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CANNES 2019

PARTICLES

A FILM BY BLAISE HARRISON



LES FILMS DU POISSON and BANDE À PART FILMS present

QUINZAINÉ  
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CANNES 2019

# PARTICLES

A FILM BY **BLAISE HARRISON**

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**P**ays de Gex, on the French-Swiss border. P.A. and his homies are in their last year of high school. One hundred metres beneath their feet, the Large Hadron Collider (LHC), the most powerful particle accelerator in the world is crashing protons into each other to recreate the energetic conditions of the big bang and detect previously unknown particles. As winter sets in and P.A. sees the world shifting around him, he starts to observe strange phenomena in the environment. The changes are imperceptible at first, but gradually his whole world seems to be on the brink.





## INTERVIEW BLAISE HARRISON

**/ After two documentaries, *Armand 15 ans l'été* and *L'Harmonie*, *Particles* is your debut feature. Was it a smooth transition?**

As a student in the film department at Lausanne art school, I had made two shorts. Then I discovered documentary almost by myself while trying to find a manner of shooting that was the best fit for my personality and sensitivity, preferring to start from the real and let accidents and unforeseen events shape it. My first documentary short, co-directed with Maryam Goormaghtigh at the end of my course, was a stroll through Alsace one summer, encountering people and landscapes. It's a fairly photographic and contemplative film, without narration or plotting but with a real urge for cinema. The film came together on the shoot, as ideas and encounters fell into place on the way. From the start, I loved that freedom, which led me to take a growing interest in documentary filmmaking without ever losing sight of fiction, or its most fundamental aspect at least: telling a story.

I never really refrained from intervening in my documentaries, either on the shoot or in the editing room, in order to bring all

cinema's resources into play to tell the story. I gradually developed the urge to adopt the opposite strategy in order to own and develop this interventionist approach with greater freedom: starting out with an idea for a fictional story, plot and characters, then seeking in reality everything that came close to it. It was a very different experience for me because it involved intensely preparing the narrative before the shoot, as opposed to on set or in editing as I had done previously.







**/ How did you apply that approach to *Particles*?**

The film was born out of the desire to film adolescence, inspired by the memories I have kept of events and emotions from those years in a very particular geographical region that I know well since I grew up there. Pays de Gex is both very ordinary and very peculiar, caught between Geneva's urban sprawl and Haut-Jura's savage wilderness, with CERN's particle accelerator burrowed away underground. I invented nothing. I built on what was there. It was crucial for the film's young cast to come from the region. I

filmed their environment as it is, at home, with their real parents and siblings. I set out to find people who were as close as possible to what I had imagined, and at the same time I hoped they would take me away from it. That is also why I didn't want the actors to read the script beforehand. They would discover a little bit more every day. Even then, I never gave them anything to read. I simply explained the situation and context, and I tried to see what they would make of it. I didn't want to put words into their mouths. On the contrary, I wanted them to express themselves with their words and awkwardness. I also wanted to stop them developing preconceived ideas of what I expected of them, in order to preserve at all costs that precious innocence and spontaneity. It was risky because I also had to deal with the fabulous yet cumbersome infrastructure of a feature film, with scenes that require a bigger crew, more attention and more preparation. I had to strike a balance between a strong desire for freedom and contextual constraints. While starting out with a fictional story, reality is there to add something new and invigorate the fiction. It is a framework that allows me to identify what I want from reality.

**/ It's easy to imagine the casting of the four friends in particular being a major challenge in that respect.**

Yes, the group of guys at the heart of the movie is representative of those objectives. The group did not exist in real life. They were not friends, they had never met. In order to find them, we spent several weeks out of the year that it took to cast the movie at the

high school that I had attended, which draws together young people from all over Pays de Gex. We asked any teens who were interested to meet us there and talk about themselves in filmed interviews. The initial aim was not to test their acting abilities, but to get to know them and grasp their sensitivities. More than 500 students came forward and those encounters were fascinating: they expressed themselves with great freedom and provided fulsome and touching portraits of their lives. Nonetheless, we found the boys for our central group outside of those auditions. And it's not surprising, because my characters would never spontaneously put themselves forward. We were really taken with certain physiques, attitudes and personalities. I had to reach out to them, convince them, win their trust, and it was better that way.

