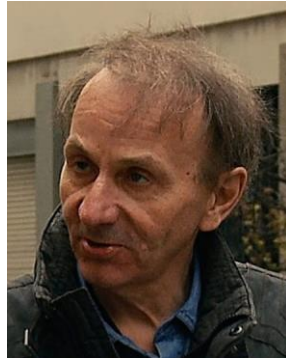


KINO LORBER

presents

THE KIDNAPPING OF MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ A FILM BY GUILLAUME NICLOUX



Official Selection 2014 Berlin Film Festival

France | 92 minutes | 2014
In French with English Subtitles

www.KidnappingMichel.com

www.KinoLorber.com

Opens March 25, 2015 at Film Forum in New York

A Kino Lorber Release
Kino Lorber, Inc.
333 West 39th St. Suite 503
New York, NY 10018
(212) 629-6880

Publicity Contacts:

Rodrigo Brandão
Rodrigo@Kinolorber.com

Adam Walker
Film Forum
Adam@filmforum.org

KINO LORBER

Synopsis

Michel Houellebecq, possibly the most widely read living French writer, was believed kidnapped on September 16, 2011. But was he really? After a flurry of media reports of his abduction, the story goes cold and Houellebecq, famously reclusive, refuses to set the record straight. Now he goes one step further by starring as himself in a film that purports to tell the tale.

With a nod to O. Henry's short story, *The Ransom of Red Chief*, the film explores the dramatic territory where the personae of criminal and victim are remade in unexpected and surprisingly amusing ways.

- Karen Cooper, Director, Film Forum

“An inspired comic thriller... [The film captures] some of his signature tone of sour, absurd, deadpan humor... Soon he is charming his kidnappers, who respect his intellectual reputation even when he barrages them with diva-ish demands for fine wines and the services of a local prostitute... Houellebecq plays himself convincingly – indeed he appears genuinely drunk in some scenes.” – Stephen Dalton, *The Hollywood Reporter*

Director's Statement by Guillaume Nicloux

September 16, 2011. TV news networks, newspapers, blogs, websites and radio stations are all reporting on one story: star-author Michel Houellebecq, winner of the prestigious Prix Goncourt in 2010, has been abducted. Some members of the media go so far as to suggest that Al-Qaeda may be involved. For the next few days the news ripples through literary circles, feeding intense buzz and speculation.

Who really is Michel Houellebecq? A good writer? A great author? Even more than that? The most widely read living French writer in the world? The most hated and the most respected one? Does he deserve to be classified among those celebrated enfants terribles of our national prose, right there next to Artaud, Céline, Genêt or Gracq?

If we agree that, ever since the theoretical work of Christian Metz, all documentary is a fiction, then *The Kidnapping of Michel Houellebecq* is a portrait covered up as a funny criminal chronicle. A *mise en abyme* using the storytelling and the news item as a starting point.

His kidnapping is the launching pad for introspection. An experiment wherein the actual writer becomes mixed up with the fictional writer, literally peeling off all of his various skins. An attempt to strip himself bare, using lies as a potential truth.

KINO LORBER

Director's Statement by Guillaume Nicloux

– Continued –

Through the comedy of the film, we're able to compare and contrast various points of view: Michel's world, the world of his kidnappers and the hosts' point of view. As such, the film tackles a plethora of topics, such as artistic creation, fear, Poland, the lottery, reincarnation, European integration, Nietzsche, weapons, Viagra, architecture, and mixed martial arts – among others.

Beyond this, I hope to reveal a writer who is funny, sensitive, endowed with a caustic wit, beset by doubt, naïve, unkind, anxious, intelligent, and in love. The kind of man we don't expect to meet.

Along with a final surprise: *The Kidnapping of Michel Houellebecq* may also be the portrait of a man who never aspired to be a writer, but rather hoped to become a racecar driver.

