MEDIACONTACT

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For Immediate Release

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Stills from Heartsnatcher's creative workshop. ***Press Images can be found here.***

Jingletown Films' Cheryl Dunye, director of the pioneering landmark movie *Watermelon Woman* Joins as Executive Producer for Nelly Ben Hayoun-Stépanian's New Feature *Heartsnatcher*

Berlinale Talents and former Sundance's grantee Nelly Ben Hayoun- Stépanian acquires Rights to Boris Vian's Heartsnatcher for a new hybrid adaptation.

www.heartsnatcher.xyz

In the lead-up to London's BFI Flare (18–29 March 2026), and marking the 30th anniversary of Cheryl Dunye's groundbreaking film The Watermelon Woman, we announce that Dunye and producer Karina Hodoyán join Heartsnatcher as executive producers and mentors.

London / San Francisco- March 2026- Heartsnatcher Ltd and Nelly Ben Hayoun-Stépanian are delighted to announce that they have **secured the rights to Boris Vian's iconic 1953 novel Heartsnatcher**, forming the narrative backbone of director **Nelly Ben Hayoun-Stépanian's** newest feature film and multimedia project. **Heartsnatcher** is a creative non-fiction film and immersive installation that merges drag performance, artist moving image,

and science documentary to explore the collapse and reconstruction of global ideals like peace and family.

The film asks: How can one achieve world peace? This drag science documentary offers a deep dive in dismantling patriarchal systems, investigating the upcoming decommissioning of the International Space Station (ISS) in 2030 as a provocation for reimagining the commons. It offers alternatives via the queering of motherhood, and proposals such as turning the International Space Station into a love hotel. Can queering science, psychiatry, and motherhood allow for the human species to reach world peace? Narrated by Timortis,a genderfluid psychiatrist inspired by revolutionary pan-african Frantz Fanon, it merges 3D, live reenactments with drag performances.

This landmark acquisition enables a radical reinterpretation of Vian's surreal, absurdist tale through a queer, scientific, and multi-disciplinary lens. Boris Vian's Heartsnatcher is an absurdist family drama set in a mountain house where Clementine locks her triplets inside an invisible fortress, its exaggerated larger-than-life characters forming the narrative tapestry of our documentary. Written in 1953, its psychotic and surreal traits feel uncannily reflective of our present, offering fertile ground for exploring estrangement and drag forms in filmmaking.

Alongside this news, the production proudly confirms that **trailblazing filmmaker Cheryl Dunye**- creator of the seminal *The Watermelon Woman*-and **Jingletown Films managing director Karina Hodoyán** have joined the project as **Executive Producers**. The collaboration was initiated at **Berlinale Talents 2025**, where Dunye, Hodoyán and Ben Hayoun-Stépanian first met. Dunye-a guest speaker at the event-immediately connected with the film's bold cinematic vision and its interrogation of motherhood, queer futurism, and postcolonial imaginaries. Since then, Dunye and Hodoyán have been providing **ongoing mentorship and monthly guidance**, shaping the creative and structural evolution of the film.

Dunye, a seminal figure in queer cinema and the groundbreaking director of *The Watermelon Woman*, brings decades of experience in narrative and experimental filmmaking, as well as directing major series such as *Bridgerton*, *Dear White People*, and *Lovecraft Country*. Her influence marks a significant milestone in the evolution of *Heartsnatcher*-a film that, like her own work, refuses binaries and reimagines identity, liberation, and form.

'Cheryl is an icon, a force, and a visionary,' says director Dr. Nelly Ben Hayoun-Stépanian. 'Meeting her and Karina Hodoyan at Berlinale Talents felt like an orbit-shifting moment. To be adapting Boris Vian's masterpiece Heartsnatcher (L'Arrache-cœur) for cinema is an immense honour; this book has compelled me with equal parts curiosity and horror ever since I first read it as a teenager in the French educational system. Boris Vian was so multifaceted and an absolute out of the box thinker and maker, a rebellious and kindred spirit- I want to thank his family and estate representative for believing in me and for supporting me in developing this experimental work. Having Cheryl and Karina mentor Heartsnatcher, together with Nicole at the Boris Vian Cultural Legacy is not only a dream come true-it is a profound expansion of creative and innovative possibilities in storytelling and filmmaking."

