



Zita
HANROT

Louise
CHEVILLOTTE

my
sole
desire

a film by Lucie **BORLETEAU**

Runtime : 117 mn
2022 – France – 2.39 – 5.1

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synopsis

The Paris strip club *À mon seul désir* (My Sole Desire) is home to a mesmerizing troupe of seductive female performers. Like a moth to a flame, newcomer Manon (Louise Chevillotte) is drawn to their sensual allure and adopts the stage name Aurore. Among her fellow dancers is audience favorite Mia (César Award winner Zita Hanrot), a beautiful, aspiring actress who moonlights at the club unbeknownst to her live-in boyfriend. From identifying which clients she should avoid to booking private dances, Mia serves as a trusted guide on Manon's erotic journey. But even as Manon begins to experiment with riskier propositions that Mia will not pursue, it is not long before the two begin to develop romantic feelings for one another. Navigating the complexities of this new life, Manon must face questions about her sexuality as the line between professional and personal desire starts to blur.

interview with LUCIE BORLETEAU

Your story begins like an enchanting tale, and then a distancing effect is achieved through a piece to camera. A bit like a hypnosis session.

The script has always started out with Élodie speaking directly to the camera, which is also a nod to theatricality. The baroque quality of the film allowed me to be daring. I have always been fascinated by the idea that women may enjoy showing off their bodies. In art in general, and cinema in particular, the female body has profusely been used as a bewitching element, or a marketing tool, with variations from one period to the next. As a character, the stripper is often portrayed as a victim or as an enchantress. As for me, I wanted to make the audience experience what a young woman who starts performing striptease might feel. Because for many people, myself included, it remains a fantasy. So the film always fluctuates between tale and reality, in order to question our relationship to desire, whether we try to arouse it or we find it overwhelming.

Indeed, the film raises more questions than answers. It opens many drawers, only to leave them open...

This is precisely what we tried to achieve. We were perfectly aware that we were tackling a touchy subject. *à mon seul désir* is an ode to freedom. The main character overcomes all the obstacles that sex workers must face, without being a victim – obviously, we do not pretend that it is all rainbows and unicorns either. Beyond that, I believe in a world where women can take all the risks they want without being punished for it. I am in favour of a prochoice, polyphonic and complex form of feminism. I am in no position to give lectures. Art is meant to document the complexity of reality, to make us wonder, to shake us up and, at times, to make us change our minds.

Mia shares her unequivocal views on prostitution with Aurore: she sees it as the ultimate level of submission for a woman.

I was interested in the idea of pushing boundaries. When we discover Aurore, at the beginning of the film, she walks into a strip club for the first time and has no experience whatsoever. In all my films, I explore the issue of work and the way people behave and interact in the workplace. Some girls at the club, including Mia, have set clear boundaries. The film shows another outlook with the character of Aurore, and I focused on the questions it raises.

Like a character in a fairy tale, Aurore literally dives into a colourful underground world, and she takes us with her.

The idea of a strip club set in a cellar is authentic. Symbolically, it is meaningful. You go down this shady place. Despite the thriving sex industry on the internet, there are still places like the one I show in the film. I was more interested in showing reality than the virtual world. I also really wanted the film to be entertaining, and to showcase funny, creative shows. Indeed, there is joy to be found in sexuality! *à mon seul désir* is also a film about the theatrics and the artifices of the stage.

The power of sisterhood is one of the cornerstones of the film.

In *Fidelio*, I filmed a group of men with a single woman in the middle; this time, the film rests on a group of women. This kind of sisterhood is not a myth: I have noticed it in the field. It seemed important to me to put it in the spotlight. In Zola's novel *Nana*, for instance, the courtesans are in constant rivalry, and in literature as well as in the collective unconscious, this image of women prevails. Yet I have seen a genuine solidarity in places where women potentially put themselves at risk. There is not so much competition as a lot of fun and encouragement between these women of various ages, social classes, and origins. A bit like in *Fidelio*, they are in the same boat and they stand together.

