

# Les neiges du Kilimandjaro

a film by Robert Guédiguian



LUX<sup>2011</sup>  
EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT  
FILM PRIZE  
WINNER



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DIRECTOR  
**Robert Guédiguian**

CAST  
**Ariane Ascaride**  
**Jean-Pierre Darroussin**  
**Gérard Meylan**  
**Marilyne Canto**  
**Grégoire Leprince-Ringuet**  
**Anaïs Demoustier**  
**Adrien Jolivet**

SCREENPLAY  
**Robert Guédiguian, Jean-Louis Milesi**

CINEMATOGRAPHER  
**Pierre Milon**

EDITING  
**Bernard Sasia**

CO-PRODUCTION  
**Agat Films & Cie / Ex Nihilo**  
**France 3 Cinéma**  
**La Friche Belle de Mai**

SALES AGENT  
**Films Distribution**

DURATION  
**107 min.**

COUNTRY  
**France**

YEAR  
**2011**

# The Snows of Kilimanjaro



BACKGROUND BRIEFING BY THE 'LES GRIGNOUX' CULTURAL CENTRE - MANON QUOILIN

The film *'Les Neiges du Kilimanjaro'* ('The Snows of Kilimanjaro'), the inspiration for which came from Victor Hugo's poem *'Les Pauvres Gens'* ('How Good are the Poor'), on which it is (very loosely) based, shows how an entire value system is first challenged, and then gradually reinstated by the efforts of Michel and Marie-Claire, a couple played by Jean-Pierre Darroussin and Ariane Ascaride. These actors, together with Gérard Meylan, regularly appear in the work of the film director, Robert Guédiguian. He, true to form, has produced a film with a message which, if not exactly militant in tone, calls into question both contemporary society and the direction in which it is travelling.

## The values promoted by the film

The film opens with a painful dilemma: Michel, a trade union official, is required to draw by lot the names of 20 people who will be dismissed immediately. When he reads out his own

name, his colleague gives him a look which is questioning, perhaps even accusing. This colleague, who is also Michel's best friend, is then seen reproaching him for having put his name in with the others, despite the fact that he could have avoided dismissal by virtue of his position as a union official. Michel replies that he did not wish to exploit his position, thus showing his concern for fairness and impartiality. This short conversation is not particularly significant in terms of plot development, but it enables the director to introduce the main characters and the central theme of the film. This opening sequence immediately sets the tone for the whole film: the focus is on the **values** upheld by certain characters, which will be severely challenged as the plot unfolds.

Later, while Michel and Marie-Claire are entertaining friends at home one evening, two masked men burst into their house to steal the money with which they were going to pay for a trip to Mount Kilimanjaro. The victims of this crime are completely taken aback. Why were they specifically targeted by these intruders? What had they done in their lives to deserve



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such treatment? This violent robbery calls into question all the values which these characters have spent their lives defending, by plunging them into a situation which they regard as a brutal and incomprehensible act of injustice.

Michel's bewilderment is even greater when he discovers the identity of one of the attackers: Christophe, a young worker who was among the 20 selected at random for dismissal at the beginning of the film. In Michel's view, all the dismissed workers are in the same situation, and the normal reaction in such circumstances is a feeling of unity and solidarity. That was why he and Marie-Claire had invited everyone who had been sacked to the party to celebrate their 30th wedding anniversary and share this happy occasion. From Michel's perspective, Christophe had been 'one of us', working for the same firm and sacked at the same time. Later, when both of them are looking for work, Michel speaks encouragingly to Christophe, not knowing at the time what he has done.

So, when the two confront each other at the police station after Christophe has been arrested, Michel clearly articulates his feeling that he has been wronged: 'We used to work together; we were sacked at the same time. And yet you came to rob me?' Robbery is a violent and unjust act, but above all, in the trade unionist's eyes, it tramples on the principle of solidarity which should exist between all workers. So Michel,

abandoning the concept of solidarity now that it no longer applies, lodges an official complaint against his attacker and thereby invokes the abstract principle of justice, which is supposed to be the same for everybody and to punish all unlawful acts.

It should be noted, however, that the film does not confine itself to a single point of view, and shows us very early on – immediately after the attack – Christophe's possible motives. After showing the masked and hooded figure committing the robbery, the camera follows Christophe as he escapes along the town's darkened backstreets. He then removes his disguise, catches a bus and returns home to look after his younger brothers. From this point on, the attacker is clearly identified, presented as an individual and humanised by the director through his interaction with his family.

