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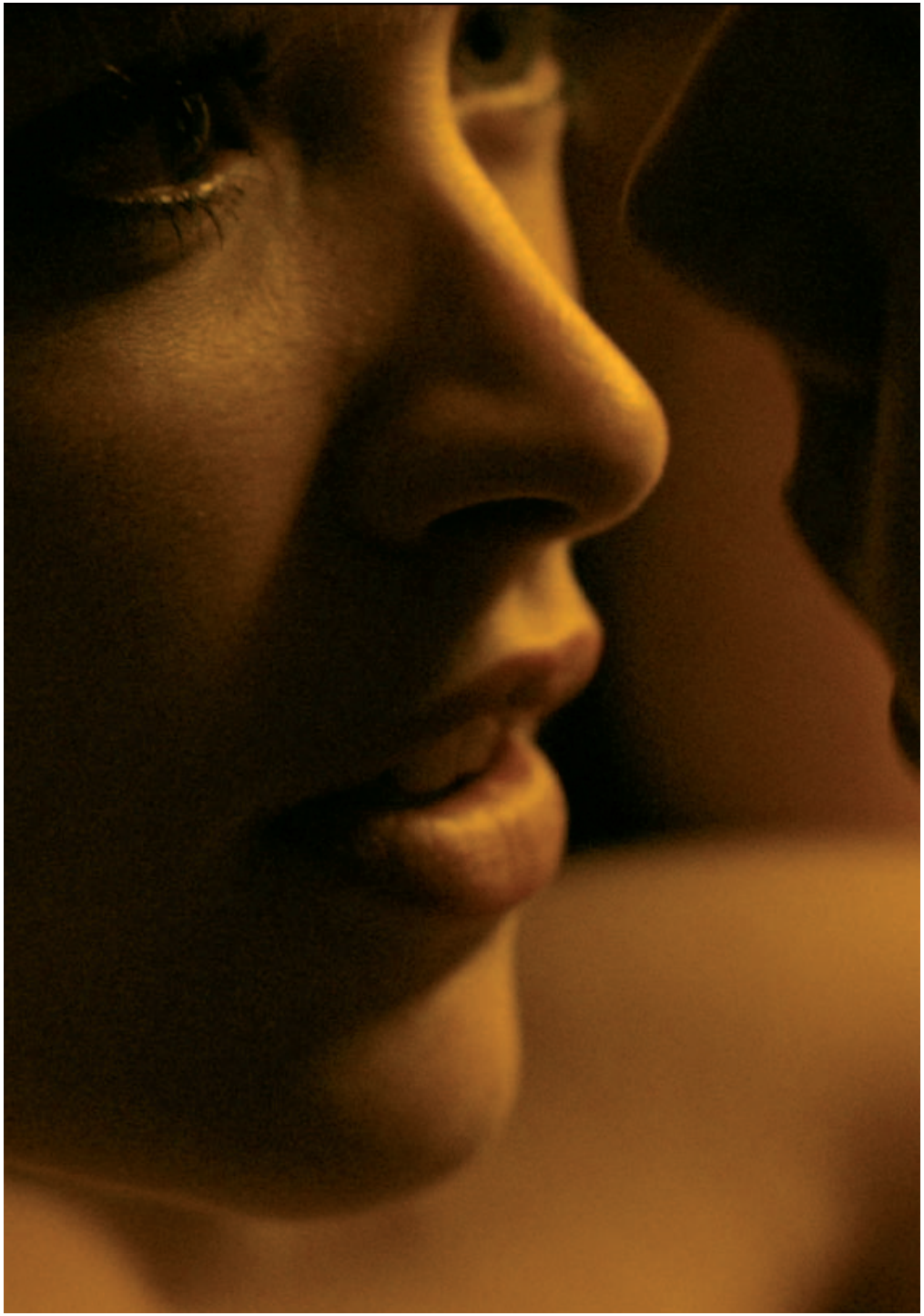
BANGGANG

(A MODERN LOVE STORY)

A FILM BY EVA HUSSON



Full House, a label of Maneki Films
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tiff.40 toronto international film festival
OFFICIAL SELECTION 2015
Platform

BANG GANG

(A MODERN LOVE STORY)

BANG GANG (UNE HISTOIRE D'AMOUR MODERNE)

A FILM BY EVA HUSSON

France / 2015 / 98 min / Scope

INTERNATIONAL SALES

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SYNOPSIS

George, a pretty teen girl, falls in love with Alex. To get his attention, she initiates a game with their friends, discovering, testing and pushing the limits of their sexuality.

