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**MA VIE DE COURGETTE
(MY LIFE AS A COURGETTE)**

Claude Barras
Switzerland, France



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MA VIE DE COURGETTE

My life as a Courgette

AN ANIMATED FILM BY CLAUDE BARRAS

Courgette is not a vegetable at all: he's a brave little boy. When he loses his mother, he feels alone in the world. But that's before he starts his new life at the children's home and meets his new friends Simon, Ahmed, Jujube, Alice and Béatrice. They all have their own stories — stories as bitter as they are sweet. And then there's Camille. When you're 10 years old, there's a lot to discover: having a group of friends, falling in love ... And why not? After all, there's a lot to be happy about.

The film is based on a novel and appeals to a wide audience. Its original aesthetic — with wide-eyed little figures brought to life — and especially the tone — which allows serious subjects to be explored with great sensitivity — set it apart from most children's films. 'It took a leap of imagination to believe that this could be the perfect children's film', admits Céline Sciamma (*Tomboy* and *Girlhood*, which was nominated for the LUX FILM PRIZE in 2014), who wrote the script for *Ma vie de Courgette* (*My life as a Courgette*).

TENSION BETWEEN FORM AND CONTENT

At first glance, *Ma vie de Courgette* (*My life as a Courgette*) looks like any other children's film, as animation is a genre generally associated with younger audiences. Here, the characters — with their swollen heads and saucer eyes — seem to confirm this: the protagonist is a 9-year-old boy. The visual setting for his story is richly coloured; Courgette himself has blue hair. The characters follow the same model, varying in colour and size, with different voices and, often, cartoon-like personality traits, like the glasses worn by the head care worker Madame Papineau, Simon's scar or the long blond locks that Alice hides behind.

And yet the impression of a typical children's film is immediately contradicted. In the first few minutes, we can see that the subject matter and tone of the film belong to a register far removed from the usual fare served up to children: Courgette's mother watches TV on her own, drinking beer (the empty cans lie about on the floor) and spitting out words fuelled by her bitter disillusionment with men ('Liar!' she calls the actor swearing his eternal love to an actress), while Courgette, his eyes ringed in blue like someone old before their time, collects the empty cans to go and play in the attic, piling them up. But when the tower of cans collapses, Courgette's mother, disturbed by the noise, shouts to her son and heads for the attic to give him a beating ...

This first scene is handled with great sensitivity. We naturally infer that Courgette's mother has been abandoned by her husband, and that despair has driven her to drink. A hatred of men in general, or the disgust she feels for her cheating husband, is now transferred to her son, whom she beats for the pettiest of crimes. This appears to be part of their daily life.

But it's going to get even worse. Terrified of the coming blows, Courgette slams the trap door to the attic shut, hitting his mother on the head. We hear her tumble backwards down the stairs. The following scene that follows confirms the viewer's worst fear: the police officer asks Courgette if his mother was nice to him, and then, when asked about his father, Courgette shows him his kite on which he has drawn a picture of his father. On the other side is a picture of a bird — 'Dad's bird', he tells the policeman, in his mother's words ...





Courgette doesn't grasp — not consciously at least — that 'Dad's bird' isn't really a bird. The adult viewer can see that Dad has gone off with another woman. The humour in this scene is dark, and would only be understood by an adult audience.

The themes of the film are thus established within the first few minutes. *Ma vie de Courgette* (*My life as a Courgette*) looks like a film for children, and it can certainly be seen by children because it is told from a child's point of view, but it is also a film for adults.

SAUCER EYES

Children's films are often guilty of over-simplification and caricature and of portraying a complex world in black and white. In *Ma vie de Courgette* (*My life as a Courgette*), there is a clear contrast between good and bad (Raymond the police officer vs Camille's aunt) and yet, even for those prone to hasty judgments (like Ahmed, who keeps pouring water onto Raymond's head 'because he's a policeman', or the woman up in the hills who accuses Ahmed of stealing and lying, almost certainly because he is North African), the film ultimately offers a far more nuanced vision.

