



## STOP MOTION: CELEBRATING HANDMADE ANIMATION ON THE BIG SCREEN

# My Life as a Courgette

### Manipulation

**Director:** Daniel Greaves  
**Production Company:** Tandem Films  
**Animator:** Daniel Greaves  
**Model Animation:** Sean Sewter  
**Inbetweens:** Tom Beggs,  
Barry Hutchinson, Chris Clarke  
**Editor:** Rod Howick  
**Sound:** Russell Pay, Mike Hackman  
UK 1991  
7 mins  
Digital

### My Life as a Courgette (Ma vie de courgette)

**A film by:** Claude Barras  
**©:** Rita Productions, BSP, Gébéka, KNM,  
France 3 Cinéma, Rhône-Alpes Cinéma,  
Hélium Films  
**In coproduction with:** Radio Télévision  
Suisse, SRG SSR, Rhône-Alpes Cinéma,  
France 3 Cinéma, Hélium Films  
**With the participation of:** Office Fédéral de  
la Culture/Swiss Federal Office of Culture,  
Cinéforum  
**And the support of:** Loterie Romande  
**With the participation of:** Eurimages,  
Canal+, France Télévisions, Ciné+, Centre  
National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée,  
Nouvelles technologies en production,  
Indie Sales Company, Indie Invest,  
Suissimage, Région Rhône-Alpes,  
Département de la Charente, La Région  
Poitou-Charentes  
**Production Companies:** Rita Productions,  
Blue Spirit Productions, Gébéka, KNM  
**In coproduction with:** RTS Radio Télévision  
Suisse, SRG SSR, France 3 Cinéma,  
Rhône-Alpes Cinéma, Hélium Films  
**With the participation of:**  
France Télévisions Distribution  
**Developed with the support of:**  
Producers Pooling Program  
**With the support of:** Stage Pool,  
Fondation Ernst Göhner, Département de  
la Charente, La Région Poitou-Charentes  
**In partnership with:** CNC  
**Within the framework of:**  
Pôle image Magelis  
**Presented by:** Rita Productions, Blue Spirit  
Productions, Gébéka Films, KNM  
**Produced by:** Max Karli, Pauline Gygax,  
Armelle Glorennec, Marc Bonny,  
Kate Merkt, Michel Merkt, Eric Jacquot  
**Production Manager:** Théo Ciret  
**1st Assistant Director:** Marianne Chazelas  
**Casting Director:** Marie-Eve Hildbrand  
**English Casting:** Stephanie Sheh,  
Michael Sinterniklaas  
**Screenplay:** Céline Sciamma  
**Collaborator on the Screenplay:** Claude  
Barras, Morgan Navarro, Germano Zullo  
**English Script Adaptation:**  
Christian La Monte, Michael Sinterniklaas  
**Based on the novel:** Autobiographie d'une  
courgette by: Gilles Paris  
**Director of Photography:** David Toutevoix  
**Camera Operators:** Aurélie Sprenger,  
Maxime Fossier, Chloé-Anne Le Grand  
**Digital Visual Effects Supervisor:**  
Fabrice Faivre  
**Animation Director:** Kim Keukeleire  
**Editing/Chief Editor:** Valentin Rotelli

A stop-motion family animation, indebted to Ken Loach, with the curious title *My Life as a Courgette*: that's already quite a billing to live up to, but Swiss director Claude Barras's first feature completely nails it. Its story of an artistically inclined young boy Icare – nicknamed 'Courgette' – who accidentally kills his alcoholic mother and is placed in a home for abandoned and/or abused kids, is adapted from an untranslated French novel by Gilles Paris, but its origins, in fact, lie much deeper in Barras's past. 'When I was a kid, there was one child I was quite close to who had severe family difficulties. I promised myself, because I wasn't able to help or defend him at the time, that I would do something in that direction one day. It was 40 years later while making this film that I suddenly remembered my promise; so it turned out I was finally following that path after all.'

Honouring his friend's tribulations clearly meant standing firm against sentimentality, and *My Life as a Courgette* doesn't sidestep the brutalities and losses the children in the home have suffered. One girl, Alice, sexually abused by her father, has nightmares every night and starts banging cutlery repeatedly at the first sign of stress. Another girl, Camille, to whom Courgette takes a shine, saw her father kill her mother, then kill himself. A boy Jujube was force-fed toothpaste and told it would be good for his health, a habit he can't now break. And so on and so on. This terrible litany is related to Courgette by the equally traumatised Simon, self-appointed leader of the pack and a bully (at least at first), who encapsulates their plight thus: 'We're all the same – there's no one left to love us.'

