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The Venerable W.: The Buddhist face of terror

<http://cineuropa.org/nw.aspx?t=newsdetail&l=en&did=328750>

by Fabien Lemercier

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CANNES 2017: Barbet Schroeder completes his “trilogy of evil” with an enlightening portrait of a Burmese Buddhist fanning the flames of anti-Muslim nationalism



“Hatred is by far the longest pleasure.” This quote by Lord Byron progresses very quickly in *The* the new and very instructive documentary by **Barbet Schroeder**, shown today in a special screening of the his “trilogy of evil” that began with *General Idi Amin Dada*

The Buddhist monk Wirathu, using the 969 Movement as his basis, attempts to embody Buddhist culture and identity while in reality preaching “the protection of race and religion”. He is undoubtedly an incendiary personality of the first order, fanning the flames of an inter-ethnic conflict with the Rohingya minority, who have the great misfortune of being Muslim in a country where the religion that makes up the very large official selection at the 70th Cannes Film Festival. It is the perfect description of a very dangerous individual (beneath his smiling exterior and high sense of self-satisfaction) on whom the filmmaker shines a spotlight to complete majority believes that someone who can kill an animal is also capable of killing a human being.

By recounting and retracing Wirathu’s journey with masterful narration, Barbet Schroeder, enamoured by Buddhism, sets out in search of an answer to how such a tolerant and pacific religion can produce such a sectarian and diabolical individual. Focusing on Mandalay, where the 1 million inhabitants include 300,000 monks and being sure to highlight that only 4% of the Burmese population is Muslim, the director sets the scene with an edifying sermon by Wirathu where he denounces the strategy of money and sex used by Muslims to draw women away from the Buddhist religion: “If we let them continue in the name of human rights, our race will be destroyed.”

Going back in time, the film then revisits the different stages of the Venerable W.’s journey, who became famous in 2003 due to the recordings of secret meetings doing the rounds, where he calls for a boycott of Muslim shops, before promising to speed things up (“As soon as I give the signal, be ready behind me, I have to plan an efficient operation, like Mossad or the FBI”, “I am the leader now. I will make sure that the Muslims have nothing to eat, nowhere to live”). The violent, murderous riots that followed gave the military enough reason to imprison W., but he was pardoned in 2012, when he picked up his crusade, fed by a propaganda video and the internet with fake news playing its part by blowing up the slightest incident. A wave of violence then spread through the entire country, with the passive complicity of the military authorities, who have always – as the film also explains – adopted a long-standing repressive policy against the Rohingya, a strategy that has not really ended with Aung Sang Suu Kyi coming to power.

Letting the extent of Wirathu’s sinister and manipulative discourse reveal itself progressively (“we will fence off our country with our own bones, if that’s what it takes”) and also presenting a general overview of the complex geopolitical situation of Burma where the Rohingya have been stripped of their nationality and denied their rights since 1982, Barbet Schroeder and his talented editor **Nelly Quettier** give us *The Venerable W.*, a fascinating and very rich documentary (notably with a very good mix of highly diverse archival footage and interviews counterbalancing the points of view) that elucidates with acuity the Buddhist saying “The fool with evil fills himself, he soaks up little by little.”