



A FILM BY MICHEL OCELOT

99 minutes | France | 2006/2008

Directors Fortnight, Cannes Film Festival 2006

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Synopsis

Azur and Asmar is the story of two boys raised as brothers. Blonde, blue-eyed, white skinned Azur and black-haired, brown-eyed, dark-skinned Asmar are lovingly cared for by Asmar's gentle mother, who tells them magical stories of her faraway homeland and of beautiful, imprisoned Fairy Djinn waiting to be set free. Time passes, and one day Azur's father, the master of the house, provokes a brutal separation. Azur is sent away to study, while Asmar and his mother are driven out, homeless and penniless.

Years later, as a young adult, Azur remains haunted by memories of the sunny land of his nanny, and sets sail south across the high seas to find the country of his dreams. Arriving as an immigrant in a strange land, Azur is rejected by everyone he meets on account of his "unlucky" blue eyes, until finally he resolves never to open those eyes again. The once-beautiful child clad in gold is reduced to a blind beggar. Yet, blind though he is, little by little and step by step, he discovers a beautiful and mysterious country. Meanwhile, back in her homeland, Azur's nanny has become a wealthy merchant and Asmar has grown into a dashing horseman. Reunited but now as adversaries, the two brothers set off on a dangerous quest to find and free the Fairy of the Djinn.

Press Quotes

"Magnificent! Entrancing! So gloriously bright, auds with sensitive eyes may need shades"
- *Variety*

"Wondrous! Splendid! Michel Ocelot's enchanting parable tackles the concepts of prejudice, respect and tolerance, but it's the vivid quality of the inspired, enhanced silhouette animation that leaves the most lasting impression."

- *Time Out London*

"Quite simply, it's a visual masterpiece that combines cut-outs with CGI and the mesmeric beauty of Islamic art to create a magical world, in which scarlet lions with blue claws and birds with rainbow wings stand between the blonde Azur and Asmar, the estranged Arab friend of his childhood, as they try to rescue the Djinn Fairy from her crystal cell."

- *Empire Magazine*

"A flawless sense of wonder! This exquisitely crafted, computer-animated story rediscovers the simple yet resonant wonders of Fairy Tale."

- *Film Review*

Film Credits

A FILM BY MICHEL OCELOT

Story, dialogue, storyboards, characters, drawings, direction

Produced by CHRISTOPHE ROSSIGNON

AZUR	STEVEN KYMAN
ASMAR	NIGEL PILKINGTON
JENANE	SUZANNA NOUR
CRAPOUX	NIGEL LAMBERT
AZUR AS A CHILD	LEOPOLD BENEDICT
ASMAR AS A CHILD	FREDERICK BENEDICT
PRINCESS CHAMSOUS SABAH	IMOGEN BAILEY
THE DJINN FAIRY	EMMA TATE
THE ELF FAIRY	SUZANNE DAVID
WISE MAN YADOA	SEAN BARRETT
THE FATHER	KEITH WICKHAM

English Version written and directed by
Michel Ocelot & George Roubicek

Original Music Composed by
Gabriel YARED

This film was made in Paris, by people from different backgrounds who all got along well - from Algeria, Armenia, Argentina, Belgium, China, Egypt, France, Germany, Spain and the USA. Great Britain, Iraq, Italy, Japan, Laos, Lebanon, Luxembourg, Morocco, Palestine, Senegal, Syria, Turkey, Tunisia, Vietnam, Yemen.

Co-Produced by
Nord-Ouest production - Mac Guff Ligne - Studio O
France 3 Cinéma - Rhône-Alpes Cinéma - Artemis Productions - S2 international
Zahorimedia - Intuitions Films - Lucky Red

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Diaphana, Exception - Wild Bunch, Groupe Un

Nord-Ouest Production is a member of Unifrance (+LOGO)

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Artémis Production - Zahorimédia - Intuitions Films - Lucky Red

Fabulist of filmmaking

By: Nigel Andrews, FT.com site

Published: Oct 22, 2006

If Michel Ocelot ever wants a second career, he should consider that of fire officer. He can bring people to their feet in theatres faster than almost anyone living. Standing ovations at this year's Cannes and Annecy film festivals for his new feature *Azur & Azmar* show that the French animator's previous, acclaimed film – the dazzling *Kiriku and the Sorceress* – was not a lucky accident. This man just makes beautiful cinema: cinema whose every frame could be hung on an art gallery wall. Sitting beside a Cannes swimming-pool early this summer, Ocelot looked wide-eyed, happy and a little shell-shocked. "They were innocent, like children," he says of the audience who had cheered the premiere of *Azur & Azmar* the night before. "They applauded before the end. They applauded a lot."