The mix of naturalistic voices, *mise en scène* and strong 'social' subject matter, with the vivid anti-naturalist character design – large eyes, red noses, long arms – somehow works, coheres magically. Barras had been making animated shorts for some time, working through similar themes, before managing to get *Courgette* made. It took ten years in all; six working with a colleague who finally departed for other projects, then four more on his own once a script had been written by French writer-director Céline Sciamma, best known to UK audiences for *Water Lilies* (2007), *Tomboy* (2011) and *Girlhood* (2014).

Barras and Sciamma's fortuitous alliance was brought about by smart producers who recognised that two like-minded talents operating in similar terrain, around youth and marginality, might just strike sparks off each other. And so it proved. Sciamma, shown the figures Barras had created, was utterly seduced. 'We felt like we knew each other,' she says. 'Both of us take children characters very seriously, and we connect on wanting to talk to children about political subjects, about harsh matters which are true to life.'

There were three firsts on this project for Sciamma, although you wouldn't guess it. She'd never adapted a book, written a kids' film or scripted an animation. How does writing for animation differ from live action? 'I was probably naive when I wrote the film – and, in fact, I was asked not to write it as an animation film – but now I've done it I know it's different for one big reason. When you write for live action, then along come the actors and maybe they do some improvisation, and ultimately the film can be found in the editing room. But with animation there's effectively no editing. That means there is a very big responsibility on the script. So you have to be very accurate, because it will be so true to what you've written.'

The script she turned in is delicate yet incisive, skilfully pitched at a young child's level of articulacy. 'I wanted to make it a tender film about dark matters,' Sciamma says. 'I didn't want to make it kid-compatible by making it sweet, but by making it true to what we wanted to tell. We wanted the story to be a big mix of emotions, a big grey zone which is more true to what it feels to be a child; because children are able to feel very strong emotions, and at the same time.'

Like Barras, she cites Loach as an influence, but also credits the Dardennes, with whom she shares an ability to write dialogue that feels both honest and direct. 'It freed me in a way writing for kids, because you make it more simple, more primal,' she says. 'It's about looking the emotion in the eye.' It should also be said that the film has a lot of humour, and moments of joy; they're kids after all, irrepressible. But even those moments are complicated, undercut, inevitably given their histories. 'Some of the lines we laugh at, but they're also heartbreaking in their frankness. And the film relies a lot on that truth-telling for the humour, and also the political parts.'

That's the main link, of course, with Loach and the Dardennes: concern for the fates of the damaged and vulnerable. The film exudes an understated radicalism, which manifests itself partly in a series of inverted expectations. When Courgette arrives at the home early on, I was braced for some horrific authority figure, a painful institutional critique. Not so. Touchingly, the home is a sanctuary, staffed by dedicated, caring people. 'We were concerned to pay a tribute

Film Editor: Claude Barras  
 Production Designer: Ludovic Chemarin  
 Head of Puppet Production:  
 Grégory Beaussart  
 Costume Designer: Atelier Gran'cri  
 Costume Designer (at Atelier Gran'cri):  
 Christel Grandchamp  
 Costume Designer: Atelier Nolita  
 Costume Designer (at Atelier Nolita):  
 Vanessa Riera  
 Music/Original Music: Sophie Hunger  
 Sound Design: Denis Séchaud  
 Sound Recordist: Denis Séchaud  
 English Re-recording Mixer:  
 Gary J. Coppola  
 Sound Mixer: Denis Séchaud  
 Sound Mixing: Denis Séchaud  
 Sound Editors: Benjamin Benoit,  
 Jérôme Vittoz  
 Voice Directing: Marie-Eve Hildbrand  
 Voice Cast:  
 Gaspard Schlatter (*Icare*, 'Courgette')  
 Sixtine Murat (*Camille*)  
 Paulin Jaccoud (*Simon*)  
 Michel Vuillermoz (*Raymond*)  
 Raul Ribera (*Ahmed*)  
 Estelle Hennard (*Alice*)  
 Elliot Sanchez (*Jujube*)  
 Lou Wick (*Beatrice*)  
 Brigitte Rosset (*Aunt Ida*)  
 Natacha Varga-Koutchoumov  
 (*Courgette's mother*)  
 Monica Budde (*Madame Papineau*)  
 Adrien Barazzone (*Monsieur Paul*)  
 Véronique Montel (*Rosy*)  
 Romane Cretegny (*little girl*)  
 Evelyne Bouvier (*little girl's mum*)  
 Léonard Geneux (*boy*)  
 Anne-Laure Brasey (*fairground stallholder*)  
 Jean-Claude Issenmann (*judge*)  
 Iannis Jaccoud (*Simon – additional voices*)  
 Switzerland-France 2016  
 67 mins  
 Digital

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to social workers – that's Claude's Ken Loach side,' Sciamma tells me. 'He even stayed in a home for several weeks. We showed the film to people who do this job, and they were like, "Yeah, that's how we dream it goes if it goes well".' Even the policeman character is a beacon, his compassion quietly exerting itself as a force for good in the children's lives.

