

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of an elderly woman's face, focusing on her eyes and skin texture. The image serves as the background for the movie poster.

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Société des réalisateurs de films  
CANNES 2016

# THE LIVES OF THÉRÈSE

A FILM BY SÉBASTIEN LIFSHITZ

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AGAT Films & Cie presents



# LES VIES DE THÉRÈSE

A FILM BY SÉBASTIEN LIFSHITZ

55 min – France – 2016 – Ratio 1.85 – Sound 5.1 – in French



A woman with long, flowing white hair is seen from the back, looking into a mirror. The mirror is framed by a dark wooden structure. In the reflection, the woman's face is visible; she has a serious, contemplative expression. She is wearing a white and black horizontally striped shirt under a brown, textured cardigan. The background in the reflection shows a brick wall and some indistinct objects. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of her hair and the details of her clothing.

# SYNOPSIS

Thérèse Clerc is one of France's fiercest activists. From abortion rights to sexual equality to homosexual rights, she has fought every battle. With the knowledge that she is dying from an incurable illness, she decides to give a tender and lucid last look at what was her life, her battles and her loves.



# AN INTERVIEW WITH SÉBASTIEN LIFSHITZ

## WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF THIS FILM?

I met Thérèse while shooting *Les Invisibles*, in which she participated. During the shoot, we developed a very strong bond. I had the feeling of becoming close to her through her telling me about her life, introducing me to her children, letting me film in her home. In the years that followed, well after the film's release, this bond only strengthened.

Three months ago, Thérèse phoned to tell me that she was suffering from an incurable disease and that she had little time left to live. Despite her age, 88, she had always seemed eternal to me. Even a few weeks before her passing, her agenda was full of appointments, interventions in congresses, symposiums and other political events. Since 1968, Teresa threw herself into battle and led many struggles. She fought for women, for homosexuals, for the right to abortion, for the condition of the elderly, immigrants. She protested against all colonial and post-colonial wars. She was a part of all struggles. A final one was left for her to lead. And that was the reason for her call. She asked bluntly for me to come film her last few remaining weeks

that remained because she wanted to die standing, in action. She wanted to show a glorious image of someone's departure.

## HOW DID YOU REACT TO SUCH AN ALARMING REQUEST?

I was shocked at first. I obviously did not expect the announcement of her illness any more than I had imagined I would find myself one day filming her «to the end». Immediately, questions were spinning in my head, even if one thing was certain: I could not say no to Thérèse. I ended the phone call by saying that I would do it and that we needed to discuss it.

## HOW DID YOU IMAGINE FULFILLING HER REQUEST?

One of the first questions I asked was what I was going to film exactly and what I was going to tell. Did I want to film someone dying? How far should I go? Could everything be shown? Could I make a film about someone who requests to be watched up to her last breath? While on the way to her house in Montreuil, a form of terror came over







me. There was no way for me to go beyond certain limits, even if Thérèse asked me and it was hard for me to refuse her anything. Strangely, part of me was upset by her request, because she revealed suddenly all the affection and trust she had in me. This role she offered me was crazy, dangerous, but touched something deep within me. When I arrived at her Montreuil apartment, I discovered a weak woman, her body emaciated and troubled breathing. Fortunately, Thérèse did not suffer. She looked me straight in the eyes, with infinite tenderness, then she smiled at me.

#### **WHAT DID THE SHOOT CONSIST OF?**

I filmed her in her home, which she rarely left. We did extensive interviews retracing the path of her life and how she was living her approaching death. I found she spoke both boldly and with commitment, but the sickness had made her into a fragile state which was particularly moving for the interviews. Her voice became more intimate. She had been used to public speaking, and now she found a softer, calmer tone. Of course, I asked her why she wanted to make this film. Without hesitation, she replied that it was a militant act. She considered death, like old age, to be taboo in our culture and it was necessary to show it, give a testimony about it. I guessed she probably also needed a crutch to get through this last path. Something that would allow her to communicate with herself.

#### **HOW DID HER FAMILY, HER CHILDREN, REACT TO THE IDEA OF THE FILM AND THE PRESENCE OF A FILM CREW?**

It was not simple. To my surprise, Thérèse had not informed her children about the making of

this film. Although I already knew Isabelle, Agnes, Jean-Marie and Vincent, they were very surprised to see me the first day of shooting in their mother's apartment. Thérèse left me to handle them on my own. The children immediately banned me from filming them. They did not want to be a part of their mother's «crazy» request. Above all, they were hurt by the idea of being taken hostage by Thérèse's desire to impose a film crew on them in such a dramatic period. Of course I understood their reluctance. Fortunately, friendship united us, through the experience of having participated in my film *Les Invisibles*, we were able to overcome this misunderstanding. I explained to them that if they were not in the picture, the film probably could not tell anything other than the story of a woman who died alone. This idea disappointed them because they were so devoted to their mother. They could not imagine letting her die alone, not even on the screen. After consideration, they finally accepted the idea of the film.

