

'People who make films are in danger every day' Jean-Jacques Annaud

The director on the joy of China, his affinity with Inner Mongolian wolves, and why embracing their bestiality might help keep people from therapy.

As soon as he finishes his coffee in Cannes, Jean-Jacques Annaud will take a plane to Paris, then another to Beijing, then a third to Inner Mongolia. There he will drive for six hours to Ölgii and the set of his new film, a 1960s-set steppes epic. It's a monthly commute, one the 69-year-old has been making for three years since he started pre-production on the film, likely to be finished next year ("No fatigue! It's like love! You climb mountains, you cross oceans"). When he arrives, there will be no need to freshen up: a 75lb wolf will lacquer him in saliva the second he steps from the car.

This is Cloudy, one-time alpha male of the 30-strong pack. "We have a very extraordinary relationship," says Annaud, face full of affection. "With the new king, Parker, there is not the same love." Last week they were shooting a scene which required a wolf in a hole. The task, naturally, fell to Parker. "But he was very frightened. And all the other wolves were thinking: 'Is our new king weak or brave?' The prime minister [Parker's deputy] offered to go first, but after much hesitation he got into the hole, peed in it and got out, very proud. All the courtiers were licking his face. Cloudy was witnessing the circus and I could see him thinking: 'Yeah. I've been there. Don't trust them! Next day they will kill you.'"



Director Jean Jacques Annaud and actor Shaofeng Feng meet Cloudy with wolf trainer Andrew Simpson.



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He grins at the brutality. "This is their strength! This is why a pack of five will decimate 1,000 sheep. When a new guy comes to the king to challenge him he ends up either dead or the new king. And the former has one leg left. It is the same in Cannes." He gestures round the dining room of the Majestic hotel: "A cruel and fragile world of ambition. Where your fate can be decided in a few seconds. You get thousands of lickings and then you lose a leg."

Secret malice aside, Annaud is a classic wolf in sheep's clothing. He bleats sweetly and softly; the friendliest of men, topped with a shaggy fleece of silver curls. He conducts himself with such charm and delicacy, you can't imagine him baring fangs. But he would hate to be mistaken for livestock.

"There are some jobs – like a civil servant – where your life is not in danger every minute. You'll never get the lickings or the fights. Wolves have to fight for their lives every day. It's the life of a warrior. People who choose film are in danger every day. Otherwise your life is eating, sleeping, getting fat and being eaten."

He doesn't weary of the lupine lifestyle? "No. I know that

people who smile also have a knife at their back. When you experience success you become a public enemy; when it's failure you give people so much pleasure. It's sort of sad at first and then you see it's the rule of life. I love it, it's my world. But yes, if my movie gets a bad review my friends are very happy and they're still my friends. This is human."

Today, Annaud is especially fired by these themes ("I feel very honoured to help try stop the degradation of the world"), but it is the "soul-brotherhood" he feels with Lu that was the real clincher, he thinks. Lu went to Mongolia in 1969, the same year Annaud was sent to teach film in Cameroon as part of his military service. Annaud says the key tension in his films is between his Western intellectual origins and the emotional life of nature. "I do the same movie over and over. I hide it – I change period, location, hero."

Still, though, I'm slightly baffled. There was a long search for a director, after all – initially they'd been hoping to release in time for the Beijing Olympics. Why him? "They said a Chinese director can't say these things; that it's too sensitive. They didn't want an American. I'm sort of neutral. And I have made a lot of films with animals."