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THE WAKHAN FRONT
a film by Clément Cogitore

Press Reviews

Cannes Film Review: 'The Wakhan Front'



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Clement Cogitore's striking debut puts an inventive fresh, uncanny spin on the War in Afghanistan soldier study.

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For a still-young subgenre, it can feel as if the narrative possibilities of the War in Afghanistan soldier study are approaching exhaustion — until a film like **Clement Cogitore** (<http://variety.com/t/clement-cogitore/>)'s clever, curiosity-stoking **"The Wakhan Front"** (<http://variety.com/t/the-wakhan-front/>) points out the pockets of uncanny experience that lie within it still. A portrait of tense frontline routine in which the most urgent threat to troops' survival takes a distinctly metaphysical form, this brooding broadcast from the Twilight War Zone stars the steadfast Jeremie Renier

(<http://variety.com/t/jeremie-renier/>) as a committed French army captain whose authority gradually deserts him when his men begin unaccountably disappearing. Though its disquieting premise never quite combusts into a full-scale psychological thriller, Cogitore's accomplished, arresting debut should reverberate widely on the festival circuit; select distributors may proceed with caution.

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Introducing the film at its Cannes Critics' Week premiere, its writer-director described it wryly as "John Ford meets M. Night Shyamalan" — as if to preempt any such comparisons, flattering or otherwise, from the critical contingent. At a more highbrow level, Cogitore might have invoked Michelangelo Antonioni's "L'avventura," a dissimilar investigation of disappearance with which his film nonetheless shares comparable concerns about the presence of absence, and the insecurities that those left behind project into the uncertain void.

"Benedictions are for the dead," Renier's Capt. Antares Bonassieu gruffly counsels one of his disconsolate grunts. "What you need is sangfroid — that's what gets you home in one piece." Bonassieu seems to have more than enough of that for all his men, though it still doesn't prevent the strange occurrences that send shockwaves of discontent through his squad, hitherto sleepily stationed on the eponymous corridor near the Pakistani border. ("The Wakhan Front," incidentally, seems an insufficiently suggestive title for a war film with such abstract themes; distributors may prefer an approximation of the pic's French title, "Ni le ciel, ni la terre," which translates as "Neither Heaven Nor Earth.")

With NATO-led troops in the process of withdrawing from Afghanistan, Bonassieu's men have little to do with their days but wait matters out until their own departure: Establishing sequences effectively convey the day-to-day grind of life in this oppressively male domestic unit, where pumping iron and recycling banter are all that pass for leisure. (After a dominant run of U.S. films about Middle Eastern combat, it's gratifying to see other sides of the foreign military experience onscreen: "The Wakhan Front" is as vividly unifying a depiction as Britain's "Kajaki" last year.)

The troops' unchallenging military duties principally involve surveillance of the local sheep-farming villagers, whose resistance to the forces has been worn down to impatient tetchiness. A native ritual involving the tethering of sheep to a lone stake planted in the valley arouses suspicion from Bonassieu, however. He senses that it may be a way of communicating with concealed Taliban insurgents, and points the blame in their direction when two of his soldiers fail to return from a night-watch shift.

It emerges, however, that the Taliban have been mysteriously losing men of their own in the same valley. The rival factions resolve to lay down their arms for a joint investigation, though they make little headway. Bonassieu's sangfroid, meanwhile, gradually drains from his system: As other soldiers vanish, including naive expectant father William (Kevin Azais), he begins to fixate on what he believes are cryptically coded dreams, while maintaining his skepticism as others turn to their faith for clarity and comfort.

Cogitore and co-writer Thomas Bidegain (a regular Jacques Audiard collaborator) are less interested in the phenomenon — earthly or otherwise — behind the disappearances than in the belief systems either agitated or fabricated in their wake. That may disappoint audiences seeking a headier tilt into the supernatural, though "The Wakhan Front" remains edgily unnerving even as character drama. The ensemble commits to the premise with utmost gravity and conviction, enabling our belief in even the most improbable interpretations of its core enigma. Maintaining his sympathetic sturdiness even as his force of control weakens, Renier gives a textured human face to the film's most esoteric ideas.

Tech contributions are uniformly outstanding, with d.p. Sylvain Verdet's glacially composed long shots often losing the actors in the landscape's rye-colored expanses of dust, rock and ruin — it's certainly an environment conducive to vanishing by any means. Cogitore will occasionally disrupt the taupe consistency of the scenery with more brashly lyrical imagery: A rippling gold-foil camouflage cape serves both a critical narrative function and a visually poetic one. Sparse, specific sound design keeps nerves on high alert, as does Eric Bentz and Francois-Eudes Chanfrault's score, with its alternation of ethnic and electronic elements. One abrupt dance sequence, set to an aggressive techno track, seems a direct homage to Claire Denis' "Beau Travail" — still the gold standard for studies of soldiers lost (even when found) in the desert, though "The Wakhan Front" is a worthy admirer.

