

'I am an Artist'

Portrait of a Salafi *en abyme* in the Cyber World



*Hamburger Lektionen (Hamburg Lectures)*, a film by Romuald Karmakar, Germany 2006.

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Mohammed al-Fizazi is the sole character in Romuald Karmakar's film, *Hamburger Lektionen* (*Hamburg Lectures*, 2006). Sitting on a chair, the casually dressed actor Manfred Zapatka plays the role of this Moroccan Salafi sheikh who delivered the Ramadan lectures on 3 and 5 January 2000 at the Al-Quds Mosque (Jerusalem Mosque) in the Hanseatic city, reciting the German translation of two of these lectures verbatim. They were included in a nearly three-hour-long video in which we see and hear the original scene in Arabic. This video was sold in the bookstore adjacent to the makeshift Muslim prayer room, which was notably frequented by three of the September 11 hijackers as well as by immigrant workers and Arab students, Moroccan but also Levantine or Egyptian, some of whom came to the lectures with their children.

In 2000, video-sharing websites did not yet exist, and this low-quality videotape, passing from hand to hand, represented the vehicle *par excellence* of what was said in such milieus, from which certain individuals would commit the most spectacular attack in the contemporary world. Prolonging his experience with Himmler's speech that explained the 'rationality' behind the Nazi's extermination of the Jews, similarly decontextualized and read on screen by Zapatka in *Das Himmler-Projekt* (2000), Romuald Karmakar aestheticized the Hamburg lectures in a way such that the German spectator – and, thanks to the English subtitles, the western (or 'global') spectator – could appropriate the semantic materiality of Fizazi's words. Whereas the media vulgate ordinarily presents Islamists, Salafi, and other Jihadists via their gesticulation, and reduces them to a visual of fanaticism filled with pointed beards, belching, brandished weapons, images of attacks, or women in the niqab, *Hamburger Lektionen's* fiction wants us to penetrate the depths of the thinking, or at least the reasoning, that forms the intellectual foundations of Islamist terrorism by reproducing the 'state of mind' of those who perpetuate it, their *Weltanschauung*.

For, strictly speaking, terrorism is not mentioned in these words. Rather, a discursive process is at stake, one in which a radical cultural rupture is developed inside of a mosque that serves a congregation of Arab immigrants from different countries. This rupture opposes *Muslims*, assigned to a virtuous community promised felicity on Earth and Paradise in the hereafter, and *infidels* (or 'impious' – *kuffar* in the original Arabic), for whom humiliation and degradation is reserved in this world, followed by hell for all eternity. The effect of this ontological differentiation between good ('us') and evil ('them') pronounced by Sheikh Fizazi is to get the faithful accustomed to considering

that they are in a cultural war with their 'impious' western environment and that (under certain conditions) the infidels' goods, women, and children will become the lawful (*halal*) 'spoils' for Muslims. Hence to consider, so the Arabic expression goes, that the blood of the *kuffar* is lawful – which is to say that it is permitted to kill them – and one only has to fast forward the reasoning to the point of perpetrating 11 September.

Fizazi's words immediately establish an existential cleavage. He institutes a border between the faithful and the unfaithful that is more insurmountable (except by the expected conversion of the *kuffar* to Islam in growing numbers) than the congregation targeted by this paraenesis is fragile, because it is comprised of individuals living in Germany who are thus subject to certain western cultural influences, which are depicted as so many temptations to degrade the identity of the pious Muslim under siege, to make him deviate from the true Way: in Islamic terms, these temptations are called idols (*asnam*) by the preacher. This is how the society of consumption is characterized, understood here as the supermarket from which one wants to shoplift, as sex – the 'blonde German women with blue eyes' that arouses concupiscence – or as alcohol. The entire European environment is depicted as a machination designed to lead the Muslim into debauchery and perdition, to make him 'abandon prayer', and to lead him down the path of sin that will end in the capital crime against Allah: apostasy.

However, in the future, the infidels' goods and women will be lawful for Muslims; they will comprise the war bounty at the end of the victorious jihad that will destroy the west. But for that to occur, it is first necessary for the community of believers to be in a situation of strength (*tamkin*). It could thus collectively seize hold of the spoils that will be shared amongst the soldiers of jihad, as prescribed by the Qur'an, the sacred texts, and jurists (*fuqaha* or '*ulama*'). As an immediate urge, coveting the infidels' goods must be restrained: it is one of the motors for constituting a community fused together by faith, which alone will allow the later transition to triumphant jihad. This is what will make taking the spoils of the vanquished infidels lawful.

