



FESTIVAL DE CANNES  
2021 OFFICIAL SELECTION

Dario Argento  
Françoise Lebrun  
Alex Lutz

# Vortox

A film by Gaspar Noé

# SYNOPSIS

LIFE IS  
A SHORT PARTY  
THAT WILL SOON  
BE FORGOTTEN.

# INTERVIEW WITH GASPAR NOÉ

## What was the origin of *Vortex*?

I've been wanting to make a film with elderly people for several years. With my grandparents, then with my mother, I realized that old age involves very complex survival issues. It generates overwhelming situations in which those who have protected you most revert in turn to their childhood. So I imagined a film with an extremely simple narrative, with one person in a state of mental deterioration losing the use of language, and her grandson who has not yet mastered it, as two extremes of this brief experience that is human life.

## It's your least provocative, least violent film to date.

That's not for me to judge. While it's my first feature film for all audiences, I'm also told that – due to the very common situation it describes, which most people are or will become familiar with – it's the toughest.

I've already made films that scared people, turned them on, or made them laugh. This time I wanted to make a film that made them cry as hard as I could cry, in life as at the cinema. Tears really do have a sedative effect when they come into contact with the membranes of the eyelids, which makes them one of the most pleasurable substances there is.

Also, this isn't the first time that I've filmed with the greatest love people older than me: it was the case with Philippe Nahon with whom I made *Carne* and *I Stand Alone*. But this time, *Vortex* is really inspired by recent experiences in my life, and all those ultra-brilliant loved ones whose powers of thought I saw decay and then die before my eyes. The film probably refers to the emptiness that surrounds us and in which we float. I've also been told that it recalls *Enter the Void* in the sense that its subject is the great emptiness that is life and not death.

## It's also your most radical, desperate film.

Maybe, in any case not very Manichean. It's just the story of a genetically programmed disintegration, when the whole house of cards collapses. As we wrote for the Cannes Film Festival synopsis: Life is a short party that will soon be forgotten.

## Did you write this film following your sudden brain haemorrhage?

No, not at all. I'd already thought about the subject for this film long before. On the other hand, with this stroke, from which there was very little chance that I would emerge alive or unscathed, I was catapulted onto the dark side of the moon. While I was on morphine for three weeks, I thought about my death and its consequences for all those around me, the mess I would have left behind. That's death: the objects of a life you leave to others and that disappear in a garbage truck as quickly as memories that rot along with the brain. In any case, since the hand of destiny gave me some joyful extra time, I feel that I'm more serene with these two concepts we call life and death. In addition, the convalescence that was imposed on me, followed by this fabulous collective experience of confinement linked to a virus, allowed me to spend months discovering the greatest melodramas of Mizoguchi, Naruse and the unjustly forgotten Kinoshita, whose melancholy, cruelty and aesthetic inventiveness reminded me what truly great cinema could be.

## Was it a commando shoot?

I wrote a 10-page text, that grew to 14 pages when I expanded the bodies of the characters to deposit it at the CNC (laughs). Canal + committed and I got the *avance sur recettes* for the first time. I shot in April, over 25 days, and finished on May 8th. I had an editing room on set and, since we didn't have very long shooting days, I started editing right away, in the evenings, on weekends. It was very fast, especially the post-production before Cannes, but I love speed. It worked well for Fassbinder, it worked well for all the great Japanese directors in the 60s. Why do slowly what you can do quickly?

## When did you have the idea for the split-screen?

The story of the film is very commonplace, it's just something that happens quite naturally for people aged 80 and over that their children must manage. And these situations are so heavy day-to-day that most of those over 50 carry them like individual curses that they're almost ashamed to talk about. For the form, I envisaged something almost documentary, without written dialogue, and on a single set, as realistic as possible. The only aesthetic position I took was to film some scenes in split-screen

to emphasize the shared loneliness of this couple, but I hadn't planned to do so over the entire duration of the film. The first week I only shot a few sequences with two cameras, but in the editing room I realized that when one of the characters left the frame, leaving us alone with the other, I really wanted to continue to see what he or she was doing at the same time. Reality is the sum of the perceptions of those who make it. And since there's nothing more boring in cinema than this artificial tv movie language that almost everyone uses I thought, as long as we're making something as contrived as a film, why not have fun with the split-screen?