“We are honored to support Nelly’s work and support them in developing their ‘extraterrestrial’ vision. We are confident that Heartsnatcher represents a decisive and timely artistic contribution- rigorous, experimental, and philosophically daring.” says Cheryl Dunye and Karina Hodoyán of Jingletown Films

“At a time when the very house where Boris Vian lived and created on top of the Moulin Rouge in Paris- a place of memory now threatened with destruction- risks being lost forever, the decision to licence the rights of adaption to Heartsnatcher to Nelly represents more than a legal step: it is an act of cultural preservation. By re-interpreting Vian’s work through a queer, experimental cinematic lens, I am very confident that Nelly’s adaptation honours his spirit of unrestrained imagination, ensuring his revolutionary voice continues to resonate internationally, and pledges that neither his legacy -nor his house-will vanish into oblivion.” says Nicole Bertolt, Estate Representative and Director of the Boris Vian Cultural Legacy

ABOUT THE PLATFORM - *Heartsnatcher*, a new form of movie making

From its inception, Heartsnatcher has been designed as both a film and a participatory experience through creative workshops and a digital platform. The aim being to allow for a new type of global connection between the international cast and collaborators of Heartsnatcher during its development, allowing artists, cultural influencers and scientists performing the same role (such as the various “Timortis” worldwide) to meet, exchange ideas, and build collectively the film's living network already while in development. Each participant and audience members alike can meet and discuss online on heartsnatcher.xyz and share skills in the real world but also discuss and put their role in practice in their daily routines in their respective place across the world. Two pilots workshops have been developed so far at queer film festival: Queer Wave in Nicosia, Cyprus and at the young talent film festival, Festival of Future Storyteller in Munich, with more to be announced, members of the public are invited to reach out to set one of this workshop in their local community by emailing heartsnatcher@nellyben.com

ABOUT THE FILM - Heartsnatcher

Heartsnatcher is a creative non-fiction feature exploring the collapse and reconstruction of global ideals such as peace, care, and interdependence. Drawing from Boris Vian’s 1953 absurdist novel, the film merges drag performance, artist moving image, science documentary, and analogue 3D to examine how queering motherhood, psychiatry, and space science might unlock new frameworks for planetary peace.

Narrated by **Timortis**, a genderfluid psychiatrist inspired by revolutionary thinker **Frantz Fanon**, *Heartsnatcher* interweaves: filmed reenactments and analogue 3D sequences; scientific investigations into magnetite biomineralization, maternal brain plasticity, fungi intelligence, and quantum microtubule theory; drag king/queen performance workshops across the world.

The project’s international research has already included collaborations with neuroscientists in Tokyo, midwives and obstetricians in California, and mycologists at Kew Gardens, alongside filmed experiments and creative labs with queer nightlife performers and scientists.

Notes to editors:
Heartsnatcher website: www.heartsnatcher.xyz
Cheryl Dunye in conversation at the BFI, London, as a part of BFI Flare festival:Thursday 19 March 2026 14:00 here
Watermelon Woman screening at the BFI, London as a part of BFI Flare festival:Friday 20 March 2026 12:55 Tix here

Core Crew:
Director and creative: Nelly Ben Hayoun-Stépanian | Executive Producers: Cheryl Dunye, Karina Hodoyán | Director of Photography: Fiona Braillon | Editors: Raluca Petre and David Potter | Motion Graphics: Gene Limbrick | Producer: Ioanna Karavela and Hannah Taieb | Pictures by Nick Ballón

ABOUT NELLY BEN HAYOUN STEPANIAN Ph.D:
Nelly Ben Hayoun-Stépanian, Ph.D. (she/they) is a multidisciplinary artist, filmmaker, and cultural activist. Their work has premiered at MoMA, V&A, MET, National Museum of China, and Gaité Lyrique and she has collaborated with NASA, the UN, and underground communities worldwide. Nelly is the founder of tuition free University of the Underground, NASA's International Space Orchestra, SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) Institute's Experiences department and LGBTQA+ nationwide festival Tour de Moon; director of five feature films examining diasporic and queer ecofeminist futures through an experimental lens, they have screened at festivals including SXSW, Munich Film Festival, Frameline, and the BFI London Film Festival and have been awarded prizes from Sundance Institute and BFI Doc Society. Their work is in the British Film Institute Archive, NASA and a part of other collections globally. Recent work includes Art of London's takeover of Piccadilly Circus and Leicester Square, culminating in Piccadilly Un:Plugged, a world-first event broadcasting human heartbeats and unreleased tracks from Massive Attack and Pussy Riot to the moon and back with a 25-minute screening of Nelly's film From The Void To The Full on Piccadilly Lights. In 2025, Nelly was chosen by a jury of international experts from the fields of film and other art forms as one of the 81 directors selected across 3,836 applications to take part in Berlinale Talents.