We bumped into the teen who plays Mérou on the first day of the school year. His charisma and the way he held himself jumped out at me and brought to mind the character. For our main protagonist, P.A., the process was different. I heard him talking with a friend during recess, and I was immediately struck by his language, his body language and his attitudes. I had imagined the character being like me at the same age, yet Thomas seemed so different. It took me a long time to accept that he was the obvious choice. His candor, innocence and intelligence transcended the performance we asked of him. Thomas is the only one who actually had to act out a role. Even though those are his clothes, his haircut and his manner, Thomas had to get into the skin of a character who is much more reserved than he himself is in real life.



**/ For four boys who had never met before the shoot, the chemistry between them on screen is striking. How did you achieve that?**

Yes, the group had to exist. They all had very strong, almost incompatible originalities, but I sensed a connection. They needed to feel it, too. I organized a music deep-dive with the composer of the film's score. None of them was a musician, but it was interesting to watch them listen to each other and let go, to let them learn and share an experience, to see harmony





developing. Then I brought them to Paris for a few days. They'd never been. We spent the weekend wandering around the capital. An osmosis occurred, a bond was forged between them, which was the whole aim. I wanted them to interact as naturally as possible in front of the camera, for their friendship to be unfeigned. As I had never directed actors and was apprehensive about that aspect of the shoot, I resolved to proceed as I had in my documentaries by provoking chance events and creating a context that enabled me to tell the story I had in mind. Even for scenes requiring greater precision, I always tried to make things



happen of their own accord. Working with a focus on unforeseen events and letting-go is fascinating to me. The same process was applied to casting the supporting actors. More or less all of them play themselves, but in a revisited context. It's a curious mixture, with one foot in documentary and the other in fiction. That equilibrium had to be found in editing in particular.

**/ Is the quest for equilibrium linked to musicality, which seems to be central to the movie?**

Exactly. Overall, music and sound guide all my projects. I envision my films as big music scores, constructed on a foundation of different movements with their own rhythms, accelerations, pauses, etc. The way I imagine a story, I never really think of a classical narrative structure with its more theoretical phases. The musical metaphor fits a more intuitive approach. I love minimalist music, developing over a long duration with its own inherent movement, and that's the approach I bring to editing. It's why the film's music is so important. It is the inner voice of the characters, and the main character in particular, recounting his personal arc and capturing his emotions. The strangeness and the fantastical dimension of the film are also born out of music, since it expresses everything that remains invisible to the protagonists and audience.

That is why, symbolically, it was important for the character to be a musician and for the group to exist through music. Besides that, they don't communicate much. They don't need to talk. They say all they need to say through music. At one point in the movie,



there is practically no more dialogue, no more words. Like an invitation to perceive rather than comprehend the movie. That is another aim of my films: to share sensations and perceptions with the audience.

**/ In *Particles*, what sensations govern the story?**

In the film, the protagonist experiences a progressive unraveling of reality, and that's what I tried to make the audience feel. As the film progresses, the wheels come off for P.A. A shift occurs and recounts his anxiety with regard to the constantly changing world around him. Supernatural or dreamlike perceptions question him and lead him to wrestle, almost in the metaphysical sense, with issues such as the way of the world, his role in it, what he's doing there, what is real and what is fake... I wanted the film to take the form of those questions and for audiences to reflect on what they are seeing. Once again, the sound and music enable me to make the invisible exist, especially the particle accelerator, which is hidden underground and evokes the unknown. It is presented as a mysterious and scary presence, and there is something unnerving about the thought that below our feet, the circumstances of the Big Bang are being artificially recreated. Sound seemed to me to be the best means of giving a sense of the presence of this enormous, monstrously powerful machine underground, while making it resonate with the characters and audience.

