

LE COUSIN JULES



a film by Dominique Benicheti

“Some films defiantly refuse to be categorized- ‘documentary,’ ‘cinema verite,’ ‘minimal cinema,’ are at best half-truths in describing a film like Dominique Benicheti’s. It is all of these and something more. The film is an odd, compelling, hauntingly obsessive study of an old French couple; a record of two lives which have, after nearly eighty years, settled into a rigid routine that has become a last tenuous link with life. Benicheti’s approach is, paradoxically, both intensely personal and highly objective- a filmmaker of remarkable originality.”

- Richard Whitehall, Filmex, 1974

A MASTERPIECE REDISCOVERED



A lost masterpiece of cinema, *Cousin Jules* was the result of five years of painstaking work by director Dominique Benichetti and cinematographer Pierre-William Glenn. Over that period, they photographed in Cinemascope and recorded in stereophonic sound, the daily lives of Jules and his wife- French farmers living alone in the countryside. The result is a ravishing, totally immersive work, in which we not only enter into the subjects' world but also into the very rhythms of their lives. The film received extraordinary reviews, won the Special Jury Prize prize at Lucarno, and screened at numerous other festivals including Moscow, New Directors/New Films and the Los Angeles International Film Expo. Charles Champlin, writing for *The Los Angeles Times*, called it "one of those extraordinary discoveries which film festivals ought to always be about." Richard Pena of *The New York Film Festival* and Dan Talbot of *New Yorker Films*, were among the film's most passionate advocates.

Despite clear indication from critics and audiences alike that this was a masterwork to be reckoned with, the film did not find a distributor. It was in part because, as one reviewer said, "it defiantly refused to be categorized," and required a degree of patience from audiences to experience its deep rewards. Additionally, the arthouse theaters for which the film was intended did not have the capacity to screen in the film's native Cinemascope format, and the director refused any other exhibition format for the film. He believed that the drama of the film, of life and the meaning of it's ordinary days, was best understood on a monumental scale.

Over the years the negative and existing copies of the film began to disintegrate. Benichetti himself was in the early stages of restoring the film at the laboratory where he worked in France, when he died very suddenly in 2011. When Richard Pena inquired about the availability of the film for the 2012 New York Film Festival, a group of the film's most dedicated supporters raised the funds for the remainder of the restoration work. The exquisite restoration was completed at Arane-Gulliver, the lab where the director worked during his last years.

Cousin Jules awed its audience at the 2012 New York Film Festival and will be presented again in screenings at *The Berlin International Film Festival* in 2013.

PRODUCTION



CAST

Jules and Felicie Guitteaux

DIRECTOR
WRITER
PRODUCER
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
CAMERA OPERATOR
ASSISTANT PRODUCERS

Dominique Benicheti
Dominique Benicheti
Rythma Films
Pierre William Glenn and Paul Launay
Walter Bal
Georges Dupont, Michel Gauthier,
Pierre Albin and Philippe Ricou

GAFFER
CAMERA ASSISTANT
SCRIPT SUPERVISOR
SOUND
EDITING
SOUND MIX (1972)
LAB (1972)
RE-MASTERING (2012)

Jean-Claude Gasché
Philippe Delpont
Geneviève Benicheti
Roger Letellier and Rene Jean Bouyer
Marie Genvieve Ripeau
Jacques Maumont
LTC Saint Cloud
Jean-René Faillot and Géraldine Desindes
Arane-Gulliver Lab, Paris

FILMED IN 35MM CINEMASCOPE
REMASTERED TO 2K DCP

DOMINIQUE BENICHETI



Dominique Benicheti was born in 1943 in Paris. He graduated from the National School for Applied Arts, National Superior School of Fine Arts, and the Institute for Advanced Cinematographic Studies (IDHEC) in Animation. He directed and produced more than 30 films; documentaries, scientific films, institutional films, and animation, and was a technical and creative consultant for many 3D and large format films. His expertise in 3D technology contributed to the success of The Futuroscope Park in Poitiers, France, and was also called upon by Gower Studios in Hollywood, where he acted as a consultant stereographer.

In 1975 he arrived at Harvard University, first teaching documentary filmmaking and then working for several years at the Jefferson Laboratories of Experimental Physics, and the Harvard Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics,

Benicheti was active in the launch of Arane-Gulliver, one of the premier 70mm and special format film laboratories in Europe. He designed and built printing shuttles for 4-5-8-10 and 15 perfs in 70mm, as well as anti-bubble systems for 70mm wet gate printers.

