



QUINZAINÉ
DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT
CANNES 2019

ZOMBI CHILD

A FILM BY BERTRAND BONELLO

MY NEW PICTURE & LES FILMS DU BAL
PRESENT

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ZOMBI CHILD

A FILM BY **BERTRAND BONELLO**

WITH **LOUISE LABÈQUE** | **WISLANDA LOUMAT** | **KATIANA MILFORT** | **MACKENSON BIJOU**

FRANCE | 103 MIN | 1.85

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SYNOPSIS

Haiti, 1962. A man is brought back from the dead only to be sent to the living hell of the sugarcane fields. In Paris, 55 years later, at the prestigious Légion d'honneur boarding school, a Haitian girl confesses an old family secret to a group of new friends - never imagining that this strange tale will convince a heartbroken classmate to do the unthinkable.

INTERVIEW WITH BERTRAND BONELLO

How long ago did you get the idea to shoot a film, albeit partly, in Haiti?

The idea had been with me for a while. A number of years ago, in a notebook, I'd already written down these two words: "Zombi, Haiti."

And what kind of film did you have in mind with these two words – Zombi, Haiti?

I'd developed an interest in Haiti in the early 2000s when a close friend of mine, Charles Najman, was directing *Royal Bonbon*, with Josée Deshaies as his director of photography. Charles loved Haiti; he would spend three months there every year, and his enthusiasm was very catching when he evoked the rich intellectual life there, much richer than in France, telling me tons and tons of stories. I started reading things, with great fascination.

Yet, it was only at the beginning of 2018 that I returned to the idea. I had spent long months on an unwieldy project that is still pending, and I felt like making a film that could be shot quickly with a low budget, but with a strong idea all the same. I had to find the right project for this equation. Rereading those two words it became obvious to me: this earlier passion was rekindled, intact, and increased tenfold. What is a zombi? It is a man that has been removed from the world. I imagined him as a man who walks slowly, with his head bowed. A simple image that, for me, constituted a true starting point.

Right away, my intention was to start shooting as of October, in order to be ready by springtime 2019. I



set constraints for myself: four weeks to shoot the film, a €1.5million budget, practically no lighting, a skeleton crew... The first thing I actually wrote was the shooting schedule: twelve days' shooting at the Saint-Denis boarding school, three days in the suburbs, one week in Haiti.

Everything was thus prepared and developed at the same time – the screenplay, financing, the whole mental planning of making the film – with great care to ensure overall consistency – even though in the end the film is somewhat of a hybrid.

All in all, you reverted to the New Wave's precepts. Eric Rohmer liked to say that the shooting schedule is the film. As for Jean-Luc Godard, you've often referred to his answer to producers when they would ask how much money he needed: "Tell me how much you're giving me and I'll tell you which film I want to make."

Indeed, it's a sentence that has stuck with me. And this time I was able to put it straight into practice! I was coming out of making two heavy films, *Saint Laurent* and *Nocturama*. I really wanted to go back to something lighter. In 2016, a little after *Nocturama*, I directed a 20-minute film shot in two and a half days, *Sarah Winchester, Ghost Opera*, a commission for the Paris Opera, which tells a fairly long story in a short timeframe, with a reasonable budget. I felt like reiterating the experience with a feature-length film.

Today there is a way of doing things which, everyone knows, has become the general rule: find financial backing, write successive versions of the screenplay; everything adds up so that in the end it takes more or less three years to put a film together. I needed to step out of that logic. And I managed to; which I think is related to three factors. First, a certain experience on my part. Second, having

the good fortune to work with a young producer, Judith Lou Lévy, from the production company Les Films du Bal, as well as her associate, Ève Robin, which allowed me to think about things somewhat differently. And further, the fact that I was also what we call in France the "delegate" producer – the person who created the project, but also guarantees it – which, when shooting in Haiti, is no small task, and finally, the project's financial coherence.

Did the finished film turn out the way you thought it would?

Absolutely. There are only eight filmed shots that didn't make it into the final cut. That's nothing! Although *Zombi Child* may be a financially modest film, it never lacked or wanted for anything. The four scheduled weeks were enough. I immensely enjoyed making all of it. Working with Judith, discovering Haiti, meeting Yves Cape, the cinematographer, the lightness of the entire adventure... The fact that a filmmaker like me can, within only a few years, direct a film like *Saint Laurent* and another like *Zombi Child* makes me feel extremely fortunate. I'm not going to claim that I would from now on like all my films to be made in these conditions, nor that the habitual pattern is bad, but it was important for me to break away from the cycle. I wasn't sure, as a matter of fact, that after *Saint Laurent* and *Nocturama* I would be able to return to a small-budget film, especially for staging and directing reasons. I was pleased to see that I could.

