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TONY LEUNG CHIU-WAI

SILENT FRIEND

A FILM BY
ILDIKO ENYEDI





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2025 - GERMANY/HUNGARY/France - DRAMA - 147 MIN

A close-up photograph of several ginkgo leaves against a dark, blurred background. The leaves are a vibrant green color and have a distinctive fan-like shape with visible veins. One leaf is prominently in the foreground on the right, while others are scattered in the background and to the left.

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SYNOPSIS

In the heart of a botanical garden in a medieval university town in Germany stands a majestic ginkgo tree.

This silent witness has observed over a century the quiet rhythms of transformation across three human lives.

2020, a neuroscientist from Hong Kong, exploring the mind of babies, begins an unexpected experiment with the old tree.

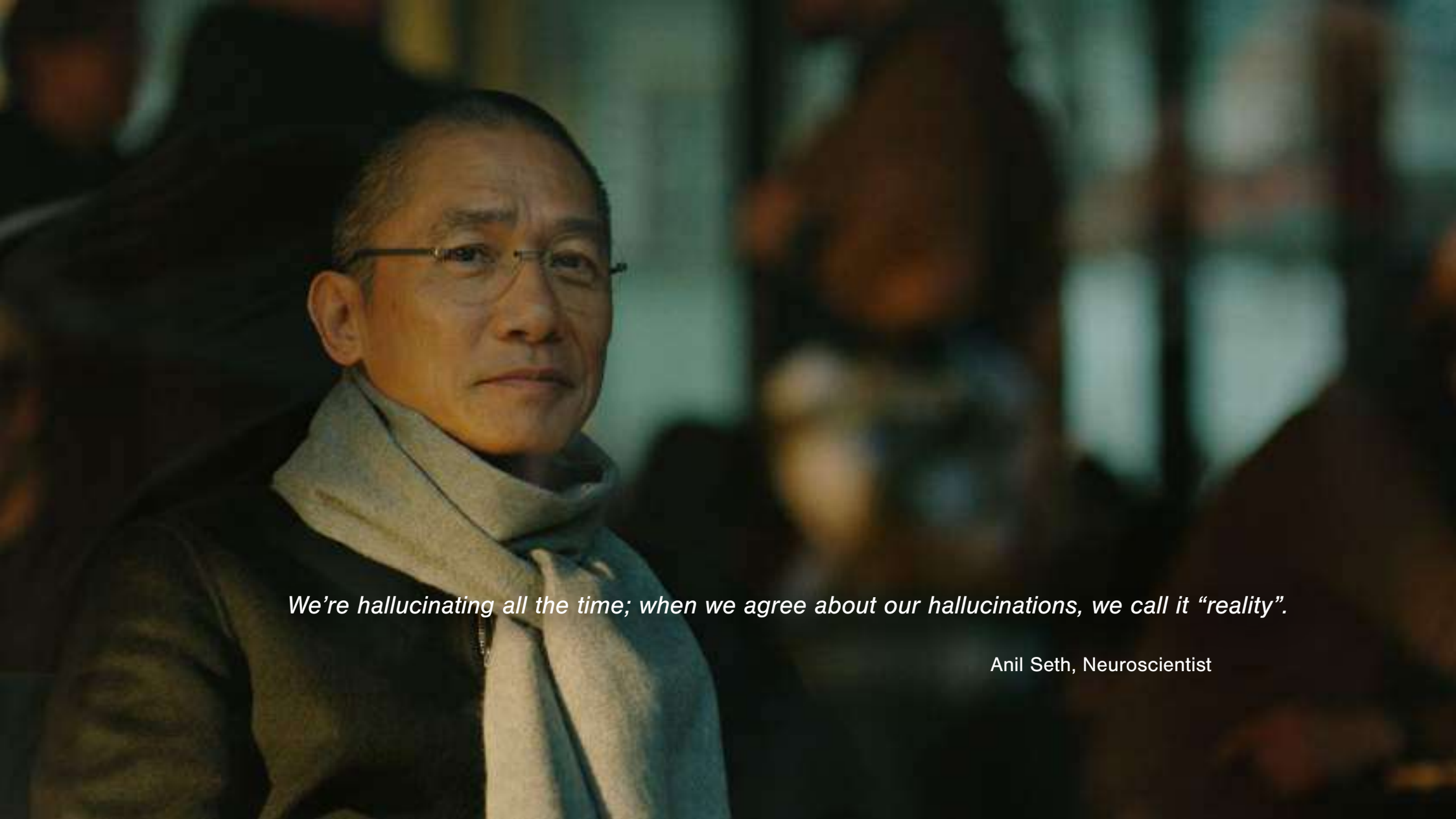
1972, a young student is profoundly changed by the simple act of observing and connecting with a geranium.

