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BIANCA BALDI

# Zero



# Latitude



A USER'S MANUAL

*'How strange the change from major to minor'*



—Every Time We Say Goodbye (1944)

Indeed it is strange every time we bid farewell to the harmonious tones, the seductive sense of sequence, in the stories we once cherished.

According to Adolf Loos, writing at the turn of the last century, the bloom came off the decadent rose with ‘the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects’ in the process of so-called ‘cultural evolution’ (1908). With the rise of industrialisation and the speeding up of transport (getting from point A to point B), it seems that decoration became more a threat than a luxury to the run of the mill, as efficient forms of production heralded the passing away of ‘wasted labour’ (Loos) and the ‘ruined material’ (again, Loos) of carefully crafted things.

It is this diminishing (or minoring) of decadent themes in history which offers the starting provocation for the work of Bianca Baldi. Since her graduation from art school in Cape Town in 2007, Baldi’s attention has traversed a vast terrain of those ruined materials – geographically and conceptually tracing their economic, political and mythological borders. Baldi consciously and critically employs a certain “style” to draw seemingly discreet poles ever closer into proximity; recalibrating the mercurial attraction between centres and their peripheries, ugliness and beauty, the overlooked and the spotlighted, the banal and the anomaly.

In an earlier work, *Natal Patria* (2011), Baldi monumentalises a blip on the radar of the KwaZulu-Natal coastguard (a blip that could have been a sea monster) framing it within the greater story of a specious colonial territory through photographic and diagrammatic images. Both the sea monster and this former territory have now become the stuff of legend, but despite this, Baldi attempted to locate and depict this tall tale.

Regarding more classical accounts, in the work *Leaving Your Every Hope Behind* (2010), Baldi exposed the supposedly pre-, or one could say extra-, colonial story of the Greek underworld, to the harsh light of day, tracking its exact entrance to the site of a lake, which is now a contested zone between Italy and the Camorra. While her representation of the lake is serene, even unremarkable, and the text describing her journey to it bears the melancholy of a personal odyssey, with all its anticlimax and frustration that leads the viewer in circles round the lake’s circumference.

The paired down appearance of her earlier projects gains a certain flare in more recent series such as Baldi’s *Fun Capital* (2012). This set of works, which include found footage, rock casts, spotlights and photographic prints,

continues her exploration of the artificial and the real, in the case of Sun City: an entertainment complex constructed outside of Johannesburg in the former apartheid homelands in the 1980s. These areas, reserved for rural black communities, were also the sites of various shady deals, which the homelands’ exceptional status afforded. It was Frank Sinatra’s visit and stirring performance at Sun City during the most stringent global anti-apartheid cultural boycott which, for Baldi, revealed just how decorative the constructs of both celebrity and censorship were.

By honing in on those sentimental blue eyes, fake plants, and gilt frames, Baldi modulates the tone of these narratives, turning them from authoritative abstraction into what she calls “minor aesthetic studies”, capable of unpicking the guises of place and time. By showing the stitches of these historical cases – the craftsmanship, the intricacies, the intrigues – the artwork produced does not seek to flatten and *aestheticise* their empirical urgency, but rather, through Baldi’s attention to ornament (or that ol’ wasted labour), we become aware of its image potential and can, if so inclined, lean in closer to inspect the makings of it.

It is this *Zero Latitude* (also the title of Baldi’s most recent work (2014), which brings us face to face, full circle, on a scale of one to one, with the mechanisms of an evolved (read: pop) culture and capitalism’s ever-present colonial coordinates. By unpacking the baggage of a doubly ubiquitous iconography of the expedition and that of *haute couture*, while also naming its tailors, the artist sets the scene where a threatening luxury looms. In this zero point, all that is solid melts into gold; and that gold becomes a double disc “come back” album of someone to whom we thought we’d said goodbye.

#### Clare Butcher

is a curator and writer who cooks. Currently she’s teaching at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and is a member of the School of Missing Studies in Amsterdam.

## Conversation between Clare Butcher and Bianca Baldi Yam-Yam Korean Restaurant, Berlin 26 January 2014

CB So, maybe we could talk a little about how your current interests – which are now travelling beyond South Africa, to engage with the region around it – and how that’s allowing you to discover parts of Africa. I want to use those words “discovering” and “exploring” in a consciously loaded way. But maybe you could speak about what tracks you’re following now in terms of this most recent project...