When he died suddenly in 2011, he left behind several screenplays for 3D and large format films. Passionate about music, architecture, and science, Dominique's aim in films was always to achieve through sound and image what words could not express. In the words of Richard Pena (New York Film Festival Director), "he possessed an extraordinary mind and unique talent, a mind literally too creative to be encumbered by traditional film formats."

DOMINIQUE BENICHETI SELECTED WORK

In Progress

PATHÉ-BABY

35mm 3D

blending fiction and documentary in a fantasy time-travel story featuring 3D interviews of people long gone, and observed by a ten year old little girl. Benicheti was at work on this film at the time of his death.

2009

L'ODYSSÉE MAGIQUE

20 min. 70mm/8perfs

a documentary hymn to nature for Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's Vulcania Edutainment Park in Auvergne. Filmed in Iceland, Colorado, French Guiana, the Grand Canyon, California, Viet Nam, and France.

2000

LA GROTTTE CHAUVET

20min, 70mm/5perf

In celebration of the discovery of the 34,000 year old Chauvet Cave in 1999, Benichetti designed and built a special motion control system for the 70mm camera that could fit in the entrance of the cave, reachable only by spelunking. The exceptional 3D sequences were produced using stop motion and long exposures.

1997

LA REVOLE

20min, 70mm

the first French 3-D musical comedy, a magical realist story set on the last day of the wine harvest. Created for and on exhibit at the Beaujolais Wine Museum in Beaujolais, France.

1994

LE PRIX DE LA LIBERTÉ

20 min, 35 mm

Created for and on exhibit in a custom built theater at the Museum in Arromanches to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Normandy Landings in 1944. The film is presented in a 360 degree panorama that blends in a continuum, shots filmed by war correspondents with staged sequences of contemporary Normandy.

1973

LE COUSIN JULES

91 min, 35mm Cinemascope

A documentary portrait of life on a farm in Burgundy, France. Heralded by critics and film scholars worldwide, it was awarded the Special Jury Prize at the Locarno Festival in 1973, and exhibited at New Directors/New Films, Moscow International Film Festival and the Los Angeles International Film Exposition.

PRESS



Unlike Rouquier's film, *Le Cousin Jules* never tries to impose a pattern on the material, but lets the material evoke its own pattern as it records two lives which have, after eighty years, settled into the rigidity of routine, and where routine is almost the last link with life. Dominique Benicheti is paradoxically both intensely personal and highly objective in his handling of actuality.

Richard Whithall, *Filmex*

Five years of tenacity are erased by an uncommonly new work which overthrows all previous use of widescreen technique, renovates the employment of the soundtrack, and proposes an original and purposeful type of narration..

F. C., *La Suisse*

Not a word, not a musical phrase, on the spot recorded stereophonic sync sounds, amplified so as to transform them in a symphony of everyday noises and images, in real time..

Micheline Landry Beguin, *Locarno*

Benicheti's ninety minute cineportrait, though filmed over a five year period, gives the impression of unfolding in one day, from morning to night. The wide angle camera lens contemplates, with the obsessive vision of a painter or a mystic, the daily routine existence of Jules and Felicie, two aged, wrinkled souls whose lives seem to have long since been emptied of any purpose or meaning, dwelling on minute but richly significant details and movements. Thus, though *Le Cousin Jules* falls within the realist tradition begun by Lumiere and evolved by Flaherty and Rouch, it moves beyond the "documentary" with a social or political stance, to the realm of pure aesthetic contemplation.

Lee Atwell, *Film Quarterly*

Le Cousin Jules is one of these extraordinary discoveries which film festivals ought always to be about..It is indeed an invitation to learn to hear again, to pay fresh attention to filed birds, rooster crows, the ring of hammer on an anvil, the sizzle of a blade on a grindstone and, not the least, the matter of fact thudding of clods of earth onto a new coffin, which is how we learn of the one major event of this remarkable film.

Charles Champlin, *Los Angeles Times*

—Sat., Mar. 30, 1974

AT FILMEX

'Cousin Jules' to Have World Premiere

The 1974 Los Angeles International Film Exposition began Thursday at the Paramount Theater in Hollywood and runs through April 9. It is impossible to preview in detail all the offerings of a 50-event film festival, but The Times will cite as many of each day's major events as possible.