When the nature of their activities is revealed, each of them deals with the scandal in radically different ways. Faced with the implosion of their value systems, they move on by reassessing their priorities, finding love and their real desires.

INTERVIEW WITH EVA HUSSON

Where did you get the idea for the film?
I was inspired by a news story that I heard of in 1999. I was 22 at the time, and the people involved reminded me of my own group of friends to when I was a teenager: same type of small provincial town, same middle-class social background, etc. This account of drifting into a collective madness kept on resonating with me, even years later. It's not so much the sexual side that interested me – having to face that was terrifying – but I was especially curious to understand how these young people, without any particular predisposition for this type of behavior, had been able to go so far.

Where did this news item take place?
In the United States, initially, but while researching the subject I came across other, similar events that took place in France, in Germany and Belgium. More than being an American occurrence, it is a phenomenon that is generally more associated with youth. I purposely situated the film in a wholly fictional temporality and geography.

***Bang Gang (A Modern Love Story)* occurs in a very particular climate: in the middle of a heat wave with railway accidents and disasters all over the news.**
Narratively speaking, it was interesting for the characters to be able to find in external circumstances – climate or current events – an echo of the intense moments they were living. I wanted them to have the feeling of being perfectly in synch with the world around them, a world which is also in the midst of exploding and reconfiguring itself. Everyone has known, at one time or another in their life, this type of unbelievable synchrony that gives you the feeling, whether or not you are a believer, of belonging to a whole.
The heat and the trains that derail are a condensed version of events that occurred these last few summers – the bits of news we hear on the radio are real excerpts. All of this works towards creating a fictional distance.

George, Laetitia, Alex, Nikki and Gabriel, you were saying, have being middle class in common. Half of them come from divorced families and all of them are filled with a very great loneliness.
From my point of view their solitude is essential. As an adolescent I was always stunned to see how cinema treated this period: a so-called state of grace within a group that didn't correspond at all with what I was going through. I lived in Le Havre, an entirely schizophrenic city at the time – culturally rich and otherwise poor. At fifteen, I was permanently depressed. The films tended to describe either truly isolated kids, or on the contrary, those who were very much at ease in a group. I would spend my time trying in vain to integrate groups of kids who hung out together. The events I describe, which could very well have happened in that city, gave me the opportunity to tackle this practically unexplored sense of solitude within a group at this stage in life.

Beyond their personal isolation and long before the Bang Gang process is triggered, the characters in the film are unbelievably open about sexuality. Sex is omnipresent in their conversations.
This freedom already existed in the 1990s – I experienced it. But their language is cruder than during my time as a teenager. I sometimes toned the teen language down a lot to make it accessible for a broader audience. If I had used all of today's adolescents' vocabulary, the film would have been incomprehensible to most people.

They are also very much at ease with their bodies…
For some people, at that age, one's relationship with one's body is obvious. I experienced this type of state of grace when I hung out on nude beaches in Ibiza when I was about sixteen years old: you didn't think about it, you were in a sort of sheer presence. I found it very touching to vicariously rediscover this natural state through directing my actors.

Nor do they have any inhibition concerning the other sex, as in the scene at the beginning, where Laetitia, at the pool, insists that Nikki show his private parts to the whole group.
I found this role reversal, where it's the girls who ask the boys to reveal their privates in order to scrutinize them, being both funny and fair. And Fred Hotier was the perfect person to play that. He has a fascinating physical freedom.

