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present

# The Mokele-Mbembe Hypothesis

A FILM BY MARIE VOIGNIER





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# The Mokele-Mbembe Hypothesis

France - 2011 - 78 min - Bluray, Digital Betcam

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## INTERNATIONALE SALES

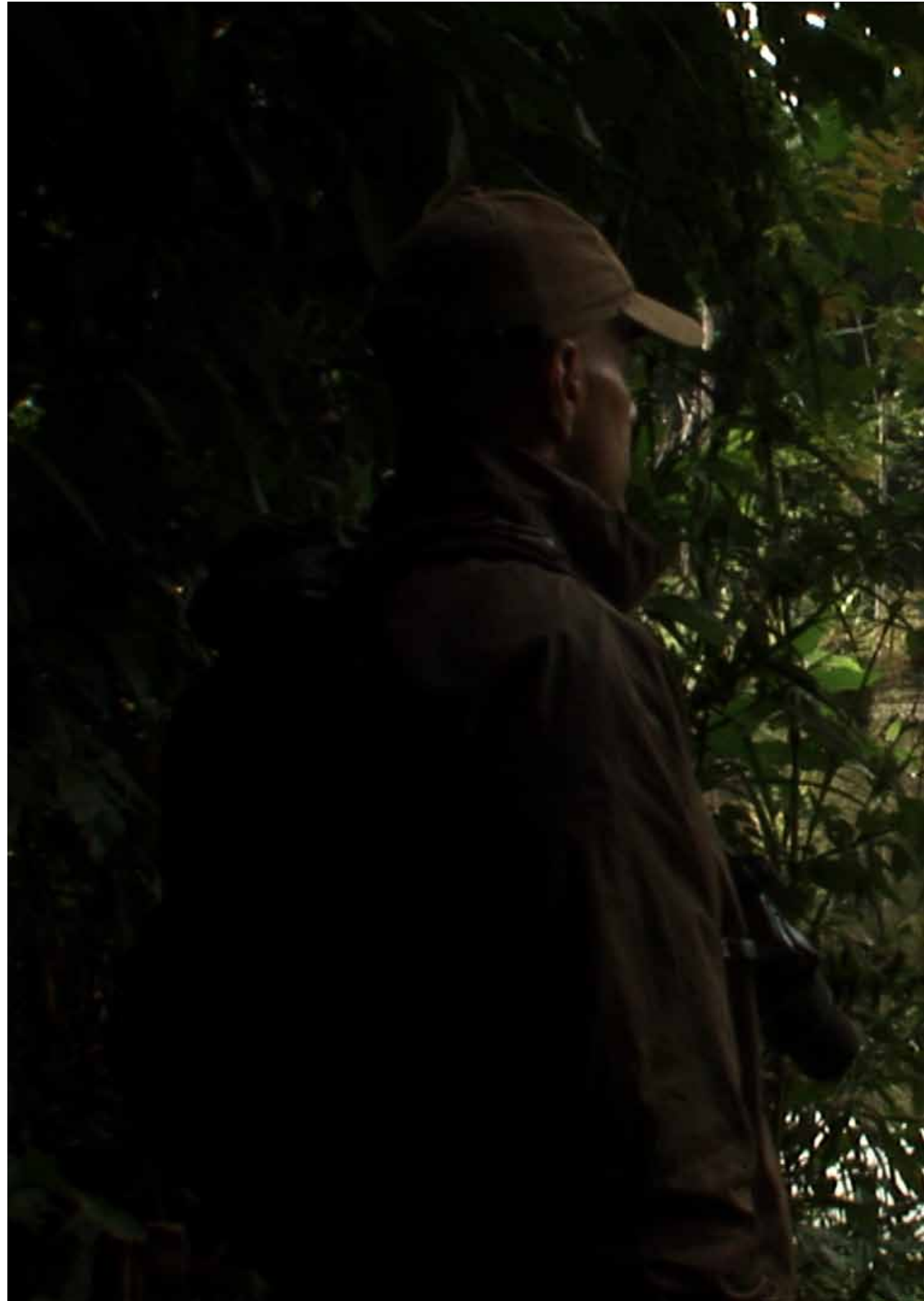
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# SYNOPSIS

South-eastern Cameroon, a man has wandered the jungle and the muddy banks of rivers for several years looking for an animal unknown to zoology: the Mokele-Mbembe. Pygmies met by the explorer during his travels describe this animal as a kind of rhinoceros with crocodile tail and snake head. Some say they have already met it near the river. Is it a real animal or a mythical creature? The explorer has long been convinced of the existence of this beast. He takes us on a relentless quest to find traces of the animal in a universe where likelihood get confused with legend, bringing us back to the roots of belief and fiction.





