

Maneki Films
presents



SÉLECTION OFFICIELLE
COMPÉTITION
FESTIVAL DE CANNES

**LES
FILLES DU
SOLEIL**
GIRLS OF THE SUN

A FILM BY EVA HUSSON

Maneki Films
presents

**GOLSHIFTEH
FARAHANI**

**EMMANUELLE
BERCOT**

**LES
FILLES DU
SOLEIL**
GIRLS OF THE SUN

A FILM BY EVA HUSSON

Duration: 115 min - France - Image : Scope - Sound: Digital 5.1

SCREENINGS IN CANNES:

Sat. May 12th – 6:30pm – Grand Théâtre Lumière

Sun. May 13th – 9:00am – Salle du Soixantième

Sun. May 13th – 11:00am – Grand Théâtre Lumière

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SYNOPSIS

Somewhere in Kurdistan, Bahar, commander of the “Girls of the Sun” battalion, is preparing to liberate her hometown from the hands of extremists, hoping to find her son who is held hostage.

A French journalist, Mathilde, comes to cover the attack and bear witness to the story of these exceptional warriors.

Since their lives have been turned upside down, they have all been fighting for the same cause: Women, Life, Liberty.

THE EVENTS THAT INSPIRED THE FICTION

On August 3rd, 2014, in the arid Sinjar Mountains of northern Iraq, ISIS troops suddenly pour into Yazidi territory. Sinjar, then the last unconquered area between southern Iraq and Syria, is strategically important to ISIS.

The attack is simultaneous throughout the region and takes the 300,000 Yazidis who live there by surprise. In the villages, ISIS fighters massacre the men and round up the women who didn't make it out in time. The rare witnesses speak of genocide – hundreds of bodies lie on the mountain, mass graves are dug. The young women and children are taken to Tal Afar, Mosul or Raqqa. The women and little girls are gathered and handed out as sexual merchandise, forced into marriage, tortured, sold as slaves. The little boys are sent to jihadist schools where they learn to kill as early as age 3. Over 7,000 women and children are captured.

Two years of horror follow. Two years of captivity, of isolated escapes and of desperate attempts by Yazidi political leaders to get help which never really comes. Yazidi women in parliament move heaven and earth to obtain American and international help, with no probing results. Once this hope is gone, autonomous resistance and liberation networks organize for the captives. Meanwhile, Yazidi resistance units are formed with the YPG, the Syrian army armed PKK forces, and the Peshmerga, Kurdish fighters in Iraq. Little by little, more and more women take up arms, until the emergence of an all-female Yazidi combat unit, the “Girls of the Sun.” They have nothing to lose and resist fiercely, despite internal political struggles and the weight of a patriarchal society, to take charge of their dignity. They are convinced that barbarity must be fought and that it is better to die standing than

on one's knees. Their battle cry: "They rape us, we kill them." Their psychological superiority: ISIS soldiers are convinced that if they die at the hand of a woman, they won't go to heaven. The female fighters terrorize them.

The battle of Sinjar lasts 15 months. Along with the recapture of Mosul and the country's final jihadist bastions in the summer of 2017, it marks the beginning of the end for the Islamic State in Iraq.

Two months later, the fall of Raqqa, the capital of ISIS in Syria, marks the weakening of Islamist control of the region. But to this day, the fate of over 2,000 Yazidi women kidnapped at Sinjar remains unknown. Those who were liberated now face a difficult return to their families and communities.



CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE YAZIDIS AND KURDISTAN

The Yazidis are a stateless minority established mainly in northern Iraq and, to a lesser degree, in Syria, Turkey, Georgia and Armenia. They practice a monotheistic religion that combines elements of Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam, among others. Because they continue to practice endogamy (marrying only within the limits of their local group), their religion is not well understood by the neighboring communities, and they've been persecuted for centuries.

