

Les Films Velvet presents



Donostia Zinemaldia
Festival de San Sebastián
OFFICIAL SELECTION

UNDERCOVER

(Enquête sur un Scandale d'Etat)

A film by Thierry de Peretti

FRANCE - 120 MINUTES - RATIO: 1.33 - SOUND: 5.1 - COLOR

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Synopsis

October 2015. French Customs seize seven tonnes of cannabis in the heart of the capital. The same day, Hubert Antoine, a former mole with a shady past, contacts *Libération* journalist Stéphane Vilner. He claims to be able to demonstrate the existence of State drug trafficking led by Jacques Billard, prominent media figure and high-ranking French police officer. Suspicious at first, the young reporter finally dives into the investigation, which will lead him to the darkest corners of the Republic.

Against a backdrop of endemic corruption, major league drug trafficking and political disillusionment, a French journalist embarks on the most challenging investigation of his career.

Interview with Thierry de Peretti - Director

by Anne-Claire Cieutat

Your film opens with two cards announcing it as a work of fiction...

The cards are somehow ironic. They echo “based on a true story” at the beginning of some films which resonates as a form of blackmail: what we are showing you is supposed to be validated by reality, as if it exempts the audience from asking questions, particularly about the kind of cinema they’re being shown.

In the case of *Undercover*, which relies heavily on real elements, I thought it was funny to me to give in to this usage by subverting it slightly.

Earlier on in the project I was tempted to keep the real names of locations, characters, institutions, and see how we could replicate it all on film, starting from the events it depicted – playing the game of likenesses to twist reality in a more dynamic way.

For legal reasons, it was impossible. We had to change names and acronyms. But it amused me that such a documented film claims to be a work of fiction and that it invites the viewer to distinguish what is real from what is not.

Why did you choose to adapt Hubert Avoine’s testimony, co-written with Emmanuel Fansten, moving you away from Corsica, where you made your first films?

I’ve long felt the desire to film Paris, which is also my city, since I spend part of my time there. I wanted to convey what I’ve seen and felt since the November 2015 attacks. I live in République,

a neighborhood under daily pressure and very much exposed to threat with the events of recent years. I started to think about all this, then I was offered the job of adapting and creating a series of *Undercover* written by Hubert Avoine, former undercover for OCRTIS (The Central Bureau for the Repression of the Illegal Trafficking of Drugs), and Emmanuel Fansten, a *Libération* journalist. The book traces Hubert's journey, from unionism to Mexican cartels via OCRTIS. He denounces what he took part in and considers a dangerous slide in the fight against trafficking in France. The book intrigued me, but I couldn't see myself adapting it: it was too remote from me and my first cinematic territory – Corsica. But when I met Hubert and Emmanuel, I was both intrigued by and immediately liked what I saw of their relationship. I thought there was material for a film telling the story of the unprecedented relationship between a journalist and his source today.

So your film is as much the story of a friendship as an investigation...

Because I spent a lot of time with Hubert and Emmanuel before starting to write, until Hubert's death in 2018. They were generous and involved enough to enlighten me, to accept me while they were still in the middle of their investigation. They continued to meet people related to the case, to communicate daily, to reflect... I was like an intern given access to incredible secrets.

That's how the desire for fiction was born. And meeting Emmanuel Fansten, a journalist on a major daily newspaper, young, Parisian, connected to thousands of realities of Paris today, devoted body and soul to his work... that corresponded with my desire to make a film linked to this city.

I was ready to work on a film with Frédéric Jouve (who also produced *A Violent Life*) and on a series at the same time, but only the film project ended up being made.

But it's true that above all it's the bond between Hubert and Emmanuel that interested me, their common obsession with this investigation, their level of language, the extreme theatricality of their uninterrupted, hypnotic and demanding dialogue. It was obvious that they were saying something about the world and about these times that are coming to an end.

During certain sequences the film adopts a 'right-to-the-heart-of-the-matter', deliberately non-pedagogical stance which is very immersive for the spectator...

These extreme discussions were for me a first element for film. As a spectator I like being thrown into a film and not understanding immediately everything that's being played out. I like the characters not to care about me, to be independent of my perspective, it allows me to be free. The characters know very well what they're talking about. The thoughts and the words moving forward are the movement of the film.

Keeping these dialogues precise, very realistic, but definitely not commonplace, gave the promise of entering Hubert and Emmanuel's world... the promise of at least partially understanding how a long-term investigation is conducted today.

