

FILMS GRAND HUIT

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CANNES 2024

OPENING FILM

GHOST TRAIL

A FILM BY JONATHAN MILLET

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2024 –FRANCE, GERMANY, BELGIUM – DRAMA, THRILLER – FRENCH, ARABIC, ENGLISH – 105'

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FILMS

SYNOPSIS

Hamid is part of a secret group pursuing the Syrian regime's fugitive leaders. His mission takes him to France, on the trail of his former torturer whom he must confront. Based on true events.

INTERVIEW WITH JONATHAN MILLET

"I do an enormous amount of research in order to make room for fiction."

Your career path is quite uncommon. Did you learn to film through travelling?

At 18, I picked up a camera and set off on a trip with no particular destination in mind. I went from one country to another and, following a chance encounter – on a boat sailing upstream on the Jamuna River in Bangladesh – I was hired to film content for an image bank, on my own and with virtually no restrictions. I found myself travelling the world with my camera and was encouraged to go to the most remote regions. I ventured through, and filmed: Iran, Sudan, Pakistan, all South America, Africa, and the Middle East. Through this, I began to learn how to capture faces and spaces and convey an atmosphere in only a few shots. In a way, this is how I learned to film and how I became a filmmaker.

Was it during one of these trips that you lived in Syria?

Yes. When I was about twenty, I moved to Aleppo, where I began to learn Arabic and made many friends. A few years later, the war broke out and some of my friends in Aleppo sent me photos and videos of the conflict, and of the neighbourhood where I used to live, which had been completely destroyed during the war. They went into exile in Istanbul, where I met up with them again on several occasions – in the heart of the Syrian community in Turkey – and then in Germany. This was the beginning of their long exile, which I followed every step of the way.

At that point, I completed my first documentary on the Ceuta border detention camp in northern Morocco. I then made a short fiction film about the arrival of a Cameroonian exile in Paris, inspired by one of the characters in the documentary. My approach has always been the same: to try to capture singular, individual lives and tell the story of exile through stories on a human scale.

All my years of research and encounters have shown me the inner wounds and memories of pain these men carry around with them. This is the story I wanted to tell.

I thought of making a documentary about this and spent several weeks in a treatment centre for victims of war and torture. I met a large number of Syrians and listened to their stories of war, imprisonment, and torture.

Their words were so incredibly powerful – but I could never find the right place for my camera. When I write, without ever omitting the harshness of their reality, I look for some sort of light, for a possible hope. Whether that hope materializes or not, that becomes the movement of the film. I don't believe in desperate dramas or tragedies where there's no possible way out.

Is that when you heard about secret cells, like the one shown in *Ghost Trail*?

As I did my research, I gradually heard more and more about underground networks, evidence hunters, and groups that would track down war criminals in Europe for months on end. I sensed there was something powerful here, and I was immediately drawn to it. This discovery coincided with the publication of two articles in April 2019, in *Libération*, on the Yaqaza cell and the hunt for the “Chemist” in Germany. From that moment on, I wanted to follow this trail. I suddenly sensed that all my documentary prep was going to find a form in this dynamic narrative.

What made you switch from documentary to fiction?

The trigger was point-of-view. Through fiction and choosing a genre, I found a means to speak about reality in a way that was fulfilling for me.

I spent a year documenting these cells, meeting some of their members and listening to accounts of how they would tail people. Thanks to all this data, my knowledge of the subject enabled me to create my characters, which were inspired by these encounters.

Although there was never a Hamid chasing a Harfaz, most of the characters’ actions, deeds, and traits are based on concrete facts. The issues driving the film are completely authentic: the creation of a secret cell, the tracking down of war criminals in Germany and France, the months of silent observation, tailing, and doubts, the meeting in Beirut to authenticate the photo, the group’s split over the consequences of an arrest on migration policy...

By documenting the situation as accurately as possible, I finally found the emotional angle of my film, where the theme of trauma could fit in with a plot based on bereavement and the different futures available to my character. First and foremost, I wanted to use intimacy to capture the madness of all these breathtaking contemporary adventure stories, these geostrategic issues experienced by the real heroes of our time who are never mentioned by the media.

It was a real challenge for me to turn my characters into heroes – tragic heroes, perhaps, but definitely cinematic ones.

Why did you choose to make a spy film?

The spy genre was an obvious choice. The exiled people I drew inspiration from needed a legend. Depending on their native country or their age, they could be deported, so they learned to have a fake name, and a fake homeland. They were forced to lie, to be careful about everything they did, to fool people with their identities – with everything this entails, in terms of risk, arrest, and deportation.

On the other hand, what I like about the spy genre is when the characters are not trained spies. Among the members of the cells I met, one was a cab driver, the other a lawyer.

But above all, espionage is about observing others and lying about oneself. These have been my two driving forces in writing and directing. This genre allows me to bring cinematic qualities, intensity, and high stakes to my work, and a chance to get away from the flat realism of a basic political film which interests me less as a viewer.

Why did you opt for a subjective, sensorial approach?

Like selecting a genre, the sensorial approach offered certain realistic choices that could produce something cinematic. I wanted to film sound, touch, and smell, while leaving all the overly-connotative images – like those of war or torture, which are only present as recordings – off-screen. The *mise-en-scène* immerses us in Hamid's inner self and the heart of his doubts. Sensations are given centre stage in this film, like amplified or distorted sounds, the smell of sweat, the power of touch in the sequence where Yara bandages him, or in the kaleidoscope of colours in the Beirut market stalls.

The film's own theatre of operations is the very whirlwind of Hamid's thoughts. I wanted to explore history through the eyes of one character.

Did you have to work hard on the soundtrack to achieve this?

