VAN GOGH – IKUISUUDEN PORTEILLA
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LÄHDE: FILMIKAMARI

AT ETERNITY'S GATE

Can a movie speak to—in its own kinetic, time-altering way—the intense swirl of feeling and aliveness that goes into painting? It was the seeming impossibility of this which beckoned to Julian Schnabel as he created At Eternity's Gate. He wanted to capture some things that have often evaded movies about artists. Schnabel's vision of Van Gogh's final days is a view into the artist unlike any other. This is a story that pursues what the act of creation—that visceral, searing magic that defies all words and obliterates time— feels like from the inside, the strenuous physicality of painting and the devotional intensity of the artist's life, especially the way painters see.

The result is a kaleidoscopic and surprising movie experience—one that becomes just as much about the role of the artist in the world, about being alive and reaching for the eternal, as it is about the beauty and wonder Van Gogh left behind, never knowing his profound impact.

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Schnabel: "The Van Gogh seen in the film comes directly out of my personal response to his paintings, not just what people have written about him."

Van Gogh became a prism for Schnabel, Jean-Claude Carrière and Louise Kugelberg (his co-writers and co-editor), and ultimately cast and crew, to look anew at the relentless human urge to express and communicate. The film does draw on letters, biographies, the legends we've all heard as well as the innumerable perspectives to the history. But at heart, this is a work of sheer imagination, an ode to the artistic spirit and to having a conviction so absolute that you must devote your life to it.

Jean-Claude Carrière: "It's a film about a painter, Van Gogh, in which we tried not to provide a biography of Van Gogh—that would be absurd, it's so well known—but to dream up scenes that might have taken place, in which Van Gogh might have participated, might have taken part, in the course of which he might have spoken, but which history does not record. It's quite a novel approach to Van Gogh."

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At Eternity's Gate began in the museum. Julian Schnabel took his friend, the renowned French screenwriter, novelist and actor Jean-Claude Carrière to the Musée d'Orsay to see the exhibit entitled "Van Gogh/Artaud: The Man Suicided by Society" (drawn from French playwright, poet and visionary Antonin Artaud's book of the same name).

Carrière is himself a cinematic legend, known for his 19-year collaboration on the films of the master film director Luis Bunuel (including Diary of a Chambermaid, Belle de Jour and The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie), as well as such screenplays as Danton, The Return of Martin Guerre, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, and Cyrano de Bergerac). In 2014, Carrière was awarded an honorary Academy Award for his body of work as a screenwriter.

As the duo wandered through the 40 paintings in the show—including Portrait of the Artist, Paul Gauguin's Armchair, Dr. Paul Gachet, Augustine Roulin and Pair of Shoes— they began to talk of a film and the idea took on a sudden, unexpected life of its own.

Recalls Carrière: "What was extremely interesting for me was the idea that we might have a film about the life of painting that would be made by a painter."

In that afternoon at the museum, Schnabel already began to intuit the structure of the film he wanted to make. "When you stand in front of a particular work, each one tells you something. But after you look at 30 paintings, the experience becomes something more. It becomes an accumulation of all those different feelings put together," he describes. "That's the effect I wanted to aim at with the film, to make the structure such that as each event you see happening to Vincent aggregates, it feels as if this entire period of his life is happening to you in a moment."

With that spark, Schnabel and Carrière began to see what might evolve. Says Carrière, "We started writing together and reading a lot, but the idea was never to make a biography or to answer the usual questions. What was interesting to us is that Van Gogh in the last years of his life was totally aware of the fact that he had a new vision of the world, that he was no longer painting the same way as other painters. He was bringing a new way of seeing to people, and that way of seeing is what we wanted to show in the film

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Louise Kugelberg: "If you look at Van Gogh's paintings and drawings you see a view of someone who is far away from society but in the middle of nature. We needed to take his walk and follow his physically demanding path, in order to see what he saw. Silence is as important as dialogue, landscape as much as portraiture. To make this film we went to all the actual places Van Gogh worked and lived in his last two years—Arles, the asylum in Saint-Remy, Auvers-Sur-Oise. It's told mainly in the first person; hopefully, you have a chance to live a little inside this man, instead of watching from afar."

As the filming continued, Kugelberg (an interior designer known for her work combining historic renovations with modern art) began to play a significant role in the every aspect of the physical making of the movie. Thus began a three-way collaboration. Schnabel: "She brought an affinity for the natural world that came to infuse both the screenplay and the production with Van Gogh's deep communion with nature."

