

## True Story

Directed by Amine Lakhnech

- TMFF CRITIQUE REVIEW -

### CRITIQUE TAGLINE:

"A terrifying modern fairy tale about the pure essence of evil that dwells within us."

### SYNOPSIS

Deeply affected by the malformation of her new-born daughter, a mother is willing to make any sacrifices to repair this biological error. However, the price charged for invoking the forces of darkness may be too high.

### COMMENT ON THE IDEA

#### Premises

*The inception of a film lies in its idea which arises out of a sudden, unpolished and very short. Nothing is yet certain or clear, the story threads haven't found their way, and the characters... most of them haven't yet been discovered.*

*When viewing a film, the idea is usually the first one that stands out and has the power to set a film apart from its precursors or its contemporary kindreds. This is why it is utterly important for it to be well thought over and have the power to make the film look original and captivating.*

#### Particularities

Inspired somewhat by both contemporary folklore haunted by people's ancestral fears, and by the aesthetics of fairy tales or magical realism, this short film explores in a fantasy-like way the trauma of a mother confronting an inexplicable curse that condemns her daughter to a bizarre malformation. The director thus attacks the theme of the human soul faced with a crisis situation using elements detached from a magical gothic universe from which occultism and demonism are not lacking, to construct through an experimental cinematic aesthetic a painful and terrifying foray into the despair of a mother who struggles with the invisible spectrum of a cruel Creator. The result is more than spectacular, since the director proves the talent needed to combine a series of disparate literary and cinematic influences into a magnetic and innovative product that seems to have only incidental similarities to other works of the same genre. Thus, Tim Burton's gothic universe (as it appears rather in his short animation *Vincent* – where the famous director uses Vincent Price's voice as a narrative voice, in a manner similar to this short film's), but lacking the candour of his protagonists, the monochrome interface short-circuited by blood-red images of films such as *Sin City* series, the characters seemingly inspired by Gabriel Garcia Márquez's or Mathias Malzieu's novels combine in a dense, nightmarish and fascinating cinematic substance that reconfigures a rather unexplored cinematic genre, a kind of gothic folk magic realism area.

The idea is **Excellent**.

### STORY AND SCRIPT OVERVIEW

#### Premises

*The script is the 'arena' where the idea gets processed. Characters are designed and shaped, the story details and events are imagined, and the environment for the personages to manifest themselves is created: with all its psychological, emotional and social layers.*

*A very important part is usually played by the ending which, in its aim to either serve a turning point to the story, surprise the viewer or make them contemplate about what they have just witnessed, it is supposed to reveal the layers of meanings and 'score' the main emotion of the film.*

*This is why the script is so important: it will dictate the rank achieved by the subject of the film on the scale of its maximum potential. The script is the first element that can elevate or degrade a film.*

#### Particularities

Adopting the stylistic conventions of a cinematic modern fairy tale in which the grave voice of a narrator accompanies us through the darkness of the fictional universe, the script uses a

series of familiar elements that we find not only in the stories of the Brothers Grimm, for example, but also in the most important writings of this kind from all over the world: a birth curse, a mysterious disease, an unknown visitor, an incredible cure, a dangerous compromise, etc. However, despite these structural premises, the short film is far from being a faithful adaptation of an already established story, since the author pushes the fictional convention to a more experimental area, creating a contrast between the narrative thread and its cinematic materialization that is far from adopting the principles of a “classic” film. The fairy-tale-like interface of the entire storyline is a pretext through which the author explores people’s ancestral fear of the unpredictability of the destiny that governs us, creating a metaphor for the sacrifice by which the despair of the individual most often manages to potentiate the power of the inner demons. In fact, the author / director seems to be inspired by the original formula of a medieval fairy tale, taking with striking fidelity the specific violence of these writings, which were unfairly attributed to children’s literature modern category. Thus, the absence of a happy-ending, the violent contact between human suffering and the magnetism of demonic characters, the gothic atmosphere that captures human misery in all its forms (all being constituents of an authentic fairy tale) form in this short film a profound and shocking narrative basis that explores the universality of human emotions that are the same, regardless of the place and time of the story. Indeed, there is a risk that the final sequence in which we find out the true identity of the narrator will not be highly appreciated by all readers / viewers, since the author attacks in a manner that may be too obvious the moralizing dimension of a fairy tale, but this aspect doesn’t diminishes the general effect produced by the whole project.