1908, the university's first female student discovers, through the lens of photography, sacred patterns of the universe hidden within the humblest of plants.

We follow their clumsy, awkward attempts to connect — each one of them deeply rooted in their own present — as they are transformed by the quiet, enduring, and mysterious power of nature.

The ancient ginkgo tree brings us closer to what it means to be human — to our longing to belong.



A medium shot of Anil Seth, a middle-aged man with short grey hair and glasses, wearing a dark jacket and a light-colored scarf. He is looking slightly to his right with a thoughtful expression. The background is blurred, showing other people in a dimly lit room with warm lighting.

We're hallucinating all the time; when we agree about our hallucinations, we call it "reality".

Anil Seth, Neuroscientist

INTERVIEW WITH ILDIKO ENYEDI

***Silent Friend* addresses topics already present in your previous films: the possibility of connections with invisible forces, the complexity of relationships between people, the influence of science on everyday life ...**

My intention was to raise questions and bring certain, for me exciting topics into light for further exploration, to engage in a conversation with the imaginary spectator. But these questions are deeply rooted in my personal itinerary - all my films are very personal.

I was a teenager in the 70s. I have spent two significant years in France, in Montpellier at the University Paul Valéry where I was granted a special permission being a high schooler from behind the Iron Curtain. You can imagine how defining it was for 16-17 years old to be part of that buzzing, intense post - '68 university life. This was a time - deeply connected with the beautifully open, curious vibe of the era - when the first big wave of experiments about plant communication took place. That was extremely exciting for me. Of course, it was a very naive period, the attitude that was at its core is still valid today. It is quite telling that, while living through those times, when so many things were questioned and reinvented, instead of political activism, I chose the curiosity towards other life forms. "Magic Hunter", my second feature which was in competition in Venice, follows six hundred years of an oak tree. In "Simon the Magician" a potted plant resolves a murder case. I am not someone with 'green thumbs', I am a city girl isolated

from nature. I feel the distance and am longing for connection. Quite like the human heroes of *Silent Friend*.

"In the stories of the three characters, set in different eras, a tree serves as a central motif. Was the tree itself the starting point of your project?"

Karl Baumgartner, this visionary independent producer, deeply missed by the whole industry, approached me with the idea of making a film together about plants. He knew from my previous films that I look at plants with curious eyes. As we started, I immediately thought of the botanical garden as the central location - not the wilderness, but a man-created, artificial living space for plants -. Alongside the defining presence of the old ginkgo tree, I chose from the start three human protagonists, and their transforming meeting with the world of plants. While the tree is fundamental, this is a film made by humans and will be visioned by humans in a movie theater, within our narrow and very special sensory limits. It's an invitation for a conversation between humans.

