



elles

A film by Malgoska Szumowska

2012, France/Poland/Germany, 96 minutes
HD, 2.35:1, in French and Polish with English subtitles

Official Selection

Toronto International Film Festival

Berlin International Film Festival

Tribeca Film Festival

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SYNOPSIS

A provocative exploration of female sexuality, *Elles* stars the fearless Juliette Binoche as Anne, a well-off Parisian journalist investigating the lives of two student prostitutes (Joanna Kulig and Anaïs Demoustier) for a magazine article. What begins as a routine assignment, though, quickly turns personal, as Anne is drawn into the lives of these fiercely independent young women and forced to confront her own sexual fears and desires.

CAST AND CREW

| | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| ANNE | Juliette Binoche |
| CHARLOTTE | Anaïs Demoustier |
| ALICJA | Joanna Kulig |
| PATRICK | Louis-Do de Lencquesaing |
| ALICJA'S MOTHER | Krystyna Janda |
| THE SADISTIC CLIENT | Andrzej Chyra |
| SAÏD | Ali Marhyar |
| ANNE'S FATHER | Jean-Marie Binoche |
| FLORENT | François Civil |
| STÉPHANE | Pablo Beugnet |
| CHARLOTTE'S MOTHER | Valérie Dréville |
| CHARLOTTE'S FATHER | Jean-Louis Coulloc'h |
| THOMAS | Arthur Moncia |
| CHARLES | Scali Delpeyrat |
| COLETTE | Laurence Ragon |
| COLETTE'S HUSBAND | Alain Libolt |
| THE YOUNG CLIENT | Swann Arlaud |
| THE GUITAR CLIENT | Nicolas Layani |
| THE BEAUTY MARK CLIENT | Laurent Jumeaucourt |
| THE CRYING CLIENT | José Fumanal |
| | |
| DIRECTED BY | Malgoska Szumowska |
| WRITTEN BY | Tine Byrckel & Malgoska Szumowska |
| PRODUCED BY | Marianne Slot |
| EXECUTIVE PRODUCED BY | Olivier Guerbois |
| DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY | Michal Englert |
| EDITORS | François Tourmen & Jacek Drosio |
| SOUND | André Rigaut |
| CASTING | Aurélie Guichard |
| COSTUME DESIGNER | Katarzyna Lewinska |
| ART DIRECTOR | Pauline Bourdon |

PRODUCED BY Slot Machine
IN COPRODUCTION WITH Zentropa International Poland, Zentropa International Köln,
Canal + Poland, ZDF Shot Szumowski, and Liberator Productions
WITH SUPPORT FROM Polish Film Institute, Agnieszka Odorowicz, Filmstiftung NRW,
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Hellmich, Programme MEDIA de l'Union Européenne, La
PROCIREP, l'ANGOIA-AGICOA
WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF Haut et Court Distribution, Memento Films International, Potemkine
et Agnès b. DVD, KinoSwiat
IN ASSOCIATION WITH Cofinova 7, Arte/Cofinova 6, la sofica Soficinéma 6

ABOUT THE PRODUCER

A French producer of Danish origin, Marianne Slot founded the independent production company Slot Machine in 1993. She has produced for Lars von Trier since 1995's *Breaking the Waves*, and has also worked extensively with a number of Latin American filmmakers, including Lucrecia Martel (*The Headless Woman*) and Lisandro Alonso (*Liverpool, Fanasma, Los Muertos*).

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

Malgoska Szumowska was born in 1973 in Krakow and graduated from the Lodz Film School. Her credits as director include the internationally acclaimed feature films *Happy Man* ('00), *Stranger* ('04), and *33 Scenes from Life* ('08, Silver Leopard winner at Locarno), as well as a number of short documentaries and a contribution to the omnibus film *Visions of Europe* ('08). She has been working with the production company Zentropa since 2005, and served as a co-producer on Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* ('09).

