Mon Ange

by Harry Cleven

SYNOPSIS

Louise, overcome by sorrow after her partner mysteriously disappears, is committed to a psychiatric asylum. In utter secrecy, she brings into the world a little boy whom she names Angel and who possesses an amazing peculiarity: he is invisible.

Louise urges Angel never to reveal his existence to a world that shows a ruthless intolerance to difference. But one day, Angel meets Madeleine, a little blind girl, and falls hopelessly in love with her. Due to her blindness, Angel can love Madeleine while keeping his secret.

Their love grows over the years, until the day Madeleine announces something that will turn their lives upside down: she will recover her sight.

Thomas GUNZIG's note, CO-SCREENWRITER

The first motion picture that really blew me away was James Whale's The Invisible Man, a very close adaptation of H. G. Wells' novel. Wells' tale and Whale's film ground and extend at once the age-old myth of invisibility. Homer himself had dealt with the subject in the Odyssey, when Athena uses her magic to make Ulysses invisible and thus approach King Alcinous without fear.

Invisibility, perhaps along with the dream of flying, is a wish hidden deep down in people's hearts. It is one of those desires that fuels their imaginations, their dreams and their fantasies. I have always wanted to refresh the subject...To treat it in a new way, placing it at the center of a story that would be modern, poetic, dramatic and romantic all at once.

Thinking about it, I came to view invisibility as a form of absolute freedom, the freedom not to be known to anyone, to come and go without hindrance. Being invisible and "free as a bird" seem to go together. It's something closer to a puff of air than to the physicality of a visible body. Then I got to thinking that representing the invisible locked up might be an interesting avenue to explore.

And that's how the idea of Angel– an invisible baby born in prison– came about.

Harry CLEVEN's note, DIRECTOR/CO-SCREENWRITER

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Gunzig had this fantasy about an invisible character coming into the world and then growing up. I was captivated by the poetical potential of his proposition, and the idea of a romance between an invisible little boy and a little blind girl took shape.

Right from the start, Jaco Van Dormael – who had introduced me to Thomas – was excited about the project and offered to produce the film. Following Jaco's wise advice, we adopted a minimalist style in developing the script, focusing on the straight and pure line of this impossible love. The story is written like a fairytale or a fable.

Quickly seduced by the project, Olivier Rausin, Daniel Marquet and Bart Van Langendonck joined the adventure, which allowed us to have a bigger budget than initially expected.

BUT HOW?

The idea of never really showing Angel, our main character, and telling his story from his point of view, as if from within, soon emerged as an obvious choice.

How were we to go about telling the story of somebody you never really see?

Angel's reason for living is his love for Madeleine. When they are children, this love is possible because she is blind. But from the moment Madeleine tells Angel that she is going to recover her sight, his invisibility becomes an obstacle to their love affair again.

Identification with a character occurs when viewers can recognize the issues a character faces, when they can share a character's hopes and fears and joys. When the obstacle to overcome and the goal to reach are explicit and compelling, identification with a character works best.

"Will Angel manage to fulfill his love for Madeleine in spite of his invisibility?" is a simple and forceful dramatic issue. That is why I'm convinced that viewers will feel empathy toward Angel and they will slip into his skin to experience this story with him, from within.

That is why I have shot Angel's story almost exclusively from his point of view

ANGEL'S POINT OF VIEW

We shot mainly with a handheld camera, using a long focal length lens, with very little depth of field, to create the sensation that the camera IS Angel, that we see what he sees, «from the inside».

So we see what Angel sees and hear what he hears, in other words mostly Madeleine and Louise. These two are the ones who make Angel exist in counterpoint, through their reactions, their emotions, and their sensations, which are perceived through his eyes.

At other moments, however, we use stable, static shots to show that we are outside of Angel's point of view. These objective shots enable us to suggest Angel's presence as seen "from the outside."

For instance, we can see the shape of his body underneath the sheets, his footprints, his weight when he sinks into an armchair, his silhouette under the shower, his hands under the water of the sink, the objects he handles, the water that splashes when he falls in the lake, etc. In other words, the visible traces he leaves.

This constant back and forth between subjective and objective shots created Angel's presence in such an efficient way that, during the editing, I could play with the reality of his existence. As if you could sometimes think that all the story took place in Louise's sick mind.
Because, as a wise spectator told me, it's when we doubt his existence that we want to believe in him most!

THE AESTHETICS OF THE FILM

As it is a fairytale, I could take the liberty to have a very strong aesthetics, to be visually free. I wanted to tell this love story in the most sensory, intimate and sensual way possible.

ANGEL'S EYES

The mere fact of pursuing the subjective vision of Angel to its logical end produced some very peculiar shots.

The actors played with the camera as if it were Angel's face and eyes. When Louise kisses Angel, she comes very close to the camera. When Madeleine strokes his face, her hands skim over the lens. When Angel is lying on his side to look at her, the viewpoint is vertical.

As Angel's eyelids are transparent, the image becomes slightly hazy and bright when he closes his eyes. When Angel tears up, the image becomes blurry.