Simon (who has a scar on his forehead, a sweater with a skull and crossbones and an arrogant attitude) quickly emerges as the local tough guy who's going to give Courgette a hard time: he makes fun of him, pulls his chair out when he goes to sit down and greets him with a threatening 'Welcome to prison, idiot'. But after a confrontation between the two boys, it's Simon who reaches out to Courgette and seeks to befriend him, telling him the stories of how each child came to be in the home. And subsequently, although he never quite loses his rebellious streak (the walls of the home are covered in his skull and crossbones graffiti), we discover that behind the 'big guy who picks on the little ones' is a protective older brother figure. He helps Camille escape her horrible aunt, and when Courgette and Camille leave the home he takes charge of the other children, even though he is clearly very upset: 'You're going to race, and whoever comes last is going to wash my underpants for the rest of their life.' This challenge lays bare the full complexity of Simon's



emotions: the pain of watching his friends leave, knowing that *he* will never be adopted; his resolve to stop the youngest children from dwelling on the present; and the fact that he hides his own vulnerabilities behind false threats — and, ultimately, his great unutterable loneliness. For Simon is no longer a child, but not yet an adult.

Personal experience has taught these children not to expect anything from grown-ups. Courgette saw his father abandon him and his mother, followed by his mother's subsequent descent into alcoholism; Alice was sexually abused by her father; Simon saw his parents taking drugs and watching porn all the time, and these days he gets presents from his mother through the post, without any note of greeting; Jujube lived with a mother who was completely mad; and Camille saw her father kill her mother and then himself. As for Ahmed and Béa, they saw their parents forcibly removed from French society: Ahmed's father is in prison because he 'committed armed robbery at a petrol station to buy him a pair of Nikes', and Béa's mother was deported. It is not surprising, then, that they are wide-eyed to discover other kinds of grown-ups. When Courgette hears Rosy announce that it's time for goodnight kisses, he can't quite believe it. And when, up in the hills, the children from the home see a little boy fall over and be picked up and comforted by his mother, they are rooted to the spot, eyes wide open in amazement. 'His Mum's pretty,' says one. 'Maybe it's not his Mum,' says another. This gesture of comfort seems alien to the children. They can't quite believe a mother to be capable of such tenderness. In much the same way, they are very interested in the sexual side of Rosy and Monsieur Paul's love affair, and seek to interpret it. Courgette has to explain it to the others: 'He's just in love. He hugs her really hard because

he's scared she's going to leave.' Courgette knows this because he himself has fallen in love with Camille.

TIME HEALS ALL WOUNDS

The children from the home have all had difficult experiences, and they are all suffering. Their suffering manifests itself in various ways: Ahmed wets the bed; Alice knots her skipping rope around her legs, gets very nervous whenever conflict arises and starts to tremble, her knife and fork knocking against her plate; Béa calls for her mother whenever she hears the sound of a car; Simon, as we know, hides behind his tough guy facade; Jujube can't stop eating; Camille hides in a cupboard ...

Now that they've escaped the source of their troubles, though, the children can gradually rebuild their lives. We see this in several small ways. For example, Courgette crushes the empty can he brought with him to remember his mother and makes a little boat with it before giving it to Camille. The unhappy memory of an unhappy relationship is thus transformed into the symbol of a beautiful new relationship. Ahmed, who was wrongly accused by the little girl's mother up in the hills, in the end only remembers the generosity of the girl, who gives him her ski goggles. He never takes them off! Alice channels her nervous energy into an attempt to beat her skipping rope record. This gradual evolution — from pain and suffering to a kind of calm contentment — can be measured in the marks left on the walls as a record of the children's growth. When Courgette goes back with Raymond and Camille to the apartment where he used to live with his mother, the marks stand for traumatic events (the day he found out he had to repeat the school year, the day his father left ...) but at Raymond's house, each mark is a happy event: 'The day you became my children.'

The film ends with the letter that Courgette sends to Simon. Simon had told Courgette shortly after his arrival at the children's home all about the other children's pasts and concluded that there was 'no one left to love us'. Courgette writes to him to tell him that he was wrong and that he and Camille haven't forgotten him and nor have the other children. And yet, perhaps even more telling than this message is the exchange between Courgette and Camille on their last night up in the hills. Courgette talks about the future he might have had if he'd stayed with his mother (beer, TV, etc.) and feels grateful to have escaped. Camille, too, is happy to be at the children's home with the other children and the care workers, rather than with her aunt. And if it weren't for Les Fontaines, they would never have met ...

And so, despite being a children's film, the big questions asked are aimed at adult viewers: what kind of example do we want to set for our children? Is the environment we're bringing them up in the best for their development? To what extent do our adult passions, frustrations and personal interests affect them?

