

ARCHIPEL 35 present

history OF a secret

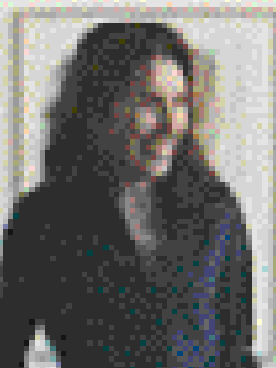
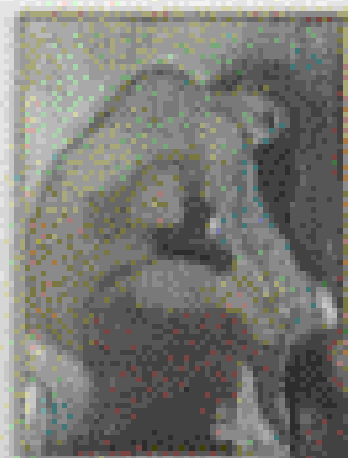
a film by
Mariana Otero

Production and Distribution :
ARCHIPEL 35
52, rue Charlot
75003 Paris
Tél : 01 42 72 10 70
Fax : 01 42 72 41 12
archipel35@wanadoo.fr
www.archipel35.fr

DVD edition
Blaq out
52, rue Charlot
75003 Paris
Tél : 01 42 77 88 20
Fax : 01 42 77 88 19
www.blaqout.com

**FRENCH RELEASE
15 OCTOBER 2003**

Duration : 1 h 35





SYNOPSIS

When I was four and a half, my mother disappeared. My family told my sister and me that she had gone to work in Paris. A year and half later, our grandmother admitted that she had died of an appendix operation.

Later, throughout our childhood and youth, our father didn't speak to us about our mother, except to repeat that she had been an extraordinary painter and woman. He had locked her paintings in a cupboard and put the photos away in a drawer that we were not allowed to open. Although I sometimes disobeyed, I never really showed any great curiosity about the woman who was my mother and whose face I didn't even recognize in photos.

When our father finally decided to tell us about our mother, it was to reveal the real circumstances of her death. This secret that my father had carried alone for 25 years had prevented him from telling us about her life and showing us her work.

In breaking this taboo, he returned our mother to us. But the successive lies had erased from my memory even the slightest recollection of her death.

I felt compelled to reconstruct her life and discover the woman who had been snatched from me twice, both by her death and by the ensuing secrecy.

She was a painter. I am a filmmaker. In the absence of memories, her paintings and my film could lead me to her.

HISTORY OF A SECRET

As a documentary maker, I have always told other people's stories. Here, I was confronted with the difficulty of telling my own. But I knew that I would have trouble focussing on other subjects as long as I hadn't managed to re-appropriate my own history.

THE SECRET

Telling this story was not only a matter of telling the secret. I also needed to impart the specific experience of this secret and its revelation to the viewer. I did not want to speak about the secret, discuss or explain, but rather create a cinematic equivalent for the way I experienced it.

The story was to be like a puzzle whose pieces accumulate without finding their place until the revelation throws them all up in the air while at the same time giving them meaning.

When my father tells the truth about my mother's death, I wanted the viewer to undergo the same mental operation as that experienced by somebody who is being told a secret: he or she suddenly has to go back, rethink and revisit his or her own history.

When the group photos appear with my mother in the middle, we don't know who she is. The viewer looks for her and without knowing it, goes through what I went through. Experience precedes the story. The film's structure reflects this.

THE STORIES

On one hand, there was the story as I knew it up until then and with which I had made do despite its missing parts and dark corners. On the other hand, there was the one I had just learned. Although it was disturbing, it had given meaning to the improbable.

There were also the many similar stories, still hidden and taboo - this political and social history to which I belonged without knowing it. There was the revelation of the secret as well as the description of my mother's last days and her death.

And finally, my desire to give form to a presence, using cinematic means, to a dead and forgotten mother, making visible the invisible and filling the absence.

I wanted many things in this film and I needed to find a structure that would bring together all these scattered pieces, true and false, before and after, individual and collective, life and death, my mother and me... The political and narrative challenge in this film was to bring together what had been kept apart by secrecy, taboo and the law.

REPRESENTING THE ABSTENTE MOTHER

I wanted the film to be inhabited by my mother Clotilde Vautier, and for it to evoke things that cannot be seen or heard. I wanted to make her presence felt despite her absence. The trip, the visits, the landscapes, the way the images are framed and the dialogues had to allow us to approach the men and women who are no longer here. The film became a meeting place or a passageway between the living and the dead.