P.A. has a kind of superpower, an acuity that nobody else has, a hypersensitivity to things, nature and the invisible, as if he were



singularly connected to the universe. Quantum physics tell us that all we know is that we don't know much. The world is a complete enigma and very serious researchers imagine the wildest possibilities. For any sensitive teen, this makes your head spin. I found it interesting for the fantastical to be rooted in the real, for it to be conceivable and probable. The fantastical and quantum physics merge into one point of view: there are no certainties. Do distortions of the world come from the accelerator, drugs or the creeping madness that takes over the character? The big question is, what is real?

**/ In that respect, is the particle accelerator symbolic of adolescence?**

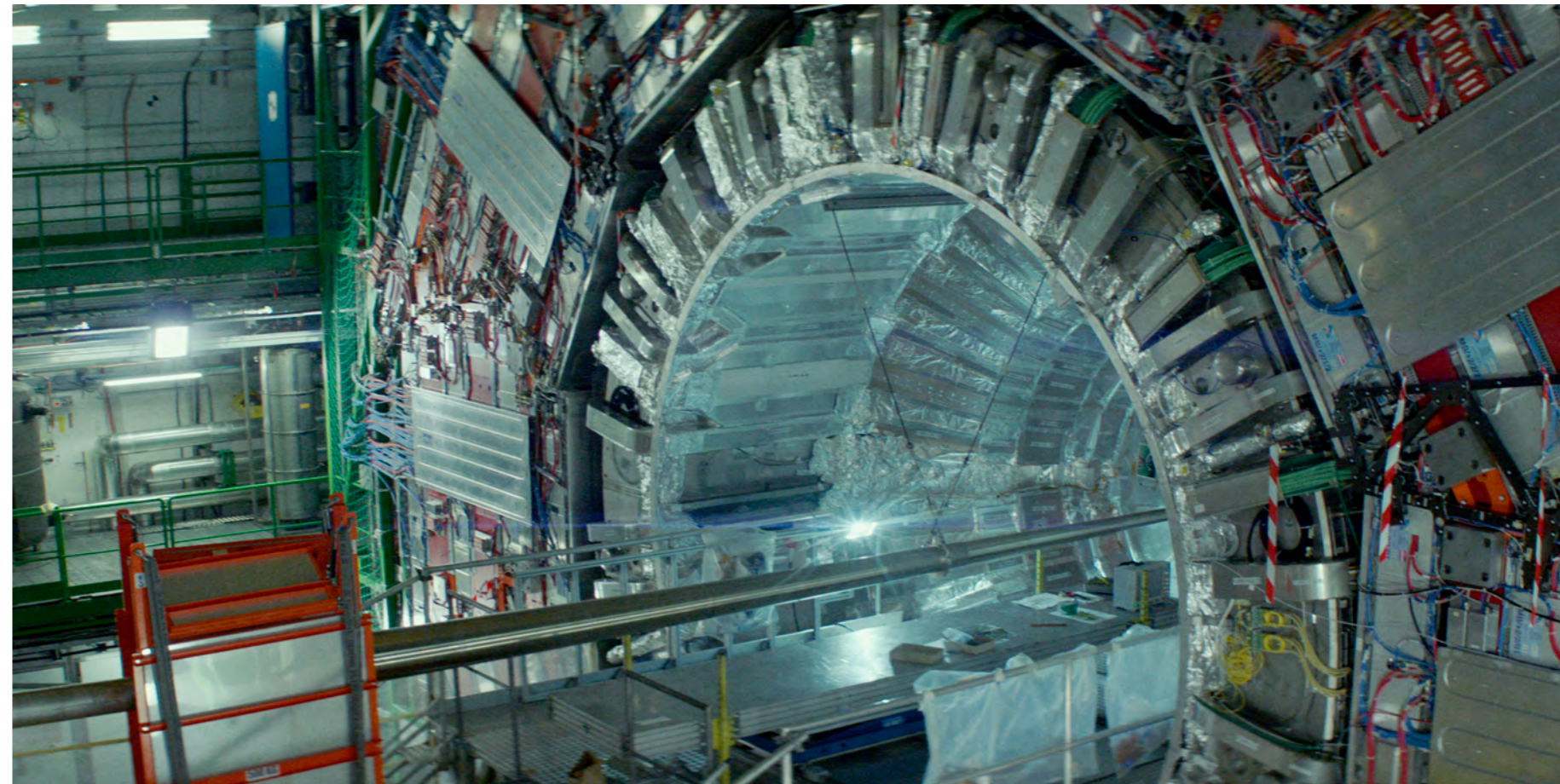
With the accelerator as a catalyst, *Particles* is indeed a teen-movie that seeks to capture the instability of that age. I find it exhilarating to play with the codes of highly identifiable genres—teen-movie, fantasy, horror, Ken Russell-style psychedelia—only to escape them all. I drew on all of that, but I also wanted to do something different. The ultimate aim is to remind audiences of how it feels to be 17-18, when everything is changing and you see the world through different eyes. The fantastical aspect is a way of recounting the protagonist's anxiety about this foreign universe he no longer understands. Thanks to his encounter with Roshine, and the love he feels for her, he succeeds in overcoming his fears in the end and growing up. *Particles* tells a very simple, slightly naive love story, a barely sketched-out encounter that