Unusually too for a family animation, the film invites us to linger. Ideas and emotions are given time to register and settle, subtly imprint themselves. 'The rhythm is slow and that's not the fashion regarding kids' films,' Sciamma suggests. 'A kid today has to go fast – well they say she has to – and we are doing the opposite, with a lot of long takes, which is pretty rare. And that is also what gives it this strong visual signature. You're staying in the spaces, enjoying the colours – it's all about the rhythm of these characters. The action might be: are they going to hold hands?'

Another inversion is the film's mode of address. Barras and Sciamma were adamant the film should appeal to children and adults, but acknowledged it would be hard to achieve. What it meant in practice was a disavowal of irony, of the 'different levels of comprehension' model, which supplies a cute story for kids alongside concealed stuff and winks for the adults. That knowingness would have grated with the material and their political sensibilities. 'There are things your kid might not get regarding child abuse, but you're watching the same film, it's not hidden,' says Sciamma. 'The Q&As we did were amazing, parents saying that for the first time after a film they could actually speak with their kids about the story and their emotions, because they'd been experiencing them together.'

This principle of mutuality is embedded in the narrative too; it's the classic individual's journey but very much rooted in the formation of a collective. If anything, Simon the bully's emotional journey is more pronounced and precisely delineated than Courgette's; the scene near the end where he recognises and accepts his own destiny is beautifully inscribed. The film conveys an amalgam of political idealism and clear-eyed fatalism, but the latter mitigated, as Sciamma explains. 'These kids have very tragic destinies, but I wanted to give perspective, not just stick to the little-orphan loneliness template. Instead I wanted to convey a collective feeling of loneliness, and thus not make the movie too fairytale-like.' A perfect example is the scene in which all the kids avidly watch a mother pick up her son and dust him down after he takes a tumble. It holds on all their expressions, before a perfectly judged cut takes us to a snowy night-time landscape. It's just great.

In the end it feels as if the film could only have been done as animation; it's impossible to imagine that scene, and various others, done 'for real'. The figures' big eyes, for example: how do they manage to convey curiosity, openness, ineffable sadness, pain, innocence, longing and more, all at the same time? That's the mystery. The years spent making the film, the love that's gone into it, shows in the sensitivity to even the tiniest gesture. Barras reveals the processes that went into achieving such emotional exactitude: 'What we were after was that even if you shoot from a wide angle, you still see the big eyes and therefore the emotions. So the work was finding how to make a head as big as possible so that it would still be balanced, so that the hands could hide the eyes at some moments, but wouldn't touch the floor when hanging down. We had to find this extremity – but it had to still be graceful.' Graceful is absolutely right, and applies to every aspect here; the canon of animated films for children and about children must surely admit a newcomer.

Kieron Corless, *Sight and Sound*, June 2017

#### Manipulation

Right from animation's earliest days, cartoon characters have resented the arbitrary power wielded by their creators. In the silent era, Felix the Cat would often shake his fist indignantly into camera. Chuck Jones' Duck Amuck took the convention to surrealist heights, with a protesting Daffy Duck subjected to mounting ignominy by the artist (finally revealed as Jones' surrogate, Bugs Bunny). In *Manipulation*, Daniel Greaves sets out the sadism of the relationship at its starkest: when it was shown at Cinanima, animators watching it were wincing in self-recognition.

True, it also celebrates the resilience of cartoon characters in surviving any amount of violence unscathed, but even the upbeat ending is subverted as, over the final credits, we hear the returning footsteps of the ogre-animator. The omnipotent white-gloved hands suggest a nod to Jirí Trnka's bitter parable of Stalinism, *The Hand*, and it's not hard to read the film in terms of political (or existential) allegory. But thanks to Greaves' fluid technique and inventive use of basic resources, *Manipulation* makes compulsive viewing on any level. Its impact is enhanced by a heightened, raw-nerve soundtrack that makes the mere tearing of paper sound like an act of calculated cruelty.

Philip Kemp, *Sight and Sound*, May 1992