This spelling – zombi without an "e" – is connected to the wish to return to the origins of this famous figure.

I liked the fact that we were going back to the deepest origins of a globally known phenomenon; and on a personal level it was important to my original connection with movies, since as a viewer,

I came to cinema through this genre. *Zombie* is the American spelling. *Zombi* is the original zombi, which is a figure that is profoundly embedded in Haiti's history and culture. It is the result of an ill-intended use of voodoo, something that people never speak about, and whose existence some deny entirely.

However, everybody there knows how a zombi walks and talks. During casting sessions, the men would all portray zombis the same way.

The film is thoroughly and precisely documented: the powder used to transform a man into a zombi, the state of slavery that keeps him on the plantations; the salt, the meat or the peanuts which, if he eats some, pulls him out of his zombi trance and makes him go home, or back to his grave. An important book, William Seabrook's *The Magic Island*, about voodoo mysteries, was published in France in 1928. Five years later, *White Zombie* featuring Bela Lugosi was released. The spelling changed as well as the political meaning attached to the zombi, including the connection with slavery: it disappeared, even though it reappears, altered, in George Roméro's cinema. The American zombie kept the Haitian zombi's walk, demeanor, slowness, but not its function. It's a dead person, which isn't the case for the Haitian zombi, which is in a suspended state somewhere between life and death. This is an aspect that I find fascinating, this connection between life and death that is still made over there, while we have discontinued this idea since the Ancient Greeks. In voodoo, there is no rift between life and death. It's not just a belief, it's a truth. The 2010 earthquake, with its approximately 300,000 dead, was a terrible reminder of that. The living and the dead had to live side by side for months on end.

What were your inspirations? Did you immerse yourself again in the zombi(e) films we just mentioned?

Not really, but Roméro's films were very much with me. Nevertheless, I did rewatch Jacques Tourneur's superb *I Walked with a Zombie*, whose title is the film's opening dialogue. I found inspiration in photography books, in novels, or anthropological publications, starting with one by a Swiss author, Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, written in the 1950s, in which he gives a detailed description of the nasal voice, the demeanor and walk, the powder causing skin depigmentation around the eyes... and then, when looking for a story evoking the zombi in a particular manner to be used specifically for Melissa's induction into the literary sorority, I discovered a poem by René Depestre, *Cap'tain Zombi*. This is the poem that is quoted as the film's epigraph. Depestre also wrote a beautiful book, *Hadriana in All My Dreams*, the story of a white zombi woman, which I discovered thanks to a recommendation by our Haitian producer, Guetty Felin.

Who is Clairvius Narcisse, the film's zombi and Melissa's grandfather?

Not everyone agrees about his existence as a zombi. He apparently "died," as depicted in the film, in 1962. Then, he "came back" to the world of the living. He is one of the rare documented cases. When I heard his story, about fifteen years ago, I found it very beautiful.

You chose to shoot the film in Haiti, a country regarded as impossible...

It was important to me for ethical reasons. What we needed to do was quite simple, because it was especially just to depict a man who walks. Yet, shooting these scenes in another country would have made them lose all their meaning. And



then, I didn't want to recreate a voodoo ceremony elsewhere. But it was also important to me for aesthetic reasons: filming the Sans-Souci Palace, King Henri Christophe's palace.

Everyone had told me that there was no country more complicated than Haiti when it came to making a film. The fact that nothing is simple is indeed the consequence of poverty, political unrest, and earthquakes. Only a handful of filmmakers have taken the risk: Charles Najman, Raoul Peck, Wes Craven, Jonathan Demme, and that's about it. What could I do? Judith and I spoke about it early on. We made three trips. Mainly to Cap-Haïtien rather than Port-au-Prince, as advised by Guetty Felin. We went on our first trip in September, to become acquainted with the country, start the casting process and get a feeling of how the project would be received by the Haitians. Being accepted wasn't a given. Haitians derive, quite legitimately, an immense pride from the fact that their country was the very first independent black Republic, in 1804. There's great mistrust towards the way the country is depicted by white people, notably with respect to zombies and voodoo... I heard it said: *When you show up with a camera, it's as though you showed up with a shotgun.*

But little by little, through encounters, gatherings and exchanges, reticence subsided. Also, a large part of the crew was Haitian.

