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DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT
CANNES 2021

LES FILMS DE PIERRE, ARTE France AND INA PRESENT

RETURNING TO REIMS

A FILM BY **JEAN-GABRIEL PÉRIOT**

BASED ON RETURNING TO REIMS BY **DIDIER ERIBON** PUBLISHED BY ÉDITIONS FAYARD NARRATED BY **ADÈLE HAENEL**



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BASED ON RETURNING TO REIMS BY **DIDIER ERIBON**

NARRATED BY **ADÈLE HAENEL**

80' - France - 2021

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Freely adapted from the eponymous novel by Didier Eribon, RETURNING TO REIMS tells in archive foota an intimate and political story of the French working class from the beginning of the 1950s to today.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

What inspired you to adapt Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims*, a personal and political account of the working-class world?

I read the book when it came out in 2009. Ten years later, the producer Marie-Ange Luciani called me and suggested I do an adaptation. I don't usually accept orders; but, in rereading the text, I saw multiple possibilities unfold. I don't come from a working-class family, but rather the working poor. One of my grandfathers was a milkman and my grandmother took care of her seven children. My other grandmother was a waitress. Unlike Didier Eribon, I didn't grow up in the working-class culture; but despite this difference, his book moved me, and I often saw myself in it.

Did something along the lines of reparation guide your desire to adapt this book?

In a certain way, RETURNING TO REIMS allowed me to talk about my own family history. My sister and I were the first to go to university. Like Marie-Ange and Didier, I'm what they call a class defector. I agreed to adapt this book because the political issues it evokes are close to my heart, and because it would allow me to bring images of the working-class world and working conditions back to the present. Searching for archive footage of testimonials from male and female workers telling their stories in their own words, giving them a shape, and showing them is my way of giving a face and a voice to those people and indirectly to my loved ones, excluded from history and representation.

In his book, Didier Eribon talks about his homosexuality, the homophobia of the working-class world and his father. Why did you choose to avoid this theme in your film?

Returning to Reims is a kaleidoscopic book, with a lot of themes and characters. In adapting it in its entirety, I was worried I'd skim

through them. So, I chose to focus on the author's parents to build a more specific story. I found the story of Didier Eribon's mother particularly touching. She was an intelligent but hindered woman who suffered throughout her life. The violence she endured as a woman went beyond the simple framework of class warfare. By excluding Didier Eribon's character, I automatically removed the issues tied to class defection and homosexuality, and that gave me more room to develop that of women's place in labor history. Since I come from a family of women, that hit close to home for me.

Is that why you chose the actress Adèle Haenel to narrate?

The text has an almost universal aspect. A lot of male and female readers can project themselves into it, feel concerned regardless of their personal stories. We wanted to open it up even more by using the voice-over. So, we thought it should be the opposite of the author's, meaning a young woman's voice reading a middle-aged man's text. Choosing Adèle was a no-brainer. Something in her voice struck me as working class and belies her social origins. She also embodies a new history of commitment and struggle – that of her generation. It all made sense.



Your film opens with the unique story of the maternal grandmother, a free woman shorn at the Liberation.

That character was interesting to me because we sometimes have caricatural interpretations of the working class and the status of women at certain times. Class history is never uniform, there have always been counter-models of life. We underestimate the fact that it's always been possible to change course, even if it's hard. The grandmother chose dances, parties, and love affairs over her children. And she paid a high price for it. At the Liberation, she was shorn along with other women accused of sleeping with the enemy as a reminder that their bodies didn't belong to them.

Damaged, tired bodies are central to your film, like that of the elderly woman who talks about having carried 25-kilo bags of potatoes and never taking any vacation.

In all my films, I need the presence of the body in the image. When working with archive footage, I look for close-ups, faces, eyes, skin details... Bodies of male and female workers, those scarred bodies, move me deeply because I know them, they're part of my daily life, and because, through them, I get a glimpse of a specific life – I feel it. It's all the more important for me to show them since they've disappeared from screens. Advertising, male and female TV presenters, stars, and male and female politicians all embody a well-groomed, standardized social body. But society is made up of different bodies, sometimes ill and suffering, but absent.

How do you make your films?

I use the same method for all my films. The time spent on archival research varies depending on how difficult they are to access. My knowledge of political cinema helped me for RETURNING TO REIMS. Audiovisual archives in France are well preserved thanks to institutions like the INA and Ciné-archives that conserve images from the PCF and the CGT, and producers like Pathé and Gaumont. This makes it possible to access clean, organized databases. I work with the same archivist, Emmanuelle Koenig,

on all my films. We always start by doing an inventory of the most readily available film material. Based on that initial research, I do a preliminary edit, which opens up new avenues of exploration. At the same time, I carry out almost academic research to identify other directors, films, and productions. And so begins a process of going back and forth between editing and research, and the film takes shape over time. Editing is an important part of writing an archive film. I edit alone because I need to get a sense of the images, their materiality, to be immersed in them.

Did you encounter any issues in your archival research for this film?

A few. Occupational categories are never represented, for example. It is possible to find images of the “working-class aristocracy”: factory workers or miners. But cleaners are rarely shown on television or in film. Or as maids. I only found one documentary and one fictional film about them, and the latter was a comedy. In the same way, since the rise of the Front National, there is very little representation of its male and female constituents, or of racism. Aside from a documentary about Jean-Marie Le Pen, I only found brief sequences about him made up of short, hateful sentences. No significant time was devoted to understanding what was happening, the reasoning behind the racism, or even the ghettoization and abandonment of housing projects by public authorities. In film, racism is almost exclusively represented by the country hick in low-brow comedy.

The first part of your film tells the story of the working class. The second, that of its disappearance and crossover into the fold of the Front National. As the film progresses, the nature of the archive footage you use seems to vary. Why make that choice?