The PKK has recently begun integrating Yazidis into its troops of Kurdish fighters. Although Iraq is a single country, it is the catastrophic result of artificial borders settled during decolonization with the 1916 Sykes–Picot Agreement, and comprises two geographic territories with populations that feel completely foreign to each other. The Kurdish population, in the north, has created the most stable province in the region: Iraqi Kurdistan. The region is autonomous and fairly well managed, despite the present burden of some two million displaced individuals, including 300,000 Yazidis. The southern population is Arabic, with a Shiite majority and a Sunni minority. But to better understand the extent of the violence enacted on the Yazidis, to get beyond the obvious, it's necessary to include a factor that may initially escape our western perception of the situation: these are populations of so-called “high-intensity culture”. In Sinjar, the individual exists primarily for the collective: from birth till death, a Yazidi man or woman is fundamentally and irremediably part of an extensive but close-knit familial nucleus that constitutes their societal foundation. The individual, on his own, has no

raison d'être, no reason to exist. These last two years have pushed Yazidi women to take on a degree of societal importance that they never had before, much in the way the First World War brought European women to the forefront.

LANGUAGES

Iraqi Kurdistan is a crossroads of cultures and languages. Almost everybody talks both Kurd and Arabic, while many speak Farsi – be it Kurds exiled in Iran who came back, business owners or cultured people.

France has kept a privileged place in the heart of many thanks to President François Mitterrand and his wife Danielle Mitterrand's positive influence in the officialization of Kurdistan's autonomy. There are Francophiles, French speakers and chiefs of staff who quote Voltaire and Rousseau. This multilingual atmosphere is manifest in the freedom with which my characters pick the most appropriate language for their respective exchange. The film is therefore shot in French, Kurd, English and Arabic.



AN INTERVIEW WITH EVA HUSSON

By Xavier Muntz

I met Eva Husson in October 2015. At the time, I was documenting the Kurdish resistance to the jihadi insurgency. In Syria, I entered the besieged city of Kobanî, crossing ISIS lines on a motorcycle. In Iraq, a helicopter dropped me in the Sinjar Mountains, which were completely surrounded by the Islamic State. Those mountains are sacred to the Yezidis, and that's where I met these women who had decided to take up arms to liberate themselves. Eva wanted to hear about these women. That first interview was followed by some thirty hours of supplementary interviews. Today, it's my turn to ask the questions.

Why did you decide to make this film?

As the granddaughter of a Spanish Republican soldier, I've been very interested in the notion of lost ideals. In 2006, I had begun working on a project about the concentration camps in France where Spanish refugees were kept in the wake of the civil war. As my grandfather had been in one of those camps, I was interested in the collective and individual trauma they could cause. When I heard about these Kurdish women, and as I delved into the subject, I found out about the Marxist ideal of the Kurdish fighters, their uncertain fight for territory, and the battle against fascism. And it resonated with my family history. I found a way, through this contemporary tragedy to express narrative ideas that I had nourished for a long time; whether it's fighting for an ideal or the search for meaning. There was a political line of thought behind the decision to make this film. And of course there was something else, something even more powerful: the story of these women fighters, captured by extremists, who had escaped horrific

situations, and in the end committed themselves to fight back against their abductors... There was a force emanating from this story that went beyond me, and it needed to be told. When I spoke with my producer about it, she was immediately on board.

You went to Kurdistan to prepare the film. Who did you meet there?

I tried to meet with as many of the Kurdish factions as possible. I didn't try to meet any extremists, because I felt it wasn't my intention. On the other hand, I went to the front and visited the refugee camps to speak with women who had escaped, the women who had committed themselves to the fight, and listened to their testimony. The character played by Golshifteh Farahani is a composite of all these accounts. It's the result of the feelings I had and the very strong connections I made with these women. I needed to adapt and transpose this humanity. When a woman manages to tell you how she was bought and sold fourteen times, and says this with incredible gentleness and strength, you automatically question your ideas and your convictions about the tragedy of suffering. It deconstructs the typical image of war. I wanted this experience in my screenplay, both to bring some gravity to the film, and to find the right note that would make this world coherent and infuse it with my own subjectivity.

These women experienced unimaginable atrocities. How did you decide to deal with the scenes of violence in your film?

There were two problematic things in terms of the cinematography. The first is that in the history of cinema, the representation of violence against women is often close to voyeurism, and sometimes there's an intense victimization of these women. I wanted to deconstruct this violence to show that for these women, it's a marker, certainly a traumatic one, but a marker nonetheless in a much broader story. Women are not defined by the violence they've suffered. That's why I left certain violent scenes off-screen, all while retaining their intensity. The second

point, and it's essential, is that I had a problem with the jihadist rhetoric, this rhetoric of terror. I didn't want to serve as an instrument of propaganda. I had only one scene where I had used their grammar, when we see a little boy execute a hostage. But I said to myself that I was falling right into their trap, and so I ended up not using that scene.

