



January 2023

Animalia

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Recommended Citation

Lyden, John C. (2023) "Animalia," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 27: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol27/iss1/5>

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Animalia

Abstract

This is a film review of *Animalia* (2023), directed by Sofia Alaoui.

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Author Notes

John Lyden is the Department Chair and Blizek Professor of Religious Studies at University of Nebraska Omaha. He has been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



Animalia (2023), dir. Sofia Alaoui

This is the feature debut for Sofia Alaoui, a French Moroccan woman whose short film, *So What if the Goats Die*, won the Sundance Film Festival Grand Jury Prize in 2020. In this film, she offers an allegorical tale that presents a challenge to how we view our relationship to religion, God, and the universe.

Itto (Oumaïma Barid) is from a poor background but lives a life of privilege in Morocco, having married into a wealthy family. Her husband and father engage in business deals while she spends her time in their opulent mansion. She is pregnant and about to deliver her first child. While this life is comfortable for her, she lives a life of isolation much of the time, bored and lonely. But her life changes dramatically when she is left alone at the house and aliens from another dimension land in Morocco.

We never actually see the aliens, and their arrival is surrounded with mystery and fear. Strange weather and security risks makes the roads impassible so that her husband Amine cannot return for her. People flee their homes, and Itto desperately looks for a way to reach her family, but she cannot find anyone willing to really help her. Fouad finally agrees to transport her, although he disdains her sense of privilege and her feeling that she can always buy help. While Itto is a religious Muslim who performs *salat* at the appointed times daily, calling on God to protect her and deliver her safely to her family, Fouad tells her that God does not seem to protect the poor and weak but only the wealthy and powerful. As she experiences neglect and hardship in her current situation, she also begins to learn that she cannot count on God to rescue her. Meanwhile, across Morocco, religious Muslims rush to mosques to pray for deliverance from the devilish threat they see facing them. Animals seem possessed, as dogs attack people, and birds gather ominously in a fashion reminiscent to Hitchcock's *The Birds*. All this adds to people's fear as it seems that something like an *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is about to transpire, with aliens occupying the bodies of humans who smile in a creepy way and say that everything will be alright.

But this film has a different message from fear of the other. While many science fiction films include malevolent aliens bent on domination who are driven back by human courage and ingenuity (cf. *Independence Day*), in this they do not seek the destruction of humans but their integration into a cosmic whole. In spite of her fear, Itto and Fouad begin to appreciate this after an encounter with the aliens in the desert. Rather than praying to a God who is separate from everything else to protect their privilege, they need to recognize that they are part of a larger whole, and nothing exists except as part of that. "God is nothing, and everything," as one character remarks. "We don't exist except as part of that One." This message flies in the face of much traditional religion—although it bears resemblance to the mystical strain in Islam, and other

religions—but the real message is that we should value the world around us rather than just praying for our own continued privilege as we ignore the poverty and suffering of others. The Prophet Muhammed had a similar message, not to mention most of the Hebrew prophets, including Jesus.

The original name for the film in French was “Parmi Nous,” or “Among us.” This suggests that the aliens are among us, but not in a fearful way so much as in the sense that they are part of us already, and we are part of them and everything else. The film does a fine job representing the fear associated with losing our privileged status while at the same time suggesting that this is inevitable and ultimately our desired destiny. Religions have a habit of making humans the center of creation, but there is also a lot of theology that suggests we are not the center but only a part of it, and that we need to learn our place—especially now in a time of massive environmental destruction at the hands of humans. This is a beautiful and evocative film that can challenge our traditional understandings of God and religion, as well as all those labeled “aliens” from perspectives of exclusion and fear.