



SUBMERGENCE

By Wim Wenders



PRESS NOTES

Starring: James McAvoy & Alicia Vikander

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SYNOPSIS

Submergence is a love story that takes us into the extremely different worlds of our two protagonists, Danielle Flinders (Alicia Vikander) and James More (James McAvoy). They meet by chance in a remote hotel in Normandy where they both prepare for a dangerous mission. They fall in love almost against their will, but soon recognize in each other the love of their lives. When they have to separate, we find out that James works for the British Secret Service. He's involved in a mission in Somalia to track down a source for suicide bombers infiltrating Europe. Danielle 'Danny' Flinders is a bio-mathematician working on a deep sea diving project to support her theory about the origin of life on our planet. Soon, they are worlds apart. James is taken hostage by Jihadist fighters and has no way of contacting Danny, and she has to go down to the bottom of the ocean in her submersible, not even knowing if James is still alive...

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Wim Wenders (*The Salt of the Earth*, *Wings of Desire*) directs this romantic thriller based on the novel "Submergence" by J.M. Ledgard from a screenplay by Erin Dignam (*The Last Face*).

Submergence stars James McAvoy (*X-Men: Dark Phoenix*, *Split*, *X-Men: Apocalypse*, *Atonement*, *The Last King of Scotland*) and Academy Award®-winner Alicia Vikander (*The Danish Girl*, *Ex Machina*).

Cameron Lamb produced the film, along with Wim Wenders and Uwe Kiefer for Neue Road Movies in Germany, Jean-Baptiste Babin for Backup Studio in France and Juan Gordon for Morena Films in Spain.

A multi-layered story that embraces some of life's most profound concerns, *Submergence* is based on the novel by J.M. Ledgard. A journalist who covered society and politics across Africa for *The Economist* magazine, Ledgard was inspired by his experiences living and working in Somalia.

"I was very interested in our lack of perspective of the planet we live on," he says. "It is much bigger than we think it is, much more complicated than we think it is. At the same time it is much harder and tougher as well. I have always been obsessed with the oceans and the idea that there is clearly a lot more life in the ocean than there is on the surface, particularly the microbial life of bacteria, viruses and algae at very deep levels. This life outweighs all other life on the planet. It is older, it is tougher and stronger. And whatever happens to human beings, that life is going to keep on going. Of course we now know that we evolved from the bottom of the ocean; that is where life began, deep in the oceans.

“At that time of my life when I was in Africa,” he continues, “I was reporting a lot on terrorism and spending a lot of time with Al-Qaeda guys who you probably would not get to meet these days, at least if you wanted to keep your head. So the story bubbled up out of those two experiences.”

Ledgard constructed a highly intricate, cerebral novel interweaving three distinct but overlapping worlds. “The novel has three strands,” he says. “One strand is set in Africa and about a British spy who is kidnapped by a Jihadist group. The second follows a professor at Imperial College, London who is a bio mathematician, which means she studies the volume of microbial life in the oceans. The third sees these two characters meeting in a hotel in France and forms the central part of the story. They have a passionate love affair. So really, it is about science, belief and love.”

The novel’s compelling subject matter and Ledgard’s masterful style have earned the author a growing army of fans. One of those is producer Cameron Lamb. “I just could not resist the material, it was so poetic,” he says. “I tried to find excuses not to dive into this world because it was so complex to structure as a film and had so many different locations around the world, but I just couldn't put it to one side. It kept coming to life in my mind and I wanted to see it as a movie. So I met Jonathan Ledgard and pitched my vision for the material as a movie and then I shared the book with writer Erin Dignam, who I had been looking forward to work with for a number of years. She had the exact same reaction to it as me - she fell in love with it - and I knew she was the right person to write the screenplay.”

Cameron Lamb was drawn to the novel by its many layers and its mature approach to its interlinking and often very complex and challenging themes. “Jonathan Ledgard always says it’s a geopolitical novel because it is about the earth, where we came from, the bottom of the ocean. And it is also about where we are at now, in terms of war, famine, overpopulation, many things. So it is about the past and whether we have a future. “But it's also a romance,” he adds.

Dignam began an intricate process of pulling apart the narrative and rebuilding it. The final screenplay is structurally nothing like the book which is largely narration with little dialogue.

When Cameron Lamb began to think of directors who would be able to bring the project together it became immediately apparent that only one filmmaker had the talent and vision to do the story justice: Wim Wenders.

Having discussed the decision with Ledgard, Lamb sent Wenders the novel and a few days later, the director replied that he was interested. A year later, Lamb sent Wenders the first draft and it was then that he boarded the project and began to work on a final screenplay that would go out to actors.