ABOUT CHERYL DUNYE: Cheryl DUNYE (1966, Liberia) grew up in Philadelphia, where she graduated from Temple University before attending Mason Gross School of Art in New Jersey. Her work often revolves around topics of race, sexuality and gender. She became known for her unique style of filmmaking, which mixes documentary and fiction. She calls films in this style 'dunyementaries'. She released a number of short films before directing her first feature The Watermelon Woman (1995). The film premiered at the Berlinale, where it won the Teddy Award. Her next work was television film Stranger Inside (2001), which premiered on HBO and portrays the life of African-American lesbians in prison. The film won several awards. The following year, she was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award by *Girlfriends* magazine. In 2004, she wrote the comedy My Baby's Daddy. The Owls (2010) and Mommy Is Coming (2012) both premiered in Berlin, with the latter being nominated for a Teddy Award. In 2013, she took part in the omnibus film Valencia: The Movie/s, an adaptation of Michelle Tea's 2000 memoir *Valencia*. In

recent years, she has directed episodes for numerous TV shows, including Queen Sugar (2017-2019), Dear White People (2019) and Lovecraft Country (2020).

ABOUT KARINA HODOYAN Ph.D: Karina received a Ph.D. from Stanford University, focusing on Mexican and Latinx Cultural Production. Her writing explores how immigration, race, gender, and sexuality in the US-Mexico Borderlands are represented in the visual and literary arts. She is a graduate of the UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television's Professional Program in Producing.

ABOUT JINGLETOWN FILMS:

Jingletown Films is a bold, independent production company dedicated to visionary storytelling and formally adventurous cinema. **Jingletown Films** is dedicated to amplifying the voices of diverse storytellers and filmmakers whose work has historically been underrepresented in the film industry. Founded by Cheryl, a film and television veteran since 1989, Jingletown Films reflects her longstanding commitment to fostering diversity both in front of and behind the camera. Inspired by the vibrant spirit of Oakland, Cheryl's home, **Jingletown Films** embodies the city's rich cultural, political, and artistic legacy. It is a creative hub rooted in community and bold storytelling. With a commitment to artistic risk-taking and deeply collaborative practice, the company supports projects from inception to screen, nurturing films that leave a lasting imprint on audiences and the industry.https://jingletownfilms.com/

ABOUT BERLINALE TALENTS:

From February 15 to 20, 2025, Berlinale Talents will welcome 201 selected filmmakers to Berlin. Over six days, participants will explore the theme "Listen Courageously: Cinematic Narratives in Times of Dissonance" through an engaging programme of talks, workshops and public discussions. Representing a multifaceted community from 62 countries, the filmmakers' participation is the first step into one of the world's largest film communities.

The careful selection process was guided by the Berlinale Talents' core values, diversity and equality. It took place over several months, culminating with 201 Talents selected from 3,836 applications from 123 countries.

With over 10,000 alumni worldwide, Berlinale Talents is a global community that offers a unique opportunity to connect and collaborate on a world-wide scale, fostering connections and creativity beyond regional networks.

Berlinale Talents is a globally recognised project and talent development initiative that has shaped and created for 23 years the next generations of film makers and inspires the global film industry with new ideas and aesthetics. In recent years, Cate Blanchett, İlker Çatak, Geraldine Chaplin, Tsai Ming-liang, Lupita Nyong'o, Ruben Östlund, Euzhan Palcy, Martin Scorsese, Kristen Stewart, and many more participated in focused conversations with the selected filmmakers.

Berlinale Talents is supported by the Minister of State for Culture and Media, Creative Europe – MEDIA Programme of the European Union, Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, German Federal Film Board, Mastercard and ARRI. https://www.berlinale-talents.de

For more on Heartsnatcher, please connect:
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