



MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE
 D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA
 LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA 2024
 Official Selection

MALDOROR

[illegible]

Frakas Productions and The Jokers Films present, in association with One Eyed

MALDOROR



A film by Fabrice du Welz



Belgium, France – 2024 – 1.66:1 – 155 minutes – French with English subtitles



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SYNOPSIS

Belgium, 1995. The shocking disappearance of two young girls leads to the formation of a secret police operation known as Maldoror. Newly recruited officer Paul Chartier is tasked with monitoring a dangerous suspect but soon finds himself in a losing battle against bureaucracy and systemic dysfunction. As official efforts collapse and the case is closed still unsolved, Paul spirals into obsession, pushing him beyond legal and moral boundaries in a relentless pursuit for justice.

Inspired by true events, *MALDOROR* is “a propulsive, compelling thriller” (*Screen Daily*) about crime, punishment and the failures of institutions meant to protect society.



INTERVIEW WITH FABRICE DU WELZ

How much did the Dutroux scandal, which the film is loosely based on, affect you?

When the scandal broke out, in the mid-90s, I was 20 years old and I was naïve enough to assume that the adult world was a safe, well-organized place. Like most people of my generation, I was overwhelmed by an apocalyptic case, mixed with information being withheld, absurd, preposterous, mediocre implications, and carelessness. We Belgians couldn't shake off this case for a long time – it was a cesspool in which Belgian citizens were thrown, witnessing, appalled, how helpless the parents of the little victims were in the face of the flaws and the absurdity of the justice system. We found out later on that the investigation had been bogged down by police rivalries that triggered many dysfunctions and irreparable damage. In Belgium, like anywhere else in the world, we all wondered – how did we get there?

In the back of my mind, I'd always thought that I'd like to make a film about this tragedy. Because the facts are particularly gruesome, it was difficult for me to take ownership of the material, especially in Belgium where the scandal is still a highly sensitive issue. When I began talking about making a film "inspired" by the Dutroux scandal, I had to put up with a lot of hostility. I had to find the right angle, the right lens, the right distance, without ever hurting the victims. Most importantly, I realized that it was key to set the story in Charleroi where the people are still affected by the scandal. It's an industrial city, which used to be very affluent back in the 1800s and which has since been hit hard by social and economic decline. As a Brussels resident myself, coming from an upper-middle class family, I had no idea, as I was scouting locations in Charleroi, that the city was very much a character in its own right. It was key to approach working-class people living there and people with Sicilian descent that worked in the mines with the utmost dignity.

Tell us about your research process.

With my co-screenwriter Domenico La Porta, we did some comprehensive, almost obsessive research from official sources that were sometimes difficult to come by. We took a very fact-based approach, and the script structure was very much influenced by the fact that Domenico trained as a lawyer. We could have tried to connect the many criminal sites of an immoral network that stretches way beyond a pedophile scandal – but we chose instead to focus on a man with a conscience, who's been traumatized by guilt. So, we had well-documented material but, at the same time, the story is so extravagant that it could have been hard to sell. Which meant we had to find the right balance so that the narrative could be believable.

When did you let fiction drive the narrative?

I approached the project like a pared-down cross-section of a sprawling scandal. I felt like moving the narrative toward fiction – all the way to uchronia, to a fantasized justice system whose many flaws kept us from having any justice at all. Very quickly, I felt like addressing the scandal through the crime genre, like Yves Boisset's *The Woman Cop*. I wanted to reconnect with 1970s French noir movies whose leading auteurs were Alain Corneau and Yves Boisset. But as I watched Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time ...in Hollywood*, I had an epiphany, realizing that I could make an actual cinematic piece just as I gave back some dignity to those whose honor had been trampled. Because my main concern was to make as entertaining a movie as possible while being character-driven. This film is also a departure for me because of its evocative resonance and

universal ambition. So, I really felt like pushing toward fiction and the challenge was to come up with something new.

Paul's investigation turns into an obsession and sends him on a self-destructive path. What drives him?

Paul is an instinctive, idealistic police officer who deludes himself into believing that you need to be on the "right" side of the law to have any influence whatsoever on justice. He's also a young man who's about to start a family of his own and to make life-changing decisions, and his journey is one of moral ambivalence – he comes from a traumatized background, he meant to cut loose as he thought he would join a world where justice meant something – and he realizes that this world is even more corrupt than the one he left behind. He then finds himself facing a huge moral dilemma and the fictional element really gets important in the last chapter – What will drive Paul's behavior? The tools of justice or those of his original background? It's a staggering issue. Because in the last chapter, Paul becomes vengeance incarnate, haunted by the little girls' killer that he's been hunting down like Captain Ahab hunting Moby Dick... all the way to the end. I definitely identified with Paul as I wrote the script, then to Anthony [Bajon] with whom I worked hand in hand for two months on the shoot.

Paul not only has to fight a damaged police system, but also a corrupt judicial system from within...

