

# FILM REVIEWS

## FEATURE FILM

**Merzak Allouache, director. *Investigating Paradise*.** 2016. 135 minutes. Arabic and French, with English subtitles. France/Algeria. Les Asphofilms. No price reported.

One of the most tragic and saddening consequences of radical Islam today is the corruption of the youth. This is the subject of Merzak Allouache's latest documentary, *Investigating Paradise* (2016), which has already won some awards in film festivals around Europe such as the Berlinale (Germany) and the Festival International des Programmes Audiovisuels (France).

Given the current political climate, this film could not be more timely. It shows us the dangers of radical Islam and the ways in which Salafist preachers indoctrinate youngsters with tendentious ideas about paradise, including the promise that each will have seventy-two *houris* (celestial virgins) once they arrive there. This belief has unfortunately taken hold in Algeria, and in the rest of the Muslim world, in the past couple of decades.

This film, which is half documentary, half fiction, follows the story of Nedjma, a young journalist working for an Algerian daily who is investigating the depiction of paradise that radical Islamists, from both the Maghreb and the Middle East, have been using in their jihadist propaganda. Nedjma's investigation starts with the video that her colleague, Mustapha, showed her on the Internet. This video, which has been circulating mostly among youngsters, features a radical imam describing paradise in a quasi-pornographic manner. Building on the sexual frustration of young men, these pernicious preachers deceive them with visions of paradise and the promise that it will offer them all the pleasures of life that they cannot have on earth.

In the character of Nedjma, the actress Salima Abada then conducts documentary-style interviews with various groups of people, including famous artists, political activists, former Salafists, feminists, psychiatrists, writers, film and television stars, intellectuals, and of course, the youngsters themselves. The viewer instantly notices the difference between two classes with opposing views regarding representations of paradise. On the one hand, the highly educated groups, composed mostly of the generation that was born immediately after independence, criticize—often sarcastically—this fanatical depiction of paradise in particular, and Islam in general. The youngsters, on the other hand, who form the majority of the population,

are perceived as completely lost, in limbo—and therefore easy targets for the Salafists who use the Internet and satellite television to prey on them.

In one of the best segments of the film the celebrated Algerian writer Kamal Daoud asserts that only schools, books, and other positive cultural activities can push back against these strong Islamist forces. He adds that the concept of paradise itself has done much damage to society because it removes any incentive to produce something in this life. As the film as a whole shows, in presenting their particularly alluring promise of the afterlife, Salafists not only undermine our efforts in the present, but undervalue human existence itself. Those who fall victim to this ideology celebrate death and are willing to kill others in order to hasten their enjoyment of the glories that await them.

Merzak Allouache's aim is to unveil this sham. In depicting his native Algerian society, he manages to deconstruct the Wahhabist discourse while also presenting Algerians who have been working hard to counter radical Islamist forces, even sacrificing themselves in order to preserve the best aspects of their country: a modern, democratic, Mediterranean nation that is, above all, open to the promise of a better future. Homage to some of the most heroic opponents appears via archival footage, such as Tahar Djaout and Matoub Lounès, who were both assassinated during the "Black Decade," and Hocine Ait Ahmed, a symbol of opposition to French colonialism and then to the postindependence state.

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## DOCUMENTARIES

**Hubert Sauper, director. *We Come as Friends*.** 2014. 110 minutes. English, Arab, Chinese and others, with English subtitles. Austria-France-Sudan. Adelante Films/KGP. No price reported.

*We Come as Friends* is a documentary film directed by the Austrian-born filmmaker Hubert Sauper, supported by ARTE Cinema and Eurimages. Sauper, the director of the acclaimed movie *Darwin's Nightmare* (2005), which presented the invasion of a fish species around Lake Victoria in Tanzania as a metaphor for globalization and economic exploitation of the ecosystem, is dealing in this case with the consequences of neocolonialism, racism, and capitalism in Sudan after the civil war and during the early days of the new Republic of South Sudan, which became an independent state in 2011.

The film begins with a voiceover that describes the arrival of an alien's aircraft in Africa. We are told that this Martian has only one eye (called "videocamera"), and we suddenly understand that this "alien" is in fact the filmmaker himself documenting his trips to Sudan between 2010 and 2012.