The story and the script both get a **Very Good**.

#### ACTORS AND ACTING

##### Premises

*Acting brings a film to life. Whether it is done through the actors’ naturalness or their intense impersonation of the characters, acting should always remain credible and convincing and most of all should have the power to stimulate the public to interact with the story and make them empathise with its protagonists.*

*It is up to both the director’s ability to guide the actor towards the personality they have envisioned for their character and to the actors’ ability to transpose themselves into this ‘skin’ that will make the film look genuine and convincing.*

##### Particularities

Even though the major role in triggering the viewer’s emotions is assured by the cinematographic mechanism and the chromatic convention that accentuates the reactivity of the characters, the actors do an extraordinary work, managing to surprise through their facial and corporal expressiveness both the authenticity of the shock felt in the face of the inexplicable divine punishment and that minimal artificial degree specific to fairy-tale protagonists that interact with their social environment through a slightly pronounced pathos.

Actors’ work is **Very Good**.

#### DIALOGUE

##### Premises

*Dialogue should never, ever ‘be’ the film. Dialogue always comes in to ‘help’ the visual story. The most common thing that happens with dialogue, making it a diminishing factor for a film (sometimes even a flaw), is that it becomes ‘explanatory’. The dialogue should always remain ‘suggestive’ and ‘real’: in accordance with the characters’ natures and feelings.*

*The dialogue’s main ‘talent’ is to sustain the image and make it ‘steam’ otherwise hidden messages or to contribute to the atmosphere, to reveal psychologies, to help harness the conflicts between the personages and so on. Dialogue itself is an art.*

##### Particularities

The dialogue respects, as mentioned above, the principles of a modern fairy tale melted in the mould of a magnetic and percussive cinematic experiment, the author / director using both the spectator’s interaction with an omniscient narrator (who, we find out eventually, is the Devil), and conventional dialogic sequences that ensure the evolution of the narrative thread. The result is more than intriguing, since the dialogue becomes an integral part of a macrostructure, contributing

to the enhancement of the image, just as the image and the other shooting strategies give the textual dimension a special aura through which the narrative itself goes beyond the strictly fictional framework of the story, in order to talk about the universality of humans' reactivity faced with the injustice of fate or with the imminence of their own extinction in the proximity of the forces of darkness.

Dialogue is **Very Good**.

## CINEMATOGRAPHY & EDITING

### Premises

*Cinematography, it is easy to guess, is maybe the most important element of a finished film. It not only has the power to make a film pleasant to watch and raise its quality through its good 'looks' (aesthetics) but it also plays an utterly important role in establishing the mood and atmosphere of a film and sustain the harnessing of the emotion behind it. Cinematography leaves a powerful print on the 'story telling' of the film and that is why it should never be neglected or treated with shallowness. Colours, light, framing, camera movements, they are all concurring to generating emotion.*

*Editing will give the film's pace and will guide over a correct visual grammar - of course, as long as the cinematography 'took the time' to respect it. It is literally a talent to cut at the right moment and the right pace (and this is beyond just cutting between matching shots).*

