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Contemporary Algerian Filmmaking: from "Cinéma National" to "Cinéma De L'Urgence" (Mohamed Chouikh, Merzak Allouache, Yamina Bachir-Chouikh, Nadir Moknèche)

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CONTEMPORARY ALGERIAN FILMMAKING: FROM “CINÉMA NATIONAL” TO “CINÉMA DE L’URGENCE” (MOHAMED CHOUIKH, MERZAK ALLOUACHE, YAMINA BACHIR-CHOUIKH, NADIR MOKNÈCHE)

By

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To the memory of my grandmother.
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This dissertation considers the position of contemporary Algerian filmmaking (1988-2003) against the much-debated concept of national cinema. Drawing upon a range of theoretical frameworks and concepts such as Third Cinema, transnational cinema, and “accented” cinema, this dissertation asks—among key questions—whether Algerian-directed films still articulate a national coherence. In other words, do they still speak the nation? If so, how might we, based on their modus operandi, thematic and other constituents define this particular cinema?

As part of a larger discussion and through the works of four distinctive Algerian-born filmmakers, each chapter takes into account questions of production, distribution, exhibition, influences, textuality, critical reception and audience (whenever feasible), and addresses each director’s specificities as well as their relationship and engagement to Algeria. In doing so, this study accounts for the complexities of a body of films whose ties to the nation-state remain both significant and historically relevant for they probe specific and contemporary questions surrounding gender, sexuality, and politics, but most importantly the rise and impact of Islamic fundamentalism.

Although it is often difficult if not impossible for Algerian filmmakers to openly address Algeria’s political instability, the efforts which they have made in this regard, have resulted in multiple representations of a young society with an uncertain sense of identity and direction. Specific film texts are thus examined as constitutive of multiple counter-discourses of the nation and the dissertation argues that they are best categorized under the rubric of “cinema de l’urgence;” [crisis cinema] a deterritorialized cinema, devoid of a national industry, and which addresses Algeria’s immediate political, social and cultural reality via a multiplicity of marginal voices as well as languages. Through its analysis of such texts, the dissertation aims to bring attention to a corpus of understudied works and to highlight their national specificity.
INTRODUCTION

Born in the maquis and initially used as a “combat weapon” and a form of “testimony”\(^1\) during the war of Liberation (1954-1962), early Algerian cinema and many of the key structures that helped shaped post-independence filmmaking were set up to serve the newly implemented nation-state building measures. Used simultaneously as propagandistic tool in the service of the construction of the nation-state and its associated identity, Algerian cinema aimed to circumscribe the Algerian nation whose strength was to be found in its “unified” people, and the efforts of the latter in adhering and embracing the then state agenda. Algerian cinema up to the late 1980s, functioned thus as a state-monitored discursive space, delineated by state directives and preoccupied with celebrating and promoting the birth of a nation. Understood thus, Algerian cinema was synonymous with national or state cinema and was institutionalized as early as 1964. Today however, and as will be explained as some length throughout this study, Algerian-directed features are best conceptualized by the term “cinéma de l’urgence,” [crisis cinema]. The narratives that these recent films offer bespeak an acknowledgement of the bloody events of the 1990s and of the importance of the image that is commensurate with the need of Algerians to be visually present on the global scene.

In *Naissance du cinéma algérien* (1971),\(^2\) Boudjedra distinguishes three overall phases that make up the evolution of Algerian cinema. Each phase corresponds in part to distinct thematic concerns. The early days (up to the early 1970s) covered themes of the war of Liberation in an attempt to rewrite history from a non-Western perspective while at the same time establishing the parameters of an Algerian national and cultural identity. In addition to celebrating the heroism of the people, early Algerian cinema championed many of


\(^2\) Although no longer available in print, both Stora (2001) and Armes (2005) have used Boudjedra’s study in their respective works.
the state’s initiatives in building the country’s economy while enforcing the use of Arabic as the official language and promoting collective efforts as opposed to individual ones; all of these being central to the nationalist project. The second phase of Algerian cinema was mostly framed and guided by the agrarian reforms implemented by the state, however this phase also marks the beginning of industrialization under Boumediene’s presidency. The third phase (late 1970s) gradually stepped away from collective representations and turned to questions surrounding for instance the position of women in Algeria, young people, humor, popular culture(s), unemployment, and so forth.  

Algerian cinema from the 1980s and up to the 1990s evolved more assertively from a thematic standpoint and geared itself towards thorny questions of sexuality, social inequalities, modernity and traditional cultures. In particular, the events of October 1988 provided filmmakers with abundant new material to work with, enabling as such the crafting of new visual narratives both historically and socially relevant to postcolonial Algeria.

October 1988 and Algerian filmmaking today: a brief overview

Les enfants nés après l’indépendance ont été bercés par des discours pleins d’héroïsme, pleins d’anecdotes généreuses et d’abnégations […] Les enfants se sont sentis coupables de n’avoir pas participé à la guerre. (Chouikh 1997: 49)

Children born after the independence were cradled by discourses full of heroism, and stories of self-sacrifice and generosity […] The children felt guilty for not having participated in the war.

On the eve of October 4, 1988, hundreds of frustrated young Algerians descended upon the streets of Algiers. Starting in the neighborhood of Bab el-Oued, the riots spread like wildfire throughout the country and lasted over two weeks. On October 5, President Chadli Bendjedid declared a state of emergency, and the military’s intervention led to violent clashes with civilians. Shots were fired in the crowds leaving hundreds wounded, dead and missing. These insurgences were primarily the result of a severe economic crisis, an inept
and corrupt bureaucracy, a sharp rise in Islamic fundamentalism, and the worn-out use of the Liberation struggle as a pacifier by oblivious leaders who had at once become part of an exclusive and wealthy social elite.

September 1989 marked a new beginning in political management with the lifting of the ban preventing the participation of opposition political parties. September 1989 also witnessed the birth of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) as a legitimate political party and numerous other parties.\(^4\) The first round of parliamentary elections held in December 1991 clearly indicated that the FIS, which had won 188 seats, was set to take over governing the nation’s affairs after the impending second round of voting. Faced with this unexpected turn of events, the military promptly acted and cancelled the second round of the elections, preventing \textit{de facto} further involvement in political matters by the FIS and other parties. The military took matters further by banning the FIS as a legitimate party and imprisoning a number of its key activists. These military-led actions prompted more than a decade of spiraling violence in Algeria for the FIS and other groups counter-reacted and retaliated in a most deadly way. The Islamic Salvation Army (AIS, the FIS’s armed wing which likewise supported the implementation of an Islamic state) and other groups of radical Islamic guerillas initiated bloodshed in which approximately 100,000\(^5\) were killed. Entire villages were wiped from the map and disturbing reports of children, women and the elderly being found dead with their throats cut, or raped or kidnapped became numerous. 

Over the past decade, many have sought to address and explain the nature and impact of such violence in a variety of ways. According to Adamson for example, this complex web of nation-wide violence following the cancellation of the second round of elections in 1991 in Algeria has “deeper historical roots that are specific to the Algerian situation” (75). To Adamson, this widespread violence has much to do with the historical past of Algeria as a former colony and as a Muslim society. To Messaoudi, an Algerian feminist, the 1988 October uprising and the violence which followed are both the results of economic pitfalls,

\(^4\) According to Stora’s study, 44 parties in all came into existence between 1989 and 1990. (Stora 2000: 198)

\(^5\) This number is open to debate. Estimates vary from 50,000 to 150,000 (Stora’s study is a good example, see p. 215 and p. 240 where he records 70,000 dead since 1992). At any rate, I suspect that the exact number of victims will fail to be accurate as long as official records fail to include the exact numbers of those who disappeared. Many never came forward to report the names of those who disappeared. In addition, many have never been recorded in any official state documentation (here, I am thinking of the rural populations that have been recurrent targets of violence). Add to this the many seniors (60+) who never had their birth date recorded thus are invisible since not on record.
political mishaps, military involvement and most importantly, power struggles amongst different factions within the state and Islamic partisan groups.

To the filmmakers dealt with in this study, the bloody decade often referred to as “les années noires” [the black years] has prompted a desire and a need to chronicle the impact of the violence and tell stories from the margins via the use of sometimes atypical and sometimes ordinary characters. Most importantly, the 1988 October revolts marked the end of Algerian cinema as understood until then. Audiences were already turning their backs from the theaters and sought refuge in the safety of their home, in front of their television sets. The advent of satellite dishes coupled with the crumbling audiovisual infrastructures and general insecurity formed a new challenge to those filmmakers hoping to lure Algerians back into the theaters. The 2003 special edition of Cahiers du Cinéma reports that audiences went from 9 million in 1980 to half a million in 1992. By the same token, since 1999, the total number of theaters has fallen to just 12 throughout the country. This is a far cry from the 458 theaters Algeria had following its independence from France.

Following the 1988 October revolts and a long period of state control (which had started in 1962), Algerian cinema began to undergo significant institutional changes prompted by the state in an attempt to initiate a series of reforms (institutional, legal, political, economic and so forth) aimed at substituting a historically controlled centralized system for a market-oriented one. These measures gradually led to the complete withdrawal of state funding in 1998-9. As a result, three of the major agencies in charge of audiovisual productions were shut down. These include the Centre algérien des arts et de l’industrie cinématographiques (CAAIC), the centre de l’Entreprise nationale de production audiovisuelle (ENPA) and the Agence nationale des actualités filmées (ANAF). This disengagement of leading Algerian film agencies threw an already fragile film industry into an unpredictable free market economy (both within and outside Algeria’s borders).

Despite these circumstances, at the time of writing a total of approximately 39 feature films by Algerian directors have been released since 1990. This total does not include the work of directors of Algerian origin born or raised in France by immigrant parents, members of the so-called “Beur” generation. Among the 39 films released since 1990 are eight shot with support from the “Année de l’Algérie” (2003) in France, a year-long cycle of cultural initiatives jointly funded by the French and Algerian states. In all, 14 movies were funded by
the “Année de l’Algérie,” of which five have yet to be released. Although the Algerian state (specifically through the efforts made by the Minister of Culture, Ms. Khalida Messaoudi) is striving to re-enter the business of movie financing and production, the majority of films by Algerian filmmakers since 1990 have been made with little or no support from the Algerian authorities. Most of the features financed primarily by the Algerian state during this period have not been released outside Algeria; rare exceptions to this are the movies directed by Mohamed Chouikh and Yamina Bachir-Chouikh. Since then, the reduced role of the Algerian state combined with the growing diversity of funding sources and filming locations have made co-production a crucial component of contemporary Algerian filmmaking (particularly since 1988).

Undoubtedly, the free market economy model pushed Algerian filmmakers in different directions. Notable efforts are being made to attract foreign investors. The latest initiative was launched at the 2005 Locarno Film Festival where filmmakers from the Maghreb (Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria) were invited to an “open door” workshop to discuss and find a way to network their existing and future productions. This initiative taken by the Swiss Ministry for Foreign Affairs’ Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) encouraged the collaboration of 23 Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian directors in promoting their work worldwide and in attracting the needed funds. A total of seven Algerian filmmakers were present. Among those, Lyes Salem, Jean-Pierre Lledo, Mohamed Chouikh, Mouzahem Yahia, Saïd Ould-Khelifa, Brahim Tsaki, and Belkhacem Hadjaj.

Algerian cinema and Algerian filmmaking have never been the subject of abundant studies among film scholars. In fact, contemporary studies of both categories have been and continue to be scattered among other film studies pertaining to either Arab cinema as a whole or African cinema. I feel confident in asserting that very little of a scholarly nature has been written on Algerian cinema although countless newspaper articles can be found in the Franco-Algerian press relating the ups and downs of the industry. In the light of the recent political and civil upheavals in Algeria, the aim of this dissertation is to examine recent Algerian-directed features and investigate the ways in which they challenge the concept of national cinema. Whereas the 2003 special edition of Cahiers du Cinéma is asking “Où va le cinéma algérien?.” [Where is Algerian cinema going?] I am asking here what Algerian filmmaking is, making thereby a distinction between Algerian cinema (by which I mean the
films that were fully financed by the state) and Algerian filmmaking (by which I mean recent films made with little or no contribution from the state since 1988). Of Swedish cinema, Jean-Luc Godard once said that there is no Swedish cinema but that there are Swedish filmmakers. The same presumably could be said here insofar that there is no Algerian cinema per se but there are Algerian filmmakers. The period of interest in this study thus concerns the films made between 1988 and 2003.

As early as the 1980s and increasingly after the start of the 1990s, those who have been able to scramble together funds and pursue filmmaking became preoccupied with questioning the ideology of nationhood that had long shaped the Algerian state and the first generation of Algerian cinema. Earlier Algerian cinema, even as it expressed a belief in the cohesion of the people of Algeria in the face of French occupation, seemed to share a need for a renewal. Oppression at the hands of France and its subsequent representation on screen (a good example being the Battle of Algiers by Pontecorvo) had portrayed a seemingly homogeneous nation ready to shape and define itself. This representation progressively began to be questioned in the 1980s and the 1990s. In particular, the films discussed in the following chapters draw on various representations that stress the failing attempts of the state to “unify” the people of Algeria under the same banner.

**Dissertation structure**

This dissertation includes five chapters, the first of which offers an overview of the literature on the concept of national cinema and related concepts. Drawing on this review, chapter one aims to construct a theoretical framework best suited to contemporary Algerian filmmaking and outlines the consequences of the state’s withdrawal from funding Algerian-directed film productions. Chapter 2, 3, 4 and 5 each take a closer look at four Algerian filmmakers who differ greatly in their social and educational backgrounds, film work and career patterns but whose respective works share common concerns (terrorism, gender, sexual orientation, television, etc.) and cultural transformations. As will be made apparent in each chapter, contemporary Algerian filmmaking cannot be divorced from the conflicting political events that are at play in contemporary Algeria. In order to understand both the
strengths and limitations of each filmmaker dealt with in this study, each chosen film will be situated in its “national,” cultural, social, and historical context.

Although no longer supported by the state, and in spite of the continuous threats made by various groups to the Francophone intelligentsia of Algeria, Mohamed Chouikh decided to remain in Algeria. Chouikh is best representative of the 1954 generation of filmmakers who came to the profession with an avid disposition to start rolling the cameras and telling Algeria’s histories from scratch. As will be seen in Chapter 2, *The Ark of the Desert* (1997) possesses a visual and narrative quality engendered both by the conditions of filming and the director’s considerable knowledge of Arab and Berber oral traditions. In addition, the use of parables in Chouikh’s cinema and the poetic dimension of *The Ark of the Desert* clearly make for a cinema whose hopes and fears concerning the recent past and current social environment in modern and future Algeria are made particularly evident.

Upon his relocation to France in the late 1980s, Merzak Allouache is perhaps the clearest – some might say, the only – example of an Algerian filmmaker who has successfully transitioned from being a state-funded filmmaker to an independent filmmaker. Mostly interested in writing bridge narratives taking place between France and his homeland, Allouache is still very much concerned with questions pertaining to Algeria and is particularly interested in the social and economic conditions of the younger generation. Through the analysis of Allouache’s film *Bab el-Oued City* (1994), chapter 3 seeks to highlight some of the inherent difficulties encountered by displaced filmmakers in France. Most importantly, Allouache’s position enables us to grasp the extent of Algerian filmmakers’ limitations when it comes to the representation of certain political and social realities in Algeria, and the transmission of these realities to their respective targeted audience.

Yamina-Bachir Chouikh’s background as a montage specialist and the worldwide success of her first full-length feature *Rachida* (2002) made her an ideal selection for this study. Her addressing of gender-related issues and Islamic fundamentalism amidst an unpredictable political climate is particularly pertinent to postcolonial Algeria. Centered on Bachir-Chouikh’s feature *Rachida* (2002), the fourth chapter in this study is based on an interdisciplinary approach encompassing cultural, social, political, economic and historical dimensions pertaining to the position of women within Algeria.
Chapter 5 turns to Nadir Moknèche’s new and upcoming cinema which bears all the marks of ultra-cosmopolitanism and transnationalism in Algiers. Part of the younger generation of Algerian filmmakers, Moknèche’s debuts are celebrated for their innovation and the challenges they present to traditional views of Algeria and its people, particularly women. Like Allouache, but perhaps more assertively so, Moknèche’s second film *Viva Laldjérie* (2004) boldly questions the dominant heteronormative status of Algerian society and showcases a youth clearly at loss within its own social sphere and in search of a more accepting society.

Although each filmmaker chosen in this study is positioned differently vis-à-vis Algeria and is working differently to get his or her craft on screen, all films studied here address complex questions pertaining to nation, identity, the sense of belonging and much more. They each interrogate the fragile and changing nature of national identity in Algeria. In some cases (as seen with Moknèche and Allouache), the films show some of the internal dynamics that shape the cultural and social mutations of young people in Algeria. In each chapter, I first explore the director’s distinctive position and influences. I then turn specifically to the making of the selected feature and the filmic text itself before addressing style and thematics, which I discuss at some length in each chapter. I finally address infrastructural questions of production, distribution and exhibition and audience (whenever applicable) in order to circumscribe common and defining characteristics. We will see that for each filmmaker, dependency on external state-aid mechanisms and independent producers is further complicated by market demands and sometimes minimal screen exposure, guaranteed mostly by festival selections and similar outlets.

Overall, the objective of this study is to consider actual filmmaking practices among Algerian filmmakers and the national specificity of their work via the counter-narratives of the nation that each film provides, all within a specific context, that of the bloody events of the 1990s. In Higson’s view, histories of national cinema are to be understood as histories of crisis and conflicts, of negotiations and resistance. As Hayward puts it “a national cinema can problematise a nation by exposing its masquerade of unity” (2000: 101). In the case of contemporary Algerian filmmaking, I argue in the context of each chapter that if resistance constitutes an essential part of national cinema then today’s directed-Algerian productions fall most clearly within the rubric of “cinéma de l’urgence,” as outlined in chapter one.
CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW, THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter broadly considers the scholarship on national cinema(s) that is most relevant to the Algerian case. The term “national” presents many challenges, particularly in relation to those cinemas emerging from post- or neo-colonial situations. Indeed, the thorny dialectical relationship between film and nation has been for quite some time the center of fruitful debates in film studies; debates that have been deemed increasingly essential as Hollywood and internationally financed co-productions are leading the way on the global audiovisual scene and shaping new patterns of consumption worldwide while—at the same time—contributing further to the unevenness of film distribution and exhibition.\(^6\) In addition, transnational and global practices at the level of production have raised important questions concerning the fate of local, national and regional cinemas and the conceptual framework necessary to understand them.

As noted by Higson, current debates on national cinema(s) are “characterized by a tension between those who are working on the political economics of cinema and those who analyze and investigate textuality and the putative spectator, and by the corresponding absence of much work on actual audiences, beyond the examination of critical discourses” (2002: 65). Drawing upon a range of theoretical perspectives, my intent here is to lay out an analytical grid suitable to recent Algerian-directed productions enabling us to ask, and in some cases answer, the following key questions: what is the “national” specificity of the films selected in this study? Can these productions help us distinguish a cinema that we might still call a “national cinema”? In other words, do recent films directed by Algerian filmmakers still articulate a national coherence? To what extent might we be inclined to use the concept of national cinema, particularly if this given body of works has long ceased to

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\(^6\) For a rich and insightful study on all aspects (financial, labor, etc.) of co-productions and blockbusters, see *Global Hollywood* (2001) Eds. Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria and Richard Maxwell.
contribute to the building of a monolithic Arabo-Muslim national identity and has undertaken a slow yet increasingly assertive dismantling of previously aestheticized images of the Algerian nation?

When it comes to contemporary Algerian filmmaking, the link between cinema and the now much debated term “national” becomes highly complex and problematic particularly if we consider both the development of Algerian cinema following the independence of Algeria and the transnational/multiple border-crossing nature of films directed by Algerian filmmakers in recent years. As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, the state has played a key role in Algerian cinema since its inception. Early productions contributed to some extent in shaping a national, homogeneous identity meant not only to inspire a sense of belonging unique to Algerians but also to celebrate the collective participation and sacrifice of the latter in building the newly independent nation. In recent years however, political upheavals, social unrest and unprecedented human losses revealed deep fractures in every significant area pertaining to the make-up of the Algerian “nation.” As such, internal political and religious factions compounded by external influences of various forms led many to ponder whether the rupture between nation and state marked the end of a “national” identity whose cultural and religious foundation no longer serves as a unifying factor.

Increasingly, debates surrounding the fate of nation-states have inspired critical discussions pertaining to such questions. Such discussions may be found in various publications such as *The Postnational Self: Belonging and Identity* (2002), co-edited by Hedetoft and Hjort, and where questions of “belonging” – for instance – touch and re-touch upon analytical frameworks surrounding the emergence of secular nationalisms, particularly in regions of the Third World. In “Transatlantic Images of Belonging,” Hall writes that “belonging needs to be re-imagined because the world has changed. The nation-state is being hollowed out by global forces, making traditional identities less and less adequate” (53). Such re-imagination has been made particularly evident in contemporary Algerian filmmaking. In my analysis of selected films through chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5, I argue that the representation of a so-called homogenous identity and culture in Algeria is irremediably fragmented, and is at times—as illustrated in chapter 4—challenged at its very core. Paradoxically however, and as seen in chapter 5, these representations reveal the undeniable mark of a certain “Algerianness” leading to the projection of a “national” imaginary that
opposes the official discourse in that it acknowledges social and cultural specificities that are invariably rooted in the contemporary fabric of Algeria’s society, but have remained until now unacknowledged by the state.

Among many pertinent and partially overlapping concepts relating to the notion of national cinema, I consider below key rubrics, highlighting their relevance (or lack thereof) to contemporary Algerian filmmaking. Most importantly, and to better introduce as well as situate this particular understudied body of audiovisual works within its many contexts, I have in each of the following chapters let the filmmaker’s voice take center stage for the voices of these filmmakers have been significant if not necessarily determinant in shaping analytical considerations. As a result, the elements I draw together in the concluding part of this chapter are best conceptualized by the terms, “cinéma de l’urgence,” [crisis cinema] which I have borrowed from filmmakers Yamina Bachir-Chouikh and Belkacem Hadjadj. Noting the presence of a “littérature de l’urgence” based on the bloody events of the 1990s, both filmmakers tentatively used the terms “cinéma algérien de l’urgence” (my emphasis) to designate—at the most elementary level—those works that are both directly or indirectly concerned with Algeria’s crisis, or simply put, terrorism. Tensions within each cinematic text analyzed in this study are thus all connected to the Algerian crisis. As such, this cinema unmistakably bears the marks of its own local cultural, religious, social and historical specificity tied to Algeria’s colonial past, but most importantly post-colonial present.

In this study, I am using the term “cinéma de l’urgence” [crisis cinema] as a descriptive and conceptual rubric to better frame the constitutive elements (political, cultural, religious, social, logistical) of the selected films discussed at length in chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5. Directed by Algerian-born filmmakers, the core basis of this cinema’s thematic is essentially motivated by national-based preoccupations that address Algeria’s immediate political, social and cultural reality via a multiplicity of voices as well as languages. In doing so, this cinema not only dismantles a previously crafted homogenous national identity, but also confirms the death of the much-celebrated Algerian hero (or “mujahid”) in earlier films only to replace him with marginal characters (women, youths, gays) or regional minority groups. In addition, and as best illustrated in chapter 3, this “cinéma de l’urgence” primarily posits the nation as a site of tensions and competing ideologies. In this sense, and as seen in chapter 2, “cinéma de
l’urgence” is typically delineated by a political and sometimes ideological perspective that opposes more or less assertively and using various aesthetic devices the official discourse of the state.

From a logistical standpoint, this cinema is best defined as a deterritorialized, “floating” or “orphan” cinema. No Algerian-based industry supports its production whose pre- and post-phases are mostly made possible by a variety of external European and non-European funding sources (both public and private), and in some cases, public local resources. Editing, marketing and distributing components are mostly handled and managed abroad (usually in France). The crews are typically diverse and include both European and non-European individuals. This “cinéma de l’urgence” has key similarities with a variety of filmmaking practices that include, but are not exclusive to:

1) Third Cinema (use of non-professional actors, minimal equipment, difficult and at times unsafe or potentially life-threatening situations forcing the director and his/her crew to film quickly without the possibility of recording more than one take);

2) “Accented” cinema (as elaborated by Naficy and whose characteristics include various elements such as orality, asynchronicity, voice-over narration, and so forth. This cinema has many of the Third Cinema aesthetics);

3) Mainstream and/or commercial cinema (particularly that of Europe, and most notable in Allouache’s cinema). This cinema is typically defined by the universal appeal of its straightforward linear narratives, continued editing and mise-en-scene.

Inside locations as is the case for Allouache and Moknèche may be filmed in studios outside of Algeria. Finally, and unless this body of works benefits from the international exposure provided by pertinent and interested festivals worldwide, this cinema—unlike the much-favored Iranian films—has little chance of becoming economically viable. Each film is the sole result of the director’s personal initiative and motivations in securing funds and distribution. Working with shoestring budgets means that each filmmaker takes on different roles placing him/her thus in an unmistakable authorial seat. In other words, this cinema is enabling the survival of a new breed of postcolonial “auteurs,” whose multiple positions (social, cultural, political, and geographical), and voices make for a body of works whose
varying characteristics lead us to consider different conceptual approaches. Thus, while more established categories seem to fit well with early Algerian cinema (that predating 1988), we will see that contemporary Algerian-filmmaking straddles different rubrics that are exclusively or only partly relevant to its logistical, thematic and other constituents. The present chapter is divided into three main parts, each covering a relevant body of literature. The first of these examines the concept of “national cinema.” The second section looks closely at the notion of “Third Cinema.” The third draws on Naficy’s important study *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001), exploring interrelated and increasingly important concepts such as transnational cinema which offer more nuanced alternatives to categories of “Third” or “national” cinema.

**National cinema**

Canonical film theory (as noted for instance by Crofts 2002; Gabriel 1986 and Stam 1991) has tended to be Eurocentric or Hollywoodcentric. Over the past decade however, the scholarly corpus on national cinemas has widened to include a growing number of pertinent studies dedicated to cinemas other than mainstream, European or US. Thus, there exist countless publications on national cinemas focusing on different regions and countries of the world. Arab filmmaking has for instance inspired a number of studies such as *The Cinema in the Arab Countries* (1966), edited by George Sadoul, and which offers a concise historical and geographical based anthology which offers a variety of articles retracing the advent and development of all Arab cinemas but also articles pertaining to Arab culture and its visual representation. Viola Shafik’s *Arab cinema* (1998) is another study, but which focuses specifically on the cultural identity of selected Arab-directed films. Without dismissing their historical and social contexts, Shafik primarily examines the aesthetic components of Arab films such as *mise-en-scène* and editing. Roy Armes and Lizbeth Makmus’ study *Arab & African Film Making* (1991) approaches its corpus from two angles. First, it examines the emergence of cinema in Africa and the Arab world within its historical and geographical contexts, and then addresses the particularities of those cinemas such as narration and other identifiable and recurrent components such as the representation of key characters, one example being that of the hero. Lina Khatib’s *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in*
the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World (2006), includes among other elements an insightful reading of fundamentalism on screen, and situates such representations within a contemporary context. Denise Brahimi’s Cinémas d’Afrique Francophone et du Maghreb (1997) is a condensed yet concise historical study of African francophone cinemas and North African cinemas, and goes over their institutional framework as well as the main challenges they face at the level of production and narration. Brahimi’s study also includes short case studies and concludes by highlighting key areas of concern to those filmmakers from francophone Africa and the Maghreb. Brahimi foresees a difficult future for these selected cinemas whose survival depends on their willingness to abide by market demands. In a similar study, Roy Armes has authored the first Anglophone book pertaining exclusively to North African films which include that of Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria. Titled Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film (2005), Armes’ study is a helpful reference for those seeking to get a better understanding of these three cinemas, their respective development and thematic patterns. Covering different time frames, this work also offers fifteen case studies, each of which deals with a particular thematic. Overall, the theoretical frameworks applied to these cinemas vary based on multiple perspectives (historical, political, textual, among others), and often include elements that are uniquely designed to fit within their chosen cinema.

Apart from numerous studies on specific national cinemas, there are also works surrounding the concept and definition of national cinema itself. Among the most recent and substantial anthologies are: Cinema & Nation (2000), co-edited by Hjort and MacKenzie, Film and Nationalism (2002), edited by Alan Williams, Theorising National Cinema (2006), co-edited by Vitali and Willemen which reproduces previous essays such as Stephen Crofts’ “Reconceptualizing National Cinema/S” (1993). It is noteworthy that this last anthology is the only one that includes an article pertaining to Arab cinema, “The Quest for/Obsession with the National in Arabic Cinema” (2006) written by Sabry Hafez. Among influential leaders in this field of studies are Andrew Higson (British cinema), John Hill (British cinema), Stephen Crofts, Susan Hayward (French cinema), Thomas Elsaesser (German cinema), Tom O’Regan (Australian cinema), and Ella Shohat (Israeli cinema), to cite a few. Generally, authors have drawn on Benedict Anderson’s seminal study Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (1983) and on Ernest
Gellner’s *Nation and Nationalism* (1983) for whom nationalism is what creates nations and not the other way around. In Anderson’s view, “print-language is what invents nationalism” (134). Most importantly, the nation, Anderson adds, “is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (ibid.). His notion of “imagined community” has been reprised by many film scholars only to be further challenged. Rick Altman for instance—as noted by Williams in his introduction to *Film and Nationalism*—points to limitations in Anderson’s concept in that it fails “to acknowledge the ongoing nature of the process he has described” (1999: 198).

There is not a single definition of national cinema or, as Higson puts it, “a single universally accepted discourse” (2002:52). As a filmmaking practice, national cinemas are best delineated by a wide range of criteria that include, but are not limited to, modes of production, distribution, exhibition, consumption, (national) culture(s), politics, thematics, style, and so forth. Thus, definitions of national cinema typically involve a variety of factors: from infrastructural questions, production, distribution, and exhibition to history (i.e. narratives of past and present history), and language. Shohat and Stam have asserted that “all films are in a sense national” (2003:10) in that they are “the products of national industries, produced in national languages, portraying national situations, and recycling national intertexts (literatures, folklores)” (ibid.). As such, they all “project national imaginaries” (ibid.). Moreover, as we shall see later, a cinema might still be deemed national even if its production is not solely located within the national borders of the nation it is said to belong to.

Overall, I find that studies of national cinema are less worried about re-formulating a concept than they are about revising preexisting methodological approaches. Higson for example identifies four approaches to defining national cinema: the first one being in economic terms, the second being a text-based approach, the third one is a “consumption-based” approach, and the fourth approach being a criticism-led one that “tends to reduce national cinema to the terms of a quality art cinema […] rather than one that appeals to the desires and fantasies of popular audiences” (2002: 52-53).

National cinemas may also be defined in terms of cultural specificity, identity and difference and or comparatively (e.g. in contrast to other cinemas such as Hollywood) as
does O’Regan, for instance, in regard to Australian cinema. In what follows, I will explore O’Regan’s, Crofts’ and Higson’s influential contributions to the concept and theorization of national cinema. Starting with O’Regan’s wide and most complete approach to national cinema, we will define how Algerian filmmaking might, on the basis of O’Regan’s approach, be said to bear some of the characteristics of a national cinema.