BB Well, I’m right in the production phase now so it’s a very specific interest... but the thread that runs through everything more generally, is territory and the imaging of territory. Through images and the mapping of these spaces, I’m able to zoom in. Maps not only locate a space but also narratives that connect to it. So in a way, I’m using the territory almost as a justification to bring some often quite incoherent narratives together, and the thing that locates the story *is* the space.

CB And what about the object? Because your work seems to be not only image-based but very object-oriented. In a sense,

I suppose, this points to a significant disparity – the map is a thing as well as a representation. A tool and an image. There’s a kind of doubling here...

BB Yes, there is something to this...I mean we could touch on the whole thing of what a diagram is, but I don’t want to go into that kind of detail. If we look at the example of the architectural diagram however, we see how a plan can relate to an object in the process of making the image. So there is a connection through scaling but also how things can stand on their own with some reference.

CB So then, if we are to think of you as a bit of a cartographer, how do you go about using the territory as an excuse to explore and connect things? And furthermore, how do you go about making those connections visually? Do you end up making a map of that new territory?

BB In the case of *Zero Latitude*, it goes back and forth – there’s no clear trajectory really. It’s not so easy to map a mythological space, of point zero. There’s a tension between the real place and the imaginary one and through making one connection, you come across others – such as the archetypical character of the explorer, de Brazza, his cultural and consumable baggage, as well as the histories of the Congo River. So my approach is more speculative and also, maybe not whimsical or by chance, but there is an intuitive aspect to how I proceed, based on the way that I encountered each element.

CB Having not seen the film yet, I'm interested in how or if you intend to resolve these continuously contentious entities within the framework of your project. Thinking about the equator which goes round and round, never beginning or ending anywhere, as well as your other projects which tend begin stories but never to finish them. That's interesting, in the sense that these images never die. And I wondered what your thoughts are about this irresolution, loss, or "*saudade*"? There's something to be said for this element in historically motivated research. What does this gesture backwards mean? Why are you looking for these characters - from Frank Sinatra in your *Fun Capital* project to de Brazza in your most recent work - these oddballs who enter places they're not technically allowed to?

BB The emphasis is definitely not on resolution, as I find it impossible to take only one position on these characters. I'm drawn to them by curiosity in their dubious affiliations. I find this ambivalence interesting because I feel the same way. I'm seduced by the objects around them, too. The trunk bed, made by Vuitton for de Brazza, which appears in the film, is irresistible on a formal level. But there's also a certain repulsion to these elements and the histories they're complicit in. However, it's in this repulsion that I want to learn more. And it's not that I'm unwilling but rather that I'm disinclined to take a position as, in a way, these char-

acters are almost anonymous figures. And I don't want to tell a strictly historical narrative either because there are other formats which do that so much better - the biography, history books about the subject matter. I'm interested in the surface reading and how these surfaces work together to create ambivalence.

CB Because one of the key questions that's going to emerge time and again as you continue with these sorts of projects is what your affiliation is with these sorts of people. That sense of loss is attractive, especially with someone like de Brazza, is interesting because he's Italian and there's this geographic proximity to Africa that isn't quite finite. Which your recent research in the Lisbon Geographic Society also links to - there's a closeness and a distance that mimics the time gap that historical research always reflects. A natural repulsion.

And I'm interested in what happens when, by leaving something ambiguous, by opening up that gap, to that question of "what if?" What if it had been different? Or, what if we knew something different about that story itself? What would our perception be of the nuanced nature of history, which is made up of micro-narratives and not the so-called grand ones which we think we know?

That, I would argue, is a much better way of telling those stories, not the biography or the textbook, which is never actually as faithful as they claim. And yours isn't claiming to be at all. Maybe it's because of that per-

sonal fascination, curiosity - those "problem words" in the work of historicisation - that the project of history itself is redeemed, made more human. More humane.

BB And don't forget desire!