But nowadays, Islam in general and Muslims who have immigrated to Europe in particular are in a situation of weakness (*istid'af*): the isolated and bearded worker or student who pilfers toothpaste from a supermarket in Hamburg makes himself guilty of theft (*sirqa*), which is forbidden (*haram*) by the religion; this also holds true for he who abuses an impious woman. Furthermore, such an action discredits Islam in the eyes of

the infidels, discouraging their expected conversion to the True Faith, which they risk perceiving as a religion of thieves and rapists. It is harmful if it remains an individual occurrence. This is why the community must fuse itself together around its most intransigent imams, those who extol the rupture in values with the surrounding impious society. The believers must interiorize a vision of the world that prepares them for final jihad, the prelude to the Islamic conquest of Europe and to all of humanity's submission to *shari'a* and the religion that Allah revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.

For Fizazi reminds his flocks, assembled together in the modest Hamburg prayer room crowned with the prestigious name of the holy city of Jerusalem (permanent evidence of the sacred duty to protect it from Israeli occupation), that they are still very far from constituting the victorious army of jihadists who will conquer Europe to implement Muhammad's prophecy that wanted Rome to be taken and pillaged one day, as Constantinople was in 1453. He reminds them that at the moment they are only immigrant workers reduced to servile tasks in the eyes of European societies: 'sweeping the streets, cleaning the bathrooms.'

One day, these slaves of the post-modern world will reduce Europeans vanquished by jihad into slavery and take their women to put in their harem. But this social revenge with its eschatological dimension is not for the present moment and it requires a long preparation. It requires reinforcing the piety of the faithful, their devotion to their imams, giving alms. While waiting for these objectives to be realized, Fizazi pleads for reinforcing the control that imams of his persuasion have over the community of the faithful.

But certain people will free themselves of this pious patience: also decontextualizing the *Hamburger Lektionen* in their own way and taking the words at face value, they will trigger jihad against the west a year and a half later with the 'blessed double attack' on New York City and Washington D.C. on 11 September. Indeed, three Al-Qaeda kamikazes occasionally worshipped at the 'Al-Quds Mosque'. But the exact nature of the relationship between Fizazi on one side and the Egyptian Mohamed Atta or the Lebanese Ziad Jarrah on the other still remains obscure, much like the exact nature of the European mission of this Moroccan 'prince of the Salafis', whose subsequent career will make him a lackey of the Cherifian authorities, as we will see. Particularly, as a certain number of testimonies from those around him, which have not been

refuted, indicate, Fizazi undertook his preaching tours in European mosques with the financial backing of his country's government. Was the cultural rupture, extolled by the preacher who preached the radicalism of far off objectives in order to better control his flocks on a daily basis, overtaken by Al-Qaeda's logic, which applied jihad in the present moment? We do not have the information to prove it today. But we can begin to recreate the pieces of the mental puzzle that were put in place, the intersection of an ideology and a praxis, the telescoping of theory and action.



Set photo, *Hamburger Lektionen (Hamburg Lectures)*, a film by Romuald Karmakar, Germany 2006. We see actor Manfred Zapatka rehearsing in the studio set.  
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In this process, it is evidently crucial to understand the substance of Sheikh Fizazi's words, all the more so if we do not belong to the Arab-Muslim cultural milieu that he addresses – because we know that the bloody consequences of the cleavage he preaches affected the entire human community, with the explosion of Islamic terrorism in the first years of the new millennium. This remains true even if Fizazi pursued other objectives than Bin Laden, if his specific motivations and his instrumentalization by other powers additionally gave rise to a number of presumptions and suspicions. Unlike Himmler, who belonged to the machinery of the Nazi state's hierarchical system and to the circle that directed the bureaucracy led by Hitler, Fizazi is only one asteroid in the nebula of Islamic radicalism, and we will see that he becomes a shooting star, precipitated in the second part of his life towards a conspicuous gravitation around the

Moroccan authorities. But the vagaries of his personal trajectory take nothing away from the pertinence of analyzing his words at the moment when he expresses himself during the first days of 2000, in the congregation of worshippers at Al-Quds Mosque.

