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Abstract

This is a film review of *La Disparition des Lucioles (The Fireflies Are Gone)*, directed by Sébastien Pilote.

Author Notes

Sherry Coman is a professor of film, visual culture and digital media at Humber College in Toronto and adjunct professor in film and theology at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo, Ontario. As a writer, educator and story editor with more than thirty years experience in theatre and film, she works as a development consultant with writers and artists working in film, fiction and digital media. She is the also the curator and creator of online devotional projects for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.



***La Disparition des Lucioles (The Fireflies Are Gone)*, dir: Sébastien Pilote**

Trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FeY_FHcWhMo

“Dad says a bay can be looked at two ways. One way it’s an opening on the world. The other, it’s a dead-end.” These words spoken by Léo (Karelle Tremblay) in Sébastien Pilote’s beautiful new film *La disparition des lucioles (The Fireflies are Gone)* capture her own dilemma in a nutshell. About to graduate from high school, Léo feels the pressure of what lies ahead while also trying to convince herself and others that the future is not something any young person wants to think about, ever.

Her mother’s boyfriend Paul, a right-wing radio host (Francois Papineau) tells his listeners that the fireflies have left their region of Saguenay, Québec because they can no longer be seen against the artificial glaring light of the city. For Léo, Paul has already extinguished an even deeper light in her life: in recent days his right-wing rants led to a confrontation at the mill where her father Sylvain worked. The fallout has sent Sylvain up north to make a living, coming home only

now and then in brief visits. The discontinued mill that occupies the landscape of the bay is a constant reminder to Léo of that loss and of how quickly life can be upended. “We’re a family full of contradiction,” she says at one point to a potential employer who cannot resist inquiring. Among the lights of Léo’s life, there is also the ‘spotlight’: being known as the kin of the notable and notorious.

Lights and light are a deep and abiding theme of *La disparition des lucioles*, Pilote’s third feature. Léo gets a job at a ball park caring for the baseball diamond. Every night she flips a switch that allows the night lights to grind on. Over the course of a summer and under their gaze we see her move out of the shadows and stand in the field itself and then move back to the bleachers again, sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied by kindred spirit Steve (Paul-Luc Brilliant), an older metalhead guitar teacher whom she latches on to in a deeply stirring, yet platonic, friendship. At one key moment she falls asleep under those bright arc lamps of the ball field, only to wake up with the even brighter sun beating down on her. Even she seems to sense that hidden in the nature of light is a measure of how her life is going.

In his essay *Devotional Cinema*¹, avant-garde filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky talks about the ‘relative’ and ‘absolute’ nature of time in the cinema. Relative time carries forward the narrative whereas absolute time allows us to dwell with characters for no particular reason of plot, but simply to know and be with them. When we are with characters in absolute time, he says, we can encounter a transformative spirituality, we can be engaged in an act of meditative devotion. One of the gifts that Sébastien Pilote brings to his storytelling is an exquisite sense of absolute time. His heroes and heroines move around in their established worlds comforted by routines, but they are also not really going anywhere and that’s okay. In his debut feature, *Le Vendeur (The Salesman)*, an aging car salesman finds his award-winning sales record up against changing realities when the town’s

plant suffers losses and people lose jobs. Industrial Québec is a visceral character in that film and in *La disparition des lucioles*, where it acts as a heavy contrast to the otherwise picturesque and lush landscapes we see. One of the most moving experiences of the film is how it dwells in its own listlessness, summer days that are both free and filled with an inertia.

In dwelling with the characters we experience something of the non-narrative routines that have everything to do with the place they find themselves in, the condition of their spirit. Steve's comfort with his own life, his respect for the mother and her dog whom he takes care of, his capacity to be content with little is both a draw and a mystery to Léo. Steve's anonymity throws a welcome pool of shade from the harsh light of scrutiny that others have of her. Those others are deeply motivated by relative time, by the marching on of careers and relationships, the need for life to amount to something. But in Steve's basement, Léo can dwell and learn how to feel more deeply. Within his rhythm and energy, his commitment and consistency as a friend, his refusal to be cynical like her, Léo finds a safe place to test her own inner shadows. In sequences as humorous as they are touching, the two friends hang out together and pass a summer, and somewhere in there we sense Léo's slow movement from cynicism into a gentler, kinder confidence — even while she is still unable to find a consistent way of being. Pilote himself has referred to his movie as something he “made with a smile, a kind of brief melody that vanishes at the moment it appears, simple and naive.”²

Pilote lives in Chicoutimi and his love for the Saguenay-Lac-St.-Jean region of Québec fills every frame of his movies. In *Le Démantèlement (The Auction)*, the struggle of another aging man, set in his ways, to make a sacrificial shift for the sake of his daughter, is punctuated by long lingering shots of sheep on hills and birds arcing over the land that has been in his family for generations. For Pilote you sense that living in being of this part of the world is itself

transformative: if we are going to know his characters we must know them in relation to the land that has formed them.

In this film, Pilote has turned the point of view around and we see these spaces from the point of view of a “daughter” (his previous films featured daughter characters who are both a source of comfort and also of concern for the aging protagonists). In *La disparition des lucioles*, Léo sees only the shadows of what used to be — in her own life and in her community. At the same time, she cannot resist being out among them. Never one to sulk or mope at home, she spends her days walking the town, listening to her music, hopping on buses spontaneously, going somewhere while going nowhere.

At one point, Léo pushes a machine to make sharper defining white lines for the ball diamond. Looking over her shoulder, she sees a wobbly mess. By the end of the film she has mastered that line, but despite the effective metaphor, the film wisely prevents us from thinking that Léo herself is about to tow her rope along the straight line of life. Her penchant for escaping complex and challenging conversations by jumping on a bus is just one sign of the struggles that lie ahead. The film’s ending suggests that the fireflies may be visible after all, if enough artificial light has been stripped away to reveal them. Léo has started to remove some of her own artificial layers. She is wiser but still full of impulsive energy. Like fireflies, she moves through the spaces of her life, occupying them in brief illuminations, but she has become more centered. She knows what to expect and also what to demand of life. The darkness of a cynical world has been peeled away to reveal just a few, brief, glimmers of hope.

¹ Dorsky, Nathaniel (2005). *Devotional Cinema*. Tumba Press. Berkeley.

² Pilote, Sébastien (2018), receiving the TIFF Award for Best Canadian Feature film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2J-BSXETd4> (minute 29).