DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2026/27 SEASON

ANIMALIA

(Language: Arabic, French, Berber languages)

Director:	Sofia Alaoui
UK Release:	12 December 2025 (first seen in the UK at the London Film Festival, 9 October 2023)
Running time:	90 minutes
Presented by:	Dorchester Film Society, 18 November 2026

"Despite being heavily pregnant, Itto (Oumaima Barid) seems a fragile, uncertain presence, dwarfed by the intimidating, empty opulence of her husband's family home in the rich agricultural lands of Morocco's interior. Left alone for the day while the rest of the family visits prosperous business connections, Itto finds herself stranded by a mysterious event – a supernatural or extraterrestrial visitation. As Sofia Alaoui's intriguing but oblique philosophical sci-fi unfolds, Itto comes to reappraise the life she has started to take for granted, and to question the God in whom she has hitherto placed her faith.

It's an ambitious, if enigmatic, first feature from French-Moroccan director Alaoui, who returns to Sundance having previously carried off the Short Film Grand Jury Prize with *So What If the Goats Die* in 2020. The film went on to win the César for Best Short Film in 2021. Alaoui, who was a 2022 Screen International Arab Star Of Tomorrow, has an arresting visual sense and handles the blend of social and religious commentary and CGI fantasy with flair. While the film might struggle to break through in the arthouse market, it is distinctive enough to make quite a stir on the festival circuit and could find a home on a streaming platform.

Itto and her husband Amine (Mehdi Dehbi) are looking forward to the comfortable future that his lucrative latest business deal will provide. But even as he paints a verbal picture of the home they will build, his phone rings and his mother (Souad Khouyi) demands his attention; for Amine, the dutiful son, family comes first. Itto relishes a day to herself, snacking on candy and temporarily discarding the strictly enforced rules of etiquette. But when she gets a call from her husband telling her that roadblocks are preventing his return, she grows anxious. Army vehicles tear past the gate of the family compound; soldiers with loudhailers urge her to stay indoors,

A neighbour, paid to transport Itto to join Amine in the city of Khourigba, instead takes her and his family into the Atlas mountains, leaving Itto stranded

in a small, sullen village. It's there that things start to get weird: the local street dogs sit silently in a circle; the birds seem to be watching her every move. Something is in the air. But, curiously, Itto feels less threatened by the anomalies of the natural world than she is by the gazes of the hard-eyed local men who resent the fact that she, a young woman, is travelling on her own.

Alaoui crafts a sense of mystery with a breathy, wistful score which floats on the air like the mountain mists which seem to hold the key to the strange and unnatural events. The widescreen landscape is a dramatic canvas for the judiciously used special effects. And Itto's faith – the one tangible comfort to which she clings in this time of uncertainty – is shaken when a fellow traveller, Fouad (Fouad Oughaou), points out that the God she worships is money, and the answers to her prayers have come courtesy of her wealth rather than a higher power. Simultaneously, she realises, there is a power at work.

For better or worse, Alaoui ultimately leaves plenty of questions unanswered, even after a final voiceover from Itto that attempts to weave the threads of the mystery into some kind of existential, multidimensional fabric."

Wendy Ide, *Screen International*, 22 January 2023

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"In Morocco, the pregnant Itto (Oumaima Barid) lives in the palace of her rich family-in-law. Her husband Amine (Mehdi Dehbi) is the son of local caïd Mustapha (Mohamed Az-El-Arab Kaghat) and Hajar (Souad Khouyi), who is cold and hostile towards her daughter-in-law. Perhaps it is related to her lower-class upbringing, with Itto musing to her husband that she is "nobody's daughter." When the family head off to visit the governor in Khourigba, Itto deliberately stays behind. Then supernatural events – later revealed to be aliens arriving – force the country to declare a state of emergency and block off the city. Amine quickly arranges for a neighbour to take her to Khourigba. However, he abandons Itto in a random village not too dissimilar to where she grew up.

There, she tries to steal a motorbike that belongs to an inn owner named Fouad (Fouad Oughaou). As uncertainty grows and people gather to pray in mosques, Fouad offers to take her to Khourigba. Along the way, they come across a nebula cloud that puts Itto on the path to emancipation.

