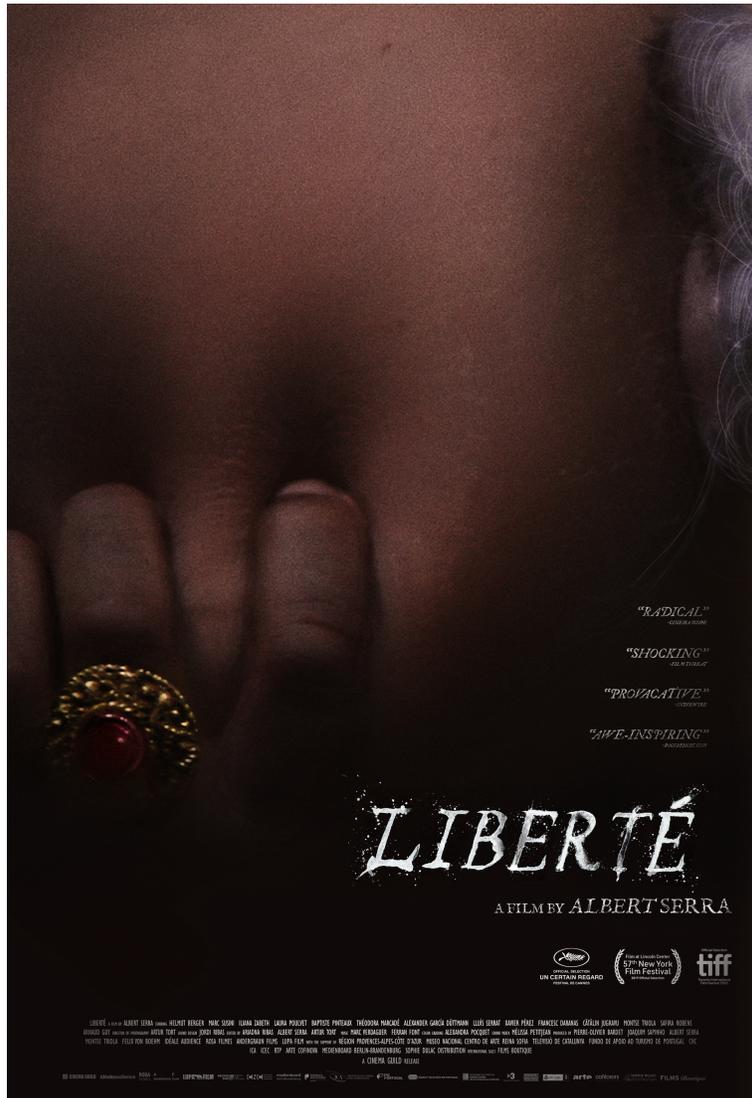


a Cinema Guild release



2019 / 132 min / 1.85:1 / DCP / Dolby Digital 5.1  
In French, German, Italian with English subtitles

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## SYNOPSIS

Just before the French Revolution, in a forest outside Berlin, a band of libertines expelled from the court of Louis XVI rendezvous with the legendary German seducer and freethinker, the Duc de Walchen (Helmut Berger), to convince him to join in their mission: the rejection of authority and all moral boundaries. What begins as an evening of strategizing on the proliferation of libertinage, descends into a Sadean night of pansexual one-upmanship.

Liberté is a singular cinematic experience only Albert Serra could deliver, a film in which increasingly dramatic acts of pain and pleasure unfold in counterpoint to cinematographer Artur Tort's luminous images of moonlit sylvan spaces. As Serra and his committed team of regular performers and newcomers "open the gates of Hell" and explore the limits of the erotic imagination, you won't be able to look away.

## CREW

Written and directed by	Albert Serra
Production	Pierre-Olivier Bardet Joaquim Sapinho Albert Serra & Montse Triola
Associate producer	Felix von Boehm
Director of photography	Artur Tort
Sound design	Jordi Ribas
Editors	Ariadna Ribas, Albert Serra, Artur Tort
Costume design	Rosa Tharrats
Creator of carrier chairs	Sebastian Vogler
Sound mixer	Mélissa Petitjean
Camera operator	Alexandra Pocquet
Music	Marc Verdaguer, Ferran Font
Produced by	Idéale Audience, Rosa Filmes, Andergraun Films & Lupa Film
International Sales	Films Boutique
U.S. Distribution	Cinema Guild

## CAST

Duc de Walchen	Helmut Berger
Comte de Tésis	Marc Susini
Mademoiselle de Jensling	Iliana Zabeth
Mademoiselle de Geldöbel	Laura Poulvet
Duc de Wand	Baptiste Pinteaux
Madame de Dumeval	Théodora Marcadé
Comte Alexis Danshir	Alexander Garrcía Düttmann
Armin	Lluís Serrat
Capitaine Benjamin Hephie	Xavier Pérez
Libertine	Francesc Daranas
Catalin	Cătălin Jugravu
Madam Montavrile	Montse Triola
Mademoiselle Rubens	Safira Robens

## DIRECTOR'S BIO

Born in Banyoles in 1975, Albert Serra is a Catalan artist and director. Having studied philosophy and literature, he wrote plays and produced video work. He gained international recognition with his first feature *Honor of the Knights*, a loose adaptation of Don Quixote starring non-professional actors from his village. The film was presented at Cannes' Directors' Fortnight in 2006.