So I timed the shots and filmed the missing parts to complete the sequences. The process then imposed itself from the second week of filming. It feels like we're following two tunnels that evolve in parallel but never meet, two characters irrevocably separated by their paths in life and by the image. The camera language was a bit complex, and, as usual, I hadn't made storyboards. It requires a good spatial logic and I was constantly solving a mental Rubik's cube. Once again, I slept very badly at night.

### **And your actors?**

My three actors were the most beautiful Rolls-Royces of improvisation that I could have dreamt of. But by working with Françoise and Dario, given my admiration for them, I put myself under a lot of pressure, joyful and constructive as it was. I didn't want to screw up, to do a lazy directing job in front of a master of the image like Dario Argento, nor dare to miss a single performance by anyone with Françoise in the film.

I've idolized Françoise since discovering her in *The*

*Mother and the Whore*, even though Jean Eustache's use of ultra-precisely written dialogues is the exact opposite of what I try to do.

When Dario agreed to act in the film, I had less than a fortnight to find his son. I thumbtacked photos of Françoise and Dario on a wall and asked myself who could be physically credible as their child. Then I thought of Alex Lutz. I'd seen Guy by chance and was blown away by his performance. I stuck his photo next to his parents' and it worked perfectly. We met, and he was available. And when he told me he had himself directed Guy from a 10-page screenplay, I figured we were well suited!

### **With this more 'grown-up' film, you may even risk getting good reviews.**

Most great films are massacred when they're released, and the worst ones are venerated...So I don't care. To paraphrase Pasolini, what we do is more important than what we say. *Vortex* might be more 'adult' than my other films. But, *I Stand Alone* and my short *SIDA* aside, I feel as if I've only really made films about teenagers for teenagers. Today, at 57, perhaps I'm finally entering adulthood a little. I am getting into an unknown world.

# FRANÇOISE LEBRUN

## Do you know why Gaspar Noe called you in?

Yes! He saw *The Mother and the Whore* and he loves that film, it really moved him. But we didn't talk much about it, we stayed very demure.

## Did he give you a script?

No, and I didn't want one. He called me a few months ago, we had lunch. Later, he asked if wanted to read the script and I refused, because it was obvious to me that we were going to do something together. He more or less told me the story, but I had a kind of trust in our connection. I thought: This man has seen what I can do and loved what was at the origin of my whole story with cinema. So, I trusted him. It's as simple as that...

## Were you familiar with Gaspar Noe's cinema?

A little. I had seen *Lux Æterna* and he gave me some DVDs of his films that made me laugh a lot... I felt he filmed his actors with great empathy... I'm thinking of certain shots of Béatrice Dalle... he has a beautiful way of looking at actors and actresses. Gaspar Noe is the son of a painter, and I find that he works like a painter, he prepares his frame like a painting. He's very meticulous with the composition of the image.

## Still, he is seen as a provocative director, with scenes that venture very deep into violence or sex.

Obviously he didn't want to take me in that direction, with this film, he took a different turn. I pretty much knew that the subject was very personal to him, he has a deep understanding of the character I portray. That helped me to act it. I watched a lot of documentaries about Alzheimer's and I realised that each person develops their own disease. I threw myself into it knowing that Gaspar was there to direct this exploration of the unknown that I was making.

## Does Gaspar talk about the psychology of the characters?

Not at all! Or perhaps I didn't get it! (laughs) He gives practical indications: "An emptier look, wiggle your fingers, mumble..." Very concrete things. He doesn't talk about the character's moods and so much the better because I can't bear all that.

