

**KINO LORBER**  
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presents

# MAKALA

A FILM BY EMMANUEL GRAS

France • 2017 • 96mn • Color • 16/9 • Sound 5.1

Winner -- 2017 Grand Prize and  
Golden Eye Special Mention for Best Documentary,  
Cannes International Critics Week

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**A Kino Lorber Release**

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## SYNOPSIS

*Makala* (Swahili for "charcoal") is a powerful testament to one man's commitment to his family, and his endurance in working to provide them with a brighter future. Kasongo, a 28-year-old man living in Congo with his wife and daughters, dreams of purchasing a plot of land on which to build his family a home. He sees his opportunity to earn money by selling charcoal, culled from the ashes of a mighty hardwood tree that he has felled with great strength and baked in an earthen oven. Loading up the bags of charcoal onto the back of his bicycle, Kasongo sets off on a daunting journey – up steep hills and across treacherous roads – to sell the charcoal at market. Featuring stunning cinematography that finds beauty in this tireless labor, *Makala* won the 2017 Grand Prize and Golden Eye Special Mention for Best Documentary at International Critics Week in Cannes.

## LOGLINE

Featuring stunning cinematography, *Makala* (Swahili for "charcoal") is a powerful testament to one man's commitment to his family, and his endurance in working to provide them with a brighter future.



## INTERVIEW WITH EMMANUEL GRAS

### *Where did you shoot Makala?*

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Katanga province in the south of the country, and more precisely around the town of Kolwezi. It's a fairly dry region, with vast open-pit mines. In Swahili, makala means charcoal.

### *Where did the idea for this film come from? Meeting Kabwita Kasongo?*

I had the idea for the film before I met Kabwita. I had done two shoots in the region as a cameraman, and I was struck by the sight of these men and women walking along, carrying loads of every kind. Even deep in the bush, you'd be sure to run into someone carrying something. The most striking image for me, however, was that of people pushing bikes laden with sacks of charcoal. I wondered where they came from, how far they traveled and how much they earned from their journey. Basic questions. How much effort for how much reward? I did some research and wrote up the project. I met Kabwita on a location-scouting trip after I obtained initial funding. I was with a Congolese journalist, Gaston Mushid, who is very well known down there and who made things a lot easier for me. I visited villages around Kolwezi to meet people who made charcoal. I met Kabwita in Walemba and decided very early on that I wanted to make the movie with him. I liked his attitude—reserved but not shy—his look and, above all, his gentle but very alert gaze. It just happens sometimes that you make a connection with certain people, who draw you toward them, and that was the case with him. One year later, I went back and we started filming.

### *Tell us about Kabwita Kasongo.*

Kabwita is 28 and married to Lydie. They have three children: a baby, Brigitte; Séfora who must be 2-3; and Divine, 6, who lives with one of Lydie's sisters in town, as shown in the film. They are Kabwita's only family in his village. His only object of value is his bicycle. Kabwita and Lydie rent their shanty, unlike other inhabitants, who own their homes. They are poor, therefore, but that is true of the immense majority of villagers. We don't see it in the film, but Kabwita made his own tools. He's very hardworking, he has responsibilities, but he also behaves like a young man— he drinks the local brew mukuyu with his friends, and likes to have fun. He has a very strong personality, with a caustic streak. He's a tough cookie beneath the gentle exterior.

### *What does the image of the rat cooked by Lydie tell us about their daily lives?*

The villagers go hunting in the bush, but there is practically no wildlife left in the immediate vicinity. Slash-and-burn results in bushfires pretty much all over, and trees are chopped down to make charcoal. Around Kolwezi, nature has been devastated. Mammals flee, leaving only birds and rodents behind, so rats are hunted for food. It's not at all unusual. Besides that, the staple food is fufu, which is made from maize flour and cassava. The villagers also keep ducks, hens and small pigs, as shown in the film.

### *What did you tell Kabwita before you started shooting?*

I told him I wanted to film his life as a charcoal producer, the whole process, from chopping down the tree to making the sale in town. And that I was looking for someone who worked alone. It was very simple and, as it turned out, enough. Kabwita perfectly understood what I wanted to do, so we

discussed what he would do, the different stages of his work. That provided a fairly precise framework, within which he was able to take on his own role. I think that a documentary, especially one that follows a particular individual, becomes a collaborative process between filmer and filmed. The “character” becomes an actor playing their own role, and the documentary offers them a new way to be themselves. Kabwita occupied that space with astounding poise and ease.