"Cousin Jules," having its world premiere at 4 p.m. today, is one of those extraordinary discoveries which film festivals ought always to be about.

Dominique Benichet recorded at intervals over a 5-year period from 1968-73 the quiet, ordered lives of a very old rural French couple, blacksmith Jules Guiteaux and his wife Felicie and their world. There is no narration and almost no dialog, only a sedate succession of absolutely beautiful images to see and to hear. "Cousin Jules" is indeed an invitation to learn to hear again, to pay fresh attention to field birds, rooster crows, the ring of hammer on anvil, the sizzle of a blade against a grindstone and, not least, the matter-of-fact thudding of clods of earth onto a new coffin which is how we learn of the one major event of this remarkable film. It is enormously affecting, partly because the European heritage belongs to so many of us, partly because the countryside and the life look not so different at all from the rural America many of us knew. A stunning film which I hope will be back for a longer stay.

—CHARLES CHAMPLIN

Saturday, March 30, 4:00 p.m.



10 Le Cousin Jules

World Premiere



France, 1974, 90 minutes

In French with English subtitles and stereophonic sound

Director/Screenwriter: Dominique Benicheti

Cinematographers: Paul Launay, Pierre William Glenn

Editor: Marie Genevieve Ripeau

Principal Cast: Jules Guiteaux, Félicie, Claude Chaudat, Adrienne,
Paul Rabat, Marie Cordelier

Production Company: La Société des Films Oiseaux

Source: Unifrancefilm

There are some films which defiantly refuse to be categorized, which shake loose the labels one tends to use for easy identification. Dominique Benicheti's *Le Cousin Jules* is such a film. Call it "documentary" or "cinéma-vérité" or "minimal cinema" or "a study in behaviourism" and one will have uttered, at best, a half-truth. It is all of these and something more. It is an odd, compelling, hauntingly obsessive study of an old French couple. Superbly photographed in Eastmancolor and CinemaScope and with some astonishing direct-sound recording, it is a work with closer affinities to, say, the time structures in early Warhol or to Jean-Marie Straub than to Georges Rouquier's feature-length study of French peasant life, *Farrebique*, to which it has certain superficial similarities. Unlike Rouquier's film, *Le Cousin Jules* never tries to impose a pattern on the material but lets the material evoke its own pattern as it records two lives which have, after eighty years, settled into the rigidity of routine, and where the routine is almost the last link with life. Dominique Benicheti is, paradoxically, both intensely personal and highly objective in his handling of actuality. He is an obsessed filmmaker of remarkable originality. — *Richard Whitehall*

Short: **The Son**, Ryszard Czekala (Poland, 1970), 10 minutes

FILM QUARTERLY

1975

LE COUSIN JULES

Director/Writer: Dominique Benicheti. Cinematographers: Paul Launay, Pierre William Glenn. Editor: Geneviève Ripeau. Produced by La Société des Films Oiseaux. 90 minutes, Eastmancolor, stereophonic sound.

The profusion of speech which has characterized the recent work of Rohmer, Rivette and Godard, and perhaps reached its culmination in Jean Eustache's marathon *La Maman et la putain*, reflects the love, indeed the obsession, with language and lucidity characteristic of the French bourgeois intellectual. Often, felicities of rhetoric and philosophic inquiry tend to overwhelm the visual aspects of filmic continuity. On the other hand, certain new areas explored by *cinéma-vérité*, by the minimalist cinema of Jean-Marie Straub, and the transfixed behavioral studies of Warhol-Morrissey, give sparseness of speech a new and interesting dimension. This kind of "existential cinema," however, radically shifts its

burden of proof from the film itself to the critical sensibility of the observer, with all his tastes, prejudices, and distortions brought to bear, unstructured in terms of ordinary movie experience.

Placed in this context, Dominique Benicheti's first feature film, *Le Cousin Jules*, which had its American premiere at the 1974 Los Angeles International Film Exhibition, is a totally unique and arresting piece of cinema that eludes all present genre categories, while sharing something of all of them, yet creates a cinematic ambience that virtually eliminates verbal language. Unlike Truffaut and Godard, who launched themselves with relatively popular genre pieces, Dominique Benicheti's debut inherits virtually none of the requirements of a feature-length or documentary film: there is no narrative, characterization, dramatic evolution, no acting to speak of, and the camera rarely moves from a fixed position with long sustained takes. There are scarcely a dozen lines of dialogue uttered, of relatively minor significance, none of which are subtitled, and absolutely no commentary or music score. These severe restrictions are not just economical or practical but grow out of the very subject and nature of the film's aesthetic plan and its very personal subject.