When I shot the modeling sessions in my parents' old apartment, I was not interested in a reconstitution. Rather, I wanted my mother's presence to spring from her paintings. They are traces of past moments that I attempt to reveal. For the models and for myself, being back in that apartment triggered an unsettling emotion that bridged past and present.

The film was edited with this in mind: giving the film a poetic dimension to allow absence to take form.

The shots had to suggest something other than themselves: something distant off-camera, something from beyond that pierces the present.

This off-camera element is suggested partly by silence. It is as important as speech. While shooting, attention was focussed on words and atmosphere. Yet during the sound editing, we worked a lot on silences and its minute variations.

Music contributes to giving my mother a presence, accompanying the moments when I discover the paintings. It is like my mother's voice, her chant, that makes itself heard after a long silence before fading. It comes out of the paintings slowly, in snatches, becoming more complex and gathering momentum until it becomes a melody that accompanies the exhibition.

CONSTRUCTION

It sits at the crossover between fiction and documentary.

Unlike my other documentaries where the scenario came together during shooting and editing, here I had a script. I wrote the starting point for each scene, but obviously I did not know the responses my questions would generate. Based on the answers, on what happened, I adapted the scenes and at times, I felt I was writing the story at the same time I experienced it.

For example, I had not planned to tell my aunt and uncle the secret on camera. As the scene unraveled it became clear to me that I had to speak.

Most of the time, with the models, with my father and my sister, we told each other things that we had never said before. My father waited until the last day of shooting to reveal my mother's last words. If he hadn't taken the initiative, I never would have dared ask him.

I chose shooting locations for their evocative power. I looked for places where something important had taken place. I hoped that seeing these places would make memories resurface. I favored everyday settings, where relationships had been forged over the years, to allow the different protagonists to feel comfortable. Beyond the simple evocation of everyday life, they were to encourage a loosening of tongues, giving on to a space off-camera filled with the absent and the dead. The way shots were framed, the sets and the lighting were based on this.

Every bit as important as the places was the way they were inhabited by bodies and lighting. With my sister, to evoke our imaginary relationship with our mother, I felt we had to be sitting next to each other, very close, like we had never done before. This physical closeness threw us back into childhood and we told each other things we had never said before. Being on screen was also a way of presenting a relationship, a story that is told by body language as well as words. With my father, the car was an ideal setting because we could look into the distance and avoid eye contact while remaining in an enclosed and intimate space.

MY MOTHER'S PAINTINGS

My mother's paintings are what I have left of her. They are a trace of her life, her movements and her thoughts. They also represent a metaphor of the secret. They were hidden along with the circumstances of her death. Each of the important characters in this story owns at least one of her paintings.

At the same time as I uncover the secret, I seek out these paintings. I take them out of the cupboard, bring them together and exhibit them, finally. I really did see these paintings for the first time while the film was being shot. It was partly the perspective and analysis of the restorer that allowed me to transcend the emotion that had always overcome me when I looked at them. Today, I feel I have come closer to my mother thanks also to the way I look at her paintings.

The paintings are wonderful. They represent a fulfilled, happy and free woman, in unfortunate contrast to the causes of her death.

These bodies are also in a way all the women that the film speaks of. Today, all of this resonates in my mother's paintings.

THE REVELATION

When I learned at the age of 30 that my mother had died of a back-alley abortion, I was stupefied. It was hard to admit that it could have happened to her, that this event was suddenly part of her history, my history and that of my family's. I couldn't believe I had lived so long without knowing the real causes of her death. As for many women of my generation, the tragedies linked to abortion belonged to a distant and forgotten past.

My stupor turned into revolt and anger. I could not allow that she had died almost illegally, surrounded by shame and secrecy. As the victim of an unfair law, silence had made her a culprit.

When I first dared talk about the circumstances of my mother's death, I realized that other families had been through the same horror and in most cases, secrecy had been maintained, particularly with the children.

I observed that old or recent historical publications barely mentioned women who died after back-alley abortions, or only in statistical terms. It was as if these tales did not reveal our political and social history.

The legalization of abortion did not make it easier to talk about it, nor did it reduce the guilt of which the women and their families were victims. They were not rehabilitated. There were no apologies. Annie Ernaux stresses this in her book "The Event": "The paradox of a fair law is almost always that it obliges the old victims to keep quiet in the name of "that's all over now," to the point where the same silence as before covers up what took place." These tales are still confined to the guilt-ridden and guilt-inducing privacy of families.