Wenders was struck by Lamb's persistence. "Cameron introduced me to Jonathan's book and said he was determined to make a movie of it," says the director. "I read the novel and I realized this was quite something. I had never read anything like it and how to make a movie of it escaped me, but that is always a good sign because for me, not knowing how to do something is a good reason to try to do it."

Wenders was drawn to the book for two reasons, he says. "The material is authentic as it's by a writer who had experience of what he was writing about when he was reporting on East Africa, Somalia and Al-Shabaab. And it also drew on the extensive knowledge he learned about the deep-sea world about why it is so important for us to research what is happening at the bottom of the sea and how the bottom of the sea might be a solution for the future of our planet."

Wenders was impressed with the work Dignam did in both bringing the two lead characters to life and in structuring the story: "The two characters came to life even more in the screenplay. This 'water engineer' James More really touched me and the young professor Danny Flinders also interested me. I thought that their mutual discovery that they were the love of each other's lives and that at the same time they each had this commitment to such different causes felt utterly contemporary.

"What Erin did amazingly well was to chop up time and scenes which is incredibly hard to do," continues Wenders. "And so she spliced these two worlds together. So when James is in the desert in Somalia having his Jihadist experiences, Danny is on a ship in the Northern Ocean preparing to dive deep down into the ocean. And I think that is what makes the screenplay so powerful."

By this time, Ledgard knew his novel was in safe hands. Wenders and Dignam were collaborating on the script to get the essence of the novel and Cameron had partnered with Backup Studio out of Paris to work on the production and financing of the movie. Jean Baptiste Babin, from Backup, says that "the movie is European in its core. Its setting of course, in the fact that the original novel is British and obviously in Wim being German but most importantly in it's entire meaning and message as well. And the complexity of the movie, its different locations, universes and layers, the

many different emotions the film tries to engage the spectator with, were always going to lead to a challenging production process. The only way to make a movie that would not harm the promise of the novel and weaken Wim and Dignam's ambitions would require the collaboration of several producers, and that is when we reached out to Morena and Juan Gordon in Spain."

"If you were to say, what binds all of this together," continues Ledgard, "it is a planetary story. It is about who are we on this planet, right now. Where do we belong? What are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? Wim has shown through his career that that is the kind of sensibility he has."

THE CASTING

With such a challenging story revolving around two such complex characters, it was crucial to find two actors who would not only create on-screen chemistry but had the intellectual sensitivity to do the material justice.

James McAvoy and Alicia Vikander take on the lead roles, as water engineer James More who is taken hostage by Jihadists in Somalia, and Danny Flinders, a biomathematician undertaking dangerous research taking her to the bottom of the oceans.

Says Cameron Lamb: "I always had James McAvoy in mind, even when I was reading the book and was only just thinking about turning it into a film. Wim Wenders had the exact same opinion. So as soon as the material was ready, we submitted it to James. And we gave it to Alicia at the same time. Within a week we had sorted out a meeting between Wim, Alicia and James in London. And that is when we started moving forward."

"James McAvoy is one of the great actors of his generation and he has demonstrated that with several films," says Wenders. "I saw 'The Last King of Scotland' when it came out and it was one of my favourite films, so I knew, he had it in him. He has played a very wide range of characters, but in there was also an actor who was able to deliver something very, very personal and close to his heart.

"And Alicia was very much as I imagined the character," continues the director. "She is very charismatic, very beautiful, very brilliant, and almost has an alchemy with the camera. She had to do a lot of research to prepare. Danny Flinders is only 28 but there are so many young people around that age that have such responsibility in their work environments, whether it is working in a senior

position at Google or in science so Alicia, who is also that age, is someone that younger generation can identify with, and she has brought such a wonderful determined presence to the role. She is perfect as this dedicated, extremely bright, extremely motivated person who is willing to go all the way with her mission despite the risks. In Alicia and James, I had two actors who really wanted to be these characters.”

Backup’s David Atlan-Jackson adds “Alicia and James very early on in the process became Danny and James in our mind. They both had the complexity and modernity that these two characters embodied and required. Two souls trapped in a very dangerous and secluded environment. And we knew they could make these characters happen and interact seamlessly and most importantly make believable and concrete this incredibly strong yet budding relationship.”

Cameron Lamb concurs: “James and Alicia only rehearsed briefly before filming their few scenes together in Normandy because their characters are separated for so much for the film. That location was so beautiful and romantic and they had such chemistry from the minute they started working together. It was exactly what we always hoped for and it was interesting to see their roles develop together. We certainly saw their journey come to life in front of us as their characters fell in love.”