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The first feature film from French-Moroccan filmmaker Sofia Alaoui, *Animalia* certainly has more than a few atmospheric moments. DP Noé Bach shot Alaoui's Sundance award-winning short *So What If the Goats Die* (2019), and their established relationship leads to some spectacular tableaus here. Itto trying to look at a horizon obscured by thick fog. Auroras which remind one character of the 1972 coup attempt. The stars in the night sky. And the mountainous landscape of the Atlas Mountains, captured in colossal wide-screen. Later, Alaoui and Bach place a heap of style onto the moment Itto and Fouad venture into the nebula cloud, from double exposures and dissolves to Wong Kar-wai style step-printing. The latter creates an experimental, otherworldly look for what becomes a reawakening for Itto.

Her shifting views regarding two specific parts of her life drive *Animalia*. The first is the privilege of her new family. Their extreme wealth is shown in the first scene at their opulent, lavishly furnished house – full of chandeliers, Pharoah lamps, mosaics and fountains. And Mustapha's influence allows Amine to buy a large plot of land for him and Itto, which will be full of poultry and solar panels. This opulence contrasts sharply with her past. As a Berber (a group indigenous to North Africa), her family made do and weren't able to buy things freely. In a conversation with Fouad, she admits to feeling envious in her youth.

But at the same time, Itto is caught between two worlds – and is uncomfortable in both. Switching between French, Arabic and Berber throughout, she also tries to bribe multiple people including the incorruptible Fouad. But when she returns to her family, the luxury cars, the copious amounts of food, and the disapproving looks from her mother-in-law stick out even more. If she is an outsider there, where does she truly belong?

The second part of her life that changes is an aspect that is important to Arab society. At the start, Itto is very religious. It makes sense when we see the nationwide response to the aliens, with people flocking to holy places. Yet it causes a rift with the anti-wealth, agonistic Fouad. Itto believes God will take all His believers on Judgement Day. Is it about to arrive? Or, as a hitchhiker known in the credits as The Teenager (Mohamed Lahbib) muses, is God "more elusive than a black ant on a black stone on a dark night?" The direction Alaoui is leaning towards is perhaps revealed in the final act, which is deeply critical of religious traditions (which conveniently also keep up gender and class divides).

Opaque in a way that will frustrate some, depicting an alien invasion that is spiritual rather than physical, *Animalia* is a somewhat alluring rumination on

privilege and religion through a woman's journey. And whilst the film loses its way in the final act, the rest is anchored by Bach's visuals and Oumaima Barid's performance as the emotional, defensive Itto. "The physical world is based on a more complex one. Like fish who cannot see the water they are in, we are immersed in something we don't see," says The Teenager at one point. It hints at the grand realisation that Itto has gone through. Things will never be the same after this.

And Sofia Alaoui's debut is about how we react to random, cosmic events, and how we come to challenge the structures we once clung to.

Daniel Allen, *Loud and Clear*, 27 September 2023

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"Sofia Alaoui makes her feature film debut with a film that is highly critical of the Moroccan regime and uses science fiction as a backdrop.

The end of the Anthropocene, nature's rebellion against the excesses of humankind, has reached the Moroccan Atlas Mountains. Animals are going mad, cell phones are malfunctioning, and the world is collapsing. Amidst the disaster, young Itto (Oumaïma Barid), eight months pregnant, rides around in a Berlanga-esque, decidedly Placido-like motorized tricycle in search of her husband. You don't need to ask ChatGPT to know that science fiction, even low-budget science fiction like this, often contains layers of political critique. *Animalia* is no exception, and that, more than its mysticism heavily indebted to the films of Terrence Malick, or its majestic cinematography, is what makes it a truly relevant work.

Israel attacks Iran in retaliation while Trump warns Netanyahu: "I'm the one in charge"

Sofia Alaoui, the director, is French-Moroccan. She films on the other side of the Atlantic, a place that, judging by what we've seen, has profound problems. Her dystopian Morocco is the fictionalized flip side of her real Morocco: young women are treated with insulting sexism by men, but also by women of other generations. They, like the men, are subjected to the yoke of an Islamic religion that many devotees interpret in a fundamentalist way. And, above all, the empty rooms of sumptuous palaces owned by the ruling minority stand in stark contrast to the dusty misery of the majority of citizens.

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Filming a science fiction movie in present-day Morocco as a woman can't be easy, but bringing one to fruition with a feminist, pantheistic message that advocates for an end to the privileges of the economic elite must be bordering on impossible in a kingdom like Morocco. Pessimistic in its premise but optimistic in its conclusion, if the changes Sofia Alaoui advocates were to materialize, the Apocalypse can wait a little longer."

Rubén Romero Santos, Cinemanía (Spain), 4 April 2024

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