For his second film, *Birdsong*, Serra took inspiration from a traditional Catalan Christmas song, "El cant dels ocells," and worked with the same group of people to tell the story of the three wise men following their guiding star to find Jesus.

In 2013, the Centre Pompidou in Paris gave him a carte blanche for a correspondence with the Argentinian director Lisandro Alonso. The same year he received the Golden Leopard in Locarno for his new film *Story of my Death*, inspired by Casanova's memoirs.

*The Death of Louis XIV*, starring Jean-Pierre Léaud as the Sun King, was presented in the Official Selection of Cannes Film Festival 2016.

*Liberté*, starring Helmut Berger, Marc Susini, Baptiste Pinteaux, is the cinematic recreation of his 2018 Berlin Volksbühne play of the same name. The film won a Special Jury Prize from the Un Certain Regard Jury at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival.

## FILMOGRAPHY

LIBERTÉ, 2019

- Special Jury Prize, Un Certain Regard, Cannes Film Festival
- Official Selection, Toronto International Film Festival
- Official Selection, New York Film Festival

THE DEATH OF LOUIS XIV, 2016

- Cannes Film Festival

STORY OF MY DEATH, 2013

- Golden Leopard, Locarno Film Festival

BIRDSONG, 2008

- Directors' Fortnight, Cannes Film Festival

HONOR OF THE KNIGHTS, 2006

- Directors' Fortnight, Cannes Film Festival

## INTERVIEW – ALBERT SERRA

The idea, to begin with, was to create something dark, to start from the play about desire that I'd put on in the spring of 2018 at Berlin's Volksbühne theater. Theater is what it is, which at times can seem rather stilted. With a film, I knew I could go further, delve deeper into the questioning about desire, the malaise linked to desire. And then I had the idea of a kind of cruising (looking for a sexual partner), a historical cruising... about people who were driven out of the French court in 1774 upon the death of Louis XV, who was a great debauchee. Louis XVI has them exiled to bring some order back into court life.

### **After STORY OF MY DEATH and THE DEATH OF LOUIS XIV, why another historical film?**

Perhaps because of the need to cast a different look, from a distance, upon today's malaise concerning sexuality—asking the 18th-century French libertines to look at us, finding in their attitudes a detail, a fragment, something that allows the film to travel through the centuries until it achieves a form of contemporary trash. It's a costume film, yet it could very well be a film about night clubs in Berlin or elsewhere. Places where the same kind of erotic cruising is found, where there's no hierarchical levels, no handsome or ugly people, men or women, rich or poor, master or servant; everything is interchangeable, without vanity-related shackles: there are bodies, impulses, desire. You can finally forget yourself. It's an ideal that is really quite contemporary.

### **Where are these libertines?**

In a forest clearing. They find themselves exporting such court values to German provinces. This traveling to Germany was more explicit in the stage play. The film is more vague with reference to this aspect. We're nearly in a non-place, that isn't attached to a particular geographical location. These debauchees are lost. They no longer know whether to head for death, following their ideal to the end, or on the contrary seek refuge in a convent, as did Madame Du Barry, to expiate their sins, in an ultimate face-off with Catholicism.

### **Who are your actors?**

Some are non-professionals, others film or stage actors, people from the crew who felt like acting, throwing themselves into improvisation, and friends of mine who are in all my films...

### **Which source material is your text inspired by? Is it borrowed from Sade, or other 18th-century authors, or is it made up of entirely original scenes?**

At first there was a lot of borrowed text, but in the end most of it is mine. There are still quotations here and there. The first speech is an excerpt from Casanova's memoirs that Michel Foucault commented on as an example of the extreme and arbitrary cruelty of power, and hence the State.

### **The film is, you said, highly improvised.**

The play was already written. With everything already in mind, I could afford to move away from it. I thought out the film differently: freed from rhetorical heaviness. I could thus initially start with a harmless fictional narrative, and slowly sink into contemporary trash. Nothing changes, visually-speaking, the set and surroundings remain the same, but the tone changes gradually.

### **The film, through your work on shadows and darkness, and on off-screen sound, leaves a lot of room for the viewer's imagination. We, in turn, invent and mentally produce images that are superimposed over yours. We're a little like Sade, writing to his wife from his prison cell: "You've had me conjure up ghosts that I shall make real..."**

The entire editing was thought out for that very purpose. There are no ellipses. Everything flows right onwards. What happens off-screen is decisive. We shot continuously, which means that we ended up with nearly three hundred hours of rushes, for a film that after all lasts 2h12. The editing took months. Entire scenes disappeared. The narrative structure is that of serial mechanics, there's no moral emotion (laughter). It's somewhat of an anticlimax, it's artificial yet organic, it comes from avant-garde cinema though I do hope that I am moving away from a kind of minimalism (however grand) that I tended to pursue when I started out.