It was the finely tuned sophistication of the screenplay that attracted James McAvoy to the project. “I thought it was a beautiful and poetic story and a really sophisticated adult approach to a film that’s a love story and about the idea of love,” says the actor. “It’s a romantic thriller and its theme of our all being connected was, I thought, stunning. When I’d read the script, I then met Wim Wenders. It was quite a short meeting in which I did all the talking because he is, quite famously, a quiet man. I thought, ‘I am not going to get this gig. This is bad’. So I made my excuses and as I was leaving told him I’d love to be in the film but if he didn’t want me, then no hard feelings, but I really hoped that he would want me to do it. But I did think, I’m never getting that gig, so it was a huge surprise when they phoned to say I’d got the job.”

McAvoy was thrilled. Being part of the film was a chance to explore some of life’s most profound concerns. “All the major players in the story - Danny, my character, the Jihadists - are all so strongly connected to our beliefs that we are prepared to die for them. And our characters have all confronted that possibility that our job or the thing that we believe in might result in that. So it was really important that my character believed in his God, that he believed in his country, that he believed in his mission, his purpose. And then love comes along and makes it harder to be that

selfless guy prepared to die.”

For J.M. Ledgard, McAvoy was a revelation. “I had always felt that James was almost laddish, and very full of energy like a Duracell battery,” says the writer. “I saw James More, the character, as being a little bit more withdrawn, a little bit more level. But James convinced me in his performance - first of all, he is great guy, really great fun and second, he’s a first rate actor.”

Alicia Vikander takes on the role of Danielle Flinders. Like McAvoy, she was taken by the screenplay’s mature approach to love and human relationships. “Erin Dignam’s script is very special because it is like entering in a new world. It was the best adult romantic story that I had ever read because it dares to be challenging, intellectual, in the moment and shows how people meet in real life. It allows people to talk, to discuss, to fall for one another almost as though they are challenging one another to fall in love.

“I read the book after I had read the script,” she continues. “It was very interesting to compare it with the script which I had fell so much in love with. I was amazed at how much work she had done to take the story about religion, politics, science and above all love out of the very heightened and philosophical world of the novel which moves around in time and space. For Erin to be able to get the dreamlike feeling of the book and make it into something more concrete is pretty extraordinary. I thought it was something that was very, very different from anything I had ever read before and knowing that Wim Wenders was directing and Benoît Debie shooting it with James McAvoy as James More, it felt like a very wonderful chance to be invited to be a part of it.”

Vikander sees in her character a woman of extreme commitment whether that’s to her work or to the man she falls in love with. “I admire Danielle’s passion. She believes in science and even though she is a mathematician with a practical mind, I love how she adopts that scientific approach to find answers to the big questions about how and why we are on this planet.”

The handling of the romantic narrative thread was a breath of fresh air for Vikander. “Normally in love stories in film, two people will see each other, be attracted and fall in love. What I love with this film is that they are attracted by their complete differences. They share the same amount of passion for what they do, and they take great pleasure in challenging one another. It’s like throwing an idea to somebody who is intelligent enough to understand it but who can adapt it to their own field of expertise.”

Vikander was thrilled to have the opportunity to work with James McAvoy. "I saw him in *Atonement* many years ago and I've probably seen most of his films," says the actress. "He is such a versatile and brilliant actor. And he's also a very funny guy; he cracks me up. To have such a relaxed relationship with somebody while doing such a big, epic and complex love story makes it a lot easier."

Working with Wim Wenders was another reason she was keen to be involved.

"Wim has been a big part of my introduction to cinema since I was quite young," says Vikander. "Working with one of cinema's greats, one of my idols was irresistible. Wim is brave; he dares to explore and to push himself with his imagery, with his stories, and he's not afraid of finding new ways to tell a story. I feel very safe in his hands which, as an actor, helps you let go and dare to go further."

Wenders' directing technique also appealed to James McAvoy. "Wim doesn't stipulate how to do the scene but he tells you what the scene should be," says the actor. "How you go about that happens naturally but if it is not happening, he gets way more specific in direction. He wills the actors to do the things he wants them to do, but he will never tell them what he wants them to do. He would rather just go and do another take and he is praying that the actor will do the thing that he is hoping for. And when he gets it, he is like a little kid in a 70 year old man's body, jumping up and down. It is lovely watching that happen!"

