

**DISCUSSION OF THE FILM *'I'VE LOVED YOU SO LONG'* (FR
2008, Directed by Philippe Claudel)**

*(This discussion was given at the Ninth Annual Film and Psychoanalysis
Program of the Ottawa Psychoanalytic Society on January 8th 2010 by
Louise Carignan)*

I've Loved You So Long marks the directorial debut of French literature professor Philippe Claudel, also the writer of the screenplay. His film tackles with great finesse and humanity a complex and emotionally daunting subject: Juliette Fontaine restarts her life after 15 years spent in prison for the euthanasia of her six year old son. A daunting prospect for the central character, Juliette, and a challenge for the author-director who plumbs her emotional journey, and conveys it to the viewer step by step. This is accomplished in great part thanks to a haunting performance by Kristin Scott Thomas. She is on screen almost every minute of the film, often in close-ups. Her patrician face is at once eloquent and deeply remote or reticent. Her silence seems pregnant with a maelstrom of unspoken, withheld, implosive emotions, broken by occasional outbursts. Juliette's silence mystifies and draws in the viewer, as well as many other characters in the film. "Who is Juliette, the mysterious Juliette? Where has she been hidden all these years?" This gibe from a boorish host at a dinner party nevertheless calls attention to the proverbial elephant whose presence is felt by all in the room.

The main supporting character is Juliette's estranged younger sister Lea, a busy college professor and mother of two adopted Vietnamese

daughters. The plot seems driven by Lea's eagerness to reach out to Juliette and provide a temporary home after her release, an attempt to resurrect broken family ties. Through a series of cleverly constructed, indirect dialogue scenes we learn fairly early on that Lea's parents forbade any contact with Juliette since her trial for murder. Lea's father said that Juliette "no longer existed", and he refused contact with her, even on his deathbed.

Such banishment of an inmate is not an uncommon fate we are told by the case-worker in charge of assisting Juliette's re-integration in society. Consequently, Juliette is a stranger to Lea not only due to the absence of contact over her 15 years of imprisonment, but also to the banishment and silence imposed by their parents, as well as her own suppression of childhood memories of her older sister. "My parents have killed my sister in my mind" she later confesses to her husband Luc. The unspoken question looming large in the mind of the first-time viewer of the film is voiced initially by Luc: "Did she tell you why she did it?" _ Again, 'Who is Juliette?' -'How could she have killed her son?' While bits of the puzzle are divulged in the free flow of daily contact between the sisters, the mystery persists until the final revelation, for Lea at any rate. For the viewer, the question lingers on long after the curtain has fallen.... a tribute to the filmmaker, in my opinion.

From those who know or suspect the deed, Juliette gets a wide range of responses which would appear to justify her guardedness: a vicious rejection from her first would-be employer, an uneasy good will on the part of the second, reticence and wariness from Lea's husband Luc,

unexpected confidences from her melancholic probation officer capitaine Fauré and a clumsy attempt by her case-worker to breach her 'silence'. Lea's colleague Michel approaches Juliette after she has wandered away from the dinner party. He sensed that what she told the party was the truth, but that the guests did not take her seriously, presumably because she does not fit their stereotype of an ex-con or a murderess. While respecting Juliette's privacy, Michel shares with her his awareness, grown from ten years of teaching experience in prison, that those behind bars were just like him "They could have been me, or I them. It's such a fine line sometimes". The rather personable character of Michel speaks here, I think, from the director's humanistic perspective. Claudel himself would have had first-hand knowledge of the prison system, having volunteered as an English teacher in a French penitentiary for a number of years, a probable source of inspiration for the film. Therefore, Juliette's story is also a social commentary on the phenomenon of exclusion, stigmatization, and the problems of reinsertion facing former inmates.