CB And desire, absolutely, and fetish! I think the fact that the *Zero Latitude* project is taking a more or less immaterial approach, i.e. not producing more objects, is important. Come to think of it, none of your work really produces things that last - like a permanent sculpture etc. You seem to work around the artificiality and ephemerality of those stories - the ones that are not inscribed in stone, that disappear into the vaults of obscure societies. It waits to be seen really, as in your project *Leaving Everything Behind*, where that door to the underworld leads...

BB A lot of these personal interests are driven by personal desires. Last night, you called me a fetishist, and indeed there are these surfaces, patterns which are...fascinating.

CB In a sense it's a set of really thorny but compelling issues to address as a South African woman, working in Europe. We mustn't forget that a lot of the art produced by white artists under apartheid was abstract, sometimes quite formal because that was a space that allowed a kind of expression that wasn't going to represent something faithfully, or for political ends. And on the other side of the divide, you had Struggle or social realist art which sought

to tell a story and prove a point, to mobilise an action. So you have these legacies running alongside each other, each with the problem of what to represent and how to represent it.

All these pushes and pulls can be simulated in the kind of time you create in an installation, allowing those kinds of questions to float to the surface about one's own attraction and repulsion towards a subject. Also through publication, which you've been using in your work, these tensions can be drawn out, sustained. I also have to think of your collaboration with Bridget (Baker) and your research as the Bureau de Cinéma Africain around this other very dubious character, Carl Hertz and his Aerolithe Illusion. All these charlatans!

It seems that you're something of an illusionist yourself - keeping the heaviness of certain issues floating a little bit. The magic of irresolution. Blurred focus.

You often using photographically based media. And the fact that you've chosen aerial shots to depict many moments within your most recent project, is interesting because apart from the image's didactic clarity, this perspective purports to show the object for what it is. We can't ignore the medium's link with the colonial project, and of course, other references in your recent project include the work of Nadar in conjuring an image of de Brazza as an historical figure. It's incredible that, through the medium, these stories are

made less far apart from each other. They hover, together, in the same space of imagination.

I guess, at the end of the day, what I'm getting at is the importance of a kind of fidelity to certain aesthetic traditions or visualisations. How necessary is it for you, this impulse to reenact, to restage, what we think we're seeing and what time it is that we are looking into through your photographs and videos? In *Zero Latitude*, you show very specific stylistic details of the characters' suits who unpack the trunk-bed - the gloved hands for instance, linking to our visual vocabulary of museology, as well as a kind of glamour or dapperness...when we see their shiny black shoes. For that film, it's also a clean interior that you show, which reflects that Nadar-esque studio photography. And yet that style is very different from your *Fun Capital* project.

These visualisations become a kind of channel for history in the way you choose shoot. Though there's no Instagram at work here, there is a kind of filter which revels in the nostalgia of conveying a lost moment. But it can never be the same because you bring it into this contemporary exhibition language and I want to know where your fingerprint lies, on that historical information? And the distance that we gain by adding another filter/step to it? Or is that just it - you wish to be seen as adding only a frame...

BB Or a style?

CB Or a style, yes.

BB I'm not sure if I can identify a style as such just yet. But there is something to this act of styling, the dressing up of things. There's something in that which connects with studio photography, fashion and design. Because of course, if you see the model from behind, it's a very different picture. So there's this frontality, keeping up of appearances, dressing the set - these terms which I'm not sure how to articulate yet, but if I had to find verbs, these would be them.

And of course if you think of Sun City and the *Fun Capital* project, it's very much about creating an illusion of ambience of this tropical environment. All the night sky in the day or whatever it is.

CB The echo of the gondoliers!

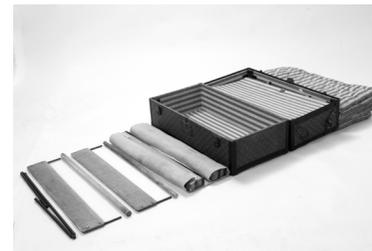
Yes, it will be interesting to feel that ambience at work in the space of your Zero Latitude pavilion. And in fact, I've always seen you working in a curatorial manner, in terms of your thinking through mise-en-scene, framing and treating your created footage as if it was historical document. And thence curating the diorama around it to validate the fact that it's true, that it's there: constructing history while self-consciously fictionalising it...without taking oneself too seriously. You're dressing up...as if.



a.

# The Explorer's Suitcase

By Sean O'Toole



b.

