

Les films du Parotier & New Story present



VEDETTE



a film by

Claudine Bories & Patrice Chagnard

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Synopsis

Vedette is a cow.

Vedette is a queen.

In fact, she once was queen of the queens of the Alpine pastures.

But Vedette is old now, and in order to spare her the humiliation of being dethroned by younger rivals, our neighbors asked us to look after her for a whole summer.

It was at this time that we discovered that every cow is unique.

The story takes place in a high valley in the heart of the Swiss Alps.



Interview with Claudine Bories and Patrice Chagnard



Your previous documentaries mostly took place in cities, or urban areas. What motivated you to focus on cow fights in an upper valley of Switzerland, this time?

Patrice: To us, the fights were mainly a good starting point. The fact that those cows, those “queens” as the Swiss call them, are fighters is indeed fascinating. But Claudine and I had been thinking a lot about the way humans interact with animals for a few years, in a philosophical, poetic and political manner. Yes, the cows are beautiful and majestic, and so is the valley. But more importantly, we felt they met our own reflections about humankind’s place in the natural world.

***We the People, The Arrivals* and *Rules of the Game* were three movies about political issues such as the situation of asylum seekers or the difficulty of finding jobs in our current society... *Vedette* holds up a mirror to our world in a very different way.**

Claudine: Our cinema has always been political. Our previous movies were indeed more straightforward about it, they addressed clear problems in the way our society works or doesn’t work. But lately, Patrice and I have been looking at the big picture. We stand in the middle of a massive ecological crisis and it makes us reconsider the way we’ve been treating other living creatures. We share our planet with the animals, yet we brutalize them. The capitalist society and mass consumption exploit them. And it makes us wonder: how and why have we come to establish that kind of relationship with other living beings?

Patrice: We are convinced the way we treat animals says a lot about the way we treat other people. History has proven it many times. By focusing on our interactions with

animals, and remembering that animal life is indeed *life*, we get to rethink our own humanity and our place in the world all around us.

In this valley of Switzerland, cows are not exploited by humans. Farmers and animals live together, respectfully. That's not a common thing.

Patrice: Here, the cow holds a strong and symbolic place in society. She's also the natural gardener of the mountain. Without cows, it wouldn't be in a good state, there would be more avalanches every year... They are valued for their milk and for their meat, of course. But more than that, they have a great impact on the biodiversity of the valleys and local farmers are well aware of their importance.

Claudine: What struck us the most is that they have infinite respect for their animals. The cows follow their own rules. They decide whether they will fight or not. They also decide which one of them will become the proper "queen", the one who'll get the tastiest grass of the pastures, the one who'll dominate them all. It's a fascinating thing to witness. Every farmer with a herd hopes their queen will be the strongest, what they call the "queen of queens"... but they never interfere with the process. Their only concern is to make sure the cows don't get hurt. They respect the cows' way of life.

Why are the farmers so eager to have a queen?

Claudine: Because it comes with a lot of prestige! You can't imagine the pride of owning a good queen. But we live in a capitalist world and unfortunately, those cows are now becoming expensive. Some people don't hesitate to pay a whole lot of money for a queen. Because it means her offspring can be sold for a good price too, for a queen's daughter has a higher chance of becoming a queen as well.

Patrice: Farmers are extremely attached to the bloodline of their cows. In this area, the animal is a part of the family. The human bloodline and the animal bloodline are intertwined. Farmers keep portraits of their queens next to those of their family members! It shows an incredible bond. Animals are not a simple way for them to earn a living.

The movie stands as proof that human-animal relationships can be much more respectful and gentle than they are nowadays.

Patrice: When Claudine and I first discovered this place, we thought it could be the vestige of an old way of doing things that was doomed to disappear... or, on the contrary, it could be a way out of this ecological crisis we're in. I'm gonna be honest with you, I'm convinced the breeding industry as we know it has had its day. It comes with so much brutality... I honestly believe that human beings won't be able to tolerate it any longer. The way we treat animals reminds me a lot of slavery. At the time, slaves were not considered human, they were things people could own. Masters could decide which of them would live and which would die. Not unlike animals, right? And then, at some point, the world decided it could not tolerate it anymore. It wasn't easy, but it changed. I do believe animal farming is facing a similar revolution.

Claudine: Elise and Nicole, our neighbors in Switzerland, are farmers. They lead a hard, exhausting life... and yet, both of them are genuinely happy. For a time, we thought about building the whole movie around them. We wanted to understand how this way of living could fulfill them so completely. It may be difficult to understand for someone who did not witness it, but this happiness is rooted in their relationship with their animals. With

everything that is *life*, really. You can't touch it, you can't own it. It's pure poetry and it's overwhelming.

You were already filming when, by chance, you were introduced to Vedette. She was a beautiful cow, but you turned her into a real movie star.