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

It is a fact that young female students resort to prostitution to finance their studies. In the media, the subject is treated with moral disapproval on one hand and voyeuristic curiosity on the other. In magazines, there are ads that use women's bodies to sell objects alongside sententious, moralizing reports about women selling their own bodies to obtain those same objects. We wanted to confront this hypocrisy through an exchange of women's views: a female journalist in an enviable economic position, questioning two students who are trying to climb the social ladder and finance their studies through sex work — but also questioning her own desires along the way.

INTERVIEW WITH MALGOSKA SZUMOWSKA & TINE BYRCKEL

Tine, how did you come up with the idea for the film?

Byrckel: The original idea came from the producer, Marianne Slot, who I've been working with for a long time. The media regularly talk about these young women who prostitute themselves to be able to finish their studies. This social phenomenon intrigued her. What did it mean to these young women? What did it say about society? Is prostitution the ultimate act of liberation for a woman, or is it an intolerable act of submission? We wanted to ask these questions without making any judgments, which cinema allows you to do better than any other medium.

How did you end up writing the screenplay with Malgoska?

Byrckel: Marianne and I were familiar with Malgoska's work and had been completely captivated by a rough cut of her film *33 Scenes from Life*. She has a unique ability to film the universe in all its tiny details. That's how the film had to be made in order to avoid any moralizing; we wanted to bring into play each protagonist's responsibilities and desires.

How did your writing process work?

Byrckel: Before meeting Malgoska, I had spent time working on the story, bringing together a female journalist and several girls. There was also a structural reference to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, about a day in the life of a woman who is thinking about the dinner she has to prepare later. The questioning comes from the everyday gestures and dialogue rather than being expressed through great parables. Then, with Malgoska in Warsaw, we came up with about a hundred scenes, which I used to write the first versions of the screenplay.

Did you do any investigation into prostitution?

Byrckel: We only conducted research in the field after writing the first versions of the screenplay. In France, we asked the excellent documentary filmmaker H el ene de Cr ecy to go out and interview girls. She was so fascinated by their stories that she made a documentary, *Escort*, which was also produced by Marianne Slot.

Szumowska: Before the start of the shoot, I wanted to meet some young female prostitutes. In Poland, I knew from reading the papers that many young female students are forced to sleep with the owners of the rooms they live in. The account of one young girl who was both beautiful and elegant made a great impression on me. From the start of the interview, she only talked about sex, what she did and what she liked to do.

Did you get answers you weren't expecting?

Szumowska: To be honest, I was shocked. Shocked by the fact that a girl this pretty and intelligent derived pleasure from sleeping with men for money. And it wasn't only to meet vital needs such as food and accommodation, but also for pleasure and to have a more pleasant life. In fact, it was very different from the fantasy that most people have of prostitution.

Byrckel: We met young women who were far more proud and casual than we'd imagined. It was worlds apart from the accounts that are peddled by the media, attention-grabbing stories of young women who have been abused. We didn't want to talk about trafficking or pimps or drugs. We wanted to talk about young women who choose to prostitute themselves, with an avowed goal of climbing the social ladder. It's far more disturbing. There's the issue of women as sex objects, but there's more to it than that. On the one hand, there are men who mistake these sex acts for love. And on the other hand, women who ask for...objects! The young women we met want it all and they want it right away. They are caught in a sort of material fever.

Szumowska: Another surprise was meeting a girl who was barely 20 years old and who knew more about sex than many women in their late thirties. We started to realize that the film couldn't just be about the social aspects. We had to talk about intimacy.

The film draws a parallel between the work of the journalist, a woman who has a well-established position in society, and that of female students who prostitute themselves.

Szumowska: Absolutely. We do all kinds of things for money. Juliette's character accepts a lot of compromises. In addition to her work, she spends the day preparing a meal for her husband's boss, and she doesn't mention her frustrations or her opinions to him. As a director, I sometimes have to do things I find unpleasant. Why is sex so different?

Byrckel: Juliette's character has difficulties keeping her distance and makes viewers aware of their own voyeuristic pleasure. We can't keep our politically correct conscience completely intact.

When did you think of Juliette for the lead role?