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Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (Critics' Week), May 16, 2015. Running time: **103 MIN.** (Original title: "Ni le ciel, ni la terre")

Production

(France-Belgium) A Kazak Prods. production in association with Tarantula.
(International sales: Indie Sales, Paris.) Produced by Jean-Christophe Reymond.
Executive producer (<http://variety411.com/us/los-angeles/producers/>), Said Hamich.
Co-producers, Joseph Rouschop, Valerie Bournonville.

Crew

Directed by Clement Cogitore. Screenplay, Cogitore, Thomas Bidegain. Camera (<http://variety411.com/us/new-york/camera-sound-equipment/>) (color, HD), Sylvain Verdet; editor (<http://variety411.com/us/los-angeles/editors/>), Isabelle Manquillet; music, Eric Bentz, Francois-Eudes Chanfrault; music supervisor, Martin Caraux; production designer, Olivier Meidinger; sound (Dolby Digital), Fabrice Osinki; supervising sound editor, Julie Brenta; re-recording mixer, Vincent Cosson; visual effects supervisor, Philippe Frere; associate producer, Amaury Ovisse; casting, Omar Tissli.

With

Jeremie Renier, Kevin Azais, Swann Arlaud, Marc Robert, Finnegan Oldfield, Clement Bresson, Sam Mirhosseini. (French, Farsi dialogue)

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CANNES 2015 Critics' Week

The Wakhan Front: The invisible enemy

by FABIEN LEMERCIER

16/05/2015 - CANNES 2015: Clément Cogitore's first feature film is an astonishing and highly original piece of young French cinema about a platoon of soldiers in Afghanistan



Jérémie Renier (centre) in *The Wakhan Front*

"Southern Post to Northern Post", "civilian in sight", warnings, patrols, long periods of waiting around, sudden exchanges of fire which pierce the silence that quickly settles in again afterwards: **Clément Cogitore** ventures into military territory with his first feature film, *The Wakhan Front* [+], which is being screened in competition in Critics' Week at the 68th Cannes Film Festival. A subject which has been touched on very little in French film, here the army is portrayed in a way which is all the more original for the fact that the storyline plays out in Afghanistan, centering around the inexplicable disappearance of soldiers in an environment characterised by rocky ground, heat and isolation. The setting is reconstructed realistically and cleverly by the director, known for his talent as a visual artist, who clearly knows how to create atmosphere and works on the border between genres (war/fantasy; thriller/action) and areas of interest (realism/mysticism).

(The article continues below - Commercial information)

"Blessings are for the dead! You need a cool head if you want to return home in one piece." Captain Antarès Bonnassieu (played by the intense **Jérémie Renier**) firmly leads his platoon on a surveillance mission into a valley in the middle of the Afghan mountains, not far from the border with Pakistan. With the exception of minor skirmishes with the Taliban and diplomatic/stormy neighbourly relations with the local villagers, all goes to plan. From blockhouses, the soldiers observe their surroundings, on the lookout for the unexpected day and night, exchanging stories over the radio or at their camp of their memories of Kabul, of the bodies of soldiers that were blown into a thousand pieces and then sent home in sealed coffins filled with earth. But this routine comes to an abrupt halt with the inexplicable disappearance of two soldiers who seem to have vanished into thin air. After holding a fruitless inquiry fraught with accusations and threats (from his own soldiers and then the villagers), and increasing security measures, another disappearance moves Antarès to take action and enter into talks with the Taliban rebels, as they are also looking for men who seem to have fallen off the face of the Earth. What's going on in this place? Why are the men having the same disturbing dreams about the disappeared men being in a cave somewhere? Antarès tries to find rational explanations to it all whilst fears that metaphysical forces are at work mount...

Filmed using a shoulder-mounted camera, *The Wakhan Front* paints a highly realistic portrait of daily life in the army and perfectly uses the scale of its natural setting and technology such as thermal imaging and infra-red sight to thrust the viewer (in an elegantly unique way) into the shoes of the soldiers. With a rhythm not unlike that of *The Desert of the Tartars*, the director skilfully creates a threatening atmosphere for a group of men (solidly portrayed, most notably by **Kevin Azaïs** and **Sâm Mirhosseini**) straying dangerously close to the edge of the abyss as if suffering from dizziness, torn between beliefs and worlds (western and eastern) that are just too different. Built on the principle of "the less you say the better", the film (the storyline for which was written by Clément Cogitore with the collaboration of **Thomas Bidegain**) showcases a filmmaker who, despite unfortunately going astray during the home straight of the film with an excess of mysticism and metaphors, is not afraid of being bold.

Produced by Kazak Productions and co-produced by Belgian production company Tarantula, *The Wakhan Front* will be distributed in French theatres by Diaphana, and international sales will be taken care of by Indie Sales.

(Translated from French)

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