



**MADMAN**



## **THE VELVET QUEEN**

DIRECTED BY **MARIE AMIGUET**

RELEASE DATE **TBC**

RUNNING TIME **92 MINS**

RATED **M**

**MADMAN ENTERTAINMENT PUBLICITY CONTACT:**

Lydia Debus - [lydia@madman.com.au](mailto:lydia@madman.com.au)

<https://www.madmanfilms.com.au>

## **SYNOPSIS**

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.

## **DISCUSSION WITH DIRECTOR MARIE AMIGUET**

**Where did you get the idea of accompanying Vincent Munier in his search for the leopard and on this expedition in particular?**

Vincent had seen my work, in particular the film *La Vallée des Loups* that I made with Jean-Michel Bertrand, and in 2017, he offered me this project in Tibet. I must admit that I couldn't imagine refusing an adventure in the heights of Tibet with a writer whom I admire enormously and Vincent, the photographer who, as people know, became my partner in-between times. Even though, at the time already, for me that raised the issue of the environmental impact of our trip.

**Where exactly did you go?**

We went to the east of Tibet, to the plateaux that are on average at 4,500 m in altitude with peaks that reach 6,000 m in altitude. The landscape is very dry, very arid. The vast landscapes stretch off as far as the eye can see.

**How long did the shoot take?**

First, I realized about the existence of detective cases inside nursing homes. When I was working at and observing detective agencies, this was a type of case that constantly appeared and repeated: people wanted to know how their relatives were inside nursing homes. This was the kind of case that interested me the most, because it allowed me to reflect not only on the nonsense of these investigations but also to explore and reflect on old age and what happens to people inside these places. From the detective we got this specific nursing home and realized this was the case we wanted to portrait.

**How many hours of material did you collect?**

Sylvain, Vincent, Léo-Pol Jacquot, the assistant director, and I did two longer stays of three weeks there but there were also shorter trips. However, Vincent had already brought together an enormous quantity of wildlife videos from his preceding 5 trips, where he was either alone or had travelled with naturalist friends. His first trip dates from 2011.

**What had you come to film? The snow leopard? The famous wildlife photographer on the tracks of the leopard? An encounter «at the summit» between the writer with his gift of the gab and the silent master of lying in wait?**

I wrote that down in my notebook before we left: I effectively wanted to film the encounter between two guys from very different worlds. I was curious to discover what sort of fireworks would be prompted by this intimate encounter, with, on the one hand, Vincent, a man who's very receptive to nature, obsessed by beauty, and effectively a man of few words, and on the other, this extremely talkative

writer who lives life to the very full. I love filming passionate people and trying to understand what drives these exceptional human beings. That said, I didn't have any preconceived ideas. I hadn't done any location scouting and refused to stage anything. So, I simply had to remain open to whatever would arise.

**How did you choose the moments when you could film as you wished without getting in the way of Vincent's work? Did your camera always come second place when the photographer had already taken all the pictures he needed?**

It's true that when he heads off alone, Vincent thinks of taking photos continually. He barely takes the time to sleep a little. But this time, he had other things in mind. His goal was to share this quest. And from the moment he decided to take Sylvain along, he was in a different work mode. He put photography a little on the backburner. His aim was this dream encounter between Sylvain and the leopard. So, he gave us all the space we needed.

**That meant that you had to be doubly discreet. Firstly, so as not to disturb your human subjects and secondly, to be even less of a disturbance for the wildlife they had come to observe...**

Effectively. But I know what it means to lie in wait, and I know how to be discreet. Like them, I lay flat on my belly on the ground, crawling when I needed to move, I kept out of the way, staying either behind them or beside them, transforming myself into a stone, motionless. That way, I filmed everything that happened, and nothing was written down.

That also meant, of course, that I couldn't go back and forth between shots and counter shots, for example. I was able to anticipate more during our second stay, in 2019 by getting ahead of them a little, which meant I could film them face-on as they came towards me, putting a little distance between us.

**Were there moments when the camera wasn't necessarily welcome?**

As a rule, I'm pretty quick to feel when I'm likely to be in the way, but the camera's presence didn't seem to bother them. They behaved very naturally, totally caught up in their observation. I don't actually know how they managed to do that.

**Even if it was up to Vincent to photograph and film the wildlife, did you also record wildlife sequences on occasions?**

In that respect, we had a lot of material that Vincent had brought back from his previous trips to Tibet. But we added a few moments filmed during the second trip, in particular for the scene with the bears. I really aimed to film the guys, even when the leopard came the first time. I knew that Léo-Pol's and Vincent's cameras were filming the wildlife scenes. My encounter with the leopard through the emotion in Sylvain's eyes was even better than seeing the animal for myself.