# MARIE VOIGNIER / INTERVIEW

## How did you get interested in crypto-zoology and Mokele-Mbembé?

I started getting interested when I attended a crypto zoology symposium in Berlin in 2009, where I met the zoologist François de Sarre who gave a lecture on Michel Ballot's expeditions. Here I saw more pictures of Michel and his work that I'd already become familiar with from his blog.

Crypto zoology, literally «the science of hidden animals», is the study of animals not yet officially recognized by zoology. It relies on renderings, testimonies, stories, and legends. What truly interests me about it is this hovering between fantasy and science, fictional and factual, in a stubborn and capricious search for the truth. Since the late twentieth century, we've entered an era of certainty: the Earth has been fully explored, the world is mapped and digitized. Discovering species has been replaced by preserving species; what was curiosity is now evidence. But people like Michel, refuse this paradigm of a fixed and known world. It is this refusal: the engine of an impossible quest, which is the heart of my film. What interested me about crypto zoology and the research of Michel in particular, is it addresses our register of belief, truth and reasonableness. The range of possibilities

becomes enormous. Reason and imagination feed each other in an attempt to inventory the whispers of the world, its stories and beliefs. The film provides no answer to the existence or non-existence of the beast. The questions it raises interest me more than anything else. Can we believe in the existence of this uncanny Mokele-Mbembé? Can we trust the pictures? The stories?

## Has Michel Ballot seen the movie? How did he react?

Michel is the first person I showed the film to, but only when it was finished, not before. But during the filming and editing, we had a lot of discussions about my intentions and I made sure that he knew exactly what to expect: not a film about the Mokele-Mbembe, or an exhaustive inventory of research. He knew that the film wouldn't look like something he would have done himself on the subject. But he readily accepted the subjectivity of my approach and the risk of bringing an outside vision into his work. When I explained to him what interested me about a story not directly about Mokele Mbembe, he always told me: «Anyway, this is your film. It's up to you, I trust you. « It was very important to me that he recognize himself in my film, and that is indeed the case. In fact he told

me: «You made a human movie. This is a film about humans more than the beast, and that's really nice.»

## The initial project was to make a documentary on the research of Michel Ballot? How did you prepare for the film?

My idea was not to do a portrait of Michael Ballot, but rather to follow him in the field and observe his research and his methodology. From our first meeting shortly after the conference, a mutual trust developed, and he immediately accepted the idea of the film. He was very open, cooperative and completely at my disposal. He even entrusted me with his video diary filmed during previous expeditions... Michel goes to Cameroon three or four times a year, but each mission is different from the previous: sometimes he goes alone, sometimes he is accompanied by others, other times it's just to set up a camera and tripod. The expedition that I shot was organized with my film in mind. We were looking for witnesses interviewed during previous expeditions, but we also went to previously unknown areas for Michel, to create new encounters.

We also had a preliminary meeting in February 2010 allowing Michel and I a couple weeks to get to know each other. I also had to verify the feasibility of the project, of course, as well as meet with potential witnesses, see about the locations and the impact of weather on the equipment. The area that we visited is deep in the jungle without electri-

city or means of communication. We were at the mercy of local leaders who could've seen this small group of lost whites as a potential financial windfall. Fortunately, Michael spent eight years building a strong network of contacts that provided us with logistical support (access to three hours of a day of generator power, expert guides, and intermediaries to negotiate bribes). Still there were technical hang-ups (moisture damage to the equipment, trees blocking roads), and some supply problems (no fire during the first days of filming, only bread and bananas to for food). Nothing was insurmountable except the time, which passed too quickly: the shoot could last only ten days, during which my team and I stayed constantly at Michel's side.

## Did you direct Michel Ballot? How did you "guide" him?

First I wanted to watch Michel work, leaving him the necessary freedom for his research. He led the expedition. In most cases, his interventions were spontaneous. He asked questions to the Pygmies, as usual. However, I also wanted to spotlight some situations, organize meetings or discussions that Michel and I deemed important. Some trips that Michel could have done, had he been alone, were impossible with the equipment particularly because of the weather and difficult terrain. In these cases, we organized things differently. We'd choose another, more ac-

cessible location to remake the scene from beginning to end. That is movie making! Michel understood this from day one. We were going to shoot a movie and not a journalistic account of his expedition. In his film diary, which you see some excerpts of in my film, he puts himself on stage. He is accustomed to the camera and self-representation, and we really worked on this aspect together.

He never complained about the requirements (often quite heavy) for a particular shoot. He was totally involved in the organization of the film in “acted” as well as “improvised» scenes.