***Clearly Kabwita had a great awareness of the camera.***

Yes. As a protagonist in the filmmaking process, he started to come up with situations that enabled us to tell our story. Nobody was more surprised than me by the way Kabwita and Lydie grasped what we were doing. I should point out that, by having a clear idea of what I wanted, we didn’t harass them in their home with the camera. There was an unspoken agreement that we would not venture too far into their private life. They showed what they wanted, and raised issues that they might discuss with neighbors. We never went into their bedroom, for example.

***What was your influence over the shoot?***

To some extent, much of what Kabwita does was influenced by us. It’s not a fly-on-the-wall documentary that involves simply charting events. If he chops down a tree at a given moment, it’s because we asked him to wait until we were ready. Otherwise, he might have done it earlier or later. As we had a pretty tight schedule, he organized his work to fit everything in. My overall impression, as it says in the credits, is that we were making a film “with” Kabwita and Lydie, not about them. Having said that, when we were filming, we did not intervene, as long as I had the feeling they were just getting with their lives. Afterward, Gaston rapidly translated for me what they had said.

***In the more arduous moments that Kabwita endures with his consignment of charcoal, were you not tempted to help him?***

There was one particularly difficult ascent that might raise the question in some people’s minds, but for me the deal we had was that I stayed with him, there, behind the camera, working with him, trying to find the best angles to show his work, even though it is clearly less grueling physically. The sympathy that I wanted the audience to share comes from us staying together, not from me breaking off to help push if he was in difficulty.

***The pitch for Makala is fairly slender. At what point did you realize you had a film?***

Financial constraints made it impossible for me to go filming in Africa for months, waiting for a subject to crop up. So I developed this principle, derived almost from fiction, of a beginning and end: someone goes from one point to another with a specific aim, and encounters difficulties. It so happens that person has made charcoal and wants to sell it. It’s the first time I introduce such a narrative slant into a documentary project. And then there was the image of a guy relentlessly pushing a bike. I had dreamed up multiple ways of filming his exertions, but I had a major doubt over it being enough to constitute a film, especially as his efforts are extremely repetitive. So I left for Kolwezi with an idea and plenty of doubts. Anything that added to that minimalist basis was a bonus. For example, Kabwita’s cinegenic power. Or discovering the huge tree that I would never have imagined being so large. When I saw it, and we filmed the scene afterward, I sensed that I had something. When you mentally pare down a project to the bare minimum, it enables you to appreciate the splendor of everything that adds to it, however modestly. Conversely, if the initial project is dazzling, it blinds you to everything else. Some level of deprivation induces a more accepting attitude.

***Watching Makala, it's hard not to think of Gus Van Sant's Gerry. Did you have that film in your mind?***

Yes, I thought about it. Gerry made a very strong impression on me, and proved that you could make a film out of very little, particularly connected to walking. There are several shots where neither character speaks, but we hear them both walking and breathing. Those shots captured for me what it is to walk. I simply tried to get across the effort that is involved in pushing a heavily laden bicycle for a long time. I also like the films of Bela Tarr. His camera has a physical presence, always on the move. The opening scene of *The Turin Horse*, with a long tracking shot and the camera revolving around a horse-drawn cart, really impressed me.

***Your film is very materialist, yet opens onto a conceptual dimension.***

What interests me is making another dimension emerge from something concrete—in this case the human's encounter with the world's material reality. It could happen through exertion, through kindness... We exist through our actions in the world. If the stakes are simplified as far as possible, as in *Makala*, the human's efforts to survive emerge very clearly. As a filmmaker, I see human beauty stemming from that and transcending prosaicness. There is beauty, for example, in the skills Kabwita deploys to build the forge.