**Can you tell us a little of the climatic conditions you dealt with during filming?**

I can't deny that they were difficult. In February, the average temperature is -18°C or rather -25°C in the morning. One day, when we'd slept in the tent at an altitude of 4,800 m, the thermometer read -35°C but that's because that was the lowest reading it could give! We were very well equipped, of course, but I had to find solutions in order to be able to film. Particularly as having very cold fingers is a real handicap for me. Therefore, I limited the number of settings I had to deal with on the camera so that I wouldn't have to remove my mittens, or I used heating pads. But I also had to take into account the wind, which was very frequent and strong and stirred up a lot of fine dust! That could be really bad news for the equipment and on top of that, I could feel the dust between my teeth, which was much more unpleasant than the cold on a journey where we had no water to wash with.

**At times, it must have seemed as though the hours you spent waiting for an animal to appear were endless?**

No, on the contrary, that time seemed too short. Especially as I had to factor in altitude sickness. You finally start feeling totally well after about 3 to 4 weeks, and that's when you have to come back down! In any case, during my travels, I've understood that it is vital for me to take my time. Above all, I can't travel to "tick boxes" but to fully live in the moment, exchange, learn, and share. Meeting nomads, for example, who allowed us to live with them for 8-10 days, taking advantage of every minute of that experience could have been all I needed to make my journey a success!

**What references did you have in mind when you were in the mountains?**

To tell the truth, I just went with the flow. When we left, I had no particular references in mind. I barely even read Tintin in Tibet before leaving (laughter)! I had read Sylvain's books, was familiar with Vincent's work, and know I love what's unpredictable. But until the job is done, you can only have doubts.

**What enchanted you most? What eye-openers were there? What fears did you face?**

As regards enchantment, there was this possibility of having once again this sensation of the sheer size of the landscape, in which you're really put back into perspective as a human being. Meaning you are nothing, or really very insignificant. That's something I'd already been overwhelmed to experience in southern Algeria and also at sea when I crossed the Atlantic, but never since then. As regards eye-openers, I was above all touched by the impact of Chinese politics on Tibetan nomadic culture. The government is eradicating it. For example, we learned that the Tibetans don't have the right to use roof racks on their cars, to make sure that they don't undertake long journeys. The local population isn't allowed to receive foreigners. Finally, more than a fear, there was this question: what meaning will what we are doing really have? Why go to Tibet today? If it's to witter on about adventure, sensations, all that, there's no interest whatsoever. It will only be useful if our film participates in stimulating debate and raising awareness of how little space we leave wildlife, today. I believe that a change in paradigm is both urgent and necessary.

**The leopard really seems to have wanted to participate in the story's tension. It decided to appear just as you were preparing to break camp and leave Tibet, like a real screenwriter from a thriller. That must have felt serendipitous?**

Particularly, as, in fact, I didn't even imagine we might see it! I saw it as totally inaccessible, a photo in a book, and for me, that was enough. And then, it came. And what a moment that was!!! But what was possibly the most striking is that it was this old leopard, probably the most beat-up in all of Tibet, which chose to meet Sylvain. There was something mystical in that.

**Today, after everything that you experienced there, and after the long months spent editing the film, what does that snow leopard still represent for you?**

It's the ultimate totem animal. Which, paradoxically, is also a danger: it is one of those species that is so emblematic that it could eclipse all of the others. That is why we chose our final shot, which is simply of a little red tail, as a reminder that all wildlife needs to be preserved, and that we have to pay attention to that. It's true of the leopard as it's true of a simple earthworm. The fact remains that this imperturbable feline, that discreetly observes us from above, is like a silent lookout at the summit of a world that is being irreversibly damaged. It is the emblem of all that diversity (animal, but also cultural)

that is disappearing, caught up in the upheavals of our time. It embodies the very concept of what is rare; the sort of rare thing you can approach, certainly, but very cautiously, so as not to disturb it.

## **DISCUSSION WITH DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY 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 mindset. 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!

**On a more down to earth matter: You've already tested the comforts of Chinese jails in the past when you were out looking for leopards. Did you travel less hazardous administrative routes this time?**

Astonishingly, yes. Yet, in these regions, the police are on the lookout. They are all over the place and carry out constant checks. You're not allowed to photograph the poverty of the nomads, Chinese installations, and so on. The police force is probably the Chinese State's largest employer in Tibet. And effectively, during one of my previous trips, when I had discovered the perfect place to watch out for the leopard, I was arrested by the police who accused me of poaching. It was totally absurd and very violent. In fact, I thought I'd been blacklisted and wouldn't be allowed back. The exceptional presence of Europeans can create a veritable climate of paranoia in certain sectors. Luckily, we didn't have any problems the last two times.

As a side story, the pictures of the leopard during the film's closing credits, when we hear Nick Cave's moving voice, were taken thanks to an automatically triggered camera. I'd placed it on the prey it had recently killed and, in between times, I'd been taken in by the police who kept me several days for a brutal interrogation. I got my first pictures of the animal without seeing it!