After his enrollment in the animation department at L'IDHEC, in 1965, at the age of 22, Benicheti suddenly had the inspiration for *Le Cousin Jules*. Realizing he could never make the

LE COUSIN JULES



film by conventional means, he took a job as a cameraman in French television and began saving to realize his dream. A skilled draftsman, Benicheti began gradually, with sketchbook and camera, to return to a scene of his childhood.

"I have in Burgundy a distant relative on my mother's side; he lives in a small village near Pierre-de-Bresse. Jules was born in 1891. At 22 he married Félicie. His father and grandfather were blacksmiths. So he also became a blacksmith. I spent all my summer vacations there as a youth. I have always been fascinated by iron work. I therefore decided to make a film on Jules in 1967. Whenever I could find time off from my TV work, I would leave for Burgundy and film in 16mm and in color. I also took lots of stills; for me this was like a rough draft. I was already preparing a very precise script of my film. I made a sketch of each scene."

On the basis of this material, Benicheti began filming in Cinemascope, with stereophonic sound, with his camera instructor from L'IDHEC, Paul Launay, as principal cameraman, in April 1968. Since the young director wanted to assume all production responsibilities, editing was not begun until April 1969, resulting in a 24-minute film, later reduced to 10 minutes. In August 1969, with the additional assistance of Pierre William Glenn (Truffaut's cinematographer for *La Nuit Américaine*) shooting resumed. Another year lapsed before Benicheti achieved a 40-minute cut which he screened publicly for the first time at the Centre National du Cinéma, which granted him a subsidy of around \$8,000. Then, in August 1971, Jules's wife Félicie died. Though he was deeply shaken by the event, Benicheti decided to continue filming. "Cousin Jules's life-style had changed. He was alone. I asked him if he still wanted to work with me. By a strange coincidence, he stopped working as a blacksmith at the time of his wife's death. We resumed filming in February 1973. The definitive print of *Le Cousin Jules* was ready on May 16."

Benicheti's final 90-minute cineportrait, though filmed over a five-year period, gives the impression of unfolding in one day's duration, from morning to night. The wide-angle camera lens contemplates, with the obsessive vision of a

painter or mystic, the daily, routine existence of Jules and Félicie, two aged, wrinkled souls whose lives seem to have long since been emptied of any purpose or meaning, dwelling on minute but richly significant details and movements. Thus, though *Cousin Jules* clearly falls within the "realist tradition" begun by Lumière and evolved by Flaherty and Rouch, it moves beyond the "documentary," with a social or political stance, to the realm of pure, rapt aesthetic contemplation.

Behind the titles, the camera glides slowly past the tool benches in the shadowy dew-laden workshop—a central image for Benicheti and the final link with Jules's creative heritage. In close-up we watch him heating and forging instruments on his anvil, a process made fascinating by the demonstrated skill of the artisan and the visual contrast and textures of the environment. Benicheti's method seems to be marked by documentary precision, yet, like the peasant studies of Millet and the rural landscapes of Corot, who took their subjects from authentic locales, the vision is never impersonal. Benicheti has not dwelled on these elderly Burgundians because they are "interesting," but because he loves them. And in spite of the film's lack of overt action, it communicates a radiant absorption of the artist in their unembellished world.

Most documentary or "realist" film-makers consider themselves obliged to discover a natural conflict or dramatic tension inherent in their subject. Whether it is Flaherty, remolding the immediate environment to recreate primitive conditions which no longer exist or never existed at all, or Leacock following political or show-business figure, the objective stance remains artificially contrived or manipulated. Benicheti's relation to his material is different. Having become intimately acquainted with his elderly subjects over a period of many years as well as with their rustic rural milieu, Benicheti offers to our eyes, so jaded and polluted by urban industrial civilization, a natural style of living precious by virtue of its rarity. As each shot unfolds, one begins to see a fresh vision of age as captured by a youthful and rapturous eye. And nothing looks artificial, forced, or manipulated.

