

THE ISLAND

A FILM BY JULIEN PUJOL



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After travelling around the world, Nina and Mathieu arrive on an island to spend midsummer with friends. As time passes and the island's nature slowly begins to assert itself in their consciousness, they become confronted with the emptiness of their desires.



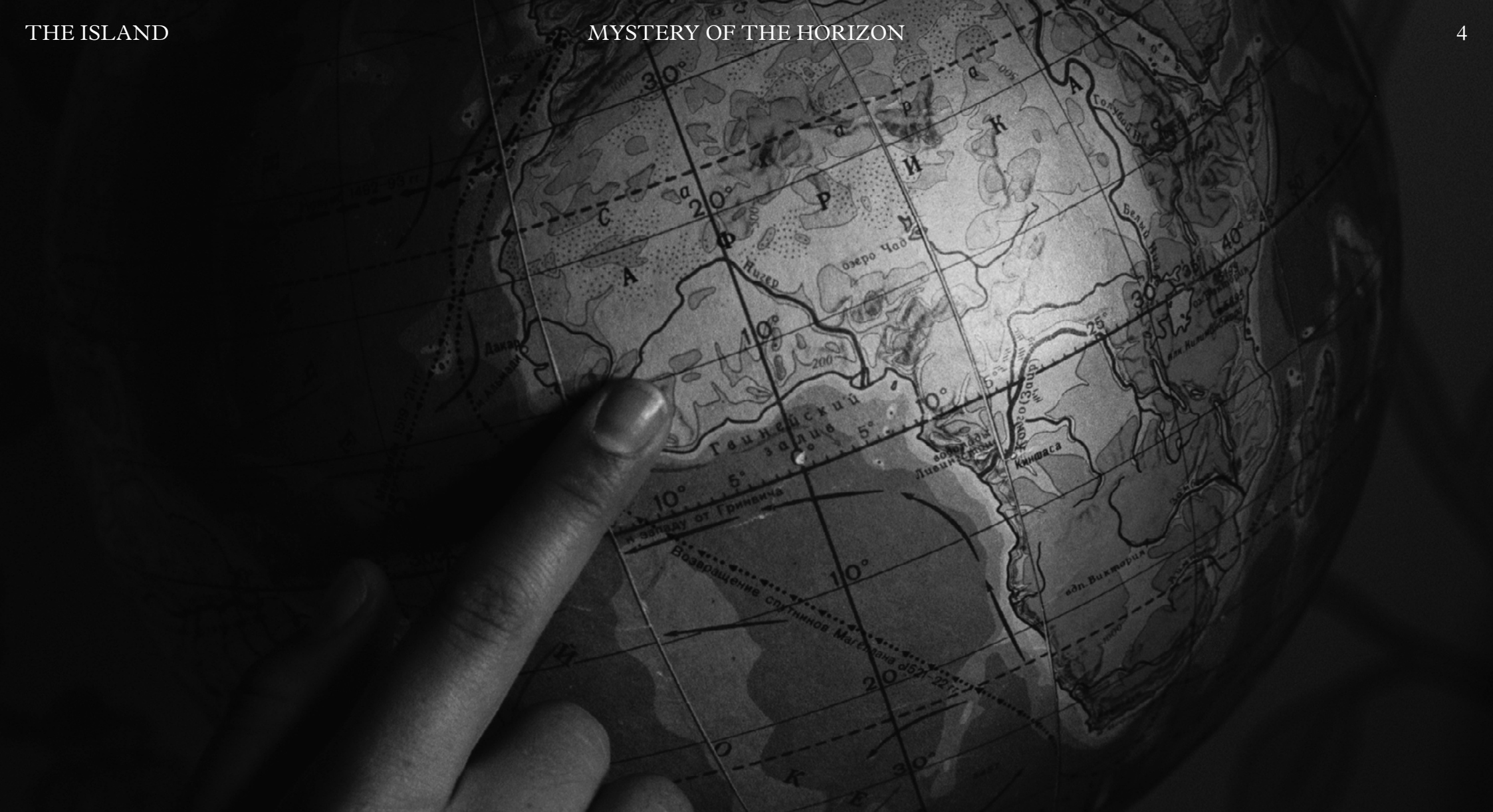
Director's Statement

For the past few years, I have often spent midsummer's day on the island of Saaremaa in Estonia. To reach this island I would take a couple flights from Paris and, in under five hours, find myself in the middle of a forest,

or swimming in a lake. The feeling of being able to leave one world and enter another with such ease was both liberating and frightening. For me, it reflected how quickly we can acquire our desires in today's world: I can fly wherever I want on this earth; I can seek out anything and potentially

own it; and yet I feel there is an emptiness to that knowledge, a traumatic cycle of having and desiring. Are we just ego and desire? What is left now that we are potentially all-knowing? During those midsummer nights, my friends and I would make a sauna, run through the forest and jump into

the sea. This ritualistic act of stripping away one's identity replaced my desires and consciousness of the modern world with something ancient. I want *The Island* to reflect that feeling.



