

Invité d'honneur Emmanuel Carrère

Emmanuel Carrère

A biography



Fr Emmanuel Carrère amorce sa carrière comme critique de cinéma pour Positif et Télérama. En 1982, il écrit son premier livre, une monographie dédiée au cinéaste Werner Herzog. Il oriente alors sa plume vers le roman, notamment avec *L'Adversaire*, récit troublant consacré à l'Affaire Romand, adapté au cinéma en 2002 par Nicole Garcia. Emmanuel Carrère navigue adroitement à travers les médiums. En plus d'être journaliste et écrivain, il est aussi scénariste et cinéaste. Avec son film *Retour à Kotelnitich* (2003, Mostra de Venise) il mêle Histoire russe et son histoire personnelle, avant d'adapter son roman *La Moustache* (2005, Quinzaine des réalisateurs), avec Vincent Lindon et Emmanuelle Devos.

Carrère est un auteur aux interrogations multiples, notamment sur la question du réel, constamment nappé d'ambiguïté, de nos croyances, et nos introspections. Au fil de son œuvre et jusqu'à son dernier livre *Yoga*, Carrère—récompensé par le prestigieux prix Renaudot pour *Limonov* en 2011—a brillamment questionné l'opacité de la fiction et l'étrangeté du monde tangible.

De Emmanuel Carrère begann seine Karriere als Filmkritiker. 1982 schrieb er sein erstes Buch, eine an Werner Herzog gewidmete Monografie. Dann wendete er sich dem Roman zu, namentlich mit *L'Adversaire*, der verstörenden Geschichte des Mörders und Hochstaplers Jean-Claude Romand, die 2002 von Nicole Garcia als Kinofilm adaptiert wurde. Emmanuel Carrère navigiert geschickt zwischen den Medien, er ist nicht nur Journalist und Schriftsteller, sondern auch Drehbuchautor und Filmemacher. Mit seinem Film *Retour à Kotelnitich* (2003, Filmfestspiele Venedig), vermischt er die russische mit seiner persönlichen Geschichte. Dann adaptierte er seinen eigenen Roman *La Moustache* (2005, Quinzaine des réalisateurs), mit Vincent Lindon und Emmanuelle Devos.

Als Autor befasst sich Carrère mit vielen Fragestellungen, insbesondere mit der Frage nach der Realität, die ständig von Zweideutigkeiten verschleiert wird, nach unseren Überzeugungen und unserer Selbstreflexion. Im Laufe seines Werks und bis zu seinem letzten Buch *Yoga* ist es Carrère, der 2011 für *Limonov* mit dem angesehenen Renaudot-Preis ausgezeichnet wurde, brillant gelungen, die Undurchsichtigkeit der Fiktion und die Eigenartigkeit der greifbaren Welt zu hinterfragen.

En Emmanuel Carrère began his career as a film critic. In 1982, he wrote his first book, a monograph devoted to filmmaker Werner Herzog. He then turned his pen to the novelistic form, in particular with *L'Adversaire*, a troubling account dedicated to the Romand Affair, which was adapted into a film in 2002 by Nicole Garcia. Emmanuel Carrère skilfully navigates through the different media; as well as being a journalist and a writer, he is a screenwriter and a filmmaker. With his film *Retour à Kotelnitich* (2003, Venice Film Festival), he blended Russian history with his personal stories, before adapting his own novel *La Moustache* (2005, Directors' Fortnight), with Vincent Lindon and Emmanuelle Devos.

Carrère is an author with many questions to ask, particularly on the subject of 'reality', constantly coated with ambiguity, with our beliefs and our introspections. Throughout his works, including in his latest book *Yoga*, Emmanuel Carrère—awarded the prestigious Prix Renaudot for *Limonov* in 2011—has brilliantly questioned the opacity of fiction and the strangeness of the tangible world.

Bibliography and Filmography

2021	Le Quai de Ouistreham (film)
2020	Yoga (account)
2016	Il est avantageux d'avoir où aller (account)
2014	Le Royaume (account)
2011	Limonov (account)
2009	D'autres vies que la mienne (account)
2007	Un roman russe (account)
2005	La Moustache (film)
2003	Retour à Kotelnitich (film)
2003	Le Soldat perdu (TV Report)
2002	L'Adversaire, by Nicole Garcia (adapted from the novel)
2000	L'Adversaire (account)
1998	La Classe de neige, by Claude Miller (adapted from the novel)
1995	La Classe de neige (novel)
1993	Je suis vivant et vous êtes morts (biography dedicated to P.K. Dick)
1986	La Moustache (novel)
1982	Werner Herzog (essay, monography)

Emmanuel Carrère or the art of the fictional documentary story

Emmanuel Chicon

En “To use materials of which I was not the master and which I had to take as I found them (since my life was what it was and I could not alter my past by so much as a comma, a raw fact representing for me a fate as unchallengeable as the beast that runs into the ring is to the torero), to say everything, devoid of emphasis, without leaving anything to the imagination as if obeying a necessity—such was the risk I accepted and the rule I had fixed for myself, such the etiquette with which I could make no compromise.”
Michel Leiris, *Manhood*.