In *Australian National Cinema* (1996), O’Regan defines national cinemas as those

made of the films and film production industry of particular nations. National cinemas involve relations between, on the one hand, the national film texts and the national and international film industries and, on the other hand, their various social, political and cultural contexts. These supply a means of differentiating cinema product in domestic and international circulation. […] National cinemas also partake of a broader ‘conversation’ with Hollywood and other national cinemas. (1)

When distinguishing national cinemas from Hollywood mainstream, O’Regan points to different components such as industry, screen texts or narratives and the specificities of these in particular national contexts. O’Regan’s rather elastic definition indicates that national cinemas 1) emanate from a country equipped with an industry for its cinema, 2) foster relationships with international film industries while maintaining their own national industry, 3) engage in a dialogue with national contexts (social, political and cultural) while also communicating with external influences. In other words, national cinemas—most specifically Australian cinema since it is the object of O’Regan’s study—are defined in part by elements constitutive of “internal” national spaces and in part by their relationship to international film industries and other national cinemas. More recently, O’Regan defines national cinemas in a broader, yet more specific manner:

National cinemas are simultaneously an aesthetic and production movement, a critical technology, a civic project of state, an industrial strategy and an
This definition appears in some ways problematic due to O’Regan’s suggestion that national cinemas have tended to become a counter-reaction to Hollywood, which the author also defines as a national cinema (92). Understood thus, national cinemas would appear to be reactive cinemas that exist solely to defend themselves against dominant Hollywood productions. Yet, other studies have shown that national cinemas are also motivated in varying degrees by their own agenda or purposes. They can, for instance—as was the case of early Algerian cinema—serve as a nation-building device. However, O’Regan argues that with a few exceptions, such as Indian and Egyptian cinemas, national cinemas outside Hollywood generally lack strength in their own domestic markets (91), and paradoxically, have to be seen as “manifestations” of internationalization, or “vehicles for international integration” (97). According to O’Regan, national cinemas are “structurally marginal, fragile and dependent on outside help” (92). As a result, there is a need for in-house help, either in the form of state subsidies (for example, the CNC -Centre de la Cinématographie in France) or other policies that aim to protect national industries and help them create their own space on the global scene and their own national scene. As such, in O’Regan’s view:

National cinemas provide a means to identify, assist, legitimate, polemicize, project, and otherwise create a space nationally and internationally for non-Hollywood filmmaking activity. Just as ‘the international’ makes no sense without nations, so, in cinema terms ‘national’ makes no sense without ‘le défi américain’ (97).

These observations take into account the role of national cinemas simultaneously as carriers of national cultures and as contributors to an international exchange, or as O’Regan puts it: “National cinemas are one of the means by which cultural transfers are routinely accomplished in the international cinema” (111). In other words, producing a national cinema helps maintain equilibrium in the transfer and exchanges of cultural codes and practices at the international level. In a sense, O’Regan joins Hill, who believes that a national cinema
should be viewed in terms of “the value of home-grown cinema to the cultural life of a nation and, hence, the importance of supporting indigenous film-making in an international market dominated by Hollywood” (11).\(^7\) In O’Regan’s view and while drawing on Elsaesser’s assertion that Hollywood and national cinemas are “communicating vessels” (qtd in O’Regan, 1994: 26): “The local and the international are ineradicably mixed in the constitution of the national cinema project” (O’Regan 2002: 111). At the same time O’Regan observes that “most national cinemas are not coterminous with their nation-state” (126). In addition, they operate “within the multiethnic context” (131).

O’Regan’s studies provide an ample conceptual groundwork, and based on his observations above, national cinemas have—in a broad sense—the following observable characteristics:

a) national cinemas have their own in-house industry;

b) national cinemas react to international cinematic output (or to quote O’Regan, they are a ‘manifestation’ to internationalization);

c) with the exception of a few (India, Egypt), national cinemas do not generally dominate their own domestic market;

d) national cinemas do not pose a threat to Hollywood;

e) national cinemas are dependent upon outside help;

f) national cinemas are contributing partners in cultural exchanges on the global scene (i.e. they are both receivers and senders of national cultures);

g) national cinemas may not be directly related to their nation-state;

h) national cinemas are themselves functioning within a multi-ethnic context.

Not only does O’Regan take into account infrastructural aspects of national cinemas, but he also includes in his observations other pertinent dimensions such as the global, the cultural, the social, the historical, the ethnic and the political (which I have not reviewed here in detail given that O’Regan’s principal case study applies to Australian cinema). When applied to Algerian filmmaking, some of the above characteristics may prove to be problematic as they either do not apply, only partly apply or fully apply. For example, Algeria no longer has a state-financed national cinema industry and the small private

Algeria-based production, and distribution companies\(^8\) do not—unlike Hollywood—make up for the lack of a state-funded national industry. Armes rightly points out that: “In order to develop a large-scale national film production, a country needs a secure domestic distribution base with well-developed exhibition circuits” (1987: 41). However such conditions do not exist in Algeria. Algerian filmmaking does not dominate its own market (which is overrun by pirated videos, Egyptian, Indian and Hollywood films); still less does it pose a threat to Hollywood. It does, however, contribute (albeit very minimally and mostly through the venues of international festivals) to a certain cultural exchange at the global level. This exchange is evidently unequal since Algeria receives more than it sends out. This is generally true for most Third World nation-states in Africa.\(^9\)

O’Regan’s outlook on cultural exchanges amongst national cinemas at the international level is an optimistic one and his study lacks a certain postcolonial optic, one which according to Bhabha “bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order” (1999: 190). As Mohamed Chouikh puts it: “Dans cette bataille sans merci, l’Algérie et le tiers monde font figure de nains de jardin” (2000: 8). [In this merciless battle, Algeria and the Third World resemble garden gnomes.]\(^10\) Moreover, Algerian filmmaking today depends almost 100% on outside funding, mainly from Europe. This economic dependence towards European nations coupled with the lack of an in-house industry may be seen as subjecting Algerian filmmaking to “neocolonial pressures” (Shohat and Stam 1994: 30).

It remains true that, even if production teams and casts are not entirely composed of Algerian nationals, the subject matter of most (if not all) Algerian-directed features are mostly confined within and concerned with Algeria. To the extent that these directors offer a demonstrably “Algerian” vision of specifically Algerian subject matter – questions which are

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\(^8\) Among private, independent Algerian distributors are: Tassili Films, MD Cine and Cirta Films.

\(^9\) Per Shohat and Stam, the term “Third World” designates: “the colonized, neocolonized, or decolonized nations and ‘minorities’ whose structural disadvantages have been shaped by the colonial process and by the unequal division of international labour.” (Shohat, Stam 1994: 25)

\(^10\) A recent and encouraging development took place in 2005 following a symposium titled "Porte ouvertes: Tunisie, Algérie, Maroc", which was part of the 58th Locarno International Film Festival (3 au 13 août 2005), and during which 30 Maghrebi filmmakers (Algerians are: Mohamed Chouikh, Belkacem Hadjadji, Mouzahem Yahia, Brahim Tsaki, Saïd ould Khelifa, Nadia Cherabi et Malek Bensmaïl) created "Maghreb Cinémas", an international association aiming to promote and develop films made by Maghrebi directors or directors of Maghrebi descent.
among those examined in detail in my case studies – there is at least a prime facie case for regarding them as evidence of the existence of a body of work that could be categorized as Algerian national cinema.

At the same time it should be noted that the recent output of films from Kabyle filmmakers (La montagne de Baya, 1997, by Azzedine Medour, La colline oubliée, 1997, by Aberrahmane Boughermouh or Machaho, 1996, by Belkacem Hadjadj) testifies to a greater freedom for Algerian-born filmmakers who produce films that highlight regional and ethnic differences within Algeria. In this respect, some of the Algerian-directed films do function within a multi-ethnic context that ironically groups these films into a cinema whose multiple discourses are essentially posited against nationalist principles advocating the promotion of a homogenous culture.

As Shohat and Stam remarked: “The topos of a unitary nation often camouflages the possible contradictions among different sectors of a society” (2003: 10). Susan Hayward equally identifies a paradox of national cinema which is now “at cross-purposes with the originating idea of the nation as a unified identity” (95). Hayward notes that, in the case of European nations, for instance, these

…have become, more evidently than ever before, territories of struggles between competing subject positions, narratives and voices, which nationalist discourses attempt to win either by appropriating the diverse cultures and placing them under some sort of illusionist rainbow coalition and integrated whole, or by some vain attempt to wipe out the traces of these struggles. (2000: 94)

John Hill—a historian and theorist of British cinema—believes that national cinemas have the capability of being more critical of the national identity they represent by highlighting that society’s multicultural and/or multiethnic components. To Hill, a national cinema does not have to: “assume the existence of a unique, unchanging, ‘national culture,’” and should be “capable of dealing with social divisions and differences” (1992: 16). This I believe is one of the key characteristics of Algerian-directed features in recent years and one that will be explored fully in separate case studies.
In view of the lack of an industry apparatus in Algeria, O’Regan’s observations might seem unfitting when it comes to Algerian filmmaking. However, given the international financing status of most national cinemas (whether from or displaced from the Third World or not), Algerian filmmaking bears the characteristics of a national cinema which:

1) operates almost 100% independently from the state (or state subsidies);
2) is geographically located both in and out of Algeria and within different spaces including Algeria’s domestic space and European and international spaces (provided that filmmakers succeed in qualifying for international festivals).

Now let us ask this question: if Algerian filmmaking can, mutatis mutandis, be deemed national based on some of the characteristics laid out by O’Regan, then which type of national cinema might it specifically be?

In “Reconceptualising National Cinema/s,” Stephen Crofts distinguishes seven permeable and overlapping categories of national cinemas, which function differently in relation to the state from which they emanate. Crofts also points out that a given cinema may straddle two or more categories:

1) cinemas which differ from Hollywood, but do not compete directly, by targeting a distinct, specialist market sector (such as European-Model Art cinemas that often target specific audiences);
2) those which do not compete directly but do directly critique Hollywood (Third Cinema);
3) European and Third World entertainment cinemas which struggle against Hollywood with limited or no success (Third World and European commercial cinemas);
4) cinemas which ignore Hollywood, an accomplishment managed by a few (India and Hong Kong cinemas);
5) Anglophone cinemas which try to beat Hollywood at its own game (imitation of Hollywood films);
6) Cinemas which work within a wholly state-controlled and often subsidized industry (cinemas of Fascist Germany and Italy, for example);
7) Regional or national cinemas whose culture and/or language take their distance from the nation-states which enclose them (Quebec, Catalan, Aboriginal, Maori, etc.)

Algerian filmmaking could be said to straddle/overlap categories 1, 2, 3 and 7 with the understanding that Third Cinema refers to a cinema that “distinguishes itself politically and largely aesthetically from Hollywood and European art cinema models…” [my emphasis] (Crofts 31) while Third World productions or cinemas refer to “comedies, action genres, musicals and varieties of melodrama/romance/titillation” (ibid.) with “populist” tendencies (ibid.) thus that do not concern themselves with political motivations. Further distinctions between Third World Cinema and Third cinema will be made below.

The 1990s in Algeria were perhaps the most challenging years to Algerian filmmaking. Due to drastic changes at the institutional, political and cultural levels, the few films that managed to be produced were all—in varying degrees—politically concerned such as for example, Les enfants du néon by Brahim Tsaki. However, these films are not necessarily “engagé” as exemplified by Bab el Web from director Merzak Allouache whose “wish is to make films which are popular, accessible to the general public, and not convoluted” (1987: 98). For this reason, Algerian-directed features are composed of works that fall both categories of Third Cinema and Third World productions as described above by Crofts.

As Crofts is particularly interested in the distribution of national cinemas in foreign markets, he looks at their marketing and reception and notes that they are often “limited to specialist exhibition circuits traditionally distinct from those of Hollywood product”11 (39). This is especially true in the case of Algerian-directed films. Finding willing and interested distributors has become an increasingly difficult task that is often left in the hands of the filmmakers. Well-known and well-funded directors such as Merzak Allouache usually get enough screens to draw attention from audiences. Others only get minimal screen exposure.

For example, La colline oubliée (1996), directed by Abderrahmane Bouguermouh, was released in Paris in three theaters for only nine weeks. La montagne de Baya (1997) by

11 These circuits as listed by Crofts include: Art house cinemas, film festivals, specialist television slots, community, workplace and campus screenings.
Azzedine Meddour was released in Paris in three theaters for four weeks. Although released in only two theaters, Belkacem Hadjadj’s *Machaho* (1994) inexplicably remained in select non-mainstream theaters for twenty-eight weeks. On the other hand, *Le harem de Mme Osmane* (2000) Nadir Moknèche’s first full-length feature was released in Paris in five theaters and was screened for a total of sixteen weeks. Tickets sales for this film were fairly high for an Algerian-directed feature as records show 64,837 tickets were sold across France. The highest sale record for an Algerian-directed feature is most likely that of Allouache, *Chouchou* (2003), which reportedly sold 4 million tickets in France alone. More often than not, Algerian-directed features are shown in theaters that specialize in foreign and/or European art cinemas. They are also shown in various “Maison pour Tous” (Community centers open to all). Marketing and publicity for these films heavily rely on hear-say, ethnic-oriented radio (such as Beur FM) and local papers which target specific audiences. In addition, filmmakers such as Moknèche do not hesitate to roll up their sleeves and do their own marketing in select neighborhoods and stores that are frequented by potentially interested audiences (mainly Algerian immigrants and second or third generations of Maghrebi descent). In spite of these admirable efforts, the exposure of and the carving out of a space for Algerian-directed films in both foreign and domestic markets remains minimal. As a result, building a brand name for Algerian-directed features in audiovisual spaces has been and remains a difficult task in spite of routine press coverage and scholarly articles (both Francophone and Anglophone).

In the absence of an Algerian film industry, Algerian films may in principle be more readily identified on the basis of a specific national identity. Higson insightfully observed that:

To promote films in terms of their national identity is also to secure a prominent collective profile for them in both the domestic and the international marketplace, a means of selling those films by giving them a distinctive brand name. (2000: 69)

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12 This data was collected by and obtained at the BIFI [Bibliothèque du film] in Paris.
Unfortunately, not all Algerian-directed features make it across the Mediterranean. Filmmakers face selective distributors who are looking for films with universal appeal and/or perhaps a certain exotic flavor. In this respect, Crofts writes: “Such exclusions can enable the resultant cultural constructions of the exporting country in terms of the sun-tinted spectacles of armchair tourism” (39). He adds further that “foreign distribution of national cinemas, then, will tend to erase the culturally specific” (40). A very specific example comes to mind to illustrate Crofts’ observation and it is that of *The Desert Rose* (1989), a film directed by Mohamed Rachid Benhadj whose narrative evolves around the life of a young disabled man, Moussa, who tends to a rose somewhere in the Sahara’s dunes. When it was screened at the Filmfest D.C in 1991, Neil Hollander—a Paris-based private distributor—noted the film’s potential marketability in Western markets because of its “…intent is to deal with a universal theme rather than a Maghribi problem,” adding that: “The film moves beyond reacting against things and presents world-class cinema dealing with human problems” (Hollander qtd in Simarski 1992: 3). These observations tend to explain why a feature like that of Yamina Bachir-Chouikh, *Rachida* (2001)—which tells of daily terrorism in Algeria—greatly appealed to both domestic, European and non-European audiences. Films may thus be selected based on their universal appeal at the thematic level, but also on the basis of their seemingly unique cultural and geographical specificity. Crofts’ approach to national cinema then does help move the debate along and brings us a little closer to a workable definition of Algerian-directed filmmaking.

Whereas Crofts believes that studies of national cinemas should include “distribution and exhibition as well as production within the nation-state,” (43) other film theorists such as Andrew Higson believe the parameters of those national cinemas “should be drawn at the site of consumption” (2002: 52). In Higson’s view, studies of national cinemas should take into account “the range of films within a nation-state,” (63) audiences’ patterns (64), and the “range of and relation between discourse about film circulating within that cultural and social formation, and their relative accessibility to different audiences” (ibid.). Higson concludes that looking at patterns of consumption among domestic audiences will help us identify “how actual audiences construct their cultural identity in relation to the various products of the national and international film and television industries, and the conditions under which this is achieved” (65). The question of cultural identity remains important, but it is one which
requires in-depth studies of audiences’ habits and expectations when it comes to both national and international audiovisual productions. Higson’s approach is thus one that includes a sociological perspective, but one that would help define a national audience that enables a national cinema to exist for—as Higson concludes—“what is a national cinema if it doesn’t have an audience?” (2002: 66).

While I agree that looking at domestic audiences’ patterns of consumption might help us define how Algerian-filmmaking might be viewed as a national cinema, it is very difficult to apply this in the case of Algeria. Starting in 1988, patterns of consumption by moviegoers have been interrupted. Audiences’ demographics have changed and Algerians seeking safety from daily terrorism remained home where satellite television, DVDs and the Internet often provided the only entertainment available. I thus join Shohat and Stam when they write: “Contemporary spectatorship must also be considered in the light of changing audiovisual technology” (2003:15). Interestingly, these new forms of entertainment bypass—unlike previous Algerian filmmaking—potential heavy-handed censorship.

In her article, “A Neo-Marxist Approach: World Film Trade and Global Cultural Flows,” Janet Staiger writes that new technologies “easily elude government restrictions, particularly in attempts to prevent nation-state boundaries from being breached” (239). Cultural imports enabled by the advent of satellite dishes in Algeria allow for a multiplicity of influences (both western and non-western) that escape the Algerian state’s control. As stipulated in the Charte d’Alger (1965), 13 Algerian culture, as viewed by the state, “will fight the cultural cosmopolitanism and western impregnation which have contributed to inculcating into many Algerians a contempt for their own language and their national values” (qtd in Abucar 1996: 58). In practice, Western influences (particularly those coming from Anglophone regions, most notably Hollywood) have inevitably infiltrated the cultural national space of Algeria and have shaped specific audiovisual tastes or preferences among the younger generations.

In a 2002 interview, Chouikh shared an interesting story taking place in Algeria and about his son’s audiovisual preferences. As they turned the television on, a French film was playing and Chouikh’s young son asked him to change the channel. Chouikh did as his son

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13 The Charte d’Alger is a body of legal texts which define the legal and constitutional basis of the Algerian state. These documents were first drafted by the FLN (National Liberation Front) in 1964.
wished and changed the channel to a German film. Again, his son asked him to change the channel. He then turned the channel to an Arab film which prompted Chouikh’s son to scream in horror. Chouikh turned the channel once again, this time to an American film. His son was pleased and contently watched the film. When Chouikh asked his son why he enjoyed this particular film, he responded “c’est un film normal” (2002: 71). This little anecdote is a telling one. It might indicate a “décalage” between what young audiences expect to see on screen (mainly entertainment) and what contemporary Algerian filmmaking is attempting to do (aesthetically and thematically).

Algerian filmmaking is confronted with a breed of viewers whose expectations and preferences have been mostly shaped by Western image-makers and other cultural manifestations coming from outside Algeria. As such, these younger generations seem to respond favorably to mainstream audiovisual productions while seemingly shunning contemporary Algerian films or other non-Anglophone productions. Filmmakers seeking to reach a wider audience are thus faced with the task of making films whose recipe includes marketable ingredients found in mainstream cinema. This compromise is not always looked upon favorably for Brahim Tsaki (an Algerian filmmaker) keenly observes: “Nous avons été exclus de l’image pendant des siècles. Et, maintenant, on veut changer notre manière de faire des films” (2002: 71). [We have been excluded from images for centuries and now, they want to change our ways of making films.] At any rate, given the technologies available to Algerian audiences today, it is clear that expectations and patterns can no longer be defined based on what is culturally produced at the local and national levels—if, indeed, they ever were so defined. Apart from television programs which are still controlled and censored by the state, the technological audiovisual entertainment that is accessible in Algeria is currently what maps out the national cultural terrain of Algeria. It is uncontrolled, uncensored, often obtained illegally, and eclectic. In short, Algerians’ audiovisual tastes and expectations are shaped by some sort of visual hybrid assemblage that comes from all corners of the world.

In addition, the number of cinemas in Algeria has been drastically reduced and those that remain are run-down and neglected. Privately owned theaters, which offer screenings of pirated videos, have become meeting grounds for a growing number of unemployed youths, but also a rendez-vous hideout for those who seek to avoid the stern reprimands of self-
appointed religious moral guardians. Other theaters have been transformed into fast food
restaurants (Selma 2002). Moreover, the domestic market in Algeria is for the most part
dominated by Egyptian features, occasional American blockbusters and some Indian features.
Finally, when it comes to surveying audiences’ demographics, patterns and expectations,
First World nation-states might be infrastructurally equipped to do so but nation-states of the
Third World, such as Algeria, have yet to ascertain whether or not their domestic cultural
terrain is one that allows a domestic audience to, not only grow, but also create a need for a
national cinema. Most importantly, from an industrial standpoint, there aren’t arguably
enough Algerian-directed features to constitute a national cinema. Yamina Bachir-Chouikh
points out: “Un film ne fait pas le cinéma algérien. On pourra parler de cinéma algérien
quand on fera 100 ou 120 films par an. Ce n’est pas en faisant un film ou deux, tous les ans,
qu’on peut parler de cinéma algérien (2003: 24). [One film only does not constitute Algerian
cinema. We’ll talk about Algerian cinema when we make 100 or 120 films a year. One or
two films every year does not mean that we can speak of an Algerian cinema.]

From an economic standpoint that considers both production and distribution, we
cannot speak of an Algerian national cinema. However, and bearing in mind that approaches
to national cinema have evolved and continue to evolve in response to many changes varying
in scope and degree (economic, structural, historical...), we can speak of a national cinema
from a textual, critical, and historical perspective. It is likewise important to consider not
only an approach to Algerian-directed features that is flexible enough to encompass all works
directed by Algerian filmmakers - those still residing in Algeria such as Chouikh, those
directed by filmmakers residing alternatively between France and Algeria such as Moknèche
and those who have opted for permanent residence in France or elsewhere such as Allouache
- but also one that would acknowledge the different aesthetic directions taken by Algerian
filmmakers.

Drawing on Jameson’s seminal essay “Third-World Literature in the Era of
Multinational Capitalism” (1986) and Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities (1983),
Hafez writes that “making films in an Arabic culture is never ideologically or cognitively

14 This information is taken from a press article published in Le Jeune Independant (no. 1420, Section: Culture,
December 31st, 2002) in which director Amar Laskri was interviewed.
neutral” (226). He adds: “The national, whether in its purely political or socio-cultural dimensions, has been the mainstay of Arabic cinema since its inception” (228). This certainly is true in the case of early Algerian productions up to the 1980s. Born in the midst of revolution, Algerian cinema was from the start a cinema imbued with the national, starting with the writing and re-writing of Algeria’s history. Looking at Egyptian cinema and cinemas of the Maghrib, Hafez further observes that the latter is more concerned with form and aesthetics, not so much for its awareness of European cinema, but mainly because of its quest for narrative codes capable of expressing a constantly shifting reality, an elusive, complex identity caught between pre-modernity, colonial and post-colonial modernities, and an anticipated emergence of subjectivities unmarked by any form of coloniality. (241)

Algerian filmmakers draw their inspiration from the reality that surrounds them and tell stories where tensions remain the key denominator of Algerian subjectivities (particularly since the October revolts of 1988). Mostly, Algerian filmmakers are disillusioned with the state of their national cinema and the failed organization of film production. What matters the most is to create films to which the people can relate. However, many note the inability of the Algerian population to appreciate its own image on screen. Belkacem Hadjadj—an Algerian filmmaker—was quoted as saying: “La seule chose qu’on a appris à l’Algérien, c’est de mépriser son image. Tout le débat est là” (2002: 71) [The only thing Algerians have been taught is to despise their own image. This is where the debate is]. How is a filmmaker to express the grim reality of Algerian society today? How can one cinematically transpose the underlying experience of civic trauma, for instance? Most importantly, which narratives are the best at reaching across the screen? Algeria’s reality is one that—to a greater degree than in the neighboring countries Tunisia and Morocco—is marked by terror, tragedy, deep social inequalities, corrupt politics and unstable peace. Making films in such an unstable climate has proved to be challenging as illustrated by the following examples.

In 1988, the set of De Hollywood à Tamanrasset, directed by Mahmoud Zemmouri, was burned down on three separate occasions. In 1992, the set of L’honneur de la tribu, also
directed by Zemmouri, received continuous threats. In 1995, Djamel Fezzaz, another Algerian filmmaker, was shot and seriously injured for filming love stories. Needless to say, the outlook for Algerian filmmakers has been grim but this context also helps to explain why the few films that manage to be produced might seem complex in their narrative and aesthetic forms. As seen in chapter 3, unsafe filming conditions and imposed national curfews may force the crew to film scenes quickly (often in one take) to avoid attracting unwanted attention. As such, the editing of the narrative might be cut abruptly at times as demonstrated in the film *Rachida* (2001) or the picture might remain frozen on an image while a sound only narrative takes place as seen in *Bab el-Oued City* (1994). Such editing technique (e.g. frozen picture) though may also be an aesthetic strategy from the director’s point of view. In *Touchia* (1992) for example, an extraordinary feature directed by Mohammed Rachid Benhadj, a still image of the main character (a very young girl) remains on the screen for what seems like interminable seconds while we hear three men brutally raping her. Only the breathing sounds of the three rapists and the girl’s cries can be heard. This audiovisual technique conveys a sense of helplessness to the audience. It is effective in that the sounds of the breathing men combined with the still image of the girl successfully convey the horrific act of the rape taking place. In choosing to film the rape scene in such a manner, Benhadj also defies censorship (which prohibits sexual acts), and uses sounds rather than images as the narrative vehicle to make the nature of the crime explicit.

Hafez’ article offers an interesting comparative analysis between early Algerian cinema and Egyptian cinema. In reference to national allegories as observed in selected films from both countries, Hafez asserts that Algerian cinema is trapped into a “claustrophobic static frame” while Egyptian cinema “sees the national as open, flexible and fluid, inscribed in all aspects of human experience…” (248). While such observations might be relevant to early Algerian cinema, it will be made evident in the following chapters that today’s productions put forth complex filmic narratives that clearly grasp Algeria’s current political climate while highlighting perceived or implied tensions between modernity and tradition.

Unlike Egypt, which benefits from a long-standing film industry and an elaborate star-system, Algeria’s lack of such apparatus has forced many Algerian filmmakers to tap into their creative reservoir and to rely on outside locations, non-actors and remote
equipment. In addition, some filmmakers intentionally did not seek the complications normally involved in a typical production. Merzak Allouache, for example, tends to prefer “a crew operating freely, with a hand-held camera if need be, with, of course, freedom for the expression of a point of view” (Allouache qtd in Armes 2005: 7). Armes has likewise keenly observed that

One of the crucial elements in an evaluation of Third World film making is the location of the film maker astride two cultures, on the one hand using a Western-originated technology and often employing formal structures of narrative derived from the West, and on the other drawing on—and relating the work produced to—his or her own native tradition. (1987: 229)

As a result, Armes adds, this dual position from which some filmmakers benefit has proven to be “of enormous creative potential for an artist” (ibid.). By the same token, I do not believe that Algerian filmmaking is still trapped into a “claustrophobic static frame.” By not taking into account the most recent cinematic works, Hafez is seemingly dismissing the qualities of a cinema which is truly espousing innovation and challenging tradition. I nevertheless agree with Hafez in that Algerian-directed features are marked by a certain national allegory, which in the context of Third Cinema theory, is defined by Mike Wayne as

…one which ‘shrinks’ a larger social totality, a larger historical narrative, into a smaller story. This is then combined with a second operation, for the larger story is not only compacted, it is also transformed or translated into another story altogether. In order for this transformed story to impart its larger moral and political lessons, the viewer has to decode the story’s relationship to the larger issues at hand. Thus an allegorical narrative is suitable for telling a (larger) story in a context in which, for whatever and various reasons, that story might be received with difficulty. (130)\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{15}\)Shohat and Stam have distinguished three types of specific allegories pertaining to Third Cinema which I will discuss in the relevant section.
As will be shown in chapter 2, today’s allegories in contemporary Algerian filmmaking tend increasingly to celebrate the diversity inherent to Algeria’s national space. In other words, recent cinematic allegories tell the stories of a nation composed of multiple cultural and subjective identities and stories. As we will see in the following chapters, the past is no longer glorified and iconic figures are superseded by complex and, at times, egotistical characters that are neither good nor bad. Collectivist ideology is making room for an increased individualism. The interpenetrating constructions of gender and sexuality are at the forefront of narratives whose codes are often embedded into the contemporary historical context of Algeria. At the same time, deconstructing mythological history in the process of constructing individual stories has been a major aspect of recent Algerian-directed feature films. Teshome H. Gabriel’s essay “Third Cinema as Guardian of Popular Memory: Towards a Third Aesthetics,” (1989) will be—at a later stage—particularly helpful in considering the changing role of Algerian filmmaking (from seller of official memory to a vector of popular memories).

In “Framing National Cinemas” (2000), Susan Hayward asks the following questions: “what is the value of a national cinema? What needs does it fulfill? How can we think in terms of framing or conceptualizing it? What function does it serve?” (88). All these are indeed important questions to ask but I will venture to say that if these same questions appear to be perhaps applicable to cinemas whose industries are partaking in transnational activities, they are not universally applicable to cinemas coming from nation-states of the Third World that are devoid of an industry. In addition, because questions of national cultural identities are still central to postcolonial societies and studies, questions surrounding concepts of national cinemas that emanate from countries of the Maghreb for instance are still very much important to consider. As such, framing conceptually the cinema/s directed by Algerian filmmakers (or more generally, Maghrebi filmmakers) is of relevance particularly if we consider that one kind of official Algerian nationalism has been nothing but an imposed “official memory that has evacuated the pluralism that was at work in nationalism” (Stora 2001: 233). It is in this sense that Hayward’s study is of use to us here for both she and Stora nurture the idea that nationalism was created at the expense of internal differences and was in part a viable undertaking thanks to imposed historical amnesia. Hayward quotes Smith who observes that: “the importance of national amnesia and getting one’s own history wrong (is
essential) for the maintenance of national solidarity” (Smith qtd in Hayward 1996: 383 / 2000: 90). In the case of Algeria, questions pertaining to nationalism are invariably complex and go well beyond the scope of this study. That said, I am here using Stora’s and Hayward’s observations to better highlight the premises upon which early Algerian cinema was based.

In the early days and up to the 1980s, this cinema was not spared the burden of imposed amnesia in the name of unified collective and cultural national identity based on an official version of historical events (namely those concerning the war of Liberation). In addition, pluralistic ethnic differences in Algeria were dismissed to promote a *one-size fits all* ideology that has ceased—over time—to fit everyone. The paradox is that the pre-liberation cinema (up to 1962) sought to create its own images of Algeria while the post-liberation cinema obeyed directives contrary to those defined by Third Cinema as demonstrated by films dealing with the war of liberation and restrained by the state-imposed ideology surrounding those who contributed to Algeria’s independence. The October revolts of 1988 were mainly the work of a population\(^{16}\) that was born well after the independence of Algeria among whom the national mantra on the liberation struggle had ceased to find subscribers. To Stora, these fabrications stood in the way of the “construction of a nationalism based on the republican spirit and a tolerant Islam” (234). Although a comprehensive view of the dynamics and components of Algerian nationalism lies beyond the scope of this study, it is however important to understand that the dominant national allegory in Algeria was –up to the 1980s—that of the liberation in 1962, whose promises of effective reforms (at all levels) and social equality have to this day and for the most part remained unfulfilled or have been insufficient. In contrast with such notions, Algerian filmmaking –as diverse as it is—implicitly and explicitly challenges the mythological collective history to make way for individual stories. This undertaking constitutes a counter-narrative of the nation particularly since recent films are witnessing what Stora calls the emergence of a more assertive “individual autonomy that expressed itself in a greater frenzy for the consumption of media images, a greater desire to move about freely […]” (180).

It thus makes sense to look at national cinema in Algeria as “a body of textuality [that is] given a certain amount of historical specificity” (Rosen 2006: 17). I will not engage here

\(^{16}\) “By the 1980s, the Algerian population of the 1950s nearly tripled, seventy percent of the population was born after independence.” (Hafez 1995: 64)
in complex theories of textuality as does Rosen. However, I will in the following chapters, take into account narrative articulations of Algeria-related histories. In doing so, I am thus arguing that while Algerian filmmaking might no longer be from an economic standpoint considered a national cinema, it remains—from a textual perspective—a national cinema; albeit one that presents itself as a counter-narrative of the nation it seeks to represent (or, it is a counter-narrative of the official discourse). As likewise noted by Hafez in his article: “The concern for history, politics and the mythic aspects of traditional culture is prevalent in all these cinemas, but each one expresses it in different forms, as demonstrated in the Algerian case, the richest and most representative cinema of these countries” (e.g. those of the Maghreb) (243).

