

# ***ATHENA: CINEMATIC APOCALYPTICA AND VISIONS OF CIVIL WAR***

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powers-that-be or some rebel force.

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Director Romain Gavras' Netflix-produced film *Athena* depicts the outbreak of civil war in modern France, told from the perspective of the family whose tragedy sets it all off: the sons of a Franco-Algerian military veteran.

After the youngest of three brothers is murdered by police, the middle son, Karim (played by the talented Sami Slimane) mobilizes the community at the council-estate-like complex where he lives—called Athena—to assault a Parisian police station, stealing specialized riot-squad equipment.

Following this, Athena is besieged by security forces, including the oldest brother, Abdel (masterfully interpreted by actor Dali Benssalah), himself a member of the French army.

The cinematography consists of long blocks of smooth, unedited tracking shots requiring a level of sustained engagement on the part of actors the likes of which is rarely seen on screen.

Occasionally, background noise is punctuated by snippets from news reports on some television set left on in someone's apartment. These inform us that what we are seeing is not exceptional, with similar scenes of violent confrontation between migrant communities, the police, and the far-right, unfolding throughout the country. Hyper-realistic soundscapes are lyrically amplified by the film's epic, operatic score throughout.

From Houellebecq's *Soumission* to *Athena*, French fiction seems to avoid the fixation on visions of supernatural apocalyptic destruction one might find in American cinema or Japanese anime, but it does present us with frighteningly specific visions of social collapse

and transformation.

Such fiction will tend to function to promote either conformity or radicality with respect to existing social arrangements. This depends on whether the source of impending destruction is identified with the powers-that-be or with some rebel force, and on whether the narrative functions to justify that destruction or not.

*Athena* answers these questions in its very last sequence (do not read on if you have not seen the film unless you don't mind having the ending revealed).

It turns out that the police are not responsible for the tragedy's foundational murder. The official story, according to which the guilty party consisted not of officers, but a group of fascists posing as law enforcement precisely in order to set off a civil war, is revealed to be true.

For their part, then, our protagonists, the two surviving brothers—together with the rest of a rebellious proletariat, both migrant and non-migrant in origin—who had come to believe the police were responsible, are shown to be wrong. Their understanding of the authorities and the social reality they inhabit is incorrect.

Prior constriction to the perspective of key characters is suddenly expanded to include something they could not know, arresting the narrative build-up with a sudden, didactic full-stop.

Officialdom is asserted, as is the status of an ever-looming far-right as the principal threat to a socially stable future France. With this, *Athena's* apocalyptic dispels all ambiguity. A few seconds at the end make all the difference, fixing what the preceding hours have meant.

But however one responds to the point the film is making, this is a well-worth-watching piece of frankly excellent cinematic story-telling.