While Jules is heating and deftly hammering into shape an iron fork, Félicie enters the shop, takes a bag of coffee beans from a shelf and carefully grinds them. When the coffee is prepared, Jules joins her in what appears to be a ritualistic partaking of the drink. Similarly, at midday, Félicie prepares a crude peasant meal of curd, potatoes, bread, and wine, which they consume with habitual exactitude, exchanging only a few perfunctory phrases, with long intervals of silence.

Benicheti moves briefly beyond the confines of the farm house to reveal in ravishing long shots the placid golden splendor of rural fields with grazing cattle, tranquil country roads. Such rudimentary and prosaic non-action gradually takes on an aesthetic dimension by virtue of carefully selected framing and a supple though uninflected *mise-en-scène*. The director's re-creation of reality recalls most approximately the vision of Straub in *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*, filtered through the distilled, yet warm perspective of an Ozu study of family life.

The second half of the film—shot after the death of Félicie—is composed of the quotidian existence of Jules: making a bed with fastidious care, drinking coffee while reading his latest issue of *L'Indépendant*, shaving, feeding the chickens. We see him gathering firewood in a nearby field with the aid of a neighbor or relative and carting it to the homestead. In the exteriors, Benicheti always remains at a distance from the action. Later, when Jules is seen purchasing vegetables and bread from a roadside vendor, Benicheti places the camera in a field with a massive tree in the foreground, so that we are unable to see or hear the transaction clearly. The effect is a kind of aesthetic discretion, keeping us removed, yet drawing the eye into the image to discern its radical simplicity.

As the day comes to its natural conclusion, Jules sweeps the floors and prepares vegetables for cooking. As he is eating, alone, by candlelight, the camera observes first closely, then from an exterior view of the window. Finally, the closing images of the deserted blacksmith shop, clothed in dust and nocturnal shadows, suggest

that Jules is awaiting patiently the final specter of death, and ultimate reunion with Félicie.

In an interview, the young director suggests that his use of color, wide screen and stereophonic sound are "the only solution to competing with the small screen," meaning, of course, television. This modest justification notwithstanding, *Le Cousin Jules* would not be the exceptional and unique cinematic experience that it is without the aesthetic dimension of these technical devices. His ordering of space, color, and movement is clearly the work of a sensitive graphic eye that never sentimentalizes or romanticizes what is before it. Whereas most directors conceive of a shot as a fragment of a narrative, or ideological context, Benicheti asks us to surrender our attention to his open, freely scannable images, and not to read, but to experience and reflect for a much longer duration than might normally be expected. The resulting adagio, melancholy tempo, consistent with the temporal experience of the subjects, is at first difficult to adjust to, but patience yields its rewards.

Le Cousin Jules has been shown at Moscow, Locarno, and Filmex, and has won a number of awards. Yet it has received little attention by the press or film distributors to date. Bravely, Benicheti has said, "I would like to see *Le Cousin Jules* shown on the Champs-Élysées, and let the general public be moved by it. Maybe it is a difficult film to approach. But it is not marginal. You just have to ask the spectators to be quiet and to listen as if they were at a concert." This is precisely what we are invited to do since every sound, from the piercing blow of a smithy's hammer, the cutting of fresh vegetables, or the clatter of wooden shoes, every directly recorded sound, is given a rich, delicate perspective, awakening us to a new aural sensitivity via the beautifully engineered stereo track. By capitalizing on these aspects of image and sound, Benicheti proves that truth and beauty are indeed in the eye and ear of the beholder, who discovers them through actively contemplating the natural flow of life.

—LEE ATWELL

Dan Talbot, 1990

Mon Cousin Jules

An excellent example of a *miura* would be an obscure film by Dominic Benichetti called *Mon Cousin Jules*. Let us now praise this exquisite gem, this masterpiece of humanity. It is a documentary-like story of a couple in their eighties, peasants who live on their small farm in an undesignated part of France. The husband is a blacksmith. He is of medium height, erect, comfortable in his sturdy plain cotton pants and shirt. He has an inquisitive look. The wife tends the vegetable garden and cooks. An uncommonly handsome woman, she looks optimistic. They have lived with each other for over sixty years. We do not know if they have children. The film maker is related to Jules, the elderly man in the film, hence the title, although this is ambiguous, since Benichetti was in his early thirties when he made this only film of his (he taught at Harvard for a while) and I'd be curious to learn how a thirty year old and an eighty year old can be cousins. No matter.