This is the advantage of the process of decontextualization and translation in *Hamburger Lektionen*, as directed by Romuald Karmakar. Karmakar's *mise-en-scène* elevates it to a work of fiction and thus integrates it within the corpus of global culture, allowing it to reach the status of an object destined for universal meditation while removing it from its particular Arab-Islamic glebe. Such aestheticization allows for the reconstitution of a 'Master Narrative' of Jihadist Salafism by focusing on a single object: the *Hamburger Lektionen*. Through a metonymic process, this *mise-en-scène* 'represents' the semantic field of Salafism preached in Europe today in its entirety. It gives it to be *heard* in its profound signification; it lays it bare.

We will note how the scenography proceeds in an anti-Aristotelian way: whereas in the first lines of *Metaphysics*, the Stagirite privileges sight as the vehicle for knowing the world, *Hamburger Lektionen* takes this sense to task for providing an understanding that is too easy, too superficial – one that videos shared online will henceforth force-feed us. The viewer sees only a nearly motionless shot: the actor Manfred Zapatka seated on a chair, totally expressionless, retaining none of Fizazi's movements from the original tape except reading small pieces of paper on which questions from the faithful are written, and the game that his operation requires with his pair of glasses. The sheikh's are round whereas the actor's are reading glasses for the farsighted; the former must endlessly remove and replace his in order to go from reading the questions to appealing to the audience, while the second raises his eyes above the glasses perched at the end of his nose.

Zapatka does not reproduce the comical expressions of the sheikh, who interacts with his audience by creating a strong sense of proximity thanks to regular banter ridiculing Germans and Europeans. He is endowed with a strong physical presence, a bodily charisma: the actor, whose movements and posture are minimalist, does nothing that would distract the viewer from the desired concentration on the text's meaning. Conversely, in order to better convince the faithful that his words are inscribed in the register of the divine Word, Fizazi dons religious garb: it is the cobbled together product of the priestly clothes of a Salafi imam. On his head he wears the white skullcap

preferred by followers of the most puritanical version of Islam, and the hooded *burnous*, typically Moroccan, indicative of the atmosphere of Hamburg's globalized Islamism. He speaks against a curiously hybrid background: behind him, we catch sight of fragments of small columns whose capitals frame the alveolar *mihrab* that indicates the direction of Mecca and of prayer, which renders both place and word sacred. On the steps that probably lead to the pulpit where the Imam delivers the Friday sermon (*khutba*) (Fizazi is not standing there because the status of the 'lecture' is more informal and characterized by a back-and-forth with the faithful's questions, whereas the homily from the pulpit is a ritualized address to the believers), we glimpse someone (off-camera) who sets down a sizeable box with an Arabic word written on it (the poor quality of the video makes it hard to discern: it could be *Qatar* or, more likely, *Fitr*, the feast celebrating the end of fasting that would come the next day or the one following to conclude the month of Ramadan).<sup>[1]</sup> On each side of the *mihrab* are Venetian blinds in front of picture windows through which we see Hamburg's illuminated night time landscape. The surrealist patchwork of the background, which could be that of a de Chirico or Dali painting, mixes the anachronism of the globalized world with the dehumanized industrial landscape of a German city today, the poor stucco imitation of antique sculpture with this immigrant mosque's *mihrab* and an unlikely cardboard box. None of this décor remains in Karmakar's *mise-en-scène*: Manfred Zapatka is dressed in a brown suit against a gray background, unified and unadorned.

Finally and above all, Zapatka is clean-shaven whereas the sheikh stands out for the very long beard that characterizes followers of Salafism. Indeed, this doctrine preaches having a beard 'longer than a fist' in supposed imitation of the Prophet and his first companions. Ordinarily, the length of this ideal beard *is limited* de facto by the individual's average ability to grow a beard. But Fizazi's hairiness is exceptional and his beard, very full and very black, long like a 'sapper's beard', gives him a logo, a look, an ostensible Salafist brand. In the imagination of the ordinary believer, such a remarkable attribute is a *baraka*, a divine benediction. It contributed to establishing Fizazi's image and ensuring his name recognition as much in Morocco as in the different European mosques where he undertook his preaching tours, and even more on Arab satellite channels like *Al Jazeera*, where he was sought after as a guest.

These visual points of reference have been deliberately erased from Karmakar's film, as if it had been purified of them. Sight – so valued by Aristotle – is expressly put to the test by this nearly two-hour-long austere spectacle (a test that is intensified for non-

German speakers obliged to read the English subtitles) in order to privilege, to 're-educate' we could say, hearing. It is this sense that is privileged as the vehicle *par excellence* of the spectacle's intellectual work; everything is put in place in order to guarantee its role as the primary vector so that the viewer listens to what is said, concentrates all of their attention on it. Indeed it is through speech, through words that are authorized by the divine Word, that Fizazi's words flow, and the *mise-en-scène* forces us to *hear* it for what it says – divesting these words of all that could distract from them.