What allowed you to avoid this trap?

I'm obsessed with the question of point of view. It informs something like 90% of my choices. When I feel lost, I reorient myself around my subjectivity, because it's the only thing left when exhaustion and stress come into play; it's my rock. When I'm navigating blindly, the only thing I have left to be sure of a scene's faithfulness is my perception. It's a gamble. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, but I need this center of gravity. We have a responsibility; even if it's only impressionistic in the sense that cinema is an immense portrait of society at x moment in time. The accuracy of this collective painting depends on the accuracy of each stroke. I try to bring this accuracy to my films without voyeurism or indulgence. In this exercise in empathy, I need the audience to agree to accompany my main character. The emotional journey is what interests me.

Sound has a very important role in the film. Why?

I have a very hard time believing in objectivity. Realistic films are fairly foreign to my understanding of the world. What's interesting in cinema, and what always deeply affected me, is encountering the world through someone else's experience, and I think that sound is one way to achieve that. There are moments in life where you hear absolutely every sound, and others where you don't hear anything, according to your emotional state. I wanted to create this emotional journey. The sound and the image allow you to do this. I wanted to have sounds that are extremely clear, because that's how one perceives them in daily life. We have so many details. And I also needed subjectivity. I

needed internal sounds, for example — those moments where you don't hear anything but the beating of your own heart. It's as though your eardrums were blocked, but it's not necessarily tied to an external assault, such as a sound that's too loud. It can be fear or an emotion that overwhelms and submerges you. This is the type of journey that I wanted to create. I don't really know what realism is. Objectivity is an illusion. Whatever happens, you can't extract it from your individual, historical, and geopolitical context... Everyone carries this subjectivity within themselves, so you might as well accept it. And that's what always moved me in cinema; I've always loved filmmakers who were very subjective.

In this film about war, one gets the impression that you enter into people's hearts more than their minds.

I'm obsessed with the question of the individual's place within the community — how do we reconcile individuality, when it's constantly brushing against other people? We don't exist without the collective, and yet we are sensitive beings with our own back-stories and neuroses. For example, for me, there's no singular hero. The individual can only access the status of hero through the collective; the word is almost an oxymoron. That's why my lead character says that they are all heroines. Each of us is engaged in unique ambitions that are completely modeled by our experiences and our environment. And that's something I can try to transmit through emotions. Through cinema, I can express how one loses one's land, a parent, or even a child. I don't know whether it's a war movie; I think it's more of an odyssey — the loss of one's land; the quest to reconstruct oneself and one's community.

The different armies or Kurdish militias aren't identified in your film (Peshmerga, YPG, YPJ, PKK, YJE, YBS). You speak simply of the "Kurds." Why?

I began without any preconceived idea on the subject, and after speaking with many people, I realized that there were political

leanings that were quite opposed to one another, and some very strong divisions. Both my grandfather and my great-uncle were Republican soldiers during the Spanish Civil War. One was a communist; the other was an anarchist — he even became the head of the POUM (Workers' Party of Marxist Unification) while in exile in Paris. Politically they were *frères-ennemis*, brothers and yet bitter rivals. So I'm familiar with these antagonisms, and I realized that we were in the same, passionate type of context. I didn't want the subject of the film to be cannibalized: my aim was to make a film about women, and not to let myself be overtaken by internal political conflicts. I looked for the right solution for a long time, and in the end I decided not to name the factions, but rather to differentiate them visually onscreen through their uniforms, and to exhibit their internal disputes in order to underline the complexity of these power struggles and quests for power on the ground.

You filmed with many Kurdish actors. Did you sense these political divisions while filming? What were the difficulties related to filming in Kurdish?