**Tell us about your first encounter with the snow leopard.**

What a moment that was! But first and foremost, it was tracking it that was fascinating. Looking for its tracks, reading the clues, spending whole days with my binoculars glued to my eyes. Tracking it down is so exciting! Deep down, it has this slightly devilish side to it, constantly watching us without us being able to see it. It obliges us to behave a little like it does. We have to hide, camouflage, and above all, not be intrusive... that's what it brings to us. The first time, there was this slow crescendo. First, there were old tracks, then fresh tracks, a crow calling out (which meant there may be a predator around), a change in weather (which often leads animals to change location)...and as I was spending hours and hours looking through the binoculars, it suddenly appeared in my field of vision. It went past without seeing me! It was like a perfect appearance on screen in a wildlife film. I was even more satisfied as I hadn't disturbed its movements.

**The last trip you made also provided you with a new encounter: the Tibetan bear. Yet you didn't seem to believe it would happen.**

Effectively, that was another crazy story. The Tibetans are a little scared of this bear. I'd heard about quite a few fights up there between nomads and bears. But it seemed very improbable that I'd get a chance to observe it. It's so cold up there. What could they possibly find to eat? They are mainly herbivores, after all! That's what's so wonderful about this passion. Nothing is planned, you go from surprise to surprise.

**Over the years, with your work, you've accumulated a wealth of in-depth knowledge about nature and its inhabitants. But does your instinct also play a role in your decisions as regards where to go, where to lie in wait, or whether to press on?**

Yes. A huge role. I really believe in the notion of instinct. It's difficult to describe the role your body plays at those moments in the way you react and the choices you make. Your whole being soaks everything up. All of your senses are brought into play. It's as if you resonate with the space around you and the living elements in it. Your emotions are literally heightened, and your animal element can finally express itself. Yet, there are regular failures – and that's a good thing! Failure allows us to understand how vulnerable we are out there.

**You say yourself in the film: “I don’t work like a photojournalist, showing what’s wrong with nature.” But isn’t showing only its beauty tantamount to drawing up an inventory of what will soon disappear?** That’s sadly true! And I’m not equipped to place my cameras where things are harsh or dark, or where horror has prevailed. In fact, I take my hat off to those who are capable of dealing with that. Naturally, I tend to live off poetry and beauty, even when it’s extremely vulnerable, and it would be really hard for me to only be the witness of ecological catastrophes.

**You have often had to deal with very harsh weather conditions. That’s probably not by pure chance.** The Arctic, the Antarctic, and Tibet are the three zones that attract me for a number of reasons. I have always liked cold lighting and the animals that live in these hostile conditions. On top of that, because of that extreme harshness, man is less present and the link to wildlife is much clearer. In Tibet, there’s also a very tense geopolitical dimension. There are very few visitors to the sites and its wildlife such as the Tibetan fox, the Tibetan antelope, and the manul remain largely unknown.

**For a few years, you’ve been making more films than you have taken photographs. Why is that?** When the filming option was put on our cameras about ten years ago, I simply started to use it more and more often. It got to the point where, in Asturias, where I recently made a film on bears, I hadn’t taken any photos at all. I feel that moving images are a better way to portray emotions. It’s exciting being able to integrate sound, too, which echoes the landscape, its ambiances, and its resonances. But a film is also much longer and much harder to make.

**After having crossed the leopard’s path several times, do you still dream of it, today? What does it represent for you?**

The first encounter is inevitably unforgettable. Like all the major first times: with the Eurasian lynx at home in France, that I waited for, for 15 years, after setting up camp a number of times... I would hear it yowling, but never see it! And finally, the day it appears, you’re finally within reach of something supreme, that’s haunted you for a long time. In the same way, I feel haunted by the memory of the ghostly presence of the first pack of white wolves I observed in the Canadian High Arctic. You’re so obsessed with these visions that you end up wondering if they are fantasies or reality. And there’s not just the image! There are the smells, the noises. All of that permeates you, permanently. Something outside us lodges inside of us, setting us in motion. Like the very first roe deer that I photographed when I was 12 years old, and that changed my life, dramatically. That’s the effect that the snow leopard still has on me, today.

## **ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS**

### **MARIE AMIGUET - DIRECTOR**

Franco-Swiss director Marie Amiguet trained as a biologist and then obtained a Master in wildlife cinema (IFFCAM). With Jean-Michel Bertrand, she shot *La Vallée des Loups* and directed *Avec les Loups*, a portrait of the filmmaker. In 2017, she met Vincent Munier with whom she worked on *Silence des Bêtes*, which was a protest against lynx poaching. Then, she headed off on an adventure to Tibet to film this encounter between a writer and photographer.