Kugelberg: "As we wrote, we started to go out in nature more and more—and I think Julian discovered that when you walk, you see things differently. Vincent was somebody who spent a lot of time in the forest walking very long distances—so understanding that experience, and how arduous it was, was an important bond for us to share with the viewer. As you keep walking you get pushed a little further and further, until you can see past what you thought you could see, and maybe even see what he saw." Kugelberg notes that eternity is something that was on Schnabel's mind in thinking about Van Gogh.

Schnabel: "We all have a terminal case of life. Painting is a practice that in some ways addresses death, because it is related to life yet different from the rest of life, so it gives you access to this other place. Art can transgress death. In the film, Vincent's audience is not born yet, but that doesn't stop him from doing what he was compelled to do. When you see him out in that field smiling while pouring dirt on his face, he is not a poor man. He is a man who feels he is in the right place at the right time, in complete connection with being alive."

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Producer Jon Kilik, who has collaborated with Schnabel since his first film Basquiat, says it is always an organic and fluid process making a movie with Julian. "There's a line in the film where Vincent says he

doesn't invent what he paints. He says 'I find it already in nature, I just have to free it.' That is definitely a process that occurs when Julian is making his paintings, and it also happens with his films. He is not so much trying to capture the stories of painters, writers, poets and musicians as allowing their stories to flow through his unique point of view."

"The film is a portrait of anybody who has ever sat down to create something, whether you're a painter or not." Kilik concludes.

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To pull this ambitious concept off, the production set up an unusual painting workshop led by a French painter Edith Baudrand.

For example, Baudrand did an initial painting of Dafoe as Van Gogh, then Schnabel painted over it. Says Baudrand of watching Schnabel at work: "Each painter is very different, and Julian is really free when he paints and makes Van Gogh's vision his own. My work was to replicate or create a work of art in the manner of Van Gogh, but Julian goes further, developing his experimental dimension of art with greater freedom so his portraits and paintings are very alive. I think it's very interesting to see the two dimensions combined."

Schnabel had developed a vision for the film's design before shooting began, but once the crew was on location, he was also responding instinctively to the places where the production shot, including Arles, the asylum at St. Remy, Auvers-Sur-Oise and the Louvre Museum's Grand Gallery. He assembled a highly creative crew, led by director of photography Benoît Delhomme (who is also a painter and known for such films as The Theory of Everything, A Most Wanted Man and The Scent of Green Papaya), production designer Stéphane Cressend (art director on Dunkirk) and costume designer Karen Muller- Serreau (Amour, Venus in Fur).

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For Delhomme, from the minute he heard about the project, he was ready to do anything to be a part of it. "I immediately thought: I want to shoot this—for Julian, for Van Gogh, for Willem who I met on the shoot of The Most Wanted Man, and because I have been painting secretly for the last 20 years between film shoots. I thought it was a chance to combine everything I love to do: filming and painting."

He recalls the unconventional way he was hired, after Schnabel invited him to Montauk to talk about the film. "Julian asked me to read the script's dialogue in French to him," Delhomme recalls. "I was petrified but I did it and enjoyed saying the lines. Julian can give you a lot of strength. He could ask me to shoot on the edge of a cliff and I would do it forgetting I have vertigo. The next evening, I was in my room and received a text from him. It said 'Hi Ben, I am painting now.' So I took my camera and ran to his open-air studio. It was magic hour and there was Julian in white pajamas working on the giant paintings for his San Francisco exhibition. He was using an 18 foot-long stick with a brush at the end of it. Without asking I immediately started to film. I was worried I might disturb his concentration so I tried to be invisible like when I shoot actors doing a monologue. I shot non-stop until it was so dark he could not paint anymore. I spent a part of the night editing my film and showed it to Julian at breakfast. Right after I that I heard Julian call producer Jon Kilik to say, 'Benoît is the DP now.'"

Some of Delhomme's first shots were done alone in a Scottish wheat field. "Julian thought we may need to have some wheat field shots for the end of the movie so we set up a shoot just me and an assistant without Julian. The week before Julian called to tell me to ask the costume designer for a pair of Vincent's pants and shoes. He said, 'I would like you to wear them and shoot yourself walking in the fields as if you were Van Gogh.

Maybe you can wear his straw hat too and shoot your shadow.' So I spent three days dressed as Van Gogh in wheat fields. There was no better way to get into Vincent's head and no better way to prep myself to shoot this movie: with the top part of my body as Benoit Delhomme and the bottom part as Vincent."