They did. I was there. And whatever Buddhists say about the beauty of one hand clapping, it doesn't match that of 2,000. *Azur* – to give the title a propitious abbreviation (for as well as having his film feted on the Côte d'Azur, Ocelot was born here 42 years ago) – is an *Arabian Nights*-style story about two re-united half-brothers, one white, one black, and their genie-seeking adventures in a far-off land. The fairy tale, conceived and written by Ocelot, addresses themes of racism, nationhood, inheritance and idealism. The pictorial style, jewelled and incandescent, has no peer or comparison in modern cinema except with other Ocelot films. Non-initiates must go outside moviedom and think of illuminated manuscripts, quattrocento art, Douanier Rousseau or Carl Fabergé – or, if possible, all at once.

Ocelot, who went to art schools in Rouen, Paris and Los Angeles before becoming a filmmaker, and who for six years (1994 to 2000) was president of the International Animated Film Association, admits to being influenced by everything. "In my first year in high school I discovered ancient Egyptian art and felt I was Egyptian. Then I discovered Greek vases and thought I was Greek. Hokusai made me think: 'I'm Japanese'. And I love the minor art of late-19th-century England, illustrators like Arthur Rackham and the Heath Robinson brothers and Aubrey Beardsley. Eventually I will make a Beardsley film!" *Azur* came out of Persian miniatures and Renaissance paintings: art in which "everything is minutely done, each leaf on each tree. Every flower in *Kiriku* and *Azur* was separately imagined and worked on. "I surround myself with picture books and the internet. Over the first year I create a storyboard of the whole film, all 1,300 frames. Then I choose the actors and record the voices. So the film is almost finished as a demonstration of what I want before it goes to the animation team." The "team" consists of six decorators and two chief decorators. Forget the 100-strong armies employed by Disney or DreamWorks. Add a year or three to this and the labour of love is complete. But it isn't just the pictures that delight. The story too is imaginatively conceived and themed. "If I'm going to work on something for six years I have to believe in it. I'm interested in the state of the planet, in relations between the west and the Muslim world. I wanted to talk, too, about immigrants in society, but in the Middle Ages with a changing of roles. So in my fairy tale the 'dirty immigrant' is white, blond and with blue eyes."

The film asks: is racial prejudice acquired or innate? Ocelot believes it's acquired. He cites his own childhood in Guinea, west Africa, to which his parents moved from France. "At school it was totally peaceful, there was no bigotry. We were mixed whites and blacks, there were Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, there was even an Anglican church. I had no idea people could be prejudiced about these things. Children can be very selfish and violent, but not for special reasons such as racism."

Azur is also a critique of sexist stereotyping. There's an enchanting portrait of a little princess, sister to the two heroes, who behaves like a wild tomboy as soon as she is out of the palace. "She's a poor little rich girl discovering life. She's full of rebellious energy. Yes, I'm being political; these princesses, shut for life in their palaces, are oppressed women everywhere." Not surprisingly, Ocelot endorses the official French view of the Muslim veil. "I think women should fight against it. It's not religion, it's slavery".

None of these themes would have power to persuade if the movie didn't have power to charm. We come back to the sheer dazzlement of *Azur and Azmar*. I ask Ocelot how he made the surfaces glow and sparkle. "It's an artist's trick; it's graded colours from dark to light. But it comes also from the contrast we got by using three different styles of drawing. The costumes are deliberately flat – I thought about advertising designs in the 1920s and 1930s – while the hands and faces are delicately modeled and the jewels and ornamentation are hyper-real. For these, we aimed at the effect of light shining directly on the surfaces. I couldn't have done that without computer animation. And [at Cannes] digital projection helped too. It added some 'diamond' to the film." He doesn't believe, though, that computer graphics are a short cut to works of genius. "You must still be mad to make animation. And you must still have flair and talent and judgment while doing it."

He nearly shrieks when I mention the title *Shrek*. "Oh no, not that! I cannot watch it!" He laughs in token mitigation of his reaction. "I suffer because of the ugliness. I want to have something nice on my retina. I'm not attracted to these sorts of American films, because very often they're not by filmmakers, they're films of bosses and boards of directors. They have to please their shareholders. I have less money but more freedom. I have only to please myself."

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Interview with Michel Ocelot

How did you start the project for Azur & Asmar?

