

1968: Rebellion & Free Love

Born in '68

REMINISCING ON 40 YEARS OF FREE LOVE, POLITICAL PROTEST, FAMILY VALUES AND SOCIAL UNREST,
BORN IN '68 FOCUSES ON THE HUMANITY OF THE LATE 20TH CENTURY EPOCH.

May 1968, a turning point in the cultural memory to the extent that documentaries, commentary, critique and political paraphernalia wax lyrical on its significance 40 years down the line. Contextualised as such, Oliver Ducastel and Jacques Martineau's *Born in '68* is a late uptaker, released in its native France earlier this year, and now showing at cinemas across the UK. Martineau recognises the year as symbolic of a transformation in French attitudes, with a "very deep resonance – we had proof of that in Sarkozy's presidential campaign, at the point when we were writing the movie. Proof that something changed very deeply in society. This is the line of the movie, the way that we consider the relationship that we have with other people and the empowerments that May 1968 gave over our body and the way we define our sexuality."

The epic saga runs the gamut of events from France's pivotal moment in 1968, through to Nicolas Sarkozy's debunking of the '68 myth on his election night. Ducastel and Martineau easily overload on epochs, as the film struggles to deal with the student riots, workers' rights, socialist utopia, free love, abortion, family values, immigration, capitalism, gay rights, AIDS and the perpetual oscillation between left and right.

On the periphery of the 1968 student riots, Laetitia Casta plays Catherine, who along with Yves and Herve, fluctuates between political confrontation and sexual trysts before escaping Paris to found a communal, collective idyll (at a healthy profit to one of their "socialist" hangers-on). More visibly their utopia is hampered by the capitalist society and the necessary evil of money sees the idealists gradually dissolve leaving Catherine and her two children while Yves settles into the conventionality of teaching in Paris. Catherine and Yves' children grow up to reject the free love mantra through a premature marriage to the Iranian Farivar (in Ludmilla's case) and to become an early victim of AIDS (in Boris' case). The generational differences are marked, and the previous generations talk of "the cause" from the isolation of their hotbed of hedonism

seems indulgent and empty in light of communism's failure and the startling mortality reeked by the interminable HIV virus.

On theatrical release, the plot becomes laboured, more appropriate to the two part, televised series for which it was originally intended, where the second part can afford to shine on its own merits aside from the clichés of the 1960s and 1970s. Because it's clear that the lifestyle of the children of 1968 is the filmmaker's familiar territory. Ludmilla and Boris find themselves in a much more complicated world, and the screenplay becomes so immersed in these characters that seismic international events like 9/11 are reduced to ignored news bulletins in the background. Of the plethora of issues which the film struggles to tackle, the onslaught of AIDS welcomes the most poignant treatment, with the raw emotion and anger of Boris and his late boyfriend, Christophe's struggle with the disease and the Active movement it inspired. "A lot of people say the second part is more moving, and probably more interesting because it's more personal. It's a part of my history, we all know the characters because we are older, almost 10 years older, but this is all the things that I lived."

Furthering the merits of the film's later years, Ludmilla's relationships with her husband and mother becomes increasingly complicated, learning imminently before her wedding of Catherine's seduction of Farivar, and the increasingly complex feminist issues that stem from her insistence on a monogamous relationship, while perusing her career goals in a separate country to her husband. Ludmilla's rejection of her parents' values is clear, but in rebelling through conventionality she finds herself torn between the restraints of a marriage and a career, her predicament is apt for the 21st Century woman who is expected to juggle it all.

But *Born in '68* opens with a barrage of clichés, as the direction launches head-first into a caricature of the free and easy 1960s, through promiscuity and freedom of choice. It's clear that the filmmakers are in unfamiliar territory





with, and Martineau's research process revolved around the fantasy of the 1968 lifestyle. "We read books, saw movies, documentaries and fiction. Nobody can say what is the historical truth, but I was more interested in the representation of the society at the time." Through interviews with "people, who lived at the time in the community, as adults, and as children" the community ethos was laid bare, but Martineau seems to make a conscious decision to represent a romanticised ideal for the most part. "The French press say the way we represent the community is too simple, in a way too typical, but what can we

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say? What can we represent of a community? People dancing in a meadow, that kind of image you see everywhere, that was the image they wanted to give to the world, obviously life was very different, but that's the way that they wanted people to see them."

As dancing in meadows fades with the spectre of 1968, Yves remains as a stand out character – one of society's most vocal critics, he is also one of the community's first deserters, failing to reject the deeply entrenched necessities of capitalism, but Martineau defends his opportunism: "I wouldn't be so mean with that character, he is as we all are very romantic. He really wanted to change the world. I wouldn't say that he has such a conventional life, he has a normal life, the life that we have. I recognise myself in him, I understand he always believes what he believes when he is young, but life is life. You have to get money, you have a family, you love your comforts, in a way, he's sliding slowly in a more quiet and normal life, and when Chirac is elected, when Le Pen is at the elections, he suddenly realises that he wasn't sharp enough and society changed in a way he didn't see. He's a sad character because he's so close to what I lived, you lose your illusions, but you don't realise they are going away." Despite Martineau's defence the characters of 1968 are firmly

entrenched in hypocrisy, constantly arguing for "the cause" that they fail to fight for or even represent. "We didn't want to represent people of May 1968 as horrible hypocrites who did protests when they were young, and 20 years on are the most important managers in industry. Those people exist and vote for the right, but I also know a lot of people who were at the barricades of 1968 but the way they now fight is different."

Practically, the events of May 1968 were a failure for the French left, with the country's right-wing leader, himself described by Martineau as "obviously a creature of 1968 – he is of foreign origin, he is divorced twice, he represents something that 30 years ago nobody would have accepted," the film enlightens us to its failures while showing everything that stemmed out of its events. In tackling so many issues *Born in '68* frequently falls short, but those areas that it successfully encroaches on, it does so with sympathy and heartbreak, and Martineau's screenplay represents the country's real struggle between constant oscillations of left and right ideology. "Now we are consumers, even the left-wing, but the left say we are citizens, and I think this distinction is really important."

Martineau describes the film's theatrical release as "very quick at the beginning, it was important to have a rapid movement to the present day, because we are obviously more interested in our present than our past." The film's four decade scope makes it difficult for its issues to be contextualised. The real interest, however, lies in what the film's creators felt and witnessed first hand: "I don't think we do movies to demonstrate anything, we do them to raise questions about what happened," and in raising these questions, the audience is there with the children of 1968, rather than in 1968 itself.

Born in '68 is screening now at cinemas across the UK. For further details please visit www.bornin68.org.

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