I spent part of my childhood on the border of South Africa and Namibia. Later, when I met my wife and first came to Estonia, I had a feeling that the wide empty landscapes and quiet starry nights were the same as those in the desert; as if somehow I had been there before. How could this

be? Much later I learned that there are many migrating birds such as swallows, swifts and storks that make the long trip from Southern Africa to Europe. In fact, on an early March day, one could see them readying for the long trip north. I would dream about the first navigators during the age of

discovery, arriving somewhere after a long voyage and coming to similar conclusions – realising these birds had known the secret of the world for thousands of years. Slowly, since the age of discovery, the process of reducing the unknown has been violently efficient. It's hard nowadays

to feel that anything is unique. What do we do with all this knowledge and science? Now that there is no mystery beyond the horizon or possibly beyond light-years, the world appears to us more and more finite, like an island. *The Island* is a reflection of this trauma.



Nina and Mathieu arrive on a small island from a trip around the world to celebrate midsummer with their friends Jessica and Ingmar. As the journey culminates, they both have different reactions to the ending of their trip. How does one feel after seeing everything? What is left once

desire is fulfilled? Mathieu tries to fill this emptiness in the form of a new desire: an old lover Jessica, meanwhile Nina has become distanced from Mathieu and searches for meaning and stability. As the film explores the clash of these two feelings, we start to notice the parallel natural world that

exists around them, oblivious to their conflicts. Later we see the friends talking over dinner while looking at the polaroids of Nina and Mathieu's trip. They comment on the places and find similarities with their own travels. The experience of travelling is reduced to these images, which can

be commented on, criticised. The polaroids are reminders of a past desire that no longer has meaning. As the dinner progresses everyone is subtly comparing and showing each other what they know and what they want.



In *The Island*, the sauna acts as a transformative door for our characters to find their ancient self. What remains when there is no issue to our desire? The sauna is a form of resolution to this trauma. The sauna is a space in which one strips away one's identity. Along with midsummer, it

is one of the few pagan traditions left in Europe and the custom of smoke sauna is unique to Estonia. It's a place in which, under the right circumstances, one can free one's mind from ego and accept their natural self. As we see them undress inside the sauna they shed their identities: no more

words, just naked bodies sweating and breathing. This is the pivotal moment of the story, at the climax of which the narrative stops —whatever conflict the protagonists have been building dissolves. The camera no longer looks for them individually, instead capturing an overview of what is happening.

They are briefly able to let go and experience something ancient, rooted in nature. The viewer feels this freedom not only as the story line disappears, but also cinematographically as it is freed with a long tracking shot that reflects this brief, almost fleeting moment of freedom for the characters.



In the Divine Comedy Dante wrote: “What are ten thousand years compared to infinity?” What is Nina and Mathieu’s story compared to the migrations of birds, or to ancient civilisations, or to eternity? The ending of our story is only a point in endless time. In order to define time I wanted to work

outside the common way of storytelling dictated by endings and beginnings; stories that enforce a myth around our own existence. How could I instead show time and nature and our place in it? I wanted the cinematic language of *The Island* to address both our subjects and their environment with equal im-

portance. *The Island* shows how nature, mankind and time overlap and allows us to see the existence of a world before and after our story, a world made of smaller stories, of images and constant moments in time and thus as time progresses our characters story becomes insignificant. I wanted the viewer to feel life existing

constantly, not only when our characters are present. We see time’s contraction and expansion and the infinite things that happen in between. I sought to compose moments that could connect the viewer to something strange, beautiful and fleeting – and to feel that our existence is only passing.



I envisioned *The Island* to be like a broken slab of marble, a Satyricon of sorts, where only pieces of the story remain. An elliptical tale where each fragment holds an individual truth yet the whole story is lost. From the beginning the idea was to shoot the film in black and white, allowing us

to see beyond a contemporary point of view. We should feel like strangers looking into a past world, close but disconnected, like a document transformed by time – ancient. What is left is the essence of its form. From the start I wanted to capture action from afar, like a collection of large

tableaux. Finally I decided the camera should be more active, slowly and curiously stepping closer into each scene. I wanted the viewer to see the film from the outside, as if they were time itself looking on. One can feel a certain desire from the camera, a closeness to bodies, almost voyeur-

istic. I wanted to play with the audience, to give them ‘traps’ so that they could also feel a need for resolution or even for an erotic conclusion that disappears in the sauna and ends like a mirror to our cinematic desires.