In the 90s, the country's three police forces – the municipal police, the criminal police and the national police – came close to having no contact with each other and the cold war they engaged in brought about irreversible dysfunctions. The Dutroux scandal brought forward a necessary reform – the three departments merged just as Belgium, in 2001, became a more centralized, federal state. At the time of the scandal, there were two conflicting theories, one being that of the lone wolf and the other that of the network. We were intent on staying away from any conspiracy theory, but it doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand that there was a network involving at least three people. I wanted to honestly reflect the existence of a network by showing that it has a totally murky organization and that you never know where evil comes from. Hence the stark contrast between Paul's wedding, filled with humanity and kindness, and that murky evil eating at the protagonist's soul.

As he has to deal with a burdensome inheritance, Paul finds himself a new home in his fiancée's family with Sicilian origins.

That sense of welcoming is key indeed. Paul is an orphan, he is in denial and he doesn't tell his wife everything – but he's given a warm welcome in Jeanne's family. From the outset, he's been of the obsessive kind – in the opening scene, during the police intervention, he relates to the beaten child that he probably used to be. I meant to address the notion of child abuse, never with a naïve, idealistic view, because what I'm interested in is the conflict between good and evil – although I still haven't solved this riddle. Once again, this is a staggering issue.

Do you think the character of Laurent Lucas portrays the ambivalence of the Belgian police in this case?

I wanted this character to be somewhat of a politician – he moves his pawns, he's often one step ahead everybody else and he plays a game of chess. He starts the Maldoror operation as it can benefit him – and he terminates it when it may harm him. Toward the end of the film, he's earned his stripes. Actually, many officers that handled the case got promoted to high-ranking positions

in the federal police hierarchy. I felt like putting things in perspective, between the apocalyptic Dutroux scandal on the one hand, and the film, on the other, which I did as honestly as I possibly could – with an emotional, cathartic dimension for Belgian people as I thought it was key that the case got solved differently than in real life.

You sometimes film Sergi Lopez like an ogre, straight from a horror tale.

I'm still very much influenced by Tobe Hooper and I can't help thinking of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* when I think of the degenerates involved in the Dutroux scandal. Even though I intended to look at the character of Marcel Dedieu in a realistic way, Sergi Lopez brings him an almost supernatural power. He's actually never better than when he plays a monster, from *With a Friend Like Harry* to *Pan's Labyrinth*. Now that he got older and heftier, he indeed embodies an ogre who belittles and humiliates Paul, to the point of driving him into a corner and forcing him to make the ultimate choice.

The film shifts from an almost naturalistic atmosphere to a horror tone.

I wanted the film to feel extremely realistic and the first part was shot on location to restrain my natural inclination to go for eccentricity or the horror tale genre. Once again, I was determined to make a crime thriller much in the vein of 1970s French films, but also of Sidney Lumet, with his realistic approach, and naturally of William Friedkin, a filmmaker who's been a special influence on me – his documentary-like approach, from *The French Connection* to *The Exorcist*, has helped him make character-driven movies that also explore the metaphysical evil that plagues society. The audience should first buy into the furniture and the production design so that they can later be one with Paul and gradually embrace his own mental drift.

Did you have other references in mind?

Bong Joon-ho's *Memories of Murder*, Sidney Lumet's *The Offence* and most importantly David Fincher's *Zodiac* whose intensity, in every respect, was a real inspiration.

The hunting sequence that closes the film is evocative of a western. How did you design it?

We first thought about the location, and we picked a natural environment – a forest – that provides a contrast with the essentially urban environment of the film. We went on to design the hunt as a really methodical duel. I gave the gutter element a lot of thought as it was extremely important from a symbolic standpoint – it takes us back to the idea of a cesspool. I wanted the mud element to be prominent in this scene – as the film progresses, Paul goes deeper in stinking manure and gets covered in mud.

What were your priorities for the film's design?

We wanted the film to be immersed in an atmosphere of immediacy – the atmosphere of Charleroi, a former mining city with a particular texture and an important working-class, immigrant population. With Manuel de Meulemeester, my production designer and art director, we started with a simple idea – just as in real life, props and furnishings don't all date back to the period the film is set in. We then broke down the film in four chapters – 1995, 1996, 1998, 2001 – that match Paul's mental journey and that help the audience follow closely the sequence of events. From there, we just set up the locations, including the Italian Catholic mission found during scouting, without changing them altogether – and we pushed the color palette toward brown shades. We were constantly seeking for truth and credibility.

How did you cast the film?

Anthony Bajon, that I had seen in Cédric Kahn's *The Prayer* and Ludovic and Zoran Boukherma's *Teddy*, was an obvious choice. He belongs to a young generation of French actors, including Damien Bonnard, Karim Leklou and Alexis Manenti, whose working-class faces I like. Besides, there's something obsessive and confrontational about Anthony that I used. I then cast the other roles around him – Alba Gaia Bellugi, who I think is amazing as Jeanne, and Alexis Manenti as Anthony's sidekick, as the pair's chemistry is undeniable. Jackie Berroyer is an old friend of mine, and I can ask him to portray the worst scum in the world – he always does so with a tinge of humor that I find electrifying.