When Madeleine looks in Angel's eyes, she's looking straight into the camera. That way, the viewer feels included in their intimate relationship. So I used a lot of very tight close-ups and blurred images to convey the sensuality of Angel's loving gaze.

These simple techniques heighten the viewer's sense of being in Angel's "invisible skin" and experiencing his story.

THE LIGHTING

We prepared every shot for a long time and thought through their meaning, framing and lighting. We took the time to pre-shoot everything and even sometimes pre-tested the editing.

We used natural light as much as possible – or fluorescent lighting, which produced a soft and contrasted image.

THE SETS

We used dark colors for the sets so that the actresses' face and body would be chiseled by the light. We often combined warm colors with cold light or cold colors with warm light. We built the sets around the light, and vice versa. This helped us get a strong yet subtle visual result.

We had few sets, but they were all symbolically very important : Louise's cell, Madeleine's house, the cabin... Every set had a very strong dramaturgic and emotional value, each had a purpose.

THE SOUNDTRACK

More than in any other of my films, the soundtrack has been absolutely essential. For Angel to exist while we can't see him, we had to make an extremely precise work on his sound presence.
What does an invisible man's footsteps sound like ? What about the friction on his skin?
I didn't want the viewer to think about logical, concrete questions like "he is naked, why doesn't Madeleine realize that?". So we made a lot of tests to make Angel exist through sound. For example, we created Angel's skin by layering the sounds of soft brush strokes on silk.

We also needed to find the character's voice. It had to be very unique but still relatable for the viewers. We used a computer program to subtly age Angel's voice when he becomes a teenager. And we needed to find an adult voice that would match the child one. After long and careful research, we found the perfect voices thanks to our 3 wonderful actors.

George Van Dam, my composer, started to write the music while we were shooting, so we could move back and forth between editing, sound editing and scoring.
Making the soundtrack, just like editing, was a rewriting of the film.

A LIGHT CREW

As a young actor, I had the opportunity to watch the speed with which Jean-Luc Godard worked with a light crew (and complained that things didn't move fast enough, apparently because he thought there were still too many people involved), and I was fascinated by the freedom afforded by this sort of shoot.

I drew inspiration from this method to shoot my second feature film, Why Get Married the Day the World Ends. There weren't even a dozen people in our crew. And I have very good memories of this experience.

I wanted to take things even further this time. I wanted to work with a young, small, highly motivated crew. I asked Juliette Van Dormael (who is a friend and whose work I love) to do the cinematography for the film. We built a young crew around her, a very versatile team, extremely united and highly motivated. For most of them, it was their first feature.

From the start, we conceived the script with the intention of shooting with limited means. It's a deliberate choice that aims to preserve the most artistic freedom possible. This method of filming works when the decision arises from an initial intent rather than being a stopgap solution for making a film despite a lack of funding.

Very few sets, two actresses (only one at a time), these conditions fitted with a light crew.
It turned out to be the right choice. We managed to shoot quickly and efficiently some difficult scenes (made harder by the special effects). But above all, we enjoyed an inspiring freedom, which shows through in the film.

CAST

LOUISE: Elina LOWENSOHN

For Louise, Angel's mother, Jaco and I immediately thought of Elina Lowensohn, who had already starred in my second feature film, Why Get Married the Day the World Ends. This choice made a lot of sense to me.
Elina is someone who's very generously devoted to arthouse cinema. She's very involved, a real partner in the creative process. She has an extraordinary sensitivity and acting talent. Elina gave Louise a beautiful ambiguity, between a slightly smothering overflow of motherly love and a troubling soft madness.

Selected Filmography:

Declaration of War, by Valérie Donzelli (2008)

A Very Long Engagement, by Jean-Pierre Jeunet (2004)
Why Get Married the Day the World Ends?,
by Harry Cleven (2000)
Sombre, by Philippe Grandieux (1998)
Amateur, by Hal Hartey (1994)
Schindler's List, by Steven Spielberg (1993)

MADELEINE: Fleur GEFFRIER

It was extremely difficult to find an actress capable of playing Madeleine.
First, I don't know why, but I imagined Madeleine from the start as a redhead with blue eyes. After scouting around for quite a long time, I naturally had to broaden my search, the priority being to find an excellent actress.
Above all, I wanted someone who had the «grace and gravity» to bring this timeless character to life, as the film has somewhat of a fairytale aspect. Anyone who conveyed something «real», contemporary or mundane wouldn't fit the bill.
It also had to be believable that Madeleine had loved only one man, Angel. So I had to find an actress who exuded a sort of «romantic purity» and was nevertheless attractive, charismatic and sensual.
What's more, since we never see Angel, I needed an actress who could play «alone» while making her invisible partner exist.

After several months of painstaking research, I finally met Fleur Geffrier, who embodies all these qualities magnificently... on top of being a blue-eyed redhead.
The shoot was magical. Through the subtle intensity of her emotions and her luminous and sensual presence, Fleur made Angel exist!
When we could, we made her work with a stand-in. But most of the time, Fleur was alone in front of the camera (Angel's eyes). She managed to be deeply moving in impossible scenes, like when Madeleine finds out the man she loves is invisible. For her first time on screen, Fleur gave her absolute all.