### Particularities

Without mentioning in detail some of the most relevant influences listed above (the aesthetic inflections taken from Tim Burton or the *Sin City* series attributed to a narrative structure inspired by the writings of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, etc.), this short film falls within the cinematic experiments area where the director juggles with the structure and composition of the image to coagulate a compact and obsessive fictional universe. Thus, recalling somewhat the atmosphere of films essential to revolutionizing experimental cinematic language, such as *Begotten*, or feature films that shape gothic typologies in contemporary narrative structures, such as *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, this short film relies on the claustrophobia effect induced to the spectator through manipulating the dimensions or the chromaticity of the image, through the sudden changes between the objective and subjective perspective of the protagonists, through the striking contrasts between light and darkness that push the characters' reactions towards a macabre area. The gothic atmosphere is thus ensured not only by an excellent acting and narrative support, but also by a good mastering of the cinematic language the director shapes in an intelligent and nonconformist project, using also some of the specificities of the theatrical language. Not coincidentally, the composition of the image, the successive spaces depicted by the director enjoy a suggestive scenography, based on a series of symmetrical principles, which becomes a material extension of the tormented soul of the protagonists who are in search of self-salvation.

Cinematography and Editing both get an **Excellent**.

## MUSIC

### Premises

*Music tends to have a great impact on a film. If the music is too dramatic it will tend to take the lead in driving the emotion and if the story, the visuals and the editing are not at least meeting the same expectations with music (they should probably exceed them) then the film will feel fake and the music exaggerated.*

*There is also a matter of fitting the theme: while some music will be in total 'sync' with the theme, other will sound inconsistent with the film's genre but surprisingly will have the power to cast a different perspective over the story and generate an original feeling.*

*Choosing music needs just as much fine tuning as anything else in the filmmaking trial.*

### Particularities

Instrumental music is a sort of second skin of the short film that fits on the structure of the image, to enhance the effect of gothic, macabre, magic. Used both as an element that ensures the grave atmosphere of the sacred spaces or rituals through which the protagonist desperately seeks a solution, as well as a natural interface for the extreme emotional reaction of the characters, the music is used in a conventional manner by the director, but its effect is decisive in coagulating the components of the entire short film.

Music is **Excellent**.

### DIRECTOR'S VISION

#### Premises

*The director's vision leads everything on set and brings all the film elements together in a final result. The director's vision reflects the dedication, the patience, the knowledge, the will, the artistic discernment and eventually - as a sum of the previous mentioned - the talent invested in the film. The director leaves their print on every aspect of the final outcome. The director's vision is the ultimate fine tuning of the film and it is the manifesting force that makes a film great.*

#### Particularities

Amine Lakhnech is definitely a director with great creative potential, proving through this short film not only a good mastering of the cinematic language, but also an interesting intuition regarding the exploration of narrative dimensions apparently familiar to the general public. Far from being a filmmaker whose projects are intended for the general public, Amine Lakhnech has the creative profile of an art film director who pushes the consecrated conventions to another level, reconsidering the philosophical and human consistency of fairy tales that explore the ancestral fears of humanity. His great challenge, however, remains how he will be able to attack the structure of a feature film, maintaining at the same intensity the overwhelming force of the atmosphere of his fictional universes throughout the project.

### FILM ENDING AND ARRAY OF MEANINGS

**True Story** updates the narrative structure of a fairy-tale to explore the boundary areas of the human soul willing to make any sacrifices to reach a self-salvation. As the title suggests, the entire experiment uses a (modern) fairy tale principle that claims to authenticate a fantastic event to enhance emotional connections with the viewer. Without detailing all the aforementioned aspects, this short film proposes an incursion into the darkness of the human soul, illustrating with an impressive visionary force the individual's oscillation between good and evil, between sacred and demonic.

### FINAL CONCLUSIONS

**True Story** is a thrilling, deep and magnetic experimental short film that combines elements taken from the fairy-tale atmosphere and the magical realist universes of some of the most important directors and writers in a homogenous and nonconformist product. Amine Lakhnech is a director with an extraordinary potential who, although won't please the general public tastes, has all the data to fascinate the niche audience with the power of his vision.

Reviewed by Andrei C. Șerban