***You mentioned earlier that you had no intention to be a fly on the wall. What do you look for in a documentary?***

I look for expressiveness, not realism. I don't like the realist aesthetic, in the sense of reproducing reality as truthfully as possible. Often, it entails the neutralization of reality: by attempting to keep things sober, a film conveys no emotion. I want to make reality as expressive as possible by finding a way to bring out what is already there. One of the ways to achieve this is to lock onto a visual element. It also involves the length of shots and the shot breakdown. In *Bovines*, I shot closeups of cuds of grass being chewed by a cow. I held those shots a long time. Long enough for the audience to think, eventually, "Hey, that's odd. That mouth grazing on that grass. The noise, the body..." Unexpected and indefinable sensations arrive at times like that. In *Makala*, same thing. The wheel plowing into sand gives a sense of weight. You sense the bike sinking and becoming a living machine.

***Let's talk about another aspect of the film. Did you want to show Kabwita, whom we see suffering, against a Christian backdrop?***

Not particularly. I wanted to film a place of worship because religion is so present in the Congo and, like everybody else down there, Kabwita is a believer. At a prayer meeting, with the singing, preaching and trances, Kabwita can be in communion with other humans who share his situation. They're not necessarily looking for redemption, but a release of their ills. It's a fantastic outpouring of their despair, but also of their hopes. Marx developed a whole theory about religion being the expression of the world we live in. Seen like that, religion is human. It interests me as another way that human beings have found to express what they feel about their lives. I saw it in action and was deeply touched, even though I'm an atheist.

***What role does Gaspar Claus's score play?***

Upbeat African-inspired music would have created a redundant feeling in relation to the rhythm of his walking. I wanted something else. I came up with the idea of using a cello, which has a very wide

range of bass and sharp notes. As soon as I heard the compositions of Gaspar Claus, I knew it was the music I needed. Gaspar plays solo and works his cello to the extent that you hear the matter of the instrument—the hair of the bow, the rubbing of the wood. His task consisted in simplifying as far as possible the melodies, with repetition of themes and few notes. The music needed not to overpower the action, but to unlock its multifaceted potential. For example, the shot of three men, including Kabwita, pushing their bikes: the music allows time to expand while simultaneously creating tension. It reinforces what we're seeing and connects physically with the film to allow it to take flight: tracing the men's exertions is left behind to attain a more existential feeling, a human solitude.

*Visually, Makala looks superb, yet manages to avoid glamorizing poverty.*

*Bovines* was shot entirely with the camera on legs, and this time I did the exact opposite. I didn't even take a tripod with me. It was a practical and aesthetic decision, so I would be as mobile as possible. I used two different cameras: a handheld camera, which captures quite raw, supposedly more "expressive" movements, and a photo camera equipped with a small stabilization system to get a steadycam look. It turns out, I used the somehow more "aesthetic" stabilized system much more, simply because it allowed me to film longer shots that viewers can watch without annoying bumps or jolts. I think that allows audiences to be more attentive to what they're seeing. The expressiveness that I look for does not necessarily require the camera to be more explicitly expressive. It comes from the attention paid to things. And since Kabwita and his achievements are very beautiful to me, I wanted to bring that beauty to life.

*Interview by CHRISTOPHE KANTCHEFF*



## DIRECTOR BIO



### Emmanuel Gras

Emmanuel Gras is a French director whose films deal with contemporary social issues and are marked by a commitment to form. He studied film photography at ENS Louis Lumière. His film *Bovines* was nominated for the César for Best Documentary in 2013.

- 2017 – MAKALA
- 2015 – 300 HOMMES (co-directed with Aline DALBIS)
- 2013 – ÊTRE VIVANT [Short]
- 2012 – BOVINES
- 2007 – SOUDAIN SES MAINS [Short]
- 2005 – TWEETY LOVELY SUPERSTAR [Short]
- 2003 – UNE PETITE NOTE D'HUMANITÉ [Short]
- 2002 – LA MOTIVATION! [Short]

## CREDITS

With KABWITA KASONGO, LYDIE KASONGO

Director EMMANUEL GRAS

Cinematography EMMANUEL GRAS

Sound MANUEL VIDAL

Editing KAREN BENAINOUS

Sound Mixing SIMON APOSTOLOU

Music GASPAR CLAUS

Produced by NICOLAS ANTHOME (BATHYSPHERE)

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