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THE SMELL OF US

A Larry Clark Film

88' – French - Color - 1.85 – 5.1 – France - 2014

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Synopsis

Paris, Le Trocadéro

Math, Marie, Pacman, JP, Guillaume and Toff meet up every day at The Dome - behind the Museum of Modern Art, opposite the Eiffel Tower - skateboarding, goofing off or getting stoned as they ignore the smart crowd of art lovers.

Some of them are inseparable, bound by complicated family ties. They live for the moment and amidst the lure of easy money, anonymous internet pick ups and trashy parties filled with sex, drugs & rock'n'roll". Toff just keeps filming everything...

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

I've wanted to make a film about French youth since I went to Cannes with my first film *Kids* in 1995...

In 2010 I had a fifty year retrospective of my photographs at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and my films at La Cinemathèque française... during the month I was there hanging my show I used to work late so I would have to leave the back way and walk around to the front of the building through all the skateboarders next to the Palais de Tokyo... it reminded me of the kids skating in Washington Square Park in *Kids*. I would just stand there and stare and think what a visually good way to start a film about kids in Paris... I met a young French poet, SCRIBE, and he and his friends started taking me around to the teenage nightspots and clubs where the kids hang out and I started to talk to the kids and listen to their stories and I asked SCRIBE to write *The Smell of Us* for me, after having spent every free moment I had with him talking about the story. Later during shooting, I changed the storyline and certain characters. It's a fiction by inspired by stories that were really lived.

I wanted to show this microcosm that is constantly changing. Some details are shocking to me while others are not; but that's the world of these young Parisians today. Youth is my biggest source of inspiration and I am often criticized for it! I've photographed and filmed for the last fifty years and the world has had time to change its relationship to teenagers as well.

With ***The Smell of Us***, I wanted to pay a tribute to youth to show its naivety, its confusion, its errors and even more than before, its solitude. The youth portrayed here, if one looks at appearances more than opportunities at the start, shows Math and his group evolving in the 16th arrondissement of Paris, the nicer neighborhoods. But they are also lost souls, navigating carefully as much as any other born with less privilege. These teens share in common a mastery, better than most, of new technology, but these children of the Internet, born with a proverbial joystick between their fingers, were cast off by adults. They play the role of free men and they can be cruel, but they are the victims. I wanted to show their beauty, their freedom at risk. They are misled by their attraction to money, consumerism, brand names etc. They consume and are also consumed and manipulated. It is adults and their fucking marketing that created all of this. ***The Smell of Us*** is written like a manifesto that lies at the heart of all my work as a photographer and filmmaker, and one that provides some answers about it.

Larry Clark

Interview

What's the genesis of the film?

I was at Cannes in 1995 where I was presenting my film *Kids* and it was at that moment that I got the idea to make a fiction about French youth. I spoke about this to different producers who all gave me the same categorical response. They were all adamant that I couldn't make this film because I wasn't French. It took me twenty years to take on this challenge! Paris is my favorite city in the world; I was dying to go back. The production team is entirely French, and the same goes for the casting.

This is your first film shot outside of the US. How did you find your actors? Was language ever an issue?

I've come to Paris multiple times. I wanted to film this city in the most realistic way possible and stay away from the postcard. Except for the sequence where we see the Eiffel Tower in the background. I couldn't resist; it was just too beautiful! I knew a couple of skaters and later on, I met a slew of others. There was a casting director, Fabienne Bichet, for

adult roles and I would personally cast young kids off the street. Through their network, the circle got bigger. I spent a whole lot of time with them and this lasted for more than a year, in order to prepare the film. There was a lot of planning and scouting ahead of time. My actors all spoke English and I knew them so well that a mutual understanding had taken place amongst us.

The script was written by a 26 year old author and poet, SCRIBE. How did you work together?