The soundtrack offers us access to Hamid's inner turmoil, to the intensity of his thoughts when he can't let anything show. This is the most baroque aspect of the film. The process of sound design was long, and it involved sonic close-ups, hyperacuity, whispers, feedback, and powerful tones. But, yet again, this is the result of privileging realism. The Syrian prisoners are immersed in total darkness for months on end. This heightens other senses. One of the most frequent tortures they undergo is to have their heads held under water, which has the effect of damaging their eardrums, causing hyperacusis. I didn't choose to make a sensory thriller simply for aesthetic purposes, but because certain elements of realism demanded it.

Why do the members of the cell choose to communicate via a war video game?

Real reasons are always more fascinating than fictional ones: whether you're a terrorist or the member of a cell, you have to be able to communicate. And what's the only place online where you can repeat words like "bombs", "attacks", "death", and "kill" over and over again without being spotted by algorithms?

What was the casting process like?

It took over a year. I met as many Arabic-speaking actors as I could, between the ages of 20 and 40, in over 15 countries.

And then I met Adam Bessa, who exudes an intensity and interiority like no one else. He has an air of gravity about him that makes you believe he has been through the worst events. Something is weighing on him.

When you see him simply sitting there, you can feel the whirlwinds of his tormented mind. You're afraid for him – and of him, of what he might do. That's what I was looking for in Hamid.

Coming from a documentary background, and having met real Syrian prisoners, all it takes is one sentence or one moment of silence to feel the absolute power of such a terrible experience. And Adam was able to capture this.

How long did it take to prepare Adam Bessa?

Prep for the shoot – which lasted forty days between Strasbourg, Jordan and Berlin – involved a lot of work on his gestures, his gait, how he sits, how he behaves with his mother, etc. The members of this cell would sometimes spend nine months stalking their target. What happens to your body when you've got the man who tortured you within your sights for so long? To understand this, we had to work a lot on gestures with Adam, as if he were mute. What I like about him is that he's never completely unruffled; no matter how calm or pained he is, I feel that at any moment he can surprise me, stab his enemy, or throw him in front of a streetcar. The unusual and unexpected is always possible with him. He embodies the dilemma at the heart of the film: that of reason versus impulse. Is it still possible to live after enduring everything he has gone through?

There was also the question of his accent. I didn't want to make yet another Western film where characters spoke in broken Arabic. So Adam had to work for weeks to get the best possible Syrian accent.

Did you first see Tawfeek Barhom in *Cairo Conspiracy*?

It's funny, because I did see him, but I thought he was still too young and too naïve. In short, he had nothing in common with the aura of mystery surrounding Harfaz. If you look closely, at the beginning of the film, Harfaz is just a silhouette. So when I met Tawfeek, I asked him to move around, to get a cup of coffee and observe him. And that's when I sensed the fascination he could exert, which is the same kind exuded by the character. He has a real magnetism about him. Tawfeek is Palestinian and, when I met him, he didn't speak a word of French. Yet he was going to have to shoot a scene that would be filmed in one twelve-minute shot in this language. He, too, had a lot of work to do, as did Julia Franz Richter, who didn't speak French either.

What struck you most about this story?

What struck me most about their quest was its urgency, and how absolutely contemporary it is. These executioners exist in this life, today, in France and Germany. The migration issues they discuss are current issues. Their story is not a mirror of our world, it is our world.

ABOUT JONATHAN MILLET

After studying philosophy, Jonathan Millet spent many years filming distant or inaccessible countries for image databases. Alone with his camera, he traveled through and filmed about fifty countries (Iran, Sudan, Pakistan, all of South America, the Middle East, and extensively throughout Africa). He was encouraged especially to go to the most remote regions. This is where he began to learn to capture faces, spaces, to convey an atmosphere in a few shots.

After this experience, he directed the feature-length documentary *Ceuta, Douce Prison* selected in over 60 international festivals, followed by *Tell Me About the Stars* filmed in Antarctica, and *La Disparition* filmed in the Amazon. He then directed several short films selected in numerous festivals (Clermont-Ferrand, Pantin, Palm Springs, Brest...), including *Et Toujours Nous Marcherons* selected for the César Awards in 2018, and the medium-length film *The Wake* which had a theatrical release. That same year, he was nominated as a "Talent in Short Films."

Ghost Trail is his first fiction feature film.

CAST

Hamid	Adam BESSA
Harfaz	Tawfeek BARHOM
Nina	Julia FRANZ RICHTER
Yara	Hala RAJAB
Hamid's mother	Shafiqah EI TILL
Foreman	Sylvain SAMSON
Afghan vendor	Mohammad Saboor RASOOLI
Old man at shelter	Faisal ALIA
Advisor at the prefecture	Pascal CERVO
Translator at the prefecture	Mudar RAMADAN
Psychologist	Marie RÉMOND
Jalal	Dorado JADIDA
Hertha Berlin	Fakher Aldeen FAYAD
Volunteer	Janty OMAT
Journalist	Jacques FOLLOROU

CREW

Directed by	Jonathan MILLET
Produced by	Pauline SEIGLAND - FILMS GRAND HUIT
Screenplay by	Jonathan MILLET, Florence ROCHAT
Directeur of Photography	Olivier BOONJING
Editing	Laurent SÉNÉCHAL
Sound	Nicolas WASCHKOWSKI, Tobias FLEIG, Simon APOSTOLOU
Original music by	YUKSEK
Set design	Esther MYSIUS
Costume	Anne-Sophie GLEDHILL
Co-produced by	Nicole GERHARDS - NIKO FILM, Julie ESPARBES - HÉLICOTRONC, VOO, BETV, SHELTER PROD
Associate Producer	Lionel MASSOL
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