If this aestheticization of language has been at the root of Romuald Karmakar's artistic process since *Das Himmler-Projekt*, a significant difference exists between the conditions of the Salafi sheikh's *mise-en-scène* and that of Hitler's ideologue (even if both are supporters of the final solution, the former for the 'infidels' and the latter for the Jews): Himmler expressed himself in German. It was his very words that Zapatka could use without changing them, focusing the attention on them by getting rid of the jumble of Nazi decorum, the swastikas, its goose step, and Hitler's other salutes. This dates the speech, referring to the Third Reich years, putting it at a distance via its inscription in a historical period that has ended and from which we believe to have made a clean break. In this sense, putting it back into circulation, decontextualized, like a contemporary German speech, functions easily, pertains to a familiarity (which renders its reasoning even more alarming): the German-speaking viewer understands Himmler's words without requiring their recontextualization, their translation. They belong to the same culture, the same *heimat*, a corruption on which the viewer is led to reflect, while using cultural tools appropriate to decoding the Nazi ideologue's words, to critiquing it, to being vigilant about its possible persistence, and so on.

The same is not true for Fizazi: his words are inscribed in a culture with whose codes the German – or European or western viewer, in general – has no familiarity, starting with language. The proof is the necessity that has Karmakar regularly introducing glosses into Zapatka's remarks that render words belonging to the Islamic semantic register comprehensible to the viewer, to elucidate their connotation, the wordplay in classical Arabic and even in the Moroccan dialect, without which the sheikh's translated and re-enacted speech would remain opaque, be left unintelligible, would belong to the domain of the 'foreign', in the literal sense. Likewise, the actor pronounces Arabic expressions from time to time, a scruple that recalls that something remains beyond the literal meaning of the words translated into German or English, that any translation

remains incomplete. The same statement here reaches its climax because Fizazi puts the Arab-Islamic semantic register completely in the service of the desired destruction of the culture and identity of the film's European viewers, previously dehumanized as *kuffar*, as impious. The words themselves are deadly weapons destined to kill those who hear the translation. And Zapatka pronounces these intrusive words with a strong German accent (so that the hissing *s* – the voiceless alveolar fricative of Arabic – becomes the voiced alveolar fricative, that of the *z* in English or French, and the main stress is displaced), which inflicts them with phonetic distortion. Such distortion designates them as a body foreign to Germany identity, as an immigrant in Germanic vocabulary – a status that finds itself between *Gastarbeiter*-phoneme and *Ausländer*-phoneme, so to speak, in order to lead to the Salafi-phoneme and prepare for the Jihadist-phoneme.

Taking on this problem of translation raises the question of the words' signification. What do we understand when we focus on the *signified* of Fizazi's text? What intellectual resources are available to the German (or 'global', seldom or not at all acquainted with Arab-Islamic culture) viewer only able to reproduce some snippets of its *signifier*, thanks to the Arabic glosses and phonemes that interrupt the German phrasing or English subtitles?

In bringing up several elements in order to understand the signifier of Fizazi's words, we would like to extend Romuald Karmakar's approach by showing how the sheikh's discourse functions in the semantic grammar of those for whom it was originally destined – his congregation of Arab workers and students assembled together in the Hanseatic city during these first days of January 2000, this beginning of the third Christian millennium, to celebrate the end of Ramadan, which fell at the same date that year according to the lunar Hijri calendar. Today, with our distance of about a dozen years, the multitude of biographical information about Mohamed Fizazi and the profusion of sources available since 2005 thanks to online video-sharing websites – YouTube most of all – permit sketching a contrasting portrait of this preacher who, in the Hamburg night, articulates this 'vulgate' of Salafism that today has become the most common discourse of global Sunni Islamism, with the blessing of the Sunni Arab oil monarchies and their accomplices.