#### **DID THE FILM'S STRUCTURE COME TO YOU QUICKLY?**

ÇIt took time. At first, I filmed without knowing where I was going. Then by speaking to Theresa with her children, I started to understand the movie I wanted to do. During our first filmed interview, all her children said they had not had the same mother. Jean-Marie was born in 1949, Isabelle in 1961. During that stretch of time, society changed, and Thérèse herself changed so quickly that the relationships she had with her children were extremely different for each one. When she gave birth to Jean-Marie, Thérèse was married, heterosexual, a young housewife. She obeyed the most conventional rules of women's status in



the 50s. When Isabelle was born, 12 years had already gone by. Thérèse had become an ardent supporter of the ideas of the German psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich who invited among others to lead a revolutionary struggle for the total liberation of mankind, in the social, economic and sexual domains, especially by breaking taboos about marriage, family and private property. She had become someone else, another woman with an acute political awareness.

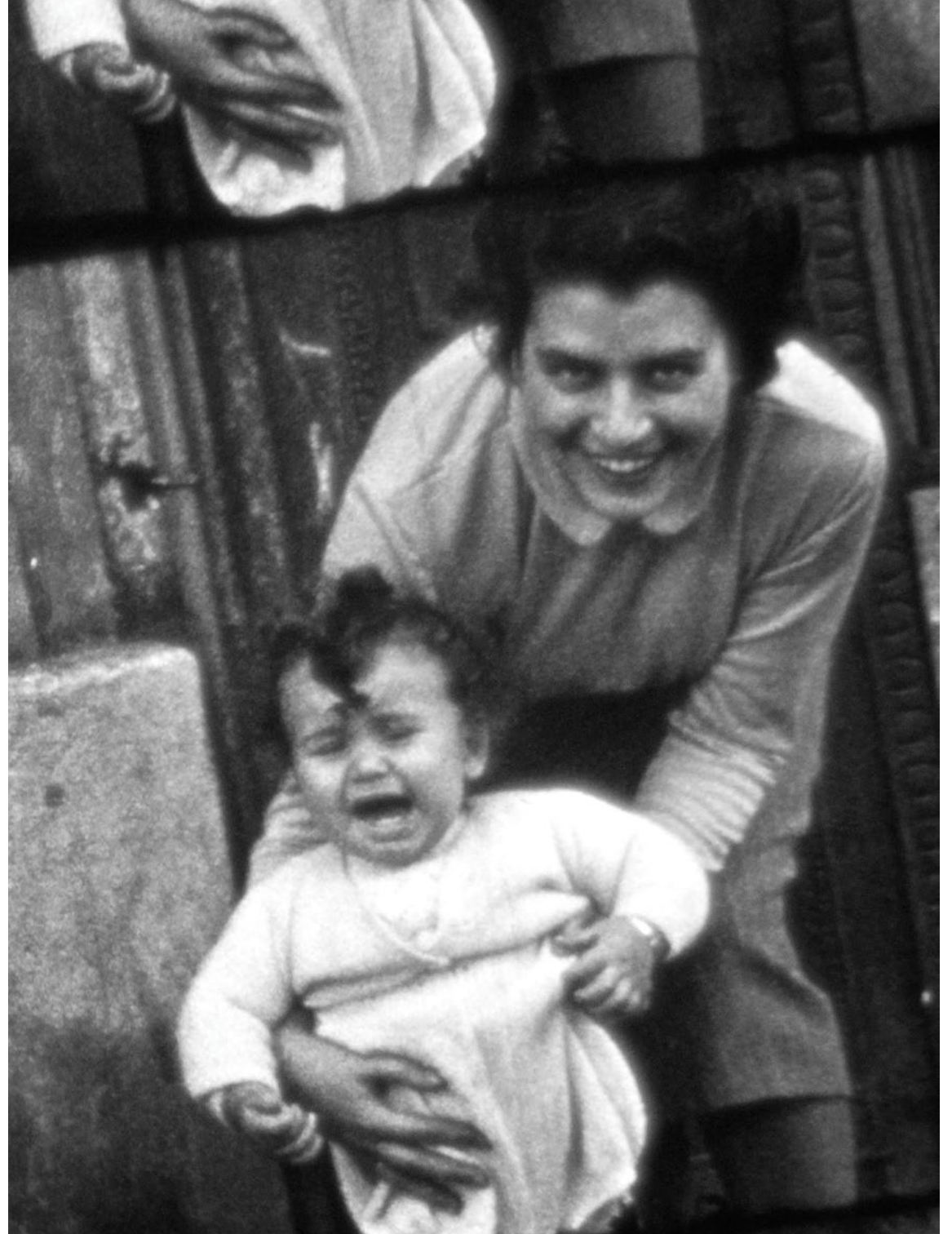
**HOW DID YOU AVOID FALLING INTO AN EXTENSION OF «LES INVISIBLES» SINCE THÉRÈSE'S LIFE IS LARGELY TOLD IN THAT FILM?**

