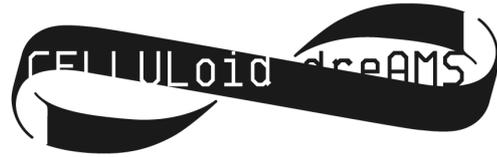


the directors label



# THE SOWER

by Marine Francen

*Winner New Directors Award at San Sebastian FilmFestival*

"Marine Francen's seductive first feature, winner of the prestigious New Directors award at San Sebastian.

The feminist subtext of the film's literary source material is woven subtly in with both nature and politics.

*The Sower* is in one sense a dream, the enactment of a myth that goes back to Ancient Greece and beyond."

-SCREEN INTERNATIONAL

"*The Beguiled* meets *Black Narcissus* in debutante writer-director Marine Francen's *The Sower*, a finely etched miniature of quietly cumulative emotional impact."

-THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

"The lyricism of its *mise en scène* and the sensuality of its execution.

An aesthetic approach reminiscent of painted scenes of the grape harvest, an event in the agricultural calendar that is loaded with symbolism in this film."

-CINEUROPA

# 'The Sower' ('Le semeur'): Film Review | San Sebastian 2017

11:05 AM PDT 10/3/2017 by Neil Young



San Sebastian International Film Festival - Pauline Burlet in 'The Sower.'

*Seeds of plentiful promise.*

Pauline Burlet stars in Marine Francen's debut, winner of the New Directors competition at the long-running Spanish festival.

*The Beguiled* meets *Black Narcissus* in debutante writer-director Marine Francen's *The Sower* (*Le semeur*), a finely etched miniature of quietly cumulative emotional impact. Relating a fable-like but apparently true story of isolated farming women and the virile blacksmith who stumbles into their midst, it landed one of the most lucrative prizes in world cinema — the \$58,750 (€50,000) New Directors award — when premiering at San Sebastian.

This exposure should open numerous further festival doors, though the lack of recognizable names in the cast may limit the niche international distribution the picture deserves. French

release is set for November 15, and deals with Spain and Greece have reportedly been locked down by sales-agent Celluloid Dreams.

The literary origins of *The Sower* are unlikely and fascinating: Francen and her collaborators Jacqueline Surchat and Jacques Fieschi based their script on Violette Ailhaud's 38-page *L'homme semence* ("The Seed Man"), published by a small French company in 2006 but originally written in 1919 when its author was an octogenarian. Ailhaud, who died in 1925, gave the manuscript to her attorney with instructions that it should be passed on to her female descendants in 1952, exactly 100 years after the narrative concludes.

In the last decade this slim volume, looking back on Ailhaud's teenage years during a period of great national turmoil, has become a considerable word-of-mouth success in France. The three scriptwriters must surely have been tempted to open the material up by including details of its composition — there's certainly enough material here for a feature documentary — but instead keep their focus firmly on Violette's own story as she tells it.

In the wake of President Louis-Napoleon's December 1851 coup d'etat — he would eventually declare himself Emperor — Republican forces and sympathizers all over France were ruthlessly suppressed. Many adult men were killed or deported, leaving whole communities populated solely by women and children. Tumultuous early scenes depict the bloody crackdown in kinetic detail, after which Violette (Pauline Burlet) and her fellow survivors make haste to a picturesque hilltop hamlet where they find safe refuge.

Working the land with the local women, they half-jokingly imagine what they would do if some eligible fellow should happen along. They make a deal that any such visitor would be "shared" sexually among the sisterhood — and soon after, as if conjured up by their carnal longings, handsome Jean (Alban Lenoir) duly appears. Violette is deputized to make the newcomer welcome, and the pair bond over literature, Violette being one of the few women in the area able to read and write. Passionate feelings quickly develop, clouded by Violette's knowledge of what the women have in store for her bearded beau...

Living without men and away from the trappings of civil society — in effect there is no church, no police, no government — the females of *The Sower*, most of them instinctively of a free minded Republican persuasion, quickly come up with new social rules and norms as their unusual circumstances demand. This aspect gives an intriguing political and philosophical subtext to a film which works perfectly well as a moving, sensual love story between the innocent Violette and her rather more worldly paramour.

Strongly performed by the ensemble cast, with moon-eyed Burlet particularly affecting (as a character some years older than her literary equivalent), *The Sower* takes its visual cues from paintings of the period, most obviously Realist giant Jean-Francois Millet, a great favorite of Vincent van Gogh. Francen even borrows her title from Millet: his 1852 work *Le semeur* was at the time a highly controversial piece for the way it unfashionably glorified downtrodden peasantry.