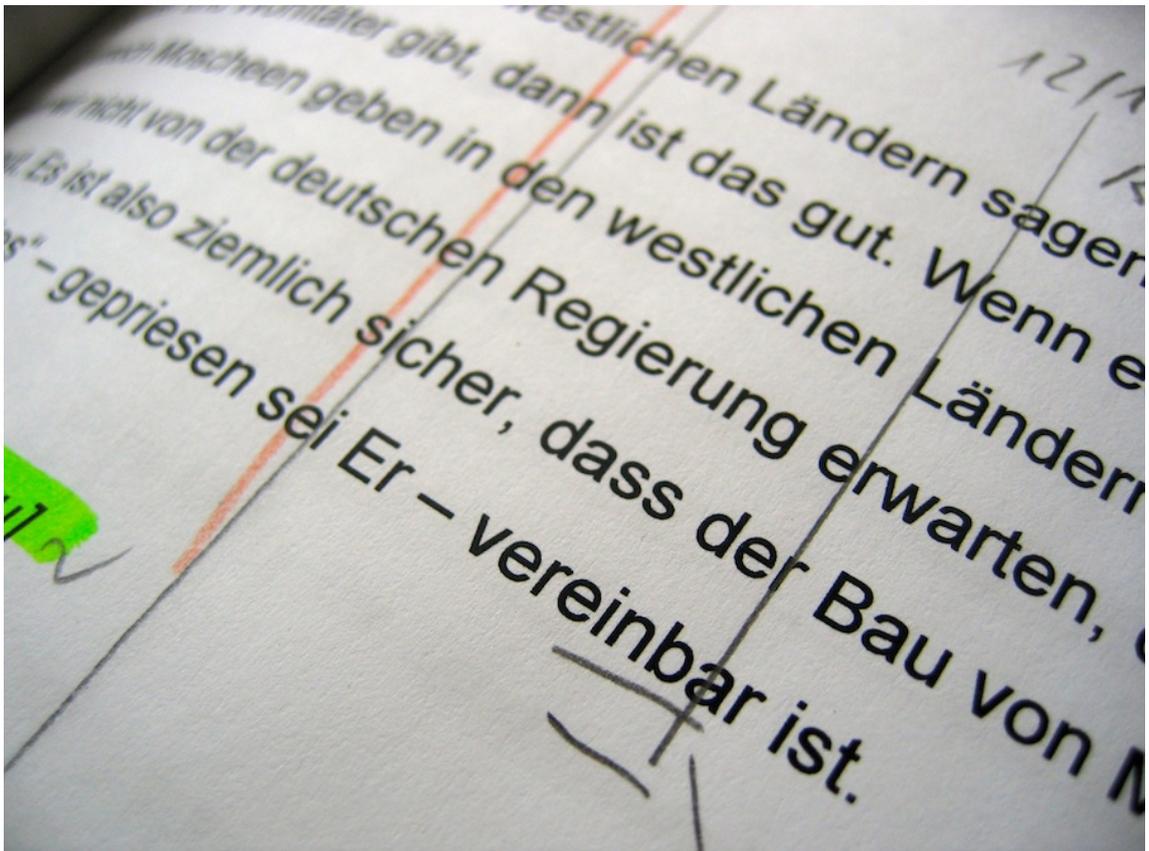
### **Black Beard, White Beard: Sheikh Fizazi and his 'Phantom'**

Born in 1949 in Taza, south of the Berber (Amazigh) region of the Moroccan Rif Mountains, Mohamed bin Mohamed al-Fizazi was 50 years old when he visited the Al-Quds Mosque. His father, Mohammed bin Hassan al-Fizazi, is also a well-known Salafi sheikh, today a nonagenarian, but still just as radical. The younger Fizazi has numerous gifts: endowed with a beautiful voice, he sang for a Moroccan national television program during his youth, according to a rumour that Fizazi did not deny during a 2011 interview with *Al Arabiya*, the Dubai-based, Saudi-owned television channel. Invited to show the full measure of his talents by the journalist conducting the interview, Fizazi responded that he no longer used his voice except to intone *anashids* – male *a capella* tunes exalting jihad and celebrating martyrs, and the only type of singing authorized by Salafi Islam, to the exclusion of musical instruments and female voices that soften the soul, leading it into debauchery, and distancing it from accomplishing religious ideals. Interrogated about his other tendencies, notably drawing, Fizazi declared, 'I have been an artist for 40 years (*Ana fennan min arba'in sana*).' Indeed, religious preaching, in the image of the father, only subsequently became a vocation for the younger Fizazi because, uncommon for a diehard Salafi, he began by attending the government-run École normale d'instituteurs, where he specialized in teaching French and maths.