What was primarily of interest to us in this section is whether or not Algerian filmmaking, given its displaced and hybridized status, could be rightfully identified and linked to the nation it represents. I have already established that it can be linked to the nation of Algeria, though my argument assumes that the national identity of Algeria is itself changing. Increasingly, many are arguing that nation-states across the globe are being superseded by the globalization of economies and cultures and that the use of information technologies results in lives being increasingly organized in transnational ways (at the social, cultural and economic levels). However, I do not believe that Algeria as a Third World nation-state is affected in the same way by globalizing processes particularly when we consider the tight control held by the Algerian state and the military. In addition, these globalization processes are not all simultaneously affecting Algeria. Juergensmeyer distinguishes eight aspects of globalization\(^\text{17}\) (6) and rightly points out that “people in a particular region of the world will experience one kind of globalization but not others” (ibid.). While the cultural terrain of Algeria might experience the euphoric fusion of several cultural articulations in music, fashion and television, other areas such as governance remain untouched. In this sense, I join both Higson and Wayne who still view the nation-state as “a vital and powerful legal mechanism” (Higson 2000: 70) and as a “real historical force” (Wayne 2001: 123). I will not discuss at length here the economy of Algeria but will briefly

\(^{17}\) These eight aspects listed by Juergensmeyer are: globalization of production, ownership, market / globalization of currency and financial institutions / globalization of political alliances, law, world order / globalization of military justification and intervention / globalization of environmental concerns and protection / globalization of media and communications / globalization of culture and ideology / globalization of citizenship and identity.
acknowledge that attempts at privatizing various sectors of the economy in Algeria are a direct result of globalizing processes.\textsuperscript{18} Abdou Benziane, a well-known film critic of Maghrebi films, observes

Les films financés par l’État avec un baril à quarante dollars et l’importation des films en devises ne sont plus possibles. Parrallèlement, les fromages de toute l’Europe et trente-six marques de dentifrice innondent le marché. Le secteur public cinématographique à ‘l’ancienne’ n’est plus concevable dans un environnement national déchiqueté par des privatisations anarchiques, à coté d’une législation sur le cinéma aussi archaïque que sous-développée. (1999 : 12)

Films financed by the state with oil at 40 dollars a barrel coupled with the importation of films bought with foreign currency are no longer possible. At the same time, cheese from all over Europe and thirty-six toothpaste brands are inundating the market. The ‘old school’ audiovisual public sector is no longer conceivable in a national environment torn by anarchic privatizations and where audiovisual legislation is as obsolete as it is under developed.

In other words, where some parts of the economy have been overtly developed in Algeria, others such as the audiovisual sectors are seriously lagging behind. This does not mean that globalization theories are fully applicable to Algerian filmmaking practices. The positioning (economic and geographic) of Algerian filmmaking production in relation to mainstream cinema and as a cinema representative of a Third World nation places this cinema among

\textsuperscript{18} A short but excellent study on economic programmes undertaken in Algeria to gradually replace state subsidies and implement privatization is that of Mohammed Saad, Hakim Meliani and Mahfoud Benosman, “The Tortuous and Uncompleted Privatisation Process in Algeria,” in Transition & Development in Algeria: Economic, Social and Cultural Challenge (2005), pp.17-27. Reducing the state intervention in the economy sector has and continues to be a challenging undertaking in Algeria however, the globalization of economies worldwide does not leave many options to Algeria whose economy has until recently been under the state umbrella and whose trade unions are resisting proposed changes (21). As noted by Majumdar and Saad: “While these different spheres (economic, social and cultural) naturally have their own specific tensions, conflicts and potentialities for progress, there is also evidence that they are all affected by the main characteristics of Algeria’s difficult development process and the shifts in focus away from the monoculture of the central planning system and its single ideology, along with the crisis of authority and legitimacy of the major public institutions.” ( 2)
other categories under the label of Third Cinema but it is still very much dependent on
European technical resources and funding. In addition and as noted earlier, besides struggling
against globalizing forces, Third Cinemas that are dependent on European funding also have
to withstand what Shohat and Stam identify as “neocolonial pressures” (1994: 30). That said,
however, Third Cinema theory and associated studies can highlight pertinent points which
will help us further understand why in the case of Algerian filmmaking, the concept of
national cinema cannot be dissociated from that of Third Cinema. In the next section, I
explore how such interpenetrating concepts may help to provide a conceptual fit for Algerian
filmmaking.

Third Cinema, Third World Cinema and Third Worldist Cinema

Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino coined the term “Third Cinema” in their famous and
influential manifesto *Towards a Third Cinema* (1969), which addresses the emergence of
new cinemas driven by revolutionary ideals to inscribe their own history in the face of
Western domination. Third World nations from Latin America and Africa saw in the film
medium a powerful tool that could be used to counter-tell what was wrongly told and to
denounce social and political inequalities both at the national and international levels. In
Solanas and Getino’s words: “Third Cinema is […] the decolonization of culture.” To the
newly emerging Third World nation-states of Africa which had grouped themselves under
the FEPACI (Fédération Panafricaine des Cinéastes, est. 1969 in Algiers), cinema was seen
as “a tool for the liberation of the colonized countries and as a step towards the total unity of
Africa” (qtd in Diawara 1986: 69). As noted by Shohat and Stam:

> In the face of Eurocentric historicizing, Third World and minoritarian
filmmakers have rewritten their own histories, taken control over their own
images, spoken in their own voices. It is not that their films substitute a

19 Other early influential manifestoes of the 1960s are that of Julio Garcia Espinosa’s “For an Imperfect Cinema” (1969) and that of Glauber Rocha’s “Esthetic of Hunger” (1965).
20 Need to find page number for this quote.
pristine ‘truth’ for European ‘lies,’ but that they propose counter-truths and counter-narratives informed by an anticolonialist perspective, reclaiming and reaccentuating the events of the past in a vast project of remapping and renaming. (1994: 248)

Important contributions to the field of Third Cinema have been made since the revolutionary period of the 1960s, such as Teshome H. Gabriel’s *Third Cinema in the Third World – The Aesthetic of Liberation* (1982) and “Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films” (1994). Another important contribution include Shohat and Stam’s monumental study *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (1994). Many scholars have shown interest in varied cultural productions emanating from the Third World and debates surrounding the concept of Third and Third World Cinemas have proven to be fruitful as demonstrated in anthologies such as *Film & Politics in the Third World* (1987), *Questions of Third Cinema* (1989), and *Rethinking Third Cinema* (2003). Of relevance are also Roy Armes’ publication *Third World Film Making and the West* (1987) and Mike Wayne’s *Political Film- The Dialectics of Third Cinema* (2001). Broadly speaking, “Third Cinema” designates a body of works that distinguishes itself from First (mainstream/commercial) and Second (Auteur and European Art) Cinemas but—as noted by Wayne—it can overlap and situate itself at the intersection of these two cinemas. Before going any further, it is pertinent to clarify here what distinguishes Third Cinema (or counter cinema) from Third World Cinema. Third Cinema is a politically motivated body of audiovisual works—usually made with small budgets—that is concerned with questions surrounding colonialism, race, gender, religion, and so forth. Thus it is concerned with “a historically analytic yet culturally specific mode of cinematic discourse” (Willemen 1987: 8). Finally, as noted by Gabriel, Third Cinema should not be geographically restricted solely to nations of the Third World. The core of Third Cinema to Gabriel “…is really not so much where it is made, or even who makes it, but rather, the ideology it espouses and the consciousness it displays” (1982: 2). By contrast, *Third World Cinema* is comprised of cinematic works of varying genres from Asia, Latin America and Africa and “minoritarian cinema in the First World” (Shohat and Stam 1994: 27). They are generally speaking devoid of a political agenda and are enjoyed exclusively for their entertainment value.
Drawing on both Solanas’ and Getinos’ essay *Towards a Third Cinema* and that of Cuban filmmaker Tomas Gutierrez Alea’s *The Viewer’s Dialectic* (1980), Wayne revisits the notion of Third Cinema in an attempt to establish a dialectical relationship between past and present Third Cinema film practices, and Third Cinema theory (108). In Wayne’s view, theories of First, Second and Third Cinemas are indicative of: “institutional practices and sets of aesthetic strategies, it follows that all three cinemas take up their own distinctive positionings in relation to a shared referent: i.e., the historical, social world around them” (6). That is to say, the production circumstances matter a great deal for Wayne so that, in contrasts to Shohat and Stam, he views *The Battle of Algiers* (1965) as a European film about the Third World given that “the key creative positions were occupied by Italians” (9). As such, Wayne defines Third Cinema as: “a body of theory and filmmaking practice committed to social and cultural emancipation” (5); one which “seeks to develop the means for grasping history as process, change, contradiction and conflict: in short the dialectics of history,” (14) and whose concern is to explore “the process whereby people who have been oppressed and exploited become conscious of that condition and determine to do something about it” (16). Third Cinema as a concept is undeniably fitting to early Algerian cinema, which was born in 1957 amidst the Liberation struggle but evolved with difficulty under the state control and monopoly via censorship over audiovisual productions. The institutionalization of the film industry in Algeria was seen, as Hafez remarks, as “a mixed blessing” for “It freed film-makers from constraints of the market but subjected them to rigid state control, political guidelines and official censorship” (244). Paradoxically, and asides from using cinema for its own nation-building purposes, Algeria was a major contributor in early Third World cinematic productions and financed a fair number of co-productions which did not contribute in any ways to the nation-building agenda. One such example is Costas-Gavras’ *Z* (1969). Egyptian director Youcef Chahine also benefited from the Algerian state support for three features including *Alexandria Why?* (1978).

In *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, Shohat and Stam distinguish four “overlapping circles” of what they term “Third Worldist”21 films. The first one includes films “produced by and

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21 As a reminder, the term “Third World” designates: “the colonized, neocolonized, or decolonized nations and ‘minorities’ whose structural disadvantages have been shaped by the colonial process and by the unequal division of international labour.” (Shohat, Stam 1994: 25)
for Third World peoples […] and adhering to the principles of ‘Third Cinema.’” The second includes productions of the Third World that are made with or without an adherence to Third Cinema conventions. The third comprises films made by “First and Second World people in support of Third World peoples and adhering to the principles of Third Cinema.” Finally, the fourth category includes “diasporic hybrid films […] that build on and interrogate the conventions of ‘Third Cinema’” (28). I find these distinctions particularly useful when it comes to Algerian filmmaking (both early and recent). For instance, the first category fits early Algerian films made shortly before and after the war of liberation. These early works include for instance those of Mohamed Lakhdar Hamina. His film, *Chronicle of the Years of Ember* (1975), is an epic which retraces Algeria’s history since 1835 and dismantles what had been said by the previous colonial power, France. During that time, the major preoccupations in cinematic productions were to concretize Algeria on screen by giving it a history that required a dismantling of Eurocentric historical discourses. This was a nationalist-driven imperative with a dual function. The first one consisted in reclaiming the nation’s voice and the second, concretized the meaning and position of that voice within historical discourses. As pointed out by Denise Brahimi in *Cinémas d’Afrique Francophone et du Maghreb* (1997):

> Le versant positif du nationalisme consiste en une volonté de s’affirmer contre toutes les images mensongères et les clichés qui ont été notamment le fait du cinéma colonial. Affirmer son identité, tel a été le grand mot d’ordre, dont on peut dire qu’il correspond au désir le plus fréquemment exprimé par les créateurs des pays d’Afrique pendant une vingtaine d’années. (10)

The positive aspect of nationalism consists in a will to assert oneself against all the lying images and clichés that were notable in colonial cinema. To assert one’s identity, such was the mission which can be said to correspond to the desire more frequently expressed by the creators of African nations for twenty years.
Continuing with Shohat and Stam’s categories, an example of a film fitting in the second circle would be *De Hollywood à Tamanrasset* (1990) directed by Mahmoud Zemmouri. This film is a comic satire exploring the effects of satellite television on young and vulnerable Algerians. Films fitting in the third circle would be for example that of Ahmed Rachedi, *L’aube des damnés* (*Dawn of the damned*, 1965) whose script was written by René Vautier (an French pro-FLN activist at the time of the war of liberation), *Une si jeune paix* (*Such a young peace*, 1965) directed by another French pro-FLN activist, Jacques Charby. Of course, let us not forget The *Battle of Algiers* (1966) directed by Gillo Pontecorvo. The fourth circle mostly concerns works directed by those residing in Europe (mostly in France) such as for example Mehdi Charef, Yamina Benguigui, Bourlem Guerdjou and Rabah Ameur-Zaimeche. This category also includes as we will see later works directed by filmmakers who regularly travel to and from Algeria.

Paradoxically, early Algerian cinema and recent Algerian-directed filmmaking both straddle the first and second categories outlined by Shohat and Stam. However some of the recent features such as those made for example by Moknèche, Zemmouri and Allouache can also be placed under the fourth category umbrella. Most if not all narratives of Algerian-directed features are anchored around Algerian cultures and ways of life. Examples of such narratives include for instance *Machaho* (1995) directed by Belkacem Hadjadj, *La voisine* (*The neighbor*, 2002), a film funded by L’Année de l’Algérie budget and directed by Ghaouti Bendeddouche.

Questions of cultural practices, traditions and so forth are never far from being the central focus of Algerian-directed features, and as Mike Wayne puts it: “Understanding that culture is the crucial realm in which identity, beliefs and values are forged, Third Cinema intervenes in culture as a site of struggle” (75). Most Algerian-directed cinematic productions also fall under the category of Third Cinema because they have pointed to political tensions within Algeria (*Bab el Oued City*, 1994, by Allouache is a superb example of such tensions) and because they do tend to point to political tensions in Algeria they are concerned with nationally-driven imperatives. Of these films of the 1990s, Stora says:

Ce qui frappe avant tout avec ces quelques films dans une période si grise, c’est la volonté de survie. Comme si les cinéastes avaient pris la décision
collective d’aller à la rencontre d’un monde qui, visiblement, ne les attendait plus. (90)

What is above all striking in those films made during such a dark period, is the will to survive. It is as if the filmmakers had collectively decided to go to a world which, evidently, was no longer expecting them.

In a broad sense and as already mentioned in the above section on national cinema, Algerian-directed films have been concerned with deconstructing history to give room to (hi)stories. This desire to tell through a multitude of different voices, is nevertheless to my view, a nationally-driven imperative, one leading to the creation of a cinema which—as Rosenbaum simply yet clearly puts it—“expresses something of the soul of the nation that it comes from: the lifestyle, the consciousness, the attitudes” (2002: 224).

Having established that Algerian-directed features generally fall under the second category of films determined by Shohat and Stam and that they are made with or without an adherence to Third Cinema conventions, they are nevertheless evolving and responding to the changes observable within the culture(s) they seek to represent. Unlike earlier works, recent films have sought to engage discussions with the viewers as opposed to imparting lessons drawn by the state to mute audiences. Gone is the revolutionary inspiration of Third Cinema or as Armes puts it “the euphoric mood” (1987: 87) which has lead Wayne to ask an important question: “How does Third Cinema survive when the initial revolutionary context from which it emerged has dissipated?” (130). The author’s answer is that “it adapts and one strategy which is useful in the long night of the counter-revolution is the development of allegory” (ibid.). Shohat and Stam in turn have specifically pointed to the inevitable evolution of Third World cinema, observing that it has become both inwardly and outwardly more reflexive about its impact and mission. Instead, Third Worldist films (to borrow their term) are finding ways to ask questions while giving the screen to a multiplicity of voices. In their words:

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22 My understanding is that a counter-narrative to the nation is itself a narrative concerned with the nation hence it is a national narrative.
The ‘post-Third Worldist’ films of the 1980s and 1990s display a certain skepticism toward metanarratives of liberation, but do not necessarily abandon the notion that emancipation is worth fighting for. But rather than fleeing from contradiction, they install doubt and crisis at the very core of the films. Rather than a grand anticolonial metanarrative, they favor heteroglossic proliferations of difference within polygeneric narratives, seen not as embodiments of a single truth but rather as energizing political and esthetic forms of communitarian self-construction. (287)

Today, very much in the spirit of these remarks, films directed by Algerian filmmakers have considerably distanced themselves from the old state agenda and most especially from a mythological construction of a collective/homogeneous national identity and culture in Algeria. Algerian filmmaking is no longer in the service of a mythological ideology. Instead, recent films directed by Algerian filmmakers boldly venture in the liminal space of Algeria. Some do so in a thought-provoking manner while others are still testing the waters. As such, these films tend to focus on the margins of the “collective identity” by displaying characters (fictional or not) and stories that highlight the very differences that have and continue to make up Algeria’s multicultural society. I have stated in the section on national cinema that Algerian-directed features are still engaging in forms of allegories which I call national allegories that, in recent years, have evolved in response to Algeria’s current social reality, thus they have become a counter-narrative of official discourses. The Honor of the Tribe (1993) directed by Zemmouri and Mohamed Chouikh’ Youcef: the Legend of the Seventh Sleeper (1993) are such concrete examples of counter-narratives of the nation.

In the Honor of the Tribe (1993) an incestuous relationship between a promiscuous brother (Omar) and his sister (Macha) in a remote village leads to the birth of a child (Djamel) who grows up to be a lawyer and fundamentalist Islamist. Allegorically, the film explains where radical religious nationalism comes from. In the course of her pregnancy and during the war of liberation, Macha falls in love with a French military man but her feelings are not reciprocated. Here a parallel is made with the dysfunctional relationship between France and Algeria. The protection the officer gives Macha is negatively looked upon by the villagers. Twenty years later, Omar—a now successful official given his participation in the
struggle for liberation—returns to the village with (ironically so) his Russian wife (which points to the Soviet model the newly born nation of Algeria had turned towards). Omar is appointed mayor of the village by the leading party however his return gives way to a constant rift between tradition and modernity, between a sedentary life and a promiscuous or western-like behavior. Clearly, the director pokes fun at the politically oblivious rural population but his most clever criticism is directed at the Islamists’ activists, who in this film, are explicitly the product of an incestuous relationship. At the same time, the Islamists growing presence and interaction with the masses in the national landscape of Algeria is indicative of a slippery regression to traditional religious-based values in a society in urgent need of developing itself through more healthy contact with the outside. Once the villagers come across the young man (Djamel) born out of the incestuous affair between Omar and his sister Macha, they welcome him and listen to his simply formulated yet radically-oriented diatribe (all said in a language the villagers can relate to). The fear of the unknown, of the new mayor, his socialist-tainted speeches, his brusque manners combined with the changes he imposes at the expense of traditions make for a willing audience. In the end, Djamel – using the fear of Western influences and the merit of traditional values and ways of life—wins the support of the villagers who ignore Omar’s pleas.

Mohamed Chouikh’s feature, Youcef: the Legend of the Seventh Sleeper (1993) tells the story of Youcef, a mujahid (freedom fighter) who has been suffering from amnesia since before the liberation in 1962. Not knowing he has missed the liberation and that many years have passed, Youcef escapes from the mental institute and travels the country yet fails to recognize around him any of the liberation ideals (those that he and his friends so fervently fought for in war time) applied to contemporary Algeria. When running into a former comrade, Youcef stares in disbelief at the latter’s acquired wealth and status (all thanks to his participation in the war and involvement with the single party). In a moving scene, a small village recreates for him the 1962 celebration of the Liberation however, the already disillusioned youth does not fully partake in this mock recreation. The villagers are shown sitting, expressionless watching Youcef walking down the street. What Chouikh is showing is that the war of liberation mantra used by the state in order to appease minds and justify its unique and long-term position in governing matters has come to a halt. In other words, the war of Liberation as a historical marker and nation-building device is no longer perceived as
a valid referent upon which members of the FLN may justify their exclusive authority. Using amnesia and memory as devices to criticize the state, Chouikh makes a film that denounces the single party’s monopoly over Algeria’s governing affairs as well as corruption but he does so indirectly and using a character frequently celebrated in early cinematic productions as per the state directives: the mujahid, the hero par excellence. Youcef’s innocence is set against those previous mujahids who—since then—have become part of an elitist class.

Shohat and Stam have distinguished three types of allegories notable in Third World cinema. The first consists of “the teleological Marxist-inflected nationalist allegories of the early period…” (1997: 271). An allegory most notable in early Algerian works also imbued with a Fanonian spirit.\(^{23}\) The second distinguishable allegory is a “modernist self – deconstructing” one (272) and the third allegory is “as a form of protective camouflage against censorious regimes, where the film uses the past to speak of the present…” (ibid.). This latter category is where Zemmouri’s feature Honor of the Tribe seems to fit. Made in 1995, it explores the reason for the growing Islamist activism in the 1990s using the immediate post-liberation historical context. An aspect of the first type of allegory as distinguished by Sham and Shohat is that women were generally excluded from nationalist discourses and the public sphere and this proved to be sadly true in early films of the Third World. Typically directed by men, Third Worldist films’ discourses did not include a feminist perspective. Rather, these films “favored the generic (and gendered) space of heroic confrontations…leaving women’s ‘private’ struggles unacknowledged” (287). However, and as Shohat and Stam observed, women often serve as allegorical figures for nationalism as superbly exemplified in the last scene of The Battle of Algiers by Pontecorvo where an Algerian woman rhythmically waves a makeshift Algerian flag while chanting the newly acquired freedom of Algeria.\(^{24}\) Another example is that of the peasant mother in The wind of

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\(^{24}\) In an article titled “Women in Algeria, Dimensions of a Crisis and of Resistance” (2005), Cathie Lloyd gives us an insightful study on the place of Algerian women within their society: “…about 10,949 fighting women, mostly in their twenties, joined the struggle for Independence (3% of all combatants); a fifth of all women in the maquis were killed in battle;” (Lloyd 2005: 67) “The paradox of Algeria, with its considerable regional
The Aurès (1966, directed by M.L. Hamina) convincingly played by the much loved Algerian actress, Keltoum. During the final scene and after repeated long failed attempts to see her son detained by French troops in a prison camp surrounded by an electrified fence, Keltoum throws herself against the fence and dies, symbolizing in this way the pain that many Algerian women endured during the Algerian war of Liberation and, indeed, the trauma of Algeria itself. Unlike Boudjedra who believes that the use of an Algerian woman as being part of the main narrative in this film is a universal symbol and shifts the focus away from nationalistic cinematic representations (1995: 261), it is my view that this scene is on the contrary very much emblematic of a national allegory motivated by the state. This allegory suggests that once the masculine gender is removed from the family unit, women alone are reduced to helplessness, madness, and loneliness and are left with no tools to survive, and that Algeria itself is in such a condition.

These questions of allegory are important to consider for they revisit in some respect the question of the construction of national history. As already discussed in the section on national cinema, both Hayward in “Framing National Cinemas,” (2000), and Stora in Algeria 1830-2000 – A Short History (2001) have argued that nationalism is based on the selective appropriation of historical moments thus implying that certain truths have ‘necessarily’ been left out. Stora has noted that the revolts of October 1988 have prompted an outpouring of testimonials dating back from before and after the Liberation. These testimonials attest to internal differences among those who fought collectively and separately for Algeria’s independence and as a result, many stories from the popular collective memory have resurfaced and have contradicted components of the official discourse and accounts of the war of liberation. In “Third Cinema as Guardian of Popular Memory: Towards a Third Aesthetics,” Gabriel defines popular memory as “the oral historiography of the Third World” (54). He then describes folklore as “an account of memories passed from generation to generation” (ibid.) adding further:

Because the promise of freedom and the recovery of autonomy of identity lingers in memory, folklore offers an emancipatory ‘horizon’ –a liberated and

variations, is that of a country with one of the highest levels of educated women in the Arab world, yet with relatively low levels of women in paid employment.” (Lloyd 2005: 72)
alternative future […] folklore attempts to conserve what official histories insist on erasing. In this sense, folkloric traditions of popular memory have a rescue mission. They wage a battle against false consciousness, and against the official versions of history that legitimate and glorify it. (ibid.)

Aware that struggles still prevail in the Third World regions, Gabriel tells us that “the original manifesto of ‘camera as a gun’ still holds” (55), adding that “Third Cinema is able to challenge official versions of history” (57). While the former assertion might be a little far-fetched when it comes to Algerian filmmaking, the second holds true in that recent features have taken risks in challenging official discourses of contemporary history. The ironic paradox is that both Algerian cinema (by which I mean films previously produced by the state) and Algerian filmmaking (by which I mean independent features produced thanks to external funding) have assumed the task of telling history but the former was guided, monitored and censored. It told of collective efforts and praised heroic initiatives aimed at promoting the ideals of the newly liberated state. It neglected individual and collective memories to create one consciousness, one memory held by one people only. The latter also tells history but in the form of stories that show a balance between good and bad and where individualism is not condemned but in a way celebrated. Algerian filmmaking counter-tells and gives marginal individuals (e.g. women, gays) and groups (e.g. fundamentalists) their own voices as opposed to a collective voice embodied by the people as a whole. This is to say that unlike what was shown by its predecessor, contemporary Algerian filmmaking shows a multitude within a collective ensemble; a social reality that largely differs from what was officially described. In the words of Saïd Ould Khelifa, who directed Ombres blanches (White Shadows, 1991): “Jusque dans les années 1985-1989 […] Pour le système, le cinéma était un produit pour l’exportation, pour donner une certaine image de l’Algérie” (2003: 70). [Up to 1985-1989 (…) To the state, cinema was a product for export, to give a certain image of Algeria.] However, the truth is that things for Algerian cinema started going downhill in 1978 following President Boumediene’s death. Rather than showing a mythical collective national identity, Algerian filmmaking in recent years has been preoccupied with revealing the diversity within Algerian society. It is thus a filmmaking not only working at deconstructing official discourses but it is also deconstructing a previous cinema. However
the challenge is considerable for, as Stora asks: “C’est un pays qui fonctionne sans arrêt dans la rupture, en situation de table rase. Comment le cinéma peut-il anticiper cela, cette absence de passé ? Comment articuler toutes ces histoires ?” (2003: 12). [It is country continuously living in a state of rupture, from scratch. How is cinema able to anticipate this absence of the past? How might one articulate those stories?]

Precisely because, then, of the state’s withdrawal from funding film productions and the lack of resources (cultural and other) available to Algerian filmmakers, Algerian filmmaking has been able to develop the project of Third Cinema in a distinctive way. While fitting under the Third/Third World Cinema umbrellas, Algerian-directed films are representative of a cinema that is all at once local, national and transnational and while it used to have a significant tie with the state (in terms of finances, content management control/censorship, etc.) and delved deeply into social realism (faithful to the Stalinist social-realism model) by promoting a monolithic unity through the cult of simple yet trusted heroic figures who are made to embody the collective consciousness (the peasant, the mujahid, the worker, the school teacher), today’s cinema does no longer subscribe to the state but does subscribe—in a broad sense—to the nation and the subjectivities inhabiting it.

In the following section, I address the notion of transnational cinema while seeing how this newly debated concept in the field of national cinemas applies to Algerian filmmaking today. A transnational cinema might be reason to celebrate and/or to ponder questions such as: Is the notion of transnational cinema disguising what Shohat and Stam have identified as “neocolonial pressures”? Or, does the notion of the transnational automatically erase all questions of economic dependency? Some Algerian filmmakers have voiced their concerns regarding the increasing economic dependency of African filmmakers upon European (mostly French) financial helpers and the question as to whether or not filmmakers should be solely financed by the state has and continues to be debated. In regards to outside financing, Brahim Tsaki was for example quoted as saying that being financed by the French is “une mécanique très perverse,” which implies some “pressions insidieuses exercées par ceux qui donnent de l’argent, [et qui] lui [le cinéaste] demandent d’élargir son public. Petit à petit, il [le cinéaste] s’éloigne de ce qu’il est” (2003: 70) [insidious pressures

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applied by those who give money and who ask filmmakers to widen their public. Little by little, filmmakers distance themselves from whom they are]. These remarks add to those of Shohat and Stam and while we should avoid falling into a reductive analysis or to quote Naficy a “discursive ghetto,” we must while discussing the knotty notion of the transnational bear in mind the filmmakers’ voices and position in relation to Algeria, France, and what comes in between and beyond those spaces.

**Transnational, diasporic, exilic and “accented” cinemas**

Within the mainstream of studies of national cinemas, Third Cinema and World Cinema, the concept of transnational cinema has proven to be one of the most elusive concepts as it encompasses broad questions which concern at one and the same time economic, political and cultural infrastructures. The categories of national and transnational in the realm of film theory are, of course, far more complex than the simple binary suggested by these two labels might suggest. From a cinematic standpoint as noted by Ezra and Rowden, the latter category: “comprises both globalization—in cinematic terms, Hollywood’s domination of world film markets—and the counterhegemonic responses of filmmakers from former colonial and Third World countries” (1).

Transnational cinema as a concept has been tossed around and against what are proving to be at times slippery notions of national, exilic, diasporic and “accented” cinemas. This is due to the fact that it offers a whole network of common thematic concerns surrounding for example the filmmakers’ position in relation to their place of origins, their political and/or social adherence to one or more cultures, their chosen and/or imposed filmmaking practices, audiences, and so forth. The main challenge faced by film theorists is thus to locate a given body of chosen films within the parameters of a well-demarcated national space and/or culture, or to distinguish it, i.e. highlight its unique characteristics as distinct from another body of works, be it Hollywood mainstream or other national film industries. In Ezra and Rowden’s words, it is

> [t]he impossibility of assigning a fixed national identity to much cinema [that] reflects the dissolution of any stable connection between a film’s place or production and/or
setting and the nationality of its makers and performers. This is not in itself a new phenomenon; what is new are the conditions of financing, production, distribution and reception of cinema today. (1)

The increased global dominance of Hollywood and the growing involvement of media mogul corporations in the financing of local and/or regional filmmaking worldwide have made it increasingly difficult to determine what might make a film French, German, Spanish, etc. It is also important to note, as do Ezra and Rowden that: “…the transnationalization of cinema extends beyond European and Euro-American coproductions to include international production centers in, most notably, South and East Asia” (2). As per Higson’s observations, we have already seen (in the national cinema section) that national cinemas’ industries have not and do not operate 100% autonomously (67), particularly in terms of distribution and reception. We must keep in mind though that distribution and exhibition outlets for non-Western national cinema industries at the global level have yet to compete with Hollywood’s dominance. As a result, resorting to a concept such as “transnational” when describing a given cinema or a body of films covers up a complex web of questions surrounding—as Ezra and Rowden pointed out—the whole cinematic apparatus but also I might add, political and aesthetic strategies.

Studies of particular interest to all these questions include (among many others) anthologies such as Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary (1996), Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality and Transnational Media (2003), Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader (2006), The Postnational Self – Belonging and Identity (2002). Key studies in understanding what is meant by Hollywood’s dominance are those of Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, and Richard Maxwell, Global Hollywood (2001) and Global Hollywood 2 (2005). In these works, Miller et al look at the ways in which Hollywood’s global expansion led to an increasingly unequal division of labor worldwide, and the ways transnational capital, labor and culture have permeated and transformed local economies. Other works include Mike Featherstone’s Undoing Culture – Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity (1995), George Yudice’s The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era (2004), Toby Miller and George Yudice’s Cultural Policy (2002) which examine similar questions concerning the effects of globalization on culture.

The works cited above do not, by any means, constitute an exhaustive list of studies pertaining directly or indirectly to transnational filmmaking practices worldwide or to the consequences, patterns of transnational practices at the global level in the realm of culture, economics, politics, policies, and related domains of inquiry. In the course of my readings, I have found that “transnational” as a concept has been used in various fields of expertise and has referred to different domains found to be relevant by their authors. In other words, “transnational” crosses multiple disciplines and theoretical spaces that are decidedly too vast in scope to exhaustively consider in this chapter. What is of interest to us here is how this concept might be applied to Algerian filmmaking.