I met SCRIBE in 2010 during my exhibit at the *Musée d'Art Moderne* (Museum of modern art) in Paris. I got involved with the writing towards the end only, to change a few elements. At first, he did not want to speak about his own life. But he named the first character Math, which is kind of funny when you know his true identity.

***Kids* was shot nearly 20 years ago and portrayed youth as confronted with AIDS. Your latest film is a new snapshot of violence, the kind which young people who grew up with smartphones are confronted to. Could we say that *The Smell Of Us* is, in a way, the follow-up to *Kids*?**

That's not really the way I saw it. I wanted to make a movie, set during the Internet age and focusing on the trouble young kids get into because of this medium. Not a day goes by without you reading articles about this in the papers. Young kids document everything and share these videos on social media, without thinking about the disastrous consequences. It was important to me that I show what was going on here and now and that people ignored. I wanted to deal with this precise moment in time.

The way in which you film French youth is close to the way you portray your American teenagers. Do you see similarities between French and American youth?

I mostly see differences. Young Americans are tougher. The French are Daddy's and Mommy's kids. What I really wanted to do was show all the age groups amongst these kids, and how they belonged to different social classes. My last film is close to *Ken Park* because I am interested again in parents, who are very ambiguous. For a long time, I've been witnessing the wicked behavior of some of them and wanting to show that in a film.

Simply because it's not something that you see often. The actress who plays Math's mother, Dominique Frot, is exceptional. The scene where she's with him on the couch is improvised. It lasts for eleven minutes and I wouldn't cut it for anything in the world.

Just like in *Ken Park* and *Bully*, You act in your own film. You play two characters, Rockstar and the client, a foot fetishist. Why did you choose to cast yourself twice?

I didn't intend to act in my film at first, but the actors we had cast for the roles never showed up on set! I had no choice. Instead of stopping the film, I had to go for it. I was scared shitless. It was the same thing for *Bully* and *Ken Park*. I had to step up. For the fetishism scene – which I hope my kids will never see – I had never done anything like that before. This, in fact, gave me a lot of freedom because I didn't know how to approach it. I don't know a single foot fetishist. It was a strange experience. As of the character of Rockstar, I built him over the course of the shoot. I had the whole movie in my mind. I work better in the heat of the battle, when everything goes haywire. My creativity goes way up and gets me to experiment with things that I would have never thought of in a normal situation.

There is an extended version of the film, where we see you, on top of your two roles, as a director, talking to your actors in between takes. This highlights your role as a mentor for them. Why did you choose to include these sequences, which go beyond the simple “making of”?

With this version of *The Smell Of Us*, I break the fourth wall. I've never seen anyone do it before. This more “artsy” version will also be released. In terms of my role as a mentor, which isn't the word I would have spontaneously used but it's appropriate. That's what I am. I've spent a lot of time talking with Lukas Ionesco who plays Math. I sent him to the gym so that he would get back in shape and be ready for the role.

Those three figures, real and fictional, that you play, come together as a form of self-portrait. This is even more blatant with the character of Toff, this young boy who films everything. He reminds us of your beginning as a photographer in Tulsa, where you were looking to get accepted by kids older than yourself...

Sure. This character films non-stop, in places and situations where he's not even supposed to be present. Just like when Math goes to see his clients. It's obvious that Toff represents me and that he is my alter ego. He's probably a throwback to my debut as a photographer in Tulsa, fifty years ago. As the film progresses, it becomes more and more about myself. ***The Smell Of Us*** is in part a self-portrait. I consider it my most important film because it's the sum of all the other ones.

Even though it's realistic, your film wanders in the realm of fantasy and is filled with all sorts of mental projections, portrayed by Rockstar and the character played by Michael Pitt...

Sure. I wondered what Math would look like in fifty years. And that's Rockstar. I also included this character who has the same blue eyes as Math and represents him at another age.

Is this character meant to comment on Math's feelings through his songs, kind of like a Greek chorus?