I would never dare to tell anyone how a tree perceives the world. I just would like to draw attention to the fact that it is a complex being with its own perceptual world, its „Umwelt“ equally valid to ours. We are not the default, our perception does not describe the world "objectively". As we cannot step outside our sensory limits, the way I chose to give a hint of these other worlds was through three meetings, three clashes, three imperfect and

rather awkward attempts to connect with this more-than-human world. Thomas Nagel's famous 1974 paper titled "*What Is It Like to Be a Bat*" had a deep influence on me. It summarizes the approach of this film. Our mind is defined by our body and accepting the impossibility of entering in the perceptual world of another being, does not mean that those worlds do not exist.

***Silent Friend* unfolds across three timelines — 1908, 1972, and 2020 — each centered on characters of different ages, from a young student to a mature scientist. Was this your way of showing how generations evolve over time?**

Yes, although instead of evolving I would rather say change.

These three different moments, chosen from the last roughly hundred years show how much and how quickly our seemingly unshakenly solid sense of reality transforms. It is not just defined by our senses, it is also a cultural construct and as such, it is quite ephemeral. Our human heroes walk the same paths of the same garden, enter the buildings of the same campus but each perceive a different world. When they try to connect with the ginkgo tree, with the plants around them, they discover not only the plants but also themselves.

"*Being You*" – a recent book by neuroscientist Anil Seth, and his entire body of research on consciousness is the major inspiration behind this film.

The idea of reality is here crossed with the concept of time. More than in your previous films, you're using it as dramaturgical device: pace of the neuroscientist arc isn't the same that Grete's one which is different from Hannes' one...

We all have our strong experiences of the first lockdown. The radical and sudden change of the pace of time is among the strongest ones. The main arc of *Silent Friend*, that of the neuroscientist played by Tony Leung Chiu-Wai, is exactly about this shocking pace change. Tony's reality in the monk-like stillness of an empty campus gives him a chance to get closer to other time perceptions. That of a tree, for example.

Alice, the scientist of plant communication, played by Léa Seydoux, in her TED talk reflects on our ridiculous blindness to other paces of time. We consider the *Mimosa Pudica* an intelligent plant because it reacts in our human time frame. It is purely incidental, but we are thrilled by it. As if we were 'the default'... For some lifeforms with a much quicker pace, we humans probably seem like immobile statues.

Compared to Tony's meditative time, Grete's time is hyper structured, led by rules, formal habits and rituals. Her world is active, reactive, conflicting, verbal. She finds her freedom by stopping time, through photography. Her models are the most humble plants - through the black and white photos she discovers universal structures of life. Ann Atkins and first of all Karl Blossfeld's work was the main inspiration behind Grete's approach. Blossfeld's photos showed boring, everyday plants as if they've never been seen before.



Hannes, a 1970's young student, is floating in time, smells, pheromones and hormones, as if lost in an impressionist painting.

Our choice of 35 mm black and white for Grete, the lush but imprecise color 16 mm of Hannes, and the piercing exactness of the digital for the 2020 loneliness of Tony were to underline these different paces of time.

There is a scene very different, by its shape and length, from the other ones: Grete's entrance exam at the university. In it, she faces a panel of professors, all men, patronizing her. There's a huge gap between that 1908 part and how Professor Wong has a more peaceful relationship with women in 2020. Did you want to address how men/women relationship, be it on sexual, social, political meanings, has evolved along a century?

This was a century of changing gender roles. A university, where new and new generations start their adult life, is quite a convenient setting to reflect on it. All three human characters are embedded in their own time. Grete has to survive in a fully male environment, which does not consider her a competition. The haircuts, the formal outfits, the solid faculty buildings, even the small iron fences around the sections of the well-kept lawn in the botanical garden suggest a sense of everlasting permanence. Grete's mere presence in this setting is a revolt. Underneath this unfair power game between her and the professors, the very topic of the exam is quite relevant, too. It is about Karl von Linne's system that categorizes plants by their sexuality. Plants not only reproduce but they have a sexuality, a sensuality. This is

the provocative topic of the exam, as well as a defining motif of the whole film.