The film follows in minute detail the cycle of this couple's day over a period of three seasons. They are both up at the crack of dawn. Roosters crow. Cows moo. There is a slight breeze. The leaves of the magnolia tree near the house flutter. The ancient woman makes a wood fire in the stove. Coffee is cooking. They sit at a distressed wooden table looking out the window towards their fields strewn with Chinese red poppies while drinking coffee and eating huge chunks of peasant bread smeared with thick layers of butter. They look at each other but say nothing. He rises and puts his cup in the sink. He walks out of the room in his clunky wooden clogs and goes to the nearby shed to make a coal fire. He puts on a leather apron. He is working on a farm implement which I have never seen before but which is undoubtedly a basic tool. He gives the making of this piece of iron his undivided attention, a gaze so fixed and intense that the introduction of a Michael Jackson MTV in this barn would produce a heart attack in Jules. He pauses, studies the contour of the tool, and then puts it back on the lathe to refine it further. At mid-morning, his wife (no given name in the film) appears with a pot of coffee and two cups. She warms it up on a brasier. He stops work. She sits down on a small wooden stool, pours the coffee, hands it to Jules. They drink together, looking at each other, saying nothing and you now understand the deeper meaning of ritual. After coffee, she goes to the garden and we see her harvesting leeks and potatoes. They will have leek soup tonight. The sun is so bright that you imagine that you are in southern France. So far we are one hour into the film. Nothing and everything has happened. If Pudovkin were alive at the time of this film he would embrace Benichetti. As the sun fades we witness this harmonious couple eating dinner. Leek soup rests in a large wooden bowl. They eat with hand-made wooden spoons. You hear the sound of clogs on the wooden floor as she goes to the stove for more soup. Throughout the film you hear the crunch of clogs on gravel paths. The film runs only eighty minutes and not one word is spoken by these two magnificent people. Now, dear reader, if your mind has been wandering trying to figure out which stock to buy, please pay attention. *Benichetti shot this film in color, Cinemascope, and stereophonic sound, twenty years before the introduction of digital*

sound. No other way would do. A sort of predecessor of this film--*Farrebique*--was made in black and white, mono sound, in a 1:33 aspect ratio, the way most films were made in the thirties, before color, scope lenses and overly refined sound changed the look of films. Benichetti's aim was to give the film the sense of a lived life, without the fakery of artifice. You hear the buzz of bees, the crackle of fire, the crunch of gravel as if you were experiencing the workings of nature for the first time. Hollywood films since then, with their leviathan industrial insults to the brain, use soundtracks that deserve to be outlawed. If Sylvester Stallone, God forbid, were to sneeze in Dolby sound, it would sound like a herd of elephants farting. I could easily see those elephant farts rending mountains asunder, uprooting two hundred feet palm trees.

Benichetti organized a screening for me to learn if I would distribute the film. After seeing it, I said of course. But then reality intervened. The print I screened was the only print in existence. It cost \$20,000 to make. The negative elements--in separate tracks--were at Technicolor in London. In order to make additional prints, the separate elements would have to be married. This, with an answer print, would run to \$75,000. Benichetti would not allow the print he showed me, a pristine print from the original negative, to be shown unless I wanted to make additional prints to the tune of \$20,000 a pop. And then, only a maximum of six to seven prints could be made. Striking additional prints would invite destruction to the negative. If one were to entertain global distribution, with the remote possibility that the film would gain a half-way decent sized audience, several hundred thousand dollars would have to be invested towards this end. Go. Go show a film of this size to the universal airhead audience. I consider myself among the priveleged few for having screened this film. I was unable to speak for two days after seeing it. I will never forget it. The film occupies a special crypt in my memory warehouse. The film is actually incomplete. Benichetti managed to shoot the elderly couple over a period of three seasons. Jules died before the onset of winter. It matters not. I am in Benichetti's debt for showing me such a great work of art, Twenty years later I still feel transformed by it.

UNIFRANCE DOSSIERS PORTRAIT

DOMINIQUE BENICHETI

Dominique Benicheti a tourné son premier film : Le Cousin Jules. Le Festival de Moscou, au mois de juillet dernier, demande à Benicheti de venir présenter son film. Quelques semaines plus tard, c'est Locarno qui le réclame et lui octroie le Prix Spécial du Jury, la première mention du Jury pour la Jeunesse et le Grand Prix Oecuménique...

Mais qui est donc Dominique Benicheti? C'est ce que nous lui avons demandé.