Working within the confines of the squarish 4:3 Academy ratio, cinematographer Alain Duplantier achieves some fleeting moments of transcendent pastoral beauty but otherwise conveys the restrictions of this remote microcosm by concentrating on bodies and faces. The viewer must suspend disbelief when it comes to the somewhat anachronistic make-up (even before Jean arrives the women appear to favor lipstick) and relatively modern-sounding dialog, while once again digital proves an unhelpful canvas for period drama, especially when it comes to dark interiors. But these are minor rough edges to what is by any measure an accomplished and promising debut from Francen. A fundamentally serious film leavened by a streak of

deadpan, droll humor, its quality will ensure even greater interest in Ailhaud's memoir in the run-up to its impending centenary.

*Production company: Les Films du Worso*

*Cast: Pauline Burtle, Alban Lenoir, Geraldine Pailhas, Françoise Lebrun, Iliana Zabeth*

*Director: Marine Francen*

*Screenwriters: Marine Francen, Jacqueline Surchat, Jacques Fieschi (based on 'L'homme de semence' by Violette Ailhaud)*

*Producer: Sylvie Pialat*

*Cinematographer: Alain Duplantier*

*Production designer: Mathieu Menut*

*Costume designer: Pascaline Chavanne*

*Editor: Minori Akimoto*

*Composer: Frederic Vercheval*

*Venue: San Sebastian International Film Festival (New Directors Competition)*

*Sales: Celluloid Dreams, Paris (info@celluloid-dreams.com)*

*In French*

*No Rating, 99 minutes*

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/sower-le-semeur-1045132>

## 'The Sower': San Sebastian Review

BY LEE MARSHALL  
5 OCTOBER 2017

Marine Francen's feature debut is the winner of the New Directors prize at San Sebastian



**SOURCE: COURTESY SAN SEBASTIAN FILM FESTIVAL**

*Dir: Marine Francen. France-Belgium. 2017. 98mins*

Marine Francen's seductive first feature, winner of the prestigious New Directors award at San Sebastian, infuses a gentle, nature-loving period piece set in mid 19<sup>th</sup>-century rural France with a high-concept premise reminiscent of *The Beguiled*. What happens when all the men disappear from a remote village community that needs to procreate and regenerate in order to survive? And if a man did somehow turn up, who would he belong to, if not all the young and fertile women who had been deprived of their partners?

You want to take certain shots and hang them on the wall

Ravishingly shot in boxy 4:3 format, with quietly authoritative performances by an almost exclusively female cast, *The Sower* will benefit from both critical support and positive word of mouth on its November 15 French release, and has the potential to nuzzle into a few other arthouse-friendly territories too, not least thanks to the allure of its stunning landscapes and peasant-chic interiors (the film was shot in the lofty village of La Garde-Guérin in the northern Cévennes).

The film's only real flaw is the relentless beauty of every single shot. And yet this is not quite a case of style over substance. Based on a novella written by a rural schoolteacher in 1919, *The Sower* carries the title not of that book ('L'homme semence') but of artist Jean-François Millet's celebrated 1850 painting *The Sower* (*Le semeur*). For Francen's debut is painterly through and through, imbued with the palette and the aesthetic of Millet and fellow Realists (like Gustave Courbet) who shocked certain members of the Paris Salon and the wider French establishment in the 1850s by taking as their subjects poor, disenfranchised peasants and workers. There's an artistic homage in framings of peasant women at rest during the harvest - you want to take certain shots and hang them on the wall - but we're also reminded that beneath Millet and Courbet's golden light and Arcadian imagery lay an unspoken critique of France's repressive social order.

That repression arrives in an impressionistically shot thunder of galloping horse's hooves in the film's breathlessly edited opening sequence. It's 1851, a succinct opening caption informs us, and astride the horses are troops sent by France's autocratic President, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, to round up and arrest all the men of a remote mountain village for their Republican sympathies.

With the men gone, the women and children are left to bring in the harvest alone, and they take possession too of the pace and feel of the film, which settles into the slow rhythms of seasonal tasks and quiet, watchful sorority cooperation and tensions. Some have seen their life partners snatched away; others, like the reticent but inwardly strong Violette (a radiant Pauline Burlet, most recently seen in *The Past*), suddenly have no chance of experiencing physical love, or becoming mothers. Hence the pact made between Violette, her more sexually experienced friend Rose (Géraldine Pailhas) and other village women of marriageable age: the first man who appears in the village will be shared between all.