KINO LORBER

Credits

Cast

Michel Houellebecq..... as himself
Luc Schwarz.....Luc
Mathieu Nicourt.....Mathieu
Maxime Lefrancois.....Max
Francoise Lebrun.....Francoise
Ginette Suchotzky.....Ginette
Andre Suchotzky.....Dede
Marie Bourjala.....Fatima
Francois Samuelson.....François

Crew

Director and Script.....Guillaume Nicloux
Producers.....Sylvie Pialat and Benoît Quainon
Cinematography.....Christophe Offenstein
Film Editing.....Guy Lecorne
Production Design.....Bénédicte Lepère and Olivier Radot
Costume Design..... Anaïs Romand
Makeup Artist..... Dorothee Cohen
Artistic Adviser.....Olivier Radot
1st AD.....Jules Cesar Brechet
Sound.....Oliver Do-Huu
Line Producer.....Laziz Belkai
Coproduction.....Arte France, les Films du Worso, Chic Films with the
participation of CNC, Le Pacte, Ciné + and Cinefeel with the support of
Procirep-société des producteurs.

KINO LORBER

Michel Houellebecq: 'T'd have been safer taking LSD'

The Guardian (UK)

By Andrew Pulver – February 19, 2014

Michel Houellebecq caused a storm when he went missing in 2011. The great literary provocateur tells Andrew Pulver why he has made a film about those three days called *The Kidnapping of Michel Houellebecq*

Here's an exclusive from the Berlin film festival: Michel Houellebecq smokes e-cigarettes. I spotted France's bad-boy filmmaker and novelist taking a furtive puff while talking about his latest big-screen venture – one titled, with typical lack of self-effacement, *The Kidnapping of Michel Houellebecq*. Naturally, he plays the lead.

What Houellebecq smokes would not normally be of huge interest, except he spends the whole of this new film either puffing on a cigarette, trying to light one, or whining to his captors to give him a lighter. When we finally talk, it turns out that Houellebecq is neither trying to quit, nor is he overly worried about lung cancer or emphysema. It's just that the sprinklers in the building are triggered by cigarette smoke. If he lit up for real, we'd all get drenched.

So let's be thankful for small mercies: the opportunity to hear what Houellebecq has to say isn't one to pass up. Maybe he'll extol the virtues of high-class prostitutes, or be horrible about Arabs, or say how much he hates hippies. It wouldn't be the first time. Since the publication of his first novel, 1994's *Extension du Domaine de la Lutte* (aka *Whatever*), Houellebecq has been the posterboy for literary provocation, his books and his interviews apparently part of a complicated revenge strategy on a world that has ignored and oppressed him and his kind: the ugly, the boring, the ineffectual. These days, of course, Houellebecq is a literary titan, his name significant enough to anchor an entire film title all on its own.

"If I'm being honest," says Houellebecq, "I thought making the film would be interesting because it was a new experience. That might be a very selfish reason, but it was the main one. And I have not been disappointed." This is not too surprising: rarely has a film given itself over so completely to allowing its subject (and its real-life subject at that) to define and embody every detail. To some, it will be received as a cinematic oddity, a vanity project; to others, a postmodern metafiction of the most high-minded kind. All this from an attempt to fill in the details of a missing few days in Houellebecq's life in 2011, when he failed to turn up for a Netherlands book tour.

The disappearance lasted only three days, and Houellebecq afterwards claimed he'd simply forgotten about the tour. But the ensuing media tizzy, with some even claiming it was the work of international terrorists, sparked an idea in the mind of Guillaume Nicloux, a film-maker of some repute in France (his last film, *The Nun*, starred Isabelle Huppert). Having persuaded Houellebecq to appear in his 2012 TV movie

KINO LORBER

The Gordji Affair, about a 1980s diplomatic scandal, Nicloux says he found him “very stimulating and interesting.”

The relationship the pair struck up produced enough momentum for this second collaboration. In *The Kidnapping*, Houellebecq's busy schedule of smoking, complaining and street-wandering is rudely interrupted by three heavies, who stuff him into a large tin box and take him home to their parents' house, where he is forced to sleep in a bedroom clearly occupied until recently by a small girl. It becomes clear that things have not been thought through all that thoroughly when they have difficulty finding anyone to pay a ransom. So the heavies are – briefly – stuck with him.

Dryly funny, introspective and unashamedly admiring of its lead, the film manages something that many would have assumed impossible: it shows Houellebecq to be quite nice – in stark contrast to his scratchy, irritating public persona. Except for the bit where he readily has paid-for sex with a penniless local girl (named, with a very Houellebecquesque ethnic charge, Fatima).