## VINCENT MUNIER – DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Since 2011, Vincent Munier has spent several months in Tibet to bring back precious images of this world that is poised between land and sky. A lover of wild open spaces and of extreme travel, he chose photography as a tool to convey his dreams, his emotions, and his encounters. Today, his pictures are exhibited in galleries in France and abroad. Vincent Munier founded the Kobalann publishing company and today, he is the author of a dozen books, including *Arctique* (2015) and *Tibet, Minéral Animal* (2018). In 2019, with Laurent Joffrion, he co-directed the film *Ours, Simplement Sauvage* (Kobalann Productions / France TV Studio).

## NOTE BY SYLVAIN TESSON

When Vincent Munier suggested I might accompany him to Tibet, in winter, on the tracks of the snow leopard, I took the time to consider what an immense favour that was. For me, it would be the chance to discover the art of lying in wait. Until then, I'd satisfied myself with travelling through landscapes. Throughout my dozens of journeys through High-mountain Asia, I'd become used to passing through vast landscapes, running after the horizon. I'm like the wind. I, who only swear by the art of fleeing, was invited to taste the promises of lying in wait. With Munier, the relationship to the world would take a very different turn. I'd no longer be cutting corners. Getting to the mountain, waiting, looking, and sometimes seeing an animal appear. The wildlife photographer doesn't hurtle through space, he becomes part of time. I remember one evening in February, when we went location hunting, and were doing reconnaissance on a canyon. Marie, the director, Munier, and I were walking along, side by side. The way our friend looked at the landscape around us really struck me. He was actually reading it the way you decrypt a poem or in the same way that a musician studies a music score. He looked at the rocky ledges, the cliff faces, and the crevices, and explained what was likely to happen. "That's a place a leopard could sneak into; this is the sort of cave that eagle owls like, and over there, are the pastures where the bharal come to graze." Those are the explanations he gave us and I understood that there were two ways of observing a location. You could look at it like a pure aesthete, and philosophise about the turbulent topography and the nuances of light. You can also put yourself in the animal's place, seeking out hiding places, pathways, retreats, and openings. If you did that, the mountains became a living citadel. Furry empresses and herbivore peoples would travel across its drawbridges and ramparts. Munier was the teacher who would show me how to read for the second time in my life.

*Sylvain Tesson trained as a geographer. He works as a journalist and travel writer and divides his time between long-distance expeditions and writing and directing adventure documentaries. His book *Dans les Forêts de Sibérie* (Gallimard) won the Médicis non-fiction prize in 2011 and was adapted for the cinema. *La Panthère des Neiges* was published on 10 October 2019 by Gallimard and won the Renaudot prize that year.*

## NOTE BY WARREN ELLIS

I was introduced to Marie Amiguet and Vincent Munier in January 2021. I was working on several projects and the idea to take on something else was furthest from my mind. I spoke to Vincent and sensed this was an extraordinary person. After watching a rough cut, with a temp score using existing film music of Nick and myself, and reading the English Translation of Sylvain's book, I agreed to try and compose half original music and to give them the rest that was existing. I booked 5 days and asked Nick

if he could come in for a day to write a theme song and play some piano. He saw the film and stayed for 4 days. There is something about the heart of this film that draws you in. I realised after a day, I wanted to do whatever it took to compose an entire original score. The film deserved to have its own musical voice. I met Marie and Vincent on zoom, a meeting that somehow had a profound effect on me. I have since gone on to try and establish a park for animals with special needs in Sumatra (Ellis Park - ellispark.org). That's the thing with this film. It speaks of things urgent, profound, of awe and wonder. Vincent would send me owl calls and images of owls, and lynxes from his home in les vosges. Nick and I realised it was way more moving to score animals than people. In the end we made what I think is one of the most beautiful films we have ever worked on. One of my favourite experiences ever working on a project. The stars are the animals in all their wild glory, as we have never seen them before, and man in reverence and wonder.

### CREDITS

Based on an original idea by Vincent Munier

Written by Marie Amiguet & Vincent Munier

Commentary by Sylvain Tesson

Directed by Marie Amiguet & Vincent Munier

With Vincent Munier & Sylvain Tesson

Original Music Warren Ellis featuring Nick Cave

Cinematography and Sound Vincent Munier, Marie Amiguet & Léo-Pol Jacquot

Editing Vincent Schmitt & Marie Amiguet

Supervising Sound Editor Olivier Goinard

Executive Producers Laurent Baujard & Pierre-Emmanuel Fleurantin

Paprika Films, Vincent Munier & Kobalann

Co-Producers Arte France Cinema & Le Bureau - Bertrand Faivre

French Distribution - Haut Et Court Distribution

International Sales - The Bureau Sales

Partners - Jean-Sébastien Decaux, Lyro Participations, Arte Cofinova 16,

Le Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée,

a Région Grand Est et le Département des Vosges,

Le Cnc, Arte France & La Procirep/Angoa