Knowing I didn't want to film trucks full of drugs crossing borders, all the fantasy dealing with trafficking that we have already seen so much in series and movies, we had to take a step aside and focus on the two characters.

Your film lies at the crossroads of several genres. Did this allow you to highlight a certain reality of trafficking that isn't widely talked about in the media?

My film exists between the investigative film and the so-called "drug movie". Getting to know Hubert Avoine and Emmanuel Fansten allowed me to update my depiction of the subject. What does today's fight against drug trafficking look like? Who are the actors, what are the tools, the strategies and the doctrines? What are the modes of consumption? What does it involve from a political, economic and philosophical point of view?

It's allegorical. The backdrop of the film is trafficking, but of course it's about capitalism and the society of the spectacle. Drugs are the ultimate capitalist product. Can we control the trade or are we reduced to doing intelligence work only? Is the war against drugs lost? The film also asks these questions.

Hubert thinks that the fight has been corrupted and that the State has become the biggest trafficker in France. Stéphane wants to demonstrate how anti-trafficking politics in France are a clear, almost criminal failure. I think there's a gulf between the way the media talks about trafficking and its infinitely complex reality.

***Libération* in your film is more than a setting, it's almost a character.**

Exactly. *Libération* opened its doors wide to us. We had the fantastic opportunity to film inside the newspaper offices during working hours. There was no question of the journalists stopping so that we could shoot, we had to slip in and be discreet, to melt into the background. You can clearly see movement, life going on, journalists walking across shots, not extras...

Libération is at the forefront of the fight against trafficking and everything related to police provocations in the matter. Emmanuel Fansten has been carrying out in-depth work for years on the excesses of this battle. The groundless accusation against the newspaper is that it is "anti-cop", and therefore not credible in its analysis, but *Libé* simply says that it is the system of the battle against trafficking that is at fault, because it forces mistakes. *Libé* questions criminal policy and the pressure that politics exerts on the police, and points to the disastrous consequences. For my part, I didn't want at all to make a "case study" film, but to be close to

the reality of trafficking and the fight against it, because it also has a completely abstract, phantasmagorical dimension that's both captivating and tragic.

The film also questions the notion of true speech, with the possible mythomania of Hubert Antoine's character evoked several times...

Sometimes we make accommodations with what's real because we want events to say what suits us, either because we have a score to settle, or a political or ideological interest. Often, the great loser is reality: the characters it affects, and all the tragedy that goes with it.

The script, which I wrote with Jeanne Aptekman, followed the visual navigation of the investigation. What interested us wasn't who was right or who was lying, but to show speech trying to catch something of reality, the words generated around this "force" that represent drugs and their trafficking.

The question of Hubert's supposed mythomania (which the film doesn't resolve) is also there, as regards his adversaries, to invalidate him and his words. If Hubert is mythomaniac or takes liberties with reality, this would only be one facet of his personality anyway. As far as I'm concerned, I don't know. What matters to me is his depth and complexity, the truth he grasps, nevertheless. He's simultaneously funny and dark, irritating at times, but also deeply moving. And just because it's conceivable that he reaches an accommodation with the truth doesn't mean that he's not "justified", as he would say himself, or that what he says hasn't really happened.

There is something mythological and romantic about this character. In the first shot, he emerges from the shadows at the top of a staircase and at the end of the story, the car that takes him away fades into the night, as if a part of the mystery should remain off screen...

When I met Hubert, I thought here's an adventurer, as well as an enabler, as we might say today. I felt I'd never seen such a character in a movie.

Part of his charm comes from the fact that he has rubbed shoulders with the players of a disappearing era. He mixed in a France that is now somewhat forgotten, if still alive and influential today: the France of parallel networks such as Pasqua, Focard, Chirac... He makes a link between the GAL (regional public and private socio-economic partners) and the SAC (De Gaulle's security services), he opens things up historically: we wouldn't have on one side, the dirty stories of the Republic – parallel networks, etc – supposedly behind us now and, on the other side the new traffickers whose origins and histories are totally different. Everything is inextricably connected. As soon as you touch one spot, you move another that you thought was asleep. Hubert brings to the table the question of legality and the limits of a supposed rule of law.

Hubert is also, like the Jacques Billard character played by Vincent Lindon, a truly cinematic character, out of the ordinary, while Stéphane – more contemporary, perhaps more familiar too – stands as if on the edge of fiction.

How did you work with your co-writer Jeanne Aptekman?