The second trip, with the cinematographer to run shooting tests, was in November, and then the third was in January, for the actual film shoot. The three stays were as fascinating as they were complicated. I will never forget the first. I experienced a shock that I have only rarely known in my lifetime. There is a way of life there, a cultural

and intellectual richness, and a power in thought that I find truly extraordinary. We had unforgettable encounters with writers, anthropologists, artists... In the end, how did we manage to shoot the film there? I believe it was a mix of luck, pugnacity, organizational skills and the support of the Haitian crew who were committed to the project along with us, and who were brought onto the project by our executive producer, Guetty Felin.

In which order were the two parts – the Haitian and the French – shot?

I initially thought I'd shoot in Haiti first, in order to return to France boosted by that experience. But this turned out to be impossible, more specifically for climatic reasons and major riots that took place in 2018. So I decided to run two separate film shoots, as if I were making two films, each requiring different logistics. First, the French part then, the Haitian part. Between the two, there was a three-month lapse, during which Anita Roth – the co-editor for Robin Campillo's *120 BPM* – and I edited the French part. It lasted 1 hour and 20 minutes at the time, with inserts indicating where to "add in" Haiti.

How did you find the boarding school near Paris where Fanny and her friends study? And why this specific choice?

Very simply, by doing some research online of girls' boarding schools in France. The school exists; it is called The Maison d'Education of the Legion of Honor and it is located in Saint-Denis*. In a way, reality surpassed my fictional expectations. Every part that I show is exact: the classrooms, the uniforms, the excellence, the mix of recent and old architecture, the curtsy, the grounds... When I learned that this public school had been founded by Napoleon nearly at the same time as Haiti acquired

its independence, I was struck by how it echoed my project. It is a place whose scenery is regularly used in filmmaking. However, it is rarely shown in its actual capacity as a school. I think the school's administration wasn't insensitive to that fact.

Zombi Child, like Nocturama, is a film without movie stars, yet the actors are extremely important, both in the Haitian and French part of the story. How did you proceed with regard to the casting?

Since there are two parts, there were two castings. The Haitian characters are mostly played by actors, and if not – for it is difficult over there to be one full time – by people who had some acting, dancing, or stage experience. That is the case for Mackenson Bijou, who plays Clairvius. The character of Baron Samedi is played by a writer, Néhemy Pierre-Dahomey, who shares his time between France and Port-au-Prince and published a beautiful novel, *Rapatriés [Repatriated]*. On the plantation, we have actual sugarcane cutters mixed with actors. We also found Katiana Milfort, who plays Mambo Katy in the Paris part of the story, in Haiti.

For the French part, we had an open casting for five months. It's a long process, I saw approximately a hundred candidates. I was set on a specific age, 15 and a half, which is the moment when girls enter high school in France. As soon as they turn 16, they start thinking about the high school baccalaureate exam, and what they'll do afterwards. They're already in a different mindset. But when they're 15 and a half, there is still a generosity in them, which corresponds to their still being unaware of who they are. This is what I was looking for.

*The Maison d'Education of the Legion of Honor is a state school intended for the daughters, grand-daughters and great-grand-daughters of French and foreign recipients of the Legion of Honor, the Military Medal and the National Order of Merit.



The process wasn't all that different from what it was for *House of Tolerance* [*L'Apollonide (Souvenirs de la maison close)*] and *Nocturama*. I had to find Fanny, the leading character, and the other girls who could form a group around her. I would ask the prospective Fannys to read the letters she writes to her lover, Pablo, and to dance; I was preparing the trance scene... Louise Labèque truly impressed me, with her precision and instinct, her concentration, and her ability to play very different things: we nearly never had to shoot more than two takes.

For Melissa, the young Haitian, I would ask the candidates to tell me Clairvius' story. It was important to find an actress with the ability to captivate the audience. It's not easy to introduce a story recounted orally at the end of a film. Wislanda Louimat is perfect. Just like her character, she is defined by her dual culture, Haitian and French. Like Melissa, she arrived in France when she was 7. I would like her to come with us when we go to present the film in Haiti.

The film is particularly precise with regard to the way adolescents speak...

My daughter, Anna, whom we briefly see in a boarding school scene, helped me. She is the same age as the characters. Anna corrected some lines of dialogue that she found outdated; she gave me her opinion concerning casting choices. It's thanks to her – and by checking her Deezer feed – that I was able to discover the rapper Damso, whose music plays a very important part in the film.