generates profound, tangible and real emotions. The possibility of a more attractive alternative challenges the dark, unsettling world of metamorphoses and doubts. The friend's disappearance is the climax of this anxiety.

The classical teen-movie treats that period as a transition, but I like to view adolescence in its own right. When it's over, to my mind, it's almost like the most beautiful part coming to an end. It's a period when sentimentality, and everything else, is exacerbated. There is extreme violence in the emotions aroused by the world, friends, passions... Growing up, you lose something of that age, which I find very touching. That's why, in the movie, I wanted to keep parents and adults to one side. In the script, they were much more present, with their own domestic or financial issues, and the anxiety-inducing reality around us, with terrorist attacks and political crises. In the end, however, I decided to leave them in the background or off-camera, because the adults can do nothing for their kids. They are inefficient at understanding, helping or stepping in. In fact, that was crucial for me. Working from recollections and emotions from my own teenage years, I wanted to be sure that they still applied to young people's realities today. Talking with teens while location scouting or in those weeks at the high school allowed me to take the temperature of modern-day adolescence. Even though I draw heavily on my own experiences, I didn't want to make a period piece. On the contrary, I wanted the movie to be rooted in the present day and speak to young people as much as it speaks about them.





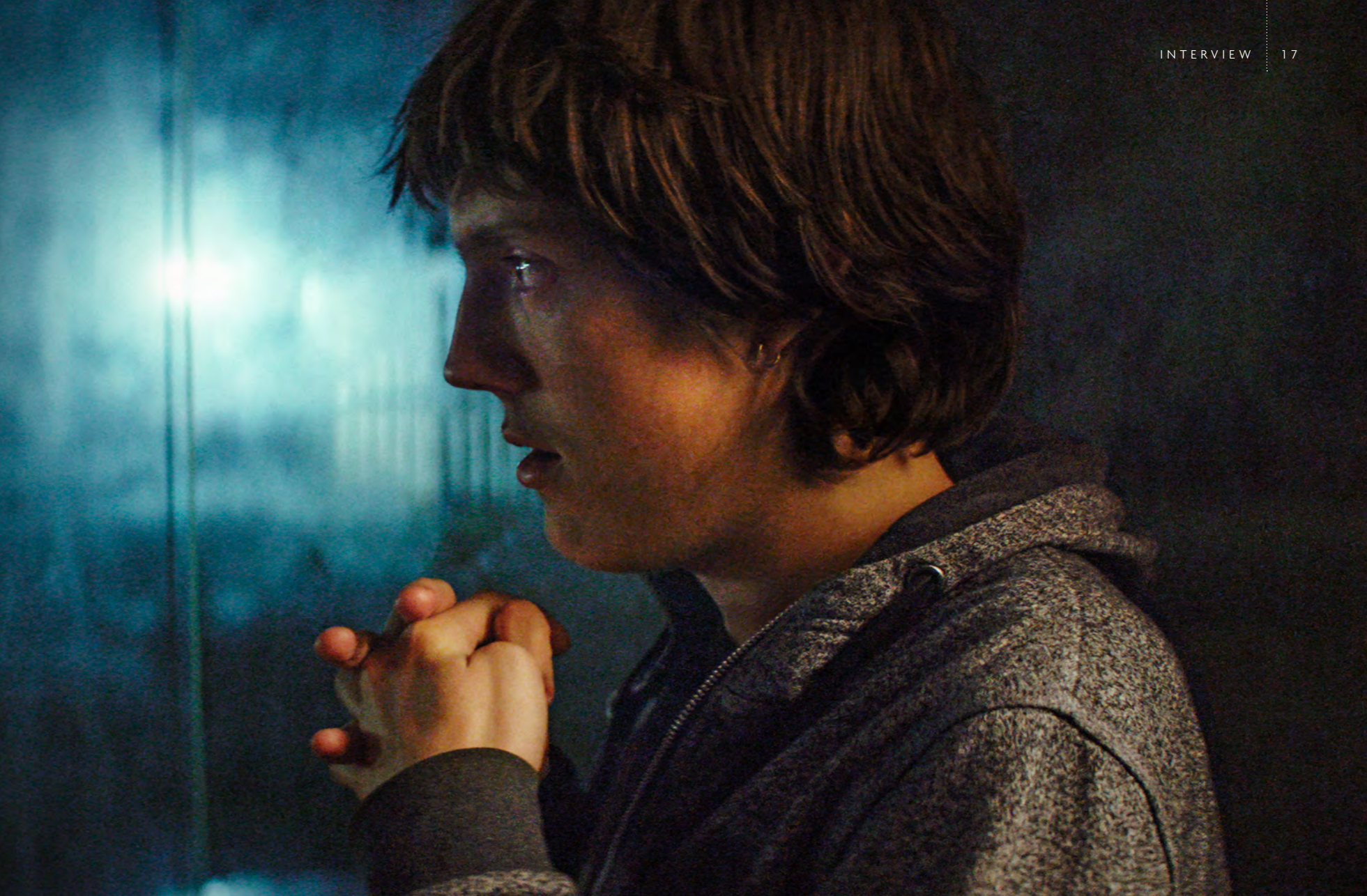
**/ Beyond genres, such as the fantastical and the teen-movie, what are *Particles*' major influences?**

Besides cinema, I wanted to make a film that evokes the world of graphic novels, which is important to me. I have in mind American indie graphic novels, such as the work of Charles Burns (*Black Hole*) and Daniel Clowes (*Ghost World*, *The Death Ray*), which explore adolescent issues by subtly combining daily life and the supernatural and creating a sense of a dark, incomprehensible world. Their visual work exudes a contemplative dimension that intersects with many things that interest me, such as photography, framing, the rhythm required to bring characters and things to life. In those graphic novels, there is also the urge to make genres implode in order to approach the narrative form in a radically different way. Like them, I wanted to let anxiety set in through longer or slower passages, and even through the composition of the image. The wide-angle lens brings us close to the characters while bringing to life the background as a place of strangeness where anything might happen. It suggests that something is hiding in the world. All this allows the audience to set off to discover the unreal. The film gradually evolves toward a form of abstraction, but it is important for the spectator to hang onto P.A., who is the Ariadne's thread of the film, since everything is seen from his point of view. As long as you stay in his footsteps, anything can happen because even if you lose your footing with him, the main thing is not to lose sight of him.