### **We walk out of the film mesmerized.**

This is what I was aiming for, that the film would physically impact the viewer and produce the type of stunned state you can be in when you walk out of a nightclub in the early hours of the morning. A mental film, where you can no

longer distinguish what you've seen from what you've heard or what you've imagined. You stage and direct it, right with me. Sometimes, we're the voyeurs, sometimes they're the ones looking at us and demanding our attention. Perhaps they're watching us, observing our reactions with great scrutiny. The film shoot itself was an experience. We shot for nineteen days in Portugal in September (it was decided during the 2018 Cannes Film Festival that the film would be made). Choosing Portugal was simple: we needed a place that would still be warm enough in September to avoid creating additional discomfort for the actors. In fact, we should really say nineteen nights, for aside from the prologue, the entire film was shot at night – with this forest and these trees that may recall Versailles' Parc-aux-Cerfs or, closer to our era, the cruising spots in Alain Guiraudie's *STRANGER BY THE LAKE*.

**Did 18th-century painting also inspire you?**

Yes, François Boucher above all, since he documented Versailles' Parc-aux-Cerfs quite a bit, as well as the women who lived there, and in particular Marie-Louise O'Murphy. Watteau and Chardin as well, but to a lesser extent. It's essentially Boucher; Boucher and Fragonard. The chairs have a deliberate rococo, baroque side. We'd had them made for the play and we used them for the film shoot; they were a little worse for wear after each night.

**During the film shoot, once the set was designed, how did you "stage" these nights?**

I didn't know, each night, how far we could go, how explicit we could be. This depended upon the actors and I hate having to ask something like that. All this needs to come spontaneously, which means that you have to create an atmosphere that is conducive to that. I let them act freely. It's the Andy Warhol side of me. I don't dictate anything, but I create a form of intimacy that influences them. This entails a bit of violence, and a bit of tension, otherwise it doesn't work. Solicitude towards people translates into something on their faces which wasn't what I was interested in for this film; I needed a bit more tension. The actor's work begins with this tension between intimacy and exhibitionism. Something must happen, spark off inside the actor. If I am unable to achieve this intimacy with the actor, the whole thing is no more than pornography and I fail to serve my project. So, I remove things, I fragment, and I fetishize, mainly. In my work, my approach is subtractive. I add little to what I'm given. But I carve out and chisel, a lot; I chip away, here and there, to achieve this tension, this pared-down result. Do you know Annie Le Brun's book about Sade?

**Yes, it's titled SADE: A SUDDEN ABYSS...**

Of Sade, Annie Le Brun says: "He is an idea-removing machine". Sade had a subtractive approach to his era. Removing ideas! Who would do that today? The film, I hope, works the same way: its vanity lies in presuming to remove ideas. But the reason for this is simply that I have no established views on today's society, in particular the place allotted to sex, morals. I'm just attempting this: confronting the present day to the 18th century and I observe the subtraction that this comparison produces.

**What about the title?**

It plays with the word libertine... Liberty. It is, perhaps, a dark title. The film is somber as well, I do see this, yet I am not a somber person. Why does this film have dark leanings? Perhaps because it is asking what it is that this liberty leads to, which absence? Is this absence bearable? It does have a price...

**And this absence, is it God's absence?**

Yes. In the movie, there's this line: "God is a pervert with whom I'd like to deal," that could very well summarize the film. There is an escalation in desire, eternally unsatisfied; this leads to a death wish. With Sade, desire becomes anti-bourgeois; it is impossible to come to terms with and remains insatiate.

**The film experiences Sade's world; it makes Sade a possible theater. Do you remember that Georges Bataille criticized the surrealists, and André Breton in particular, for making Sade a mere writer, thus annihilating him? Sade, Bataille said, must be played, experienced, experimented with. Which means touching upon the limits of what can be shown, indeed not be afraid of approaching horror...**

Annie Le Brun also reproached those who reduced Sade to literature or pure fantasy. I, for one, am a great admirer of what Annie Le Brun has brought to light concerning Sade. She is someone who thinks that we never go far enough (laughter).

**The film is about the end of a certain world?**

Yes.

**What is of such interest to you in the 18th century in France?**

Everything. The birth of a civilization, sophistication, something still very much alive, where nothing is fully set. It's just before sophistication went too far, freezing life, or making way for rules. There is still a form of rebellion, a few utopias. There is also, at that pivotal moment, the invention of Europe. Not an economic Europe, but a cultural Europe: Casanova's Europe.

As a foreigner, I can approach this French century in a purely aesthetical, formal manner; dream it up through Fragonard. Pure fantasy. I can also approach it in a personal way, with a little less respect.

**Does this entail going through Buñuel?**

Yes, possibly. I really like Buñuel. In his last films, there's a grandeur in the fetishism. TRISTANA is a magnificent film. The malaise runs even deeper. What he did, in terms of tension, regarding a repression-transgression system, exudes a strength that has remained intact.

*Interview conducted by Philippe Azoury, May 2019*