

LUX FILM DAYS

3 FILMS
24 LANGUAGES
28 COUNTRIES



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STYX

by Wolfgang Fischer
Germany, Austria



STYX

BY WOLFGANG FISCHER

Rike, a woman in her early forties, has decided to take a break from her career as a doctor on an emergency ward to make a journey to Ascension Island on board the *Asa Gray*, the sailboat which is her pride and joy. She sails alone, and her odyssey to the South Atlantic also takes her on a personal journey that prompts her to explore her innermost being. On board her boat, she divides her time between steering and reading the books she has brought with her, including *The creation of paradise: Darwin on Ascension Island*. Fascinated by the lush, varied vegetation on an island that had been a desert until the end of the 19th century, she is eager to visit this artificial Eden created from nothing under the guidance of the famous British naturalist himself.

One night, however, fate turns all her plans upside down: a violent storm blows into Rike's path — to the north-east of the Cape Verde islands — an old fishing boat carrying a hundred or so migrants who are sending desperate signals in her direction. She tries in vain to establish radio contact with the boat, then alerts the coastguard, which is slow to respond in spite of her repeated calls. All alone now in the face of the moral obligation to rescue the migrants, but unable to take them all on board her little sailboat, Rike finds her powerlessness all the more intolerable because she knows that she embodies hope for them. Torn between the desire to help them and the instructions she has been given to stay away, the young woman finds herself facing a tragic dilemma and, in the end, manages to save only one passenger: a 14-year-old boy called Kingsley.

CONTEXT

By bringing this tragic encounter to the screen, the director Wolfgang Fischer creates an allegory that illustrates the insurmountable gulf between a wealthy Europe and an African continent beset by poverty, political instability and all the hardships associated with it, violence, injustice and persecution. The film also seems to pose a fundamental question: faced with an emergency, what can we do as individuals when the authorities and those in power choose to ignore it?

The idea addressed in *Styx* is central to hugely controversial developments unfolding today, which are characterised in part by a resurgence in xenophobia and nationalist movements in Europe: Italy, Austria and the countries of the Visegrad Group (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) are now refusing to take migrants in, as demonstrated in particular by recent decisions to block access to ports. In the wake of a migrant crisis unprecedented in its scale, and which reached its height in 2015, if they are to resolve the issue of how to deal with migrants EU leaders now have to tackle a political crisis which is pitting two philosophies, that of an open Europe and that of a closed Europe, against one another.

ON THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES

Situated in the South Atlantic off the African coast, Ascension is a small volcanic island which Charles Darwin visited in 1836 at the very end of his expedition around the world on board the *Beagle*. Struck by the desolation of this place, which had no fresh water or vegetation, he talked about it with the botanist Joseph Holker, who then set about greening the island with many different kinds of plants and trees from Europe, Argentina and South Africa. The aim was to re-establish the water cycle and improve soil quality, and, 30 years later, his efforts had paid off. In the film, it is clear that Rike is fascinated by this unique experiment, as shown by her choice of destination and her constant delving into *The creation of paradise: Darwin on Ascension Island* — an illustrated book with an emblematic title, the cover of which is shown in close-up, along with the name of her boat. *Asa Gray*, an American botanist, was a fervent admirer of Darwin, provided him with useful material for *The origin of species* and propagated his ideas in the United States.

Piecing together these important details, therefore, we cannot help but think back to the prologue of the film, which follows a group of monkeys moving around their home territory on the Rock of Gibraltar — the only place in Europe where Barbary macaques live in the wild, in a troop of around 250. As we know, primates were central to the research Darwin carried out into the origin of species in the 19th century. The director's choice to juxtapose shots of a primate eating in the same way as a human and of Rike stowing away food for her sea voyage serves to emphasise the connection between the two species and, indirectly, to call into question the idea that humans are more intelligent than all other animals.

THE CREATION OF PARADISE

The viewer is thus prompted to reflect on the broader significance of these references to the past in the context of a modern-day story about a collision between two contrasting worlds — a Western society wrapped up in its wealth and comfortable way of life, egocentric and perhaps even indifferent to the rest of the world, and a community of migrants fighting for their lives. This use of allegory as a narrative device guides us in our interpretation of the film.

The 'creation of paradise', as alluded to on the front cover of Rike's choice of bedtime reading, gives us the first clue: it suggests that her solo expedition is some kind of return to the garden of Eden, or 'heaven on earth', and thus back to the origins of the world as described in Genesis. Humanity's responsibility for the state of the world is therefore established from the very beginning of the film, even before Rike has set sail, which means that concepts such as natural disasters or fate can quickly be set aside when interpreting the events that follow. We can therefore read these parallels as a criticism of the way migrants are treated in some countries. Similarly, the references to the 'creation of paradise' on Ascension Island can undoubtedly be interpreted as a suggestion that solutions that are humanly possible and beneficial to everyone can be found in even the most desperate of situations.

Why, then, do we accept the world as it is? On what basis do we believe it is normal to live our comfortable lives when others, who are much worse off, are dying in horrendous circumstances, while trying desperately to save themselves? There is no doubt that this is the fundamental question Wolfgang Fischer is trying to raise by including all these allusions.

At the same time, and certainly more prosaically, Rike's powerlessness to save the people on board the old, sinking fishing vessel — which emphasises the limited scope for action we have as individuals and in a way reinforces the idea of inevitability surrounding the tragic deaths of thousands of migrants at sea — is a way of illustrating our collective moral bankruptcy. During his first radio conversation with Rike just before the storm, the captain of a cargo ship tells her she can count on him if she needs help. Just a few hours later, however, he refuses to get involved on the grounds that he could lose his job, thus putting his personal interests ahead of his duty under the 1974 SOLAS Convention to save lives at sea. It is also a way of highlighting the shortcomings of European policy on the reception of migrants, in particular in its most practical form, given that the coastguards — whose task it is to protect civilian lives at sea — refuse to respond to the alarming information Rike sends them by radio.