Gundula, the love of our shy, introverted Hannes, is a powerful girl, with a newly acquired freedom, but underneath her self-confidence, she feels that she has to prove her strength. The life on the campus and the garden is very different as well. In the high, wildly growing grass, colorfully dressed young people of both sexes with long, wildly growing hair and beards discuss the big questions of life.

Alice, this young but already world-renowned scientist, serves as a mentor for Tony. They are equal, they are both revered in their own field, but Tony is wandering into her territory - where he's a beginner. He asks for her guidance and she gracefully obliges. The younger woman becomes the mentor - in a relaxed, natural way. One of my favorite small, nonverbal scenes of Tony is when - after arriving into a still buzzing German campus - he observes, coffee in hand, through the windows of the cafeteria, the students smoking and chatting outside. They are of both genders and of every color, coming from distant continents to study in this medieval town. Their effortless and warm, alive communication with each other is in a sharp contrast with the rigid campus life of 1908.

The ginkgo tree, our plant protagonist, is a female. There are no male trees in this garden. A lonely soul... I don't know, but I hope this tiny hint of humor transpires, when Alice and Tony with joint effort help this several centuries old tree to her first "sexual experience"...

Did this desire for sensuality have an impact on the

casting of *Silent friend*? Beside their acting talents, Tony Leung Chiu-Wai, Léa Seydoux, Enzo Brumm or Luna Wedler give off this vibe with their physical, almost erotic, presences...

True, and I should add to the male and female bodies also the sensuality of plants, of our protagonist, the ginkgo tree, played by three similarly shaped ginkgos of different ages. We discussed a lot and then spent four seasons and many mini-crew days with the cinematographer Gergely Pálos to capture, to let this elementary, lush sensuality appear on screen. We are not trained in nature filming, so we learned a lot about attention, patience and alertness, the need to adjust to a different rhythm of ours - within the frames of a feature film where everything is about bending reality into the shape of our imagination.

The main storyline is an awkward, uncertain meeting of two silences: the silence of the mighty tree and the beautiful silence of this lonely scientist, full of hidden pain, longing and tenderness. I wrote this role for Tony Leung. I needed a full, meaningful silence, his incredible presence. I needed not only the brilliant actor but also the person I sensed behind him, when watching some of his interviews. My producers tried to convince me to find someone else. As they said, he is very choosy, turns down most offers and never ever made a European independent film. I am so thankful that he took the risk and immediately, after reading the script, accepted the role. I am even more thankful that he resonated with the deeper layers of the script. During our first zoom meeting we were not speaking about the role - it was those hidden, and for me so important layers that we discussed. It was a half a year long preparation together,



sharing and discussing neuroscience of consciousness and plant communication research.

As a distant partner for the professor, I needed someone with an equally strong, charismatic presence, that's why I asked for the role of Alice Léa Seydoux. Her charisma is so strong that it easily overcomes the limitation of being in contact with Tony only through screens. Their separation, in their respective isolation in Marburg and Paris is the leitmotif of the film - being alone and longing for connection.

I already worked with Luna Wedler, adored it and it was somehow natural to think of her for Grete. She is a force of nature, fragile and robust at the same time, with a great sense of humor. I should write her a comic role at some point...

It took us nearly a year to find Hannes, his boyish, clumsy, lanky charm.

I am truly thankful to Nina Haun, casting director, who dug out Enzo Brumm, this young and inexperienced actor. I think we are lucky to be the starting point for a great artist of the future.

His partner, the luminous Marlene Burow already proved her great talent, her striking presence, power, intelligence and elementary sensuality tells more than any dialogue.

Casting an Asian actor, French actress, Swiss actress, German actors and making a movie produced by France, Germany and Hungary, also say something on universality for this project...