We had to overcome another difficulty: find a little girl and a teenager who could match Fleur's acting and look enough like her to make the aging process believable.

Hannah achieved something I thought was impossible, playing Madeleine (still without another actor) and making us believe she's blind. During the casting, she was the only girl to manage that and the one who looked like Fleur the most.

And finally we found our missing link, Maya, to play the teenager. She's a rare gem that looks like both girls and is extraordinarily talented. From the first day of shooting, we were all impressed by her intensity and professionalism.

SPECIAL EFFECTS

The film budget made me think from the start about the special effects I needed to give life to my invisible character. A friend, specialized in « old-fashion » mechanical effects, gave me lots of precious advices. Thanks to a very precise shooting script I could determined which effects could be done on set and which needed to be created in post-production.

I spent weeks - alone at first, then with my prop man - to carefully prepare the mechanical effects. We moved some objects with strings (edited out in post-production), we used compressed air to simulate the pressure of Angel's invisible hand on Madeleine's skin, etc. We also filmed some shots in reverse motion and then edited it in forward motion. This method gives movements a slightly offset and magical feel (like in Cocteau's films).

A young team specialized in virtual effects took care of other shots. I was impressed by their skills, availability, ingenuity, creativity and devotion. They were incredible partners and succeeded in making extremely complex effects (Angel's hand in the bathroom sink, Angel under the rain).

We also used animation techniques (pixilation, frame by frame) to make the very sophisticated effect of Angel opening the letter in front of his mum or the beautiful drawing on the cell wall.

Mixing all these techniques allowed us to still have the magical feel of the old fashion effects, while being on the edge of 3D innovative techniques.

CONCLUSION

Angel was a bold undertaking and a fantastic challenge : to tell a love story through the eyes of a character that is never seen.
It was wonderful to allow the viewer to dream this tale from inside an invisible character and to share the poetry, the magic of this very simple love story of «someone who can't see someone who cannot be seen».

Jaco Van Dormael's note - PRODUCER

On top of being a dear friend, Harry Cleven is a filmmaker I very much admire. I like his style, the originality of the forms and the language he invents, the expressiveness of his camera. It's rare to encounter such a distinctive, uncommon approach. At the same time, if Harry has shot few features, it's not for lack of projects.

Angel is a film that defies categorization. Paradoxically, it makes it possible to explore other ways of making, producing and shooting films. It's urgent (it's taken me a long time to learn the lesson myself!) to make films with very limited means, like when Shostakovich, realizing it was impossible to get his symphonies performed, put all his talent into composing for string quartets.

I encouraged Harry to do something I don't know how to do myself (but that I aspire to) and that he has an obvious aptitude for: to shoot an "arte povera" film, with a very small budget and a very light crew. That implies very salutary reflection on the entire filmmaking process.

Naturally, the screenplay written with Thomas Gunzig makes it possible to produce Angel on a small economic scale. A crew of less than ten people, very few sets, primarily natural light and no makeup, few costumes, no continuity assistant, no trucks, very little electric gear. Every member of the crew used lightweight equipment. It's a great gain in shooting time, with a flexible and quick crew.

My motivation, in supporting Harry's film, was also to take part in exploring and inventing new, lighter forms of shooting and production so that lower budget films can be made, with a different economic model. It's the dream of every filmmaker, I believe, to be able to make films the way you play the piano. For this film, the production process was fascinating, and the result even more so.

Daniel Marquet's note - COPRODUCER

What a beautiful, simple, clear, and remarkably original story. In the great tradition of stories beginning with «Once upon a time», Angel is magical like a fairytale, a fable for children, a bedtime story you read to youngsters who constantly ask «and then what?». In terms of form, it is a truly innovative cinematic proposition in the service of a universal narrative : a love story in which all the obstacles are overcome, and in which the last lines are read with tears in your eyes and a big smile on your face.

Cast

Madeleine: Fleur Geffrier
Louise: Elina Löwensohn
Madeleine (teenager): Maya Dory
Madeleine (child): Hannah Boudru
Angel's Father: François Vincentelli
Voice Angel (adult): Gauthier Battoue
Voice Angel (teenager): Léo Lorléac'h
Voice Angel (child): Jules Myny

Crew

Director: Harry Cleven
Screenplay: Harry Cleven and Thomas Gunzig
Music: George Alexander Van Dam
Director of Photography: Juliette Van Dormael
Sound Design: Lucas Le Bart
Sound Editor: Fred Demolder
Editing: Matyas Veress
Mixing: Gilles Benardeau
Costumes: Britta Angé
Make-up: Kaatje Van Damme
Production manager: François Dubois.
Special Effects: Willy Le Bleis and Marc Hericher
Producers: Jaco Van Dormael, Olivier Rausin,
Daniel Marquet
Coproducers : Bart Van Langendonck,
Arlette Zylberberg, Philippe Logie

elle.
driver