There are magnetic and heady works that we may read and read again to unearth their latent and manifest lines of force. Such are the documentary stories of Emmanuel Carrère, the composite form of which, both narrative and reflective, has been part of a field at the crossroads of journalism and literature for the past twenty years (alongside figures such as Jean Hatzfeld, Jean Rolin, etc.), a labile space in which writing about oneself means encountering others and bearing witness to them for one's contemporaries. It requires constituting, over the course of an immersive reportage possibly followed by a book which will deepen the internal echoes of the preliminary investigation, a partial truth, one that is biased but worthy of sharing, that of an experience having taken place on a human scale. At the turn of the millennium and in the name of a new literary ethic that he would gradually forge, he refused to adopt the overbearing position of demiurge creator in favour of the more modest position of a “clerk to others”¹ who makes lives parallel to his own resonate within himself in a shared space-time.

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Since the publication of *L'Adversaire* (2000) about the Romand Affair², Carrère's literary project has followed in the wake of the “non-fiction novel” invented by Truman Capote in the mid-1960s with his seminal *In Cold Blood*³, although he nonetheless radically diverges from it. At odds with the aesthetics of impersonality asserted by his predecessor, Emmanuel Carrère is an investigator who says “I” and embraces his status as an observer participating in capturing the real, within a narration that integrates the conditions of its elaboration. Criticising Marguerite Yourcenar's desire to erase the distorting prism of subjectivity to write her *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, he explains: *Where I diverge [from her], is with regard to what she calls the shadow borne (...) namely the presence of the author of today. I profoundly believe that we cannot avoid it (...), that we will always see the tricks by which one tries to erase it and that it is best from that moment on to accept it and stage it.* He goes on: *“It's like creating a documentary. Either we attempt to make it look like we see the people in it 'for real', that's to say how they are when we are not there to film them. Or we admit that the fact we are filming changes the situation, and that when we do film, it's a new situation.”*⁴

1 According to the expression used by Laurent Demanze, in a passage written in the compendium he co-edited with Dominique Rabaté: “Emmanuel Carrère, breaking into reality”, P.O.L., 2018.

2 For 18 years, Jean-Claude Romand lied to his family about his activities, pretending to be a doctor and researcher, before killing them in 1993. Sentenced to life imprisonment three years after the deeds, he was released on parole in June 2019.

3 This book, which tells the story of the murder of a family of farmers in the heartland of America, is presented as a montage of interviews conducted by the author with the majority of the people involved in this crime.

4 “La Ressemblance” (“The Resemblance”) in “Il est avantageux d'avoir où aller” (“97,196 Words: Essays”) - P.O.L., 2016

This comment is compelling in the connection it makes between literature and documentary filmmaking. We have to remember that Carrère, even before beginning his first period as a novelist (*La Moustache*, *La Classe de neige*...), was originally a critic—moreover, his first book, published in 1982, was a monograph dedicated to Werner Herzog—before becoming a script writer, adapting books by Loti, Simenon and Vargas for the television, and moving, although much more rarely, to directing. It is no accident that he made his first venture in cinema in the field of documentary. *Retour à Kotelnic* (2003) appears to be another, more underground, cornerstone, in the journey of the writer-filmmaker, who, by enacting a change in medium, would permanently shift from a purely novelistic practice towards the subjective transcription of the real begun in *L'Adversaire*. An approach through which he would seek to give a fictional form to real lives, through narration.