This is a mainly German speaking film, set in a medieval

town with a more than 500 year old university. The people studying here or making research in the cutting-edge, world-renowned labs are as colorful as our cast - which, beside Tony Leung and Léa Seydoux, is fully German with great actors like Sylvester Groth, Martin Wuttke or Rainer Bock. I would like to thank them for their generosity in seeing and understanding the importance of these roles even if it meant only very few shooting days. Nothing is superfluous in a film, so I need especially strong actors to give a rich, multilayered performance for a role with a brief screen time.

All our heroes - plants and humans alike - are outsiders. They are not part of the system - they're lonely souls. The plants of a botanical garden are torn from their own habitat, from the rich coexistence of different species and brought into this distant garden for humans to enjoy their view. The way we think of zoos today could also be said about botanical gardens. But, the ginkgo tree is even more lonely than the other plants around her - she stands among the species that caused its near extinction. Grete is the only female student on a fully male campus. Hannes, a boy coming from a farm, doesn't find his place in the intellectual environment. Tony arrives from another continent. It is not only about the difficulties, but also about the freedom, the intensity of being alone, being an outsider. You have a bigger chance to discover something that the routine hides from view for the others.

Where is this beautiful tree and garden?

I have a wonderful German husband, a man of letters from North Rhine-Westphalia who showed me this old, charming botanical garden in the very middle of Marburg

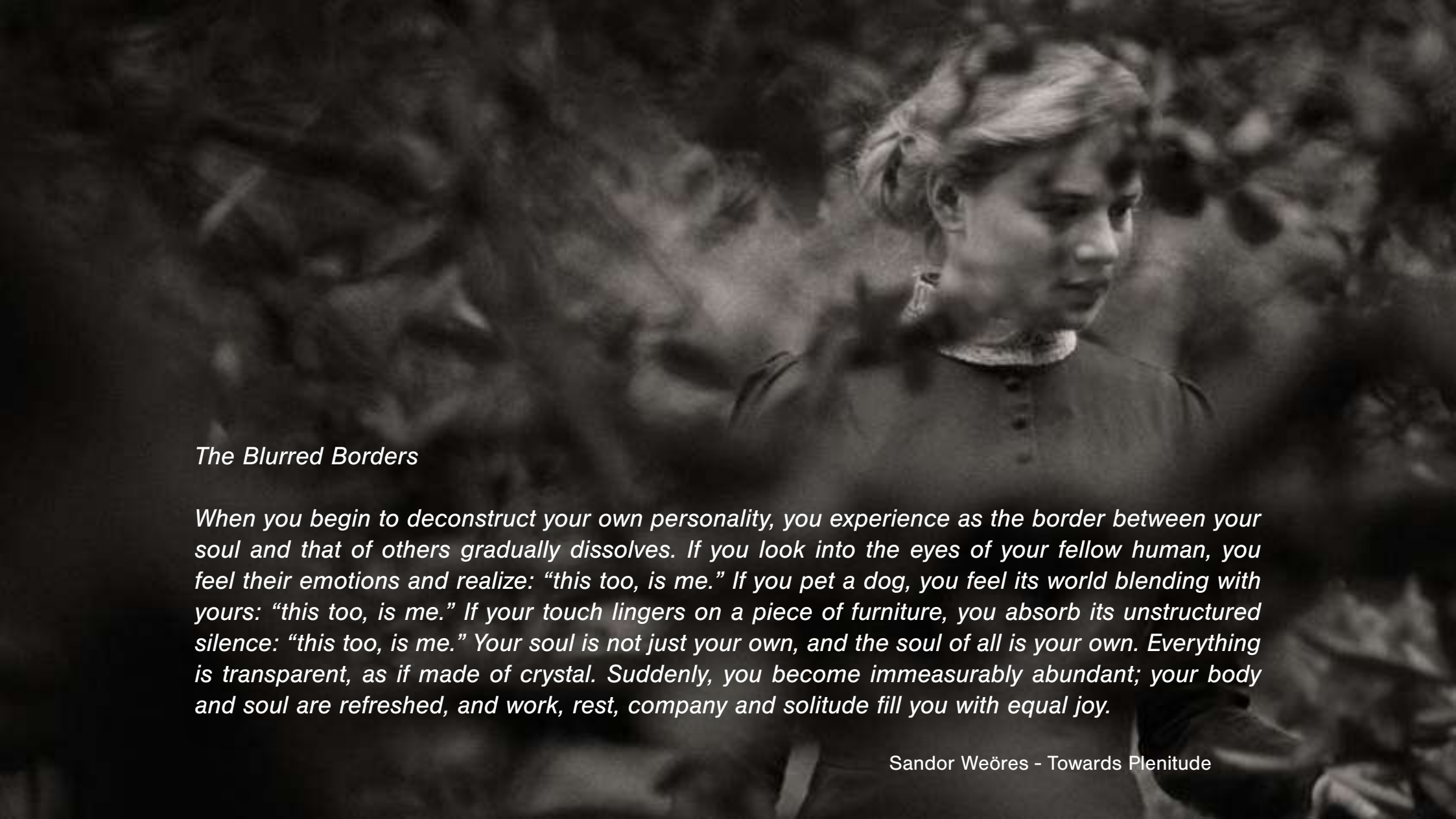
35 years ago. I know how it changed, I know certain trees. There is a huge fallen trunk beside the little pond of the garden, nowadays home to many insects and mushrooms. I saw it like an imposing, towering weeping willow casting shade on the water.