Szumowska: I thought of Juliette right away. Her acting in *Caché* had impressed me so much that I couldn't imagine any other actress for *Elles*. We sent her the script and as soon as we met, I knew it would work. The subject matter interested her and we shared the same approach to things. Once she said yes, she was totally committed to the film. She trusted me and always supported me, even in my moments of doubt. It was an exceptional encounter. Juliette helped me to become the director of this film.

What about Anaïs Demoustier and Joanna Kulig?

Szumowska: We were looking for young actresses who had the energy and liveliness I had at their age. I'd seen Anaïs in Juliette Garcias' *Sois Sage*, and I was convinced by her strength and talent. As for Joanna, I recognized myself in her. Passionate, talkative, and exuberant. She wanted to be in the film so badly that

she lied to me when I asked her if she could speak French. When I realized it wasn't true, I thought she was very sassy. And in the end, in the film, she does speak French!

Did your work with the actresses influence the film?

Szumowska: It was far more than an influence. In a way, I'd say they carry the film. After each day's shooting, depending on what had been done and said, I modified the scenes we were due to shoot the next day. The actresses gave me new ideas and I arrived each morning with changes stemming from their work. I'd say that *Elles* is a feminine entity, influenced by all the women who worked together on the project.

Once the shoot was over, was the editing a decisive stage?

Szumowska: Editing is a crucial stage in my films. I made a lot of documentaries before moving on to fiction, and I kept the habit of giving great importance to the editing in the creative process. What matters to me is the accuracy in the tiny emotions conveyed by spontaneous gestures. What I'm trying to get across is, above all, the intimacy.

INTERVIEW WITH JULIETTE BINOCHÉ

What was your initial reaction when you read the screenplay?

I immediately sensed the intelligence in the development of the subject matter, an approach that was both courageous and not oversimplified. The film doesn't accuse anyone, but questions us. It gives us a sense of the insidious changes in our society, which have influenced the way we are and how we think. It's not easy to study when you have financial difficulties. Prostitution pays well, doesn't take up much time, allows a certain financial comfort, and lets you feel a part of the consumer society. We are used to advertisements in which barely pubescent girls are surrounded by luxury in provocative postures verging on the pornographic. In time, these advertisements lead you to think that youth, luxury and sex blend together quite well. Doing a casual job becomes more degrading than making love for money.

How did you first meet Malgoska?

Slawomir Idziak, Kieslowski's director of photography on *Blue*, first told me about Malgoska, and told me she was one of the most gifted Polish directors of her generation. I liked the screenplay, so I was looking forward to meeting her. She was intriguing, funny, and almost wary. The first time we saw each other, she said it would never work between us because our personalities were both too strong!

Was your working relationship with her difficult?

On the contrary, there was a mutual understanding and respect right from the start. I felt there was something of her in the film that needed to come out into the world. It was an artistic, emotional, and intellectual birth.

By playing the part of the journalist who writes an article on these young women, do you become Malgoska's alter ego?

It's not really about her, but about the questions she poses. What is a woman? What is her sexuality? What is love? What are her fears? What are her judgments? Prostitution? Pleasure? Youth? What excites her? What is it like to be married? To feel shame? What is it like to be stuck? Shocked? To be a mother? A journalist? The director explores all these questions through my character. I become her accomplice, her inspiration, her second wind, her sister, her researcher — even her sculpture when circumstances are ideal.

Are you at a point in your career when you want to take more risks?

I find risk-taking intoxicates me, stimulates me, makes me lose my bearings. It's necessary to take risks to avoid resting on your laurels and in order to open yourself up to new, pertinent experiences. Artists owe it to themselves to risk exposing their deepest self to stir their soul, to confront it with new material, new meanings, new thoughts. The real risk would be to repeat oneself, to get bogged down in certainties. Fortunately, we're not looked at for ourselves, but beyond that. And that's why I can stand that intimacy. Otherwise I'd prefer to hide — it's more comfortable! In a film, there's the idea of conveying something intimate and extraordinary that the director seeks to reveal through the actor or actress.

Your character seems surprised, shocked, and amused by the girls' replies to her questions.

How can you not be fascinated, intrigued, horrified, envious of the seeming freedom of youth, of this lifestyle choice, for a while? It's the question of conscience that rears its head during those interviews. The solitude of these young students and of this mother aren't so far apart at times.