Behind this "return" was a commission from the *Envoyé spécial* TV show for a report on a Hungarian taken prisoner by the Red Army in 1945, who was reported missing and considered dead, until he was found 55 years later in the psychiatric hospital of Kotelnich, an ordinary little Russian town located a thousand kilometres away from Moscow. Like Jean-Claude Romand, who, without any witnesses, "lost himself alone in the forests of the Jura" (Florence Aubenas, *Libération*, 1993), Andras Toma represents for Emmanuel Carrère another cloistered figure, a damned soul, who reminds him of his maternal grandfather, a Georgian immigrant who disappeared in September 1944, in all likelihood executed for deeds of collaboration. This resonance with his own genealogy is absent from *Le Soldat perdu*, the journalistic investigation that is the driving force behind his first stay in Kotelnich, to which he returns two years later, justifying it thus: "As I imagine it, the film should be the diary of our stay in Kotelnich, the portrait of the people we will meet there, the chronicle of the relationships we will have with them—all of that combined with the more intimate story of my immersion in the Russian language. (...) But perhaps it will not be at all what I imagine it to be today. (...) I would like, I don't know if it's possible, to preserve this ignorance till the shoot. To only really discover what the film is about during the editing process: when what will happen to us will become what happened to us." The film crew thus spent a month on location, collecting atmosphere shots and interviews with the inhabitants, in the hope that the fact the observation itself would provoke an event. While editing this "chaos of scattered fragments", the unimaginable happened: Ania, a young French-speaking woman he met and filmed during the first two trips, and her baby had been brutally murdered by a madman. "I spent my time in Kotelnich wishing for something to finally happen, and then, (...) what happened was this: this horror" he wrote three years later, in *Un Roman russe* (2007), the main thread of which is made up of the erratic shoot in Kotelnich, interwoven with the account of the autobiographical conditions that provoked, accompanied and added depth to it: the investigation into the ghostly disappearance of his grandfather, the silence imposed on this story by his mother, but also a passionate love which irremediably comes apart, precipitated by the publication of a pornographic love letter in *Le Monde*.

In the literature of the 'real' such as he practices it, the presence of the "I", like a continuous bassline, rather than being an obstacle, remains a privileged gateway into the real, and the writing, an echo chamber of the words of others which, one work after the other, creates a community of existence based upon an equal commitment to the relationships and the recognition of a shared humanity.

The death of Ania and her son therefore makes the film possible, a terrible realisation that leads Carrère to return to Russia for a third time to meet the deceased woman's family, a final shoot around which the editing will "quite naturally" be organised, to take the form that we know from him, a filmed diary. A diary kept by a writer-filmmaker whose presence can be felt in almost every shot. His introspective voiceover retraces the transition from his distanced observation of an imagined reality that he initially sought to capture without a predetermined script—which often proved to be disappointing—to his own incorporation, which adjusts his distance with regard to the accumulated filmic material, into the narration which weaves together mourning process, the successive stays in Kotelnich and his personal quest: "It is strange, I came to find a grave for a man whose uncertain death has weighed over my life for so long, and I find myself before a grave, that of a woman and a child who were nothing to me, and yet, I am in mourning for them too." This sentence uttered at the end of the film, following work in the editing room which Carrère remembers as an extremely stimulating moment, "a king of yardstick of freedom", a realisation that will affect the elaboration of his subsequent books—he would go on to write *Un Roman russe* as a montage of notes and texts accumulated over time, considered as film rushes and shaped as such— and condense an original poetics that will structure his future work.

It will impose itself on the writer, with the release of the family secret brought about by both the film *and* the book, a authentic literary making-of that recapitulates and reorders what had remained off-screen. *Un Roman russe* is both an autobiographical account that resumes an act of cinema and the story of a writing process being redi-



Retour à Kotelnitch

rected *through* the latter. The long-term work undertaken in and around Kotelnitch stabilised Emmanuel Carrère's creative practice by resolving, via the filmed documentary detour, the question of his place in the face of a 'real' that is always likely to "*rip-up the fabric of our scenarios and our mental fictions*" (Laurent Demanze).

A place that he will constantly question, that he will further hone in a perpetual movement of empathy and distancing, and above all that he will co-construct with the extraordinary heroes that he will subsequently stage in his books: in *D'autres vies que la mienne* (2009) with Delphine and Jérôme and their little girl swept away by the tsunami and the two lame judges combing through cases of over-indebtedness in the Isère region (his sister-in-law Juliette, suffering from cancer, and her colleague Etienne Rigal, a leg amputee); *Limonov* (2011), of course, the man of a thousand lives—a thug in Ukraine, the idol of the Soviet underground, a vagrant and then a valet to a Manhattan billionaire, a trendy writer in Paris, a soldier lost in the Balkans and "in the huge post-communist mess", a leader of a group of young fascists—who fascinates him because this adventurous existence appears eminently quixotic to him (even if the person in question scathingly disavows it, replying out of the blue: "a shitty life, rather!").

