



ANIMALIA

written & directed by
SOFIA ALAOUI



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*A young pregnant woman
finds emancipation
as aliens land in Morocco.*

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SYNOPSIS

Itto, a young woman from a modest rural background, is slowly adapting to the Moroccan privileged codes of her husband's family. But when supernatural events put the country in a state of emergency, Itto finds herself separated from her husband and new family. Alone, pregnant and looking for her way back, she finds emancipation.





DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Born in Casablanca to a Moroccan father and a French mother, she grew up between Morocco and China. After graduating high school in Casablanca, she moved to Paris to study cinema. In 2017, she returned to Morocco to develop her own production company, Jiango Films.

She has directed both documentary and fiction shorts that have been selected at many festivals.

Her last film, *SO WHAT IF THE GOATS DIE* was shot in the Atlas Mountains, featuring non-professional actors and dialogue exclusively in Tamazight. It won the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival in 2020, and the César for best short fiction film in 2021. Then she directed fantastic short film for the 20th Century Fox, *THE LAKE*, broadcast on Hulu. *ANIMALIA* is her first feature film.

INTEVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

Your background is fascinating — you grew up between Morocco and China. Describe how your upbringing came into play when you were conceiving this story.

Yes, I was lucky enough to come into contact with very different cultures and beliefs starting at quite a young age, whether in Europe thanks to my mother's nationality, in Morocco because of my father's, or across Asia through the trips we would take when we lived in China. So I grew up with diversity, with curiosity about others, and with the idea that perhaps our pattern of thinking is not always the right one.

I have the impression that we are often trapped by a single way of thinking that has shaped us. And this, in my opinion, prevents deep reflection and stops us from questioning things we take for granted: our lifestyles, for example, or our beliefs. It's very difficult to get outside of these, and to take a step back and look at yourself and your environment with some distance.

That's why I wanted my characters, and their webs of beliefs, to be confronted with the deeply unsettling existence of extraterrestrials.

The idea of extraterrestrial life has always fascinated me, because it allows us to question our absolute certainties and truths. But also, and maybe more than anything else, it allows us to go beyond our material and everyday concerns and compels us towards bigger questions.

Itto is also between worlds, on the cusp of motherhood. Describe her surroundings at the beginning of the movie, and why she is “apart” in so many ways for much of the movie.

I absolutely wanted to avoid presenting Itto as one-dimensional, because nothing in life is black or white. What makes us human is our complexity. On the one hand, Itto is part of the system of upper middle-class life, where profit is important, making money is important. There is a shot in the film I really like that shows this: we see her

in her lush, green garden with her husband, surrounded by total comfort. We almost want to be there; there is a magnificent view and all around is an arid landscape, the desert. Nothing is growing out there, nothing is blooming, and yet we cannot help but be struck by this beautiful view.

At the same time, Itto comes from a very different background. She is Berber, who are the “natives” of Moroccan society. She is not at ease in this cold environment, which seems almost hostile to her and is disconnected from the world she grew up in.

Your approach to alien invasion is thoroughly unique, and takes on an even more fascinating dimension with a pregnant lead character. Why was pregnancy so crucial to your story?

Itto's pregnancy is highly symbolic. It represents the question of what she will pass on to her baby, in terms of a legacy of thought, a legacy of lifestyle.

This film is about both the end of the world and the birth of a new one, about the end of Itto and the

birth of a new Itto, one who is more connected to her environment. In the film, the birth of her child signifies hope for rebuilding our societies, through education, through different modes of thinking than those we have today. Because there is a great deal of criticism of our ways of life, but what is the solution? Future generations represent an opportunity for change.

This is also why the “Aliens” who are embodied in several characters during the film seem to be protecting Itto: because her pregnancy is a sign of hope.

What are you saying about being a woman in today's Arab world?

I think every society has its struggles. And there are some very good things in the Arab world that are not found in Western societies. After all, this capitalist, individualistic model came from Europe.

Misogyny and patriarchy are very strong in Arab society today, and for me this is an ongoing struggle. But they are also very present in the rest of the world.

I think religion has been appropriated and repurposed into an argument justifying human beings' domination of one another.

There is nothing spiritual about religious dogma. People follow dogma without really thinking about the meaning of things. So getting rid of the dogma that has kept women imprisoned and sidelined is very important. I say women, but I am thinking more broadly of all those who don't have the space to exist and live freely.

I also believe that ultimately, men cannot be fully satisfied with this societal imbalance. Patriarchy hurts men. In my film, I wanted to suggest what it is like to be a man through Mehdi Dehbi's character, Amine. A lot of people don't like Amine, but he too has been conditioned into his role. In his desire for Itto, who is different from the other girls around him, we sense his desire for something different. And the end of the film also marks his emancipation. Living in this new environment, he changes along with Itto.