## How was the filming?

Through the documentaries I watched, I discovered that people who suffer from Alzheimer's often have problems with speech and don't always respond when they're spoken to. With my partners I tried to find a way of communicating that wasn't necessarily with words. It was a demanding adventure but undertaken with trust. And my two partners were terrific. We were in the same boat, each with our own modes of communication. You know we did re-takes a couple of weeks after the end of the shoot, simple things - I go out in the street again, I walk... I found that it took me some time to recover the state I was in during the shoot. Without my realising it, it had been a dive into something unfamiliar to me, that I hadn't controlled. A leap into the unknown. One of the first people to watch the film asked Gaspar if I really had Alzheimer's, so I did a good job...

## Was it a demanding shoot?

It was necessary to abandon all preconditioned reflexes. Because of the split-screen we did many takes. The biggest task was to let go of control. And at the same time, because of the work with two cameras, it was sometimes also very technical. I remember we once had to do a take of exactly ten seconds. It's a change and it's very exciting.

## If everything was improvised on set for this film, was there any improvisation in *The Mother and the Whore*?

Absolutely not. We had a text specific to the last comma and Jean asked us to redo each take until it was perfect. There wasn't an ounce of improv in *The Mother*.

# DARIO ARGENTO

## **This is the first time you've taken the lead role in a film.**

I was the narrator for several of my films, including *Suspiria*, *Opera* and *Tenebrae* and you can see my hands stabbing women in *Giallos*. Gaspar is one of my great friends, we've known each other for more than twenty years. He begged me, told me he wrote the film for me, everyone around me advised me to act in *Vortex*. Even so, when Gaspar came to see me in Rome and we watched his film *Love at 10am*, I must admit that I had big doubts... It was my daughter, Asia, who finally convinced me. So, at 80, I agreed to play my first leading role, and in French. I put all my will, all my strength, all my being into it.

## **What did you think of the script?**

There wasn't a script, perhaps some 15 pages. My two partners and I improvised the whole film. Gaspar would tell us about a situation and we'd improvise for longer or shorter periods of time. But it wasn't really complicated, I think it would have been harder for me with a real script, with dialogues to follow, since I struggle with French. I had to search for the truth in the depths of myself, of my feelings.

## **Did your experience as a director help you to incarnate a character?**

Of course. I've directed actors for years, I've been at their side. And I remembered it. For *Vortex* it was sometime very technical, because of the two cameras and the split-screen, with many shots – even if I too shoot my films with two cameras. As an actor you don't think about it, you think about your marks, about what you have to say, but not about the cameras. Gaspar did the framing himself, he was behind one of the cameras. He pitched in and talked to the actors a lot. But it was very tiring. We shot the same scenes many times in a row but I didn't remember my improvisations so I would do something else... The improvisation sessions were sometimes very long I remember in particular my conversation on the phone with my friend, the critic Jean-Baptiste Thoret, which lasted 31 minutes!

## **Moreover, you play a film critic.**

You know, I started my career as a critic. Before writing the screenplay for *Once Upon a Time in the West* for Sergio Leone and becoming a director, I was a film critic, in particular for the daily *Paese Sera*. For *Vortex*, Gaspar asked me what my character's profession was and I thought: a film critic.

## **A word about your partners, Françoise Lebrun and Alex Lutz.**

Françoise is a very interesting actress and Alex is a born improviser, very gifted. He helped me a lot with my improvisations.

## **You start shooting your new film *Black Glasses* at the end of June, having not directed for ten years. How do you feel?**

A little restless, I can't sleep these days (laughs). It's a *giallo*, of course, *Black Glasses*, with Asia.

## **What will you take away from *Vortex*?**

It is a very intimate film for Gaspar, a personal story that touches him. It might be the most important film he has directed. I'm very happy about this experience, very enthusiastic, but I will never be an actor again, *Vortex* will remain a unique experience. It's finished, absolutely finished. For this reason it remains unique.