THE WATERS OF HELL

The search for paradise, which is both Rike's and the migrants' quest — even if that quest takes an entirely different form and means something entirely different for each of them — is evoked in the very title of the film as a terrifying utopia: 'Styx', which inevitably conjures up images of damnation, is an allusion to Greek mythology, in which it is one of the five rivers of the Underworld dividing the realm of the living from the realm of the dead. Through his choice of title, which clearly foreshadows the drama to come, the director casts a pall over the whole story from the very outset, hinting at a tragic outcome before the film has even begun. The striking contrast between the two notions of a paradise which is the stuff of dreams and a hell which is all too real, both for the migrants on the brink of death and for the young German woman who is completely powerless to save them, seems to be a clear allegorical condemnation of political inertia in the face of a humanitarian disaster and the widespread indifference of Western peoples to a faraway problem that seems abstract to them,

since they have never seen what it involves at first hand. In keeping with that interpretation, the coastguards who get involved at the end of the film can be said to resemble Charon — the boatman of the Underworld, whose job is to help the souls of the dead cross the Styx — transferring more bodies than survivors from one boat to the other.

Finally, Rike can be likened to Styx, the oldest of the Oceanids and the personification of the eponymous river. The Oceanids, water nymphs from Greek mythology, always play a benevolent role, and one of the tasks they were given by Zeus was to watch over young boys and guide them until they reach adulthood. This reference obviously sheds some light on the relationship that develops between the doctor and the young Kingsley, the only migrant she manages to rescue, but also on the unfortunate role she inadvertently plays in the tragic fate of some of his fellow passengers. It is undoubtedly not a coincidence that, at the end of the film — after she has finally entered the hold of the ship and witnessed the horror of the situation for herself — we are shown a close-up of her face entirely enveloped in a dark sheet that reveals only her eyes. While in the story this is simply a means of keeping her from catching an infection, the director's choice to focus on that particular image seems to be a clear reference to the hood that covered the boatman's face when he transported the souls of the dead to the other side of the Styx.





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SOME POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- The film *Styx* is composed of two distinct parts: **before** the storm, which lasts a whole night, and **after** it. Taking our allegorical interpretation as a basis, what can you say about the storm? What impact does it have? Did you see any parallels with another mythological story? What is the significance of this chance event in the film?
- Finally, the presence of the character Rike — just a normal person on holiday — invites us to reflect on ourselves and our responsibilities as European citizens. What message do you think the director, Wolfgang Fischer, is trying to get across to us, and what does he ultimately want from us?

les grignoux



EUROPEAN CINEMA FOR EUROPEANS

The LUX Prize continues to bring together a surprising variety of genres and moods in films created by young, talented European directors. The European Parliament is pleased to present the three films competing for the 2018 LUX FILM PRIZE:

STYX, a film by Wolfgang Fischer — Germany, Austria

THE OTHER SIDE OF EVERYTHING (*Druga strana svega*), a film by Mila Turajlić — Serbia, France, Qatar

WOMAN AT WAR (*Kona fer í stríð*), a film by Benedikt Erlingsson — Iceland, France, Ukraine

Adopting a sympathetic and intelligent approach, the films deal with topical subjects and reflect what is going on in Europe at the moment. They show characters who open their eyes to the world around them in order to understand reality and the societies and communities to which they belong. By showing our stories sublimated by the emotions of the cinema, the quality and diversity of European cinema will be displayed, as will its importance in constructing social values and cultural communities. We invite you to see the films during the seventh edition of the LUX FILM DAYS.

LUX FILM PRIZE

Culture plays a fundamental role in the construction of our societies.

With this in mind, the European Parliament launched the LUX FILM PRIZE in 2007. Through this project it hoped to boost the distribution of European films across Europe, and to encourage a European debate on major social issues.

The LUX FILM PRIZE is a unique initiative. While most European co-productions are shown only in their countries 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 14 November 2018.

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.

During the LUX FILM DAYS event we invite you to take part in an unforgettable cultural experience that transcends borders. From October 2018 to January 2019 you will be able to join cinema lovers from across Europe in watching screenings of the three films in one of the EU's 24 official languages. Don't forget to vote for your favourite film via our website, luxprize.eu, or our Facebook page!

AUDIENCE MENTION

The Audience Mention is the LUX FILM PRIZE people's choice award. Be sure to vote for one of the three films before 31 January 2019! You might even be invited by the European Parliament to attend the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in July 2019 and announce the winner of the Audience Mention.

WATCH,
DEBATE
AND VOTE!



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#luxprize

LUX
PRIZE
.EU

DIRECTOR: Wolfgang Fischer

SCRIPT: Wolfgang Fischer, Ika Künzel

CAST: Susanne Wolff, Gedion Oduor Wekesa,
Alexander Beyer, Inga Birkenfeld

CINEMATOGRAPHY: Benedict Neuenfels

PRODUCERS: Marcos Kantis, Martin Lehwald,
Michal Pokorny

PRODUCTION: Schiwago Film GmbH, Amour
Fou Vienna

YEAR: 2018

RUNNING TIME: 94'

GENRE: Fiction

COUNTRIES: Germany, Austria

ORIGINAL VERSION: English, German

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