I was fortunate to have a smooth relationship with all my actors; they never disapproved any of my decisions. The notion of Kurdish identity is similar to the idea of Catalan identity; it's very complex and personal, and every Kurd has their version of that identity, and it's just as valid as their neighbor's. My job was to ensure that this wouldn't become a problem, and to the contrary, that it would enrich each of their characters. It's something very powerful, even if only the language. My priority was to find good Kurdish actors who could be accurate, but there are not many professional Kurdish actors and they often speak different dialects. There are three Kurdish dialects in the film. I found myself with actors who spoke to each other in languages they couldn't understand. When I learned that Kurdish directors encountered the same issue and still made films, I got over it. If it worked for them, it could work for me. So my only point of

reference was emotion. If the emotion was right, the acting was right.

Early on, you spoke to me mostly about fighters and civilians, and then you introduced a war reporter in the screenplay. Why?

There's a group of overlapping reasons. The journalist is your window to the world. She's the spokesperson for the female battalion captain and can outsource certain things that would be impossible to illustrate through narrative in this context. She also allows me to reflect on the notion of women in war. As a female war reporter, she represents at once an inward perspective on the identity of women inside the warzone as well as an exterior one. She's like a prism that lets us navigate between the collective and the intimate contexts. It's the narrative tool of testimony.

I was greatly inspired by the personality of two iconic female war reporters: Marie Colvin, who wore an eye-patch over her left eye after being wounded in the field; and Martha Gellhorn, who started reporting in 1936, during the Spanish Civil War (about which she wrote some magnificent pieces) and who worked till she was eighty.

You asked me a lot of questions about this profession. Sometimes I felt like I was on the way to see my therapist before our meetings. You met with several of my colleagues to fine-tune the writing of your project. Why was it necessary to dig so deep?

It was very important to understand how and why one can feel vulnerable in the field. I found that it was essential to deconstruct the fictional representation of fear; to go to the source, to understand the mechanism behind it, and not just recycle something I saw in another film. When are we scared? If there's one thing I personally learned by being afraid when we went into a combat zone, it's that you can't understand fear rationally. Everyone reacts however they can in the moment,



and you can't project it onto a character. In order to understand how fear works, you have no choice but to dig deep and nourish yourself on what people tell you. I wanted to understand things that may be obvious to you but were not immediately accessible to me.

During filming, a former Kurdish combatant who was a consultant for the film asked me whether “I bought it” when I arrived on set. The atmosphere, the smells, and the soldiers immediately plunged me back in. I was surprised by his question, and I said “Totally. Don’t you?” He responded that he found it so real that he would look at the ground sometimes to see whether there were mines. How did you gather information for this film?

There are a thousand ways to narrate a world. We compiled an enormous amount of images, and instead of spreading ourselves thin, we concentrated on a few sources. We also drew heavily

on your documentary ('Surrounded by ISIS') to have a line of continuity and facilitate our decisions. It's also thanks to David Bersanetti (set designer), who acts with great instinct. You stock up on a lot of information, and at some point you put your trust in a guiding principle. Not everything is necessarily faithful to reality, but I know that overall it's accurate and coherent. This former Kurdish soldier provided us with many essential details: how fighters would arrange their weapon at night when they were going to sleep; how their survival instincts would kick in, and power dynamics.

During filming you often contacted me to know whether certain scenes were realistic, whether things actually happened this way. However, you proclaim your right to free yourself from this reality and take creative license. Isn't it paradoxical?

You know me, I believe strongly in dialectics, the "Third Way". Another of my obsessions is neuroscience, and how the brain makes sense of the world. The brain appears to project a simplified organization of the world onto reality so that we are able to evolve in all the senses of the term (for more on this subject, see the fascinating theories of Andy Clark). It preempts reality, and this syntax is common to all of us. If what founds this representation of reality is accurate, if it falls within the scope of what's universal, then I can introduce a cinematographic subjectivity. And for me, subjectivity is the essence of cinema, one of the rare opportunities to experience the world through the eyes of another. Cinema is an extraordinary historical opportunity; a subjectivity of the perception of time, of the perception of emotions, of colors and sounds. What's important to me is that this base be sufficiently solid, so that my intervention has a meaning. It would disturb me very much to be nonchalant with respect to this base, that it be part of something that is not robust. If that were the case, my subjectivity would be lazy; it would have no meaning. It has meaning only in its confrontation with the universal.

This film is talked about as a women's film.