In Transnational Cinema – The Film Reader, Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden locate transnational cinema

in the interstices between the local and the global. Because of the intimacy and communal dynamic in which films are usually experienced, cinema has a singular capacity to foster bonds of recognition between different groups, or what Vertovec and Cohen have called ‘trans-local understandings’ (Vertovec and Cohen 1999: xvii)” (3).

Ezra and Rowden add that: “transnational cinema—which by definition has its own globalizing imperatives—transcends the national as autonomous cultural particularity while respecting it as a powerful symbolic force” (2). Both authors also point out that it “imagines
its audiences as consisting of viewers who have expectations and types of cinematic literacy that go beyond the desire for mindlessly appreciative consumption of national narratives that audiences can identify as their ‘own’” (3). These observations are two-fold: they suggest that transnational cinema does not necessarily violate a national culture’s imaginary boundaries, and that an audience can appreciate a feature which does not necessarily pertain to or frame itself around their dominant/national culture.

While it may be indeed difficult to physically locate Algerian films on the global media scene, my intention in the analysis which follows is to pit contemporary Algerian filmmaking against recent theoretical approaches pertaining to transnational cinema but also exilic, diasporic and ‘accented’ cinemas in order to locate it within the wider conceptual grid of film theory. I will first identify what makes Algerian filmmaking transnational and will then draw primarily on Hamid Naficy’s key notion of “accented cinema.”

A transnational cinema

Despite its previously nationally institutionalized nature, Algerian cinema has in significant ways been transnational from its inception in 1957 and has contributed for example, to the making of many co-productions with France and Italy. In addition, Algerian filmmakers were trained in Western European nations, in the former USSR and worked in a collaborative capacity with other non-Algerian filmmakers (Armes 2005). Today’s Algerian filmmaking is also transnational but differs from earlier Algerian cinema in that it almost exclusively relies on outside funding and other non-Algerian based networks (marketing, distribution, exhibition). The Algerian filmmaker’s role has been shaped as a function of many different tasks that are required to complete a project. As such, they are very much hands-on and wear different hats when inquiring about possible investments from various sources. In spite of its transnational character, Algerian filmmaking as a whole is also very much marginalized although placed at the intersection of different spaces (local, national and transnational).

In “Phobic Spaces and Liminal Panics: Independent Transnational Film Genre” (2003), Hamid Naficy defines transnational cinema as follow:
Transnational cinema is concerned with the output of filmmakers who not only inhabit interstitial spaces of the host society but also work on the margins of the mainstream film industry. As a result, these filmmakers are multiple not only in terms of their identity and subjectivity but also in the various roles they are forced to play in every aspect of their films.” (208)

It is a genre that can comprise different films and shows “the relationship of the transnational filmmakers to their subjects to be a relationship that is filtered through narratives and iconographies of memory, desire, loss, longing, and nostalgia” (205). To Naficy, transnational filmmakers are “presumed to be more prone to tensions of exile, acculturation, and transnationalism, and their films should and do encode these tensions” (ibid.). As we will see in separate case studies, this last observation is not quite fitting to Algerian filmmaking. It may, however, fit what we now commonly refer to as “Beur” filmmaking; a body of films made by French-born and French-based filmmakers of Maghrebi descent. These filmmakers have to be distinguished from Algerian filmmakers who were born in Algeria and moved to France at an adult age.

When it comes to transnational cinema, we can identify seven elements that point to contemporary Algerian filmmaking’s transnational status/character:

1) **Infrastructure** [pre- and post- production phases] Cameras and other equipment may be rented from European countries (mostly France). Movie sets can be located outside of Algeria (Tunisia, Morocco, France). In addition, Algeria is not equipped with editing studios that would enable filmmakers to remain in-house. As Naficy notes: “By editing their own films, many transnational filmmakers not only save money but also control the film’s vision and aesthetics” (Naficy 2003: 209).

2) **Funding:** several production houses (private sector) and audiovisual institutions (public sector) provide funds to Algerian filmmakers. Fonds Sud (part of the CNC, France) is a key funding source which requires among other things that the feature uses either French or Spanish as the
prime language. The allocated funds can be used as salaries but these salaries can only go to French citizens who are hired to fill key positions such as director of photography, sound, etc. Other funding sources (although minimal) may come from international festival prizes. “Straddling more than one culture, sometimes transnational filmmakers are in a position to play funding agencies from different countries against each other to receive financing. Sometimes, transnational filmmakers attempt to get ahead by cashing in on the newsworthiness of their country of origin” (ibid.).

3) **Staffing/Cast:** due to the lack of trained technical staff in Algeria, filmmakers resort to non-Algerian employees. The cast—depending on the filmmaker’s choice—might include non-Algerian actors. “The production process of the accented films is convoluted: funding sources, languages used on the set and on screen, nationalities of crew and cast, and the functions that filmmakers perform are all multiple” (Naficy 2001:51).

4) **Distribution/Exhibition:** mostly due to the lack of available theaters, distribution and exhibition are taking place outside of Algeria through festival venues, specialized theaters, campus and other showings. When shown in Algeria, films might face censorship and thus be edited as was the case for *Viva Laldjerie*; “…after the film’s completion, these filmmakers must either spend extra effort to distribute their films themselves or be satisfied with limited distribution in art-house cinemas or TV transmission at non-prime time hours” (2003: 209);

5) **Marketing:** increased exposure on the Internet; advertising films using internet technology considerably reduces the cost of marketing but does not necessarily ensure that audiences will be enticed to go to the theater. “A large audience for their films is not a given; they must be created and sought after” (ibid.).

6) **Economic imperatives/influences:** the making of films might be influenced by the audiences the filmmaker and/or production houses are attempting to target. Multiple devices can be used such as language (Arabic, French,
regional dialects), a contemporary narrative with universal appeal, soundtrack which includes a variety of music that is not solely from Algeria, choice of actors, etc.

7) Narrative: the film’s narrative may correspond to mainstream commercial cinema; the narrative might—depending on the film’s genre—be linear and thus parallel Hollywood formulaic narratives.

Of all the above characteristics, the ones where the films’ supposed Algerianness would be susceptibly altered (or which might obstruct meanings that would clearly articulate a specific national coherence tied to Algeria) are those of economic imperatives/influences, staffing/cast and funding. To this effect, Benziane, a long time critic of Algerian films, has noted that:

Tous les films sont obligatoirement ‘contaminés’ pour, une part, par leur mode de production, leur montage financier et le circuit auquel ils sont destinés, en priorité […] Les films (de l’intérieur et de l’extérieur) tout d’abord ne sont pas assez nombreux pour constituer des courants ou des tendances pertinentes. Disons qu’ils sont assez hétéroclites dans la démarche, le contenu, le mode de production, la distribution, la langue (arabe, berbère, français) etc. […] Les sujets traités ne peuvent cependant occulter la vraie nationalité des films qui n’est pas reducible à celle du réalisateur. (1999: 13)

All these films are contaminated on one hand by their production mode, their financial set up and the distribution network to which they are destined in priority […] The number of films (both from the inside and the outside) is insufficient and does not allow for the distinctions of pertinent tendencies. Let’s say that they are eclectic in their motivation, content, production mode, distribution, language (Arabic, Berber, French) etc. […] Their topics cannot however conceal the true nationality of the films which is not reducible to that of the filmmaker.
Benziane’s observations highlight several points deserving attention. First, Benziane alludes to external influences which might impede the Algerian character of the films made but does not assertively define what their given nationality might be. In some cases, Algerian filmmakers have themselves defined the nationality of their films. Allouache for instance (see chapter 3) has openly stated that with French funding, he is making Algerian films. To Bachir-Chouikh (chapter 4) and Chouikh (chapter 2), their films are undoubtedly Algerian and are presented as such in various festival venues. Filmmaking modes and conventions in addition to the screen text are what help distinguish a given cinema from another. If that distinction is lost then so is the film (or the film’s Algerianness is so diluted among other transparent cultural referents that it becomes unclassifiable). A second point to pick up on in Benziane’s analysis is that he distinguishes two sets of films that are geographically distinct (i.e. local on the one hand and transnational on the other). Although those remaining within Algeria to film eventually step outside of Algeria for the post-production phase of their films, it is nevertheless possible to distinguish those films that are made locally and primarily target Algerian domestic audiences. These films might also participate in various festivals. A second set of films consists of those made by directors who are lucky enough to resort to different working spaces (local and transnational) to make their films. Mokneche’s first feature *Le harem de Mme Osmane* was made in Morocco while *Viva Laldjerie* was made both in France (in a studio created to that effect) and Algeria (in various public spaces). Merzak Allouache is a long time ‘habitué’ and has filmed in both France and Algeria as well.

Thirdly, Benziane just as Yamina Bachir-Chouik had asserted, reiterates that there are not enough films to constitute a tendency/movement and those that are made are too eclectic from a content and infrastructural standpoint to allow to constitute a general tendency. However, as explained above\(^\text{26}\) (see page 20), it is possible to speak of a national cinema from a textual, critical, and historical perspective. Fourthly and perhaps most importantly, Benziane’s final observation problematizes the question of belonging (i.e. are these Algerian films indeed Algerian because the filmmaker is Algerian?). I am not entirely convinced that this last remark from Benziane is true when it comes to Algerian filmmaking. Rare are those Algerian filmmakers who attempted to direct a film whose narrative did not directly concern Algeria in any way, shape or form. *Fleur de Lotus (Lotus Flower – 1998)*, an Algerian-

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\(^{26}\) See page 20.
Franco-Vietnamese production directed by filmmaker Amar Laskri is such an example as well as *Mirka* (1999) directed by Mohamed Rachid Benhadj. To make ends meet and work on their own projects, a few of the filmmakers based in France have worked and continue to work on projects that are not related to Algeria (often in television).

**Exilic, diasporic and postcolonial ethnic filmmakers**

Opting for a stylistic approach, Naficy in *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001) uses the term “accent” to identify those alternative cinemas that differ from mainstream cinema whose films “are intended for entertainment only” and are “free from overt ideology or accent” (23). From a linguistic standpoint, Naficy tells us that accent is “one of the most intimate and powerful markers of group identity and solidarity, as well of individual difference and personality” (ibid.). Thus, when applied to cinema, the term is meant to designate a body of works whose accent comes from their “artisanal and collective production modes and from the filmmakers’ and audiences’ deterritorialized locations” (ibid.). Naficy also adds that in “accented” cinema, “the characters are often ethnically coded” (24), and that films are mostly “bilingual, even multilingual, multivocal, and multiaccented” (ibid.). Accented films are “interstitial” (4) for they are located “in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices” (ibid.). In other words, they are at once local and global. The most salient aspect of Naficy’s notion of accented cinema is that the author views it as an “offshoot of the Third Cinema, with which it shares certain attributes and from which it is differentiated by certain sensibilities” (30). Naficy points to two differences between Third Cinema and accented cinema. While not necessarily imbued with Marxist or socialist ideology, accented cinema is however “engagé” but its engagement is tied to “specific individuals, ethnicities, nationalities, and identities, and with the experience of deterritorialization itself” (30-31), thus “every story is both a private story of an individual and a social and public story of exile and diaspora” (31).

Accented films to Naficy are thus defined as being made by “displaced Third World émigrés living in the West who despite fundamental differences, share the fact of their deterritorialization.” As such, an accented cinema is one produced by diasporic subjects, second and third generations of non-European descent, immigrants, exiles whose root and/or
provenance are to be located in Third World regions. This notion of “accented” cinema is an important one to consider when exploring transnational filmmaking and particularly those we consider to be transnational subjects (i.e. positioned at the intersection of two or more cultures but travel freely between these two apparent poles). What is of interest to Naficy is the site of tensions that are located at the intersection of the cultures adopted by transnational subjects and how these same tensions are transposed/translated on screen. Looking at themes and style among other components, Naficy explores what might reveal multiple subjectivities and a certain border consciousness (31). In brief, what Naficy calls an “accented” cinema reflects that border consciousness which can manifest itself in a variety of ways. It can be multilingual, it can vary in aesthetic forms, it can be edited in a fragmentary fashion, etc (ibid.). Based on Naficy’s study, it would appear that Moknèche’s productions might fall under the category of “accented” films. However, as is shown in chapter 5, Moknèche’s features do not reflect a border consciousness between France and Algeria but rather a border consciousness within Algerian society thus, in this case, the notion of “accented” cinema remains problematic and does not seem to fully apprehend Mokneche’s works. This notion seems better suited instead to Allouache’s works (see chapter 3).

Naficy distinguishes three sub-categories of exilic, diasporic and postcolonial ethnic films whose distinctions are “based chiefly on the varied relationship of the films and their makers to existing or imagined homeplaces” (21). The term “exilic” is used to refer to

…external exiles: individuals or groups who voluntarily or involuntarily have left their country of origin and who maintain an ambivalent relationship with their previous and current places and cultures. Although they do not return to their homelands, they maintain an intense desire to do so—a desire that is projected in potent return narratives in their films. (11)

The term diasporic while sharing similarities with the term “exilic” differs from the latter in that it is “necessarily collective, in both its origination and its destination” (14). Citing Armenian and Palestinian diasporas as examples, Naficy tells us that diasporic groups “maintain a long-term sense of ethnic consciousness and distinctiveness, which is consolidated by the periodic hostility of either the original home or the host societies toward
them” (ibid.). Films from diasporic filmmakers tend to –unlike those of accented filmmakers—be diverse content-wise in that they reflect the “plurality and performativity of identity” (ibid.). Finally, postcolonial ethnic and identity filmmakers “are both ethnic and diasporic” (15). They include groups such as African-Americans, Latino-Americans, Asian-Americans, and so forth. Their cinema is notable “by the exigencies of life here and now in the country in which the filmmakers reside” (15), and its problematic/tensions are “encoded in the ‘politics of the hyphen’” (ibid.).

The notion of exilic is probably the closest definition which could pertain to Algerian born filmmakers, however we cannot speak of diasporic Algerian filmmakers. Of course, there are enough filmmakers residing outside of Algeria to constitute perhaps a small diasporic group however, they are located in different spaces (working and social spaces) and do not necessarily form some sort of a collective group in relation to Algeria. They typically do not work together nor do they necessarily congregate around the same spaces and their rapport (both subjective and political) to Algeria is unique to each of them. Whereas some filmmakers might critique the state’s withdrawal from cinema-related matters, others have taken this as an opportunity to tap elsewhere and have resorted to turn exclusively to European state audiovisual subsidies to go on with their craft. That said, they are joined in matters of film production and film thematic. Their common denominator is Algeria and their stories emanate from Algeria. Their filmmaking could be thought of as an accented cinema but only in the sense that it is a cinema “engagé,” a cinema whose conventions clearly remind us of Third Cinema since it is intent on counter-telling—in varying ways—official discourses through stories revolving around social and gender inequalities. Naficy clearly points out that “…both accented films and Third Cinema films are historically conscious, politically engaged, critically aware, generally hybridized, and artisanally produced” (31).

In regards to the border consciousness notable in accented cinema, the following chapters will show that Algerian filmmaking partakes in telling stories that show existing borders within Algeria; borders between tradition/ folklore and modernity, genre and sexuality, urban and rural spaces, politics and religion, history and stories, etc. Their films are thus located at the intersection of plural narratives and sometimes binary narratives, which occupy different hybrid social and cultural spaces, but within a larger well-demarcated national space whose cultural borders are permeable, that of Algeria. Most importantly, two
of the filmmakers I am concerned with in this study (Allouache and Moknèche) do return to their homeland. It is thus in this sense that we cannot fully apply Naficy’s definition of accented filmmakers and cinema to contemporary Algerian filmmakers and their cinema.

Looking at Maghreb cinema as a whole Hafez observes that this particular cinema is more concerned with form and aesthetics, not so much for its awareness of European cinema, but mainly because of its quest for narrative codes capable of expressing a constantly shifting reality, an elusive, complex identity caught between pre-modernity, colonial and post-colonial modernities, and an anticipated emergence of subjectivities unmarked by any form of coloniality […] the Maghrib cinema had to work in a dual milieu and cultural tradition, resulting in a two-toned cinema. (2006: 241)

While some of Hafez’ observations might be debatable (for example, there is more than the cohabitation of two cultures –French and Arabic—in Algeria), the search for “narrative codes” capable of expressing cinematically what transpires in Algeria’s social and political reality is one particular feature of those Algerian-directed features. In some ways, transposing a complex cultural and social reality on screen is what either failed or helped Algerian filmmaking in recent years given that Algerian audiences (primarily young) do not feel motivated to support the few movies that manage to be played in rare working theaters.

Conclusion

Algerian-directed films are thus representative of a cinema that is all at once local, regional, national and transnational. We have seen that notions of national, exilic, diasporic, accented and Third World cinema do not quite or only partly fit the complex predicament of a form of filmmaking in constant survival mode and located inside, outside and in between two or more national spaces. While early Algerian cinema used to have significant ties with the state, and delved deeply into social realism by promoting a monolithic unity through trusted heroic figures (the peasant, the mujahid or liberation fighter, the worker, the school
teacher), today’s filmmaking no longer subscribes to the state but does subscribe—in a broad sense—to the nation. In other words, these films are stepping away from the official national discourse previously imposed by the state in order to focus on the plurality of cultural identities or marginal subjectivities typically not acknowledged by the state. Contemporary Algerian filmmaking is to be understood as a cinema whose apparatus is no longer delineated by a given state’s official narratives, but whose motivations (political or personal) remain faithful to the conventions of Third Cinema (logistical and aesthetics).

Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 will consider films all tied by their solidarity towards the Algerian crisis, hence their grouping under the rubric of “cinéma de l’urgence.” In each of the following chapters, I thus aim to argue that today’s cinematic productions can be interpreted both as a product outlined by an implied or explicit national specificity. As will be illustrated, each selected feature partakes in multiple counter-tellings of the nation which differ based on the filmmaker’s position and personal engagement towards Algeria. Each of the following chapters will be structured in such a way as to reflect to the unique position of each filmmaker vis-à-vis Algeria and will consider the thematics of their work as well as influences, conditions of productions and questions of critical reception and audience (whenever applicable). The underlying aim is to identify in these films the projection of transnational and/or regional/local imaginaries within a specific “national imaginary,” and the ways these same “imaginaries” collide or fit with what is sometimes understood to be the national, homogenous culture and identity of Algeria. Arguably, there might be global cultural and economic flows and processes taking place, but as long as we can distinguish certain loci of tensions and exchanges whether in art or cultural forms, there will always be “national” cultures per se, no matter how hybridized, transformed, oddly shaped, questioned, challenged, contested these cultures might be or might become over time.
CHAPTER 2

THIRD CINEMA AND THE REVIVAL OF POETIC REALISM IN MOHAMED CHOUIKH’S THE ARK OF THE DESERT

L’image algérienne a longtemps été façonnée par un regard idyllique. Quelqu’un m’a dit un jour ‘On va vous donner des budgets pour faire des films et montrer ce que vous aimez en Algérie.’ J’ai répondu ‘si vous me donnez un budget, je vais vous montrer ce qui me déplait en Algérie.’ (Chouikh 1997: 56)

Images of Algeria have long been shaped by an idyllic view. Someone once told me ‘We will give you funding to make films and show what you love about Algeria.’ I answered: ‘if you give me funding, I will show you what I dislike about Algeria.’

Of all Algerian filmmakers, Mohamed Chouikh is certainly the most vocal, and without doubt, the most articulate when it comes to providing a thorough background history and a critique of Algerian cinema from its inception to the present. Although scholarly articles about his works are few, several press clippings concerning his political views and films can be found in both the French and Francophone Algerian press. Chouikh was a witness to the birth of revolutionary Algerian cinema, and has lived through the institutional framework and dismantling of all state- implemented audiovisual institutions. In addition, and as we will see in The Ark of the Desert (1997)\textsuperscript{27}, his cinema is one that clearly distinguishes itself from his contemporaries in that it seeks—perhaps more assertively than any others—to shed light on what is lacking within Algeria’s society, what is forgotten and particularly what appears to be irreversibly dysfunctional.

As has been argued in the case study of Yamina Bachir Chouikh (see chapter 4), Mohamed Chouikh’s cinema is best defined as counter national-cinema or oppositional

\textsuperscript{27} The film title in this chapter will be shortened to The Ark of...
cinema, as his films do not “so much reject the ‘nation’ as interrogate its repressions and limits” (Shohat and Stam 1994: 288). Chouikh’s cinema not only opposes the state’s national discourse but, as with most post-Third Worldist films of the 1980s and 1990s, his films showcase “skepticism toward metanarratives of liberation, but do not necessarily abandon the notion that emancipation is worth fighting for” (ibid.). In Youcef (1993) for instance, Chouikh seeks to highlight the “déséquilibre entre le discours et le quotidien” [the disequilibrium between discourse and daily life] (Chouikh 1997: 55). Youcef relates the story of a fervent FLN combatant who, due to unspecified mental illness, not only did not get to see Algeria’s liberation in 1962 but remained locked up for 30 years in a mental institution. Upon his escape, he finds that the country has remained unchanged and is still suffering from violence and poverty. He also discovers that the men who fought by his side 30 years ago are now wealthy and corrupt bureaucrats whose revolutionary ideals have gone stale. Through the character of Youcef thus comes a sentiment of disillusion which is also “un regard sur la double-face de cette image négative et positive” [a look at both sides of this positive and negative image] (55-6). Many have compared Youcef’s fate in the film to that of Algerian President Boudiaf who was assassinated on June 29, 1992, six months following his return to Algeria after 30 years of exile in Morocco. Boudiaf—as did Youcef upon his return to Algerian society in 1992—had deplored Algeria’s economic state and had expressed his disillusion with the single party’s long-standing and rigid monopoly of all aspects pertaining to Algeria’s political and social affairs. As a result of such correlations between the film and the political context of the 1990s, Youcef was withdrawn from the theaters very shortly after its opening.

As already discussed, Algeria’s previous national cinema was one preoccupied among other things with telling Algeria’s history and promoting the state’s official discourses. Chouikh’s cinema is likewise preoccupied with questions pertaining to history, but specifically with what has been omitted, wrongly told or plainly forgotten. In Chouikh’s own words, “l’histoire algérienne a été enseignée d’une manière aussi sectaire, intolérante, régionaliste, jalonnée d’amnésies et de gouffres. De nouvelles idoles devaient remplacer celles qui étaient déjà floues dans nos têtes” (13). In this way, “les auteurs ne regardaient plus le peuple pour s’en inspirer, mais les plannings des ministères” (24). [Algeria’s history

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28 National Liberation Front
was taught in a sectarian, intolerant, regionalist manner and is punctuated by amnesia and abysses. New idols were replacing those which were already a blur in our minds (…) the authors were no longer getting their inspiration from the people themselves but from ministerial agendas.]

In seeking to rectify what in his view does not rightly “represent” Algeria’s current plight, Chouikh’s cinema is also to be defined as a Third Cinema in that it is systematically politically motivated and engaged. Furthermore, and as is characteristic of Third Cinema, the minimization of cost forced a minimalist use of technical and human resources which, as a result, gave Chouikh ample room to insert his creative, philosophical and political visions into his films. Despite the risk of a certain overdose of parables, which permeate all of his films and attracts only select audiences, Chouikh’s cinema—as best exemplified in The Ark of…—is one whose essence intimately centers around Algeria’s rich cultural and ethnic diversity. Shot in an oasis in the deep Algerian Sahara, The Ark of… was made using mostly non-professional actors and minimal technical equipment. The film, which primarily functions as a parable, starts with a forbidden love story between two young adults (Amin and Myriam) from two separate villages, which leads to disagreements among villagers but also dissensions, and ultimately irreparable violence. Lyrical in its imagery yet analytical, metaphorical and political, The Ark of… offers a sound example of what Algerian cinema has to offer in terms of both Third Cinema and national cinema, as it clearly addresses questions of ethnic separatism, racism, tradition, forgotten history and violence within a well-delineated national context: that of post-colonial Algeria.

From an aesthetic standpoint, this form of cinematic realism (alwaqi’iya) is further distinguished by the use of symbols and metaphors that in turn revive a certain neorealism reminiscent of the earlier works of Mohamed Lakhdar Hamina. There is no single unanimously accepted definition of neorealism however, its general characteristics, as already pointed out in the case study of Yamina Bachir Chouikh, include a “realistic treatment, popular setting, social content, historical actuality, and political commitment” (Bondanella 1990: 31). Generally speaking, neorealist films also bear “the unmistakable signature of a single director’s individual stylistic or thematic preoccupations” (74). The Ark of… offers a rich visual perspective on Algeria’s desert population, and the prophecy of certain dialogues adds to this unique oriental visual tapestry all through the eye of a
filmmaker whose intent is to preserve the natural and social space in which Algerians must learn to live together and in peace (Chouikh 1998: 1).

In the first part of this chapter, I examine the filmmaker himself, his influences, political stance and his other works to highlight the nature of his oppositional cinema. I then turn to specific questions of production concerning the film treated here and will offer a synopsis of the text. The second part of this chapter will address at some length the film’s thematic and cinematic style. In doing so, I will distinguish themes that are concerned 1) with the nation, 2) with the nation’s crisis and 3) I will briefly consider the spiritual, religious and historical dimension of symbolic characters in the film. Based on these observations, my analysis will consider the theoretical pertinence of the concepts of national and Third Cinema while taking into account the transnational logistical dimension of Chouikh’s cinema. Questions of critical reception will help us further distinguish Chouikh from the likes of Allouache and Moknèche.

About the filmmaker

Born in 1943 in Mostaganem (Algeria), Chouikh was 11 years old when the Algerian war started in 1954 and 19 years old when he began a career as a theater actor before getting his first screen role in Ahmed Rachedi and René Vautier’s feature L’Aube des damnés (1965). Chouikh went on to play for notable filmmakers such as Lakhdar Hamina in Le vent des Aurès (1966) which earned the “prix des premières œuvres” at the Cannes Film Festival and for Michel Drach in Elise ou la vraie vie (1969), a role which made him known for the first time to the French public. Parallel to his career as an actor, Chouikh also started writing and worked on different film sets to learn the ropes of filmmaking. His first films L’embouchure (1972) and Les paumés (1974) were made for Algerian television. It is not until 1982 that Chouikh worked again with Lakhdar Hamina but this time behind the cameras for Vent de Sable (1982), a Franco-Algerian production, also selected by the Cannes Film Festival of that same year. In 1983, he officially entered the institutional circuit and
assumed a high administrative post at the C.A.A.I.C., which he obtained thanks to his film *Rupture* (1982) which covers a complex slice of Algeria’s history, namely the 1930s, a time when according to Chouikh “commençait à s’affirmer une conscience politique” (1997: 184). Unless filmmakers were part of the system, it was impossible for them to subsist and freely make films without being censored. Thus entering the system “à la façon du ‘cheval de Troie’” [like a Trojan horse] (Chouikh 1997: 31) proved to be one of the ways for Algerian filmmakers to “préserver nos libertés” [preserve our freedom] (ibid.). At the same time, Chouikh admits that the financial security provided by the monthly salaries supplied by the state was a perk Algerian filmmakers found difficult to turn down. The upshot was that, in spite of yet another institutional reorganization of the audiovisual sector, the 1980s saw the emergence of a few notable films in Algeria. Among filmmakers that were lucky enough to secure financing during this period were Ghaouti Bendeddouche, Ahmed Rachedi, Mohamed Bouamari, Amar Laskri, Sid Ali Mazif, Merzak Allouache, Okacha Touita, Brahim Tsaki, Mohamed Rachid Benhadj and of course, Mohamed Chouikh.

Chouikh went on to make several short films and documentaries, but is best known for *La Citadelle* (1989) which was widely distributed to 70 international film festivals and which earned a total of 20 prizes. Other films include *Youcef* (1993) which was introduced at the Venice and the Berlin Film Festivals, *L’Arche du Désert* (1997) which opened the Locarno Film festival, and *Le Douar de Femmes* (2005) which was premiered in 2005 at the Ninth Annual Arab Film Festival in San Francisco. All his filmic narratives are known to be politically oriented, embracing important questions of gender, class and religion, among others. In Chouikh’s view the ‘nation’ as he views it is not a static, perfectly homogenous entity but is dynamic or as Shohat and Stam put it: “an evolving, imaginary construct rather than an originary essence” (286). More specifically, *La Citadelle* is a social and political critique on the condition of women and Muslim laws permitting polygamy. The film also questions authority matters that are left in the hands of the village’s eldest men. Legitimacy of power granted on the basis of age is according to Chouikh: “pas très éloignée de celle ‘historique,’ du système” (Chouikh 1997: 42). [This legitimacy is not too far from the historical legitimacy of the system.]

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Chouikh’s cinematic influences are diverse and come from varied corners of the world. As a younger man, Chouikh would walk miles to see, in the course of the same day “quatre Godard d’affilée, de vrais bains de cinéma pour assimiler le langage et l’expérience des autres” (1997: 21). [...] four Godard films in a row; veritable cinematic baths to assimilate others’ language and experiences.] However, one must not read in this statement a mere desire to replicate or imitate what was seen at the theater. Generally speaking, filmmakers have always been subject to varied influences which—at times—enabled the birth of different and revolutionary cinematic forms that challenged conventional cinematography as exemplified for instance in Truffaut’s works. In Chouikh’s case, these influences were such that: “Il était difficile de choisir une école. Le néoréalisme italien était bien ancré chez nous, le cinéma de la Nouvelle Vague aussi, mais ce sont les grands maîtres, Luis Bunuel, Pasolini, Visconti, Fellini, Renoir qui étaient les plus porteurs d’influences” (21). [It was difficult to choose a school. Italian neorealism was well anchored in Algeria as well as New Wave but it was the grand masters, Luis Bunuel, Pasolini, Visconti, Fellini, Renoir who were most influential.] It is important to note as well that Chouikh’s artistic and intellectual inclinations are at least as much if not more profoundly ingrained in Arab culture and philosophy. Chouikh has—more often than not—quoted the influential works of Ibn Khaldoun (a well-known 14th century historian and philosopher) and Abderrahamane Mejdoub (a 12th century poet). Furthermore, his films’ dialogues often include wisdom from tribal cultures’ oral traditions such as proverbs, poems and so forth.

Often and regrettably so, works of filmmakers from the Third World are seen as being the product of Western influences and thus as pale imitations of Western canonical filmic texts. For example, Chouikh’s feature Rupture (1982) was viewed as one closely imitating the American western genre because of the presence in the film of four horsemen wearing turbans and galloping in the desert. However, as rightly noted by Chouikh himself, this is not an influence but an intrinsic reality of Algeria given that: “...les Arabes galopaient déjà sur leur chevaux avant la conquête de l’Amérique. Voilà comment parfois notre propre culture, ancrée depuis des millénaires, peut passer pour une pale copie” (1997: 22-3). [Arabs were already galloping on their horses before America was conquered. Here is how our own culture, which has been established for thousands of years, may sometimes pass for a mere copy.] For this reason alone, film studies based on cinemas of the Maghreb are of
prime importance for they further enhance understandings of some aspects of both Arab and Berber cultures, and help prevent further misinterpretations such as the one cited above. This is not to say however that Third World filmmakers or any other filmmakers for that matter are not imitating and/or borrowing certain cinematographic techniques and style from each other, but with some one such as Chouikh, these influences often prompt a desire to make a cinema closer to home both historically and socially. The following statement by Chouikh further clarifies the investment made with the multiple and varied influences received from his contemporaries and also earlier generation of filmmakers:


…all these filmmakers drew their universal dimension from being firmly anchored in their own culture. This is what I have taken from their works: going towards being oneself and not attempting to imitate them. Digging deep into one’s own specificity. Finding in my homeland what they found in theirs. It is in this respect that they had an influence on me.