At the end of this process, how does it feel to make a movie about the importance of understanding science, at a period where science is quite denied now?

Thank you for this question. Because *Silent friend* also intends to be an alert not to throw out the most precious and beautiful aspect of humanity, but to defend, shelter and encourage it - to respect and appreciate scientific research.

"Zarte Empirie" - tender empiricism. This Goethe term for participatory science, where the researcher is not some God-like objective observer but an inherent part of the experiment, is what describes best what our human protagonists, Tony, Grete, Hannes, Gundula are involved in. They do it with the shamelessly naive, passionate curiosity of a real scientist.





The Blurred Borders

When you begin to deconstruct your own personality, you experience as the border between your soul and that of others gradually dissolves. If you look into the eyes of your fellow human, you feel their emotions and realize: “this too, is me.” If you pet a dog, you feel its world blending with yours: “this too, is me.” If your touch lingers on a piece of furniture, you absorb its unstructured silence: “this too, is me.” Your soul is not just your own, and the soul of all is your own. Everything is transparent, as if made of crystal. Suddenly, you become immeasurably abundant; your body and soul are refreshed, and work, rest, company and solitude fill you with equal joy.

Sandor Weöres - Towards Plenitude







ILDIKO ENYEDI

Ildiko Enyedi, awards winning and Oscar nominated director, started her career as a concept and media artist. Her first feature film, *My XX. Century* won the Golden Camera for best debut in Cannes, *Magic Hunter* competed in Venice, followed by *Tamas and Juli* (Venice special screening) and *Simon the Magician* (Locarno, special prize). After a long absence, while she made shorts and worked with HBO, she returned to feature films with *On Body and Soul* (Berlinale, Golden Bear 2017 / Oscar Nomination) and *The Story of My Wife* (Cannes Competition 2021). Among others, she served on the main jury in Berlin (1990, 2021) and Venice (2018) and was jury president of shorts in Cannes (2024). Ildiko Enyedi is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the European Film Academy.



TONY LEUNG CHIU-WAI

Tony Leung Chiu-wai is considered one of Asia's most successful and internationally recognized actors. He has won many international acting prizes, including the Cannes Film Festival award for Best Actor for his performance in Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* and has worked further with him in films including *Chungking Express* (1994), *Happy Together* (1997), *In the Mood for Love* (2000), and *The Grandmaster* (2013). He also appeared in three Venice Film Festival Golden Lion-winning films, including *A City of Sadness* (1989) by Hsiao-Hsien Hou, *Cyclo* (1995) by Anh Hung Tran and *Lust, Caution* (2007) by Ang Lee. Leung also stars in the Academy Award-nominated film *Hero* (2002) and more recently as Wenwu in the Marvel Cinematic Universe film *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021) by Destin Daniel Cretton.