But the Maghreb's radical religious milieus ordinarily lead a veritable *Kulturkampf* against the French language, the carrier of hated secularism *par excellence*. Certainly, in the numerous videos posted online in which he expresses himself, we never hear him speak French (he sometimes uses French terms when speaking Arabic, pronouncing them perfectly and without a Maghrebi accent, with the *r* uvular and not rolled, a sign of belonging to local, well-educated Francophone milieus). On the other hand, in 2011, he became a defender of making the Amazigh (Berber) language on equal footing with Arabic and he manages to speak a few phrases in the Rifian dialect in his videos, claiming that he supports it as an indigenous language in Morocco, unlike French, a foreign language brought by colonialism that, according to him, enjoys an unwarranted place in the Cherifian kingdom.

Specialization in religious science only came during this pedagogue's second stint at the university. Having taught children since 1970 in a Tangier middle school, he began theological studies at the Islamic University of Al-Qarawiyyin in Fez in 1980. There, he

completed a Master's degree in sciences of the *hadith*. This discipline is particularly valued by the Salafis, because it is connected with studying the words of Prophet Muhammad – the *hadith* or *sunna* – which constitutes the second normative source in Islam after the Qur'an or Allah's revealed speech, which was written down under the first caliphs. And yet the Qur'an's corpus is limited and the words attributed to the Prophet by Islamic tradition provide vast jurisprudence that completes the former, covering a very large spectrum of human activities. It has the force of law because of its sacrosanct and intangible character – the Prophet being the infallible incarnation of all Islamic virtues.



Work photo, *Hamburger Lektionen (Hamburg Lectures)*, a film by Romuald Karmakar, Germany 2006. We see an excerpt of the director's shooting script used in the editing room.  
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In the Sunni Muslim world, two major logics for interpreting the scriptures exist in opposition. The first, more liberal, endeavours to find adaptations between faith and the world; it privileges an allegorical reading of sacred texts and leaves a large place for interpretation by theologians, seeking out their consensus. This relatively liberal reading predominated until the 1970s. Since then, Saudi oil manna has given considerable financial support to followers of the more purist and closed logic, minimizing human interpretation and refraining from any *aggiornamento* perceived as

an adulteration of Islam. Its followers draw the majority of their inspiration from fatwas (juridical opinions founded in the Islamic tradition) issued by legal scholars (*'ulema*) from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia based on their reading of the *hadith*, which are then transmitted through the internet and strengthen the global scale of this country's ideological domination of Sunni Islam, thus protecting its domination over Islam's two holy sites, Mecca and Medina.

But certain Salafis, critical of the Saudi-American alliance, estimated that – all the while adhering to the rigor and literalism of the Saudi *'ulema* – it was necessary to take up armed jihad against the American, western, and in general 'impious' interests throughout the world, including against the 'apostates' of the Arab regimes, and even against the Saudis. Al-Qaeda incarnated this line of thought. It is between these two tendencies of Salafi filiation that Fizazi positioned himself. But, contrary to Al-Qaeda doctrinarians like Osama bin Laden or Ayman al-Zawahiri, he never explicitly preached an immediate transition to violence. Rather, as is the case in the *Hamburger Lektionen*, he kept his audience in a state of uncertainty, glorifying the rewards for pious Muslims while neither setting its date of realization nor ordaining its implementation.

Beginning in the 1990s, Fizazi became a charismatic and much listened to Salafi preacher: his way with pedagogy and his familiarity with French and modern knowledge allowed him to master the communication techniques that facilitated his access to a culturally hybrid public in Morocco's large cities. He understands his enemy well: European culture, French in particular, carrier of hated secularism, harbinger of impiety, which he will devote himself to eradicating, to uprooting – with his compatriots as much in his country as in emigration. He was noticed for his eloquence and talent for levelling the contradictory debates of his adversaries whose logic he penetrated thanks to the ubiquity of his knowledge. He preached in Tangier – where he taught – at a mosque in the Casa Barata neighbourhood. It is known for its souk that specializes in technological contraband, counterfeit videos and DVDs sold for a modest price with poor quality pirated versions – similar to the original video of the *Hamburger Lektionen*, which circulated at the beginning of the 2000s. It is almost as if the cybernetic sheikh were physically linked from the very beginning to the materiality of *Lektionen's* mediocre technical support that would permit his *mise-en-scène* by Karmakar.