Chouikh turned to Algeria’s history and clearly manifested a desire to “connaître mes racines, remonter dans le temps. C’est une quête qui me poursuit toujours” (1997: 32) […]get to know my roots, going back in time. This quest continues to haunt me.] His outlook is also a sociological one in that Chouikh views the Algerian as being close to his family ties as well as tribal culture practices and beliefs that were originally anchored in the countryside, hence Chouikh’s interest in “la vie des gens vue de l’intérieur, les drames populaires, la poésie” [people’s lives viewed from the interior, popular dramas and poetry] (26). Although most Algerians now live in and around cities, their mindset—according to Chouikh—finds its roots in the specificities of their original tribal cultures. In Chouikh’s words, the Algerian
est proche de ses liens familiaux qui sont restés au bled. La structure sociale
demeure encore tribale. Même si les Algériens vivent verticalement dans des
cités, leur esprit et leur comportement demeurent horizontaux, leur
‘béduinéité’ est très ancrée. Les rites de la campagne font partie de la cité
[...] Cette culture de la terre est en chacun. Ce qui peut expliquer la phase
difficile que traverse aujourd’hui l’Algérie sur le plan religieux ou
philosophique. (1997: 28)

is close to his family ties which remain in the countryside. The social
structure remains tribal. Even though Algerians live vertically in cities, their
mindset and behavior remain horizontal; their Bedouin character is deeply
ingrained. The rites of the countryside are part of the cities [...] This tribal
culture is in everyone and this might explain the current difficult phase
Algeria is going through from a religious and philosophical standpoint.

Chouikh’s interests thus go beyond the bloody events of the 1990s and tap into the
fragmented narratives of Algeria’s histories drawing as much on popular memory, culture,
religion as on the current state of Algeria’s political scene. Furthermore, Chouikh’s themes
do not shy away from what are considered to be taboo topics in Muslim societies such as
homosexuality, as seen in Youcef when both Youcef and a queer character cross-dress to
escape the authorities. Chouikh is refreshingly open about homosexuality, rightly
highlighting its borderless nature and pointing out its presence in the Arab world where it is
part of existing cultures and literatures (1997: 47). At the same time, Chouikh notes that there
is no lower status than that of homosexuals in Muslim societies, pointing out that theirs is
lower than that of women (ibid.). Most importantly, “Dire que chaque homme a sa part de
féminité dans une société où la féminité est considérée comme un mal et une tare, c’est
insulter les gens” (ibid.). [To say that each man has a feminine side in a society where
femininity is viewed as wicked and defective is to insult people]. His filmic outlook has also
provided ample room to contest and screen the plight of Algerian women as seen in La
Citadelle. To Chouikh, one cannot speak of Algerian society without talking about the
“maillon le plus faible de la société” (46). [...]society’s weakest link.] La Citadelle relates
the story of Kaddour, a simple yet kind-hearted young man who is continuously abused and mocked by his father and the tiny community he lives in because of his impossible love for the shoemaker’s wife. Kaddour’s father, a man who has married five wives to make them work around the clock in a claustrophobic and tiny house, decides to organize a wedding and promises his son a good wife. Overjoyed by the prospect of having a family of his own, Kaddour eagerly awaits to meet his bride but only following the wedding festivities, as is traditional custom. When the time comes, Kaddour enters the room in which the bride supposedly awaits but comes face to face with a female looking dummy. A disbelieving, stunned and saddened Kaddour steps outside the room with the dummy only to face the entire village community waiting to see his reaction and laughing uncontrollably. As Kaddour walks backwards from the crowd and while contemplating the multitude of open laughing mouths, he tragically falls over the high stoned wall that surrounds the tiny community.

Kaddour’s tragic fate openly questions the outcome of authority when left in the hands of an exclusive group of men. The convergence of the theme of patriarchal authority, polygamous marriages, Muslim-based laws and gender is thus staged through the plight of a man whose generosity and need for love is unjustifiably mocked and discarded. According to Shafik, such societal representation in La Citadelle, its flaws and abuses shows that this film “argues for a modern, ‘humane,’ and progressive social order” (151). What I find most pertinent in this feature however is the clever use of a female-looking dummy for it helped in successfully conveying a very specific critique. The use of such a prop to Chouikh was “…le moyen le plus clair de traduire le statut de la femme-objet […] Elle a tout sauf la parole, et comme la femme n’a pas le droit à la parole, le mannequin devient sa parfaite réplique” (1997: 46). […the best way to translate the social status of the woman-as-object (…) She has everything but the ability to speak and, given that women do not have the right to speak, the dummy is the best representation of her status]. This atypical cinematic representation of the Algerian woman goes against what was previously done. Women were often seen working in factories or in the fields following the same format and using similar slogans to those seen in the former Soviet Union. But as pointed out by Chouikh himself she remained in an “état de servitude. La femme algérienne a de tout temps porté le fardeau pendant que l’homme se prélassait au café, cela ne l’a jamais libérée pour autant” (43). [state of servitude. The
Algerian woman has always carried the burden while men would hang out in coffee shops, which hardly helped to liberate her.

Chouikh’s latest feature film, *Douar de femmes* (2005), is a tribute to those women who have survived the bloody events of the 1990s. The film’s subject matter is such that it has prompted a number of journalists such as Ahmed Bedjaoui of the *El Watan* newspaper to term it “cinéma féministe au masculin” [masculine, feminist cinema] (Jan. 19, 2006). Seeking refuge in a small village in the distant countryside, Sabrina—a young girl whose parents have been assassinated by fundamentalist Islamists—finds herself living in the company of women who have been left alone by their husbands (gone to work in a factory) under the sole moral supervision of two elder men. However, in order for the women to protect themselves against terrorist attacks, the husbands have left them their weapons. As the story goes along, the women succeed in defending themselves against one terrorist attack and end up forging lasting bonds among themselves in a joyful atmosphere free of male dominance and surveillance. In the meantime, Sabrina freely falls in love with an imprisoned younger man who is thought to be a confused terrorist. Finally, upon their return from the factory, the men fall into a terrorist ambush only to be rescued by their armed wives.

This latest film is not intended to be a fairy tale promising the upcoming societal liberation of Algerian women. Indeed, there is no indication that the harmony reached between husbands and wives in the end and only made possible by the unfortunate chaotic period the country is going through will last. In other words, there is no indication that the women in the film will be treated differently following their successful mission in freeing their husbands. In their study of films from the Third World, Shohat and Stam note that the camera is used not so much as a “revolutionary weapon” but as “monitor of the gendered and sexualized realms of the personal and the domestic, seen as integral but repressed aspects of collective history” (1994: 288). It is in this sense that Chouikh’s latest film may be understood.

Although the film did not get the rave reviews *La Citadelle* received (for the press reproached Chouikh with the unlikely nature of the story), *Douar de femmes*, along with *Rachida* (2003) by Yamina Bachir Chouikh and *El Manara* (2005) by Belkacem Hadjadj have generally been placed under the rubric of “cinéma algérien de l’urgence.” Chouikh’s filmic approach to these varied themes is one that closely resembles that of the “meddah,”
(storyteller) which I will turn to later in this chapter when discussing Chouikh’s cinematic style. Furthermore, the sociopolitical environment in which Chouikh made his films and the way this comes through on screen makes for a particularly interesting cinema where conventions are continuously challenged. Chouikh’s filmic approach however might seem a little challenging to grasp given at times the frequent use of symbolism, metaphors and parables. *The Ark of...*, which is the subject of this case study, is a fitting example of Chouikh’s complex use of parable. Nevertheless, the film very explicitly addresses one of Algeria’s thorniest and most complex internal issues, namely ethnic separatism and racism, as well as misuse of patriarchal authority. However, what makes *The Ark of...* most notable are the conditions in which it was made and the notable creative effort to assemble a compelling cinematic human tale of doomed love and irreparable violence.

**The making of The Ark of the Desert**

J’aime circonscrire mes personnages dans un espace ‘naturel’, où ils demeurent l’unique relief, où les gestes et les passions sont mesurés à une échelle humaine. (Chouikh 1997: 28)

I like to situate my characters in a natural setting where they are the only elements which stand out, where their gestures and passions are measured on a human scale.

Chouikh’s *The Ark of...* incorporates several Third Cinema filming practices: free camera motion, exclusive use of natural light, spontaneity, minimal interference with the performance of non-professional actors, fluid film composition through the use of uninterrupted shots, and inclusion of day-to-day scenes. When Chouikh arrived in Timimoun to start filming, he observed that everyone living in the Saharian oasis was singing. Thus, instead of bringing his own selected musicians, Chouikh decided to arrange his script around what was already there, around the observable reality. This approach is in essence that of Third Cinema in that it does not seek to alter the reality it wishes to represent on screen but
rather an accurate portrayal. Walking around and inside the oasis, Chouikh was actively researching all the human activity that was taking place. In doing so, he integrated into his film some of the rites and songs he heard because—in his words—he did not want to be in “contradiction avec les décors” (1997: 65) [in contradiction with the natural setting.] He added: “Je n’ai pas cherché à changer le tempérament des gens là-bas, je me suis adapté à leur façon d’être. Au besoin je réécrivais le scénario. C’est une démarche que j’ai constamment” (ibid.) [I did not want to change the locals’ temperament. I adapted to their way of being. When necessary, I would rewrite the script. I always take this approach.]

Unlike Youcef which was the last film fully financed by the state, Chouikh had to scrape together funds here and there from private and public venues based in Algeria, France and Germany to make The Ark of.... The film was thus produced thanks to a myriad of funding bodies. The equipment used to make the film was state-owned and included only a handful of old Russian-made cameras, a sound plate, a couple of power generators and an unsteady crane. According to Chouikh, this material was both obsolete and unsafe, but it was all he had at his disposal (1997: 71; 2003: 74-5).

**Synopsis**

The film opens with an establishing shot of the Sahara going from right to left and then the camera pans the oasis of Sidi Aziz to show men of different ethnic groups working and chanting rhythmically while digging an irrigation canal. Women dressed in colorful attire walk in a single file along the canal to pour water in. The story is that of Myriam and Amin who have fallen in love and secretly meet to avoid reprimand for they each belong to separate tribes of different unspecified ethnic background. Alas, they are caught by Myriam’s brothers during one of their secret rendezvous and while Myriam is being dragged on the desert sand back to the village by her brothers, Amin is severely beaten. This leads to a series of events where tribes build roadblocks and deny each other free access to different parts of the small

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30 Atlas-Films (Algeria); K-Films Production (France); E.N.P.A. (Algeria); Vulkan Kultur Gmbh (Germany); Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication (Algeria); Fond Sud: Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Ministère de la Coopération; Centre National de la Cinématographie (France); U.N.E.S.C.O. & la contribution de la Fondation Montecinemaverità (Locarno) and finally, DDA: Direction de la Coopération au développement et de l’aide humanitaire (Switzerland).
village. Myriam succeeds in escaping her captors and seeks refuge in a nearby mosque under the protection of the Imam. Meanwhile, both tribes are engaging in relentless verbal arguments until the town elders intervene to prevent physical violence. Each tribe is asked to cohabit peacefully until a decision is made. Amin is sent to live in exile in a nearby deserted citadel wherein resides an oddly composed tribe headed by the fierce Houria and El Moutanabi (a self proclaimed servant and disciple of Noah). As for Myriam, she is first taken to a secluded house in order to have her virginity checked by two of the village’s oldest women. This is probably one of the most troubling scenes of the film for this all takes place in a sand-made house, in semi-darkness and complete silence. Myriam is entirely covered by a green-colored fabric underneath which one of the older women checks whether or not Myriam’s ‘honor’ has been taken. Myriam’s mother awaits anxiously until finally, the older woman turns to look at her and shakes her head slowly in a negative fashion. As she is about to place the unlit candle by the window to let the village know that Myriam is no longer a virgin, the second older woman pulls her arm and motions her to take her box of matches to light the candle. It is worth noting that some critics have failed to see this show of solidarity amongst the women. In line with the town elders’ decision, Myriam is then kept chained in her house under her mother’s supervision and until her uncle—the sole paternal figure in Myriam’s family—travels to the oasis to decide her fate. When Amin’s mother pleads with Myriam’s mother to let them marry, she is shunned as she belongs to a poor, darker-skinned tribe “Mais Myriam appartient a une digne tribu,” [but Myriam belongs to a worthy tribe] Myriam’s mother exclaims. When Myriam’s uncle arrives, he hastily arranges a marriage between his niece and an unknown man to safeguard the family’s honor but still wishes to get revenge and commands his men to look for Amin. During the evening wedding ceremony and as the women’s celebratory song progresses into a climactic chanting, the chosen groom enters the tent to take physical possession of his bride, Myriam. Following a few seconds and as Myriam’s mother anxiously waits outside the tent, we hear a scream and see the groom stepping out of the tent, bleeding to death at the throat and dropping on the ground. Myriam then runs out and escapes in the middle of the night. With Houria and El Moutanabi’s help, she is taken to the same hiding place where Amin has been kept safe. While the two lovers get reacquainted, the entire village goes through a night of terror and massacre prompted by unknown traveling men.
The following morning, both Amin and Myriam leave their hiding place and run to the village only to discover a sea of corpses scattered about on the desert sand. They run through the burning houses and streets only to find dead bodies after dead bodies. Very few survivors are seen and, among them a little boy, by the name of Salim (whose presence and gaze upon the events has been shown intermittently throughout the narrative) who is all packed up and ready to leave the oasis. The last scene shows him passing by El Moutanabi who pleads with him to get on the half buried Ark and save himself for the end is near: “Monte où tu seras pris dans les flots de la haine, dans les vagues de la culpabilité. La preuve, ils ont fait naufrage.” [Come on board or you will be taken by the streams of hate and the waves of guilt. The proof is that they sank.] Salim however keeps walking and exclaims: “Que Dieu vous pardonne à vous! Je ne veux plus vous voir. Je pars pour être en paix. Vous brûlez tout! Vous frappez et tuez les enfants. Les adultes sont devenus fous.” [May God forgive you! I no longer want to see you. I’m leaving to be in peace. You burn everything! You hit and you kill children. You adults have gone mad.] The last shot gives us a panoramic view of the desert dunes and of little Salim walking alone in the distance.

A cinema of parables

Chouikh’s The Ark of… is a cinema of inquiry, laying out key themes of tradition, religion, genre and ethnic separatism. Uniquely blending reality and fiction, Chouikh assembles a poetic visual tapestry with the help of traditional characters such as the beggar, Houria (a woman whose wisdom is reminiscent of pre-Islamic times), Moutanabi (a man possessed by the biblical prophecy of Noah’s Ark), Salim (the embodiment of innocence and also of tomorrow’s generation), Myriam (an oriental version of Juliet), and Amin (a dark, handsome Romeo). Such characters enable Chouikh to inscribe a certain oral tradition which he combines with local traditional music. Such an approach offers a unique aesthetic visual composition particularly enhanced by the full use of the natural environment provided by the mystic Sahara and the oasis of Sidi Aziz.

In spite of its Algerian specificity (both geographically and thematically), the crisis portrayed in The Ark of… is one which—according to Chouikh—goes beyond Algeria’s borders. It is one of those rare films that could very possibly be viewed without dialogues for
the imagery alone is powerfully and universally meaningful. To Chouikh, “L’Arche était une urgence par rapport au drame algérien qui symbolise aussi les autres drames du Tiers Monde. L’Arche représentait, en microscome, toutes ces tragédies qui s’abattent sur les pays pauvres” (1997: 66). [The Ark was an SOS in relation to the Algerian tragedy which also symbolizes other tragedies of the Third World. The Ark represents at a microscopic level all of these tragedies that plague poor countries.] He adds that his cinematic reflection is quite simple, and at the same time ecological: “Nous sommes sur une terre comme dans une oasis, où nous sommes dans l’obligation de tout partager pour vivre: l’eau, la verdure, le travail” (ibid.). [We’re all on this earth as if in an oasis, where we must share everything to live: water, green spaces and work.]

Metaphors and symbols in the film abound, using natural settings, elements and objects such as the boat standing in the sand. There is also a deserted and decrepit citadel reminiscent of an earlier time from which nothing is known and within which a tribe made of outcasts (all dressed in black) resides. It is not uncommon to find such metaphors in Maghrebi cinema and, Chouikh has often argued, such a cinematic method is the reflection of a given specific culture, that of the Mediterranean: “Mais nous sommes avant tout un peuple méditerranéen avec une culture spécifique, où l’usage de la métaphore est fréquent. On est plus proche de Pasolini et Bunuel que des cinéastes russes ou américains” (1997: 23). [We are above all a Mediterranean people with a specific culture and where the use of the metaphor is frequent. We are closer to Pasolini and Bunuel than to Russian or American filmmakers.]

Although not endorsing Fredric Jameson’s much debated observation according to which all texts from the Third World are “necessarily allegorical,” Shohat and Stam view allegory as a “productive category” (271) in their study of Third Worldist films, and they have distinguished two types of allegories: the first being “Marxist-inflected nationalist […] where history is revealed as the progressive unfolding of an immanent historical design” (ibid.), and the second, “where the focus shifts from the ‘figural’ signification of the onward march of history to the fragmentary nature of the discourse itself” (272). They also discern a third variant of allegory where it “serves as a form of protective camouflage against censorious regimes, where the film uses the past to speak of the present…” noting that such use of allegory “becomes exaggerated in the case of repressive regimes, perhaps, especially where intellectual filmmakers, profoundly shaped by nationalist discourse, feel obliged to
speak for and about the nation as a whole” (ibid.). In Chouikh’s case, his use of allegory straddles both the second and third categories as outlined by Stam and Shohat. We have seen for instance that in the film La Citadelle, the female-looking dummy was used as a metaphor to highlight the Algerian’s woman status as a barren-voice. In Youcef, the portrayal of a FLN activist suffering from mental illness is a way to camouflage a message intended to highlight the misdoings of the long standing single-party system. Both of these films, unlike The Ark of…., were financed by the state and their allegorical nature was one of the ways which the author found to get around censorship while still making an oppositional cinema.

Often, Chouikh has had to justify his use of metaphors and symbolism for at times, the level of abstraction in his films can be such that they require much attention from the viewers. Some journalists (on both sides of the Mediterranean) have suggested that the complex meanings surrounding symbolism in Chouikh’s films take away from the narrative. Such observations are open to question particularly when one considers the rich plurality of interpretations made possible by Chouikh’s stories.

Symbols in The Ark of… are plentiful and some of them are implicitly connected to religion. Take for instance the use of separate colors (green and blue) that the tribes use to help distinguish each other and the women’s colorful clothing and scarves. Green, which is so prominent in the film, was the color of the banner of the Prophet Muhammad and is also the color of joy, hope, peace and success in Arab cultures. This color is often found in the national flags of Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Libya, Algeria, Pakistan, etc. The water circulating through the oasis garden and shared equally by all ethnic tribes symbolizes peace in the community regardless of their respective differences. In fact, and up until Myriam and Amin’s loving relationship is uncovered, water alone seems to be the stabilizing factor among tribes. From a religious standpoint, and specifically in Islam, water has various origins and functions. It is used before ablutions and is also to be found in its purest form in the heavenly gardens promised to believers (Chebel 2003: 112).

In what follows, I distinguish two main overlapping themes: those that are concerned with the nation and those concerned with the nation’s crisis. I discuss some of the most pertinent elements circumscribing the nation such as ethnic separatism, and widespread violence. Following this thematic analysis, I then turn to questions of cinematic style and ask how far Chouikh’s approach may be said to be representative of a cinema delineated by
national concerns and imperatives but whose Third Cinema characteristics and practices reinforce its oppositional dimension both at the logistical and thematic level.

Themes

Themes of the nation and what makes the “national”

Nous sommes dans une période charnière, entre le régional et l’Internet, entre la mondialisation des médias et les narrations de coin de cheminée. Avant de penser à s’inscrire dans ces grands bouleversements de la société, il est nécessaire de préserver les richesses qui sont à notre portée, le berbère, l’arabe, et même le français. Un peuple parlant plusieurs langues est un peuple plus ouvert que celui qui ne parle que celle de son père. (Chouikh 1997: 50)

We live in a key transitional period, between the regional and the World Wide Web, between media globalization and the folk tales told around the fireplace. Before embracing these gigantic changes in society, it is necessary to preserve the riches that are within our reach such as Berber, Arabic and even French. A people that speaks many languages is a people more open than one in which people speak only their father’s tongue.

In Chouikh’s view thus, the diverse make-up of the nation is what constitutes its strength. In highlighting Algeria’s polyphony and plurilingual richness, Chouikh puts forth a discourse which celebrates the nation’s ethnic plurality while at the same time dismantles the unitary concept of the people as promoted by the state. In The Ark of…, the use of old Arabic from the 14th century which serves to emphasize the narrative’s poetic quality, the plurality of tribal cultures and of ethnic groups seen in the film, are domains that are too numerous and complex to exhaustively discuss within the framework of this case study.
Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari,31 Bensmaia in Experimental Nations or, the Invention of the Maghreb, distinguishes 4 types of languages: vernacular (or local, Kabyle, Touareg, etc.), vehicular (national, mainly used as a means of social communication), referential (i.e. one that “functions as oral or written reference, through proverbs, sayings, literature, rhetoric, etc.”), and a mythic language which, in Algeria, would be literary Arabic (2003: 17-8). In The Ark of..., the spoken language is permeated with proverbs, old prophetic warnings, biblical tales and ageless folkloric songs. This form of language could, in Bensmaïa’s terms, be defined as referential. Chouikh’s film is in fact part of a larger body of post-Third Worldist films that “favor heteroglossic proliferations of difference within polygeneric narratives, seen not as embodiments of a single truth but rather as energizing political and esthetic forms of communitarian self-construction” (Shohat and Stam 1994: 288). Thus, it is important to remember that Chouikh’s choices are politically motivated in that they reject the state’s assertion of national and cultural homogeny in Algeria.

In The Ark of..., while the sharing of ‘national’ resources such as water holds diverse communities together, the slightest rift creates havoc and turns attention away from more pressing matters such as the threat posed by unknown traveling desert men. Although ethnic separatism is not clearly articulated in the film, it is precisely at the root of the tragic events that are taking place and, it is often referenced visually through the shots taken of the different looking tribes. What we do know for sure is that the tribe from which Amin comes is one made up of poorer and darker skinned workers.

More generally, Algeria is roughly made up of two main ethnic groups: Algerian-Arabs (whose ancestry is predominantly Arab) who make up Algeria’s largest ethnic group and the Berbers (whose ancestry goes back to inhabitants of Algeria and other parts of north-west Africa prior to the arrival of the Arabs in the seventh century). This latter group is scattered in different regions of Algeria such as Kabilia (East of Algiers) and branches out into varied smaller groups such as the Shawia (Chaouia) who live in the Aurès Mountains, and the Tuareg who typically occupy the southern region of Algeria. It is not uncommon to find in the southern Sahara ethnic groups of Negroid origin hence the prevalence of black

31 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, trans. Dana Polan, foreword by Reda Bensmaia (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986)
tribes in *The Ark of…*. Although not involved in the conflict, these same tribes (in the filmic narrative) are engulfed in the same tragic fate in the end.

Many of these groups continue to speak their own dialect and have preserved their own cultural rites and customs in spite of the wide spread ‘arabisation’ program implemented by the state following the liberation. This has caused many rifts over the years and forms of regionalism have been frowned upon by the state. Berber groups are continually fighting for their linguistic rights but, as pointed out by Chouikh himself: “Le système de l’époque avait prôné une culture et une langue au nom de l’arabisme. Or, au nom de cette ‘arabité exclusive,’ on a nié l’existence des autres” (1997: 50). [The old system had promoted one culture and one language in the name of Arabism. In doing so, other cultures and languages were denied.]

In Chouikh’s film, we not only witness ethnic separatism but also economic separatism which is close to Algeria’s reality in that different groups are able to cohabit peacefully but remain culturally and economically separated. This point is rather well-illustrated by the following dialogue excerpt from the film when Houria asks Amin why he was not allowed to marry Myriam:

**Houria:** Why did they refuse? It is not the first inter-ethnic union.

**Amin:** You all know why. Everybody knows why. Our community always did the jobs that others refused. Because they own the lands and we the mattocks. The true reason is that I am poor and that my face is more burnt by the sun than theirs.\(^{32}\)

Chouikh has often stated that only a true democracy could include and accept diversity: “Seule une vraie démocratie admettrait sans heurt une diversité de langues, de cultures, et pourrait mettre un terme aux dérives régionalistes et malheureusement racistes” (1997: 50). [Only a true democracy would acknowledge without any problems a diversity of languages, of cultures and could put an end to regionalist excesses and even racism.] This is not to say that Chouikh opposes the considerable cultural heritage left by the Arabs but he is strongly in favor of preserving cultural specificity (ibid.). In doing so, Chouikh’s political stance echoes

\(^{32}\)Chapter 4: “La nuit du feu” [The night of fire]
that of many others in that nations should be viewed as “heterogeneous, at once urban and rural, male and female, religious and secular, native and immigrant and so forth” (Stam and Shohat 1994: 286).

Ultimately in the film, Myriam and Amin find each other again but amidst bloody chaos. The joy felt upon their love is one but fleeting since they each lose an integral part of themselves and of their culture when losing their respective family members and community. Discord among the groups led to such escalation of violence that not even the elder community members could help settle peace and squash the deadly threat posed by the unknown horsemen who ultimately end up destroying everyone’s lives.

In Chouikh’s films, elder men are often used as a metaphor to represent and question the inability of the state to tackle important national affairs. The boat half buried in the sand should be read as a symbol of loss, but also as an allegory tied to the idea that revolution has not served its purpose. As pointed out by Denise Brahimi, the boat’s allegory is that of the “idéaux et des espoirs enlisés” (2004: 159) [buried ideals and hopes]. Brahimi adds further that: “L’arche qu’on voit finalement est évidemment le navire de la révolution, réduit à l’état de lamentable et dérisoire épave” (ibid.). [The ark we finally see is obviously the revolutionary ship reduced to a pathetic and useless wreck.]

Such biblical reference are also open to different interpretations. In Chouikh’s view, the boat half buried in the sand :

…c’est presque la faillite du symbole biblique […] C’est ce bateau, symbole des références religieuses et morales qui s’avère ensablé dans ses racines […] Le vrai bateau qui sauvera l’humanité, c’est cette oasis où l’on peut accoster et vivre […] C’est cette terre, essentielle et précaire, qu’il faut apprendre à partager. (1997: 68)

… is almost the collapse of the biblical symbol […] This boat, symbol of religious and moral references, bends up stranded in its roots […] The real boat that will save humanity is this oasis where we can land and live […] It is this land, essential and precarious that we must learn to share.
Themes of the nation in the film thus revolve around poorly handled community politics by self appointed elder leaders, and also questionable patriarchal authority as best embodied in the character of Myriam’s uncle, polygamous practices, women’s subordination and social exclusion as best exemplified by the tribe composed of outcasts and headed by both El Moutanabi and Houria. Separately and as the film moves on to its final climatic scene of death left by the massacres, one cannot help but interpret the violence in the end as the ultimate cinematic translation of a foreseeable socio-political reality once again anticipated by Chouikh.

I have already mentioned in my introduction that correlations have been made between the narrative of the film Youcef and the assassination of the President Boudiaf on June 29, 1992. The arrest of hundreds of members of the FIS\textsuperscript{33} party following the President’s assassination contributed in no small part to the uncontrollable and nationwide spread of bloody violence. Threats were made, ultimatums were given, and amidst fear and chaos, a small poster plastered in the Islamist-dominated neighborhood of Belcourt, outside of Algiers, bore the following warning words:

On vous fera bientôt payer l’usage abusif de notre détention au sud du pays (les camps où ont été incarcérés plusieurs milliers d’islamistes) que rien ne justifie, et de nous avoir enlevé le privilège de vivre avec nos familles. Nous vous ferons porter l’habit de la peur jusque dans vos foyers.\textsuperscript{34} (Kroës: 1992)

We will soon make you pay for the unjustified and abusive use of our detention in the south (the camps where thousands of Islamists have been incarcerated), and for taking away from us the privilege of living with our families. We will make you live in fear all the way to your homes.

Shohat and Stam write that films “do not claim to represent specific historical incidents, [yet they] still implicitly make factual claims” (179). Just as in Youcef, the Ark of the desert’s final massacre proved to be regrettably premonitory of the series of massacres that took place

\textsuperscript{33} Islamic Salvation Front
in Reis, Béni Messous and Bent alha in the course of the year 1997. The night of August 29, a massacre of horrific proportions saw the death of up to 400 men, women and children in the village of Reis, south east of Algiers. On September 5, 150 were killed in Béni-Messou, a suburb of Algiers. 252 women, children and men were likewise killed in the small village of Benthala the night of September 22. Chouikh had once again anticipated his surrounding reality, something he deplores given that: “Plutôt que d’anticiper le malheur, j’aimerais pouvoir le désamorcer […] Si je montre les désastres de la violence, c’est pour altérer les consciences” (1997: 80). [Instead of anticipating disaster, I’d rather defuse it (...) If I show the disasters of violence, it is with the aim of changing minds.]

Themes of the nation’s crisis

Le film anticipe les risques d’un autre drame algérien, qui pourrait être le plus grave de son histoire. L’Arche montre que si l’on ne peut pas faire une nation dans la diversité, dans la tolérance, si chacun se replie sur sa chapelle, il n’y aura plus ni nation, ni chapelle. (Chouikh 1997: 67)

The film anticipates the risks of another Algerian tragedy; perhaps the most serious in her history. The Ark shows that if we cannot build a nation embracing diversity, in a tolerant climate and if everyone turns inwards towards their own sect, that will bring the end of nation and sect alike.

Themes of the nation’s crisis are thus embodied in the escalating and uncontrollable violence originally initiated by the love of two young individuals from different tribes. The thematic and visual audacity of the film was also to intertwine an account around two characters whose loving innocence could have never anticipated the night-long violence caused by the group of horsemen whose motives are left unexplained. Intolerance and superstitions played a considerable part in this hellish descent towards death for it is clearly the elder’s incapacity to protect the community that prompted such a tragic collective fate. According to Chouikh:

35 For further factual details, see Françalgérie, Crimes et Mensonges d'Etats by Lounis Aggoun and Jean-baptiste Rivoire, Editions La découverte, 2004.
“Le système du parti unique tendait irrémédiablement vers une explosion que tout le monde attendait et redoutait. Le FIS est l’aboutissement de cette descente aux enfers” (1997: 69). [The single-party system made inevitable this explosion, which everyone expected and feared. The FIS is the culmination of this descent into hell.]

To illustrate such views, Chouikh has—as already mentioned above—resorted to using a biblical reference such as Noah’s Ark as a way to make the following analogy: “Dans l’Arche de Noé, c’est Satan qui montait et se mêlait aux animaux. L’arrivée des armées belliqueuses dans la palmeraie représente cette intrusion” (ibid.). [In Noah’s Ark, Satan infiltrated himself among the animals. The arrival of the belligerent armies in the oasis represents this intrusion.] In addition, Chouikh often uses in his films the figure of the child whose emblematic purity and innocence stands in stark contrast to societal chaos and injustice. Of children, Chouikh has said that: “Le regard de l’enfant reste le plus vrai dans mes films car il règle les passions. Le regard de l’enfant aujourd’hui, c’est le regard de l’homme de demain, celui qu’on est en train de former.” Adding further and most importantly that: “On ne naît pas terroriste ou voleur, on le devient, et je reprends encore une réflexion d’Ibn Khaldoun qui dit que ‘l’homme est le fils de son environnement’” (48). [The child’s look is the most authentic in my films because it rises above passions. Today’s child’s gaze is tomorrow’s man’s gaze; the one that we are shaping (…) One is not born a terrorist or a thief, one becomes one or the other. And I quote here another of Ibn Khaldoun’s observations when he says that ‘man is a product of his environment’].

**Cinematic style and poetic realism**

All the above themes and elements are cinematically incorporated and represented in different ways and the use of long, circular traveling shots are reminiscent of traditional oral storytelling which brings me now to consider Chouikh’s cinematic style. As we will see, mostly everything in *The Ark of…* from the film’s production logistical methods to work ethics are very much characteristic of Third Cinema but also of poetic realism.