The lucky guy, the intense Jean (Alban Lenoir), claims to be a travelling blacksmith. The engaging way he is warily accepted into the community, then warily circled by those women who resent the rapport he strikes up with Violette, is where parallels with *The Beguiled* are most keenly felt. But here the approach is more subtle - at times excessively so, in a film that keeps overt dramatic conflict at arm's length.

The feminist subtext of the film's literary source material is woven subtly in with both nature and politics. There's something primal in a landscape where fields of corn have been reclaimed from wild nature and need to be scythed, threshed, tamed, while nature

surges inside a female community cut off from sexual outlets that would never have been discussed openly back in the 'man time' as they are now. And if the village's utter isolation feels unlikely, that's because *The Sower* is in one sense a dream, the enactment of a myth that goes back to Ancient Greece and beyond.

Production companies: Les Films du Worso, Versus Production

International Sales: Celluloid Dreams, [info@celluloid-dreams.com](mailto:info@celluloid-dreams.com)

Producers: Sylvie Pialat, Benoît Quainon

Screenplay: Marine Francen, Jacqueline Surchat, Jacques Fieschi, based on the novella 'L'homme semence' by Violette Ailhaud

Cinematography: Alain Duplantier

Production design: Mathieu Menut, Olivier Geyer

Editor: Minori Akimoto

Music: Frédéric Vercheval

Main cast: Pauline Burlet, Géraldine Pailhas, Alban Lenoir, Iliana Zabeth, Françoise Lebrun

<https://www.screendaily.com/reviews/the-sower-san-sebastian-review/5122971.article>



SAN SEBASTIÁN 2017 New Directors

## ***The Sower: The much-desired man***

by Alfonso Rivera

29/09/2017 - SAN SEBASTIÁN 2017: French filmmaker Marine Francen's feature-length debut, screening in the New Directors section, spirits the viewer to a hamlet inhabited entirely by women



Pauline Buret and Alban Lenoir in *The Sower*

France's Marine Francen has unveiled her first full-length directorial effort with *The Sower* [+], competing in the New Directors section at the 65th San Sebastián International Film Festival, also the setting for its international premiere. Francen admits that she has never formally studied filmmaking, but learned everything she knows on the job. She's had no shortage of teachers though, among them some very distinguished names: she interned as an assistant director on both Michael Haneke's *Amour* and Oliver Assayas' *Something in the Air* [+], and cut her teeth in production with the company run by Ismail Merchant and James Ivory. As a director, she already has four short films to her name.

Loosely based on the short story *L'homme semence* by Violette Ailhaud, Francen and co-writers Jacqueline Surchat and Jacques Fieschi (Yves Saint Laurent [+]) have transposed the tale from its original setting in Provence to the misty foothills of the Alps. In the year 1852, Napoleon's troops descend upon a tiny village, rounding up all the local men in revenge for their conflicting political allegiances and carrying them off. Suddenly, all of the women have lost their bedfellows, and they find themselves forced to build their own little world, almost a dystopian nightmare, from which all masculinity has been violently expelled.

In the midst of this enforced sisterhood is Violette, a young woman who had been preparing for her wedding when the military oppressors struck. Francen uses a yellow-hued lens to intimately document the day-to-day lives of these women, with their domestic chores, their meetings and their conversations. Shot in 4:3 aspect ratio, the music and the grandeur of the Alpine landscape are shunted into background as the camera focuses on the shaken emotions of the characters, trapped in an almost dreamlike state of waiting. During one of their ad hoc meetings, the women swear that, should a man ever come along, they will all have to share him in order to conceive children — because time waits for no one.

As the reader will have guessed, soon afterwards a stranger wanders into the village, and tensions erupt. Whatever happened to solidarity? What will become of the promises they made? And what about the feelings of the much-desired man, and the woman he chooses out of genuine love? Francen tackles such questions as female sexuality (far less openly discussed at that time as it is today) from an aesthetic approach reminiscent of painted scenes of the grape harvest, an event in the agricultural calendar that is loaded with symbolism in this film.

The plot may cause some viewers to compare it with *The Beguiled*, the film that won Sofia Coppola the Best Director Award at Cannes earlier this year, but the absence of violence in *The Sower*, the lyricism of its *mise en scène* and the sensuality of its execution make it as far removed from Coppola's film as it is from Don Siegel's 1971 original.

*The Sower* is a co-production between Les Films du Worso (France) and Versus Production (Belgium). It is to be distributed in Spain by Bteam Pictures, with Celluloid Dreams in charge of sales.

<http://cineuropa.org/nw.aspx?t=newsdetail&l=en&did=337736>