Claudine: During this journey, we quickly realized that every cow has a distinctive personality. Just like Elise and Nicole have very different relationships with each of them. When we were first introduced to the herd, we couldn't tell them apart. All we could see were black animals with horns and hooves, and that was it! It took us a little time to realize they had distinctive characteristics, in their moods, in the way they moved or interacted with Elise and Nicole. It was the most important discovery: it meant a cow could eventually become an actual protagonist of the movie.

Patrice: We already knew what the movie was about and where we were going to shoot it. But the story was missing. Fate brought us an invaluable gift: the opportunity to spend an entire summer with Vedette. As a queen of queens, she already was quite a heroine. The fact that she was getting older was even better: it made it possible for the audience to relate to her.

In order to tell the story you wanted, you had to gain Vedette's trust, just like she had to gain yours. How did the three of you manage to tame each other?

Claudine: With a lot of improvisation, just like in a theater! I tried a lot of different things to get Vedette's attention and most of the time, it failed. She refused to come closer, sometimes she even seemed upset. And I couldn't figure out what I was doing wrong, even though Elise and Nicole had given me some advice. So I tried to talk to her. But what was I supposed to say? I had no idea, so I read her some essays about humans and animals. Against all odds, it worked and we finally bonded on some level!

Patrice: It also gave us the opportunity to punctuate the movie with a few quotes from philosophical texts that had already nourished our own reflections.

In 2021, the theory of the animal machine as it was written by Descartes appears as extremely violent. The movie shows how outdated and wrong the whole thesis is.

Patrice: Absolutely. And yet it has shaped our society as we know it! Our livestock farming industry is based on that concept. If the animals can't think, if they can't feel, we can treat them however we like. The reason why humankind can butcher animals is that we don't see them as living creatures. Claudine and I wanted to address and dismiss that theory. We were lucky to meet Vedette. Like all Hérens cows, she's a fighter. She's a strong symbol, which enabled us to give our movie a spectacular turn.

How did the cows react to the camera? Were they cautious or did they accept its presence easily?

Patrice: They were terrific! The movie focuses on Claudine and Vedette's growing bond, so we had no choice but to edit out a lot of material we had shot. I spent quite some time filming Vedette on my own to figure out how to properly include her in the frame. I wanted to look at her through the eye of the camera. Sometimes, I was wondering how I could get her consent. From the way she was looking at me, I could tell she was intrigued about my intentions. But I had no idea how to explain myself and have her understand.

Claudine: Then, one day, she turned to us, stopped eating and started mooing. We knew that was her way of telling us she was okay with what we were doing.

Patrice: And that was the beauty of this encounter. Vedette had the same problem as we did. We had to understand each other. Trying to get her consent was a bit odd because I would never have gotten a proper “yes”. But it was an important milestone of our experience, because it showed progression. I knew I wasn’t trying to film *something* anymore, but *someone*. A cow that is one of a kind, the same way we say that every person on Earth is unique. The whole challenge was now to pass on this feeling to the spectators.

To make them realize a cow is as much of a living being as humans are, despite our differences.

Claudine: As every animal on the planet, cows are the ultimate Other. It goes way beyond being from another ethnic community, another social environment. The animal is basically an alien... It doesn’t ask for anything, it can’t even talk or communicate the way we do. But that doesn’t mean we can’t acknowledge its existence, its dignity, its uniqueness. Just like we acknowledged Vedette’s when we got to know her.

Patrice: And it brings us so much joy! Just like when children see an animal for the first time and don’t quite understand what they’re looking at yet. It comes with a sort of wonder! What is this strange-looking, massive, handless being? Why is it staring at me with its big, deep eyes? It’s the kind of encounter that really makes you reevaluate your place in the world.

Cows are not known for their expressiveness and strong personalities. The movie brings justice to a misunderstood species.

Patrice: And it’s unfair, because cows have been extremely important in our history. We should all take a minute to think about everything they brought to all civilisations, really.

Claudine: That being said, we could have built that philosophical tale around a completely different animal. There is a writer and philosopher I know, Baptiste Morizot, who does a very similar work with wolves. He knows them, he follows their trail, he speaks to them. He calls them and the wolves howl back. Baptiste shares a common vision with us: the Earth belongs to all living forms. There can be no human-centric planet. We need to realize that every living creature is not meant to be captured or used for profit. It’s the only way for us to avoid an ecological disaster. But it obviously goes against the notions of capitalism and productivism our society is based on.

It’s not the first time your movies have addressed the importance of communication to understand other people. But *Vedette* shows an important formal evolution.

Patrice: The DNA of our work remains the same, but the form did evolve, yes. For *The Arrivals* or *We the people*, we were attached to the style of direct cinema. Claudine and I decided to keep assuming our role as observers. We didn’t want to interfere with what was happening in front of us. For *Vedette*, that notion changed when we decided to turn Claudine into an actual character. She became a part of the story. It was a necessity in order to understand Vedette, to properly show her as she is. The movie is now closer to what Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin called *cinéma vérité*. We could use set-ups and techniques as a way to reveal the truth we wanted to tell. A truth that would not be absolute

but would still show the reality of our experience. It marks a break with our previous work, but I believe it was the right fit for the movie.

