



NEW RELEASES

The Velvet Queen: Snow Leopard

High up on the Tibetan plateau. Amongst unexplored and inaccessible valleys lies one of the last sanctuaries of the wild world, where rare and undiscovered fauna lives. Vincent Munier, one of the world's most renowned wildlife photographers takes the adventurer and novelist Sylvain Tesson (*In the Forest of Siberia*) with him on his latest mission. For several weeks, they'll explore these valleys searching for unique animals and try to spot the snow leopard, one of the rarest and most difficult big cats to approach.

Interview with director Vincent Munier

Why has the snow leopard been the main focus of your thoughts and your journeys over the past few years?

I'm still a big kid who lives off his dreams and images of mythical animals. I discovered this leopard in the adventure stories of American biologist George B. Schaller. He had filmed it in Chitral, in Pakistan, in the 1970s. But when I went to Tibet for the first time, in 2011, I wasn't very convinced I would have a chance of seeing it. On the other hand, I knew I would see other species that were equally enigmatic. And to start with, I spent a month without seeing it – just some tracks –, but it was fascinating to know that it was there. I was first attracted to these high plateaus by the wild yack, a totem animal from another era, which was probably around at the same time as woolly rhinos or mammoths. Like the musk ox in the Arctic. Deep down, the leopard was a pretext. An extravagant pretext, but a pretext all the same.

What made you come back on its tracks so often?

As with the Arctic, I like to return to the same places... I like to discover them at my own pace, over time, and often alone. It's a great satisfaction to slowly learn to uncover the secrets that surround wild animals, by imagining them, tracking them, and observing them! I've effectively always preferred to spend several years focussing on one subject, rather than flitting from one to another: fleeing orders and following my instinct. As regards Tibet, I must have been there eight times, at first to shoot photos and then for a book. Then, I got this desire to film, with a small team of 2 to 3 people at most, to avoid disturbing the wildlife and to be able to remain adaptable and flexible in this complex high-altitude environment. Léo-Pol Jacquot has been working with me for 8 years, mainly in the office. I was delighted to get him away from his screens a bit and take him up there!

He has practically no on-terrain experience and I was astonished by his ability to adapt. Marie Amiguet brought a fresh look at the place, a particular sensitivity... and I appreciated her leopard-like discretion. Her mission was to follow us whilst remaining invisible, to film us without anything being staged, so that we could be as close to reality as possible. That method brings its share of awkwardness and technical shortcomings, but also a certain amount of sincerity in the moments captured. The aim was to precisely capture the emotions we were feeling.

Why is it that the last two times you decided to travel with a writer?

To get a broader vision. It's no longer sufficient for me to take my fill of the beauty I encounter and these living dreams. I want to share these experiences, to draw attention to the urgency of putting aside our intense anthropocentrism, to end the devastating hegemony of the human species over all others. I am deeply scarred by the destiny that awaits all these animals that are pushed into ever-decreasing areas because of us! And it's difficult to portray that dimension using only images, particularly when you've chosen to show beauty rather than devastation. To emphasise the wonder that I want to portray with my photographs, I felt that a well-composed, engaged written presentation was necessary.

What made you choose Sylvain Tesson?

Sylvain and I had already bumped into each other several times and he'd mentioned he'd like to accompany me on my observations. I knew his adventure tales but I was particularly taken with his book *Sur les Chemins Noirs*. You could feel an ecological thread running through it. So, I naturally invited him to bring my adventures to a close with a book using his texts and this film. As is often the case, I strive to build bridges: to convey wonder, follow nature's slow pace that you become completely steeped in as the hours and observations pass. So the aim was to film our exchanges around a common dream by using the wildlife images brought together during my preceding adventures up there. At the same time, came the idea of proposing a beautiful object related to that, an album whose photos would have captions composed by the writer. That's my artistic side. I like to follow every stage at my own pace, so I can be as close as possible to what I really want to share, with no constraints and no pressure.

Vincent, you who are often used to doing your wildlife-watching alone, this time you had more people than ever before with you: guides, a writer, a director, and an assistant director following in your steps. How did that change the way you work?