*Nevertheless, there is one celebrity in *Zombi Child*: the historian Patrick Boucheron, professor at the Collège de France, author of several books, including *France in the World (A new global history)*. We see him at the beginning of the film, giving a class. Why – and how – did you call upon him?*

I wanted to include some classes. Within the film's logic, it seemed to me that I could allow myself a few surprising elements. It was important to me to start off the film with a strong reflection on history. Yet, who today can do such a thing? Patrick Boucheron seemed obvious to me. He responded very quickly to my request. I had chosen the topics, the two trends in liberal thinking in the 19th century, and I had sent them to him. He prepared his class, we filmed three ten-minute takes, with a new camera angle each time.

Then what happened is something I couldn't possibly have foreseen. What Boucheron actually explains in this very class is in close connection with the film: the discontinuous, underground nature of history, its resurgences, a questioning with regards to experience. All this sheds a light that enhances the film's vision. I didn't expect Boucheron to start with Michelet's quote on the people. For a film director who likes contrasts, it was a dream come true!

Boucheron also asks a question that is at the heart of the film: how, and from which perspective, do you tell a story that isn't yours? In short, how do we handle what is today called cultural appropriation? It's my first time shooting a film abroad. I in fact asked myself the question from the onset, in terms of storytelling: from where is this story going to be told? From France. The film is absolutely clear about this. There was never a question of the story taking place entirely in Haiti. I wouldn't have been capable of doing that.

Regardless, the question remained: how does one shoot a film abroad? Being extremely close is impossible. Keeping too much distance dooms you to a tourist's approach. I sought an in-between that is perhaps – I hope – the right distance. A distance that hovers between being specific and being open

to interpretation. Like a reminiscence. Nothing stops anyone from thinking that all the Haitian scenes are the fruit of Melissa's imagination, based on family stories she would have heard in her childhood.

In the end, to what degree is any of this real? The figure of the zombi is at the meeting point between history and the collective imagination in Haiti. I tried to preserve this ambiguity. And I like the idea of going through imagination to evoke something that is in fact very real – slavery. There is a kind of mythology that made me think of the Ancient Greeks, who also had a polytheistic ideation that was rich, violent, and crazy, which enabled them to keep a balance in their society. Returning to the question about perspective, earlier, I spoke about the Haitians' reticence. I believe that one of the reasons they were less reticent was that *Zombi Child's* underlying themes are a reflection on slavery. It's not about folklore, but about political and historical reflection. And this, through a figure that is well known the world over – the zombi.

*Your films are often daring in terms of structure. It's customary to find them arranged in two parts, or two halves, often corresponding to a connection between an interior and an exterior: *Nocturama* is a perfect example, as was *Tiresia*. It's once again the case, here, although conceived differently since *Zombi Child* goes back and forth frequently, slowly establishing the connection between the France of today and Haiti of yesterday, and through them the connections between an enclosed space – the high school – and an open space – the plantations.*

That's right. The starting point is rather simple. There's the image of the zombi, the desire for a Haitian element. Then the French element, an adolescent's first love and heartbreak, came from looking for the right perspective to tell this



story. The enormous contrast between these two elements creates a friction from which other things arise. This is what has nourished my interest in my filmmaking these last years, the continuities and discontinuities being built, which once again refers us back to Patrick Boucheron's history lesson.

I just brought up the possibility that the Haitian part of the story might be Melissa's imagination. It's just one example among others. This is where the film, in a certain way, ceases to be premeditated. Indeed, numerous correlations only appeared to me at the editing stage. It's something extremely stimulating. The fact, for instance, that the image quivers during two scenes brings to mind the earthquake, but as I watched the film I discovered that echoes of the latter also appeared in places I hadn't anticipated. And I can see, when I hear the audience's first

impressions, that they too discover many other correspondences as well. I am delighted with this wealth of perspectives and interpretations.

I was aware that the idea of parallel editing between France and Haiti could potentially not work out. There was the risk that it would remain too theoretical. All the more so because the finished film is close to its screenplay version. I also knew – and it happens frequently – that there was the possibility that one part of the narrative would interest the audience more. All this was therefore a bit of a gamble, a structural gamble. In the end, I believe it works, beyond any of my expectations. Little by little, doors open, esthetically and politically. My goal when writing is also that something will at some point escape me, reaching beyond.