#### **Have you made Michel Ballot into a fictional character, an adventurer?**

Michel struck me immediately as a character in a movie - indeed, his resemblance to Klaus Kinski in Werner Herzog's Fitzcarraldo struck me the first time I saw a picture of him. He is a complex character that I chose not to even try and unravel: I did not make a «biopic.» His family life and his past did not interest me for the film. I did not want - and could not give - an easy and reassuring psychological explanation for his quest. I preferred that the spectator be confronted with all the doubts that this generates. I focused on my partial vision of Michael, my interpretation of his research. But with this bias arises another difficulty, the perception of Michel by the viewer. Leaving aside some interviews, I did not show Michel's capacity for self-criticism.

Though just as any scientist, he looks at all the testimony impartially before making a certain selection.

The use of the footage he entrusted me with could somewhat restore this imbalance. I did not use them as they were originally intended. Michel uses this footage to document his investigations and research in time. My own use is purely cinematic -- to put his vision and mine into perspective, to give him the floor, but not through the lens of my camera.

#### **Can you describe the scientific belief of Michel Ballot and the mythological beliefs of the Pygmies of Mokele-mbembe?**

This is very complex. In Yaounde, Cameroon's capital, Mokele-Mbembé exists only through stories and legends. It is a monster that devours children. The Baka Pygmies are rather confident of its existence as a zoological (and not a mythological) species. For them, this animal is like the rhinoceros, extinct in the area but their grandparents still talk about it. Pygmies speak of Mokele-mbembe as a rare beast, difficult to see and dangerous, not as a creature with supernatural powers. They never use the notion of belief, for example. They say: «I saw,» «I know», «I was told that» or «I heard.»

For Michel, the existence of the Mokele-mbembe is a hypothesis to be tested. For eight years, he has continued his research, collection and investigation. Mostly listening to testi-

monies, more or less fanciful stories, and trying to «translate» the linguistic, philosophical and spiritual Baka concepts, that make their vision of the world organization and cosmology difficult to understand. Some terms remain opaque and difficult to put in perspective: “to shield» for example. Language at the cusp of two cultural worlds (the Pygmies' and ours) is a nodal point of the film. Mokele-Mbembé embodies and crystallizes this disjointed meeting with colonial history, where the figure of the explorer haunts the film like a ghost. This antagonism is also reflected in the title: on one hand: the «hypothesis,» a pro-

position in Western science, with all of the possibilities it can offer until it is confirmed or refuted, on the other: «Mokele-mbembe,» this extraordinary animal of unproven existence.

While this confrontation between views is implicitly present throughout my film, I do not pretend to be shedding any light on the status of Mokele-mbembe in Baka culture. I am not an anthropologist; I am totally new to this field. For me, this is primarily a way of observing Michel's methodology and sensitivity as he tries to make sense of all the accounts and witnesses, and his persistence in an extraordinary quest that continues to elude us.



# MARIE VOIGNIER

## Biography

Marie Voignier is a French artist. She spent a few years in Berlin after graduating from science's university, then joined the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Lyon and filmed her first video-films.

She directed *Le Bruit du Canon* (Prix du Court métrage – Cinéma du Réel, Paris, 2007), *Hinterland* (Prix des médiathèques FID Marseille, 2009) and *Hearing the shape of a drum* (Berlin Biennale 2010).

In 2010, her first personal exhibition was held in the Parisian Gallery Marcelle Alix.

## Filmography

- 2011 *The Mokele-Mbembe Hypothesis*, 78 min
- 2010 *Hearing the shape of a drum*, 17 min
- 2009 *Hinterland*, 49 min
- 2009 *Des trous pour les yeux*, 12 min
- 2008 *Au travail*, 47 mi.
- 2007 *Un minimum de preuves*, 10 min
- 2006 *Le bruit du canon*, 27 min
- 2005 *Western DDR*, 10 min
- 2004 *Les Fantômes*, 13 min

# TECHNICAL INFORMATION

A film by Marie Voignier

With: Michel Ballot

And: Jean-Claude Bembo, Etienne Bembo, Patrice Lumumba, Lucien Abagui Iya, Lucien Betti, Janvier, Rémy Boudou, Roger Assamoni, François De Sarre, Gislain Adoumadjeli, Anourou Ousman, Traore, Anatole, Clément Banga

Assistant director: Stefanie Baumann

Sound, sound mixing, mixing: Thomas Fourel

Photography: Marie Voignier

Editing: Marie Voignier

Color grading: Julien Bisschop

Length: 78 minutes

Production year: 2011

Country: France

Langage: French

Subtitles: English

Shooting format: HDV

Screening format: Bluray, Digital Betacam

Production: Thierry Lounas – Capricci Films

Coproduction: Elisabeth Pawlowski – L'âge d'or / L'espace croisé – centre d'art contemporain

International sales: Capricci Films

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