Pauline Gaillard, the editor of the film, and I were aware of the pitfalls of not reproducing the story of Les Invisibles. We had to invent another form to evoke both Thérèse's past and present. When we saw the rushes, we realized that the emotion and the strength of the footage came from simple everyday things like seeing Thérèse wash or eat, or cross a room step by step. Everything took an unexpected power. And then there was also the importance of the sleep scenes. I filmed Thérèse sleeping a lot and it was beautiful to watch. She seemed happiest in

those moments, a sense of relief. Sleep and dreams quickly became the base of the story. What goes on in the head of a woman who knows she has been condemned and who sleeps most of the time: what does she think about? What's left of her existence? What memories flutters in her conscience and her dreams? It is from these moments that we tried to make the film depart from reality to give it a more poetic and mental shape with the recurrent use of Thérèse's voice-over.

**WHILE MAKING LES «VIES DE THÉRÈSE», DID YOU THINK OF ANY OTHER FILMS?**

In cinema history, there are few stories of similar agony, but the existing ones remain in memory. I could name a few that particularly struck me, like *Nick's Movie* (Wim Wenders), *My Sister Yoka* (Johan Van der Keuken), *No Home Movies* (Chantal Akerman) or the film by Naomi Kawase about her grandmother. Through these documentary works, I realized very quickly that I did not want to make a film somehow giving the advantage to death, letting it win at the end of the story. On the contrary, I decided I would try a film that remained on the side of life to continue the work and struggles of Thérèse.





2016 LES VIES DE THERESE  
 (THE LIVES OF THERESE)  
 2013 BAMBI  
 2012 LES INVISIBLES  
 2009 PLEIN SUD  
 (GOING SOUTH)  
 2006 LES TEMOINS  
 2004 WILD SIDE  
 2001 LA TRAVERSEE  
 (THE CROSSING)  
 2000 PRESQUE RIEN  
 (COME UNDONE)  
 1999 LES TERRES FROIDES  
 (COLD LANDS)  
 1998 LES CORPS OUVERTS  
 (OPEN BODIES)  
 1995 CLAIRE DENIS LA VAGABONDE  
 1994 IL FAUT QUE JE L'AIME

## SÉBASTIEN LIFSHITZ

After studying art history, Sébastien Lifshitz began working in the world of contemporary art in 1990, assisting curator Bernard Blistène at the Pompidou Center, and photographer Suzanne Lafont. In 1994, he turned to filmmaking with his first short, *Il faut que je l'aime*.

In 1995, he made a documentary about film director Claire Denis, and in 1998 he completed his mid-length feature *Open Bodies*, which was selected for numerous international film festivals, including Cannes and Clermont-Ferrand, and won the Prix Jean Vigo and the Kodak Award for Best Short Film. In 1999, he directed *Cold Lands* for Arte as part of their series *Gauche-Droite*. The film was selected for the Venice Film Festival.

In 2000, he directed his first full-length feature, *Come Undone*, hailed by the critics and released internationally. In 2001, his second full-length feature, a documentary - road movie entitled *The Crossing*, was selected for the Director's Fortnight in Cannes. In 2004 he began shooting *Wild Side*, which went on to be selected for numerous international festivals and won, among other awards, the Berlin Film Festival's Teddy Award. In 2009 he shot *Going South*, which was selected for the 2010 Berlin Film Festival. Then in 2012, he directed *Les Invisibles*, a documentary film selected in Cannes Film Festival in the Official Selection. The film won the César (French Academy Award) for Best Documentary of 2013. That same year, he completed the documentary *Bambi* which was presented at the Berlin Film Festival, where it won the Teddy Award. In 2014, Sébastien Lifshitz received the «Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres.»



# MAIN CREW

Director  
Image  
Sound

Sébastien LIFSHITZ  
Paul GUILHAUME  
Clément LAFORCE  
Yolande DECARSIN  
Pauline GAILLARD  
Carole VERNER  
Alexandre WIDMER  
Isabelle LACLAU  
Cécile PERLÈS  
Cécile NIDERMAN  
Hannah TAÏEB

Editor  
Sound Editor  
Mix  
Grading  
Assistant Editor  
Documentalist  
Production Manager

Producer  
A production  
with the participation of  
a collaboration

and the

Muriel MEYNARD  
AGAT Films & Cie  
CANAL+  
Création originale documentaire /  
Courts et créations  
Centre National du Cinéma  
et de l'image animée





## SCREENINGS IN CANNES

### **Press Screening**

Monday, May 16<sup>th</sup> – 12:15 PM / Théâtre Croisette

### **Official Screening**

Monday, May 16<sup>th</sup> – 5:00 PM / Théâtre Croisette

### **Reruns**

Tuesday, May 17<sup>th</sup> – 11:30 AM / Cinéma Les Arcades

Tuesday, May 17<sup>th</sup> – 6:30 PM / Studio 13