**/ Isn't filming adolescence essentially about portraying a passage from one world to another?**

Yes, in the final analysis, *Particles* is a film about frontiers and their permeability: the Franco-Swiss border, the border between the visible and the invisible, between knowledge and belief, between teens and adults, between reality and the supernatural, between fiction and documentary. The border between worlds. At the end of the movie, is P.A. living in the same world as at the beginning? A lot of questions are asked in *Particles*, to which I don't necessarily want to reply. The same goes for life—you don't always understand everything, but it doesn't matter. It's the journey that matters. P.A. travels on a path that, at the end of the film, enables him to grow. ❖

*Interview conducted by Nicolas Tello, april 2019*





## CREW

A film by **Blaise Harrison** • Produced by **Estelle Fialon, Lionel Baier** • Written by **Blaise Harrison, Mariette Désert** • Original score **Èlg** • Cinematography **Colin Lévêque** • Film editing **Isabelle Manquillet, Gwénola Héaulme** • Sound recordist **Marc von Stürler** • Sound editor & sound design **Olivier Touche** • Sound mixer **Olivier Goinard** • Special effects **Mac Guff** • Casting **Blaise Harrison, Elie Grappe** • 1<sup>st</sup> assistant director **Lucas Loubaresse** • Production manager **Tatiana Bouchain** • Produced by **Les Films du Poisson, Bande à part Films** • In coproduction with **Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Cinéma, RTS Radio Télévision Suisse** • With the participation of **La Région Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes** and of **Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée** • With the support of **l'Office Fédéral de la Culture (OFC)** • With the participation of **Canal+, Ciné+, Cinéforum** and the support of **Loterie Romande, CNC (création visuelle et sonore), La Fondation Gan pour le Cinéma, Le Fonds Culturel Suissimage, Succès passage antenne SRG SSR** • In association with **Cinémage 13** • With the support of **MEDIA Desk Suisse, Fonds Culturel de la Société Suisse des Auteurs (SSA), Ciclic Région Centre-Val de Loire** in partnership with **CNC, Cinémage 10 Développement, Cineventure Développement** and **Soficinéma 10 Développement** • Distribution France & International Sales **Les Films du Losange**



## CAST

P.A.....	<b>Thomas Daloz</b>
Roshine.....	<b>Néa Lüders</b>
Mérou.....	<b>Salvatore Ferro</b>
Cole.....	<b>Léo Couilfort</b>
JB.....	<b>Nicolas Marcant</b>
Léa.....	<b>Emma Josserand</b>







## BLAISE HARRISON

Born in 1980 and having the dual nationality French-Swiss, Blaise Harrison graduated from the l'École Cantonale d'Art de Lausanne (ECAI) in 2003. After his first short film *Bibeleskaes*, co-directed with Maryam Goormaghtigh and selected at the Visions du Réel festival in Nyon, Blaise Harrison directs 12 shorts for the documentary review Cut Up for ARTE France (Quark productions).

He then directs *Summer Growing Up* (Les Films du Poisson) as part of a collection of first documentaries for ARTE France. This film was selected in 2011 at the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes, as well as in many festivals abroad, including the Dei Popoli Festival in Florence where it received the Best Documentary Award.

In 2013, he directs a new documentary for ARTE France and RTS: *Harmony* (Les Films du Poisson / Bande à part Films), a French-Swiss co-production selected at the Locarno Film Festival. This film receives in 2015 an Étoile de la SCAM.

In 2016, Blaise Harrison is part of the list of the «100 figures making French-speaking Switzerland» published by the weekly magazine *l'Hebdo*, while his films are regularly subject of special screenings (Mois du film documentaire, High School students and apprentices in cinema, etc...).

In 2017, Blaise Harrison wins the Fondation Gan pour le Cinéma with his feature film project *Particles*, selected at the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes in 2019.

Alongside his activity as a director, Blaise Harrison regularly works as a cinematographer (*The Paris Opera*, by Jean-Stéphane Bron).

- 2019 **LES PARTICULES** (Feature film)
- 2016 **ARMAND, NEW YORK** (Short-length Documentary)
- 2014 **ARMAND, 19 ANS** (Short-length Documentary)
- 2013 **L'HARMONIE** (Documentary)
- 2011 **ARMAND, 15 ANS L'ÉTÉ** (Documentary)
- 2006 **BIBELESKAES** (Short-length documentary)