Earlier, I spoke about a modest film. It's true: there is in *Zombi Child* a unity in the staging, everything being addressed on the same level, simply and precisely, without excessively seeking to be outlandish or "out there." First, things are established. Then they are drawn more closely together. And it's this connection that opened up perspectives and dimensions that are, for their part, less modest. When you bring two things together, you end up producing a third, which you aren't aware of in advance. This is an old principle, inherited from Robert Bresson, which I didn't just apply at certain moments, but to an entire film.

Interview by Emmanuel Burdeau.

BERTRAND BONELLO



Bertrand Bonello was born in Nice in 1968. He began a career in music, participating in numerous artist's albums, then turned to cinema and directing.

In 1996, he directed *Who I am* – based on Pier Paolo Pasolini [*Qui je suis – d'après Pier Paolo Pasolini*] a documentary short adapted from Pasolini's autobiographical prose poem. His first feature film, *Something Organic* [*Quelque chose d'organique*] was presented at the 1998 Berlin Film Festival.

His next feature film, *The Pornographer* [*Le Pornographe*] (2001), with Jean-Pierre Léaud, was presented at the Cannes Festival's International Critics' Week and was awarded the FIPRESCI prize. In 2003, *Tiresia* was selected for the Cannes Film Festival's official Competition. Then he directed *On War* [*De la guerre*], shown at the Directors' fortnight in 2008. Three years later, his feature film *House of Tolerance* [*L'Apollonide – Souvenirs de la maison close*] made Cannes' official selection; praised by the critics, it received eight nominations for the French César awards.

In 2014, he directed *Saint Laurent*, which also was selected in official Competition at the Cannes Film Festival. The movie represented France at the academy awards and received ten César nominations. The same year, he exhibited at the Pompidou Center, which dedicated a film retrospective to his work, and released a music album: *Accidents*. In addition, he took on the leading role in Antoine Barraud's *Portrait of the Artist* [*Le Dos rouge*].

At the same time, he went on directing musical and short films: *Cindy*, *The Doll is Mine* (2005) with Asia Argento, which made Cannes' official selection, *My New Picture* (2007), *Where The Boys Are* (2010), *Ingrid Caven: Music and Voice* [*Ingrid Caven, Musique et voix*] (2012) presented at Locarno, and *Sarah Winchester, Ghost Opera* [*Sarah Winchester, Opéra Fantôme*] (2016) for the 3rd Stage, the Paris Opera's digital platform. In 2016, he released *Nocturama*, his seventh feature film.

Today, Bertrand Bonello is presenting his latest film, *Zombi Child*, shot in France and Haiti.

CAST

FANNY
MÉLISSA
MAMBO KATY
CLAIRVIUS
SALOMÉ
ROMY
ADÈLE
THE HISTORY TEACHER
BARON SAMEDI
FRANCINA
PABLO
THE SUPERINTENDENT

LOUISE LABÈQUE
WISLANDA LOUIMAT
KATIANA MILFORT
MACKENSON BIJOU
ADILÉ DAVID
NINON FRANÇOIS
MATHILDE RIU
PATRICK BOUCHERON
NÉHÉMY PIERRE-DAHOMEY
GINITE POPOTE
SAYYID EL ALAMI
SAADIA BENTAIEB

CREW

DIRECTOR
SCREENWRITER
PRODUCER
COPRODUCERS
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
EDITOR
SOUND
MUSIC
COSTUMES
MAKEUP
PRODUCTION DESIGNER
PRODUCTION DIRECTOR
LINE PRODUCER (HAITI)
ASSISTANT DIRECTORS
CASTING
FRENCH DISTRIBUTOR
INTERNATIONAL SALES

BERTRAND BONELLO
BERTRAND BONELLO
BERTRAND BONELLO (MY NEW PICTURE)
JUDITH LOU LÉVY & ÈVE ROBIN (LES FILMS DU BAL)
PLAYTIME, ARTE FRANCE CINÉMA
YVES CAPE
ANITA ROTH
NICOLAS CANTIN, NICOLAS MOREAU, JEAN-PIERRE LAFORCE
BERTRAND BONELLO
PAULINE JACQUARD
RAPHAËLE THIERCELIN & LAURE TALAZAC
KATIA WYSZKOP
THOMAS JAUBERT
GUETTY FÉLIN
BARBARA CANALE (FRANCE) – IFÉ DAY (HAITI)
MARLÈNE SEROUR (FRANCE) - IFÉ DAY (HAITI)
AD VITAM
PLAYTIME