McAvoy also was impressed by how collaborative and flexible both Wenders and screenwriter Erin Dignam were willing to be. "Erin wrote an incredible script," says McAvoy. "And she's a very confident writer so she can happily let you mix it up sometimes, which is nice. And Wim likes that. Don't get me wrong: they're quick to say when the actors go too far or in the wrong direction but more is more, less is never more. We were definitely comfortable enough with our characters to spontaneously try things out on set. I felt very comfortable playing James. I felt he is like a lot of me with a good dose of Wim in there as well."

Vikander also enjoyed the freedom Wenders allowed the actors. "Wim is like most of the best directors in that they don't give a lot of notes, but they give you a few very powerful ones," she explains. "When you step back and see what they have done, you realise they gave you the freedom to try and find the role yourself - they set you on that path to see where you are heading. Wim is intelligent; he observes and then just gives you a little keynote."

A large portion of the film deals with Islamic Jihad. When James More is kidnapped, he is thrown into a world where religious belief dominates all just as scientific belief dominates all in the world of his love, Danielle. Portraying the Jihadists presented the filmmakers with several challenges. “I thought the only possible approach to how we would present the Jihadists was to look at them as people and as people who believed in something,” says Wim Wenders. “Even if that belief was something I could not possibly share, I thought it was interesting and that we had to take them seriously. There is no dialogue with them right now in the real world - the only dialogue is trying to bomb them out of this world – but I figured that if a person like our character James gets in touch with them and really gets to meet them, he would want to know more about them and what is behind them.”

Playing the key roles in the Somalia section of the film are French actor Reda Kateb as suicide bomber Saif, Britain’s Alexander Siddig as Dr Shadid and Somali-born Hakeemshady Mohamed as Amir Yusuf Al-Afghani.

“Saif is an extreme character, a suicide bomber whose vest did not blow up and is therefore considered a saint, but really he is a maniac,” says Wenders. “We found him in Reda Kateb. Reda’s a great actor and he really got under the skin of this man, in a scary way! Sometimes when we were shooting with him, I thought I’m happy I don’t run into this guy in the middle of the night somewhere! I first saw him in the extraordinary French film *A Prophet* where he also played a very scary guy and I’d worked with him once before so I knew he had that in him. But he is also a very kind soul. Alexander Siddig plays a doctor who is working with the Jihadists who is both a committed Jihadist but a doctor at the same time so he’s a very torn character. Alexander is a fantastic actor who captured that complexity.”

“We have had the chance to work with Reda on a couple of movies that were very different in the past,” says Atlan-Jackson, “and we were convinced that he would be great for the role. Reda is a great actor because he embarks with the same energy and passion in projects whatever their scope or size, whether it is a first time director or Kathryn Bigelow, because they offer him the chance to portray something different each time.”

Hakeemshady Mohamed, who grew up in Mogadishu before fleeing to Kenya from where he found asylum in the US, was very helpful with providing an authenticity to the film's scenes in Somalia, as Wenders explains. “Mohamed Hakeemshady - or Shady as I call him - was such fantastic help. He

was able to teach all the extras the correct way of speaking Arab with a very distinct Somali accent. And he knew so much about the world that the film was describing, in terms of clothing, in terms of customs and behaviour because he had seen it all. So he was a huge help. And I do not know how I could have done some of the scenes without Shady.”

James McAVoy was also struck by the talent he was playing opposite. “Reda and Hakeem were both incredible. Reda's presence is so strong and he has got a great malevolence mixed in with a sympathetic thing going on, and Hakeem has got first hand experience of this world and this kind of militant fundamentalism. And his knowledge has been invaluable, not just for Wim and me, but for all the other actors, a lot of whom are Somali in descent but have been there since they were two or three and have never learned or have forgotten the local customs. Hakeem has been one of our most useful resources. And added to that, he just has got it in his bones when he is performing, you cannot fake that. They have both been incredible to work with.”

For his part, Hakeemshady Mohamed found his initial trepidations soon were overcome. Before shooting began, he was encouraged to build a background to character he is playing, because of his first-hand knowledge of Somalia. “Somalia was a war-torn country, with poverty and no education system,” he explains. “If you live in that environment, you are either going to become a victim or you are going to become one of the bad guys with an AK-47. My family didn’t want that for me so I was lucky to get out. I was asked to put together Amir Yusef’s backstory is and how he got involved with Jihadists so we could understand his character. Erin was very humble about taking my opinions on board.

“At the beginning of the shoot, I was afraid of Wim,” he continues. “I was thinking, ‘OK, this is a big time director. What is he going to say? What is he going to do? But I felt like I was in safe hands. He was very open to me, always asking for my advice about the character.”