For the all the supporting roles, we went on to cast people in Charleroi right off the street, on streetcars or on trains. I wanted the Charleroi people to be front and center and to be proud of the film. It was key that the casting process matched our quest for truth.

Wasn't Sergi Lopez hesitant about portraying such a monstrous character as Marcel Dedieu?

He liked the idea of playing a freaky redneck, with no moral compass, and with a Tobe Hooper-like vibe. He perfectly understood that he had to step into the role of a retard who rapes little girls as naturally as you would buy yourself a beer! Good actors have an amazing instinct – and I asked him to live in the moment, without thinking too much, and to get immersed in that mediocrity.

What did you want for the score?

It was a long process. I've always worked with Vincent Cahay – I send him my script, he thinks about the score, he comes up with ideas and we do a lot of back and forth. Very quickly, I was convinced that we needed an electronic score – but with analog synths, much in line with 1990s electronic music. Except for Purcell's *King Arthur*, performed by Vincent's very high-pitched voice on all mockups. Now, it so happens that Epona Guillaume, the young girl playing Mathilde, is also a singer with a very special voice. I asked her to record the piece, and we were dumbfounded – it suddenly felt like the voices of all the little girls we never get to see got heard through her. So, we decided on using Epona's voice in the end.

One last question. Can you comment on the title's literary reference?

It's actually a reference to *The Songs of Maldoror* by Lautréamont who, in 1869, was interested in exploring the evil of his time. Just like him, I wanted to explore the essence of evil, how it spreads unabashedly, and its consequences, but at a period of time that I'm more familiar with – my own.

BIOGRAPHY

After studying Dramatic Arts at the Liège Conservatory under Jacques Delcuvellerie, Fabrice continued his training at INSAS, the Brussels film school. In 1999, his short film *Quand on est amoureux, c'est merveilleux*, which won the Grand Prize at the Gérardmer Festival, hinted at a filmmaker with a unique vision.

In 2004, *Calvaire*, starring Laurent Lucas and Jackie Berroyer, established him as one of the leading figures in young Belgian cinema. The film was presented at Cannes (Critics' Week). Between 2008 and 2013, he directed *Vinyan* (official selection at the 2008 Venice Film Festival), starring Emmanuelle Béart and Rufus Sewell, and the commissioned film *Colt 45*, produced by Thomas Langmann.

In 2014, he reunited with Laurent Lucas for *Alleluia* (the second part of his Ardennes trilogy, which began with *Calvaire*), presented at the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes. In 2015, he directed *Message from the King*, produced by David Lancaster (*Drive*, *Whiplash*, *Nightcrawler*) and Stephen Cornwell (*A Most Wanted Man*) in Los Angeles, starring Chadwick Boseman, Luke Evans, Teresa Palmer, Alfred Molina, and Natalie Martinez. The film premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in September 2016 and was subsequently acquired by Netflix.

In 2018, he directed *Adoration* with Benoît Poelvoorde, Fantine Harduin, and Thomas Gioria. The film had its world premiere at Locarno in 2019 and was released in early 2020. In 2021, *Inexorable* was unveiled at the Deauville Film Festival and selected for the Toronto International Film Festival as well as the London Film Festival.

FILMOGRAPHY

1999 *Quand on est amoureux c'est merveilleux* (short)

2004 *Calvaire* – Cannes Critics' Week

2008 *Vinyan* – Venice Film Festival

2014 *Colt. 45*

2014 *Alleluia* – Directors' Fortnight

2017 *Message from the King* – Toronto Film Festival

2019 *Adoration* – Locarno Film Festival

2022 *Inexorable* – Toronto Film Festival

2024 *La Passion Selon Beatrice* – Locarno Film Festival

2024 *Maldoror* – Venice Film Festival

CAST

Paul Chartier	ANTHONY BAJON
Jeanne Ferrara	ALBA GAÏA BELLUGI
Luis Catano	ALEXIS MANENTI
Marcel Dedieu	SERGI LÒPEZ
Charles Hinkel	LAURENT LUCAS
Didier Renard	DAVID MURGIA
Rita	BÉATRICE DALLE
Mme Santos	LUBNA AZABAL
Jacky Dolman	JACKIE BERROYER
Juge Remacle	MÉLANIE DOUTEY
Roberto Santos	FÉLIX MARITAUD
Dardenne	GUILLAUME DUHESME

CREW

Directed by **FABRICE DU WELZ**
Produced by **JEAN-YVES ROUBIN, MANUEL CHICHE ET
VIOLAINE BARBAROUX**
Based on a Original Story by **FABRICE DU WELZ**
Written by **FABRICE DU WELZ ET DOMENICO LA
PORTA**
Director of Photography **MANU DACOSSE SBC**
Editor **NICO LEUNEN**
Music **VINCENT CAHAY**
Production designer **EMMANUEL DE MEULEMEESTER**
Costume Designer **LAURENCE BENOIT**
Sound **DIRK BOMBAY, JULIE BRENTA, HÉLÉNA
RÉVEILLÈRE, LAMY AU ROUSSEAU,
EMMANUEL DE BOISSIEU**
With the Support of **CENTRE DU CINÉMA ET DE
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