We wanted to use all the material, literature and images at our disposal to investigate and construct the narrative. A heterogeneous assembly of materials – hearings, written or filmed interviews, official reports, testimonies, diverse statements, etc – but especially the accounts of Hubert and Emmanuel, with whom we conducted many interviews. We went with them to Spain, the Costa del Sol – epicentre of European trafficking – and to Marseille, to see what was happening there and particularly to observe them together.

It was about following their trajectory for as long as possible. The defamation lawsuit that we see at the end of the film actually took place during the shooting. The end of the film was written as the film was being made.

As for the sequences of editorial boards at *Libération* which were shot on site, they were written with the actors according to the procedure of the real editorial boards of the newspaper.

How did you shoot these sequences, which seem very authentic?

DOP Claire Mathon and I attended many boards at the newspaper. We wanted to share that with the audience: the intimacy and secrets of a newspaper being put together before our eyes, through the voices of the men and women who are part of it. Above all, we wanted to make you feel as if you were living this experience in real time, around the huge table that looks like a spaceship. It was an amazing experience to listen to all the journalists talk about the world, or a condensed version of it, striving to construct a story, to decrypt, organize, give sense, to “read” the world in front of the others, and therefore me. I wanted to pay tribute to this work and attempt to share it with the viewer.

But I also wanted it to be actors (who appear throughout the film and form the chorus of journalists around Stéphane: Alexis Manenti, Antonia Buresi, Julie Moulrier, Arnaud Churin, among others) taking hold of these sequences, not real journalists, or non-professionals, as in my previous films. Fiction is also made like that: not an imitation intended to look real, but through an equivalent incarnation, a different proposition.

And to embody these moments, as in a Greek chorus, and hold on to them from one end to the other, so many of them, it was necessary that the actors were familiar with collective speaking, creative speaking, conversation, and a certain intellectualism too.

For this I surrounded myself with many theatre actors and directors, like Pierre-Alain Chapuis or Yann-Noël Collin. They were the ones who were responsible for the newspaper and its composition, and who wrote it. Each was at the head of a department (Society, Police-Justice, Politics, etc.) They made their own day's edition. They also spent a lot of time at *Libération*, and attended a lot of board meetings, like us; they prepared themselves as for a performance or a match.

We just had to turn up and film. We shot these board meeting scenes in a single day, long takes that lasted an hour (the duration of a real board). To keep this idea of continuity, of listening and fluidity, Claire and I didn't want to shoot with many cameras. A gigantic circular track allowed us to glide around the table and to be all ears. The shots were unique, very prepared. Even if the meetings are shorter in the film than those we shot, they were extracted in entire blocks, which were kept to a single breath.

How did you address the question of narrative point of view?

Storytelling constantly raises the – very current – question of ownership of the story: who owns what is told? Who assimilates it? Hubert, who shares his experience, his story and his life? Stéphane who relates it, rewrites and appropriates it? The traffickers themselves? The investigators? The first victims of trafficking? During an argument, Hubert tells Stéphane that he's nothing without him. Who is the most legitimate in the exercise of the narrative? All these theoretical questions, which are also raised by classical tragedy, take us beyond the limits of the investigation and connect us to the intimate. The point of view embraces all voices, all discourses.

Why did you opt for the 1.33 format, as for your first film *Apaches*?

It's the native format of cinema, used much more today than it was not so long ago. I like that it lends something more archaic, rawer than other formats. With this square format, the gaze of the viewer goes deeper into the image, penetrates it. It changes vision and perception. It also changes considerably the work we have to do on the sound. It's a format that contradicts the naturalistic appearance of the film.

This is also why the camera in the film is mobile, but never nervous or jerky, never handheld. The presence in nearly all the roles of professional actors affirms the desire that fiction should occupy every corner of the *mise en scene*.

In addition, your sequence shots and your very fluid camera movements provide a feeling of a very physical film, even more accentuated than in *Apaches* and *A Violent Life*...

That's because this is the third time I've worked with Claire Mathon. We work a lot from the initial stages, then question what has been done from one film to the other. Claire can "fly" through the shots. Her way of moving around inside, freely, all the while with a redoubtable ability to listen to what's being played out among the actors, contributes enormously to the feeling of fluidity.

These sequence shots are also a great physical and technical challenge for the sound crew (Philippe Welsh, Martin Boissau, Thomas Lachesnais).

Your camera, as always, also keeps a distance from your characters, which leaves room for the energy of places and actors to circulate...