One also senses a burgeoning closeness between the journalist and the two girls. Did it also exist among the three actresses?

Yes, but in a different way. Anaïs is a rising star of French cinema, with a remarkable ear and sensitivity. She has instinctive intelligence. What Joanna conveys is, above all, her desire for freedom, a wild side that can be expressed at any moment. We feel like she puts her whole life on the line when she acts.

The idea of prostitution is extended to the whole of society.

Nobody is spared. It's up to each of us to reflect on that. The film isn't judgmental, but it raises the alarm. Malgoska's idea is that the audience is excited by what they see and are caught red-handed taking part in a system. It's up to each of us to see for ourselves, and to see into ourselves.

Is it inevitable to use the word "feminism" in describing the film?

Talking about women, the feminine, and intimacy isn't being a feminist. To me, the word "feminism" is inadequate, but I can understand if some people use it. Seeing a young student selling her body for money

isn't trivial. The subject is taboo. The film doesn't try to be moralizing or assert a right. It throws light on a situation that society creates by its desire to sell, to shock, to influence, and to show the body as an object by denying a person's existence. Love in all its forms can take us to the most nightmarish situations as well as the most beautiful. True freedom is choice. It's our responsibility to make sure that this choice is safeguarded.

JULIETTE BINOCHE SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

- 2010 *Certified Copy* (Abbas Kiarostami) ~ Best Actress winner, Cannes
- 2008 *Summer Hours* (Olivier Assayas)
Paris (Cédric Klapisch)
- 2007 *Disengagement* (Amos Gitai)
Flight of the Red Balloon (Hou Hsaio-hsien)
- 2006 *Breaking and Entering* (Anthony Minghella)
- 2005 *Mary* (Abel Ferrara)
Caché (Hidden) (Michael Haneke)
- 2003 *In My Country* (John Boorman)
- 2000 *Chocolat* (Lasse Hallström) ~ Best Actress nominee, Academy Awards
Code Unknown (Michael Haneke) ~ Best Actress nominee, César Awards
- 1998 *Alice and Martin* (André Téchiné)
- 1996 *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella)~ Best Supporting Actress winner, Academy Awards
- 1995 *The Horseman on the Roof* (Jean-Paul Rappeneau)
- 1993 *Blue* (Krzysztof Kieslowski) ~ Best Actress, César Awards
- 1992 *Damage* (Louis Malle)
- 1991 *The Lovers on the Bridge* (Léos Carax)
- 1988 *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Philip Kaufman)
- 1986 *Bad Blood* (Léos Carax)
- 1985 *Rendez-Vous* (André Téchiné)
Family Life (Jacques Doillon)
Hail Mary (Jean-Luc Godard)

ANAÏS DEMOUSTIER SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

- 2011 *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (Robert Guediguian)
The Last Winter (John Shank)
- 2010 *Living on Love Alone* (Isabelle Czajka) ~ Most Promising Actress nominee, César Awards
Elsewhere (Frédéric Pelle)
Belle Épine (Rebecca Zlotowski)
Sweet Evil (Olivier Coussemacq)
- 2009 *Sois Sage* (Juliette Garcias)
- 2008 *Grown Ups* (Anne Novion) ~ Most Promising Actress nominee, César Awards
La Belle Personne (Christophe Honoré)
Give Me Your Hand (Pascal-Alex Vincent)
- 2006 *L'Année Suivante* (Isabelle Czajka)
- 2003 *The Time of the Wolf* (Michael Haneke)

JOANNA KULIG SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

- 2011 *The Woman in the Fifth* (Pawel Pawlikowski)
Remembrance (Anna Justice)
Maraton Tanca (Magdalena Lazarkiewicz)
Los Numeros (Ryszard Zatorski)
- 2010 *\$1,000,000* (Janusz Kondratiuk)
- 2009 *Janosik: A True Story* (Agnieszka Holland & Kasia Adamik)
- 2007 *Wednesday, Thursday Morning* (Grzegorz Pacek)