Chouikh chose Timimoun, a remote oasis located in the southern part of Algeria, in order to execute long wide and long panoramic shots. However, his choices of locations
mostly have to do with his preferences to film where everything is “resserré” [close together]. In shooting his previous film *La citadelle*, Chouikh picked a village where houses are built one against another along and within a high stoned wall. This choice was made to reinforce in part the idea of imprisonment felt by the women in the film and which is, as Brahimi pointed out, “l’aspect le plus insopportable de la condition féminine dans le Maghreb traditionnel” (2004: 157). [the most unbearable aspect of the feminine condition in the traditional Maghreb.]

In his own words: “Dans un petit village, je maîtrise l’espace géographique et je peux lier les mouvements des personnages” (1997: 72). [In a small village, I able to control geographical space and connect together the movements of the characters.] This is especially notable in the scene where Myriam is being dragged on the sandy streets of the village by her brothers after she is caught canoodling with Amin in the oasis garden.

In addition, the opening and closing segments of the film are executed with a panoramic shot of the oasis going from right to left as if writing Arabic (ibid.). Another technique favored by Chouikh is that of the sequence shot which enables the filming of an uninterrupted sequence: “J’aime que le plan-séquence contienne en lui tous les plans […] Il a sa propre dramaturgie et son propre rythme, captés en direct, d’un seul tenant” (ibid.). [I like to include within a single continuous shot all the shots which could have been filmed separately (…) It thus carries its own dramaturgy, its own rhythm that are captured live, in one take.]

Chouikh adds that this dramaturgy is very much part of the Arab culture asserting that “C’est très méditerranéen de tout dramatiser” (1997: 73). [It is very Mediterranean to dramatize everything.] This is when Chouikh makes the important analogy with the ‘meddah’ (storyteller) when explaining his frequent use of circular motions in the film. When telling a story, an authentic ‘meddah’ will not sit in the middle of the circle, but next to his audience thus as part of the circle. The “meddah” then moves around as he tells his story to give everyone a chance to look at him from different angles. This is precisely how Chouikh tells his story in the film, in a circular fashion and using circular camera motions. Finally, although Chouikh also uses the shot-reverse-shot technique in his films, he very much remains: “attaché à la culture de cette narration basée sur le cercle, dans la forme
What makes Chouikh’s film both compelling and reminiscent of poetic realism from a cinematic standpoint is that, while filming *The Ark of...*, he remained faithful to the natural and rural surroundings provided by the oasis stating that: “Pendant le tournage, j’ai été ainsi en ‘quête’ permanente, guettant ce qui pouvait se passer pour aller planter ma caméra, presque comme un documentariste” (74). [While filming, I was thus in an ongoing quest almost like a documentary filmmaker, looking for what was taking place in order to set my camera there.] This technique is very much reminiscent of the Italian neorealist movement; a movement whose emphasis on social realism was characterized by “popular setting, social content, historical actuality, and political commitment” (Bondanella 1990: 31).

Thus taking the cameras in the streets, either in urban or rural settings was an attempt by Chouikh to capture a certain authenticity. According to Giannetti, filmmakers of the Italian neorealist tradition “insisted upon the dramatic superiority of things as they really are, the texture of life as it is experienced by ordinary people. These directors were concerned with the ‘excavation’ of reality: instead of plots, they emphasized facts, and all the ‘echoes and reverberations’ of facts” (191). The neorealist movement, which faded away in the 1950s, was generally understood as one that opposed Hollywood cinematic conventions that had permeated Italian cinema. According to Bondanella, the neorealists sought a new form of “literary and cinematographic language which would enable them to deal poetically with the pressing problems of their time,” but without a “programmatic approach to these questions” (34). Most importantly, and as pointed out by Giannetti, these filmmakers “insisted upon the innate dignity of the human spirit, which is revealed even in the most insignificant situation” (191).

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36 Here I am using Peter Bondanella second edition. (*Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*)

37 In *Understanding Movies*, Giannetti distinguishes the following characteristics notable in the Italian neorealists tradition: “…open-ended structures, suggesting a slice of life, rather than a neatly articulated plot; an insistence upon picturing people truthfully, ‘warts and all’; a reluctance to offer slick solutions to complex problems; a preference for authentic locations and natural lighting; the use of nonprofessional actors, even in principal roles; a concern with poverty as a social and political problem; the avoidance of extraordinary characters and events; an encompassing tone of compassion, especially for the underprivileged; an emphasis on democratic and humanist ideals (with a concomitant hostility towards Fascism and bourgeois values in general); and an understated use of the camera, with emphasis on long shots, and subdued editing techniques” (190).
What Chouikh has succeeded in doing in *The Ark of...* is not necessarily to replicate the neorealists’ aesthetics, but to create his own cinematic language which is a fusion of different influences (both western and non-western) and cultures (Arab and Berber). Other references in the film allude to a very distant past unknown to many that makes for an unrestricted cinema which goes well beyond a projected national imaginary. Take for instance the overtly sensual female character Houria (which means ‘freedom’ in Arabic) who enigmatically represents a forgotten pre-Islamic time when women were equally valued. Of Houria, Brahimi says that she incarnates “tout le refoulement des sociétés islamiques” [all the repression of Islamic societies] (2004: 157).

Chouikh is probably one of the few filmmakers out there willing to relinquish control by letting the camera be a spectator with minimum interference: “Je place ma caméra en spectateur, en laissant le maximum d’ouverture et de latitude de mouvement” (1997: 75) [I let my camera be a spectator so to leave as much opening and latitude for movement.]

Finally, Chouikh does not mark the ground with specific posts where his actors and non-actors should stand. Often he will rework his scenario based on unexpected interferences. As such, his text is not a static perfectly linear narration but an ever-changing scenario based on the environment, the locals among which Chouikh chooses to film. Such is the case of an old man who suddenly appears in the film and whose monologue unexpectedly erupts and of which Chouikh later said that “Le texte n’était pas dans le scénario, c’était comme un reportage, un moment de vérité bouleversante à saisir” (ibid.) [The text was not in the script. It was like a cover story, a devastating moment of truth within our grasp.]

These artistic approaches combined with the themes explored above have helped us consider how Chouikh makes use of the national space when filming *The Ark of...*. These considerations have also helped us better map this cinema in theoretical terms. We have established that it is first an oppositional cinema in that it re-configures and projects a “national imaginary” that contradicts/opposes the official discourse as it includes and highlights Algeria’s inherent ethnic diversity with all its antagonisms and valuable cultural contributions and repressed histories. This corresponds closely with the model of Post-Third
films which, according to Shohat and Stam, “interrogate nationalist discourse through the grids of class, gender, sexual and diasporic identities” (292).

It is thus in this sense that Chouikh’s film is characteristic of Third Cinema. In Chouikh’s hands, the camera has a dual function in that it enables the author to express himself artistically but also politically. It becomes a means to convey a message: “Un film est un moyen idéal pour révéler la bonté ou la noirceur des gens, car il permet de projeter notre image et peut être de la rectifier […] le mensonge éloigne et coupe des réalités” (Chouikh 1997: 58) [A film is an ideal means to reveal people’s good and bad sides in that it enables the projection of our image and with it perhaps the possibility to rectify it (…) lying distances us and cuts us off from reality]. Chouikh as he has said himself countless times is thus both a filmmaker and a witness to his time: “Je suis un témoin d’une époque turbulente de l’histoire de mon pays et je dois en rendre compte, à 24 images seconde” (77). [I am a witness to the turbulent history of my country and I must record it 24 images per second.] And again, “Etant cinéaste, je suis appelé à m’exprimer sur ce que je vois et ce que je vis. C’est en Algérie que je me sens autorisé à le faire” (79) [Being a filmmaker, I feel compelled to express myself on what I see and live through. It is in Algeria that I feel authorized to do so.]

From an aesthetic standpoint, Chouikh replicates but personalizes both culturally and subjectively a certain poetic neorealism giving it a dramatic theatrical dimension through the use of metaphors and symbolism. This enables Chouikh to nuance his critique of the state while looking for a certain filmic coherence whose interpretation is intended to be made accessible to Algerian viewers but also crossover audiences (76). Brahimi has pointed out that the multiple interpretations made possible by the narrative form confirm further the film’s allegorical character (2004: 157).

Generally speaking, Chouikh’s films are well received both in and outside Algeria however some films such as Youcef and La Citadelle have proven to be difficult to distribute in Algeria due to the sensitivity of the state. When it comes to the interpretation of Chouikh’s films, the Francophone Algerian press is overall supportive and able to grasp some of the nuances perceived in Chouikh’s filmic narratives. The French press likewise welcomes

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38 In Shohat and Stam’s view, peoples of the Third World began to tell or “deconstruct” their history following the decolonization hence the term Post-Third Worldist (248). In cinematic terms, this re-telling and deconstruction is conceptualized by the notion of Third Cinema.
Chouikh’s works but often criticize them—perhaps understandably so—within and from a Eurocentric perspective. At times, articles bear a slightly condescending tone which more often than not reveals an inability or an unwillingness to bear in mind cultural referents other than European. Jean-Michel Frodon—a French journalist for Le Monde—has written several articles on Arab and Maghrebi cinema and has been at times—in my view—guilty of such a Eurocentric outlook. To Frodon for example, Chouikh leads his story in The Ark of… as a “maître de ballet” as opposed to a “narrateur de fiction” (1998). This observation to which I will turn to again shortly shows that Frodon has failed to capture for instance the circular motions of the camera paralleling as such the moves of the “meddah” when telling a story. Such omission is surprising given that the impact of oral tradition and technique in films of the sub-Sahara and Africa is rather well known to those with an interest in such cinema. Frodon also thought the last final sequence of young Salim was a little overdone for—as he writes so decisively - “on avait compris” (1998). Nevertheless, interpretation is as complex as it is problematic when it comes to such filmic narratives. Considerations of such cinema must encompass a wider perspective which also include questions of distribution, exhibition, audience and, very minimally so, critical reception to which I now turn.

Questions of distribution, exhibition, audience and transnationalism

Recently, the Paris-based K Films Editions/Distribution company launched the sale of a DVD with three of Chouikh’s fiction films along with a booklet containing a lengthy interview with the filmmaker and the script of The Ark of…. Chouikh’s interview, which I have used at many points in this case study, provides a wealth of information concerning not only the state of Algerian cinema today but also questions of production, esthetic influences and political views highlighting the qualities of Chouikh’s out-of-mainstream cinema. The marketing “coup” of the triple DVD release may not have happened were it not for Chouikh’s perseverance and belief in his craft. In addition, the death of state-funded cinema means that Algerian filmmakers are now free to enjoy the perks an open market economy has to offer but they may do so solely on their own. Chouikh clearly points out that Algerian filmmakers are free to say whatever they please but “à condition de financer nous-mêmes nos projets […] Pour s’adapter à la loi de marché, encore faudrait-il que ce marché existe, avec
un système de production, de diffusion, d'exploitation” (1997: 37). [provided we finance ourselves (…) But in order to adapt to a free market economy, there has to be a free market with a system of production, exhibition and sales.] Rare however were those who succeeded. Such autonomy, according to Chouikh is for now reduced to “l’anarchie la plus complète et à une économie de bazar” (39). [to absolute anarchy and to a hand-to-mouth existence.] It is important to note that Chouikh is most definitely in favor of an open market economy and one with a minimum set of regulations that would ensure the possibility of making movies (ibid.). What Chouikh wants precisely is the “création d’un environnement étatique non-hostile” [the creation of an environment free from state hostility] (75) in order to ensure a smoother transition and a certain level of protection within one’s own domestic market.

Although I am not able to cover the complexities surrounding the IMF’s involvement in and financial supervision of countries in the Third World here, I am aware that IMF pressures placed on Algeria in recent years have meant that drastic economic decisions have been made, and have necessitated—rightly or not—extreme budget cuts, particularly in the artistic and cultural domain. Chouikh—as a knowledgeable observer—has stated that such regulations imposed by the IMF have been draconian for the cultural sector in Algeria, but that cinema has suffered the most. To him: “C’est la loi de la rentabilité. Le cinéma n’étant pas une science exacte ni un marché sûrement rentable, les banques algériennes se détournent de son financement” (1997: 38). [It is the law of profitability. As cinema is not an exact science, nor is it definitely profitable, Algerian banks turn away from its financing.] 39

Evidently and in Chouikh’s case, difficulties at all levels have helped in the shaping of a cinema which bears, as we have seen, many of the characteristics found in Third Cinema compounded with aesthetic qualities reminiscent of poetic realism. During the period of state-funding, distribution of Chouikh’s films was unpredictable and Chouikh often had to find ways to get around periodic restrictions at the distribution level. In Cahiers du Cinema, Chouikh reveals for example that :

…je faisais des coproductions privées: tout en restant dans le système étatique, j’allais chercher de l’argent ailleurs, chez les allemands, etc. Bien sûr, tout revenait à l’État, je n’avais que mon salaire. Mais ils étaient obligés d’honorer la

39 See also Shohat and Stam, 1994, p.287 on IMF pressure.
coproduction…C’est ça la technique…[rires] La Citadelle a été produit a 100% par l’État et ça a été difficile de le montrer. Mais grâce au grand prix d’Annaba, il a pu sortir.” (Chouikh 2003: 74)

…I was making private co-productions while remaining within the state system. I was looking for money elsewhere, from the Germans, etc. Of course, all I got was my salary and the profit made would go to the state. But they were forced to honor the coproduction…that’s the way to do it…[laughter] La Citadelle was 100% produced by the State and it was difficult to show it. But, thanks to the Annaba Award, the film was able to be released.

Here we find that Chouikh resorted to at least two devices in order to get his films released: coproductions which often include clauses that make it mandatory for films to be distributed in select theaters, and secondly, through Festival venues. Getting an award or simply being part of an official selection means that a film has a greater chance to be distributed and viewed outside Algeria. This last point leads us to consider another and final dimension of Chouikh’s cinema which is that of the transnational.

To the question, “When you look for external help outside Algeria, how do you anticipate the acceptance of your script from co-producers who do not go through the same restraints as you?” (Taboulay 1997: 35). Chouikh’s lengthy reply which I quote below is informed by his experience and also provides invaluable insights from a non-Eurocentric perspective.

Dans ce désert arabo-africain, l’auteur tente de se tourner vers d’autres horizons, d’autres commissions de lecture en dehors du pays. Il affronte alors une autre forme de difficulté d’écriture, quitter la pensée et l’idée nationale pour la pensée et l’idée universelle. Mais les brûlures de notre histoire ne sont pas encore cicatrisées, et c’est comme se mettre devant un peloton d’exécution […] On est accusé de vendre son âme aux autres. Pourtant notre mémoire collective s’est écrite avec les autres. La révolution algérienne a été le plus fidèlement reproduite par un étranger […] Rien n’est fabriqué chez nous,
seulement l'Idée, et c’est peut être pour cela que l’enjeu est plus passionnel.

In this Afro-Arabic desert, the author attempts to turn to other horizons, other reading committees outside the country. He is then confronted with a new writing challenge which involves leaving national thoughts and ideas to turn to universal thoughts and ideas. But the wounds left in our history have not yet healed and it is as we are asked to stand in front of a firing squad […] We are accused of selling our soul to others. However, our collective memory was written with that of others. The Algerian Revolution was most faithfully reproduced by a foreigner […] Nothing is manufactured here except the Idea, and this is perhaps why the stakes are so impassioned.

This statement points to many challenging areas of investigation involving questions of nationalism, belonging and history. I do not intend here to oppose Chouikh’s view but wish to suggest one interpretation behind such a statement. In my analysis of themes of the nation, I have mentioned that at times the level of abstraction perceived in Chouikh’s film appears to be such that it perhaps over-challenges the viewer in his/her attempt to interpret the filmic narrative. Further, I have examined Chouikh’s techniques and influences to better explain his cinematic style. What I am suggesting is that more than a simple artistic inclination and personal aesthetic conventions, more than an attempt to “camouflage” certain political statements to avoid censorship from the state, the methods used by Chouikh such as allegories or quite simply the choice of somewhat “exotic” locales could also be interpreted as a compromise to:

1) satisfy the aesthetic taste of select European audiences whose trained eyes—particularly in France—have been shaped by the avant-garde and other “auteur” cinema;
2) indulge the visual tastes of increasingly diverse crossover audiences all over Europe;
3) perpetrate an “unconscious” form of neo-colonialism over Third Worldist filmic texts (perhaps unlikely so but to not be dismissed entirely when it comes to financing).
the Francophone Algerian newspaper \textit{El Watan}, it is said that in choosing the desert locale, Chouikh also perpetrates the tradition that makes the desert a place of confrontation, myth and quest for identification. Based on this same article, one of the producers supposedly said to Chouikh: “I want sand, lots of sand,” underlying at such a desire to make an oriental version of \textit{Mad Max}. (M.B.H.: 1998)

Chouikh has said of the foreign investor (generally speaking) that what matters to him is not a specific passion but the theme with which he will invest himself both “humainement et financièrement” [humanely and financially] (1997: 40). He adds that contrary to perceived ideas, those who consider an Algerian script often have a soft spot for Algeria. A producer who is moved by a script will thus submit it to several reading committees in France and the rest of Europe. These committees however have their own aesthetic criteria and scale but they mostly consider their own needs while evaluating the appeal of such a project for their own audiences which is—Chouikh agrees—understandable. However, in Chouikh’s view “cela a des incidences sur l’écriture, car on se dit que le sujet doit dépasser les frontières, être universel” (ibid.). [this has an impact on the writing because we understand that the subject-matter must go beyond the borders, be universal.]

From an aesthetic and thematic standpoint, these committees do not wish to see mere copies of “occidental” cinematic style but—while asserting their own identity—filmmakers should ensure that they do not fall into a “folklore plus susceptible de correspondre aux attentes d’un public étranger” (40-41) [a folklore which is more likely to correspond to the expectations of a foreign audience]. Finally, there is the filmmaker-producer relationship to take into account and which according to Chouikh is problematic due to a certain historical susceptibility which leads filmmakers to view the producer as one who wishes to act as a tutor. As a result, he is often considered as an “ex-colonialiste, même s’il vient d’un pays sans rapport avec le conflit franco-algérien” (41). [ex-colonizer even if he comes from a country which has had nothing to do with the Franco-Algerian conflict.]

Based on the above observations and Chouikh’s extensive remarks regarding aspects of co-productions, we are now able to consider the transnational dimension of Chouikh’s cinema. It is problematic at—at least—two levels. The first one being of an ethical nature and the second being logistical. At the logistical level, every technical aspect of the film was
managed by various Algerian-based staff, with the exception of sound. It is fair to assume that the producers of the film did not get overly involved with the shooting of the film on location particularly if we consider that the film was made during an unstable political period. From an ethical standpoint, the author has highlighted the compromising nature of some aspects involving co-financing options. Although Chouikh is not specific in his answers as to how precisely such compromises affected his own filmic narrative, I have observed that perhaps the inclusion of “exotic” elements and the seemingly frequent use of parables could be read in *The Ark of…* as one of the ways in which the text was ‘universalized’ in order to satisfy the audiences from those countries where funding has come from. In this sense, we can perhaps assume that a certain compromise has been made to not overly emphasize a certain ‘Algerian specificity’ in the film. The use of old Arabic combined with the presence of unspecified different ethnic groups as well as the unspecified location (in the textual narrative, that is) make it difficult to perceive the film’s “Algerianness,” though to any European moviegoer, the film is known as Algerian primarily because it is advertised as having been directed by an Algerian filmmaker. It would however be unfair to assume that Chouikh compromised his attachment to the nation of Algeria given that the film’s message has retained its core strength.

In some cases, the conditions of financing, production, distribution and related matters appear to be so complex and varied that it is impossible to pinpoint the ‘national’ belonging of a given cinema. Furthermore, such questions regarding the transnational nature of films encompass wider debates that are out of this dissertation’s scope for they consider the disappearance, or not, of the very idea of the nation and the possible erosion of the nation-state. In Chouikh’s cinema, the projection of a national imaginary even if contradictory to that of the state is very much alive. Chouikh’s cinema is one emanating from the nation, and one concerned with the nation and particularly its history. As Michel Serceau rightly pointed out, the underlying principle of the parable noted in most cinemas of the Maghreb is that of circumscribing the action in an emblematic place and community that offer explicit referents to contemporary history (2004: 45). As a result, if compromises were made surrounding the national character of the film, it did not detract from its prime objective which was to “témoigner d’une situation que nous vivons, de la mettre en scène en la proposant au regard de chacun” (1997: 63). [recount a situation we are living and
rendering it on screen for everyone to see.] Chouikh is however careful to add that giving a solution or bearing a judgment in a film would be anti-democratic, asserting that his sole aspiration is to “pousser le spectateur à réfléchir lui-même” (ibid.) [force the viewer to think for himself.]

However, Chouikh has specifically said that he did not want to spare any “sensibilité en masquant des vérités, et c’est ainsi que le débat peut être intéressant pour tout le monde” (65). [sensibilities in covering up truths and this is how the debate may be interesting for everyone.] It is thus possible to conceive of the existence of a national oppositional cinema that is financially sustained thanks to a transnational network of funds, provided of course that the films’ thematic-reach could extend itself beyond Algeria’s borders. Yet in addition to being subjected to audiovisual market demands both inside and outside Algeria, the dependence of this oppositional cinema upon foreign subsidies’ funding programs for foreign productions of the Third World such as Fonds-Sud (a program sponsored and managed under the CNC wing) as well as funding and other resources provided by private producers makes it evidently vulnerable.

This dependence upon outside resources presents many challenges that may seem perhaps more insurmountable than the previous dependence of Algerian filmmakers upon the state. This increased dependence upon external funding may be seen as a form of cultural neocolonialism, a point to which I will return in the concluding remarks of this study. It is important to remember however that such survival involves from the filmmaker’s part a number of acrobatic moves at the subject-matter level of his films, and to a certain extent but only speculatively so, a somewhat slight bending of personal ethics. Although unspecified, it is clear from the private funding sources Chouikh has been able to obtain for the Ark of… that, somehow, a few compromises were made to widen the reach at the viewers’ level. As exemplified by Frodon’s comments from the newspaper Le Monde, the interpretation of the film can be as varied as unexpected which—paradoxically—reinforces the transnational ‘market’ value of the film as the more interpretations, the wider the reach. The use of parable turns out to be not only a poetic form of expression, but also a valid marketable and profitable device to ‘universalize’ a film’s content while enhancing a certain ‘exotic’ flavor without however compromising the auteur’s underlying message.
Conclusion

It is difficult to assert with precision the exact influences coproduction agreements have upon filmmakers of the Third World, particularly if their craft is one designed to highlight social injustice and stale politics. Of course, any argument in favor of a national cinema is problematic due to the very contradiction posed by the term ‘national’ alone. The idea around this term presupposes a certain homogeneity in direct contradiction with the intrinsic realities of all nations in that they are best defined by their diversity. While such debates surrounding the problematic terms of “nation” and “nationalism” may be of use to the thinking circles of the Western world, such terms—regardless of their problematic—continue to embody much significance to those nations that initially sought to gain their freedom from oppression and colonial presence.

The ways in which Chouikh chooses to project and reconfigure a “national imaginary” through his film is not to be translated as a rejection of the idea of the nation, but rather as an embrace and even a celebration of what he has been able to understand about Algeria as a nation.

Such filmic projection of the nation can be perceived—to borrow Shohat and Stam’s words—as a body of esthetics of resistance, for Chouikh has brought to life a form of poetic realism enriched by an oriental dimension making this cinema worth watching. Chouikh has resorted to the use of elements such as oral tradition and other devices to create a cinema (although delineated by national concerns) also available to wider audiences. Chouikh has said that although his approach might be unconscious at times, it is nevertheless a natural one for he lives on “émotions, des situations qui sont enchevêtrées les unes aux autres. Il m’est difficile de les nier pour faire un autre sujet” (1997 : 56) [I live on entangled emotions and situations. It is difficult for me to ignore them to talk of another topic.] Chouikh’s hope is to inspire a true collective awareness: “…j’espère qu’après ce réveil il y aura une réelle prise de conscience collective. Cette fracture du temps était voulue pour mieux projeter les injustices du temps présent” (1997: 59). […I hope that this wake up call will prompt a true collective awareness. This disruption of time was intended to better project the injustice of our present]
This chronological distance from the present times is precisely what distinguishes Chouikh from Allouache, Bachir-Chouikh and Moknèche. In conclusion, Chouikh’s cinema is thus best defined as an oppositional national cinema with a transnational dimension, but whose dependence upon external resources and funding makes its existence and survival particularly vulnerable to the whims of the global audiovisual market economy. Furthermore, Chouikh’s successes in various festival venues do not guarantee a secured distribution network nor do they specifically promote a further engagement on the part of such festivals towards Algerian films as they do towards films from Iran, for instance. Nevertheless, one can safely bet that Chouikh’s next film will again be shaped by the contradictions of the social reality which surrounds him, that of post-colonial Algeria. While very much aware of living in an exceptionally unstable political and social environment, and where “faire du cinéma” may appear frivolous but also “aggressive” due to the engagement it requires, Chouikh will weigh the danger and the restraints of a story whose parameters—no matters how stretched and challenged by global forces and imperatives—will remain within Algeria.
CHAPTER 3

BAB EL-OUED CITY OR THE MAKING OF A “COUSCOUS-WESTERN ISLAMIQUE” IN POSTCOLONIAL ALGERIA

Je pense énormément à l’Algérie. J’ai la nostalgie. J’ai envie d’y retourner et de découvrir brusquement que tout a changé complètement…Totalement…Qu’enfin, un grand pays est né…L’Algérie de demain, je la vois comme une personne qui, après un accident, entre en convalescence et se met à jouir de la vie d’une manière inouïe. Est-ce que je me trompe?

I think a great deal about Algeria. I feel nostalgic. I want to return there and suddenly discover that everything has completely changed…Totally…That finally, a great country has been born…I see tomorrow’s Algeria as a person who after an accident starts recovering and then begins to revel in life in a profound way. Am I wrong?

Situated against the backdrop of the 1988 October revolts’ aftermath, Bab el-Oued City (1994) is perhaps the darkest and most poignant fictional tale on the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Algeria. With its countless panoramic shots of sun-drenched roofs and streets, its constant back and forth play with the juxtaposition of contrasting colors such as white and blue, Bab el-Oued City offers a unique collage of characters whose fate and ties to both Algeria and Islam will ultimately be challenged, and in some cases, irreversibly changed. Merzak Allouache’s films are all permeated by a form of populism, and Bab el-Oued City, with its unique take on contemporary issues within a very specific political and social context, is no exception. Filmed hastily in the midst of terror, and in the same neighborhood in which the director was born and grew up, Bab el-Oued City is a rare and valuable filmic narrative whose thematics (terrorism, unemployment, religion, sexual

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40 Allouache in La Tribune, 28 May 1998.
41 When not italicized, “Bab el-Oued” will refer to the neighborhood of Algiers itself.
orientation, gender, among others) provide an exceptionally rich interpretation and visual rendering of Algerian society in the early 1990s. The attention to the minutiae of one of Algiers’ popular neighborhoods is shown through a succession of seemingly random yet recurring street shots, long and medium shots of women tending to their washing lines on balconies, children playing in the streets, urban and human-made sounds such as the calls to prayer, cars and motorcycles speeding by and so forth. Of all Allouache’s audiovisual works, this film is without doubt the most emblematic and representative of the director’s dual experience as both a transnational and “exilic” filmmaker. Relatively successful on both sides of the Mediterranean, Allouache in recent years has and continues to enjoy a unique position both as an individual and as an independent filmmaker. Initially based in Algeria and state-funded, Allouache voluntarily “migrated” to France during Algeria’s political instability, and now enjoys dual residency status enabling him as such to move relatively freely from one territory to another. Nevertheless, Allouache’s status within his host country does not eradicate the director’s profound sense of rupture from yet ongoing longing for his homeland.

As introduced in chapter one, “exilic” filmmakers are defined by Naficy as displaced authors whose authority as filmmakers “is derived from their position as subjects inhabiting interstitial spaces and sites of struggles” (2001: 12). It is important to note here that Allouache does not consider himself in a position of exile, which as Naficy explains, may be voluntary or involuntary (ibid.). Nevertheless, and as discussed below in questions of production and critical reception for example, Allouache’s ambivalent position as a filmmaker and his constant yet restrained back and forth border-crossing due to Algeria’s political instability is often leads him to experience symptoms of exile which he compares to schizophrenia. Thus, the director’s relationship with his host country and anxiety felt towards and in his homeland—as will be seen below—position him in a “slipzone” where fragmentation and tensions, stemming from the experience of voluntary “exile,” may be transposed on screen, and particularly in Bab el-Oued City.

From a stylistic perspective, Allouache’s varied audiovisual corpus (although difficult to pin down for reasons that will be made apparent further down) best fits within the elastic concept of “accented” cinema. As seen in chapter one, the “accented” cinema style is

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typically identified by its varied and often “artisanal” modes of production in relation to mainstream cinema and the director’s deterritorialized position in relation to his/her homeland. Looking thus specifically at style, Naficy proposes to find common threads (logistics, thematics, stylistics) among films made by displaced filmmakers in order to better situate them theoretically. Because Allouache’s films tend to center around various social issues pertaining to distinct social groups, Flores Khalil points out in her interview with the director that his films constitute a “genre” in their own right due to their “thematic and stylistic break with the Algerian films that preceded his and spearheaded a number of other, like-minded films” (149). Undoubtedly, Allouache’s first feature *Omar Gatlato* (1976) paved the way for a novel and contemporary thematic orientation in Algerian filmmaking. However, establishing Allouache’s works as a separate genre simply because the author’s work took on a new thematic and cinematic style would only serve to ghettoize this specific cinema further from a similar body of works whose style and thematic can be grouped in a much less restrictive, and perhaps more pertinent category such as “accented” cinema.

Allouache situates his own work in a post-colonial context born in a “nation qui était en construction, en devenir” (Allouache 1997) [a nation in the process of being built, of becoming.] Underlined by ordinary day-to-day life, Allouache’s body of works is characteristic of Algerian cinema’s third phase. As a reminder, three general and distinct phases make up the evolution of Algerian cinema. The early days covered themes of the war of Liberation in an attempt to rewrite history from a non-Western perspective while at the same time establishing the parameters of an Algerian national identity. The second phase of Algerian cinema was mostly framed and guided by the agrarian reforms implemented by the state, but this phase also marks the beginning of industrialization under Boumediene’s presidency. Allouache’s first films are part of the third phase (mid 1970s onwards). While cinematic productions of that period were still concerned with social realism, new themes concerning the youth, gender and other marginal groups and/or individuals contributed to the making of a cinema shaped by contemporary questions for a contemporary audience. Marginal identities are likewise recurrent in Allouache’s films such as in *Omar Gatlato*, probably one of Algerian’s best films to date, and *Les Aventures d'un héros* (1978).

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At many levels and due perhaps to the director’s rare yet successful transition from state-funded filmmaker in Algeria to independent filmmaker in France, Allouache’s cinema—unlike Mokneche’s young and upcoming transnational cinema, for instance—still bears the traces of deep Algerian nationally-based concerns. In fact, there is no discernable thematic discontinuity between the films made then (within the confines of the state) and now (as best illustrated in Allouache’s latest feature Bab el-Web, 2005). The youth and the ongoing difficult issues it faces still take center stage in Allouache’s fictional narratives. Although some of the characteristics of “accented” cinema are that of Third Cinema, Naficy notes that, unlike the latter whose prime engagement is geared towards the “masses,” “accented” cinema—on the other hand and as illustrated in Bab el-Oued City—tends to focus on “specific individuals, ethnicities, nationalities, and identities, and with the experience of deterritorialization itself” (31).