It's important to me to see the bodies of the actors moving in the space, it's what touches me a lot and it's true that it requires a little distance. We choose the settings according to the dynamic they're going to create for the actors. Their restriction, or the light that can be felt changing inside.

Distance also makes it possible not to foster identification from the outset. I want the viewer to be touched by the character, not necessarily and immediately to step into his skin. I'd prefer that he or she looks at the character first as a stranger, then an acquaintance, and finally perhaps as a friend. This distance allows the viewer to remain independent. Claire and I need to see the whole thing when we're filming. This removes the jitteriness, the artificial tension in the actors' bodies and performance. I like to feel that there's something almost danced in the shot.

You cast very physical actors...

They're all committed actors, very physical, yes, they immediately inhabit the space, the situation, the shot. From the moment they arrive on set.

How did you choose them and how did you work with them?

As with my previous films, I wanted to create a troupe. Several of the actors had already worked with me, in theatre or cinema, like Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi, Cédric Appietto, Marie-Pierre Nouveau or Henri Costa.

I've dreamed of working with Vincent Lindon for a very long time and for a while there was talk that he might play Hubert!

Roschdy Zem and I met on the set of *Those Who Love Me Can Take the Train* by Patrice Chéreau. Vincent Lindon and he are quite remote from the men who inspired their characters, but they are able to find equivalences in their performances and propose surprising versions of themselves. They “discuss” with them. Both of them could easily appear in the *films noir* of Hollywood’s golden age.

Pio Marmaï looks a bit like Emmanuel Fansten. He possesses an appetite and stamina I’ve only encountered in great theatre actors. And a staggering mimetic ability. Again, this is the fruit of major, painstaking work.

All three embody a certain idea of manhood, which they gradually contradict in the film, even to the point of destroying it. It touches me deeply, this and the childhood you can see in each of them, just like their spirit, their jokiness.

We should also talk about Alexis Manenti and what he manages to make heard of the true journalistic word.

Everything they all do which seems obvious or just “fluid” is the fruit of a lot of work: we spent a lot of time together, talking about the film, preparing scenes, “speaking the language” of the film. But above all, they write with great capacity for suggestion, from one take to another, from one day to the next. They each bring a lot to the characters, their intelligence, their concentration.

Your cinema is not so feminine, but your female characters are always strong, especially in this film...

That’s true for some of the main characters, but this film is made and above all viewed – as was the one that preceded it – by female artists (Jeanne Aptekman, Claire Mathon, also Marion Monnier and Lila Desiles, who edited it, Rachèle Raoult, who designed the costumes, Julie Allione the casting director, and Barbara Canale and Julia Canarelli who work on the *mise en scene* with me and who have done on several of my films.

As for the actresses, whether it be the judge, played by Marilyne Canto, or the public prosecutor by Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi, or Anabel Lopez who plays the lawyer at the Malaga prosecutor’s office, they are the characters who reproduce political, judicial and/or corporatist words with the greatest force. It mattered to me that the point of view of the film should turn, and it is with them that it does: they jump-start our perception of events. And it’s this accumulation of points of view that for me constitutes the unity of the film.

Marilyne Canto allows us to feel that this judge knows the case, but not entirely, and this tells us something about jurisdiction today. How can you be a specialist in such complex cases without being devoted solely to the subject? It’s impossible of course, and that’s surely one of the problems. It’s like Marilyne, who, in one of the long trial sequences, shifted the scene by

the truth of her attention and her speech, something like Wiseman or even Depardon, which makes the sequence disturbing and possessed of great truth. It's very difficult to do.

As for Julie Moulier, who plays the police-justice department chief, I really love the trust we see her place in Alexis and Stéphane. We see her conviction and the risk she takes in supporting them, her commitment to the ideological position of her newspaper when she is on the stand, as well as her ambiguity at the end of the film in her exchange with Jacques Billard. Julie's a tremendous actress. I remember how the real *Libération* journalists who attended the filming of the board meetings watched her take hold of the subjects one after the other, moderate the discussion and joke, as they themselves do, around the table. They were very impressed: it looked as if they were going to offered her to stay on and work with them.

We should also talk about Mylène Jampanoï and Lucie Gallo, who guided the writing of the film considerably. I find the concrete element they bring in only a few scenes very powerful, their truth, the ease with which their characters fit into the film.

It's also a female character – the Spanish lawyer – who delivers one of the cornerstones of the film...