Moreover, Claudel casts Juliette's struggle with re-starting her life within a broader framework stressing the ubiquity of human trauma, dislocation, and the possibility of recovery, or not, in the unfortunate case of capitaine Fauré. The dividing line here appears to be the availability of close relationships. Many of the characters are indeed victims of some significant tragedy or dislocation: Luc's father survived the war in Poland as well as a stroke which left him locked in silence; he is in this regard Juliette's mute counterpart in the family home, and a quiet companionship develops between them. Michel lost his wife in a

car accident some ten years previously. Samir and Kaisha lost relatives in the Iraqi war. P'tit Lys and Emélia are dislocated from their birth parents as well as from their country of origin, a country ravaged by war after the end of the French occupation.

Lea herself has suffered from the disintegration of her family following Juliette's crime, and subsequently lost her father to cancer, and her mother to Alzheimer's. Until she was contacted by the prison staff on behalf of her sister, Lea's reparative efforts seem to have centered on a compromise: the creation of a totally new family, a multicultural "Benetton family" which breaks with her blood lineage. "I did not want to carry a baby in my womb" she tells Juliette. Is it, as Juliette construes, a reaction to her crime, possibly a secret fear of infanticide one wonders? Was Lea obeying parental injunctions that she must not in any way model herself after her older sister, just as she was steered away from being a medical doctor? If the 'elephant in the room' is Juliette's crime, the 'skeleton in the closet' is, I believe, their 'English' mother. Is it not more properly a destructive maternal lineage or identification that Lea has sought to circumvent in a concrete way by adopting her children?

Our eventual encounter with the mother, who shuns her daughters at the nursing home ("Stop calling me mom, it gets on my nerves!") makes us suspect that this may well be the case, although the mother's illness leaves a degree of ambiguity about this. Unless, of course, one interprets the mother's Alzheimer's as a metaphor used by the director to signify the eradication of mental traces of others and of the past. But traces of the question of mothers bringing babies into the world, which

was evaded and perhaps consigned to an 'un-thought-known' (Bollas) by Lea, nevertheless resurface in the next, albeit adoptive generation, symbolically, in the form of P'tit Lys' cemetery for dolls, wherein all the dead, abandoned or unborn children are tucked away in a suitcase....

The film opens on a close up of Juliette waiting in an empty airport. She is chain-smoking. Her expression appears anguished, weary, even sullen. But the song of a bird stirs a pale smile on her remarkably expressive face, a timid ray of pleasure at her newly found freedom perhaps? Her refusal to wear the clothes sent by Lea and choice of somber, outdated, institutionalized clothes on the other hand suggest an adhesion to her 'prison identity', a refusal to join society, at anyone else's call or pace at any rate. She initially moves through Lea's house with the 'other-worldly' presence of a ghost. Those subtle touches already suggest what I think is her central conflict: will Juliette's wish to remain cloistered in silence, forever entombed with the secret memories of her beloved son yield to the inevitable pull towards life? I will return to this point later.

There is an abrupt transition to the next sequence, which shows Lea running to meet her sister. She is late. Metaphorically as well, given that she has visited Juliette only a few times prior to her release. Although she has no doubt taken a 'leap of fate' in providing a home for her sister, Lea is quite likely thrown-off by Juliette's actual reappearance in her life. She also often seems rushed by a guilt-driven need to make up for many years of oblivion.

The separation in framing between the two opening sequences underscores the gap between the two sisters. They initially seem at

antipodes from one another. Thomas plays Juliette as someone who has lived through hell and has no energy left for pretense. Her attitude is austere, her questions direct, pithy, methodical. She seems to have long ago abandoned any expectation of being understood. Lea on the other hand welcomes her sister with puppyish, effervescent affection. The curious blend of tenderness, sensitivity, childish naivety and sophistication in her character is wonderfully rendered by Elsa Zylberstein. In dire contrast to Juliette who has lived through her 'crime and punishment', including her family's rejection, Lea has grown up with silence, denial and pretense. She skirts around thorny issues, and her constant use of euphemisms to refer to her sister's prison term exasperates Juliette who eventually confronts her "I was in jail, do you understand, it's called a jail"... "Don't be ridiculous, what do you think? That I was asleep all these years and that one morning the good fairy Lea woke me up?"

