



71<sup>e</sup> Festival International de Berlin  
Panorama

# THÉO ET LES MÉTAMORPHOSES

UN FILM DE DAMIEN ODOUL

ÉCRIT ET RÉALISÉ PAR DAMIEN ODOUL PRODUIT PAR ALEXANDRE PERRIER AVEC THÉO KERMEL PIERRE MEUNIER AYUMI ROUX LOUSIE MORIN ET ÉLIA SULEM PRODUCTEUR ASSOCIÉ BRAHIM CHOUHA DAN WECHSLER ANDREAS ROALD GIORGIO D'IMPERIO BERNARD CAMPAN VINCENT ROGET  
IMAGE DAMIEN ODOUL THIBAUD MAZARS SYLVAIN RODRIGUEZ SON FRÉDÉRIC DABO DIRECTION DE PRODUCTION MÉLANIE DIETER ET RONAN LEROY MONTAGE IMAGE AUNE DESTIVAL MONTAGE SON CLÉMENT CHAUVELLE ÉTALONNAGE ET FX BORIS RABUSSEAU MIXAGE MAXENCE CIEKAWY  
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# **THEO AND THE METAMORPHOSIS**

**A film written and directed by Damien Odoul**

97 min - France - 2022 - 1.85:1 - 5.1

with

**Théo Kermel**  
**Pierre Meunier**  
**Louise Morin**  
**Ayumi Roux**  
**Élia Sulem**

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## **SYNOPSIS**

Theo, a 27-year-old young man with Down's syndrome, lives with his father in an isolated house in the middle of a forest. They live in harmony with nature and animals, but one day the father goes away, leaving his son alone with his visions... Theo then begins his odyssey in which he reinvents himself, opens up to the world, experiences freedom, and tries to discover the nature of things and of beings.

## **INTERVIEW WITH DAMIEN ODOUL**

### **How would you define *Theo and the Metamorphosis*? As an intimate odyssey?**

An odyssey in camera. Indeed I like the ancient character of Ulysses in Homer's *Odyssey*, and also James Joyce's more contemporary character, but *Theo and the Metamorphosis* is above all a naturalist utopia full of hallucinations, shifts, and resilience in which the unconscious plays a primordial role. Yes, the word utopia sums it all up. It is what conjures up the imaginary. I think we need to know that there are still humans who believe in utopia so that poetry can once again have its place in our society. This film is made with this aspiration, that of believing that there are very often essential transformations in the troubled, complex times we live in. So, *Theo and the Metamorphosis* is a proposition that (re)presents another world. Ultimately, it is also a political film because it is ethical, and paradoxically, politics is never evoked. I experimented again with this new film. I'm still working on this notion of freedom, obviously with "a handicapped hero" who is like me, that is to say, who is unsuited to the modern world.

### **How did you decide on the title of your film?**

Initially, the title was TO. The main character's name is Theo, and since he is a young man who "invents himself" as he goes along, he renames himself and goes from Theo to To. Then I thought of a long title : *Theo and the Transformations* and ended with *Theo and the Metamorphosis* because there is this idea of metamorphosis, of change, of transformation, which permeated the whole story like an immense vibration. Above all, my film is about the way a being "lives in the world" and how he takes the risk of changing, of metamorphosing... And I like the word "metamorphosis", it's a visual word which is very flexible. It's rarely used in film, but more often in literature, and literature and poetry mean a lot to me.

### **Talking of literature, is it because of a literary influence that your film is divided into chapters with titles, music, and drawings?**

This chaptering is a scansion inspired by Indian music, by *râga*. I've been listening to this music for a quarter of a century, but it's the first time I've used it in a film. *Râga* is like a parenthesis opening and closing. Each *râga* is linked to a season, a moment of the day, or even a feeling. There is morning *râga*, evening *râga*. It's a relationship to time that suited my film to mark the evolution of the story.