Money is ever-present in the film. You show it concretely.

It was essential to show that these girls decide to become strippers, and some of them to prostitute themselves, mostly to win money, not because someone made them do it or just for pleasure. As long as capitalism exists, thinking that not earning money is even possible is utopian. I was really inspired by Virginie Despentes' book *King Kong Theory*, which explains it very well. Thus, showing money concretely – and its value, in a funny way, through the miserly character of Élodie – was crucial to me.

How did you write the male characters, many of whom are really gracious?

I try to create nuanced characters, either male or female. Just like in real life, some men in the film are sensitive, vulnerable, or loving, although there are also annoying customers or street harassers around.



Since the film adopts the viewpoint of the strippers, we get to meet a whole range of customers, with the most developed character probably being Afflelou. He is a notoriously stingy regular who ends up falling for Aurore. He is touching, because he is this shy, sweet, gentle, clumsy and generous man, but at the same time, till his very last scene, he never lets go of his will to make Aurore his own, to buy her. We can also see how he mistakes commercial sex for true love.

As for Mia, the man in her life, Benjamin, is like an ideal man, both handsome and smart, and she has difficulty leaving him. He loves her just as she is and he wants the best for her.

The theme of the gaze is central in this film.

The character of Aurore observes a lot. She has no plans, she does not conform to society's expectations. She wants to live life to the fullest. She seizes the day and she is going to help ambitious Mia live more in the present as well. It is her strength and the key to her freedom.

In the club, there is the gaze of the girls on stage and that of the customers in the audience...

Exactly, this is the central question that we kept asking ourselves every step of the way when we made the film, and especially when we edited it... The camera is often placed among the audience, but the shows are never filmed in the same way or from the same point of view. Similarly, we kept changing how we filmed the confined space of the dressing room, not only to keep it interesting, but also because our gaze on these women evolves – at first mere figures, they slowly become full-fledged characters with increasingly precise concerns. We do not only watch bodies, we film people.

Also related to the theme of the gaze, the motif of mirrors is explicit throughout the film.

It is also based on reality, there are mirrors everywhere: in the dressing rooms, on stage... Symbolically, it was important to me to have mirrors in the hotel where Aurore prostitutes herself, because it raised the question of consent – she sees her own reflection, she is aware of what she is doing. It also has to do with the theme of self-image. Many strippers are very shy when they are not on stage, and they find in this place the confidence to look at themselves in the mirror, and to love their bodies. And it allowed me to introduce the idea of the double, which starts for strippers with choosing their stage names.



There is a sensory and sensual dimension in your directing.

I tried to capture the power of women's bodies, the power of senses, of the intimate. The film is fast-paced, and I wanted to keep a few surprises in store for the audience. Sensation is what I find most interesting in films. I have already tried to arouse it in *Fidelio*, with the idea of the crossing, and in *Perfect Nanny*, on a darker note, like in a parent's worst nightmare.

Your images radiate cheerfulness!

I really wanted the film be joyful, as strip-tease has often been depicted in as seedy way on screen. But naïveté was also out of the question - I do show that gruesome things happen in champagne rooms, like at the beginning of the film, or outside the club, like at the bachelor party. I chose to introduce that aspect in the first part, but also to let fun prevail. Because it is what I have witnessed first-hand in the club that inspired the setting. I met women who joyfully try out plenty of different things on stage. Many of them enjoy fooling around, they are bold, they stretch the limits of decency, and make the audience laugh. Besides, we shot the film after the successive Covid-19 lockdowns, with the idea that social ties are essential and irreplaceable. Clubs have many regulars who are just lonely people in need of a bit of comfort.

In the sequence in which Mia explains how she was abused, you strip the image of all artifice and let her words take centre stage.

I chose to use a dark background and classic cuts for this scene. I am impressed to see how women have a chance to speak and be heard now, thanks to the MeToo movement. It is a real paradigm shift, even though problems persist. I probably would never have filmed the sequence that way in 2014, when I started writing the script. MeToo changed everything. And indeed, Mia's voice becomes central to the sequence in this shot that steps out of reality.