Fizazi's reputation only grew and quickly earned him his reputation as 'prince of the

Salafis'. Nevertheless, he led an early polemic against Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine, a well-known Moroccan Islamist, for his opposition to the monarchy, vituperating him from the pulpit and calling him a Saudi agent. Did attacking a religious opponent of King Hassan II (who would lock Yassine up in a psychiatric hospital) and his successor Mohammed VI in the name of Islam win him the prince's gratitude and the leniency of the intelligence services? The fact remains that no obstacles were erected against his preaching in a country where mosques were closely supervised and no constraints were placed on his frequent travels abroad – multiple testimonies indicate that his travel was even paid for by the government. In addition to the Hamburg incident in January 2000, his pastoral travels to Moroccan immigrants in Europe included 12 August of the same year when Fizazi attended a long conference in Milan – now easily available on video-sharing sites – that was dedicated to denouncing democracy as an 'idol' and explaining that this concept resulted from the worst of impieties. In it, Fizazi appears before the audience, dressed in white, his forearms bare, seated at a table on trestles in front of an Islamic green backdrop. Unlike in Hamburg, where he responded to questions from the faithful, in Milan he harangues the conference's audience, which we neither see nor surmise on the screen. Opposed to the confined atmosphere of the Hanseatic mosque, whose mediocre lighting almost gives one a sense that the video is filmed in black and white, is the violent luminosity of the Lombardi room, the cries of the orator, and his gesticulations in full colour.

This theme of refuting democracy is a Salafi tune and constitutes an obligatory refrain in the rhetoric of political Islam in general – until the Muslim Brothers' conversion to the ballot box in the years preceding the Arab revolutions. The founding argument (to which the *Hamburger Lektionen* appeal) consists of saying that democracy gives sovereignty to the people who could, if they wanted, legislate against divine will, for example by authorizing alcohol; it thus pertains to impiety (*kufir*) and is heinous to good Muslims. In Milan, Fizazi indulged in long variations on this theme, but weaving a reasoning inspired by the Marxist critique of bourgeois democracy into them – not that he subscribes to such a critique but that it allows him to annex subsidiary registers to his demonstration which lend an inclusive character to his positioning: he positions the Islam that he professes at the summit of all the registers of knowledge. The sheikh is omniscient; Muslims must pledge their allegiance to him.

At the beginning of the 2000s, notoriety in the Arab world came from *Al Jazeera*, and notably its most polemic show, *Al-ittijah al-mu'akkas (The Opposite Direction)*, hosted

by Syrian Journalist Faisal Al-Kasem. Al-Kasem basked in provoking debate between his two guests, usually selected for their extremely opposite positions, who would exchange insults and low blows in a kind of verbal fight that took after jousting in the Roman circus and the *mubahala* – the Islamic version of the Latin west's *disputatio*. Fizazi's polemic talents, but also his get-up, his signature black beard, quickly made him a choice guest on the show. In his two most famous jousts, he levelled both the Syrian mufti, who he accused of supporting Bashar al-Assad's doubly impious regime (as Alawite and Ba'athist), and a poor secular Arab intellectual, who lost his composure faced with Fizazi's attacks and, with a slip of the tongue, made a mistake when mentioning the title of a Qur'anic *sura* (chapter) during the show. The video of the 'secularist's humiliation' was posted dozens of times on YouTube and accompanied by comments exalting the sheikh's victory. This would not merit the anger of the Moroccan government, which he did not directly attack, instead reserving his anathema for other enemies.

Things changed with the 16 March 2003 attacks in Casablanca, when a group of young men from the Sidi Moumen *bidonville* killed dozens of people in a suicide attack in the kingdom's economic capital. Socialized in the Salafi sphere of influence, they acted by taking up armed jihad in a local and vernacular version of September 11. Tolerated until then, Fizazi's preaching became an embarrassment for a government concerned about showing its firmness, *urbi et orbi*. Accused of his doctrine's influence on the terrorists – according to a *modus operandi* that recalls the link between the *Hamburger Lektionen* and the future kamikazes of New York and Washington who listened to him – the eloquent sheikh was condemned to 30 years in prison. He was released after eight years in April 2011, thanks to a royal pardon at the time when, in the context of the 'Arab Spring', a prime minister from the PJD Islamist Party (*Parti de la Justice et du Développement* or Party for Justice and Development) was preparing to head the government in Rabat: Abdelilah Benkirane, who would win the elections in November that year. Political Islam, in its moderate orientation, is nevertheless co-opted by the Moroccan monarchy, and the Salafi sphere of influence was back in favour and well established.