**The nature of this film is multifaceted... For you, is *Theo and the Metamorphosis* a real fiction? A documentary? A poem?**

For me, this classification doesn't matter. "Fiction" or "documentary" doesn't mean anything... Or rather I'd say it's a "fictionalized documentary poem" ;-). The film is based on three writings: the first is the script that was never final; the second is the shoot during which I rewrote the story every day; and the third is the editing that lasted thirteen months. Everything was built to be destroyed, then rebuilt, free to explore! It was a risky process, but my producer, Alexandre Perrier, fully accompanied me on this path, he completely understood my approach. He was very attentive to me and let me work over a long period of time, which is absolutely impossible in the industry nowadays.

**How did you choose the actor who plays Theo, who is a young man with Down's syndrome?**

Initially, another extraordinary youth named Kostia Botkin, who also has Down's syndrome, was to play the main character. He couldn't do it in the end, but he still collaborated with us since he created Theo's drawings and composed the rap song at the start of the film, with his group "The Choolers"... Then I met Théo Kermel who does theatre and dance. He loves what he does.

**How did you present the role to him?**

I asked him to live inside the set in which he had to create his own theatre. The real Théo was a revelation in front of the camera. He was transformed, metamorphosed as the filming progressed. He was transfigured as soon as we started filming. The camera inspired him. He trusted me. And it worked. He abandoned himself to what wasn't yet there. I would tell him what we were doing as we went along, step by step, hour by hour, in a very simple way. For example, he loved the sequence with the Ninja because he loves fight movies... Our relationship was very playful and we progressed together.

**Is Theo's character part of the tradition of the heroes of your previous films that you call *les simples*, in homage to their direct, real relationship to life?**

These people who have punctuated my life as a filmmaker mean a lot to me. With *La Folle Parade*, one of my documentaries, I filmed with mentally handicapped people in Lozère for three years. But also "le Stef" that I call "le simple en friche (the rough, raw simpleton), my favourite actor, who was in *The Story of Richard O.*, in *In waiting the flood*, and also in *Deep breath* "The simple man" is a recurring figure in my cinema as he is my double... If I do have a double, it is he... It is deeply rooted – even at over 50 years old, he is always present. It no doubt comes from the isolation I felt from early childhood.



### **Why did you use voice-over in your film?**

It's more of an inner voice than a voice-over. As I knew that my film was not going to be very talky, with little dialogue, especially between Theo and his father, and that Theo's real encounters were with Nature... The nature of things like the nature of beings... Suddenly, I said to myself that there was little opportunity to get to know the inner thoughts of the main character, who also happens to be present all the way through the film. That's why I decided to free his inner voice, to embody it. So, Theo articulates what he is going through. Over the course of his thoughts, he summons his characters and desires, even making animals appear! He has fun with everything, creating his own magic tricks. But is he also having fun with us? He certainly is. Theo's inner voice reinforces the viewer's attention and creates another link.

### **Theo/To's inner space seems to be all-powerful. Is that the magical part of the film?**

Theo's visions come from the power of writing and language to summon images, characters, objects, and events in an immediate way. Simply by referring to them. So, the magic is very clearly present. For example, when Theo flies, it's a sensation I myself felt when I dream and I manage to wake up with my dream still present... I have this feeling of weightlessness, of flying over a world. I also knew that it was going to please Theo to shoot these sequences in levitation, and it shows – his face lights up at that moment.

### **We discover another code of your cinema: the freedom of bodies, especially when they are naked. What does nudity represent in this film?**

My characters are indeed often naked. In *In waiting for the flood* in which Pierre Richard was naked for the only time in his career, it was to express a strong idea of an old man's death... Nudity is natural for me, it is also a form of melancholy for a lost paradise, for a place where one could be oneself without worrying about appearances and illusions by fabricating strictly nothing and wearing nothing artificial. In his nudity, Theo is admirable. He is handsome. He is human and animal at the same time. I try to return to this nudity that the original poets loved. Theo's body in all its nudity also reveals its power, its suppleness, despite a handicap that we end up forgetting, and so much the better... I was thus able to respond to what he likes to see of himself: a lively, nimble body.