I had never had the impression that I was living with a secret and this situation was unbearable. I had to break the silence. My film had to participate in lifting and destroying once and for all the secrecy within my family to restore its political and social dimension. I hoped to contribute to facilitating discussion that had remained blocked and which, with the death of the fathers, would be forgotten forever.

MY FATHER

I could never have made the film without his permission. He supported me from the start of the project because the secret weighed down on him too heavily. He was aware that telling his story would help other families and do them justice. The collective part of his secret that I would evoke in the film would relieve him of the weight of his individual guilt.

He gave me carte blanche. I did not show him the script so that he would not prepare for my questions. I did not want him to consider the final result but rather, be really with me in the here and now of each scene. He lent himself to this method fully, with no fear or holding back.

The making of the film was surely painful for him but also did him good.

RESEARCH

I did research to find families and doctors who would testify. In most of the families I met, secrecy was still being maintained and nobody agreed to talk in front of the camera.

Doctors from Rennes - the city where my parents lived - put up a strong resistance. While they all agreed to answer my questions, some affirmed that there had been no deaths "in this quiet, peaceful town." It was clearly false. My history and others prove it. These doctors did not want to recognize that that they had simply not known about it and even, among themselves, 30 years later, they don't talk about it.

Others told me there was no point going back to that time, sometimes put bluntly in expressions such as, “Don’t stir up shit.” They said that going back to the past would “tarnish my mother’s image”. For me, the silence surrounding the real circumstances of her death is the real negation of her memory.

Then I met Joëlle Brunerie-Kauffmann and I found a doctor and an activist. She was able to conjure up an entire page of our history in a few moving and precise sentences.

Her testimony is important because it links my history to others. It gives the context and transmits this painful past. If it is not handed down, future doctors risk “forgetting” the extent to which performing an abortion is above all a militant act that saves women from the worst anxieties, mutilation and even death.

PRODUCTION

Denis Freyd, right from the birth of the project, always listened to me and gave support with great delicacy and confidence. Although he left me complete freedom, his perspective was essential. He served as guarantor before the risk of me losing the plot, reminding me at times of my own ideas on the film, those I had expressed in the preparatory working sessions. When the film was being shot and edited, plunged into a sometimes-overwhelming reality, I could have forgotten them.

Mariana Otero



isabel otero, interview

What did you think when your sister told you of her wish to make “History of a Secret”?

When she told me that she intended to write this film, I thought it was great that she finally wanted to visit the past. When we were kids, I was the one who wanted to put words to our story. I wanted to understand. I was emotional, whereas Mariana was silent and didn't want to know. Later, I became an actor and Mariana, in making documentaries, was more interested in other people's stories. I think this is no accident. We didn't experience and will never experience this event in the same way. When she said she wanted to appear on camera, I felt implicitly that she was creating a bridge between us. I immediately wanted to read what she had written but Mariana knew that, for the sake of her film, I had to agree to let myself go, to be surprised, to know nothing of the paths she would take us along. From the start, I trusted her completely. Starting with a family secret, she constructed a tale free of any indulgence. She made it bigger and offered it to a wide public, by looking at the existence of another more general secret and a possible reconstruction. She allows something wonderful: bringing our mother, Clotilde, back to life in an almost palpable manner. All these years, in denying her death, we stopped ourselves from letting her exist. Through the puzzle that Mariana constructs, she slowly appears behind her paintings, in her energetic defense of her life and convictions. Suddenly, she takes back her place as a being that exists.

You are directed, but the director is your sister and the structure of “History of a Secret” is at the crossover between fiction and documentary. How did you approach this unusual experience?

I never felt like an actress when I embarked on this project. Above all I saw myself as accompanying her and listening to her desire to remember. She didn't tell me anything about the screenplay but once I told her what I thought was in it. To my surprise, she answered, “Have you read it?” I hadn't read it but I know my sister! I have a great love and infinite admiration for her. I could only follow her and give myself over to our reunion. Our solidarity has sometimes been built on our respective solitude but it has lasted over the years. Being with her at a time like that could only make me proud.

In the film, we sense you have already distanced yourself from your history...