The writer also seems to have been comfortable with the strange non-acting nature of the acting job required from him. "It's true, I often totally forgot we were being filmed," he says. "There was one scene, for example, where I discussed the nature of writing with one of the kidnapppers, who was also a martial-arts free fighter. We were both in front of the camera and we were both totally sincere. I was genuinely surprised when he told me he was a fighter. And he was surprised I wrote novels."

Nicloux adds: "For me, the essential thing is that all the people in the film are themselves: not just Michel, but the kidnapppers and the others." The kidnapppers aren't actually kidnapppers in real life, though; they're just sort of heavies, men of action, outcasts. "They find their own words, use language that shows who they are. Everything is both true and fake. I could have made a documentary – but that doesn't mean it would be any truer."

All of which is a rather fancy way of saying that Nicloux made the whole thing up: the kidnapping of Michel Houellebecq didn't happen. No al-Qaida, no ransom note, nothing. Just cigarettes. In fact, Nicloux confesses, it even plagiarises one of his own films: 2007's *The Key*, which saw Guillaume Canet (the French heart-throb in *The Beach*) kidnapped by three heavies. Actually, it's the same three heavies. Houellebecq firmly refutes any suggestion that he was responsible for the script. "We talked a lot, Guillaume and myself, and sometimes he took notes. He was interested in my suggestions, but he decided not to include many other things."

There is one scene that turns out to have been his idea, though – one in which he drives like a maniac. "I mentioned to Guillaume I'd like to drive at 300 kilometres per hour. He wrote that down, and I thought, 'Shit, I regret that.' But in the end I got up to 280, which is quite close. It would have been safer if I'd said I'd like to try LSD."

It soon becomes apparent that Houellebecq isn't really interested in talking about the film

KINO LORBER

at all. That's Nicloux's job. Houellebecq – spindly, unkempt and defiantly uninterested in his personal appearance – restricts himself to gnomish utterances and sly drags on his e-cigarette.

He smiles coyly as Nicloux somehow finds yet more to say about his search for onscreen authenticity: how he found one actor after his casting director visited a prison; what fellow director Robert Bresson had to say about this ("you never find something if you look for it"); and what famed cinematographer Raoul Coutard told him at the outset of his career ("You cannot make a good film out of a bad script. But it is possible to do the opposite.")

Houellebecq does, however, become animated when we discuss the film's relationship to his literary work. Suddenly he uncoils and becomes attentive. His last novel, *The Map and the Territory*, featured the savage murder of a character called, yes, Michel Houellebecq. Is it too much of a stretch to suppose he is embarking on an extended bout of self-reference? He launches into something close to a monologue: "Hmmm. I don't think it's so much that. It's more that when I am trying to write, when I find a character, then I feel I'm OK. The themes I develop in *The Map and the Territory* are about culture in relation to art, the possibility of expressing through art, especially writing. It doesn't happen very often that a writer chooses himself as a main character. It is neither more difficult nor easier. It's just one of the resources you have available to you."

The odd thing is that Houellebecq actually seems very concerned with cinema: inferences and hints suggest it would have been his preferred medium. He has a couple of writing and directing credits for short films made in the late 70s and early 80s, when he was an agronomy student in Paris, well before his literary life took off. Among the tidbits supplied when his mother Lucie Ceccaldi started speaking to the press in 2008 was her claim that, in the early 1990s before his success with *Whatever*, Houellebecq was bugging her for money to pay for his film projects.

Later, after becoming a bona fide celebrity, Houellebecq got to direct his own feature, an adaptation of his own 2005 sci-fi novel *The Possibility of an Island*. It got panned. Tragically, it never made it to the UK, which meant we never did get to see if it really was as "ridiculous" and "catastrophic" as the critics said. One noted its "exemplary tedium".

In the end, Houellebecq says he will soldier on, not even distracted by the ongoing frenzy surround François Hollande's love life. "I try to delete his existence from my mind as much as possible." Isn't he interested? "I try not to watch TV or read the news. It's tough. I try to write novels instead."

###