### **Your film takes place far from cities. Why did you once again choose to shoot in nature rather than in urban landscapes?**

I've mostly filmed outside cities, but here, specifically, I wanted to show nothing of our industrial, capitalist, urban civilization. I wanted to show a place of retreat, a time and space that exist "alongside". Today, cities are foreign to me, as is some of the countryside. There are some places in the countryside with which I no longer have any affinity. But in *Theo and the Metamorphosis*, we are in the heart of an isolated forest among

fairly high mountains. For me, it is a place comparable to the world of ancient Chinese poetry and painting where artists often lived in exile or in isolated provinces. Whether it is in this poetry, in the art of calligraphy or drawing, there is this permanent relationship with nature, and in particular with rocks and pine trees... In my eyes, the tree is a bit like a brother, a plant double, so to speak... I can talk to it, but not at all in a pseudo-shamanic delirium, rather very simply. I must say that I feel lesser than it. When I'm in front of a beautiful tree, its beauty is, to me, superior to a human's. As for the rock, it brings me back to the idea of immortality... it will be there until the end of time... it's so powerful, it's been there for so long, it fascinates me... And then there is the presence of animals which are so numerous in the film. One must always remember a deer's prudence, its simple relationship to its surroundings. And Nature is also the relationship to the interior space... That's a permanent concern of mine.

**The sun is also an important element of this film.**

Deep inside me, there is the Greek sun in the philosophical, ancient sense... Let me explain... When I'm in the Mediterranean, I immediately recognize what I call the Greek sun, the one that, like the rock, has always been there... You feel that it has been there for so long and that it will still be there long after men and animals... In the film, it also lets you feel and see the strong, bright light.

**What with the sun, nature, freedom and space, is *Theo and the Metamorphosis* a film about happiness?**

Absolutely not. It is more about Joy, which is a more spiritual, deeper notion. There is a permanent quest that runs through the film... Theo is so close to the birds that it makes me think of Rossellini's *Flowers of St. Francis* and the link that unites Saint Francis of Assisi with the little birds... or other rare works and their joy of being in the world.

**You also face the Far East which embodies a different spirituality.**

Exactly. And Theo's bun is very Taoist... With this film, I close a long cycle about a kind of fantasized Orient I experienced in my own way... Three years ago, I went on a very powerful trip to China, which made me realize that, at 50 years old, I still had no roots, no home... I am still on the move, of course, but it is tiring, especially in this world where we're constantly told what to do... I try to listen to what calls me, but it can be hard to live with. It involves moments of fragility too, but something in me is transformed, and I now carry much less anger and rage, which is why I want to see *Metamorphosis* through... while being more at peace.

Interview by Virginie Apiou with Damien Odoul, December 2020



## **CAST**

TO **Théo Kermel**

His Father **Pierre Meunier**

The Ninja **Ayumi Roux**

The Empress **Louise Morin**

His other half **Élia Sulem**

## **CREW**

Written and directed by **Damien Odoul**

Cinematography **Damien Odoul**

Editing **Anne Destival**

Sound **Frédéric Dabo**

Production Design **Sébastien Chauvet**

Casting **Bahijja El Amrani**

Production Manager **Mélanie Dieter**

Producer **Alexandre Perrier**

Coproducers **Brahim Chioua, Vincent Roget, Giorgio D'imperio, Dan Wechsler, Didier Diaz, and Bernard Campan**

Coproductions **Wild Bunch, Same Player, Freestudios, Bord Cadre, ABS Productions**

## DAMIEN ODOUL - BIOGRAPHY AND FILMOGRAPHY

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Since 1988, Damien Odoul has written and directed 9 feature films, 9 short films, and 4 creative documentaries.

*Morasseix* is his first feature film, which he directed at the age of 24 and in which he plays the role of Caesar. The film is co-produced by Arte. It was selected at Venice Days and distributed in a single theater in Paris. *Deep breath*, his second feature, was awarded the Grand jury prize and the Fipresci Prize at the Venice international film festival in 2001 and was released in 14 countries.

In 2002, he shot *Wandering* with Laetitia Casta and Benoît Magimel. The film is presented at Toronto International Film Festival, then released on Canal+ and Arte and sold by Wild Bunch.

*In waiting for the flood*, starring Pierre Richard and Anna Mouglalis, was selected for La Quinzaine de réalisateurs at Cannes in 2004.