It's true that I've distanced myself. The truth revealed in the film is now ten years old. I mourned for my mother earlier, during a necessary analysis. The secret revealed marked the end of my quest and offered me the missing link in my understanding. I'm convinced that we have to know our past to build our future. From there, this story became my mother and father's, even though I was tragically caught up in it. I could put it behind me to light up the future. Relieved of the weight of many years of silence, I could re-appropriate my life and bring back the “old” Isabel, the one who was full of life and irony. It was like being reborn for me.

You are a well-known actress. With this film, you expose a very private part of your life. Was it a liberating experience for you? A political act?

I don't think I'm someone with a particularly definite image to defend or protect. I started acting because I found an arena for recognition and love, like most actors, I think. Only it's very difficult to work from within when you don't know yourself. When I woke up ten years ago, it made me question the future of my career, especially because I had had to put it aside for a while and it was not easy to pick up where I'd left off. It was no longer a question of recognition but of completely re-appropriating my life. It was clear to me that I liked acting and I felt I had a talent for it. I decided to come back to acting and I changed my approach.



I became interested in the instrument. Like a craftsman and through the material I was given, I fashioned it. This job is an exploration of the human being and its transformation into energy. But for me, after all those years of feeling nothing, it was also a fantastic way to feel and find myself again. Over time, I've become sure of only one thing: you have to act as true to yourself as possible, with the material you're offered, to find your coherence. Mariana's film does not break this rule. In it, I am who I am. The political dimension belongs to the film. Today, if it is offered up to the public, it is also to give a voice back to all those women, all those mothers and all those daughters, to all those who have mourning to do and of course I'm with them all the way.

Discovered in Aline Isserman's "L'amant magnifique", Isabel Otero's career includes film, theater and television.

mariana otero

Born in 1963 in Rennes

1985: Honors degree in literature at Paris VIII University published in the revue Hors Cadre

1985-1988: IDHEC

1995-1999: Lived in Lisbon before returning to France

2001 **Nous voulons un autre monde** (We want another world)

Genre/medium: Documentary - 52' - DV - Series Histoires d'ado

Production: Agat Films & Cie - France 3

1997 **Cette télévision est la vôtre** (This is your television)

Genre/medium: Documentary - 60' - Beta SP

Production: Archipel 33 - La Sept Arte - SP Films - RTBF

Awards: Special mention, Vic Le Comte Festival

1994 **La loi du collège** (Junior-High Law)

Genre/medium: Documentary series - 6 x 28' - Hi8

Production: Archipel 33 - La Sept Arte - Périphérie - Georges Pompidou Center.

Awards: Best documentary film, 5th Documentary Festival in Lisbon;
Jury'sTip, Europa Prize, 1995

1991 **Loin de toi** (Far from you)

Genre/medium: Documentary - 8' - V8

Production: IMA - La Sept Arte

Non-Lieux co-directed with Alejandra Rojo (Case Dismissed)

Genre/ medium: Documentary - 75' - V8

Production: Varan - La Sept - ZDF - INA

Awards: Best documentary, Film and Suburbia Festival, Vaulx en Velin

1987 **I Rouge U Vert O Bleu** co-directed with Daniele Incalcaterra

Genre/ medium: Documentary - 30' - 16mm

Production: Yumi - CNCNée en 1963 à Rennes



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Article 317 of the 1810 penal code:

Any person who aids a woman to abort or any woman who aborts is to be punished with imprisonment. In the case of a doctor or other health officer, the sentence is forced labor.

Neo-Malthusians defended birth control and women's right to dispose of their bodies. They still had the right to publicly defend their stance.

After the First World War, the “repopulators” and opponents of abortion had several laws passed, including the law of July 31 1920. Abortion and the sale of objects allowing it became punishable by six months to three years in prison and a fine from 100 to 3,000 francs.

In 1923, anti-abortion movements, finding juries too lenient, managed to have people brought before the magistrates' court (for criminal offences). The magistrate could thus apply the law much more strictly and severely. Article 317 henceforth sentenced a woman or health officer practicing an abortion to one to five years in prison and a fine of 500 to 100,000 francs.

The woman who had the abortion risked six months to two years in prison.

Medical staff who assisted or practiced abortions could be forbidden to practice.

Under the Vichy regime, several laws allowed capital punishment for abortionists. On July 30 1943, Marie Louise Giraud was guillotined for performing 26 abortions.

1944, the provisional French government repealed the Vichy laws but the repression remained very strict. In En 1946, 5251 sentences were pronounced.

1956, creation in France, at the initiative of doctors, of the “Happy Maternity” movement which lobbied for the legalization of contraception.