I got myself into a different mind-set. And we were rarely all together at the same time. One or two Tibetan friends stayed on the base camp (in the bottom of a valley, by a river), that we travelled out from for several days, into a landscape that I already knew a little thanks to the time I'd spent there previously. After that, we'd split up to work in more discreet pairs.

Was your encounter with this beauty guaranteed?

The highpoint of this project was that it was like a planetary alignment, everything just fell into place. To begin with, there was no foregone conclusion that this combination would work out. And there was absolutely no guarantee that Sylvain would effectively end up seeing this leopard. And then, during the very last days, she was there! When I got out from beneath my duvet in the cave, and I saw her eating her prey that she'd killed the day before, it was just an incredible moment! That's something you can't stage in advance, of course.

Talking of lucky planetary alignments, it would seem that also brought you a great surprise for the film's music.

It was stunning! We were incredibly lucky to work with Warren Ellis, an extraordinary artist, whose minimalist and enchanting music I adore. It really echoed the vast wild landscapes and magical apparitions of the animals I encountered in Tibet. I had dreamed of being able to work with him one day

on one of my films. I thought he was totally inaccessible, but, in spite of his massively busy schedule, he accepted to compose an original score for our leopard! And our exchanges during that work were extremely interesting and meaningful. I discovered him to be a sensitive and kind man. In spite of the fact that we work in very different environments, we found that we shared a lot of our influences. Even though he was supposed to go to Brighton to record his poetry album with Marianne Faithfull, he managed to make time to compose this score. And he brought in his former partner Nick Cave. Nick sings Sylvain's words! Finishing the film on their voice and music was something I'd never dared hope for!

Production notes

THE VELVET QUEEN: SNOW LEOPARD (La Panthère des neiges)

Directors: Marie Amiguet, Vincent Munier

©: Paprika Films, Kobalann Productions, Arte France Cinéma, Le Bureau

Production Companies: Paprika Films, Kobalann Productions

In co-production with: Arte France Cinéma, Le Bureau

In association with: Jean-Sébastien Decaux Lyro Participations Arte Cofinova 16

With the support of: Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image animée, Région Grand Est et le Département des Vosges in partnership with the CNC, La Procirep/Angoa

With the participation of: Haut et Court Distribution, The Bureau Sales, Arte France

Presented by: Paprika Films, Kobalann Productions

Produced by: Laurent Baujard, Pierre-Emmanuel Fleurantin, Vincent Munier

Co-produced by: Bertrand Faivre

Assistant Director: Léo-Pol Jacquot

Post-production Supervisor: Sarah Carié

Written by: Marie Amiguet, Vincent Munier

Based on an original idea by: Vincent Munier

Commentary by: Sylvain Tesson

Cinematography: Vincent Munier, Marie Amiguet, Léo-Pol Jacquot

Editing: Vincent Schmitt, Marie Amiguet

Visual Effects: Léo-Pol Jacquot, Nicolas Vrignaud

Titles by: Emma Corbique

Original Music Composed and Performed by: Warren Ellis featuring Nick Cave

Music Produced by: Warren Ellis, Ellis Enterprises

Music Recorded by: Luis Almau

Music Mixed by: Luis Almau, Warren Ellis

Sound Recording: Vincent Munier, Marie Amiguet, Léo-Pol Jacquot

Sound Mixing: Olivier Goinard

Sound Editing: Boris Jollivet, Charles Valentin, Roman Dymny, Jean-Baptiste Brunhes, Fanny Martin

With

Sylvain Tesson

Vincent Munier

France 2021

92 mins

NEW RELEASES

The Northman

From 22 April

Ennio

From 22 April

Firebird

From 22 April

We're All Going to the World's Fair

From 29 April

The Velvet Queen: Snow Leopard

From 6 May

Vortex

Tue 10 May 18:00 Preview + intro by Gaspar Noé

From Fri 13 May

RE-RELEASES

Croupier

From Wed 4 May

Vampyr

Thu 5 May Preview 18:15; Mon 23 May 14:00 Seniors' Matinee + discussion

From Fri 20 May

Cabaret

From Fri 6 May

Get Carter + The Frighteners: The Manipulators

Mon 30 May 18:00 + intro by Douglas Weir, BFI Technical Delivery Manager

From Fri 27 May

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](https://www.bfi.org.uk/join)

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

The British Film Institute is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 287780