Yes, she plays a lawyer who specializes in drug cases at the Malaga tribunal and recalls what happens when a state uses the same methods as those it is fighting. This sentence opens up the film's directly political dimension, and I agree in part with her analysis.

How did you approach the rhythm of the film?

My concern is the diversity of the sequences and the fluidity. Also, that we don't know what will follow, that everything should be renewed sequence after sequence. Tension and tempo come in part from these variations. I like to give the impression that the film is here, no matter what happens, as if there was no beginning and no end. But the rhythm comes from the actors, from the speed with which they think and therefore speak the text, which is absolutely written.

How did you work on the very eclectic soundtrack?

As with *A Violent Life*, we worked with music supervisor Frédéric Junqua, exchanging from the beginning sounds, playlists, tracks with a connection to the era the film covers or the place the characters pass through. Most things take shape during the edit: I try out a thousand and one things and then make a selection from this big toolbox.

We searched the repertoire of a number of American ambient electronic artists like Ore, Loscil and Tom Carter (whom I'd used already in *A Violent Life*) for all the layers that act as a

soundtrack, as well as legendary groups like Future Islands, The Blue Nile (for the closing credits) or Purple Mountains, last group of the late, lamented David Berman.

All this collides with Francis Cabrel, Les Négresses Vertes, some Mexican cartels *cumbias*, as well as tarantellas, as in Pasolini's films, Dean Blunt and of course Maud Geffray, one of the great contemporary French electronic music composers.

Through certain details, *Undercover* weaves subtle links with your previous films. For example, in *A Violent Life*, a line alludes to a character's "friend from *Libé*" ...

In a way, *Undercover* begins where *A Violent Life* ends. The character of Stéphane in *A Violent Life* has a journalist friend who works for *Libération* and no doubt he would have liked to follow the same profession if he hadn't returned to Bastia and been murdered.

Do you believe cinema and fiction can have an impact on the world?

I think cinema can change a viewer's life. For me, in any case, it does. I also think I see better and a little more since making films. But this film, which also evokes the issue of identity theft (and not only through Hubert's character) perhaps reveals a crisis of fiction: it is now everywhere, and especially (justice, police, politics, medias) where it shouldn't be. Cinema might well be the place from which fiction is fleeing.

Director's biography

Stage and film director as well as an actor, Thierry de Peretti was born in Ajaccio, Corsica. For his work in the theatre, he has been awarded the Villa Médicis Hors-les-Murs Prize and received in 2001 the Prix de la Révélation Théâtrale du Syndicat National de la Critique for *Return to the Desert* by Bernard-Marie Koltès. He recently directed *The Bitters Tears of Petra Von Kant* by R.W. Fassbinder at the Théâtre de L'Oeuvre.

Notable film appearances include *Le Silence* by Orso Miret, *Saint Laurent* by Bertrand Bonello and *Those Who Love Me Can Take the Train* by Patrice Chéreau.

In cinema, after two shorts, *Le jour de ma mort* and *Sleepwalkers*, he directed *Apaches*, which was selected in Cannes 2013 Directors' Fortnight. His second feature, *A Violent Life*, screened in Cannes 2017 Critics' Week. *Undercover* is his third feature.

CREDITS

CAST

Hubert Antoine:	Roschdy ZEM
Stéphane Vilner:	Pio MARMAÏ
Jacques Billard:	Vincent LINDON
Julie Mondolini:	Julie MOULIER
Alexis Novinard:	Alexis MANENTI
Mylène Antoine:	Mylène JAMPANOÏ
Antonia Nicoli:	Antonia BURESI
The Judge:	Marilyne CANTO
Lucie Grimaldi:	Lucie GALLO
Public Prosecutor:	Valeria BRUNI-TEDESCHI

CREW

Director: **Thierry de Peretti**

Screenplay: **Thierry de Peretti, Jeanne Aptekman**

Adapted from: ***L'infiltré*** by Hubert Avoine and Emmanuel Fansten
(Editions Robert Laffont)

DP: **Claire Mathon (A.F.C)**

Casting: **Julie Allione**

Sound: **Philippe Welsh, Martin Boissau, Thomas Lachesnais, Sylvain Malbrant, Raphaël Mouterde, Stéphane Thiébaud**

Production Designers: **Toma Baqueni, Marion Pagès Gonzalo**

Editors: **Marion Monnier, Lila Desiles**

Costume Designer: **Rachèle Raoult**

Production: **Les Films Velvet**

Co-production: **Arte France Cinéma**
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Rectangle Productions
Srab Films

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