LUNA WEDLER

Luna Wedler, born in Zurich in 1999, made her film debut at the age of 14 in *AMATEUR TEENS* (2015). In 2016, Luna Wedler began her training at the European Film Actor School in Zurich, which she successfully completed in 2018. In the same year, she played her first leading role in *BLUE MY MIND* by Lisa Brühlmann. At the Berlinale 2018, Luna Wedler was awarded “European Shooting Star”. Leading roles in *DAS SCHÖNSTE MÄDCHEN DER WELT* (2017), *JE SUIS KARL* (2019), *WAS MAN VON HIER AUS SEHEN KANN* (2021) and the Netflix series *BIOHACKERS* (2020), among others, followed. In 2022, Luna Wedler caused a stir as Sophie Scholl in the acclaimed Instagram project *@ichbinsophiescholl*. Her recent work includes *JAKOB’S ROSS* (2024), *LANDESVERRÄTER* (2024), *22 BAHNEN* (2025), and *SILENT FRIEND*, which will premiere in competition at the Venice International Film Festival in 2025.



ENZO HERMANN BRUMM

Born 1996 in Meaux, France and raised in Hamburg, Germany. After finishing high school, Enzo Hermann Brumm began his acting studies at the prestigious Max Reinhardt Seminar in Vienna in 2018, graduating in 2022. During his training, he appeared in numerous classical and contemporary theatre productions, including at the distinguished Burgtheater in Vienna, where he was noted for his versatile stage presence. In 2023, he played his first leading role in the Amazon Prime production „Viktor bringt's“, starring alongside Moritz Bleibtreu. His performance earned him a nomination for the „Grimme Award“ in 2025, and in the same year he received the „New Faces Award Film“ for Best Young Actor.

A close-up portrait of actress Léa Seydoux. She has long, wavy, light brown hair and is wearing dark-rimmed glasses. She is looking down and slightly to her left with a gentle smile. She is wearing a white button-down shirt under a dark jacket. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting with warm, golden-hour lighting.

LÉA SEYDOUX

In the role of Alice Sauvage, researcher of plant communication, Léa Seydoux has a special appearance.

Selected Filmography:

Dune: Part Two (2024)
The Beast (2023)
One Fine Morning (2022)
Crimes of the Future (2022)
The French Dispatch (2021)
The Story of My Wife (2021)
No Time to Die (2021)
The Lobster (2015)
Spectre (2015)
The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014)
Blue is the Warmest Colour (2013)

CREW

Written and directed by **Ildikó Enyedi**

Produced by **Reinhard Brundig**
and **Monika Mécs**

Producers **Nicolas Elghozi,**
Meng Xie,
Morgane Olivier

Cinematographer **Gergely Pálos HCA**
Editor **Károly Szalai HSE**
Production designer **Imola Láng**
Costume designer **Peri de Braganca**
Make up **Aurélie Cerveau**
Original Music by **Gábor Keresztes,**
Kristóf Kelemen
Vfx Supervisor **Béla Klingl**

A **PANDORA FILM** co-production with **GALATÉE FILMS**
and **INFORG-M&M FILM** in co-production with
REDIANCE, ZDF/ARTE, ARTE FRANCE CINÉMA
and **ALLONS VOIR**

CAST

Tony Leung Chiu-Wai
Luna Wedler
Enzo Brumm
Sylvester Groth
Martin Wuttke
Johannes Hegemann
Rainer Bock
Léa Seydoux

Tony
Grete
Hannes
Anton
Herr Fuchs
Thomas
Prof. Winterhalter
Alice Sauvage



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FILMS *Boutique*