1960, “Happy Maternity” became the “French Movement for Family Planning”. The Planning got around the law of 1920. It did not do propaganda for contraception but made it available to its members.

1962, the publication of Marcelle Auclair 's book “The Black Book of Abortion” bringing together testimonies of women who had aborted went almost unnoticed.

December 28 1967, the Neuwirth Law legalized contraception but it took until 1969 for the law to be applied.

1969, creation of the ANEA (National Association for the Study of Abortion).

April 5 1971, The Nouvel Observateur published the Manifesto of 343, which marked an important step and inaugurated the lifting of a taboo: *“A million women have abortions each year. They do so in dangerous conditions because of the illegality to which they are condemned, although this operation, when practiced under medical control, is extremely simple. These millions of women are surrounded by silence. I declare that I am one of them. I declare that I have had an abortion. Just as we demand free access to contraception, we demand access to abortion.”*

This manifesto brought together the signatures of famous women including Simone de Beauvoir, Marguerite Duras, Françoise Sagan, Christiane Rochefort, Catherine Deneuve, Gisèle Halimi, Delphine Seyrig, etc.

July 1971, following the manifesto, Gisèle Halimi founded, along with Simone de Beauvoir, Jean Rostand, Christiane Rochefort, Delphine Seyrig and many others, the movement "Choisir - La cause des femmes" (Choose - The Cause of Women).

1972, Bobigny trial, Gisèle Halimi, with the support of Choisir, was the defense attorney for Marie-Claire - a 16-year-old - her mother and two other women who helped her abort. This trial became the trial of the "wicked laws" of 1920 and 1923 and received huge public attention.

1973 was a fundamental year in the fight for legalization. The Karman method by suction, less dangerous and less painful, was imported from India. Despite the fact that it was illegal, doctors including Joëlle Brunerie-Kauffmann practiced it. The same year, 330 doctors signed a declaration affirming that they practiced abortions.

April 10, creation of the MLAC (Movement for the Liberation of Abortion and Contraception). The MLAC helped women abort by among other things, chartering buses to England.

Many demonstrations for the legalization of abortion.

May 19, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was elected President of France. He nominated Simone Veil Minister of Health.

November 26 1974, discussion in parliament of a law legalizing abortion was put forward by Simone Veil. Debates were stormy. November 28 at 3.40 a.m. the project was adopted by 284 votes against 189. It was a provisional project, which had to be put to vote again in 1979.

From 1974 to 1979 it was difficult to apply the law.

1979, the law was finally passed with article 9 obliging all hospitals to set up an abortion clinic. 1982, abortions became reimbursed by Social Security.

Very soon, many anti-abortion commandos were organized and undertook often spectacular and sometimes violent actions.

1988, authorization of the sale of the pill RU 486 known as "the morning after pill".

1990, creation of the coordination of associations for the right to abort.

June 1991, John-Paul II compared the "graveyard" of abortions to that of concentration camps.

1993, The Neiertz Law was passed sentencing anti-abortion commandos to fines or prison.

2000, the legal cut-off time changed from ten to twelve weeks. Minors no longer needed parental authorization if accompanied by an adult.

There are countries, including in Europe, where abortions are still illegal and women still die following back-alley abortions, often practiced in dangerous hygienic conditions. In Ireland and Poland, the anti-abortion law is strictly enforced. In Spain and Portugal, only abortions for women whose health is at risk are allowed. In the United States, pro-lifers are gaining ground. In France, legislation is not under threat but hospitals and clinics often lack doctors for abortions and as a result, some operations cannot be performed in time.

PRODUCTION

director Mariana Otero
image H l ne Louvart (a.f.c)
sound Patrick Genet
editing Nelly Quettier
editing and sound mixing Pascal Rousselle
originale music Michael Galasso
executive producer Denis Freyd

a coproduction ARCHIPEL 35
INA
in association with FRANCE 5
with participation from Centre National
de la Cin matographie
Conseil R gional de Bretagne
Conseil G n ral d'Ille-et-Vilaine

with
Jean-Jacques Vautier
Th r se Vautier
Isabel Otero
Jeanne Vautier
Alain Blanchard
Antonio Otero
Fran oise Bros
Mariano Otero
Douchka Pascal-Fiocre
France Villeneuve
Mercedes Ruiz
L on Faure
Jo lle Brunerie Kauffmann

Visa n 104 844 - Format 1.66 - Color
35 mm - Sound Dolby SRD