Porn seems very ordinary to all of them. They film themselves, send images to one another. In this sense, Bang Gang's subtitle is particularly relevant: *A Modern Love Story.*
While wanting to give the film a timeless dimension, I had to anchor myself in the present; I wouldn't have been able to do otherwise. I have been strongly influenced by Stendhal, whose books made a lasting impression on me when I was a young adult. An important principle for him was that "a novel is a mirror carried along a high road." I need to attach myself to what I see around me: I spent a fair amount of time conducting research on social networks and I spoke a great deal to my actors.
The difficultly consisted in finding how to correctly dose the information I was relaying. To explain a little, but not over explain, in a way that makes things clearer to the audience without being didactic, and at the same time, without giving the teenagers who were going to see the film the feeling that I had made it with my eyes riveted on an instruction manual. This was made even more complex by the fact that in just two or three years' time, while I was working on the film, the use of social networks and exchanges on Instagram became widely standardized. Images of this kind and nature, exchanged

without any hang-ups, weren't as common when I started writing the film. Besides, the first generation of teenagers to which my characters belong have started to grow up: after overexposing themselves, they realize how difficult it is to manage images that they have allowed to circulate. We have already moved on to the next phase: the absence of inhibition isn't as strong as it used to be.

You never judge your characters, even when they lapse into the Bang Gang.
Why would I pass moral judgment on these teenagers? This was about getting as close as possible to their truth. It is in no way about penalizing them. The characters in the film experience violent things, but they are teenagers: they explore, learn, grow up and bounce back. Adolescence is a period of extreme plasticity in life – you get through it.

We see that in the group some teenagers are more fragile and more exposed than others. George for example, rushes headlong into everything.
As if dealing with people face to face was not already hard enough for anyone, these teens now have to make sense of all the new communication tools on top of it. There are so many extra layers to work through compared with my generation! Some kids have a personality that incites them to be careful, and others, like George do things spontaneously, in an instinctive and vital fervor, without worrying about the consequences, simply because they don't know how to function any differently. George is going through a super rough patch. It's hard, but she is still having a fundamental experience that will neither stop her from living, nor from growing up. It was very important to not portray her as a victim. She is not broken by her journey.
Moreover I'm aware of the fact - just like those who didn't appreciate what they perceived as an absence of morals in the screenplay - that some people, men and women, will have a hard time accepting my film, because it jeopardizes the patriarchal paradigm that they have of society, the only one they know. But how could I not understand this rejection, when the majority of women's storytelling in cinema is done by men? A heroine at the height of her sexual powers who goes unpunished is most often unthinkable in the masculine narrative: Chloë Sevigny in Kids, by Larry Clark, or Emily Watson in Breaking the Waves, by Lars von Trier, for example. This narrative doesn't make for lesser films; it simply highlights the fact that there is room for another perspective. In reality, an alternative in terms of feminine sexual power does indeed exist. George's destiny is different. She is not a victim. As a woman filmmaker, contributing to changing the paradigm and the representation of women in cinema is an absolute imperative for me.

Is that the reason why you gave her a masculine first name?
Yes, for that reason and because her behavior is typically masculine. She doesn't see a difference between herself and the boys, and she's right. George is a sexually potent female and she's very comfortable with that. Yet, as she's a very pretty young girl, the way others see her is unforgiving: never would a boy post a video of another boy on YouTube to stigmatize him.

Is it because Alex refuses George's advances that the group ends up lapsing into the Bang Gang?
I believe more in a group dynamic, an accumulation of energies that fit together to create new, even stronger ones. George is a triggering factor, but not the only one. Besides, she barely participates in the orgy, she really doesn't get involved until the end – and in a clumsy way – because she took too many drugs and she suddenly finds herself in an enormous explosion of joy and enthusiasm: she wants to share this happiness that is surging through her and is expressed through physical interaction.