Growing out of an archival research project initiated in 2012, Bianca Baldi's *Zero Latitude* installation essays a pivotal moment in late-nineteenth century European and African history by minutely focussing on a particular historical artefact: a custom-made portable explorer's bed produced by Louis Vuitton, founder of the Parisian luggage goods brand. Orchestrated as a walk-through video installation, *Zero Latitude*'s variously showcases this luxury commodity – equal parts relic, sculptural object, historical cipher and performative prop – as a way of addressing a period of colonial adventurism that both prefigured and decisively contributed to the irreversible outcomes of the Berlin Conference of 1884-85.



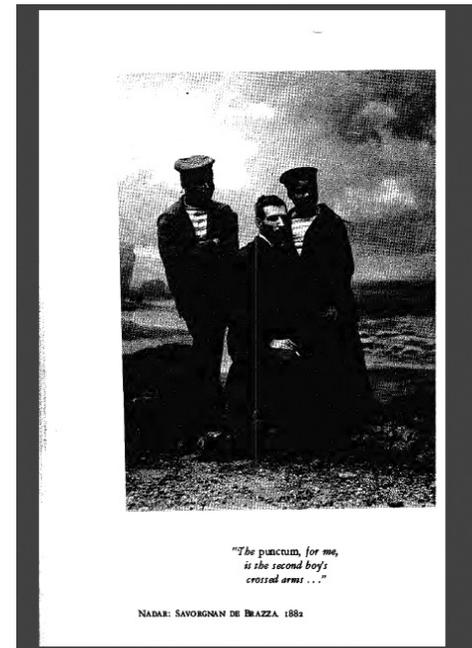
c.

A decade before the conclusion of this clubby get-together of Europe's elites, who amongst themselves legalistically authorised the wholesale partitioning of political territory in sub-Saharan Africa, Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, an Italian-born aristocrat with naval ambitions, was naturalised as a French citizen, in 1874. The following year, de Brazza, a product of the French naval academy, embarked on a three-year trip to explore Gabon's coastline and the Ogooué River. His luggage for the journey included a specially made trunk that comprised a collapsible bed frame, hair mattress, two wool blankets and four sheets. Baldi's *Zero Latitude* installation takes its cue from the Vuitton-made Explorator trunk, as it later became known, presenting it as both an imaginative conceptual prototype and tangible relic of European imperial ambition.

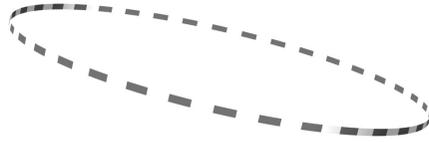


d.

Although somewhat romanticised, both in biographies and the many photographs that came to be later made of him, de Brazza was an instrumental agent of the European colonisation of Africa. His mercenary adventure up the Ogooué River was focussed on discovering the source of the Congo River, a storied waterway that had long been a place of projective fantasy for sailors, explorers, artists and storytellers. "The reason several centuries' worth of visitors failed to explore the Congo's source was that they couldn't sail upstream," writes journalist Adam Hochschild in *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998), his well-known chronicle of genocide in the Congo basin and Europe's intentional forgetting of this fact. "Anyone who tried found that the river turned into a gorge, at the head of which were impassable rapids."



e.



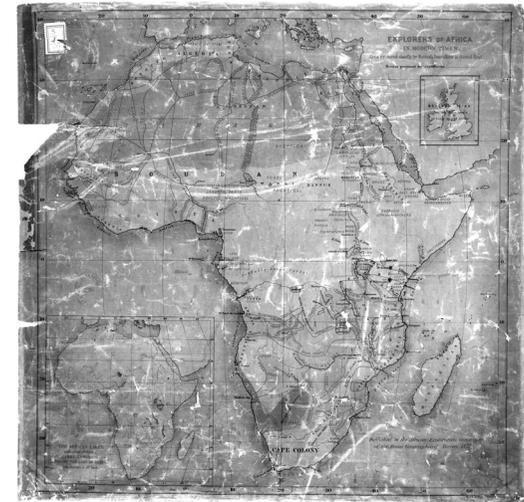
f.