The story travels from Moroccan wealth and splendor to dirt-poor rural farm life. Describe this society in your own words, and how Itto fits into it – or doesn't.

Indeed, the film shows us a very disparate country and world. Itto embodies this mix of classes, this inegalitarian world in constant need of balance.

Itto is not comfortable in one world or the other. And Fouad is not happy in his rural world. I didn't want to idealize the happiness of country life. Because it's not true. It would be a rather bourgeois view of things to say that the simplicity of Fouad and the shepherds who share a tajine with Itto is the solution. No, the solution is balance.

That's what this alien arrival is about. They come to create Chaos within the chaos, in order to restore a vital balance for us—first at the individual level and then on a global scale.

There is also a symbolic visual dimension to this journey. The lavishly decorated houses at the beginning of the film are gradually stripped.

The Atlas Mountains offer truly disconcerting landscapes that bring mystery and create a very particular aesthetic for a story rooted in reality. The arid mountain landscapes evoke humility, awareness of the fragility of human existence.

Itto tries to buy her freedom at one point. What are you saying about society's obsession with money, and greed in general?

Globalization and the blind race for profit have won the day over collective projects. Of course, we know that

*“I want to show how
a supernatural event
can create disruption
in society.”*

SOFIA ALAOUI



money is king in this capitalist world. That's not news.

But in my film, money is a very important factor in Morocco's development and for capturing the thinking of the ruling class. Here, the frantic drive for money and power leads to appalling injustices. Corruption triumphs and anything goes when it comes to trying to "make it."

Itto, my main character, is married to Amine, the son of a local *Caïd*. A *Caïd* is a figure of authority who ensures the enforcement of laws and regulations, the maintenance of public order, security, and peace, and is in charge of government agencies. But the reality is that in some areas *Caïds* are strangely rich. They use their power for their personal interests. It was important for me, in this film, to highlight these issues, because the relationship to money deeply shapes how people think in Morocco. It's like a second religion.

So much of this story is unexplained, or gradually revealed, or not revealed at all. There is genuine mystery here, effectively cultivated. Discuss your strategies for building the plot – and leaving in story details versus leaving them out.

Indeed, I don't provide a concrete answer at the end

of the film—first and foremost, so that I myself wouldn't be creating a new fixed schema, a new dogmatic structure that would be "the resolution." To do so would be to bring a lot of naivete to a transcendental subject that challenges all of us.

For me, the important thing is that the Aliens' arrival raises questions and compels each individual (whether they want to or not) to question themselves once more, intimately, and to move towards self-discovery.

Because, as Aristotle said, "Doubt is the beginning of wisdom," the end of my film will be the beginning of a journey—a long journey, one that is an untranslatable personal and sensory experience.

What is certain is that this temporary Alien possession of the population has left traces, and that the world will never again be the same.

And if the viewer wants clear answers about why the Aliens came, the film provides those in its own way, through observations about what is lost from the old world and what we gain in the new one.

I like films that give answers to those who know how to observe images and to understand by questioning themselves. I want there to be questions floating in the viewer's mind, haunting them over time.

But with "Animalia" I was also trying to make an entertaining movie, one that has a rhythm but also leaves a mysterious and intriguing imprint. That's the gamble I want to take.

Your depiction of the invasion is somewhat banal – even ordinary at times. Not like we've seen invasions depicted before. Discuss this strategy.

Indeed, I wanted the supernatural to occur naturally. I wanted all the fantastic elements to be treated in an extremely realistic way so that they would fit in naturally with their environment, because it was important for me to shoot in real settings: a real house on a lake, a real small-town mosque, real mountain roads...

I like this mixture of documentary and fiction, especially in terms of editing, in working with light. All of this was important for it to feel organic and real. Because even more than an "alien movie", which would be one way to define this first feature film project of mine, it is an ode to nature and to questioning humanity's place in a complex world.

The elements of science fiction and fantasy are just the background. What matters is the journey my characters take.

The entire story is centered around the character of Itto, who is beautifully and quizzically played by Oumaïma Barid. Explain why you cast this particular actress in the lead role.

I've worked a lot with non-professional actors, not just in this film, but also in my previous short film "So What if the Goats Die." So for the actress who was going to play Itto, I was looking at who she was as a human being. I didn't start with auditions. What interested me was finding out who she was, what she thought about the themes that run through the film.

I wanted to meet the person first, and with Oumaima I met a beautiful soul, who I knew was going to defend the film, its purpose. Oumaima looks fragile, even frail, but she has an incredible mental strength. She is a lioness, and we don't expect that when we look at her. I like this contradiction because it fits with my idea of developing complex characters who can't be put into a box.