— Je suis né le 16 mai 1943 à Paris, dans le quartier des Ternes. Mon enfance? Normale, heureuse. Mon père est artisan graveur. Je quitte l'école après le B.E.P.C. Je suis des cours de Beaux Arts appliqués pendant cinq ans. Je prépare aussi le professorat de dessin. J'ai obtenu la moitié de ma licence après une année de Beaux-Arts. En 1965 et 1966, je m'inscris à l'I.D.H.E.C., section dessins animés. Nous étions deux élèves... Puis j'ai flâné une année à droite et à gauche sans trouver de travail. A la fin de l'année 1967, j'ai brusquement eu l'idée de tourner *Le Cousin Jules*. Pour me payer le luxe, si je puis dire, de réaliser mon rêve, il me faut travailler. J'accepte donc d'être opérateur à la télévision.

— *Quelle est l'idée de départ du Cousin Jules?*

— J'ai en Bourgogne un arrière-cousin de ma mère qui s'appelle Jules. Il habite un petit village, près de Pierre-de-Bresse. Jules est né en 1891. Il a épousé à 22 ans Félicie. Son grand-père et son père étaient forgerons. Il devient donc forgeron. Je l'ai connu durant chacune de mes grandes vacances. J'ai toujours été fasciné

par le travail du fer. Je décide donc de faire un film sur Jules. En 1967, lorsque mon travail à la télévision me le permet, je gagne la Bourgogne et je tourne en 16 mm couleurs. Je prends aussi une grande quantité de photographies. Ce travail équivalait pour moi à un brouillon. Je préparais déjà un découpage très précis de mon film. J'ai dessiné chaque plan en scope.

— *Le début du tournage proprement dit?*

— J'ai eu pour premier chef opérateur Paul Launay qui fut mon professeur à l'I.D.H.E.C. Le premier tournage eut lieu en avril 68. J'avais pu, grâce à l'argent économisé, me procurer le matériel nécessaire afin de tourner en scope et en son stéréo. Comme je voulais tout assumer moi-même et en particulier la production, je n'ai pu m'attaquer au montage qu'en avril 69, montage qui me donna 24 minutes de film. J'ai pris alors un certain recul pendant trois mois. Je me suis projeté alors ces 24 minutes et n'en ai conservé que 10 minutes.

— *Et vous avez repris le tournage?*

— Oui, en août 1969 avec Paul Launay et Pierre William Glenn, à qui l'on doit les images de *La Nuit américaine*. Les difficultés ne manquent pas, surtout les raccords en scope. J'ai encore attendu une année avant de m'attaquer au montage. En juin 1970, j'avais en boîte 40 minutes parfaites. J'ai encore tourné quelques plans de raccord. En septembre, j'organise la première projection et je présente le film au Centre National du Cinéma qui m'octroie une prime de 4 millions d'anciens francs.

Je possédais donc un film de 40

minutes. En août 1971, Félicie, l'épouse du cousin Jules, meurt. Je décide de poursuivre le tournage. Cette mort me bouleverse. La vie du cousin Jules a changé, il est seul. Je lui demande s'il veut bien continuer à travailler pour moi. La coïncidence a voulu qu'il cesse de fréquenter sa forge, à la mort de sa femme.

Nous avons tourné en février 1973.

La copie zéro de *Cousin Jules* était prête le 16 mai. C'est un film en scope et en son stéréo direct. Pas de musique, pas de commentaire, nul dialogue. Je dois dire que mes ingénieurs du son ont fait un travail exceptionnel.

— *Comment définissez-vous votre film?*

— C'est une tranche de vie d'un homme, du matin au soir, qui s'étale sur cinq ans, mais qui donne l'impression de se passer en une seule journée.

Film marginal? J'aimerais que *Cousin Jules* puisse sortir sur les Champs-Élysées, que le grand public y soit sensible. C'est peut-être un film d'approche difficile. Mais il n'est pas marginal. Il faut demander aux spectateurs de se taire et d'écouter comme pour un concert.

— *Et l'avenir?*

— J'aimerais réaliser un dessin animé de long métrage. J'ai plusieurs idées. Je veux une nouvelle fois tourner en Cinémascope et son stéréo. C'est à mon avis le seul moyen de lutter contre le petit écran et la télévision.

— *Le cinéma?*

— Le plus grand des Arts, le plus complet. Il ne lui manque qu'une chose : le relief. Mais il évolue.

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