While the Ogooué River did not connect with the Congo River, as de Brazza discovered in July 1877, he was able to find, map and even perform war on the banks of the upper Congo River. The narrative of this epic journey, undertaken with a group of nearly two-dozen men, most of them Senegalese colonial troops, made de Brazza a celebrity in France. With his dark eyes, Roman nose and slightly dishevelled aristocratic looks, he was a gift to the penny press. Felix Nadar, the well-known Parisian portraitist, made a series of studio photographs of de Brazza, which Baldi searched out in a Parisian archive as part of her research for *Zero Latitude*. Her installation alludes to these studies in the large wallpaper backdrop, a claustrophobic illustration of the Congo River drawn from a late-nineteenth century source that suggests an imaginatively embellished photo-studio backdrop.



g.

Unlike his Anglophone rival, the British journalist and explorer Henry Stanley, de Brazza had little interest in the penny press. Less prone to self-promotion, de Brazza tended to use scientific outlets like the *Bulletin* of the French Geographical Society to promote the French colonisation of the territory around the Congo River basin. Writing about his 1875-78 expedition, the London-based Royal Geographical Society in 1879 reported that de Brazza had “achieved the most important geographical work in Africa” in the previous year. But it wasn’t just geographers who were interested in de Brazza’s findings. His reconnaissance mission interested merchants – who, then as now, saw opportunity and profit in sub-Saharan Africa – as well as boosters for the beleaguered pro-colonial movement.



h.

According to the cultural historian Edward Berenson, de Brazza was a “god-send” to the latter group, who until then had faced fierce resistance amongst French citizens to expansion outside the borders of the country. Bolstered by the warm response, which included overtures from the Belgian king Leopold II, de Brazza in 1879 set off on a second mission to the Congo River. In 1880, without any state mandate to do so, he persuaded King Makoko of the Batéké people to cede to the French flag. The deal further elevated de Brazza’s public reputation, if not his imperial mission. In an editorial published in an 1882 edition of *Le Petit Parisien*, the newspaper urged the French state to ratify the treaty secured by de Brazza during his “pacific conquest” of “equatorial Africa” – an area understood to be at latitude zero degrees on Africa’s western Atlantic coastline.

But it is the fold-up *malle-Brazza*, as Vuitton's Explorator trunk was popularly known, that is the focus of Baldi's installation, not de Brazza (who lent his name to the capital of the Republic of the Congo, Brazzaville). In manner of Stanley, who designed a prototype tropical hat with prominent ventilation holes in the brim, de Brazza's collapsible elevated bed highlighted a cluster of patrician wants and desires that weren't catered to by "off-the-shelf" consumer products. The first recorded use of the adjective "off-the-shelf" dates to 1950, 36 years after workmen in flat caps at Henry Ford's Highland Park manufacturing plant reduced the assembly time of a Model T from half-a-day to 93 minutes using standardised parts and procedures. De Brazza, however, predated Fordist mass production, his sorties into Africa taking place at a time when metropolitan artisanal trades like Vuitton's box-making company were still nascent enterprises, on the verge of transforming into ambitious global consumer capitalist enterprises.



i.

A historical report by a delegation of United States commissioners sent to the World's Fair (*Exposition Universelle*), held in Paris in 1889, captures some of the strangeness and novelty Vuitton's hand-made creation would have represented before it was properly commercialized in the 1890s and sold as a stock item. "Exploring is in fashion now, and the number of explorers is daily increasing," observed the US commissioners in their Paris report. Railways and fast steamers, they explained, were feeding "an eager desire to see foreign lands". This trend, they speculated, "will take possession of future generations". Luggage-makers, however, were not keeping pace of these new social habits. "There was not a single new or practical trunk, one containing much but weighing little; nice, but substantial. Neither was there anything new in camping requisites. Jules Verne would not have found trunks to suit him, nor could de Brazza find an outfit or tents for his exploring parties."

Cause and effect is often difficult to map, even retrospectively. There is no doubt however that de Brazza's widespread celebrity during the belle époque helped contribute towards promoting a moneyed cultural sensibility that remains deeply entrenched in this era of Google Maps-enabled travel and Easyjet empiricism. Navigating Baldi's *Zero Latitude* installation, the viewer encounters a kind of liminal past-now, a place of first beginnings and decisive outcomes, of romantic quests and not wholly apprehended consequences. Notwithstanding his "pacific" qualities and well-known activism against slavery in his later years, de Brazza was – unavoidably – an avant-garde cartographer of empire. But, and this needs to be reiterated, de Brazza is not the focus of Baldi's project. He is merely the fulcrum for thinking through – aesthetically and impressionistically, rather than factually; performatively, not dialogically – Europe's late-nineteenth century surge into Africa.



j.