What made you think of Aurore's visions, when she mentally undresses passers-by like a magician?

I thought about it early on when I was writing the script, as a way of showing how it feels to bare it all once you are outside the club. From the first night, Aurore is under the impression that she can see everybody naked when she gets off stage. Some strippers I have met told me about this impression. And I also wanted to take nudity out of the club and to desexualise it, to show the bodies of men and women of various ages, not only the dancers'. When naked, we are all equals. It also brought some poetry to the film, because it looks like a magic trick. I indulged in a little extravagance, like a Méliès illusion! It is a kind

of tribute to the magic of cinema.

How did you work with the group of actresses?

We set up a kind of strip residency all together, without any camera around. It was an exciting and beneficial experience that allowed us to explore our abilities and to set our own limits. I am so grateful to the actresses for agreeing to create their own numbers afterwards, like the strippers do in the club that inspired us.

Your title, à mon seul désir, echoes the mysterious last part in a series of six tapestries from the Middle Ages untitled The Lady and the Unicorn. Did you have it in mind when you wrote this story?

This tapestry is the type of work of art that one might discover at a young age and be forever marked by. I deliberately wanted to connect the club, called à mon seul désir, to the history of art and the representation of the female body. The series is based on the five senses, and this tapestry is about a mysterious sixth sense – is it desire, or feminine intuition? Like in my story, it features a couple, a duo of powerful women. There is a copy of the unicorn on the wall outside the club. It is a discrete nod, a secret key. Today, the unicorn is also a symbol of freedom and utopia, a queer emblem that suits the film.

What did you take away from that experience?

I am so glad that I was able to make such an unconventional film. I hope that viewers will be entertained and carried away by this story, and that it will challenge their perspectives. I go to the cinema really often, because it saves my life. I think that films - mine included - should be complex, unexpected, and deeply moving... just like a striptease performance can be!



LUCIE BORLETEAU

Born in 1980, Lucie Borleteau studied cinema at Saint-Denis Paris 8 University. Since then, she has worked in several fields within the cinema industry: she has worked at production, collaborated on screenplays or filmmaking with several directors – Claire Denis, Arnaud Desplechin, Lou Ye... –, acted in a few films, and sometimes in theatre plays. She has directed three medium-length films and three feature films as well as the “Cannabis” television show.

2023 *My Sole Desire*

2019 *The Perfect Nanny*

2014 *Fidelio, Alice's Journey* (in competition at Locarno IFF)

2012 *La grève des ventres* (30 min) fiction

2008 *Les vœux* (33 min) fiction

2003 *Nievaliachka, la poupée qui ne tombe pas* (32 min) documentaire



cast

Zita **HANROT** Mia
Louise **CHEVILLOTTE** Aurore
Laure **GIAPPICONI** Elody
Pedro **CASABLANC** Pablo
Sieme **MILADI** Savannah
Yuliya **ABISS** Sati
Tokou **BOGUI** Candy
Céline **FUHRER** Vergine
Sipan **MOURADIAN** Afflelou
Thimotée **ROBART** Benjamin
With the participation of **Melvil POUPAUD**

crew

Direction **Lucie BORLETEAU**
Script **Lucie BORLETEAU & Clara BOURREAU**
with the collaboration **Laure GIAPPICONI**
Image **Alexis KAVYRCHINE**
Editing **Clémence DIARD**
Set design **Aurélien MAILLÉ**
Costumes **Alexia CRISP JONES**
1st Assistant Director **Hadrien BICHET**
Casting **Colia VRANICI**
Music supervision **Frederic JUNQUA**
Original music **Pierre DESPRATS**
Original songs **Rebeka WARRIOR**
Sound **Marie-Clotilde CHÉRY**

Production **Marine ARRIGHI DE CASANOVA (ASPARA FILMS)**
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