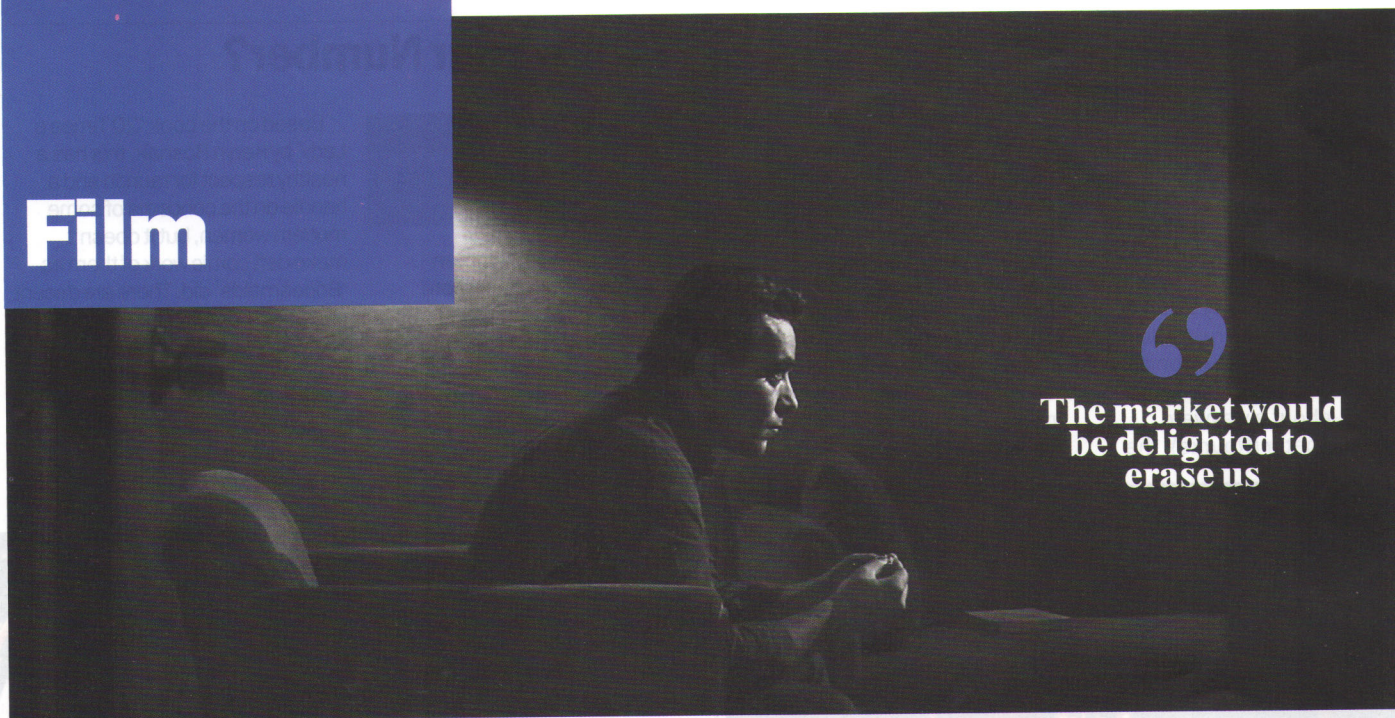


# Film



**The market would be delighted to erase us**

## The sounds of isolation

**Ghassan Salhab** shares with **Natalie Shooter** why his script might make a viewer uncomfortable, and the undigested influence of Caravaggio on his new film 'The Mountain'.

Sitting on the leafy terrace of Café Rawda, Salhab has to pause to let the airplanes pass overhead. 'I forgot to tell you, there's a lot of airplanes here. That's the reason there are a lot of airplanes in all of my films,' he laughs. His latest film 'The Mountain' breaks away from the city confines, only brought back to its Lebanese location by a few small details, one of them the Israeli drones circling above the mountainous hotel the film is set in. 'When you shoot you try to open up to what you are listening to and seeing,' Salhab tells *Time Out*.

'The Mountain' follows an

unnamed man, played by Fadi Abi Samra, who retreats from the city and shuts himself off from all contact with the outside world. Shot beautifully in shadowy black and white, the film is draped in mystery as we never find out who this man is, the reason behind his self-imposed exile or his destination. Salhab explains, 'Unfortunately the way cinema has been taken is this comfort of a script when you have reason and a consequence. For me things are more complex, mysterious and not as touchable as we think.'

The film is minimal to the extreme, with the location almost entirely set within the four walls of a hotel room.

This desire for complete isolation is one that director Salhab has experienced himself. 'It comes from a very personal point and a very old obsession of cutting off completely. I have done that in my life, before the mobile phone,' Salhab laughs. Despite the fact the main character's

isolation is pre-planned, what we witness is the subtle change as the main character begins to fall apart.

One of the most distinctive things about Salhab's films is his use of sound. In the silence of 'The Mountain' subtle sounds are amplified, from the scratching of the pen on paper to the whirling of the wind and the raspy breath of Abi Samra. The sounds transport the viewer into a position within the film where they hover over his shoulder and can feel the intensity of his experience. This careful attention to delicate sound builds the anxiety and tension of someone craving isolation from the world. Salhab tells *Time Out* 'Silence doesn't exist. When you want silence this is terrible.'

The black and white shadowy visuals give the film an almost Caravaggio quality. I asked Salhab if the painter had been an inspiration. 'Caravaggio is one of my favourites. No one can work on this path and not have – even in an undigested way – a painting in his brain. They are our teachers.' The tones of the film are something that Salhab

and the directory of photography, Sarmad Louis Sound, worked on together. 'We didn't want a clinical and clean image,' Salhab explains. 'When we talked we didn't say Caravaggio or clair-obscure painting, but it was obvious for both of us.'

Salhab identifies himself as a non-mainstream filmmaker and certainly 'The Mountain' – the first in a trilogy of films set outside Beirut – doesn't follow the standard path of many commercial films. The enigmatic plot forces the audience into the uncomfortable position of not knowing the answers or perhaps even the questions. This isn't to say that Salhab is a reactionist against Hollywood action films as he tells *Time Out* 'I'd rather be doing an action than a reaction', neither is he anti-mainstream as he cites 'The Dark Knight' as one of the big budget films he recently enjoyed, but he doesn't feel the market welcomes the variety that allows for the experimental to be included in cinema. 'The market would be delighted to erase us. They would be so happy if we didn't exist and it would be such a fucking boring world.'

### The Mountain

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