Using the overarching rubric of “accented” cinema, I first turn to the filmmaker’s previous works in order to establish specific patterns of continuity at the thematic level, as well as to address some of Allouache’s personal motivations in crafting such visual narratives. As pointed out by Naficy, “both accented films and Third Cinema films are historically conscious, politically engaged, critically aware, generically hybridized, and artisanally produced” (ibid.). We will see to what extent such criteria do indeed apply to Bab el-Oued City, or if such constraints—as experienced by many other filmmakers of the Third World—do not in fact camouflage a form of cultural neocolonialism imposed by market demands. I then turn to the making of Bab el-Oued City, and point out some of its logistical challenges before offering a synopsis of the film itself. The second and last part of this chapter addresses two interrelated and key themes (fundamentalism and the youth) as well as Allouache’s cinematic style, which appears to fall well within some of the characteristics of the “accented” style. In particular, and keeping in mind Naficy’s observations concerning the experience of exile, I turn briefly to the cinematic rendering of the Algerian national’s space in the film while taking into account Allouache’s own re-configuration of the Algerian nation as a deeply fractured space where being Algerian and living among Algerians is no longer a unifying factor.

The object here is not so much to debate whether or not, Bab el-Oued City does fit within one given theoretical rubric such as “accented” cinema, as the film’s logistics,
thematics and style will indeed establish that it does. Rather, it is my hope that a close-up of
the film will highlight the problematic surrounding the making of features relating the
Algerian crisis from within (or “there”/Algeria) yet with a perspective that stems from the
outside (or “here”/France).

**About the filmmaker**

Je ne suis pas un émigré. Je suis un cinéaste qui a envie de faire des
films où ils se font. Mon rêve à moi, c’est plutôt de dire que je suis
quelqu’un qui fait des films seulement. Mon algérianité, quant à elle,
c’est dans mes images qu’il faudra la voir.\(^{44}\)

I am not an immigrant. I am a filmmaker who wants to make films
where they are made. My own dream is rather to say that I am
someone who simply makes films. As for my Algerianness, it is in my
images that it must be seen.

Of all the Algerian filmmakers dealt with in this study, Allouache is perhaps the best
known and the most prolific. In fact, when “googling” Allouache’s name, approximately
86,000 articles, interviews and other related online entries come up on the screen. Born in
Bab el-Oued, Algiers in 1944, Allouache studied filmmaking at the Institut National du
Cinéma d'Alger in 1964 where he made his first two short films *Croisement* and *Le Voleur*
before resuming his studies at the IDHEC\(^{45}\) in Paris, France in 1967. While in Paris,
Allouache also followed seminars held by Marc Ferro (a well-known French historian of
World War II). Although impressed by the Italian neorealist traditions, Allouache’s
influences were varied and included popular American films, in particular the films of John
Cassavetes.\(^{46}\) Upon his return to Algeria, Allouache worked for television before making his

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\(^{45}\) Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques.

\(^{46}\) “Avec les copains, on aimait d’abord le cinéma américain, populaire et mouvementé…” (in *Hommes &
Libertés / Hommes & Migrations*, no. 89-90, May-June 1996, 106)
first fiction feature *Omar Gatlato*, in 1976. Considered a cult film, Allouache’s directorial debut demonstrates an uncanny ability to translate some aspects of Algeria’s postcolonial (and thus contemporary) reality onto the screen. In an interview conducted by Jacques Choukroun for the *Cahiers de la Cinémathèque*, Allouache says that his generation of filmmakers felt a desire to reflect on screen their surrounding and observable social reality, pointing out that the official discourse failed to accurately address societal problems: “On avait envie de témoigner sur ce qui se passait dans notre pays à ce moment précis. De plus on était assez agacé par le fait que politiquement, chaque fois qu’il y avait un problème, on renvoyait la cause au passé pour étouffer les choses” (Allouache 1994: 97)  

[We wanted to testify on what was going on in our country during that particular time. In addition, we were quite annoyed with the fact that, politically and every time there was a problem, the reason for it was attributed to the past in order to cover things up.]  

Set in Bab el-Oued, *Omar Gatlato* features a likeable macho-like protagonist who also functions as a narrator in the film, speaking directly and intermittently to the viewers. Failing to meet with Selma, a young woman with whom he fell in love, and torn between tradition and a desire to pursue a potential relationship, Omar renounces his instincts and remains frozen in societal conformism embodied by the *redjla*. *Omar Gatlato* was in many ways a pivotal film which marked a new trend in Algerian cinema, and gave a voice to different perspectives and social considerations pertaining exclusively to the youth. It also portrayed a character which most Algerian young men could easily identify with, and most importantly, for the first time in Algerian cinema history, the film gave the *redjla* an image and a voice on screen:

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47 In *Cahiers de la Cinémathèque*, no. 61, Sept. 1994, p. 97. “On était issu des milieux populaires. Les cinéastes algériens en général sont issus des milieux populaires”. [We came from popular locales. Algerian filmmakers in general came from popular locales.] (in *Cahiers de la Cinémathèque*, no. 61, Sept. 1994, p. 98; interview conducted by Jacques Choukroun) “On était confronté directement aux problèmes du quotidien, donc tout de suite on a eu envie de parler des choses qui nous touchaient. Donc, on a essayé de faire des films axés sur le social, la vie quotidienne...” [We were directly confronted with everyday problems and so from the outset we wanted to speak about things which affected us. Thus we tried to make films which were focused on social matters and on daily life.] (in *Cahiers de la Cinémathèque*, no. 61, Sept. 1994, p. 98; interview conducted by Jacques Choukroun)  

48 A term used to define Mediterranean masculine virility or macho-like qualities and social behavior in young men who closely bond together (homosocial bonding).
Dès le départ, je n’avais pas envie de faire de cinéma rural, j’avais envie de faire du cinéma de la ville […] Je venais de passer cinq ans en France, j’avais vécu mai 68 […] j’ai compris que la redjla, cette fameuse virilité méditerranéenne, était une valeur qu’ils [les jeunes] mettaient en avant parce qu’elle les aidait à tenir le coup.  

From the start, I did not want to make rural cinema. I wanted to make urban films […] I had just spent five years in France. I had lived through May 68 […] I understood that redjla, that famed Mediterranean notion of virility, was a value that the youth promoted because it helped them hang in there.

Allouache thus acquainted his public with not only the first Algerian yet likeable anti-hero, but also with a new, contemporary and fresh outlook at Algerian society of the 1970s, this time in an popular urban milieu, chronicled by the youth and the economic and social challenges they face. Making his political orientation clear from the start, Allouache set out to be a filmmaker with a voice, that of the Algerian youth: “Moi en tant que jeune communiste de l’après indépendance, je ne suis pas venu au communisme par

49 In Revue Méditerranéens, Summer 1993, p.61.


51 Of note, the director has made some interesting—albeit debatable—observations and correlations between the redjla, Islamic fundamentalism and homosexuality, noting for instance that such fraternal bonding among young men indicated/inspired a homosexual orientation. Allouache observes that the redjla “peut s’accommoder du kamis (robe portée par les islamistes) qui est un vêtement assez homosexuel […] je pense que dans la redjla il y a une certaine part d’homosexualité. Si l’on revoit tous les films algériens, surtout les films où il y a des héros de la guerre de libération, des héros du socialisme on s’aperçoit que dans notre cinéma, il y a une homosexualité qui est très grande et qui est rejetée par tout le monde et qui est véhiculée par notre société. Je crois que ça aussi c’est une dimension très intéressante. Aujourd’hui, quand on voit les regroupements des jeunes avec leur kamis, leur barbe, leur khôl quand on voit l’amour qu’ils se portent on s’en rend bien compte” (in Revue Méditerranéens, Summer 1993, p.62). [Can be likened to the kamis (worn by Islamic fundamentalists) which is a rather homosexual item of clothing…I think that the redjla has certain homosexual aspects to it. If one was to watch all of the Algerian films, particularly those featuring heroes from the War of Liberation, of the socialist heroes that one sees in our films there is a very large strand of homosexuality and which is rejected by everyone, and which is transpord by our society. I believe that there is also a very interesting dimension. Today, when one sees groups of young people with their kamis, their beards, their khôl – when one sees the love that they carry in them, it is very obvious.] Khoury makes similar observations in regards to the representation of homosexuality in Arab cinema stating that: “Arab cinema has a long tradition of homosexual themes or sub-themes. Similar to the case of films in most other societies, including in Hollywood prior to the sexual revolution of the late 1960s, homophobia paved the way for the creation of cinematic codes that tended to imply, but also mask homosexual relations. However, over the last fifteen years more Arab filmmakers are delving intrepidly into dealing with the issue of gay and bisexual relations within Arab society” (Khoury 2005).
intellectualisme, j’essayais de défendre ma classe […] disons le peuple, les jeunes c’est dans ce sens que je voulais faire Omar Gatlato” (Allouache 1993: 63).\textsuperscript{52} [I, as a young communist of the post-independence period, I did not adopt communism for intellectual reasons, I was trying to defend my class, let’s say the people, the youth. It was in that spirit that I wanted to make Omar Gatlato.]

Omar Gatlato was followed by Les aventures d’un héros (1977), a story about Mehdi, a curious character chosen by his tribe, who embarks on a motorcycle journey in search of new adventures, both real and imagined. L’homme qui regardait les fenêtres filmed in 1983 also features a male protagonist and relates the story of an old librarian, Monsieur Rachid who, deeply saddened by his transfer to another location, recalls the day and evening before his colleague’s tragic death. Back in France in the early 1980s,\textsuperscript{53} Allouache tapped into transnational filmmaking for the first time with Un amour à Paris (1986) which earned him the “Prix Perspectives du Cinéma Français” at the Cannes Film Festival of the same year. Successfully released in 20 theaters in Algeria, the film retraces the unfortunate journey of Ali who, upon getting out of jail for good behavior, returns to his accomplice Albert to get his share of a theft he had committed four years earlier. Tragically, Ali ends up being shot by the police, thus putting an end to his lifelong yet impossible dream of becoming an astronaut. The unlikelihood or impossibility of ordinary citizens’ far reaching life dreams is a recurrent theme in Allouache’s films, which typically cover a broad range of narratives inspired from the Algerian populace.

Following Les aventures d’un héros, Allouache returned to Algeria only to witness the 1988 October revolts. Using a handheld camera, the director turned himself into an image chronicler and proceeded to gather various testimonies on the country’s social and economic ills. His images were turned into documentaries such as L’Algérie en démocratie, Femmes en mouvement, and L’après-octobre in 1989. Feeling threatened by the unstable political climate in Algeria, Allouache returned once more to France before deciding to film Bab el-Oued City in 1993 amidst great political crisis. Filmed in Bab el-Oued which then was deserted by the police, Bab El-Oued City was made under difficult and clandestine conditions often forcing the director to hide a handheld camera for fear of reprisal from the Islamists. Both trained

\textsuperscript{52} In Revue Méditerranéens, Summer 1993, p.63.

\textsuperscript{53} From 1982 onwards, Merzak Allouache—who was granted full residency status in France—would reside alternatively between the two countries.
actors and non-actors (with whom Allouache prefers to work) had to improvise and perform rapidly as during that time, many artists and intellectuals had received death threats, been kidnapped or, most tragically of all been killed.

Filmed entirely in France, and relatively successful in festival venues and in French theaters, *Salut Cousin!* is very different in tone. It relates the story of a young “trabendiste”\(^{54}\), Alilou, who travels to France carrying a full suitcase of illegal goods. There, he stays with his cousin, Mok, a young Frenchman of Algerian descent. The two embark on different and comical adventures giving the film a light tone: “J’ai opté pour un style assez enjoué, léger, car on peut dire les choses, décrire une situation dramatique sans donner dans le pessimisme, le défaitisme et le misérabilisme” (Allouache: 1996).\(^{55}\) [I opted for a relatively light and playful style because one can still say things and describe a dramatic situation without falling into pessimism, defeatism and miserabilism.]

*Salut Cousin!* essentially centers on the cousins’ relationship and their marked differences and similarities due to their respective upbringing. Allouache indicates that their relationship consists of a “relation d’attirance-répulsion maladive où le jeune du pays envie le fils d’émigré tout en le détestant, et vice versa” (ibid.). […an obsessive love-hate relationship where the young man from Algeria envies the immigrant’s son while hating him at the same time and vice versa.] The film also brings to light questions of national identity, exile and cultural belonging. As such, it marks a thematic continuity in Allouache’s work, which had already begun with *Omar Gatlato* and had been further deepened in *Bab el-Oued City*.

Allouache has often compared the character of Alilou to that of Omar pointing to their similar mindset and carefree attitude. To Allouache, Omar does not age either which somehow alludes to Algeria’s inability to grow: “Omar ne vieillit pas non plus, comme pour confesser gravement que l’Algérie n’a pas poussé d’un centimètre, n’a pas évolué d’un millimètre” (Allouache: 1996).\(^{56}\) [Omar does not age either, as if to gravely confess that Algeria has not grown an inch, has not evolved at all.] According to the director, this film: “…tombe bien à propos à un moment où l’émigration algérienne est interpellée” (ibid.). [It is

\(^{54}\) A *trabendiste* is one who sells illegal goods (usually goods that are shipped from Western nations). In Algeria, and in particular in poor urban centers such as Bab el-Oued, small trafficking has (given the high rate of unemployment) become a way to survive and bring home a small income.


\(^{56}\) In *La Nation*, no. 177, 10 Dec. 1996.
a film which comes at an opportune moment when immigration from Algeria is being questioned.] Allouache’s characters often come close to home for the director who has confessed in the news magazine La Nation, that he could frequently relate to his characters’ sense of loss and uprooting. In one of the most compelling scenes of Salut Cousin!, the protagonist sits down on a bench and starts crying, feeling utterly lost and ashamed. In reference to this scene, Allouache has candidly shared that: “…très souvent on se retrouve seul et on se dit: ‘mais qu’est-ce que je f--- là ?’ Même si l’on est bien, même si l’on a du travail et de l’argent, dans le déracinement, souvent il y a ce moment où l’on médite. On pense à la connerie humaine” (Allouache 1996: 20).58 […]very often, we find ourselves on our own and we think: what the hell am I doing here? Even though we might feel good, have a job and money, in a state of uprootedness there is often this moment in time when we meditate and think about human folly.] Naficy has pointed out that one of the components of the accented film style is that its “structure of feeling is rooted in the filmmakers’ profound experiences of deterritorialization, which oscillate between dysphoria and euphoria, celibacy and celebration” (2001: 26-7). Exile, whether voluntary or not, is an experience from which Allouache’s fictional narratives (at least those taking place in France) do not shy away as illustrated in Salut Cousin!

Thanks to a variety of funding sources, Allouache was able to make a number of other films including Alger-Beyrouth pour mémoire (1998), L’Autre Monde (2001), the widely acclaimed Chouchou (2003) and Bab el-Web (2005). Filmed in Lebanon, Alger-Beyrouth pour mémoire tells the doomed love story of a French woman and an Algerian journalist, Rachid, who sought refuge in Lebanon following his friend’s murder in Algeria. This film is concerned with the question of journalism in Algeria, Islamic fundamentalism and forced exile. L’Autre Monde/The other world also deals with the issue of Islamic fundamentalism, but takes a closer look at terrorists, their motives and attachment to their “mission.” Featuring a young French woman of Algerian origins (Yasmina), the story unfolds on her quest for her missing fiancé, Rachid, who has been kidnapped by Islamists. Not speaking Arabic, Yasmina embarks on a journey through the Algerian countryside and desert. Taken hostage by a group of terrorists and then released by one of them (who

gradually falls in love with her), Yasmina finally finds her fiancé, but in doing so uncovers a world of contradictions. To Allouache’s regret, *L’Autre Monde* fell short of critics’ expectations and did not attract a sustained interest among the general public. In addition, the French press more or less gave the film the cold shoulder leading the director to further ponder whether or not these narratives prompted a form of unfair rejection from distribution networks:

> Je vous avoue franchement que j’ai été très surpris par le silence à propos de *l’Autre Monde* […] Nous sommes en train de nous bagarrer pour une distribution correcte de ce film, et c’est terrible. Je commence à penser qu’il y a une espèce de racisme, de boycott, de rejet de nos histoires. Sauf, bien entendu, si tu leur racontes l’histoire qu’ils veulent. (Allouache: 2001)\(^{59}\)

Quite frankly, I’ll confess that I was very surprised by the silence surrounding *l’Autre Monde* […] We are fighting for a decent distribution of this film and it’s terrible. I am beginning to think that there is a kind of racism, of boycotting, some kind of rejection of our stories. Except, of course, if you tell them stories that they want [to hear].

If distribution proved to be problematic, logistical aspects of production were just as difficult. Several challenging factors were involved in the making of this particular feature. Finding insurance prior to filming required-business like dexterity from the director given that Algeria was and still is, to some extent, considered a high-risk location.\(^{60}\) Allouache was also faced with the task of reassuring a hesitating and worried crew mostly composed of French technicians who understandably did not wish to risk their lives. Allouache—who above all posits himself as an urban filmmaker—has also frequently alluded to the fact that filming in rural areas (particularly in the desert) made him feel uncomfortable and afraid (ibid.).\(^{61}\)

\(^{59}\) In *El Watan*, 1 Nov. 2001.

\(^{60}\) Allouache in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 2004: 17.

\(^{61}\) “Pour moi, aller vers le désert, c’était projeter mon héroïne dans un espace de lieu fermé mais en même temps complètement ouvert. Un espace qui peut libérer et en même temps faire peur. Il m’a fait peur car je ne sais pas très bien filmer ces espaces. Je suis plutôt un cinéaste urbain qui aime filmer les ruelles, la vie.” [For me, going to the desert was in order to project my heroine in a closed, yet at the same time completely open, space.
Furthermore, and given the fact that Allouache resided in France during Algeria’s bloody decade, he admits that the topic of terrorism in Algeria is one that he is unfamiliar with given that it is not part of his immediate reality. Allouache’s take on terrorism is thus that of a distant spectator relying on images projected through the French television news network, a point to which I will return when discussing the filmmaker’s transnational status below. Despite the subject-matter of the film, the director did not, paradoxically want to get involved in the political debate surrounding his film, and stated rather defensively: “On commence à me dire que mon film ne met pas dos à dos le pouvoir et les terroristes. Ce n’est pas mon propos et je n’entre pas dans cette polémique” (Allouache: 2001)  

[People are starting to tell me my film does not distinguish clearly enough between the state and the terrorists. This is not my intention and I will not enter into this polemical matter].

However, what was then becoming increasingly clear to Allouache following the making of l’Autre monde was the importance of writing stories which could appeal to the markets of those who would, potentially, be willing and prepared to finance him. He notes with a hint of amusement that had he chosen a character “dégoûté de l’Algérie, qui vient en France, et qui trouve la vie là-bas fantastique, peut être que les portes seraient moins difficiles à ouvrir. Peut être, je ne sais pas. Je n’ai jamais écrit ce genre d’histoires…” (Allouache 2001)  

[…disillusioned with Algeria, and who comes to France and finds life fantastic there, perhaps the doors would be less difficult to open. Maybe, I do not know. I have never previously written this kind of story…] The director’s freedom at the narrative level is thus constrained by what potential producers in France are looking for: “…j’ai envie d’écrire des histoires qui se passent entre ici et là-bas. Même si ce n’est pas facile, car on sent comme un désintérêt pour ce genre d’histoire en France” (Allouache: 2001)  

A space which could liberate and simultaneously frighten. It frightened me because I do not know how to film these spaces that well, I am more an urban filmmaker who likes to film alleyways, and life in general.]

(Allouache in El Watan, 1 Nov. 2001)  


63 In Le Matin, 1 Nov. 2001.  

64 In El Watan, 1 Nov. 2001. Allouache’s words resonate with Edward Saïd’s observations on the condition of exile when the latter writes that: “The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever” (Saïd qtd in Naficy’s Accented Cinema) in “Reflections on Exile.” In Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures, edited by Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, pp. 357-66). Allouache is deeply attached to his roots “C’est en France que je me considère chaque jour davantage profondément Algérien, donc Africain à part entière.”

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write stories which take place between here and there – even if this is not easy, as it seems as though there is a disinterest in these kinds of stories in France.] This last observation brings to light some of the inherent difficulties encountered by Algerian filmmakers seeking external funding in that the stories they write should—in some ways—possess some components that make them marketable such as the inclusion of some “exotic” elements, and border-less themes (love story, friendship, humor, etc.) To Allouache, writing a narrative that takes place outside of Algeria is a difficult compromise which often implies that allusions to Algeria, or even a flavor of “Algerianness” in the characters has to be either minimally suggested, dropped altogether or be referred to in a comical fashion.65 Furthermore, the director’s desire to establish narrative bridges between France and Algeria66 contradicts Naficy’s suggestion about Allouache in that the director does not wish to “be associated with his homeland” (2001: 245). In fact, and as already illustrated so far, Allouache’s fictional narratives are systematically framed by the cultural and historical contexts provided by Algeria and France. The director’s geographical location and constant back and forth movements only serve to widen his narratives’ potential, and Allouache takes full advantage of this: “Moi, j’ai envie de parler de l’Algérie quand j’en ai l’occasion, que je sois en France ou au pays. Quand je suis en France, je parle de personnages Algériens vivant en France et quand j’ai l’occasion de venir tourner ici (e.g. en France), j’en parle aussi”

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65 When writing Salut Cousin!, for instance, Allouache shares the following: “J’étais pris entre deux feux. Fallait-il faire un film en rupture avec mon pays ou au contraire en relation, avec le vécu de mon peuple? Mon absence physique ne signifie pas une absence absolue. C’est ce qui explique pour quelle raison l’histoire du film concerne grandement le pays. J’écrivais le scénario en espérant que l’Algérie ne soit pas morte et qu’à travers le personnage de Aïlou les jeunes puissent se reconnaître en disant que rien n’est perdu d’avance”. (Allouache In El Watan, 23 Oct. 1996) [I was torn. Should I make a film that breaks away from my country or, conversely, one which in relation to it, and with the experiences of my people? My physical absence does not signify a complete absence. This is the reason why the film’s story greatly concerns the country. I wrote the script hoping that Algeria would not be dead and that through Aïlou’s character, the youth could recognize themselves and say that nothing is lost from the outset.] For an insightful article of Salut Cousin!, and an exploration of related immigration themes, see Mireille Rosello’s article “Merzak Allouache’s ‘Salut Cousin!’: Immigrants, Hosts and Parasites” in South Central Review, Vol. 17, No. 3, Cinema Engagé: Activist Filmmaking in French and Francophone Contexts (Autumn, 2000), pp. 104-118. This article is available on JSTOR.  
66 See footnote no. 24.
(Allouache: 2001).\textsuperscript{67} [I want to talk about Algerian when I have the opportunity to do so, whether I am in France or back home. When I am in France, I speak about Algerian characters living in France, and when I have the opportunity to film here (in France) I speak about them as well.] Thus, Allouache’s films are all directly or indirectly about and connected to his homeland, and at times, more closely so to his neighborhood. In that sense, Naficy is right in writing that: “accented films are intensely place-bound, and their narratives are driven by a desire either to recapture the homeland or to return to it” (2001: 27).

It is important to note that the director has rightly rejected the label of “beur filmmaker” (a designation for those of Maghrebi descent who were born and raised in France, and whose cinema revolves around themes of inclusion/exclusion, identity, dual cultural belonging, hybridity, and so forth). Allouache –above all—views himself as an independent filmmaker of Algerian origins, and as seen in his films, it is clear that Algeria is by no means absent from his work. Rather, the films appear to be an ongoing dialogue with Algeria and between France and Algeria, which explains the threads of continuity in Allouache’s themes. At any rate, Allouache’s readiness to experiment with new characters from Algeria earned him nationwide media attention in France, and—as expected with the writing of such narratives—the funding he was looking for.

In many ways, \textit{Chouchou}'s main protagonist embodies the qualities of a character Allouache presumed would be favored by the French public, one who would find in France that which could not possibly be afforded in Algeria. Co-written with well-known French-based comedian Gad Elmaleh, the film \textit{Chouchou} (2003) which functions as a comedy, and recounts the unlikely tale of a young Algerian, Choukri alias Chouchou (played by Gad Elmaleh), turned transvestite\textsuperscript{68} who falls in love with Stanislas, an older patron of the bar where Chouchou works. Residing in France illegally and looking for his nephew (whom Chouchou finds out works in a bar as a transvestite going by the name of “Vanessa”), Chouchou soon finds his idyllic love story disrupted by a series of comical events prompted by the suspicions of Inspector Grégoire. Hugely successful in both France and Algeria where

\textsuperscript{68} In his examination of homosexuality in Egyptian films, Menicucci points out that in the Arab world “The most ubiquitous coding for gay and lesbian cinematic imaging has been cross-dressing” adding that transvestite performers “can be traced back to pre-islamic times” (1998: 32). The author is quoting Everett Rowson’s article “The Effeminate of Early Medina” in Journal of the American Oriental Society 111: 4 (October-December, 1991), pp. 661-693.
the film was premiered simultaneously, *Chouchou* officially marked Allouache’s return as a filmmaker to his homeland. Benefiting from considerable publicity as well as an official website, the film was eagerly anticipated in both countries. Although introduced to the French public as a man of Maghrebi origin because, according to Allouache “le mot Algérien écorche la langue un peu” (Allouache: 2004), [the word ‘Algerian’ scratches the tongue a little] Chouchou, as a queer character, was immediately adopted by delighted audiences on both sides of the Mediterranean. Thus *Chouchou*, as a commercial success, also marked the entrance of Allouache into mainstream cinema.

Allouache’s next comedy, *Bab el-Web* (2004), although publicized in every marketing channel including the Internet, and despite the use of some relatively high star power (Sami Nacery), did not entice audiences as much as the director had hoped. The film takes place yet again in Bab el-Oued and features two brothers (originally born and raised in France) who do their best in welcoming an impromptu female visitor from France. Having met Laurence in an Internet chat room, Bouzid (played by Faudel) convinces his brother Kamel (Sami Nacery) to help him make this impromptu visit feasible. From then onwards, the story unfolds clumsily and allows a multiplicity of pocket narratives to interfere with an unlikely love affair between Kamel and Laurence and the latter’s search for her Algerian father. The film ends without sparks, but suggests that both brothers will plan a trip to France to meet with Laurence. Despite the inclusion of certain social issues such as trafficking and unemployment, Allouache—once again—chose to remain light-hearted, stating that: “J’aime avoir un regard un peu léger sur des choses graves” (Allouache 2004: 17). [I like to take a lighter view of important things.]

Although featuring complex characters, Allouache’s recent comedies have come in the form of uncomplicated narratives. Understandably, Algerian filmmakers each have varied aesthetic, ethical and ideological orientations. In Allouache’s work, patterns of resistance at the filmic narrative level towards official discourses are more or less articulated around the theme of national identity and what it means, in particular for young people, to be Algerian in today’s Algeria. Indeed, Allouache believes that the new generation needs a new “souffle,”

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69 *Chouchou* was financed by the following: Franco-algerian production (France: Canal+, France3 and the CNC / Algeria: Baya Films, l’ENTV, le Commissariat de l’année de l’Algérie in France and the “Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, via the Fonds d’aide aux techniques et industrie du cinéma (FDATIC))


and that Algerian culture is a national culture, meaning a culture of and for the
people.\textsuperscript{72} In his own words: “La culture, c’est d’abord la rupture avec le passé, c’est aussi
cette espèce de bureaucratie qui étouffe la société qu’il faut balayer et laisser les gens
s’exprimer” (in \textit{El Watan}, 19 May 1994).\textsuperscript{73} [Culture is first and foremost a break from the
past. It is also this kind of bureaucracy which stifles society, and it needs to be swept away
so that people can be allowed to people express themselves.] At the same time, being able
to complete a film in Algeria is likewise to Allouache a form of resistance against oppression
as was the case during the filming of \textit{Bab el-Oued City}. Overcoming his fear, Allouache
managed to complete a project dear and close to his heart: “…je vivais mal ce tournage
difficile dans un environnement hostile, avec la peur au ventre tous les jours […] J’avais pris
la décision de faire un film dont le sujet était risqué, en prise directe avec la réalité, je devais
aller jusqu’au bout. En ne baissant pas les bras, je résistais à ma façon” (Allouache 1994 : 9).
\textsuperscript{74} [I had a hard time filming in such a hostile environment, with fear in my stomach on a
daily basis (…) I took the decision to make a film with a risky subject matter that grappled
with the immediate reality. I had to go through with it. In refusing to give up, I was resisting
in my own way.]

\textit{Bab el-Oued}, to which I now turn, is a cinematic text that picks up—in a microscopic
fashion—the issue of the rise of fundamentalism, challenging as such the Islamists’ rigid
interpretation and practice of religion as the only way to salvation. It also brings to light an
existing confrontation between two overlapping sets of culture in Algeria. One, popular in
nature, is embodied in the film by Raï music,\textsuperscript{75} and the use and consumption of sought-after
Western goods by Bab el-Oued’s residents (beer, cigarettes, French romance novels,
perfume, clothing, satellite television, etc.). The other is a religiously-based culture in
Algeria which could be said to branch out in two directions: one that is moderate (as

\begin{footnotes}
[Algerian culture is a national culture. It must not be of the state.]
\item[74] In \textit{Le Matin}, no. 901, 15 Dec. 1994, p. 9.
\item[75] Raï is a musical style originating from Oran, which became highly popular in the 1980s. Songs typically
celebrate love, and other taboo topics such as alcohol and unemployment. For an interesting analysis of Raï
versus fundamentalism in Algeria, see Angelica Maria DeAngelis’ article: “Moi aussi, je suis musulman: Raï,
Islam, and Masculinity in Maghrebi Transnational Identity” in \textit{Alif Journal of Comparative Poetics}, No. 23,
Literature and the Sacred/al-Adab wa-al-Mugaddas (2003), pp. 276-308. This article is available on JSTOR.
See also, Marc Shade-Poulsen. \textit{Men and Popular Music in Algeria: the Social Significance of Raï} (Austin:
University of Texas P, 1999).
\end{footnotes}
preached by the local Imam “Rabah,” and as seen with the sacrificing of the lamb to celebrate Aid-El-Kébir), and a second, ultra-conservative strand cultivated by the Islamists represented in the film is ultra-conservative, and strives to live strictly by their interpretation of the written word provided by the Qu’ran. Interestingly enough, both groups of practicing Muslims in the film are seen praying side-by-side at the local mosque. It is important however to remember that the film is above all a fiction, or as Allouache puts it, a chronicle that tells

…l’histoire de jeunes Algériens confrontés à la montée de l’intolérance. C’est la haine à tous les carrefours de la société algérienne, c’est cette violence que le film montre dans la reconstruction d’évènements qui se sont déroulés au lendemain d’Octobre 1988 (1994).

… the story of young Algerians confronted with the rise of intolerance. There is hate at every intersection of Algerian society. It is this violence that the film shows in reconstructing events that took place in the aftermath of October 1988.

In addition, as will become apparent, the film does not adhere to a single narrative, but uses a number of characters, and showcases a loose and fragmented structure that is meant to reflect a specific and hostile climate around and against which the inhabitants of a specific locale (that of Bab el-Oued) are evolving. In fact, one of the film’s innovations resides in its hasty and stolen shots of Bab el-Oued’s residents, which in my view serves to make the focus on this particular urban site particularly fascinating.

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76 Aid-El-Kébir is a celebration marking the end of the Ramadam (a yearly fast). On this occasion, a lamb is slaughtered and shared among close friends and relatives.

77 In El Watan, 19 May 1994, and also in Le Matin: “Comme tout le monde, je me sens en danger chez moi […] L’Algérie est un pays où l’intellectuel n’a aucun prix. On l’a méprisé pendant 30 ans, et le résultat logique, c’est qu’on peut désormais l’égorger sans que cela énerve quiconque” [Like everyone else, I feel in danger at home … Algeria is a country where the intellectual has no worth. He has been persecuted for 30 years, and the logical result has been that he can now be slaughtered without anyone caring about it.] (Allouache in Le Matin, no. 901, 15 Dec. 1994, p.9).
The making of Bab el-Oued City

Sur ce tournage, j’ai été un ‘voleur d’images’. Si toutes ces difficultés se sentent à l’écran, ce n’est pas grave, il n’était pas question de faire des effets artistiques, mais de rendre compte d’une réalité, d’enregistrer à tout prix sur la pellicule, ce pays que tant de gens veulent plonger dans l’obscurité. (Allouache 1994: 9)\(^{78}\)

On this set, I was “stealing” images. If all these difficulties are observable on screen, it’s ok. It wasn’t about creating artistic effects but about reporting a reality, about recording on film, at any price, this country that so many want to bury in obscurity.