The gap between the acts committed by these teenagers and the difficulties they have in managing them, or, on the contrary, how it helps some of them to blossom is well depicted in the film.
It is precisely this gap that interested me. Each character drifts into a new narrative dimension.
It's at that moment that Laetitia reveals her extraverted nature – she has no complexes in relation to what has been going on, yet she would never have taken part in such a thing if she hadn't been brought there.
Gabriel has the maturity to understand that he doesn't need to go that route in order to change. The introvert found the girl he is going to love, and it doesn't matter to him that it happened in the midst of the strangest and least intimate circumstances possible. It doesn't bother him. George, who wasn't able to control her energy, finds in him someone who can help her to channel it.

They are revealed to themselves but also must pay the price: STD, abortions, it's a heavy bill to pay. Should it be interpreted as a sort of penalty?
It's the price to pay, but as Laetitia says, there is penicillin, the morning-after pill, and that's fortunate. I truly see this as a stage in life that they needed to go through.

The orgy scenes reflect an incredible level of control…
There are filmmakers who are very much at ease with this type of scene, I'm not. In my mind, their interest lies in the way they work as an impetus, spurring each character ahead on his or her personal journey.
We started the shoot with those scenes: to relieve the pressure – on the actors and on the production team – and because I felt it would be interesting to enrich the following scenes with what was about to take place.
I wanted them to be beautiful: their violence shouldn't stop me from making them radiant.

Did you have specific references in mind?
I thought a great deal about Paul Thomas Anderson's *Boogie Nights*, which takes place in the world of pornography. We never remember it for the sex, but as a film where very endearing people go through crazy and difficult things, including William H. Macy's wife, who is taken in front of a dozen or so guys including her impotent husband. *Bang Gang (A Modern Love Story)* doesn't play with the comic vein at all, but I was looking for this same aspect in relation to nudity. For me it was important to show what the characters were feeling at that moment.
I was also pretty much obsessed with Wong Kar Wai and Gus Van Sant while making the film. Movies have been my staple diet for such a long time that there are certainly other references that must have popped up unconsciously.

Weren't you afraid that you had set your standards too high for a first feature film?
I thought, on the contrary, that I may not have the possibility of shooting a second feature, and so therefore I had to face my fears right now. I didn't want to censor myself. Better to try and fail than doing an average film! That's more like me.

The actors are quite exceptional. How did you find them?
The casting director and I spent a year and a half looking. We scoured every place possible in search of them: agents, theater workshops, metros, skate parks... Finnegan Olfield, who plays Alex, had already been in a short film. Since, he has worked with Tony Gatlif and Thomas Bidegain. His career is really taking off. Daisy Broom, who plays Laetitia, already had an agent. We found the actor who plays Gabriel in a theater workshop in the Parisian suburbs, and Marilyn Lima, who plays George, we found on the tumblr of a young photographer. Fred Hotier had already been in a music video. He was just incredible. I immediately knew he was Nikita.

Marilyn Lima makes you think of Brigitte Bardot while Daisy Broom has her phrasing.
It wasn't entirely involuntary. Daisy was blond and Marilyn was a brunette when we started out. It was hard for the actresses, but I changed their hair color (many of us associate our identity with our hair color) and they were a bit upset with me. Yet, I felt there was a powerful, mythical quality about George's mane of hair.

How did you work with these young actors who for the most part had very little or absolutely no experience?
I let them make the text their own all the while making sure to edit certain terms that would have been incomprehensible for most of the audience. We did a lot of rehearsing, more to learn how to trust one another than anything else. I very much insisted upon the fact that they had to visualize their bodies as those of dancers, and that their privacy wasn't at risk. Keeping their distance from the fictive story was essential in order for them not to become overwhelmed by the subject matter. Each movement was choreographed exactly like a dance sequence.
I was amazed by their generosity. That of the extras as well: I met them one by one to assess how they felt about nudity. On this type of shoot, there's no such thing as a character role. You have to be immediately accessible. Not only did I not want to torture my actors but I also believe in a fundamental principle: casting the right people. Rehearsals served above all to establish a climate of trust and, on the set, I was well aware that I had very little room to maneuver.