That term poses a bit of a problem for me. I have never spoken of my films using that term, because I think that it expresses a masculine bias. I agree that a woman experiences the world differently than a man does, physically and in her socio-cultural relations. I understand the term, but “women’s film” is the expression of a generation I don’t belong to. I think my generation needs to speak about it differently. I’m taking on both the perspective of women and a film about women. On the other hand, what interests me is that it raises a question about the meaning of this formulation; it proves that there aren’t enough representations of women by women in cinema. We don’t use the expression “men’s film”, simply because the proposition from this point of view is overabundant. The history of cinema is 95% composed of a masculine perspective on the world. If we use this expression, it’s also because we’re still lacking enough women’s perspectives in cinema to extract this universality. So let’s get to work!

CAST

BAHAR Golshifteh FARAHANI
MATHILDE Emmanuelle BERCOT

Girls of the Sun

LAMIA Zübeyde BULUT
AMAL Maia SHAMOEVI
BERIVAN Evin AHMADGULI
NOFA Nia MIRIANASHVILI
ARARAT Mari SEMIDIVI
ROJIN Roza MIRZOIANI
TORHILDAN Zinaida GASOIANI
GULI Sinama ALIEVI

COMMANDER ZIREK Ahmet ZIREK
TIRESH Erol AFSIN
DAHLIA Behi DJANATI ATAÏ
CEWAN (Bahar's husband) Adik BAKONI
HEMIN (Bahar's son) Tornike ALIEVI
SUZAN (Bahar's sister) Nuka ASATIANI
WARDEN Arabi GHIBEH

TECHNICAL SHEET

Director	Eva Husson
Produced by	Didar Domehri
Co-produced by	Brahim Chioua Adeline Fontan Tessaur Etienne Comar Joseph Rouschop Vladimer Katcharava Arlette Zylberberg Jamal Zeinal Zade Dan Weschler
Scriptwriter	Eva Husson
Script Consultant	Jacques Akchoti
Casting Director	Bahijja El Amrani
Editor	Emilie Orsini
Original Score	Morgan Kibby
D.O.P.	Mattias Troelstrup
Set Designer	David Bersanetti
Sound Engineer	Olivier Le Vacon
Sound Editor	Alexis Place
Sound Mixer	Emmanuel de Boissieu
Line Producer	Claire Trinquet
1 st Assistant Director	Cyril Pavaux
2 nd Assistant Director	Olivia Delplace
Production Manager	Laurène Ladoge
Costume Designer	Marine Galliano
Make-up Artist	Oriane de Neve
Music Supervision	Jeanne Trelu (Creaminal)
Post-production Supervisors	Pauline Gilbert Laetitia Pichon
Production Administrator	Xavier Barbereau

Production company	Maneki Films
In association with	Elle Driver
Co-production companies	Wild Bunch
	Elle Driver
	Arches Films
	Gapbusters
	20 Steps Productions
	RTBF (Belgian TV)
	Bord Cadre Films
In association with	BackUp Media
	Indéfilms 6
	B Media 2014
	Cinécap
	Cinéart
With the participation of	Canal +
	OCS
	Proximus
	Casa Kafka Movie Pictures
	Tax Shelter empowered by
	Belfius
	LEPL Enterprise Georgia
With the support of	Eurimages
	National Center for Cinema
	and the Moving Image
	(CNC)
	Cinematographic and
	Audiovisual Center of the
	Federation Wallonia-Brussels
	Europe Creative Programme
	– MEDIA by the European
	Union
	ANGOA
	Nouvelle-Aquitaine Region
	SACEM

GIRLS OF THE SUN ANTHEM

Here we are, we the Women
Here we are, at the gates of the city,
Here we are, ready to attack,

We have faith
We'll wipe them all out,
It will be the new era of
Women, Life, Liberty
It will be the new era of
Women, Life, Liberty

They are for us,
Our final bullets,
They are for us,
Our last grenades,
Our bodies and our blood
Will feed the land
Our children's children,
Our milk will be red
From our death will spring life

Here we are, the Girls of Corduene,
Here we are
At the gates of the city
Here we are, ready to attack

We have faith
A new day is dawning
It will be the new era of
Women, Life, Liberty
It will be the new era of
Women, Life, Liberty

Lyrics : Eva Husson
Music : Morgan Kibby
Adaptation : Shayda Hessami

