

Guillaume Maidatchevsky about AÏLO – A LAPLAND ODDYSSEY

“The movie is my answer to a taxi driver”

AÏLO – A LAPLAND ODDYSSEY follows a young reindeer on his first steps into an icy world, above the Arctic Circle. It takes Aïlo only five minutes to get on his feet, in the next five minutes he learns to walk, and then later to swim and run through the snow. All this, we observe at close range, on a journey through a grandiose terrain, that Aïlo shares with other wild animals. Some of them are hilariously funny, and all of them are fascinating.

We meet Guillaume Maidatchevsky at the Zlin Festival, immediately after his screening. “The audience laughed a lot. After spending 200 days outdoors in Lapland filming in -40°C, hearing that laughter is an amazing reward!”

Whenever switching on Discovery Channel, you'll always come across someone hunting sharks or saving lions. This film is about an animal that might easily go unnoticed.

Guillaume Maidatchevsky: Despite all the wildlife documentaries I made about lions and elephants, one day my children told me: “You’ve never made

a film about Santa’s reindeer!” Indeed, I realised my children are much better informed about the animals of the savannah than about European fauna. AÏLO was somehow made by order of my kids!

Were they also the reason why you choose a narrative format?

Maidatchevsky: I made many wildlife documentaries before, but with this one I wanted to reach out to a new audience. There is a bunch of loyal wildlife fans watching every story about the animal kingdom. But using dramaturgy and adding an emotional layer, I might be able to create awareness among people who are less familiar with the genre. AÏLO is a tale, which allows me more freedom and empathy. This film has a story. The audience is not with “the reindeer”, they are with Aïlo. I am interested in the individual, more than in the species.

You approached every animal in the film as an individual?

Maidatchevsky: We were always shooting with one of the animals



as our point of view. Each morning I spoke to my small crew: “*Today we are a wolverine, we will move and think like a wolverine. The camera will be the wolverine’s eyes.*”

How can you write a script that is depending upon the unpredictable ways of nature?

Maidatchevsky: Every scene was somehow planned in an 80-pages long script. You should see that script as a straight line, from which deviations can occur. For example, you know a female animal will give birth, but you can’t predict exactly how and when. Filming an animal is like filming a child, you do not hold it back, you simply need to be patient.

It was a deliberate choice to film a prey instead of a hunter?

Maidatchevsky: Filming lions is boring. You always know how the story ends - he’ll make the kill, he’s the king. That’s it. From a dramatic point of view, prey are much more interesting, they always need to look over their shoulders and be afraid.

Aïlo enters the stage as an anti-hero. His mother is considering to leave the calf right after she gave birth.

Maidatchevsky: Aïlo takes a rather bad start in life. But troublesome characters often are the most interesting. For 10 days we were following a group of pregnant females, hoping to film one of them giving birth. All of



them were extra cautious, except one that would follow us everywhere. One day she left the herd and gave birth to a calf, five metres away from us. And then... she left. What we witnessed was the struggle between survival instinct and motherhood. These were honest emotions. Animals don't lie.

It seems like both mother and son trusted you completely.

Maidatchevsky: The moment Aïlo opened his eyes he saw his mother, he saw the herd... and he saw us. For him we were a part of the group. His mother passed on her confidence to him. Prey animals in general are anxious, but he did not care at all, he was curious and relaxed.

Was there a risk you would get too familiar with him?

Maidatchevsky: The main rule is: never touch the animal! I could watch him from very close, but touching him would be like breaking a barrier. He is a wild animal.

Where exactly was the film shot?

Maidatchevsky: Both in Norway and Finland. Norway is when you see the mountains, Finland is when you see flat land and forests. During their migration, reindeer are crossing the frontier. We followed their track on

snow scooters, but in the vicinity of the set we used skis. We had to be discreet.

Not to wake up the bears?

Maidatchevsky: We had to be really careful. Our camouflage tent had a six metres high chimney to drain off the human smell, so it wouldn't be picked up by bears.

There's other characters more eccentric than bears. Like the wolverine...

Maidatchevsky: Initially we planned him as a modest side character. A wolverine is a predator, a dangerous sniper. With a pack of ten wolves standing around a carcass, when the wolverine arrives, he'll chase them all away. But when this ultimate bad guy spots a female specimen, he goes berserk, rolling over and acting silly. Who has ever seen that before? Just like that stoat, going crazy. It was almost impossible to catch him on film, as he was moving so fast, like Scrat from the ICE AGE films.

I heard you referring to that movie more often.

Maidatchevsky: ICE AGE is interesting in its depiction of nature's cuties versus bad predators. After all, nature isn't that cute. Juxtaposing 'the sweet



Director Guillaume Maidatchevsky

reindeer' and 'the big bad wolf' would be a lie. For all the so called 'bad guys' in AïLO, there is room for the elegance to empathise with them.

The environmental debate is somehow inherent to this film. You depict deforestation machines as some sort of evil predators.

Maidatchevsky: The environmental discourse is becoming sterile, as we're hearing it every day. I belong to the Miyazaki school: "Amazing the audience, is like encouraging them to protect." Awareness might come if children will bond with Aïlo. Only then they might realise: What a pity if all this would disappear. A Finnish taxi driver asked me: "Why a film about a reindeer? Reindeer are stupid!" Consider this movie an answer to that taxi

driver.

What is your next project?

Maidatchevsky: I am considering two new projects. One is a fictional story against poaching, set in South Africa. By including human protagonists in a film about wildlife, I will no longer put my entire faith in the paws of unpredictable animals. And I'm planning another 'Northern documentary' about arctic foxes. The working title is KINA & UK. Shot in Canada and Alaska, this film will speak even more about climate change, because this has a huge impact on the lives of arctic foxes.

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Gert Hermans