Despite her foibles, Lea has succeeded in creating a warm home and circle of friends, a textured milieu which will facilitate Juliette's re-entry into the world, and gradually thaw her reserve. Skillful camera and editing work subtly render the feel of the slow, day by day process of re-humanization undergone by Juliette, which takes place under the watchful, compassionate eye of Lea. There are jabs of pain and flashes of fury along the way, as daily happenings unexpectedly stir up past losses and hardships, for instance when P'tit Lys wants to read her poem to Juliette, or when the sisters go out for a night of dancing in town. The resonance found in artworks at the museum, the solace provided by books as well as by daily household routines around meals

or putting the children to bed, a few outings at local cafés and even a sexual encounter with a braggart picked up in a bar all enter into the mix. Through such delicate strokes, Claudel adroitly portrays the slow journey by which Juliette is gradually accepted into the family and the community. But the principal focus remains on the relationship between the two main protagonists.

An old piano found in the attic resurrects an old childhood song, '*A la Claire Fontaine*', a traditional French song about loss, enduring love and remembrance. Music's power to evoke a pre-symbolic sensorial world is put to play, and this theme song of the film becomes a thread that reawakens early, sensual, loving memories and feelings between the sisters. In a lovely intimate scene which shows them playing at the piano side by side, Juliette conjures up the 'little Lea' to whom she taught the song many years before, and Lea re-finds her loving older sister. The successful recreation of a deep, pre-verbal holding bond between the sisters is portrayed in many scenes which show them swimming together in a pool. Further along in the film, Juliette confides in Michel that it was in fact the memory of the 'little Lea' which provided a lifeline when she was released from prison, and allowed her to overcome her fear of "being in the middle of nowhere". "It is for this little girl that I decided to come back to a past that was dead for me" she tells Michel.

If Juliette emerges gradually from behind her defensive wall, and is being enlivened and nurtured by deepening relationships, she also maintains a core of secrecy and silence that continues to gnaw at the viewer until the dramatic denouement of the film. We have, in the

interim, gathered more pieces of the puzzle, indirectly. In confidences exchanged with capitaine Fauré and later with Michel, we learn that Juliette's marriage broke down some time before she committed the crime, and that her husband testified against her at the trial; he did not look at her even once during the whole process. From her caseworker, who has read the official reports, we find out that Juliette was silent throughout the various expert examinations as well as during her trial, not speaking up in her own defense. The reports refer to a "*quasi-mute being*" and a "*fragmented psyche following the divorce and murder of the son*"...

Finally the little Émilie brings to her mother Pierre's photo and poem which she picked up on Juliette's bedroom floor. Discovering the full extent of her sister's secretiveness, as well as her secret stirs an emotional storm in Lea when she receives the interpretation of the test results written on the back of little Pierre's poem. She was clearly unaware of Pierre's fatal, degenerative disorder. (probably adrenoleukodystrophy, or Schilder's disease, a rare form of inherited (usually X-linked) disorder that leads to progressive brain damage, adrenal failure and death within 1 to 10 yrs, due to the lack of an essential protein needed to break down very long chain fatty acids found in the normal diet).

Past and present collapse in the final cathartic scene wherein Lea confronts Juliette with withholding her knowledge of Pierre's disease. "We were there! Did we not matter?" "Why did you not tell us! I was there! We were there! We could have helped!"...cries out Lea. She feels betrayed, cheated by Juliette's disaffection from the family, from herself especially, and furious at the resulting toll on their life and

relationships. She is also momentarily forgetting how young and dependent on her parents she was at the time these events took place.

“Do you think that ‘others’ matter in moments like this! That one cares what they think or do?” screams Juliette, “You were all well and alive! Those that you come to detest for the mere fact that they are (alive)!” ... “Helped me in what way? What could you have done... when he cried out in pain, when his limbs started writhing and ... when he was choking to death... what could you have done?”

Juliette is now giving voice to the ungovernable fury, the unbearable pain and helplessness she felt when she was faced with her young son’s looming death. “I saw him so beautiful, so happy, and I saw the little corpse that he would become”. Her beautiful beloved son, who had embodied the vision of a future reaching well beyond her own un-imaginable death, was brutally transformed into an omen of death and irredeemable loss. Loss of his health, loss of his beauty, loss of him, loss of them, loss of his future children... inevitably carving the shadow of a dark void within her... There was also the unbearable guilt and helplessness at being unable to relieve his pain, to nurse him back to health... is that not what a good mother does for her child after all?