THE LOCATIONS

With the cast set, *Submergence* began its challenging shooting schedule in March 2016 in several difficult locations around the world, including Toulon, Brest and the Normandy coast in France, Spain, Germany, Djibouti and the Faroe Islands. Studio work was done in Berlin and Madrid.

Behind the scenes collaborators included cinematographer Benoît Debie, production designer Thierry Flamand, editor Toni Froschhammer, costume designer Bina Daigeler and composer Fernando Velazquez.

The exigencies of the shoot required a crew prepared to deal with extremes. “Shooting in such diverse locations and places and under such extreme conditions, we needed an experienced cinematographer and a very adventurous one,” says Wim Wenders. “And I had found him in Benoît Debie, with whom I had worked already on two movies before. He is Mr Adventurous Incorporated and he has taken some very big risks with the films he’s worked on including the ones by Gaspar Noé - and Benoît was the right man for this.”

Jean-Baptiste Babin agrees “We had worked in the past with Benoît, in difficult conditions in Thailand right in the middle of the Jungle and he had managed to bring beautiful and innovative shots out of thin air. We had no doubt that Benoît was the right man for this film.”

Brest is the where the French Research Institute for Exploitation of the Sea Ifremer is based. Ifremer takes on a cameo role in the film as the institute Danny Flinders works for. In real life, the team relied heavily on the research institute to give the film and the characters authenticity. “Ifremer was the only possible partner in Europe, being the only company that does the kind of work that Danny does in the film,” says Wim Wenders. “They allowed us to use to their boat, the Atalante, for our scenes at sea and allowed access to their submersible, the Nautile, for our research. We had to recreate the Nautile, which is a yellow submarine and looks a little like the one on the front of the Beatle’s cover, in the studio in Babelsberg in Berlin.

“One of my favourite things in the whole film is being able to shine a light on the science, and on the scientists themselves, the real scientists,” continues Wenders. “We were really lucky in getting Ifremer on board and they were so excited and delighted to be able to share their work and to show their world to a wider audience.”

Alicia Vikander met the scientists in Brest before starting rehearsals. “They helped us throughout the entire shoot,” she says. “I went there with tons of questions and I was very nervous because I was concerned I wasn’t going to understand anything. But they were so helpful. Before I went, I was struck and amazed by the level of passion Danny has for her job. I can relate because there are things in my life that I have been totally sucked into and can talk about for hours and hours. When I met the scientists, I was introduced to not just a profession but a world of science I found remarkable and which I knew nothing about. It is sci-fi, but for real!”

One of the main shooting locations – where Danny and James fall in love- was found in Normandy. “The novel describes this utterly beautiful hideaway on the Atlantic coast where Danny and James

meet, recounts Wenders. “I knew that the entire film depended on finding an absolutely magical place, and we looked for it everywhere in Europe. From the coast of Galicia in Spain up to France, then all the way to Belgium and Netherlands and even Norway. We looked in Ireland and Scotland as well, until we knew about every hotel with a view of the Atlantic. But we hadn’t found yet what we were looking for. Until one day our production designer Thierry Flamand said, almost timidly: “I know a private house on the coast of Normandy, built around 1900. It’s entirely Arts and Crafts, and was built as an interreligious meeting place. It has the most amazing park just by the ocean...” He hadn’t even finished his description when I had already booked a flight there to go see it immediately. And already as we entered the gate for the first time, we knew we had found that unique place we had dreamed of.”

The African scenes had to be just as authentic as the scenes in the scientific world. Djibouti, a country of desert, volcanic formations and arid mountain ranges, stood in for Somalia.

“We really needed the location for the scenes in Somalia to feel like we were there,” says Wim Wenders. “Obviously it was too challenging for us to go into Somalia under present circumstances. We scouted Djibouti twice and it really lent itself to the material. It is such a real raw location and one of the most remote places in the world so presented a challenge to get to. But the people there are so sincere, humble and real and we really captured that which I think is very unique.”

A film that delves into unknown worlds, whether political or geographical, while exploring the passionate love story between two driven souls, *Submergence* will, hopes Wenders, inspire food for thought. “What I really hope is on a rainy Thursday night in Bristol or Detroit or wherever you are, when you come out of the cinema, your perspective of the planet, on your own habits, is just altered slightly. You will realize how large the world is, how varied it is, but also how fragile it is.”

James McAvoy concurs: “Audiences will be moved by a beautiful love story and they will be terrified for the characters but I think that they are going to be surprised at how educational the film is as well - about what is happening in our world both geo-politically and in terms of the danger the world is in physically. That does not sound like a love story and yet it is - it’s about a love for your mission, a love for your belief, a love for your planet, a love between the characters, a love for your God; it is a love for all those things.”