Fizazi's release on 14 April 2011 was filmed by Moroccan television from the moment he left the prison building and celebrated with much pomp and circumstance by his supporters. For the occasion, the sheikh sported a golden skullcap and Islamist websites titled the online videos 'Sheikh Fizazi freed from the tyrants' jails (*sujun al*

*tawaghit*).' The first visible change was the colour of his beard, now entirely white (his face had thickened as well, the interested party having benefited from preferential treatment in prison with his own cell and kitchen). But a second change, more spectacular, would not be slow to appear: from his first declarations, the now portly prisoner delivered a panegyric for King Mohammed VI, praising the democracy that he had previously declared an idol before announcing the creation of a political party, the *Parti du Savoir et du Travail* (The Party of Knowledge and Work). In Arabic, the party's name, *al-'ilm wa al-'amal*, is based on a precious assonance with religious rhetoric and on a polysemous dimension: the term *'ilm* (knowledge) signifies 'theology' in classical Arabic while *'amal* is used in the sense of 'proselytism' by Islamist activists. The party seems destined to assemble a religious sphere of influence characterized by its allegiance to the monarch himself and to dividing the Islamist groups in order to weaken the PJD in relationship to the *Makhzan*, to the Moroccan State as incarnated by the King and those around him. Very quickly, the polemic inflated the radical Salafi milieus as Fizazi's 'betrayal' and the most engaged activists began to multiply their denunciations. The interview that he gave to the Dubai station (funded by Saudi capital, whose influence he had denounced when his beard was still black) was posted on online video sharing sites by those who despised him, with the title 'here is one of the secret service's sheikhs (*ahad shuyukh al-mukhabarat*).' One of the first comments on the video said: 'Sheikh Fizazi is a remarkable man, but he is dead... the man who appears on screen is only a phantom (*shabah*).' Even his nonagenarian father participated in the polemic, appearing in a video filmed in front of a traditional Moroccan notary (*'adoul*) to record a declaration in which he renounced his son who had betrayed the spirit of Salafism.

What remains for Fizazi at the end of this particularly polemic journey? In a last pirouette, the subject of Romuald Karmakar's film almost appeared as an actor in the film *Les chevaux de Dieu* (*The Horses of God*, 2012), by Moroccan filmmaker Nabil Ayouch, which was selected for Cannes 2012. The film is dedicated to the 2003 attacks in Casablanca that had earned the Salafi sheikh his prison sentence for having influenced its authors, the re-Islamicized youth of the Sidi Moumen *bidonville* (he has always denied being in contact with them, except with one of them while in prison). Contacted in July 2011, three months after his release, by the filmmaker who did the majority of his casting with non-professional actors from the *bidonvilles*, Fizazi was at first seduced by Nabil Ayouch's idea to play the role of a Salafi imam who preached to the Sidi Moumen youth in order to stop their social deviance and lead them back to the

path of rigorist Islam.[2] In a way, he would have appeared on screen in a work of fiction to perform Manfred Zapatka's role in *Hamburger Lektionen*, in a surprising *mise en abyme*, 12 years after having served as the model for Romuald Karmakar's *mise-en-scène* of his own role.



Set photo, *Hamburger Lektionen (Hamburg Lectures)*, a film by Romuald Karmakar, Germany 2006. We see the studio set.  
© Pantera Film GmbH.

Even if he evokes his first steps as an artist in order to envision his status as an actor in the film, Fizazi finally limited himself to working as a paid consultant for three months to advise the filmmaker on the character of the imam who was going to re-Islamize the *bidonville's* youth and bring them out of their delinquency, to perfect the vocabulary that would be used by the imam in the film in order to give him the greatest realism. He even came to preach during the filming, impressing the actors with his charisma, and definitively blending the roles, scrambling fiction and reality. According to him, the Salafi preachers did well in Sidi Moumen by bringing the delinquents back to the path of true Islam. And they are innocent of the fact that a jihadist convinced them to act in order to kill 45 people (including the 12 terrorists) during the suicide attacks in Casablanca – just as, according to him, his *Hamburger Lektionen* in January 2000 have no link with their literal *mise-en-oeuvre* by Al-Qaeda's impatient kamikazes, authors of the 'blessed double raid' on 11 September 2001. Finally, Fizazi, whose collaboration with Nabil Ayouch spread and who was criticized on Islamist websites, put an end to it because of

the pressure of a Salafi milieu that was suspicious of him and which sees his collaboration with a 'secular' filmmaker as further proof of the white-bearded sheikh's betraying the cause. *Salut, l'artiste!*

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[1] In Arabic, the letters *q* and *f* have the same form, with two dots above the former and one above the latter.

[2] Nabil Ayouch, Personal Interview, Paris, 19 February 2013.

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## **About the Author**

**Gilles Kepel**