the production company LES CINEMAS DE LA ZONE with Gaspar Noé, with whom she worked on CARNE and SEUL CONTRE TOUS (I STAND ALONE). Their collaboration continued with her contribution to the screenplay of Noé's Enter the Void.

In 1996 Hadzihalilovic produced, wrote, edited and directed LA BOUCHE DE JEAN-PIERRE (MIMI), a 52-minute film that screened in Un Certain Regard, at Cannes, and won the Prix SACD at Avignon Film Festival, the Best Screenplay Award at Angers European First Film Festival, the Special Jury Prize at Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival and the OCIC Award (Honorable Mention) at Amiens International Film Festival.

In 2004, she wrote and directed the feature film INNOCENCE, based upon Wedekind's "Mine-haha" produced by Agat Films, BlueLight and Entre chien et loup. The film won the Best New Director Prize at San Sebastian International Film Festival, the Bronze Horse for Best Film and the Best Cinematography Prize (for Benoit Debie) at the Stockholm Film Festival, the FIPRESCI Prize and People's Choice Award at Istanbul International Film Festival, the Best Film Award at Neuchâtel International Fantasy Film Festival, and the Special Jury Prize at the Yubari Festival, Japan.

In 2015, she directed EVOLUTION, co-written with Alanté Kavaïté and in collaboration with Geoff Cox, and produced by Les films du Worso, Noodles Production, Volcano Films, Scope Pictures and Left Field Ventures. The film won the Special Jury Prize and Best Cinematography Prize (for Manuel Dacosse) at San Sebastian International Film Festival, the Best Cinematography Prize at the Stockholm Film Festival, and the WITFS Fondation International Visionary Award 2015.

She has also directed the short films GOOD BOYS USE CONDOMS (1998) NECTAR (2014) and DE NATURA (2018) selected in numerous festivals.

# FILMOGRAPHY



## **LA BOUCHE DE JEAN-PIERRE**

Short feature (52'), 1996

Production Les Cinémas de la Zone

Cannes Film Festival - Un certain Regard



## **INNOCENCE**

Feature (117'), 2004

Production Ex Nihilo in co-production with  
Les Ateliers de Baere and Blue Light

Best New Director Award at the San  
Sebastian Film Festival

Toronto International Film Festival

BFI London International Film Festival

Rotterdam International Film Festival

Sitges International Fantastic Film Festival



## **EVOLUTION**

Feature (87'), 2015

Production Les films du Worso in  
coproduction with Noodles Production,  
Volcano Films, Scope Pictures and Left Field  
Ventures

Special Jury, Prize Best Cinematography  
and Special Prize of the Jury at the San  
Sebastian Film Festival

Toronto International Film Festival

BFI London International Film Festival

Sitges International Fantastic Film Festival



## PAUL HILTON

Paul Hilton's most recent most credits include *SLOW HORSES* for Apple and Lucile Hadzihalilovic's feature film *EARWIG*. Before the pandemic he performed on Broadway in the transfer of the YoungVic hit show *THE INHERITANCE*, for which he was Tony-nominated. Recent television includes Stephen Frears' *A VERY ENGLISH SCANDAL* and *THE CROWN*. Film work includes Craig Roberts' *ETERNAL BEAUTY*, *LADY MACBETH*, *LONDON ROAD* and Andrea Arnold's *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*. Other recent theatre work includes Lucy Kirkwood's *MOSQUITOES* at the NT Dorfman, the title role in Sally Cookson's *PETER PAN* (National Theatre Olivier) and *ANATOMY OF A SUICIDE* (Royal Court).



## ROMOLA GARAI

BAFTA and Golden Globe nominated performer Romola Garai's television work includes THE MINIATURIST, BORN TO KILL, MARY BRYANT, THE HOUR, EMMA, CRIMSON PETAL AND THE WHITE and DANIEL DERONDA. Her extensive theatre credits include THE WRITER (Almeida), QUEEN ANNE (West End), MEASURE FOR MEASURE (Young Vic), INDIAN INK (New York), THE VILLAGE BIKE (Royal Court) and KING LEAR/THE SEAGULL (RSC). Her film credits include SUFFRAGETTE, DOMINION, THE LAST DAYS ON MARS, ONE DAY, ATONEMENT, AMAZING GRACE, INSIDE I'M DANCING, VANITY FAIR and NICHOLAS NICKLEBY. She stars in the feature film EARWIG, directed by Lucile Hadzihalilovic, and recently starred in MISS MARX, which premiered as part of the selected Main Competition at last year's Venice Film Festival. As well as her extensive performing credits, Romola Garai is also known for her writing/directing work including Sundance Best Short Film nominated SCRUBBER and her writer-director debut feature, AMULET, which premiered at Sundance last year.



## ALEX LAWTHER

Alex gained critical acclaim for his role as the young Alan Turing in the Academy Award winning film *THE IMITATION GAME* for which he won the London Film Critics' Circle Award for Young British Performer of the Year. He works across television, theatre and film, and was the lead in an episode of Charlie Brooker's *BLACK MIRROR* and BAFTA winning Channel 4 / Netflix series *THE END OF THE F\*\*\*ING WORLD*. Recent work in theatre includes Peter Brook's *THE TEMPEST* and in film Lucile Hadzihalilovic's *EARWIG*, Wes Anderson's *THE FRENCH DISPATCH* and Ridley Scott's *THE LAST DUEL*.

## CAST

**Albert** Paul Hilton

**Mia** Romane Hemelaers

**Celeste** Romola Garai

**Laurence** Alex Lawther

**The Stranger** Peter Van Den Begin

**Marie** Anastasia Robin

**The Dentist** Michael Pas

**The Concierge** Isabelle De Hertogh

**The Receptionist** Marie Bos

## CREW

**Director** Lucile Hadzihalilovic

**Screenplay** Lucile Hadzihalilovic & Geoff Cox

Based on EARWIG, a novel by B. Catling

**Production Manager** Serge Catoire

**Cinematography** Jonathan Ricquebourg

**Set Design** Julia Irribarria

**Costumes** Jackye Fauconnier

**Make-up and Hair** Anne Moralis

**Saliva-Collecting Apparatus** Marc Caro

Benoît Polvêche ~ Christine Polis

**Original Music** Augustin Viard **produced by** Warren Ellis

**Crystal Baschet Artist** Nicolas Becker

**Sound Mixer** Bruno Schweisguth

**Sound Designer** Ken Yasumoto

**Sound Re-recording Mixer** Benoît Biral

**Continuity Supervisor** Marie Chaduc

**Editing** Adam Finch

**VFX** by MILK



## FINANCIAL PARTNERS

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Anti-Worlds • Andy Starke  
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