Speaking on a panel in Frankfurt in 2012, David Van Reybrouck, a Flemish Belgian journalist and playwright, remarked how most colonial and post-independent histories of Africa have been written from an elitist perspective. This typically extends to its choice of protagonists, who are usually also privileged. "Africa is more than its elites," insisted Van Reybrouck, whose award-winning book *Congo: A History* (2010) draws on testimonies of 500 mostly ordinary people. In his talk Van Reybrouck stated that there is a need to widen the scope of history writing. The challenge for anyone interested in probing the Congo basin's tragic story, in which France played an active role as much as Belgium, is to eschew "glorious history" and engage "mundane history", he said, to work instead towards piecing together an "anthropological history".



k.

Baldi is an artist, not a journalist or historian. Written in images and objects, *Zero Latitude* is her attempt to present a generative historical narrative. While unavoidably concerned with surfacing the contradictions of a “glorious” history, one populated by elite protagonists, *Zero Latitude* nonetheless shifts the focus from subject to object, figure to something nominally abstracted, an explorer’s bed, not quite ready-made, but pre-emptive of the off-the-shelf logic of the century that followed. Perhaps more so than the figure it elevated off the earth, Vuitton’s luxury piece of mobile furniture tracks the subtle contractual linkages – between explorer, artisan and imperial state – that prefigured and then underscored Europe’s tragic and irrevocable incursion into Africa, an event that prefaced an incautious and over-reaching leap by this imperial collective of states into the modern era.

Sean O’Toole is a journalist and writer based in Cape Town.



1.

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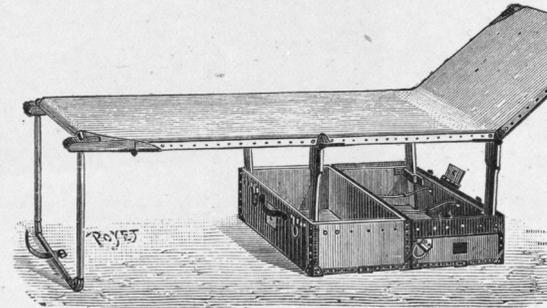
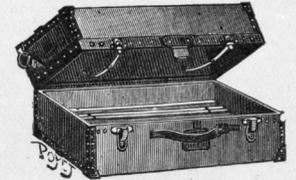
Geographical Society, Explorers of Africa in Modern Times, W. & A. K., London, 1877. – [01] f. : il., map. color.; 51x50 cm. em f. de 53x54 cm. CSDL 3-J-29. ©S.G.L. – Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa.

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# ZERO LATITUDE

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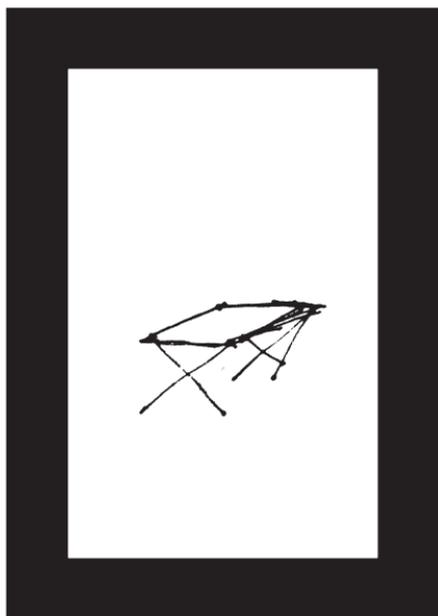
Zero Latitude (2014) is a Video Installation comprising HD video, colour, silent with installation elements.

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## FILM CREDITS

Assistant director: Emilien Abibou  
D.O.P : Olivier Guerbois  
Assistant camera: Davy Bauret  
Gaffer: Félix Marmorat  
Post-production: Christopher Hummel  
Character i : Julien Peltier  
Character ii: Vincent Berthe  
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