# ALEX LUTZ

**People might find it surprising to see you in the credits of a Gaspar Noe film. Really? Tell me why?**

**I have the impression that you move in different worlds, you have rather the image of a comedian.**

I only think about making unique objects, which don't resemble each other. Like Gaspar I am interested and deeply moved by time, like *Guy* who turns around and tries to move forward, or *Final Set*, the swansong of a 34-year-old tennis player... It's not so inconsistent... Otherwise, I know that Gaspar loved my feature *Guy* and knew that I love to improvise. As for me, I didn't hesitate. Gaspar called me and offered me the role two weeks before filming began. I love that! Films should always be made like this, with this urgency. There was a window for me, and I went for it. Brilliant!

**Isn't it a bit of a leap into the void to appear in a film without a script, that will be improvised as you go along?**

Culture is one of the last sanctuaries where it is a duty not to be afraid. Our profession still allows that. And what could happen to me? Gaspar is a brilliant filmmaker, he has directed wonders, whether I can be an oil or an acrylic on his canvas, that's awesome! The shoot was a crazy chaos in which we told ourselves: "We've got tons of Lego, what can we make together?" I loved making this film.

**How did the work unfold day-to-day?**

Gaspar has his film in his head, a total vision of what he's going to do, but no script – maybe 20 pages. On set, it's a strange mix. You feel like you can do whatever you want, but at the same time Gaspar knows exactly what he wants, he doesn't let go of you. There is a heavy, slow and very precise work of setting up with the two cameras, because of the split screen. Sometimes he moves the camera 4 inches, and it makes a real difference. And while he is searching, the actor has time to brew. Then he launches us, with things to say or encounters, and we refine it, take after take.

**Does he give you psychological hints?**

He's an artist of great delicacy, he'll give you a few bones to chew on, but he doesn't do psychology. I didn't know if my character was into drugs or if he had given up. We said that he had taken himself in hand, that he worked in some organization. I suggested that my character get some help from a social worker for his son, that he worked in editing to have a schedule that allowed him to get high. He's into drugs without being into drugs, it's the eternal problem of the addict who knows very well that that's what he'll be all his life. A junkie once said to me "Drugs? Simple, it's the mother's breast." I really like the fact that Gaspar doesn't underline anything, doesn't explain everything, and it's for the viewer – the co-author – to fill in the blanks.

**How did you work with your two partners?**

It was very powerful with Françoise and Dario. I was familiar with Dario's films, I liked his language, his accent, in a film where we struggle to talk. And Françoise is an iconic actress. In the script I'm closer to Françoise, while my character has had fights with Dario in the past, a father who has had to scour police stations and clinics for his son... I loved improvising, letting go, I'd love to do only that. But you need a director who isn't afraid of heating up the camera.

# VORTEX

## BY GASPAR NOÉ

### CAST

The Mother  
The Father  
The Son  
The Grandson

Françoise LEBRUN  
Dario ARGENTO  
Alex LUTZ  
Kylian DHERET

### CREW

Produced by  
  
Directed by  
Written by  
DP  
Sound  
Production Designer  
Costume Designer  
Editors  
  
Line Producer  
1<sup>st</sup> Assistant Director

Edouard WEIL, Vincent MARAVAL,  
Brahim CHIOUA  
Gaspar NOÉ  
Gaspar NOÉ  
Benoît DEBIE  
Ken YASUMOTO  
Jean RABASSE – ADC  
Corinne BRUAND  
Denis BEDLOW  
Gaspar NOÉ  
Serge CATOIRE  
Claire CORBETTA DOLL

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SRAB FILMS  
LES FILMS VELVET  
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**WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY GASPAR NOÉ**

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**INTERNATIONAL PR**

Ryan Werner  
[ryan@cineticmedia.com](mailto:ryan@cineticmedia.com)  
+1 917 254 7653

Charlie Olsky  
[charlie@cineticmedia.com](mailto:charlie@cineticmedia.com)  
+1 917 545 7260

Kara Maclean  
[kara@k2publicity.com](mailto:kara@k2publicity.com)

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