Lastly, against the backdrop of the tensions of marriage, the film makes the case, firmly and eloquently, for alternative family structures: the traditional family (with a father and mother) is not necessarily the perfect environment for children to thrive in. Parents can be incompetent, irresponsible, violent or absent ... What matters most is not the role, status or fact of parenthood, but the relationship between parent and child, and the way in which that relationship is nourished.





SOME POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

The grown-ups in the film are broadly split between good and bad. Not all of them can be categorised quite so easily, though, especially from the children's point of view — one that can always change. For example, let us look at what Courgette says and what he hints at about his mother. How should we interpret the drawing on the kite of his father dressed up as a superhero (with a mask and cape)? How should we interpret Béa's reaction when her mother comes back? And what should we think of the fact that Ahmed's father is in prison because he 'committed armed robbery at a petrol station to buy him a pair of Nikes'?

The trip to the funfair, where Raymond takes Courgette and Camille, has two main attractions: the ghost train and the shooting gallery. Do you think that moments like this, when we scare ourselves or shoot pistols for fun, mean something different to these children who have experienced real fear and real violence?

Films for children must also appeal to adults, because it's adults who take children to the cinema. So they must also enjoy the film or they won't take them anymore! Films often seek to do so through irony and referential nods to other things. But that is not the case in *Ma vie de Courgette* (*My Life as a Zucchini*). Have you come across any other 'family' films that make for an authentic exchange between parents and children, rather than simply offering two parallel readings? If so, which ones?

les grignoux



10 YEARS OF EUROPEAN CINEMA FOR EUROPEANS

The European Parliament is pleased to present the three films competing for the 2016 LUX FILM PRIZE.

À PEINE J'OUVRE LES YEUX (*As I open my eyes*), by Leyla Bouzid
France, Tunisia, Belgium, United Arab Emirates

MA VIE DE COURGETTE (*My life as a Courgette*), by Claude Barras
Switzerland, France

TONI ERDMANN, by Maren Ade
Germany, Austria, Romania

These multi-faceted stories, which are the result of the great dedication and creativity of talented young European film directors, will be screened during the fifth edition of the LUX FILM DAYS.

LUX FILM PRIZE

Culture plays a fundamental role in constructing our societies.

With this in mind, the European Parliament launched the LUX FILM PRIZE in 2007 with the aim of enhancing the circulation of European films across Europe and sparking Europe-wide debate and discussion about major societal issues.

The LUX FILM PRIZE is a unique initiative. While most European co-productions are shown only in their country of origin and are rarely distributed elsewhere, even within the EU, the LUX FILM PRIZE gives three European films the rare opportunity to be subtitled in the EU's 24 official languages.

The winner of the LUX FILM PRIZE will be chosen by the Members of the European Parliament and announced on 23 November 2016.

LUX FILM DAYS

The LUX FILM PRIZE gave rise to the LUX FILM DAYS. Since 2012, the three films competing for the LUX FILM PRIZE have been shown to a wider European audience during the LUX FILM DAYS.

The LUX FILM DAYS invite you to enjoy an indelible cultural experience that transcends borders. From October to December 2016, you will be able to join cinema lovers from across Europe in watching screenings of *À peine j'ouvre les yeux (As I open my eyes)*, *Ma vie de Courgette (My life as a Courgette)* and *Toni Erdmann* in one of the EU's 24 official languages. Don't forget to vote for your favourite film via our website <http://luxprize.eu> or our Facebook page!

AUDIENCE MENTION

The Audience Mention is the LUX FILM PRIZE people's choice award. Don't forget to vote for *À peine j'ouvre les yeux (As I open my eyes)*, *Ma vie de Courgette (My life as a Courgette)* or *Toni Erdmann*! You might be chosen to go to the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in July 2017 — courtesy of the European Parliament — and announce the winner of the Audience Mention.

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LUX
PRIZE
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DIRECTOR: Claude Barras

SCREENPLAY: Céline Sciamma

CINEMATOGRAPHY: David Toutevoix

ANIMATION DIRECTOR: Kim Keukeleire

MUSIC: Sophie Hunger

PRODUCERS: Max Karli, Pauline Gygax,
Aremelle Glorennec, Eric Jacquot,
Marc Bonny

PRODUCTION: Rita Productions, Blue Spirit
Productions, Gebeka Films, KNM, Radio
Télévision Suisse, SRG SSR, Rhône-Alpes
Cinéma, France 3 Cinéma, Helium Films

YEAR: 2016

DURATION: 75'

GENRE: Animation

COUNTRY: Switzerland, France

ORIGINAL VERSION: French