In 2006, *The Story of Richard O.* with Mathieu Amalric and Le Stef (his favourite actor) is selected again at Venice in the Orizonti section.

At the same time Damien Odoul wrote his first two collections of poetry before devoting himself to *Poèmes du milieu, 1 to 39*, which he performs on the french public radio. In 2010, he finished *Poèmes du milieu, 40 to 88*, the culmination of this poetic proposal started back in 2004. He did several readings in theaters in Paris, Avignon and Marseille in 2021-2012. In 2007, Damien Odoul proposed a video and photo installation for the Kamel Mennour gallery's new space with Daniel Buren under the title : *Virtual fight et lymphatique*.

In 2009, *La Folle Parade*, a creative documentary filmed over 3 years with mentally handicapped people, was released on French public television on the occasion of an evening devoted to the filmmaker.

In 2011 is released on Arte *The rest of the world* with his partner Marie-Eve Nadeau and Emmanuelle Béart, and selected at International Film Festival Rotterdam, Hong-Kong, Edinburgh, Durban, Melbourne, Namur, São Paulo, Taiwan, Göteborg... This same year, he creates and directs *Méfausti*, freely adapted from Christopher Marlowe's *La Tragique Histoire du Docteur Faust* in a Parisian theater.

In 2012, after a 5 years shooting and a 1 year editing, he finished *Rich is the wolf*, selected at the FID Marseille and the Locarno Festival. The film has been screened at the Cinémathèque Française in March 2017 and in Japan.

In 2015, the filmmaker completed his seventh feature film entitled *The Fear*, freely adapted from Gabriel Chevallier's novel. The film has been selected at Toronto, Warsaw, Ghent and Geneva film Festivals and won the Prix Jean Vigo in France.

In 2017, he published an art book about his work as a filmmaker and a poem manifesto, *Résurrection permanente d'un cinéaste amoureux*. He is also a laureate of the Villa Kujoyama in Kyoto.

In 2020, he completes his ninth feature film entitled *Theo and the Metamorphosis*.

## FEATURE FILMS

**2020 *Theo and the Metamorphosis*** (Théo et les métamorphoses), digital, colors, 96', produced by Kidam and distributed by WildBunch

**2014 *The Fear*** (La Peur), digital, colors, 93', Jean Vigo Prize

**2012 *Rich is the wolf*** (La Richesse du loup), digital, colors, 85', produced by D.O.Films, distributed by Le Pacte

**2011 *The rest of the world*** (Le Reste du monde), TV film, digital, colors, 82', broadcast on Arte on 14/12/12, produced by Arte France and D.O.Films, with Marie Eve Nadeau, Emmanuelle Béart and Charles Berling

**2006 *The Story de Richard O.*** (L'Histoire de Richard O.), 35mm, colors, 75', produced by D.O.Films, with Mathieu Amalric

**2003 *In waiting for the flood*** (En attendant le deluge), 35mm, color, 81', produced by D.O.Films with Pierre Richard, Anna Mouglalis and Damien Odoul

**2002 *Wandering*** (Errance), 35 mm, color, 95', produced by Morgane Production, D.O.Films and Wild Bunch, with Laetitia Casta and Benoît Magimel

**2001 *Deep breath*** (Le Souffle), 35 mm, black & white, 77'

## SHORT FILMS AND DOCUMENTARIES

**2013 *Le temps des transhumances***, digital, color, 26',

**2009 *La folle parade***, digital, color, 40', released on French public television

**2006 *Anima***, Super 8/35mm, sepia, 2'.

**2003 *Les barbots***, 35 mm, colors, 24', Festival Ciné 32 in Auch, program Court-Circuit, 2003, Festival Paris Tout Court, 2007, released on Arte

**2002 *Le joug***, digital/35mm, black & white, 5', produced by Agora Films, Cannes Film Festival, Le Havre, Grenoble, Bordeaux, Aix-en-Provence, 2002