Now that Christophe has in his possession the money stolen from Michel and Marie-Claire, he pays the money he owes to his landlord and goes shopping for food for his younger brothers. The audience then realises that Christophe's violent actions can be easily explained – though, doubtless, not morally justified – by his determination to ensure his family's basic needs are met.

Although Michel feels that the attack is profoundly unjust, his conversation with Christophe at the





police station makes him aware of the young man's situation. Despite the similarity of their situation in terms of their both having been laid off, the two men's circumstances differ in essential respects. Whereas Michel's friends and family had clubbed together to pay for him to take a trip to Tanzania, and he is not only eligible for a union pension but also lives with someone who has a job. Christophe, on the other hand, has no financial security and somehow has to bring up, and financially provide for his young brothers. Christophe tries to justify his actions on the basis of the inequality in their respective situations. Although it is not possible to state with certainty the director's precise position, one can guess that by allowing the young man to speak at length, Guédiguian calls into question the beliefs spontaneously expressed by Michel and his wife: does their life really accord with the **values of justice and fairness** which they appear to endorse?

Once they become aware of this, Michel and Marie-Claire try, in keeping with their beliefs and each in their own way, to rebuild the value system in which they used to believe and which has been challenged by a crime perpetrated against them by someone they regarded as similar to themselves, but whose life, they now discover, was one of real difficulty. Michel withdraws his complaint and offers – somewhat awkwardly – to help Christophe, who however categorically refuses this offer, which he regards as strange and perhaps humiliating. Michel decides, therefore, to

help the young man's family financially by using the money for the tickets for the trip to Tanzania. Meanwhile, Marie-Claire takes affectionate care of Martin and Jules, Christophe's young brothers, who are in effect abandoned after he has been arrested. Finally, the couple decide to adopt these two young children.

The attitude of the two central characters could be summed at *generosity, mutual assistance, kindness or goodness*. However, it could be said that the film promotes values which have a more general application. While generosity and kindness suggest actions or behaviour between individuals, and in a fairly limited context, the term **solidarity** tends to refer to relations within a larger group of people.

There are several indications that the behaviour of Michel and Marie-Claire cannot be explained simply by personal considerations – compassion for two children left to fend for themselves – but is based on their ideals concerning the **whole of the society** in which they live. For example, Michel is presented from the outset as a trade union official, which implies that his aim is to defend the workers as a whole, even if this role also gives him certain advantages (such as protection from dismissal); yet the very first scene of the film shows that, through solidarity and his sense of fairness, Michel has included his own name on the list of people eligible to be dismissed. Moreover, when he confronts Christophe at the police station, Michel stresses

the similarity of their position in society, although his assailant counters by drawing his attention to the unrecognised inequalities in their respective situations. This calling into question of the value of solidarity is reflected in the questions Michel and Marie-Claire ask themselves: have they become 'bourgeois'? Do they deserve to live in their present comfortable circumstances? What have they really become? But the behaviour of Michel and Marie-Claire – which their children will fail to understand but their two friends, Raoul and Denise, will in the end endorse – can only really be interpreted as a means of restoring the value of **solidarity**, even if it has been placed in doubt and challenged by new developments such as the serious problems encountered by young workers like Christophe.

Although '*Les Neiges du Kilimandjaro*' highlights solidarity, and in particular **class solidarity** among **workers**, we should now analyse exactly what it is that threatens that solidarity or calls it into question: is it simply the behaviour of an individual, such as Christophe? Or does the film highlight other factors, other developments, other **underlying trends in society** which challenge the way in which Michel and Marie-Claire understood the concept of solidarity?

### The victims' reactions

Michel is overwhelmed by a deep sense of injustice as a result of the crime committed against them. Like the three other victims, he wants justice to be done and he wants those

responsible to pay for their actions. The plot progression shows how each of those involved reacts differently in the light of their character and main concerns.

After lodging an official complaint, Michel tries to find out more about the way of life of his assailant. He then realises that Christophe is also the victim of an unjust situation, and becomes aware of the negative consequences of his own action in pressing charges. Without expressing it in so many words, his actions reflect the fact that he wishes to forgive Christophe. He then wants to correct his own mistake, turn back the clock and withdraw his complaint, but as legal proceedings have already been started, his change of heart cannot change his assailant's fate. Although Christophe refuses Michel's assistance, Michel, moved by values rooted in the principle of solidarity, does everything he can to ensure that the needs of Christophe's brothers are taken care of.