We are in a world that judges people too quickly. Oumaima brought different colors to the character of Itto.

And, what's also impressive about Oumaima is that she's very determined and this is her first lead role in a film. I'm very proud of her.

At its heart, this is a story of awakening, on many different levels. Would you agree?

Yes, exactly.

In a narrative that is deeply rooted in reality, I wanted my supernatural event to cause a disruption in the society I depict.

I truly believe that humans have the capacity, through their intelligence and free will, to get out of the patterns that are both inscribed in their genes and transmitted through their culture.

Animals play an important role in the story. What is their role, and why are they so crucial and central to this story?

After my short film, in which "the Aliens" stayed in the sky, I asked myself how this "alien" presence could be embodied on Earth. I have often been disappointed by films that show us Aliens. Usually, what our imagination comes up with is far more interesting, including when we ask ourselves questions about our souls, our material bodies. So I thought to myself that the Aliens could have material bodies that we wouldn't see in the film, but that their souls could travel and be incarnated on Earth in different living bodies: animals, humans...

In many native belief systems, it is said that we are chained, like the people in Plato's cave. Humans, the world, nature and the living beings around them are all connected to the sacred.

What are you saying about society's obsession with things rather than ideals?

I say that's why I made this film!

We are moving towards an increasingly materialistic and superficial world. We risk losing the connection to our own nature. And it's clear that people shape their image of who they are through social networks. Image counts more than true being.

So when we talk about ideals, it's the same. We must truly embody an ideal, not just superficially in words or posturing on Instagram or Facebook.

But...it's not easy. I also feel this conflict inside myself. I'm not here to judge others, and the questions I ask, I ask them of myself first.

And I believe that ultimately the most important thing is to constantly question oneself, to free oneself from the weight of dogmas...



Your country is a patriarchy, a monarchy, and almost exclusively Islamic, making it a fascinating setting for the establishment of what is essentially a new world order. What made you want to examine your home country in the context of an alien invasion?

It's the society I know best, and I feel intimately connected to everything that is present in my film.

I don't want to fall into the trap of "it's a Muslim country" and criticize it at all costs. The Arab world, and Arab directors, including myself, suffer terribly from European expectations when it comes to making films. I am not making a film to show Europeans how my country, Morocco, is really inferior to theirs, or to show that we poor Moroccans, we poor women, are suffering.

Yes, I question the patriarchy, I question the relationship people in my country have to religion. But this relationship applies to all religions. It just so happens that I am French-Moroccan and therefore better able to talk about what is happening here.

Moreover, the Aliens in my film are present not only in Morocco but in different regions of the world. It is fitting that this questioning of our patterns of thinking and living does not apply only to Morocco.

Even if the film is anchored in specific places and

can highlight local issues, I want it to have a universal dimension. That is very important to me.

Itto is religious until a certain point in the movie, after she meets Fouad, who is not a believer. Describe their relationship, which is so crucial to the middle part of the movie.

Itto and Fouad are two very different characters. I wanted to create characters who could confront one other in order to highlight each other's weaknesses.

As I said before, Itto grew up in a context of both strict Islamic practice and at the same time heightened consumerism.

Their strange marriage constructs the brand of Islam as a consumer culture. Is the relationship to faith superficial in her environment? Their God is more of a reassuring or punitive figure, who in addition is paternalistic. This is what Fouad tells her during their journey, "Your true God is money."

Fouad is profoundly lonely: he has nothing to connect to, since he doesn't believe in God. In this unjust world, he doesn't believe in anything anymore. But he has values, he is not corrupt, and he never accepts the money that is offered to him. He rejects the system Itto has entered

into; she who, like him, also came from more of a working-class background.

The two never would have met or spent so much time together if this supernatural event hadn't occurred.

Theirs is a dialogue between two classes that never meet. Fouad will pass through Itto's life, one of those people we encounter for a moment and who mark us forever. ■

CAST

ITTO
Oumaima BARID

AMINE
Mehdi DEHBI

FOUAD
Fouad OUGHAOU

Photography
Noé Bach

Editing
Héloïse Pelloquet

Color Grading
Christophe Bousquet

CREW

Sound
Mariette Mathieu Goudier

Sound Editing
Sébastien Savine

Mix
Laure Arto

Original Music
Amine Bouhafa

Production Design
Hafid Amly

Costumes
Lydie Collin

PRODUCERS

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Dounia Production / Jiango Films

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Dounia Benjelloun Mezian, Sofia Alaoui

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DOHA FILM INSTITUTE

ANGOA

PROCIREP

CINÉCAP 5

SG IMAGE 2020

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