Did you ask them to watch specific movies?
Just before the film shoot I showed them *Boogie Nights, Paranoid Park* by Gus Van Sant and *Melancholia* by Lars von Trier: I wanted them to understand the direction in which I was taking them and I was trying to lessen their resistance. They absolutely had to let themselves be carried away by the film. Everyone played their part. It was very intense, it wasn't always easy - especially for Marilyn who didn't have any prior experience. In one or two scenes, I sometimes sensed she was in a very fragile state, but she trusted me.

You took a lot of additional risks in hiring first-time actors.
No, because I have often worked with non-professional actors on my short films. It would have been a greater risk if I had been working on a film with very well-known actors. I would have been the one in the hot seat.

Why did you move this current event to a Biarritz that is so difficult to identify?
It's an entirely imaginary Biarritz: an easy-living suburb that you can quickly make your way through, almost a peri-urban neighborhood. In Anglet, where the shoot actually took place, many of the houses, which were built in the 1970s, were bought by an emerging middle class. Many teachers settled there for the long-term. It was a perfect place for the film.

How much time did the film shoot take?
Two months. The film has many shots and different locations, and the scenes with teenagers needed a lot of time. I needed the two months. You can't just set up your camera and shoot: you have to massage the steer with beer to make it better tasting... Even though I had twice the time for editing, I felt that this stage of the production was dramatically too short compared to the first part.

The lighting in the film is absolutely wonderful. How did you meet the Danish director of photography?
Mattias Troesltrup and I went to the same film school, AFI in Los Angeles. A mutual friend said that we had to meet because we had a similar way of looking at things, so he introduced us. We worked a great deal with natural light. It was important to me. When you become attached to characters as sensitive as those in *Bang Gang (A Modern Love Story)* it's important to have depth in the shadows and specifically detailed lighting: it tells a lot about the characters.
I received some criticism in France for paying so much attention to the lighting in my previous short films, including Those for whom it's always complicated, a mid-length film that was screened on ARTE last year. Europe, and France in particular, tend to favor ugliness in the name of realism. It's as if ugliness were the only true reality. Any point of view is subjective by essence, you might as well own it. Thankfully in France my generation of filmmakers went beyond this post New-Wave burdensome heritage, because for too long, there were only the great Leos Carax and Claire Denis to free themselves from this trend. Lighting is the very essence of cinema. What is a film other than light projected onto a screen? Why should we pretend that every decision concerning lighting is only aesthetic by its nature? It's primarily narrative.

You first wanted to be an actress. In 1998, we saw you in Judith Cahen's La revolution sexuelle n'a pas eu lieu [The sexual revolution didn't happen]. Why did you change course?
When I was fourteen I was spotted in an open casting and I played a role in a feature film. At about the same time, Judith Cahen became my eldest brother's girlfriend and she offered me several roles in short films and then in a feature film. I took acting classes at the Conservatory in the 10th arrondissement in Paris, and I started auditioning. But I very quickly found myself dissatisfied with the direction I was receiving as an actress, and I had the impression that I could do better. I realized that I would be unhappy in this profession, it wasn't for me. At eighteen I decided to become a director.

Why did you study filmmaking in the United States?
Simply because La Femis rejected me when I was twenty. I had ranked first in the second round of exams and then the jury wiped the floor with me during the oral exam, where I was very intimidated. The members of the jury didn't believe in my desire to make films. With retrospect, I think it is appalling to say that to a twenty-year old kid. So I took entrance exams for schools abroad, including American schools, and I was accepted at Columbia University and AFI in Los Angeles. The institutions opened their doors wide and I got full scholarship. I went to Los Angeles. In the meantime, I followed a double degree course, studying English and Spanish literature. Going to study in the US was definitely an incredible opportunity for me. I don't know I would have benefited so much from what was being taught at La Femis in the late 1990s. In the end, they probably did me a favor.