Marie-Claire, meanwhile, motivated by a desire to understand what has happened, quickly begins to explore Christophe's world so as to understand the reasons that might have led to him acting in such a way. After meeting the young man's mother she realises that she will not take care of the children, and so decides to take care of them herself. It can be seen that, unlike Michel, who tries to enter into a dialogue with Christophe and show him that he has acted wrongly, Marie-Claire does not put forward any arguments, and prefers to begin by trying to understand the whole situation. She does so,



in particular, by going to the young man's flat, talking almost inconsequentially with his two brothers and his girlfriend, and finally trying to hold a conversation with his mother. In other words, Marie-Claire takes a much more practical approach than Michel, who at first seems to be motivated by high moral principles and prefers general solutions (such as giving away all the money intended for the trip) even though, by the end, he, like his wife, plans to adopt Christophe's two young brothers.

Denise, Marie-Claire's sister, on the other hand, has an extreme reaction to the attack the four characters have undergone. At the time she is unable to control her physical reactions and, in the days and weeks that follow, she cannot overcome her fear and falls into a kind of depression. Reactions of this kind may seem exaggerated to people who have never been confronted with such traumatic situations, but experience shows that a significant proportion of the victims of violent crime are unable to overcome the terror caused by such an assault on their physical or psychological well-being, and experience a range of symptoms (disturbed sleep, inability to concentrate, emotional distress) which are known collectively as post traumatic stress disorder. By the end of the film, it seems that Denise will eventually be able to emerge from her depression, probably due to the fact that Michel and Marie-Claire, by their combined efforts, succeed in reinstating the value of solidarity to which they were all so committed and thereby restore meaning to the world in which they live.

Whereas Marie-Claire and Michel represent understanding and forgiveness, and Denise represents vulnerability, Raoul reacts in a completely different way, and is chiefly motivated by the desire for vengeance. He cannot accept the evil which has been done to people dear to him, particularly his wife, who is unable to cope with the emotional shock of the attack. Consequently, he wants Christophe to pay for what he has done. He also puts forward many reasons for his decision, particularly in the course of his discussion with Michel by the port, even if the choice he takes leads him in a completely different direction from his friend. Here again, experience shows that the wish for revenge is a very frequent – if not the most frequent – reaction in groups of people

who have been victims of crimes of violence: if individuals are overwhelmed by feelings of incomprehension or injustice, they can easily demand revenge, sometimes of a radical nature.

Against this background, the exceptional nature of Michel and Marie-Claire's reactions becomes clear: by showing us (in parallel, moreover) all the steps taken by these two characters, the director enables us to share their point of view and, finally, enter into their emotions. That probably also explains why their own children, who are unaware of the emotional journey they have travelled, cannot understand their decision to adopt the younger brothers of the very person who attacked them.

In the case of Denise and Raoul, we can assume that their longstanding friendship overcomes their incomprehension and, above all, that the choice made by their friends is dictated by values which are deeply rooted in them also, and which allow them to put the trauma behind them as well.



### The world of work: generations in conflict?

Robert Guédiguan does not only obviously uphold certain values through the film, he also presents a series of insights into the **current situation of, and trends in, the world of work**. This theme, which is evident in the screenplay, is also reflected in the way the film is presented, and in particular the choice of backgrounds. Any careful observer will notice that many shots,



including that which is used in the film poster, include in the background cranes, factories, container ships or other items relating to the world of working class people, such as trade union banners. The film speaks of the world of work, with a clear preference for the working class, whose destiny is approached through the eyes of different generations with contrasting reactions and attitudes. The whole film is based on the opposition between Michel and Marie-Claire, who form a stable couple, and their attacker Christophe, who, by caring for his two younger brothers, forms part of a 'fragmented' family.

**The two generations** shown in the film are clearly differentiated; there are practically no characters who do not belong to one or the other. On the one hand there are the central couple, Michel and Marie-Claire, and their friends Raoul and Denise, and on the other hand there is their children's generation, young people between the age of 20 and 30. This group includes Gilles, Florence, their respective partners and Christophe.

