This elegiac film recounts the daily life of Nissim Kahlon, a 67-year-old man who has spent the last forty years constructing a home in a limestone cliff by the sea near the Apollonia National Park, north of Tel Aviv.

In the intricate domestic edifice, washed up rubbish and articles from the beach become elaborate mosaics and coloured tiles and driftwood decorate the walls. Nissim's hard work – pounding cement, scraping shovels, whipping water from buckets, striking tools into the rock face, scraping grout across the floors – is closely documented. But so too is the ephemeral whistle of the wind and the incessant crash of the sea. Bronfield lived with Nissim for five months prior to filming, which may account for the impressive attention to – and rendering of – rhythm in the film.

Nissim's home is part bunker, part burrow. A bunker, it provides protection from the chaos of human relations which he seeks to eschew (his wife, we learn, left him to become a yoga teacher in the United States, while his daughter, who resents his patriarchal dominance, completely avoids him). Yet Nissim's home is also a burrow where he seeks, despite himself, to invite in elements of the outside world.

Nissim's life is plagued by contrast: light, dark; dry, wet; hot, cold. The sea, a source to ease his aches and pains after a day of work on his home, simultaneously holds the power to destroy it. His son, who makes him feel old, is also the only one who can make him feel young, as when he comforts his father by massaging the crick in his back. Rare are the glimpses of such intimate scenes and where they do appear they are shrouded in twilight. The inner house, like Nissim's sensibility, is veiled by a mantle of privacy and pride.

Nissim's son, Moshe, represents this threshold between inside and outside, having been invited by his father to come and live with him and work on the house, which he will one day inherit. Much of the film centres on the relationship between the pair. Moshe also embodies another important threshold in the film: that of boyhood and manhood. For most of the film Moshe's idleness is contrasted to his father's productivity: 'kids today are like cows, they shit, eat, talk,' laments Nissim. Then, as he turns 18, Moshe enters into the military.

The film is at times poignant, at times frustrating. Nissim appears as both a cantankerous and intolerant Diogenes figure who has alienated those around him, and as an artist with a striking vulnerability. His house, pounded by the sea, is a reminder of the fragility of the hardest and most weathered social edifices.

For through Nissim's relationship with Moshe we observe not simply the tension between the individual and the family, but between the individual and the nation. The patriotic message is rendered explicit in the flag that billows from the balcony in what is the longest shot of the film: the nation – like Nissim's house, our intimate relationships and ourselves – is a project under constant construction. In
a conclusion that sits at odds with the rest of the film, it appears that it is not in his family nor himself but in the nation state of Israel that Nissim and his son ultimately find fulfilment.

Jennifer Allsopp
Ph.D. candidate, University of Oxford

Arabic with English subs. 2007.

Each March, a group of Moroccan pilgrims known as the Regragas set off on a sacred journey. Over 39 days, they pass through some of the most remote corners of their native Essaouira region, in the north-east of the country. Known as the Daour, this pilgrimage retraces the steps of early devotees of Muhammad: those who brought Islam to Morocco. The Daour is a symbolic show of respect for these pioneering Muslims, as well as an annual tradition in which the region’s spiritual representatives visit the faithful and renew their connection with God.

Even today, the pilgrims dress in traditional attire, carry their supplies in packs on the backs of Arabian camels and travel on small, nimble horses, their leader riding a revered white mare. As they pass through mountainous villages and towns, they meet with locals and bestow upon them an intangible and yet invaluable gift: baraka, which translates roughly as God’s blessing and good will.

An understated and contemplative film, the 2007 documentary Baraka Paths reveals the deeply ritualistic practice of the Daour. Directors Manoël Pénicaud and Khamis Mesbah show a little-known side of Moroccan Islamic culture, exploring its origins in the region, and the legacy these origins continue to exert over Essaouira Muslims today.

The camera captures the landscape’s grassy hills and meandering paths, contrasting vast wilderness shots with close ups of worshippers. In this way, the film shows that while the Essaouira may be isolated, it is far from devoid of life. As we travel with this solemn group of men, we arrive at farms, schools and even a vibrant, if rickety, local carnival. As children whirl about on makeshift carousels, adults pray, sing and dance as they receive baraka from the Regragas. Their reasons for requesting baraka are varied and at times amusing: mothers wish for their children to thrive, families ask for those they have lost to find peace in the afterlife. One man even wishes for his enemy to lose his job, to which he receives the unforgettable response: ‘May your enemy work hard in a trench.’

Though we never hear the filmmakers’ voices, some worshippers face the camera and explain the fulfilment the Daour and baraka bring them. In the more frenzied celebrations that take place along the way, some enter a trancelike state known as hadra, swaying and biting down on thorny pieces of cactus in a violent and unsettling dance. At almost every community meeting, group song reigns supreme.