Indeed *Bang Gang (A Modern Love Story)* does seem to have influences that are quite far from current French cinema.
My mother is of Spanish extraction and I always have had a perspective that was highly steeped in foreign cultures, Hispanic and American to be more specific. While I deeply love French culture, I thirst for other ways of telling stories. For example, I have been very influenced by magic realism in literature. It shaped my imagination. Studying in the United States also opened up for me a world of know-how: contrary to the widespread belief that filmmaking there works like an enormous, inflexible machine, what is developed in filmmakers there is a true cinematographic craft. An extremely deep and thorough research is conducted for each stage of creation: sound, lighting, whatever it may be, new avenues are systematically explored to further the story. This approach corresponds very well with my personality. In *Bang Gang (A Modern Love Story)*, the work we did on the sound is not very French.

Meaning?
There is a long-established tradition of sound spatialization in France. I didn't want bodies lost in space; on the contrary, I wanted to work on the voices from a much softer perspective, with lavalier mics, to obtain a greater proximity. I wanted a permanent intimacy with the actors. These aspects are not readily apparent, but they participate in the general feeling an audience gets from a film.

Tell us about the musical score, by White Sea.
We have a long history of friendship and working collaboratively on projects. I met Morgan while casting her in one of my first short films in 2001 in Los Angeles. We've been working together ever since, and she's become a musician. She has written a lot for M83, a band that is not very well-known in France, but enjoys a huge success in the United States, to whom I introduced her to. The challenge for both of us was to create a coherence between a very rhythmic music that was part of the diegesis of the film and an original soundtrack that would be lyrical. The film permanently walks a fine line, and even the party music had to at times go off track so it wouldn't become overbearing. It's the reason why I introduced a *lied* by Shubert for the third party. I find that the mixture of electronic music and classical music creates a fertile ground: both call upon very different trances, but they can prove to be rather complimentary.

Why did you want an electronic version of Véronique Sanson's song "Amoureuse" *[In love]*?
It's a crazy idea I had one morning… and it was quite complicated to make it happen. I think this song is sublime.

***Bang Gang (A Modern Love Story)* is bound to arouse serious controversy. How will you deal with that?**
Controversy is inherent to such a project. If the film doesn't receive violent reactions, it will mean that I have failed at my initial ambition. Bang Gang (A Modern Love Story) deals with issues that are naturally contentious. I'm bracing myself.

EVA HUSSON

Eva Husson has been a nomad most of her adult life, living between the United States, France, Spain, England and Porto Rico, but she was born and raised in France where she got a Master in English Literature (Summa Cum Laude) and a BA in Spanish Literature from the Sorbonne University. She went on to pursue a MFA in directing at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles. During her time at AFI, she collected scholarships and awards: the Franco-American Cultural Fund, the Mary Pickford award for excellence in directing, the Multicultural Motion Picture Association award, and a three-year ambassadorial Rotary scholarship.

Her first short film, *Hope to Die*, gained international recognition: nominations at the Student Academy Awards, the American Society of Cinematographers, and numerous prizes and screenings in some twenty festivals around the world (Cannes, Tribeca, Deauville, Los Angeles...).

In 2013, Eva directed and produced a medium-length film called *Those For Whom It's Always Complicated*, written in collaboration with the cast. The 50 minute film played the festival tour and was aired on the European TV channel Arte in 2014.

Bang Gang (A Modern Love Story) is Eva Husson's first feature film.

CAST

Alex	FINNEGAN OLDFIELD
George	MARILYN LIMA
Laetitia	DAISY BROOM
Gabriel	LORENZO LEFEBVRE
Nikita	FRED HOTIER

CREW

Director	EVA HUSSON
Screenwriter	EVA HUSSON
Cinematographer	MATTIAS TRŒLSTRUP
Production Designer	DAVID BERSANETTI
Editor	EMILIE ORSINI
Music	WHITE SEA
Sound	OLIVIER LE VAGON
Casting Director	BAHIJJA EL AMRANI
Script Supervisor	BAHIJJA EL AMRANI
Costumes	JULIE BRONES
1st Assistant Director	SOPHIE DAVIN
Line Producer	RÉMI BERGMAN
Production Manager	XAVIER FABRE
Producers	DIDAR DOMEHRI LAURENT BAUDENS GAËL NOUAILLE
French Distributor	AD VITAM
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