The older generation seems to be united and inspired by shared values. All four of the main older characters come from a working class background on behalf of which they have fought, in some cases in the front line. It can be assumed that, over the course of their lives, their work has enabled them to have a decent standard of living, to buy various possessions and even to become the owners of a nice house (with a veranda) in Marseilles.

The second generation, represented by the central characters' young relations, is a much more disparate and heterogeneous group. The members of this generation have widely differing concerns and lifestyles. Christophe, for example, does his best to meet his needs and those of his younger brothers; Florence's husband has to travel

for his work, which involves separation from his family; Gilles, finally, is preoccupied by building a pergola to go with his house, a modern building in a gated community beside the sea. This forms a striking contrast with Christophe's small flat, in what looks like a '60s block. Christophe's home contains only the barest essentials; the decor is basic and the walls could do with a coat of paint. Through background details such as these, the younger generation is shown in this film as differing widely in terms of home environment, income, family situation and lifestyle.

There is also another significant difference between the two generations. Whereas Michel and Marie-Claire try to understand their attackers' motives, their son Gilles talks in terms of stereotypes such as: 'They're just looking for money, it's to do with drugs and all the rest of it. They will do anything to get their next fix'. Later, Michel and Marie-Claire's children are unable to understand their decision to adopt their attacker's two younger brothers. To explain their own point of view to their parents they ask questions such as 'What will our children think? How are we going to explain to them that strangers are sleeping at your place? Doesn't it bother you to use our present to you for these two children that you don't know?' They also say: 'Do you think Christophe would have done that for you?' These questions show that their main concern is their own personal interest (or those of their 'family' in the restrictive sense) and perhaps also suggest that they are to some extent motivated by jealousy, which underlines their inability to understand something which is, in the end, quite a simple and obvious act of solidarity and generosity.

This decision to adopt, which creates a distance between Michel and Marie-Claire and their



children, is however accepted in the end by their friends. The film's ending is explicit: **solidarity is an essential value for the generation of workers** to which Michel and Marie-Claire belong, but it is perhaps to be feared – or regretted – that this value is no longer so strongly shared by subsequent generations.

### An attitude towards society

By confronting two generations of adults in this way, Robert Guédiguian makes a wider point about the direction in which society is moving and its dominant values. We are moving from a society governed by a strong sense of solidarity to a society dominated, to a greater or lesser extent, by individualism. We should not confuse this with selfishness, however, as the children's generation also act in the interest of those close to them, for example by paying for Michel and Marie-Claire's trip to Kilimanjaro. But these actions are taken for the benefit of their families or people close to them, and not for the benefit of the wider community, as Michel and Marie-Claire's are.



As the director points out in the press information pack, this change has come about following major changes in the world of work, and in particular in industry. In

the last few decades, the economic system in which firms and workers in developed countries operated has changed considerably, thereby reshaping lifestyles and ways of thinking. The subject described – somewhat nostalgically – by the director is the gradual weakening of

a social structure and system of values which were linked to a strong and combative working class, such as that which existed until the end of the 70s. In those days, workers were united by a feeling of belonging to the same community, sharing the same fate, combating the bosses, combating inequality, and placing the greatest emphasis on solidarity for the benefit of all against the personal interests of the few. They were deemed not only to defend their personal interest but also, through unions and the political parties (basically, Socialist and Communist), to wage a general campaign against all forms of exploitation and domination, as summed up in the Marxist slogan: 'Workers of the world, unite!'

Today, however, the working class world no longer has the numerical strength it once did, and so is no longer a visible presence in the public arena, as Robert Guédiguian explains. It has given way to the new generation, which is not only confronted by a higher unemployment rate compared to their parents' day, but also a degree of job 'flexibility' which can have a destabilising effect. As they no longer have shared objectives, the members of this new generation tend to act in a more individualistic way, based primarily on their own personal interests, and to rely on those closest to them – friends or family – rather than any all-encompassing social class.

Even if this working class is tending, if not to disappear, at least to decline in importance, thereby reducing the sense of belonging to a community of people with similar prospects, Robert Guédiguian hopes that a similar 'class' consciousness, expanded to include all the 'poor people' evoked by Hugo, might still emerge, despite the prevailing individualism, to re establish a genuine solidarity between ordinary people such as that demonstrated, in their own way, by Michel and Marie-Claire.



[www.luxprize.eu](http://www.luxprize.eu)  
[luxprize@europarl.europa.eu](mailto:luxprize@europarl.europa.eu)