The first reason is technical and linked to the history of television. In the first movement, I namely use images of televised news reports dating from the 1950s to the 1970s. At that time, they were shot in 16mm. Once they're restored, it looks like cinema. After the

1970s, television transitioned to video – ugly video whose flaws are accentuated by poorly preserved, deteriorated copies. A lot of the material used for this film was poor quality. I cleaned and restored the most damaged excerpts. When I was younger, I was a visual effects editor, so I learned to clean and restore film and video images.

The second reason is linked to the quality of television journalism before the 1980s: creative documentaries with very few voice-overs - observational filmmaking of sometimes very beautiful quality. In the 1980s, television became standardized and remained as it has been until now. In parallel, that decade was also the one wherein the figure of workers disappeared from film. To talk about the 1980s, all I had was TV footage. So, my film tells a history of television and film in counter-relief.

How do you explain the absence of representation of the working class in film?

A change in production? With the TV and video boom, film, being more costly, lost viewers from the working classes. Consequently, the middle, upper and intellectual classes formed the film audience. There was no longer any need to produce films with workers, like the ones with Jean Gabin, for example. At the same time, communist producers and directors disappeared from the landscape. And the figure of the worker became caricatural.

How would you qualify your work?

I don't use archive images as illustrations to trace over a predetermined statement. In my work, the archive is as important as the text. Archive footage come before the text or, when there is a text, they are in relation to and not contingent on it. The film is altered and written by using what exists, whatever I find. And written along with it is a history of representation. It's a little cliché to say this, but the representation of the world, like history, is written by those in power. I need to continually revisit social struggles, historical events swept under the rug, to work on the unspoken areas of official history. I'm giving a voice back

to fragile, forgotten histories, to those left behind, like workers. RETURNING TO REIMS is thus a way for me to tell another history of 20th-century France.

How do you explain the move of part of the working-class vote from the Community Party to the Front National, now renamed Rassemblement National?

Didier Eribon has the words to summarize and offer an interpretation of this phenomenon. That weighed heavily on my decision to adapt his text. He explains that the Front National allowed people who no longer felt they belonged to a class, who felt robbed, to find a political space where someone spoke on their behalf. In the 1980s, factories closed, a new form of capitalism developed, and the working class changed to the point that it no longer existed as such. It was the explosion of the service sector on one side, and a destabilized, isolated proletariat on the other, now represented by bicycle delivery people, Uber drivers, or nursing home caregivers. I listened to a lot of Jean-Marie Le Pen's speeches and was surprised by the fact that he could be brilliant in the way he talked about the people and to the people, even if it was obviously an imaginary, fictional people. Conversely, the other politicians, particularly on the left, are no longer speaking to citizens but rather to consumers. It's as if politicians were now choosing an electoral market and only addressing a portion of the population it thought of as a market. Politics has become professionalized and representatives from the working class have disappeared.

Is the disappearance of male and female workers from the speeches of the socialist left a mistake?

An absolute mistake and wrong. Their only way of responding to the frontist vote of male and female workers has been to gradually recycle talking points from the far-right agenda: on the issue of security, it won. For example, in my film we hear George Marchais (the Communist Party Secretary-general from 1972 to 1994) explain that immigration must be stopped because it creates racism. It isn't the fault of immigrants if they're dying and need

to work! And how could they be responsible for the racism they endure on a daily basis... In *Returning to Reims*, Didier Eribon ponders: what do you do when your family votes FN? So, he undertakes the mission of listening to them, of hearing them. And he argues with his mother. It's through discussion that politics comes about – politics is disagreement. I think there are people who can be moved, but the “left” didn't do that.





DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Born in France in 1974, Jean-Gabriel Périot has made several short films on the frontier of documentary, experimental, and fiction. He developed his own style of film editing that explores violence and history using film and photography archives. His films, *DIES IRAE*, *EVEN IF SHE HAD BEEN A CRIMINAL*, *NIJUMAN NO BOREI (200,000 PHANTOMS)* and *THE DEVIL* have received awards from several festivals around the world.

His first feature length film, *A GERMAN YOUTH*, opened the Panorama section of the 2015 Berlinale before being released in German, French and Swiss movie theaters and receiving multiple awards.

SUMMER LIGHTS, his first feature-length fiction premiered at the San Sebastian film festival and was released in France in the summer of 2017.

OUR DEFEAT was presented at the Forum for the 2019 Berlinale and *RETURNING TO REIMS*, adapted from the book by Didier Eribon and narrated by Adèle Haenel, was selected for the Director's Fortnight at 2021 Cannes film festival.

written and directed by
produced by
based on Returning to Reims by
interpreted by
original music
researcher
cinematographer
sound
1st assistant director
2nd assistant director
researcher assistant
sound editor
sound mixer
color grading
assistant editor
editor intern
postproduction manager
postproduction assistant

line producer

administrative and financial manager
production intern

society and culture department
administrator
postproduction coordinator

audiovisual production department
associate producer
production unite manager
line producer

CREW

Jean-Gabriel PÉRIOT
Marie-Ange LUCIANI
Didier ERIBON · Éditions Fayard
Adèle HAENEL
Michel CLOUP
Emmanuelle KOENIG
Julia MINGO
Yolande DECARSIN
Philippe THIOLLIER
Vassia CHAVAROCHE
Hugo TOMES
Xavier THIBAUT
Laure ARTO
Amine BERRADA
Denis SPIRIDONOV
Sandra THEVENET
Christina CRASSARIS
Vanessa BASTÉ

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Pauline MORIZOT
Florence DIEZ
Sylvie MARTIN
Éva LEBUGLE

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Françoise TSITSICHVILI
David DUCHEMIN

INA

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