I wanted Michael to play the song ***Streetwalking Zombie***, which is one of his own compositions. It reflects Math's state of mind really well, his floating relationship with the world. We shot this scene in one take and it works really well. We understand better why Math is in such a state when we see his mother.

The scene where Rockstar, who we've established is a projection of an older Math, is seated next to him and sings looks a lot like a Vanitas painting ...

As a photographer, I've learned the most from paintings. I've always been interested in this art form and never stop looking at paintings. I've absorbed all of this unconsciously and I use it in my films.

The original score of the film, is very varied. It mixes Blues standards with Punk. How did you come up with it?

The Smell Of Us is a French film with Spanish music. I asked Jonathan Velasquez, who I've known for eleven years and who acted in ***Wassup Rockers***, to take part in the original soundtrack. He's got an excellent group called ReVolt. It's Jonathan who interprets the Bob Dylan song, ***Forever***

Young, that you can hear during the final sequence of the film. This scene, where I spend a lot of time fixated on the faces of teenagers, contains the entire movie by the way. I'm also a big jazz fan. I wanted to find a spot for Coltrane in my film at all cost and pay tribute to Cab Calloway. How many people still remember him? It was about showing these kids the archeology of rock. The sequence where we see Rockstar seated next to Math, singing the Blues standard ***Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone*** was improvised. My musical choices were made on the spot and sometimes kind of unconsciously.

Marie, played by Diane Rouxel, is the first-hand witness to Math and JP's demise. Through her, you also pay tribute to the heroines of films noirs, in particular during the taxi tailing sequence...

She's a magnificent actress, extremely easy to work with. She always gave me what I wanted. The reason this character is so strong is because of the way SCRIBE wrote her in the script. He's the one who wrote the song ***Je préfère la nuit américaine (I prefer day for night)*** that Diane sings. The references to French new wave and to films noirs are also unconscious decisions.

There were some tensions during the shoot. Did these difficulties galvanize you in a way?

Conflicts always happen when I am not looking for them. It's up to me to use them or not. I work better in chaos. That's where I am at my best. Otherwise, I get bored. The financing of this film has been a crazy story. I had never seen anything as complicated as that. We were supposed to have twice as much time and money. This is why I had to make this film very quickly, which forced me to become both very kind and very mean with people. It was tough for everyone but it was the price to pay for this film to come out. And at the end of the day, you have to be even more energetic than the kids you are shooting with. As a photographer, you don't have to speak with people, as opposed to cinema where you have to collaborate with fifty people. Making movies is the hardest thing in the world.

Biography

Larry Clark was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1943. His passion for photography began at an early age and so he was quick to assist his mother, a photographer specializing in newborn portraiture. Later, Clark's interest in underground movements and the flourishing American subculture of the 60s compelled him to document the country's underbelly, lost youth, and drug users. His found acclaim in 1971 when he published the photo collection *Tulsa*, which quickly became a cult classic for an entire generation. *Tulsa* is made up of photos that Clark took of himself and his group of marginalized and rebellious friends, all of them hailing from the same hometown. Further collections followed, such as ***Teenage Lust***, featuring a Puerto Rican teenage prostitute in New York and ***The Perfect Childhood***, featuring shots of nude adolescents making love next to press clippings about adolescents guilty of murder. Each of these works bears testimony to Clark's quasi-anthropological view of his contemporaries, and especially of youth. His work has been shown in museums worldwide, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, The Museum of Modern Art in New York and The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, The Frankfurt Museum für Moderne Kunst in Germany and the Fotomuseum Winterthur in Switzerland. In the autumn of 2010, the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris featured a retrospective of his work, *Kiss the Past Hello*. In the summer of 2012, Clark's work was also on show in Berlin's C/O, and the following summer, Amsterdam's FOAM showed the complete series of *Tulsa* and *Teenage Lust*.

In summer 2014 Clark presented *they thought i were but i aren't anymore...* at the Luhring Augustine Gallery in New York. The exhibition will be featured at La galerie du jour agnès b. in Paris this autumn.