Throughout, Delhomme gathered inspiration from Van Gogh's letters. "I was inspired by his thoughts on making images and the responsibility of the artist to the world," he says. "There were phrases I took as mantras: 'let your light shine before men is I believe the duty of every painter' and 'let our work be so savant that it seems naive and does not show our cleverness.'"

While Schnabel and Delhomme talked about such films as Tarkovsky's Andrei Rublev and Bresson's Diary of a Country Priest—the style of At Eternity's Gate was established in the moment. There was never a shot list and Delhomme notes that a "a full day could be spent shooting in a field of dead sunflowers as if they were human beings." The film was largely shot handheld, using a specially created rig to allow maximum flexibility. "I needed to be able to walk and run with Willem. I needed to be able to put the camera on the ground then suddenly lift it to the sky, to be like a war photographer in the fields," he says. "One day I asked Julian if my camera style was too shaky and he replied, 'Life is shaky, so you will never be too shaky.'"

To enhance the film's first-person POV, Delhomme and Schnabel made the decision to at times use a split diopter on the lens—which creates the vertiginous effect of two different depths of field in one image. "That came from sunglasses I bought at a vintage store that turned out to be bifocals," Schnabel explains. "The bottom of the lens was a different depth of field than the top and I thought, this could be Vincent's perspective. It's a different way to see the scenes in nature."

When Delhomme donned the glasses he saw precisely what Schnabel wanted. "I understood that what he liked is that the glasses could divide the world into two spaces and show the blurred line between these two worlds," he says.

Color itself tells part of the film's story, from the grimy haze of Paris to the fierce light of the South of France to the raw siennas and umbers of the natural world to the experimentations in tint and tone in Van Gogh's paintings. (Gauguin wrote that he and Van Gogh were "constantly at war over the beauty of colors.") Shooting outdoors as much as possible was crucial. Says Schnabel, "When Vincent is communing with nature, he's a rich man and it doesn't matter if he's sold paintings or not. That isn't what he is after. So we had to be out in nature to be with him in that."

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The real locations lent their own atmosphere. Kugelberg recalls shooting at Saint-Paul de Mausole, the monastery turned asylum where Van Gogh spent some months, which remains a psychiatric hospital today. "It was amazing to have the chance to be in Vincent's room, to see where he sat looking at the garden outside," she says. "It contributed something very true to the movie."

Production designer Cressend learned early on that the authentic locations were just a starting point for Schnabel. "There are lots of sources for Van Gogh, maybe too many sources," Cressend comments. "You have the letters, the paintings, the drawings, the many, many books. But at our first meeting, Julian said 'If you say that Van Gogh had a broken nail on the left hand, there will be ten people to tell you it was on the right hand. So, what is really important is not to get it right but to make a good movie.'"

That became the mantra of the crew. For example, in bringing back to life the yellow house where Van Gogh lived in Arles, Cressend says, "I kept telling the crew that we are not making a documentary. There were more important things to show about the house than how it was in reality. We created something different because we wanted it to feel like a shelter where Vincent welcomes Gauguin and where something is going to happen between them."

Often, Schnabel and Kugelberg would further transform Cressend's sets, changing up the dressings and paintings on the walls instinctively. Still, famous touches remain— including a wall emblazoned with a sentence Gauguin claimed (apocryphally or not) that Van Gogh once scrawled in chalk: "Je suis Saint Esprit Je suis sain d'esprit" or "I am the holy spirit and I am sound of spirit."

Another resonant scene occurs in the Grand Gallery of the Louvre Museum, as Van Gogh takes in the work of his predecessors Delacroix, Veronese, and Frans Hals. "They are speaking to Van Gogh as he speaks to painters today," says Schnabel. "There is something there about how artists communicate beyond the grave."

Comments Laurence des Cars of the sequence in the Louvre, "In this scene, the question of legacy, of finding one's own singular place in the history of painting is particularly crucial."

As filming progressed, Schnabel and Kugelberg began editing on the fly, shaping and reshaping the film even as it was coming to life. "We edited the movie wherever we went," explains Kugelberg. "We never stopped and in that way, it was like painting. We were painting the film's world and it was impossible to leave that world while we were in it."

Schnabel also brought in the music of Tatiana Lisovskaya, a Ukrainian musician who plays violin but here creates the film's emotionally resonant, piano-based score. "Tatiana created original music that takes you into the sound in Van Gogh's head," summarizes Schnabel.

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