Michel Ocelot: First of all, there was the conception: finding a subject and writing about it. Once that's done, things go very fast. For *Azur & Asmar*, once I'd come up with relations between France and North Africa, I thought about foster brothers, with very clearcut positions – one rich, one poor – then I imagined them swapping roles over the course of the story. I wrote the first draft of the screenplay in two weeks. Then, I had to concentrate on the huge task of researching and drawing it. There were about a hundred clearly visible characters and two hundred extras to be created. I draw the main animation models, i.e. each character from the front, three-quarters front profile, in profile, three-quarters back profile, from the back, plus a few key expressions and attitudes. I have help with the secondary characters. We strive to be historically and geographically accurate. That doesn't mean you can't take liberties, especially as there are no images of North Africa between antiquity and the 16th century due to religious bans. I prepare the whole film in the form of a comic strip or storyboard, which backgrounds out everything that will occur on the screen. That takes me a year. As early as possible, I invite my co-workers to help background out the animation. The 1,300 shots in the film are each defined in a file in which we also keep the framing of the shot, the characters' principal positions in the shot, the sketches of the background, dialogue indications, and camera movements. This work, carried out with a reduced crew, took two years. Then came the creation of the background, then the actual animation, which took a year and a half. And we end with a few months of post-production.

Did you like the Tales of the Thousand and One Nights when you were a child?

Michel Ocelot: I only vaguely knew it. I had a children's book based on Aladdin and His Magic Lamp. It was only later that I read the whole of the first and best-known translation of this monument of literature, by Antoine Galland. It was stunningly successful in France under Louis XIV, and its success then spread all over the world thanks to this French adaptation, the refined style of which – it was written to please the court of Versailles – did not convey the liveliness of the original, but it had its own charm. Its global popularity spread to the Arab world which had never shown much interest in this collection of popular stories and they started to write original versions subsequent to Galland's publication. I then read the modern translation by Roger Khawam which was closer to the original. I was enchanted by both versions.

Are you inspired by other fairy tales when you bring in characters such as the Djinn Fairy, the Scarlet Lion or the giant bird, which reminded me of the roc bird in the Voyages of Sinbad?

Michel Ocelot: *Azur & Asmar* is not based on any one tale. I invented the Djinn Fairy as well as the Scarlet Lion with blue claws. For the djinns, the inventive part for me is to represent them precisely, although they are not shown in traditional images. The Saimourh is a mythical bird from Persian tales. He can have other names, such as roc bird, as you said. The theme of the huge bird which can carry people as well as eat them, is a recurring theme in tales. The one we show comes directly from Persian miniatures. It was developed by Anne-Lise Koehler, the great artist who directed the background making process. The other

person who has been there from the start, helping me with the characters and the layouts, is Eric Serre. He became my assistant director and was a joy to work with. Those two exceptional people already had a decisive role in the success of *Kirikou & the Sorceress*.

Did you decide from the start not to subtitle the passages of the film in Arabic to put the audience in the same position as your hero?

Michel Ocelot: Right from the background, I considered the obstacle of languages, because I wanted to show the condition of the immigrant for whom the language barrier is a major difficulty. So, in certain passages, I do not try to make people understand so that they feel a little lost. But most of the time, I alternate between the two languages in the dialogues, and a reply provides unequivocal information about the question. I also find this absence of subtitles rather elegant... It is also a gift I am giving to children, the possibility of hearing several languages. I think it is an appealing event in sound.

How did you collect all the information on North Africa's architecture, plants, and culture which you used to create most of the film's background?

Michel Ocelot: Books, books, and more books! I enjoy it. It's a real pleasure for me to immerse myself in fine art books, even if I don't need to do it for professional reasons. But the Internet is now another precious source of information.

Were you also inspired by certain monuments to create the backgrounds?

Michel Ocelot: Yes, I make use of the great mosques in Istanbul for the finale. Their architecture is actually inspired by Sainte-Sophie, a Christian place of worship. Everything is connected, and that fits the message of the film. You will also recognize monuments from Andalusia, various North African countries, and the whole southern Mediterranean coast. I wanted people to realize that the backgrounds came from real life. I wanted to say to people: These wonderful places exist – go and see them!

So, did you go and see them for yourself?

Michel Ocelot: I've never been to Andalusia unfortunately! But I deliberately visited Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria before I developed the story.

Did you go there with sketchbook in hand?

Michel Ocelot: Yes, and above all, a camera! And I found ideas there, sometimes by making mistakes. For example, I took photos of prickly pear trees from every angle as I thought they looked magnificent and that they'd make perfect backdrops. But I later discovered that they come from America and had not been introduced to the Old World in the Middle Ages! So, regretfully I had to remove all the prickly pear trees I had imagined in the backgrounds! I also studied the costumes of the whole Middle East.