Each new opus by Emmanuel Carrère, including his most recent, *Yoga* (2020), thus functions as a search for the right distance in the investigation he conducts on others, with "himself". In the literature of the 'real' such as he practices it, the presence of the "I", like a continuous bassline, rather than being an obstacle, remains a privileged gateway into the real, and the writing, an echo chamber of the words of others which, one work after the other, creates a community of existence based upon an equal commitment to the relationships and the recognition of a shared humanity. Etienne Rigal was not mistaken. In a beautiful written piece entitled *Lequel parle à travers l'autre*, he alludes to his favourite pages of *D'autres vies que la mienne*, that tell of a moment shared with his colleague Juliette on the question of disability: "*I cannot say if this dialogue, these words, are those that I reported to Emmanuel or if he wrote them, if he is their transcriber or their author. Today, I see that these words, which are perhaps his, have become my memory, they are inscribed in me in my mind and not only in my reading (...)* How can I not understand through this experience of biography that this memory is, beyond dialogue with oneself, a dialogue with the other, with others, like a game of tennis, my essential sport, where we send our lives back to each other and where we build, and rebuild, the past together, and in doing so the present and the future of the memory."

Retour à Kotelnitch

Emmanuel Carrère
France | 2003 | 105' | French, Russian



Fr En 2000, Emmanuel Carrère part effectuer, pour *Envoyé spécial*, un premier tournage à Kotelnitch, sur les traces d'un prisonnier de guerre hongrois enfermé 55 ans, oublié de tous, dans l'hôpital psychiatrique de cette petite ville perdue aux confins de l'Oural. Là, il rencontre Ania, francophile mythomane, et son fiancé Sacha, officier local du FSB. De retour deux ans plus tard, il retrouve le couple « romanesque », avant d'apprendre quelque temps après qu'Ania et son bébé ont été sauvagement assassinés par un fou. Il revient alors une dernière fois pour filmer une famille russe frappée par le malheur. En organisant les matériaux collectés au montage, Carrère cherche moins à dresser un mausolée

suspect à la mémoire de la défunte qu'à ordonner une réflexion, par l'image, sur sa place à lui. *Retour à Kotelnitch* apparaît ainsi comme une enquête, un « rapport » sur la manière dont l'écrivain-cinéaste est travaillé par le film, et comment s'effectue son passage de l'observation distanciée de la réalité, à son incorporation corps et âme, dans l'histoire qu'il cherche à nous raconter.

De 2000 reist Emmanuel Carrère für die französische Fernsehsendung *Envoyé spécial* zum ersten Mal nach Kotelnitch, wo er einen Beitrag über die Spuren eines ungarischen Kriegsgefangenen drehen soll, der in dieser verlorenen Stadt am Rande des Urals 55 Jahre von allen vergessen in einem psychiatrischen Krankenhaus eingesperrt war. Dort trifft er Ania, eine frankophile Fabuliererin, und ihren Verlobten Sacha, lokaler Agent des FSB. Zwei Jahre später kehrt er zurück, um das « romanhafte » Paar erneut zu treffen, und erfährt kurz darauf, dass Ania und ihr Baby brutal von einem Verrückten ermordet wurden. Er kehrt ein letztes Mal zurück, um eine vom Unglück verfolgte russische Familie zu filmen. Durch die Organisation des gesammelten Materials bei der Montage versucht Carrère weniger, ein Mausoleum in Gedenken an die Verstorbene zu errichten, sondern vielmehr, durch das Bild eine Reflexion über seinen eigenen Platz anzustossen. *Retour à Kotelnitch* präsentiert sich wie eine Ermittlung, es ist ein « Bericht » über die Art und Weise, wie der Schriftsteller und Filmemacher von dem Film eingenommen wird, und wie er von der distanzierten Beobachtung der Realität dazu übergeht, sie in der Geschichte, die er uns zu erzählen versucht, mit Leib und Seele zu verkörpern.

En In 2000, Emmanuel Carrère sets off to a first shoot in Kotelnitch for TV show *Envoyé spécial*, following in the traces of a Hungarian prisoner of war who had been locked away for 55 years, forgotten by everyone, in the psychiatric hospital of this small town lost on the edges of the Ural. There, he meets Ania, a Francophile and compulsive liar, and her fiancé Sacha, a local FSB officer. Returning two years later, he finds the "romantic" couple again, only to learn some time later that Ania and her baby have been savagely murdered by a madman. He then returns one last time to film a Russian family struck by misfortune. By organising the collected material in the editing room, Carrère seeks less to erect a suspicious mausoleum in memory of the deceased than to impose a reflection, through the image, of his own place. *Retour à Kotelnitch* thus appears like an investigation, a "report" on the way in which the writer-filmmaker is affected by the film, and how he moves from the distanced observation of reality to his own assimilation, body and soul, in the story he seeks to tell us. – Emmanuel Chicon

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