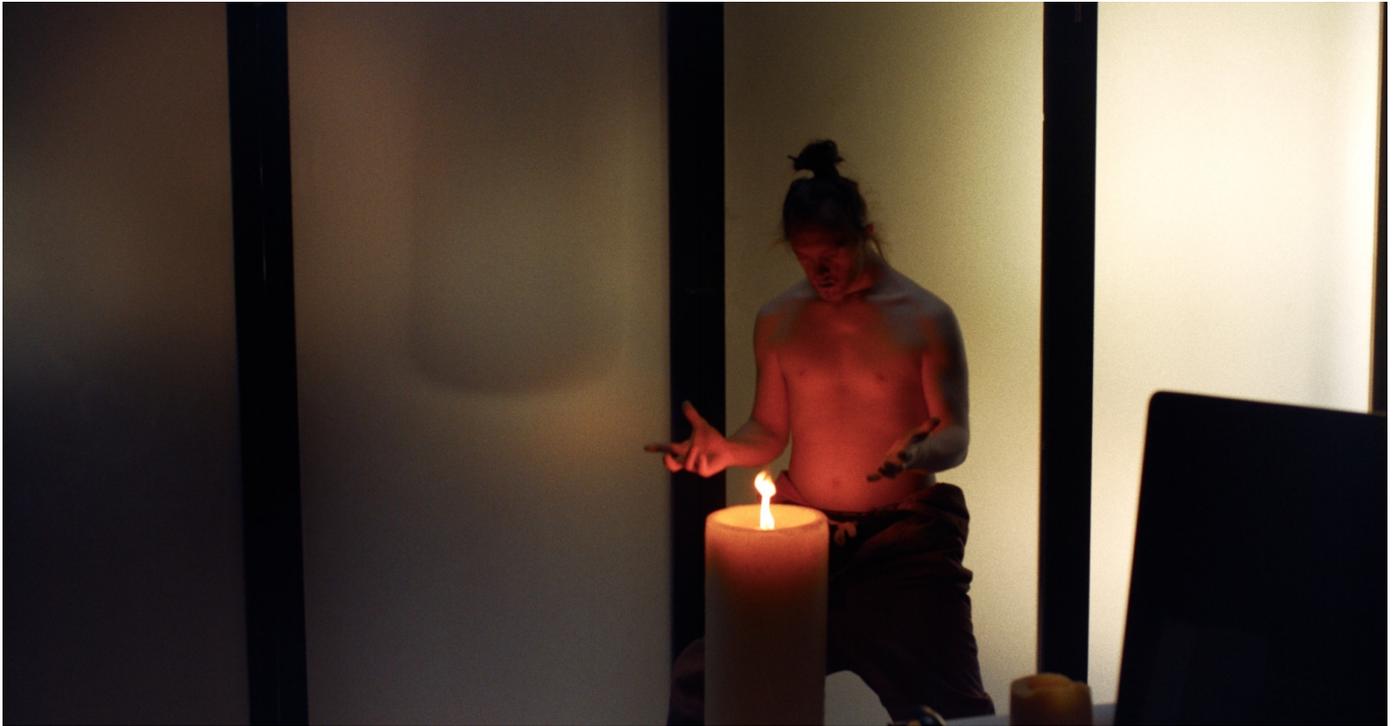
**1995 *Elegeia***, 35 mm, colors, 6', produced by Humbert Balsan, program l'Art du Court, 2006

**1994 *TOB (Tête d'Oeuf Bouilli)***, 35 mm, black & white and colors, 13'.

**1990 *A l'ouest de l'orient***, 35 mm, colors, 17', Special Jury Prize, Clermont-Ferrand Festival, CNC Prix de la qualité, Cannes Festival "Perspectives", Bratislava, Namur, Nuit des jeunes créateurs, 1990, Festival Paris Tout Court, 2005

**1989 *Tchécoslovaquie 68 / 89***, unpublished, 35 mm, black & white, 12

**1988'. *La douce***, 35 mm, black & white, 13', Orleans and Bastia festivals, 1990



TO

*"that kid-here"*

*he unfolds in space*

*he explores the other side of the mirror*

*but without time*

*he's standing in the space open to metamorphosis*

**damien odoul (spring/summer 2019)**