So, how did you find picture sources since this region has upheld the traditional ban on portraying God's creatures?

Michel Ocelot: It's true that there is no material in North Africa and Andalusia apart from a few exceptions that you count on the fingers of one hand. You can see sultans wearing the familiar traditional costumes, burnous and turban.

How did you come to work with Gabriel Yared? How did you choose the passages in which you felt that music was necessary?

Michel Ocelot: I immediately thought of Gabriel Yared, a great film musician, and a great musician period. He had the ideal background since he belongs to both sides of the Mediterranean, France and the Lebanon. I asked him to write the music, he accepted at once, because I think he identified with the story. Besides the musical talent I already knew he had, I discovered a man of quality with whom it is a privilege to work. I had chosen the scenes for which I felt music was necessary, and he agreed. He added a few passages which came naturally to him. When Gabriel's music was played over the top of my film, it was like a miracle: everything matched up, adding a force it had not had before that. For example, the Scarlet Lion scene at the start was only an episode on the heroes' journey, but the music brings out a value and dignity which deeply touch me

Do you think that these well-made tales can be told to both adult viewers by appealing to their sense of wonder and children to whom you talk about the important things in life?

Michel Ocelot: You know the answer before you ask the question! People have often asked me how I make children's films. My secret is that I never make children's films, because children are not interested in films designed purely for them! Children need to learn about the world and discover new things. They don't need to stay in familiar territory or understand everything instantly. My films are made for the whole family, and I'm delighted to bring everyone together. There are things, which I do not say crudely, because there are children in the audience, but I still say everything. I cannot make a film which wouldn't interest me today. I'm the first viewer of my work, both as an adult and a child, because I have all ages inside me!

Did you consider CGI animation right away for this project?

Michel Ocelot: 3D animation was just one of the various techniques I'd considered. I could see the innocent Child in innocent cut - out paper - or its digital version. But as for the rest? People urged me to cross the Rubicon: If you use 3D, go all the way! I ended up thinking that it was a good idea, on the one hand, to try something I'd never done before, to have different tools and images, and on the other hand, to learn a technique which speeds up the animation process. I'm extremely pleased with this choice (even if the speeding-up of the production process is debatable...)

Michel Ocelot Biography

Michel Ocelot was born on the French Riviera and spent his childhood in Guinea and his adolescence in the Anjou region of France. After studying art, he learned about animated films by directing short films during his vacations with a group of friends who each used different techniques (cartoons, puppets, etc.). Michel Ocelot also enjoyed animating paper cut-out characters. He kept a taste for varied creations and pared-down techniques. He directed the animated series, *Les Aventures de Gédéon* (1976, based on Benjamin Rabier's work), then used characters and backgrounds made with lacy paper in his first professional short film, *Les Trois Inventeurs* (1979). This highly original film was rewarded with a BAFTA in London. Since this film, Michel Ocelot has written the screenplays and done the artwork of all his creations. After this, came the following short films: *Les Filles de l'égalité* (1981) which won the Special Jury Prize at the Albi Festival, *Beyond Oil* (1982) and *La Légende du Pauvre Bossu* (1982 – César for Best Animated Film). Michel Ocelot returned to the TV series format with *La Princesse Insensible* (1986) comprising 13 x 4-minute episodes, and directed the short film *Les Quatre Voeux* (1987). His third series, *Ciné Si*, (1989 – 8 x 12-minute episodes) was animated with the shadow theater technique: carefully cut-out black paper silhouettes. Several of these sequences later appeared in *Princes & Princesses* (2000).

He wrote the 26-minute film, *Les Contes de la nuit* (1992), made up of three sequences, then embarked upon the adventure of his first feature film. In 1998, the general public became aware of Michel Ocelot, thanks to the huge box-office and critical success of *Kirikou and the Sorceress*. The film's popularity was so great that it led Michel Ocelot to relate more of his little hero's adventures in *Kirikou and the Wild Beasts* (2005) which he co-directed with Bénédicte Galup.

Azur & Asmar, minutely prepared from 2001 on, is a project full of new experiences: Michel Ocelot worked with a live-action producer (Christophe Rossignon, of Nord Ouest), chose to combine 3D and 2D, and brought together his production and animation team in Paris, the town where he lives. Unlike most other French animation productions, *Azur & Asmar* was made entirely in Paris.

Michel Ocelot was also President of the ASIFA (International Animated Film Association) from 1994 to 2000.

Michel Ocelot Selected Filmography

2006 AZUR & ASMAR

2005 KIRIKOU & THE WILD BEASTS

2000 PRINCES & PRINCESSES

1998 KIRIKOU & THE SORCERESS