We decided to shoot everything forward in time and never going back to a previous set up. The camera travels through each scene as if it were its own entity. With some exceptions this meant everything was shot chronologically, with a camera active in the storytelling. While on set we jokingly

would say ‘time has passed’ whenever we needed to keep the shoot moving or when the logic of the story got in the way. This in turn freed the camera and allowed it to be an independent character, moving and making decisions that changed how the mise-en-scene would be played out. So if

something was missed, we simply decided ‘time has passed’ and it became an ellipse; or if the light was specially beautiful or a spontaneous action occurred within a scene the camera would jump from the subject to bring our attention to this smaller detail in the background. We became slaves to

this hidden protagonist, it had a mind of its own, an observer alien to the story.



Hampus Nordenson and I were drawn to the photography of Kenneth Gustavsson and Paul Strand. Their carefully composed photographs evoked in me a timeless feeling; they gave life to objects and opened a hidden world neglected by our eyes. The idea to shoot on 35mm was not only aesthetic

but also practical. I knew that in order to capture images of birds and to shoot over different seasons and continents we would need flexibility and time. We shot the main scenes with the cast over a week on a small islet of Saarnaki in Estonia, where the legend of Ultima Thule arised. Everyday the local fish-

ermen would bring us on and off the small uninhabited islet. There was no running water or electricity and logistically, it was a difficult task. Because of the limited amount of film available to us, we needed to live on the island before shooting in order to understand the light and prepare scenes. Happily, and

most importantly, this also provided time to observe the birds nesting there. We spent about ten days trying to get 3-4 shots of the storks and swallows living around the house. On celluloid, time isn't extendable —and poetically, the last roll of film available to us captured the last storks in ancient Volubilis.



Films like Antonioni's *Eclipse* deeply inspired the way I wanted to approach each scene. Antonioni gave psychology to his camera and brought visual complexity into every scene. Even a simple moment in time could become sublime. The camera had incredible power inviting the spectator

to see and feel what the characters felt, their environment as well as hidden things all around them.

Originally the film was set to end in the desert of South Africa, but while filming, Nina spoke to me about Volubilis, an ancient city in Morocco where the storks would nest in the winter.

I saw this as a sign and decided to finish the film there. If Saarnaki was part of Pytheas' Ultima Thule, Volubilis was also once the far end of the Roman empire. As time passes we realise there are no endings or beginnings; *The Island* never remains still but constantly moves forward. By the

third act, the film strikes a haunting feeling that there is no stopping time or going back – and even the final credits cannot put an end to it.

– Julien Pujol



In order of appearance

- NINA ABOUTAJEDYNE
- MATHIEU PEROTTO
- INGMAR JÖELA
- JESSICA LUOSTARINEN
- MEHDI LARGO
- LUNA KARJAKAINEN



Director Julien Pujol
 Producers Nicolas Tiry, Julien Pujol

 Produced by The Film Partnership, Solab Films
 Co Produced by..... Cats and Dogs, Parent, Team B
 Cinematography Hampus Nordenson
 Art Direction..... Kersti Pohlak
 Editing..... Laura Rius Aran
 Assistant Director..... Juri Krutii
 Script..... Irma Holm
 Line Producer Estonia..... Kadi Freja Felt
 Line Producers Morocco..... Munir Abbar, Mehdi Lahlou
 Original score Vasco Cesaretti
 Additional music Erkki Sven Tüür
 Sound Design Senjan Jansen
 Sound Editing Bert Aerts
 Film Lab..... Silverway Paris
 Post producer..... Jérôme Giraud
 Color grading Xavier Desjours



Julien was born in 1990 in Lausanne, Switzerland. After years of living abroad, in the United States, Brazil and South Africa, he moved to Paris to work in the fashion industry, creating films for international brands. In 2018 he completed *Atlantis*, a short documentary film about migration and time in Southern Africa. In 2023 he completed the medium-length film *The Island*. He spends his time between Tallinn, Estonia and Paris, France.



Atlantis 5', 2018, 35mm, Color, South Africa
..... <https://vimeo.com/julienpujol/atlantis>
The Island 39', 2023, 35mm, Black and White, France/Estonia



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