Juliette tells Lea that she wanted to go to prison. Either way, she was guilty, she said. “I had given birth to him and condemned him to die”, “I brought him up and I took him away”. Prison no doubt allowed her to atone for her guilt, ‘either way’ as she says: either because she felt responsible for his hereditary fatal degenerative disorder, or because she terminated his life. I suspect that, had she not gone to prison, there is a strong possibility that Juliette would have committed suicide. In this way, prison may have provided a needed

cloister, a protection from even more destructive manifestations of extreme grief. Did her withdrawal into seclusion also allow Juliette to preserve a mystical union with her dying or dead son, like a sort of ‘Pietà’ dwelling in a crypt, and to shun the others, the ‘living’?

One cannot help but ask whether Juliette’s actions might have been any different had she felt that there was an understanding other, husband or relative, she could turn to at the time. A thorny question, no doubt, but then not every fatal illness in a child results in euthanasia. Leaving aside the legal debates around the issue, very much alive in Canada, what is at stake is that there is a limit to the human capacity to bear pain, be it physical or psychological. There is a limit to a parent’s capacity to bear, passively, his or her child’s unrelieved pain, along with the implacable certainty of his or her death in the face of a total lack of certainty as to when this will happen, which inevitably blurs with and conditions the child’s experience. But, as we know, the capacity to bear pain is influenced by many factors, amongst which figure prominently the availability of genuine social and emotional supports.

One always wishes to die in someone’s loving arms, like when one came into the world, in the arms of one’s lover, spouse or child perhaps, standing for the early mother. This may account for the universal appeal of the ‘Pieta’, the subject of so many famous sculptures. But then, who was there to hold the dying mother of a dying child in Juliette’s case? And who shut whom out, one might ask?

“The worst prison is the death of one’s child, you never get out of it” concludes Juliette after she has told Lea the story of how she took Pierre to the Green House where they had a big party that night, how she read him his favorite bedtime stories, said she loved him, gave him

the injection, and held his body against hers until the morning. Yet, is the very act of telling the story to Lea, 15 years later, while being lovingly held in her arms, not already a release from the inner prison Juliette was hiding in all these years?

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About the film:

Cast

- [Kristin Scott Thomas](#) Juliette Fontaine
- [Elsa Zylberstein](#) Léa
- Serge Hazanavicius Luc
- Laurent Grévill Michel bly
- [Frédéric Pierrot](#) Capt. Fauré
- Jean-Claude Arnaud Papy Paul
- Claire Johnston Mother
- Lise Ségur P'tit Lys
- Mouss Zouheyri Samir

The film was cited as one of the year's ten best by many critics

Awards and nominations

- [BAFTA Award for Best Film Not in the English Language](#) (**winner**)
- [BAFTA Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role](#) (Kristin Scott Thomas, nominee)
- [BAFTA Award for Best Original Screenplay](#) (nominee)
- [British Independent Film Award for Best Foreign Film](#) (nominee)
- [Chicago Film Critics Association Award for Best Foreign Language Film](#) (nominee)
- [César Award for Best Debut](#) (Philippe Claudel, **winner**)
- [César Award for Best Actress in a Supporting Role](#) (Elsa Zylberstein, **winner**)
- [César Award for Best Film](#) (nominee)
- [César Award for Best Actress](#) (Scott Thomas, nominee)
- [César Award for Best Original Screenplay](#) (nominee)

- [César Award for Best Music Written for a Film](#) (Jean-Louis Aubert, nominee)
- [European Film Award for Best European Actress](#) (Scott Thomas, **winner**)
- [Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film](#) (nominee)
- [Golden Globe Award for Best Actress – Motion Picture Drama](#) (Scott Thomas, nominee)
- [London Film Critics' Circle Award for Best British Actress of the Year](#) (Scott Thomas, **winner**)
- [Satellite Award for Best Actress – Motion Picture Drama](#) (Scott Thomas, nominee)