Claudine: We could have made the movie in direct cinema. It could have turned into a lovely documentary about farmers and their animals. But it was not the story we wanted to tell.

Patrice: The biggest challenge during the editing process was finding the perfect balance between a movie about farming life and our own intimate experience. We didn't want one of the two to overpower the other. The movie is built around that duality and it's exactly what we were trying to do. If you think about it, what kind of movie is *Vedette*? Is it a philosophical tale? A documentary about animals? A portrait of farmers? An impressionist work? I guess every spectator will have their take on it.

Your films have always given a great importance to the notion of speech. It still holds an important place in *Vedette* but this time, one of the interlocutors can obviously not talk back. Did it impact the way the two of you apprehended the filming?

Claudine: It did. Communication is still at the core of the movie, but this time, we had to figure out a way to communicate with someone who doesn't speak a human language. One day, *Vedette* answered my question by urinating in front of me. At that moment, something suddenly clicked in my head. It just made sense. You can't possibly hope an animal will use words of any sort. But speech comes in many forms. And it gives two very different beings the possibility of sharing a moment.

You finally succeeded in communicating with *Vedette* by using bread. How did the food impact the bonding process?

Claudine: It was essential. Most farmers don't usually feed cows with bread and when they do, it has usually been ground up. They do not share their bread with their animals like *Elise* and *Nicole* do. It's a distinctiveness of the Val d'Hérens' farmers. And it's a beautiful symbol: they share their most precious food with the living being they love the most. Cows are smart, they understand the symbolic significance of the gesture. That's how bread became their way of communicating with one another.

Patrice: The interesting thing is that, etymologically, the Latin word for "companionship" is linked to bread. A companion would be someone you shared your bread with. In this valley, farmers share their bread with the cows... and the latter love it!

Claudine: It took me a moment to figure that out, although I remember *Nicole* warning me about it. The first few days, I didn't bring any bread with me when I went to see *Vedette*. So she was confused: I could not possibly be a friend, I didn't have any bread for her! We began bonding as soon as I realized my mistake. *Vedette* started recognizing me, sometimes she would even look for me. When I called her name, she would walk towards me. She acknowledged me as a friendly part of her group. That love for bread brings farmers and cows together, it's a precious thing.

The movie points at one interesting ambiguity in the farmers' love for their animals. Despite their attachment, they still decide to sell their meat, or consume it themselves.

Claudine: Of course, they do. As estranged as that valley is, it's not disconnected from basic human desires. And loving eating meat is a part of them. Elise and Nicole are two of not so many farmers who refuse to consume their own animals. But that doesn't necessarily mean they are vegetarians! They are not.

Patrice: It's indeed puzzling, and it raises a few questions about meat consumption. Why do I feel entitled to eat an animal I have never seen in my life? But how come it bothers me so much if I already bonded with that animal? Those are important questions but it wasn't our place to give any answers.

At the end of the movie, in a powerful and poetic scene, Elise explains why she's decided to consume Vedette's meat after all. She always said she wouldn't. Did you know she had changed her mind?

Patrice: We did not. It was such a twist! She changed her mind and it was both an intimate and philosophical shift. That one time we tried to talk about that possibility, Elise and Nicole quickly changed the subject. It was uncomfortable for them to talk about it. Why did they suddenly decide to eat Vedette? Why did they go against their own logic, against their own feelings? Why choose to eat every piece of her, without selling her or sharing her with someone else? The way they talk about Vedette, about their loss, about their will to somehow keep her inside of them... It's overwhelming. And it highlights a deeper sense of cannibalism and the constant sacrifice of the animals in the history of the human race.

Claudine: The way Elise consumes her cow has nothing to do with the way any of us eat any kind of meat. When she eats Vedette's meat, she remembers everything they experienced together. She thinks about her and it just makes her happy. It's a beautiful symbol: Vedette feeds her. Elise and Nicole are two wonderful women. They have an incredible connection with nature in all its forms. Not only with cows. Elise knows so much about plants, flowers, torrents, glaciers... She got this knowledge from her parents, from her grandparents. She talks about all these things with so much poetry, so much wisdom. To her, it's obvious: everything is *life*.



Technical sheet

Country

France

Production date

2021

Duration

100 minutes

A film by

Claudine Bories & Patrice Chagnard

Screenplay

Claudine Bories & Patrice Chagnard

Image

Patrice Chagnard

Sound

Pierre Carrasco

Editing

Emeline Gendrot

Color grading

Herbert Posch

Music

François Macherey

Production

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Distribution for France

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