Martin Scorsese and Gus Van Sant readily acknowledge Larry Clark's influence on films like ***Taxi Driver*** and ***Drugstore Cowboy***, and in 1995, with the encouragement of these two directors, Clark moved into cinema with

Kids (Official Selection, Cannes 1995), an uncompromising portrait of a group of young Americans during a time of drugs and AIDS, based on a screenplay by Harmony Korine. In 1999, he made **Another Day in Paradise** (Grand Prix of the Jury at the Festival du Film Policier de Cognac) also set against the backdrop of drugs and alcohol, and which tells the story of how a hustling drug dealer charms Bobbie, a troubled adolescent, into joining him on a wild ride. Clark's third film, **Bully** (Official Selection, Venice Film Festival and Panorama Selection, Deauville American Film Festival 2001), in which he once again explored the world of adolescents and their implicit, visceral relationship to violence, packed a new punch. Some view Clark's next feature, **Ken Park** (2002), also written by Harmony Korine, as a reprise of **Bully**. The explicit sex and death scenes that punctuate this portrait of neurotic youth faced with its own incredible solitude were censored from Australia to Great Britain by way of France and the US, where the film is still banned. With **Wassup Rockers** (2006), which, with its cast of amateurs, has a near-documentary feel, the filmmaker takes an unflinching look at the tribulations of a group of skateboarders who have come to disturb the palm tree tranquillity of Beverly Hills. Clark also directed HBO's retro-horror movie **Teenage Caveman** and published **Punk Picasso**, which documents his personal journey.

In autumn of 2010, the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris invited Larry Clark for a large-scale retrospective of his photography. Entry to the exhibition was forbidden to those under 18, sparking waves of criticism about censorship. In 2012, he directed **Marfa Girl**, which received the Golden Marc'Aurelio at the Rome Film Festival. Clark decided to distribute the film himself via his website, saluting the American cinema industry with a now legendary phrase, "Fuck Hollywood!"

Marfa Girl was exceptionally projected in a movie theatre during the homage given to Clark by the Deauville American Film Festival in September 2013. In the summer of 2013, in Paris, Larry Clark shot his first film in French, **The Smell of Us**.

Through the portrait of lost youth, this film reveals to us the fifty years of his work as an artist, dedicated to adolescence. ***The Smell of Us*** had its world premier at the Venice Film Festival, within the Venice Days Selection.

www.larryclark.com

Math Lukas Ionesco

Marie Diane Rouxel

Pacman Theo Cholbi

JP Hugo Behar-Thinières

Guillaume Rayan Ben Yaiche

Minh Adrien Binh Doan

Toff Maxime Terin

Toff's Friend Valentin Charles

Catherine Niseema

Math's Mother Dominique Frot

Old Client Philippe Rigot

JP's Stepmother Valerie Maes

JP's Father Jean-Christophe Quenon

And featuring Larry Clark in the roles of Rockstar and Fetishist

Crew

Director **Larry Clark**

Screenplay **SCRIBE & Larry Clark**

DP **Hélène Louvart**

Editor **Marion Monnier**

Artistic Director **Natalia Brilli**

Sound **Pascal Armant**

Script Supervisor **Bénédicte Kermadec**

Musical Supervisor **Howard Paar**

Casting Director (adult roles) **Fabienne Bichet**

Costume Designer **Eloïse Larochelle**

Makeup Artists **Flore Chandes, Sabine Fèvre**

Special Effects **Copirate, Laurent Bigeaud**

Location Manager **Jeanne Granveaud**

Production Manager **Thomas Jaubert**

Production Manager for Morgane Production **Albertine Fournier**

Line Producer **Céline Chapdaniel**

Producers **Pierre-Paul Puljiz, Gérard Lacroix & Gérard Pont, Christophe Mazodier**

Associate Producer **Larry Clark**

**A Production by Morgane Production, Polaris Film Production & Finance,
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     **POLYESTER**  

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