Reportedly filmed in 7 weeks in 1993, the making of this particular feature positioned Allouache as an outsider on his own turf.\(^{79}\) Even though filming did not start until 1993, Allouache wrote the script immediately in the aftermath of the 1988 October revolts. What mattered most to him then, and as he revealed in a lengthy interview conducted by Flores-Khalil, was to “write a story about the intolerance and on my ideas”\(^{(151)}\). Funds from the Algerian side were granted in the early 1990s and obtained through the approval of a readers committee headed then by Rachid Mimouni and Tahar Djaout.\(^{80}\) Taking with him a crew

\(^{79}\) Of note, only the exterior scenes where shot in Algeria, and the interior ones in France in order to minimize potential exposure to danger. Several sequences in Bejaia (Kabylia) because, according to the director, some of the streets there have the same feel and look as they do in Bab el-Oued.
\(^{80}\) A famed Algerian writer who sought refuge in France in 1993 and died two years later in Paris, Mimouni was well known and loved by his fellow compatriots. He received many literary awards and wrote among other works L’honneur de la tribu (1989) from which a film was made (director: Zemmouri). Mimouni was also a human rights activist. Of Kabylia origin, Tahar Djaout was likewise a well known poet and writer and was among the first Algerian intellectuals to be assassinated by Islamists in May 1993. An excellent documentary piece titled “Shooting the writer” (produced by Catherine Seddon for BBC and introduced by Salman Rushdie) was made to celebrate the life of Tahar Djaout. About the murder of writer and friend Tahar Djajoub, Allouache shares in his interview with Lecqueret : “Quand j’ai appris cet assassinat, j’ai pensé que le cinéma était dérisoire. C’était l’un des premiers intellectuels assassinés, celui que je pensais intouchable, parce qu’il était tellement gentil, tellement bien. Sa mort a été pour moi un choc incroyable” (in Jeune Afrique, no. 1769,
composed of five French technicians, the director took on a journey where danger was so palpable that they would not stay more than two nights in a row in a hotel: “Lorsque nous tournions, le quotidien était fait d’assassinats, d’arrestations, d’embuscades, de répressions…” (Allouache 1994).  

[While we were filming, assassinations, arrests, ambushes, and repression were daily occurrences.] Allouache added: “Quand on apprend qu’Untel, qu’on connaît très bien, vient d’être tué, on ne peut que s’inquiéter. Il est facile d’imaginer qu’un contrat a été lancé contre toi”.  

[When one finds out that so and so, whom we know very well, just got killed, we can only worry. It is easy to think that a contract has been put out on you.] Allouache was deeply saddened by the murder of Algerian dramaturgist Abdelkader Alloula in addition to the loss of his close and dear friend Tahar Djaout. The early 1990s marked the beginning of a “witchhunt” against Algerian intellectuals which Allouache termed a “loterie de la mort” for no one knew who was next on the list. The director was also greatly concerned about his crew since it was composed of French technicians. Although foreigners were not yet a target at the time, the crew felt compelled to film rather quickly, and took great care in not revealing the storyline to anyone interested.  

As a result of such pressure, most of the scenes had to be shot in one take only, thus giving very little opportunity to ponder the aesthetic’ components of a frame: “J’ai dû tourner quasi clandestinement, de manière discrète, et souvent la première prise devait être impérativement la bonne” (Allouache 1994: 67).  

[I had to film in a semi-clandestine and discrete manner. Often, the first take was necessarily the best one.] According to Allouache again: “Nous n’avons fait ni cinéma, ni mise en scène. Nous ne nous sommes pas assis sur des chaises. Nous n’avons pas dirigé les comédiens, souvent non professionnels d’ailleurs, et quelquefois tentés par le FIS. Il fallait être mobile, silencieux. Clandestin” (1994).  

[We didn’t make cinema in the conventional sense of directing a movie. We didn’t sit on chairs  

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81 In El Watan, 3 Jun. 1994.  
82 In Libération, 20 May 1994.  
84 “En 1993, c’était la mort assurée si on nous avait pris pour cible. On tournait donc très vite, dans la discrétion, on ne racontait jamais l’histoire du film pour ne mettre personne en danger” [In 1993, it meant certain death if one was targeted. Therefore, we filmed very quickly, with discretion. We never talked about the plot of the film so that nobody would be put in danger.] (in Le Matin, no. 901, 15 Dec. 1994, p.9).  
86 In L’Express, 11 Nov. 1994.
and direct the actors who were often non-actors sometimes tempted by the FIS. We had to move around silently. Clandestinely. At the time of filming, a national curfew\textsuperscript{87} had been set in place and extremely aggressive counter-terrorist measures were underway. Allouache reveals that he was not granted permission to film past the curfew hence the hasty feel of the scene in which Boualem and Saïd fight.\textsuperscript{88} The team thus had to proceed carefully, and at times, resorted to the use of a 16mm camera which is a lighter and more user-friendly piece of equipment to carry around, particularly when forced to film secretly. The film was then reconfigured in the Atria labs (Paris) into 35mm in order to be properly screened in standard movie theaters. For safety reasons, and to ensure that the film would not be confiscated or destroyed, the reels were sent to Paris on a weekly basis.\textsuperscript{89} Allouache confessed that his concern and best memory was when he would learn that the film had been successfully gotten through the Algerian airport.\textsuperscript{90}

Due to such logistical constraints, Allouache could not for instance resort to the use of traveling shots: “Il était impossible d’envisager de vraies scènes de rues et, en particulier, de réaliser des travellings” \cite{5} [It was impossible to create real street scenes and, in particular, to film scenes involving traveling.] (Allouache 1994: 68).\textsuperscript{91} This challenging and rather unique situation forced the filmmaker to come up with other methods of filming to capture Bab el-Oued’s folkloric yet tense atmosphere hence the frequent shots of Bab el-Oued’s roofs overlooking Algiers’ seaport. Given such danger, many may wonder as to why the director insisted on filming in this particular locale. Allouache’s deep ties to his motherland are made especially evident throughout his body of works, and filming yet again in Bab el-Oued was a way to: “…renouer avec cette veine picaresque en privilégié le quartier de mon enfance”

\textsuperscript{87} The curfew was imposed from November 30, 1992 to 1996 in seven departments (or ’wilayas’) which included Algiers, Blida, Médéa (south), Aïn Defla, Chlef (south west), Boumerdès, Bouira (east), M’sila and Djelfa (south east) and Tipaza (west).

\textsuperscript{88} “La scène finale a été faite en une seule prise car je n’avais pas d’autorisation pour tourner après le couvre-feu” \cite{5} [The final scene was shot in a single take as I did not have authorization to film after the curfew.] (Allouache in an interview conducted by E. Lecqueret for \textit{Jeune Afrique}, no. 1769, 1-7 Dec. 1994, p. 17).

\textsuperscript{89} “Quand j’étais en Algérie, pour \textit{Bab el-Oued City}, il fallait envoyer la pellicule toutes les semaines […] C’était du travail à la va-vite …” \cite{5} [When I was in Algeria, for \textit{Bab el-Oued City}, it was necessary to send out the film every week…It was a very hurried work.] (Allouache in \textit{La Nation}, no. 171, 29 Oct. 1996, p.20)

\textsuperscript{90} “Mon meilleur souvenir, c’est quand j’ai appris que la pellicule était sortie d’Algérie, parce que ma grande angoisse était qu’elle reste à l’aéroport” \cite{5} [My best memory was when I learned that the film had left Algeria, as my great fear was that it was stuck at the airport.] (Allouache in an interview conducted by E. Lecqueret in \textit{Jeune Afrique}, no. 1769, 1-7 Dec. 1994, p. 17).

\textsuperscript{91} In \textit{Jeune Afrique}, no. 1743, 2-8 Jun. 1994, p. 68.
(Allouache 1994).\textsuperscript{92} [...to renew with this picturesque vein while privileging the neighborhood of my childhood]. Allouache has often referred to Bab el-Oued as a “quartier des excès” (1993: 60)\textsuperscript{93} [a neighborhood of excesses], and his desire to film there is made particularly explicit in the following statement made to the right wing French newspaper, \textit{Le Figaro}:

\begin{quote}
Parfois, je me demande si nous ne prenions pas trop de risques, si nous ne mettions pas nos vies en jeu, pour rien, pour du cinéma. Mais Bab el-Oued me fascine tant ! C’est un quartier célèbre pour son passé historique. Le quartier pied noir d’avant guerre est devenu ensuite le bastion de l’OAS, puis celui dit-on, de l’islamisme. Mais vous savez, dans les cafés, on peut toujours boire des bières à la pression (1994).\textsuperscript{94}
\end{quote}

At times, I wonder if we were not taking too many risks, if we were not putting our lives in danger, for nothing, for cinema. But Bab el-Oued fascinates me so much! It is a famous neighborhood for its history. A pied-noir neighborhood before the war, it then became an OAS bastion then one of Islamic fundamentalism. But you know, in cafés there, we can still drink draught beer.

It is important to mention here that the Algerian state did not oppose the making of the film. This is apparent in the presence of public services in the narrative such as ambulances, doctors and a few policemen for which permission from the state must be obtained. During the time of the filming however, and according to the director’s various testimonies, the police force had deserted that area of Algiers, and the state had imposed a nationwide curfew to facilitate counter-terrorist measures.

Of particular interest as well, and to conclude on the making of the film, is the view of the Algerian-based team which differs from Allouache’s when it comes to the filming conditions of \textit{Bab el-Oued City}. Hassan Abdou (the main actor who plays Boualem) does not at all agree with Allouache’s assertion that the crew was in a constant situation of danger.

\textsuperscript{92} In \textit{Le Matin}, 13 Dec. 1994.
\textsuperscript{93} in \textit{Revue Méditerranéens}, Summer 1993, p. 60.
\textsuperscript{94} In \textit{Le Figaro}, 19 May 1994.
In his own words, and when asked about what he thought of Allouache’s overall observations, Abdou replies rather interestingly:

Non, je ne partage pas du tout cet avis. Le tournage s’est, au contraire, très bien passé […] je ne vois pas en quoi ce film aurait été tourné en catastrophe. D’ailleurs, nous avons même tourné dans des quartiers chauds de Bab el-Oued, mais à aucun moment, nous n’avons été importunés ou même agressés (1994 : 10).95

No, I do not share this view at all. On the contrary, filming went very well […] I really don’t see how this film can be said to have been made in terrible conditions. Besides, we did film in difficult neighborhoods such as Bab el-Oued, but at no point in time were we bothered or even threatened.

One has to take into account that the filmmaker was able to return to France rather quickly following the completion of the film whereas Hassan Abdou, a young actor and practicing moderate Muslim, remained in Algeria. Given the continuous pressures and threats exerted upon the Algerian francophone press in the 1990s, one can perhaps assume that the actor (for fear of reprisal) did not wish to speak as openly as Allouache in regards to potential danger as perpetrated by Islamists in Bab el-Oued.

**Synopsis**

Mon cinéma, c’est de la fiction. Je revendique la fiction. C’est toujours des petites choses que je prends à droite et à gauche, que j’entends, que je vois. Ma source d’inspiration vient vraiment des petites choses de la vie quotidienne. Je n’écris pas des histoires compliquées (Allouache 2004).96

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My cinema is about fiction. I’m all for fiction. It’s always the small things that I take from here and there, that I hear and see. My source of inspiration truly comes from small everyday life things. I do not write complicated stories.

*Bab el-Oued* relates the story of Boualem, a twenty-something Algerian male employed as a baker’s assistant who works night shifts in one of the most impoverished of Algiers’ neighborhoods. Working six nights a week, Boualem attempts to rest and sleep during the daytime. However, a loudspeaker directly connected to the local mosque and located on the rooftop of the building in which he lives, blares religious-based admonitions and teachings all day long, preventing the protagonist from sleeping. One day, in a fit of anger and extreme fatigue, Boualem goes up to the rooftop and tears the loudspeaker down and throws it into the Mediterranean Sea. While a small local fundamentalist group led by Saïd (a fervent, self-appointed leader and brother of Yamina, Boualem’s love interest) launches a relentless search for the culprit of such an anti-Islamic, blasphemous act, Boualem—a good Muslim at heart—starts to feel remorse for his action. He attempts in vain to recover the loudspeaker with his friend and small time trader, Mabrouk. A series of altercations between Saïd’s pack of followers and the local youth (who do not rigidly follow the Islamic path as preached by the fundamentalists) indirectly lead to Boualem whose boss—under threats made by Saïd’s followers—reluctantly lets him go. Despite the local Imam’s repeated advice and warning to remain peaceful and avoid violence, Saïd continues his quest (or “hadj”) and wishes to set an example by punishing Boualem’s desecrating act. Boualem is subsequently threatened when he receives by mail a white cloth of a type that typically adorns the dead. Feeling weary of the fear instilled by Saïd’s clique in the neighborhood, Boualem physically confronts Saïd in the entryway of the building in which they both reside, and later fistfights him somewhere at night in a deserted construction site. Following the fight in which all of Saïd’s friends end up partaking, Boualem secretly bids farewell to Yamina, and is then seen in the distance embarking on a ferryboat departing for Marseilles, France.

Other stories in the film include that of Messaoud (aka Mess), a passport-less French Algerian who finds himself trapped in Algeria, and who has befriended the Islamists because

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97 Naficy has pointed out that “westering journeys” in accented cinema “are particularly valued, partly because they reflect the filmmakers’ own trajectory and the general flow of value worldwide” (2001: 33).
they have rescued him from homelessness. Ouardya, a lone woman living in Bab el-Oued with a penchant for drinking wine, freely enjoys male visitors in her apartment. Saïd threatens her at gunpoint and commands her to leave the neighborhood at once. Another pocket narrative is that of an odd couple consisting of an old, blind ‘pied-noir’\textsuperscript{98} woman who travels to Algeria with her nephew to try and recapture some of her lost memories pre-dating independence. A myriad of other characters, some of them marginal, such as Didine (a homosexual), Alilou (the taxi driver who meets up with girls in cemeteries and who takes Boualem and his friends to an illegal bar somewhere by the beach), Lynda (who loans French romance novels to the women lounging on their building’s rooftop) populate the film throughout. In addition, a couple of secret police members meet with Saïd on two occasions. Their motives remain unclear up to the end, and the object of their relationship with Saïd is never revealed. It is during their second meeting however that an unloaded gun is given to Saïd who is mysteriously instructed to wait for further information. The presence of these secret police members in the film is rendered twice as troubling given that they remain in their car, a dark BMW, throughout the narrative. While driving through the streets of Bab el-Oued, a low instrumental sound suggests that something threatening is unfolding. At any rate, the presence of these characters explicitly suggests collaborative ties between the state and Islamists.

The main narrative thus punctuated by smaller pocket narratives starts off with a close-up shot of two newspapers on top of a bed where Yamina is writing a letter to Boualem who has now been gone for three years. The film effectively functions as a long flashback, and the voice-over heard intermittently throughout the film is that of Boualem’s forgotten love, Yamina. Through her, the viewer finds out that shortly following the fistfight between her brother and Boualem, Saïd has disappeared. It is also revealed that Boualem has yet to emerge and fulfill his promise to come back for Yamina. At the end of the narrative, the viewer discovers that the letters have never been sent.

\textsuperscript{98} Term used to designate previous French settlers in colonized Algeria.
Themes

J’avais énormément envie de raconter une histoire, de parler des jeunes de mon quartier, de mon enfance et de pénétrer leur vie, leurs problèmes. Je voulais m’attarder sur les problèmes d’une jeunesse qui s’imposait subitement sur la scène politique, à la faveur des évènements d’octobre 1988, d’une manière fracassante, violente, et aussi sur la montée de l’intégrisme, notamment à travers son emprise grandissante sur les jeunes de mon quartier, le quartier de Omar Gatlato, 15 ans après. (Allouache 1999).99

I really wanted to tell a story, to speak of the youths of my neighborhood, of my childhood and to penetrate their lives, their problems. I wanted to hone in on the problems of a young generation which suddenly imposed itself on the political scene in a devastating and violent manner in the light of the events of October 1988, and also, on the rise of fundamentalism, notably through its increasing hold over the youth of my neighborhood, that of Omar Gatlato, 15 years later.

Filmed mostly in Arabic, and devoid of heroes, this film is above all defined by Allouache as a tragicomedy and focuses on the gendered, micro-level public and private spheres of an authentic neighborhood of Algiers. The text, which takes fundamentalism as its target of critique, is also openly invested in probing the effects of fundamentalism on ordinary citizens. In doing so, the film draws on different characters with different social situations and with a different focus (love, reading romance novels, drinking wine, etc.), but ultimately tied to their neighborhood and each differently affected by the rise of fundamentalism. As such, the film probes many questions, and the themes listed numerically below are in most, if not all cases, closely interrelated:

1. *The 1988 October revolts* which are referred to intermittently throughout the film in particular in the scene where Saïd takes care of the grave of a close friend killed during the revolts at 18 years of age;

99 In *Le Matin*, 6 Dec. 1999
2. *The rise of Islamic fundamentalism* versus moderate religion as illustrated by the confrontation between Imam Rabah and Saïd. Allouache thought it interesting to show the rise of intolerance during that time.\(^{100}\) As observed by Naficy, Islamic fundamentalism and other forms of nationalisms “are all instances of not only (re)creating actual, material borders but also of drawing new discursive boundaries between the self and its others” (2003: 221-222), and this is precisely what the viewer is led to observe in Allouache’s film;

3. *Technology* as embodied by the loudspeaker in the film and without which the Islamists cannot spread their propagandist message in the neighborhood. While the camera pans across Bab el-Oued rooftops at the beginning of the film and following Yamina’s interior monologue, the message heard through the loudspeaker is that of “cleansing.” Bab el-Oued must be cleaned of its impurities both literally and figuratively. Overall, technologies such as satellite dishes, music boxes, telephones, televisions and so forth, have a preponderant place and can be seen throughout. All these devices offer different forms of escapism from poverty and forced sequestration for example, and as best illustrated in the scene in which Saïd’s sister Yamina, her mother and younger brother are all enjoying a French film shown via satellite television. However, when Saïd returns, the channel is quickly changed to the Algerian channel only to be later changed back to the French film after an angered and suspicious Saïd exclaims: “Vous croyez que je ne sais pas ce que vous regardez! Un jour, je brûlerai ces paraboles”. [Do you think that I don’t know what you’re watching! One day, I will burn these satellite dishes.] Saïd then takes refuge in his room to listen to his propagandist audio tape using, of course, a tape player;

4. *Social and economic ills*: unemployment as seen with young men spending long hours in bars and at the beach and drugs as seen in the short scene in which a youth has just died from an overdose; the consumption and trafficking of unauthorized

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\(^{100}\) “…je trouvais intéressant de montrer l’effervescence qui régnait à cette époque—d’autant que la police avait alors déserté le quartier—et désarroi des jeunes de la rue livrés à leur désespoir, dont les préoccupations étaient très diverses. Et puis, déjà, cette sorte de prise en mains des quartiers par les islamistes, la montée de l’intolérance” […I found it interesting to show the effervescence prevailing at time—particularly given that the police had deserted the neighborhood—and the street youths’ disarray led to their despair, the roots of which were very diverse. And then, already, this sort of taking over of the neighborhoods by the Islamists, the rise of intolerance.] In *Le Matin*, no. 901, 15 Dec. 1994, p.9.
alcoholic beverages in illegal bars, and also when Boualem manages to get some wine for Ouardya; homelessness as illustrated by young men sleeping in their car and to whom Boualem’s friend and co-worker Mabrouk gives croissants; men’s overall helplessness within their social arena (which should be translated literally as the death of the hero in Algerian cinema, and is best illustrated in the scene where Saïd forbids the youth from hanging out by the beach and from listening to Raï music);

5. Western cultural exports and influences: the illegal trade of western goods shipped from France illustrated by the scene in which all the local petty traffickers share the newly arrived shipment;

6. Homosexuality as suggested by Didine but also in the women’s circle, as briefly alluded to in a scene during which a woman watches another woman cool down and proceeds to help her do so;

7. Relationships between men and women. Unable to date openly, Boualem and Yamina meet in the local cemetery. Messaoud also brings a girl to the cemetery in order to have some privacy. Alilou, the taxi driver, recounts his failed attempt at finding a free, tranquil space in Algiers’ zoo in order to enjoy some privacy with a girl whose eyes resembled those of American actress, Kim Basinger;

8. The state embodied by the secret police whose role is unspecified yet rendered explicit by its presence in the neighborhood, for it appears throughout the film at random intervals;

9. Women and their forced seclusion (as seen in those scenes where the only open space they can enjoy is that of the building’s rooftop);

10. Emigration: a desire to escape and “illusions of grandeur” as best illustrated by Boualem’s little brother’s desire to go to France and buy a Toyota once there;

11. Then and now: Nostalgia for a past long gone and which underscores the narrative through two characters (an old blind aunt and his nephew) personifying “pied-noirs.” According to Khatib, the presence of these two characters contributes to establishing a link between Algeria’s colonial past and the fundamentalists “who still use this issue to fuel their causes” (39). However, and following multiple viewings of the film, I feel there is no indication that such a link exists. The reference to Algeria’s colonial past is on the contrary made to highlight the country’s deterioration since the
liberation. Thus, Allouache is making an implied critique of the state which until then has been unable to build a strong Algeria; hence the multiple shots in the film of derelict, crammed and overcrowded buildings.

A micro-society on a slippery verge: fundamentalism and the youth

“Les gens me disaient: ‘Mais, tu es fou, tu ne vas pas parler de l’islamisme!’” (Allouache : 1994)\textsuperscript{101}

People said to me: “You’re crazy, you’re not going to talk about Islamism!”

Ultimately, the conflicts and tensions experienced by the characters in the film are interwoven with the rise of fundamentalism in Algeria in the aftermath of the 1988 October revolts. In addition, each theme listed above contributes to a counter-image or a counter-narrative of the nation in that each of them is a re-articulation of the nation. Fundamentalism and the youth constitute two main interrelated themes whose agents (both active and passive) are in perpetual tension on the same national terrain: fundamentalism and the youth. As seen in the film, fundamentalism—embodied by Saïd and his posse—has infiltrated the public spheres of Bab el-Oued such as the local mosque and cemetery, the local bakery, the public square by the Basilica Notre Dame d’Afrique (resting on top of Bab el-Oued), and the neighborhood adjoining beach where some of the local youth smoke and listen to Raï music. It also expands to include other spaces such as the rooftops via the use of speakerphones and family as best illustrated by the scene in which Saïd threatens to lock up his sister Yamina should she spend too much time on the balcony (even if covered from head to toe). Most importantly, fundamentalism expands ideologically and competes fiercely with the state on the same national terrain. Four specific scenes in the film point to this ideological expansion:

1) When Rachid, Saïd’s right hand, speaks to an attentive crowd of young people about the need to take up arms and contribute to the building of an Islamic state;
2) When Saïd and other fellow Islamists meet in a building hallway to discuss the neighborhood children’s need to go to summer camp. This is an example of how the

\textsuperscript{101} In \textit{Jeune Afrique}, no. 1769, 1-7 Dec. 1994, p. 16, in an interview conducted by Elisabeth Lecqueret.
Islamists intervened in community-related social and welfare needs (especially geared towards the poorest families). In Algeria, these welfare measures proved to be extremely effective and earned the FIS 47.3% of the votes in the first round of parliamentary elections in 1991;

3) When Saïd, accompanied by his posse, tries to give an audiocassette with Islamic-related teachings to a couple of young men in an attempt to dissuade them from listening to Raï music. In the 1990s, audiocassettes and propaganda videotapes in Algeria were made readily available to Islamists and future recruits. This was perhaps one of the most effective ways to get the message across and fuel the passions necessary for the construction of an Islamic state;

4) When Saïd sternly reprimands Mess for looking at women in the street.

This gradual appropriation of the urban and ideological space by the Islamists was perhaps the most important initiative undertaken by the FIS’s members and supporters in attempting to get the people’s voices and support during the January 1992 second round of the parliamentary elections. Getting the people’s votes and giving support to those most in need while highlighting the state’s downfall and corruption was therefore ostensibly a way for the Islamists to rescue the nation. Thus, the “shaab” (people) as a concept highlighting the homogeneity of the Algerian people was re-appropriated from the nationalist discourse of the PPA (Parti du Peuple Algérien) and re-inscribed into the political doctrine of the FIS and other Islamist political factions following the FIS’s dissolution in 1992 (Martinez 2000: 44-5).

Undoubtedly, the most emblematic and powerful figure in the film is that of Saïd, the anti-hero par excellence, a dark and hard-edged character, whose grip on the neighborhood’s residents gets increasingly tight until he mysteriously finds death following Boualem’s departure for France. However, and as already mentioned, what remains unclear is whether or not Saïd receives specific orders from the secret police with whom he meets at at least three intervals throughout the narrative. What we do know is that the losses incurred by the 1988 October revolts is one of the factors which led Saïd to get involved with fundamentalism-related activities (such as recruiting new members, and monitoring the

102 The FIS had successfully won the first round in 1991.
neighborhood’s criminal activities). Caring on a weekly basis for the grave of a close friend killed at 18 years of age during the revolts, Saïd shares with Mess a background of which he says: “J’ai connu la misère aller-retour. Ils ont rien fait pour nous. Tu vois mon frère, la haine, c’est eux qui nous l’ont donnée. J’en ai marre” [I know all there is to know about poverty. They haven’t done anything for us. You see, my brother, it is they who gave us hate. I’ve had enough of them.] The subject pronoun “they” in this instance refers to the state and those in power (typically named “taghout” by the Islamists) who let the situation deteriorate further in the most impoverished areas of Algiers. Saïd’s comments are evidently tainted with resentment and bitterness towards the state. Moreover, his courage and subsequent imprisonment following the October revolts—as recounted by the local Imam in his conversation with Boualem halfway through the filmic narrative—has earned Saïd the respect and admiration of the local youth and neighborhood. His one-on-one experience with the state while in prison compounded by the loss of close friends has led Saïd to take matters into his own hands by turning to Islamic fundamentalism. However, his ways have become increasingly controlling and repressive, giving Boualem an increasingly claustrophobic feeling.

When Boualem steals the loudspeaker, Saïd makes it his personal mission to hunt down and punish the culprit. “Alors, vous ne savez rien?” [So, you do not know anything?] he warns with his menacing gaze directed at some of the young neighborhood’s residents surrounding him in a circle in a street: “C’est grave” [this is serious] he exclaims loudly for: “Le voleur est contre la parole de Dieu. Il nous déshonore. Nous le trouverons. Il s’attaque aussi à vous. Il faut nous aider!” [The thief is against God’s word. He dishonors us. We will find him. He is also attacking you. You must help us!] Saïd then says rather

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103 A term which means “tyrant” or “evil” (also signifying the transgression of limits). The term is used among Islamists to refer to the members of the state and anyone supporting the state.

104 Turning to fundamentalism—particularly following the October revolts during which many youths were tortured and killed by the armed forces—was an option considered by many unemployed and deeply disillusioned youth in urban areas such as Bab el-Oued. It is believed that at least 500 people lost their lives during the riots (Martinez 1998: 21). Based on multiple accounts, torture was inflicted upon rioters who had been arrested by the paratroopers. As reported by Algérie-Actualité (no. 1204, 1988, p. 16), and as quoted in Martinez’ The Algerian Civil War 1990-1998, young people were sodomized, had their toenails torn off, their genitals mutilated or were drenched in a large tub containing foul liquids such as vomit and other human waste (46). In the documentary Algeria’s bloody years (2003), one man recounts in gruesome detail how the paratroopers proceeded to subject the prisoners to electroshocks. In Unbowed, Messaoudi confirms similar reports (87). When finally able to return home, these young men brought back with them their experiences and in doing so further fuelled the anger of those who no longer believed in the state’s failed promises.
prophetically that “Ce quartier sera nettoyé! Des choses immorales se passent, comme la femme impure qui vit seule et reçoit des hommes.” [This neighborhood will be cleaned up! Immoral things are taking place such as the impure woman who lives alone and receives men.] The woman he speaks of is Ouardya whom he wishes to evict from the area because of her “impure” ways. Said’s words are further reinforced by Rachid’s, a fellow Islamist who warns: “Dans ce pays, les armes devront parler.” [In this country, arms must talk.] In this particular scene, the control and manipulation exerted by Said’s posse upon Bab El-Oued residents is shown cinematographically by a slow panning of the camera over the youths’ faces. Thus, in one single take and in a circular motion, a succession of close ups are shown, and tension between both groups is rendered through silent pauses between Said’s warnings. Although limited to verbal intimidation and two fistfights in the film, one can feel the escalating tension between Said’s increased grip and Boualem’s close circle of friends, in particular his boss, his friend Mabrouk, Ouardya and Yasmina. In addition, the local Imam is not only unable to reach out to Said, he is also gradually overwhelmed by the mounting violence which eventually leads him to resign and transfer to another Mosque. According to Allouache, moderate Imams “se sont refugiés dans le silence et vivent très douloureusement la situation”. [have sought refuge in silence and are living through this situation with great anguish.] The early and mid 1990s were difficult years during which the multiplicity of voices was soon silenced by fear raised not only by the army’s random arrests in popular neighborhoods, but also by the Islamists’ increasingly aggressive propaganda and readiness to fight back.

Overall, the group’s latent aggressive behavior and brutality in Bab El-Oued City is cinematically rendered through short scenes in which at times the sound of a single accompanying guitar follows the steps of Said’s posse through the narrow streets of Bab el-Oued. The guitar sound as well as the walking figures (all mostly bearded, clad in black and sporting the distinctive black and white Palestinian shemagh around their neck) give these

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105 Imams working in public mosques in Algeria are paid state employees and may ask to be transferred to other communes.
107 A shemagh (or keffiyeh) is a long piece of material worn as a headwrap or scarf. Famously sported by Yasser Arafat, the shemag (particularly those with a black and white pattern) has long been a symbol of Palestinian nationalism. Outside of Palestine, the shemag may be worn as a show solidarity with the
short sequences a western flavor, which are in some ways reminiscent of Sergio Leone’s *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). These scenes explain the oblique reference made to the spaghetti western genre by the French newspaper *Libération* (see “Critical reception” below). In addition, the camera often lingers on the Islamists’ faces whose eyes are further darkened by khôl. One short scene early on in the film does in fact show Saïd applying khôl carefully to his eyes which has prompted some critics to believe that this was done to add more emphasis or render himself more charismatic. However, Islamists in Algeria were known to let their beard grow, wear kamis, apply khôl on their eyes and olive oil on their hair and beard because it is believed this was what the Prophet Muhammad did. As such, those who did commit to Islamic fundamentalism wanted to be as close to the Prophet Muhammad’s lifestyle as they could in terms of what they had been taught. In this respect, Allouache’s cinematic rendering of fundamentalism and those who adhered to it at the time the film was made could be said to be for the most part accurate. In difficult economic and social times, areas such as Bab el-Oued were prime spots to recruit young men uncertain about their future and in most cases, those who had long ceased to see the state as an ally.

To some young men, and as observed by Allouache himself, the FIS became a venue to look for answers: “*Bab el-Oued* est peuplé de chômeurs et de ‘teneurs de murs.’ De ces mômes qui passent leurs journées à s’ennuyer. Pour trouver des réponses à leurs questions, certains forcent sur une drogue : le FIS”. [Bab el-Oued is full of unemployed, ‘hittistes’](111)

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108 Khôl is a black mineral powder commonly used as make up and applied to the inner eye area in order to enhance one’s look, but Khôl’s medicinal properties explain why it has been and continues to be used among Arabs and Berbers for hundreds of years.

109 For a rich and rare account of how Islamists proceeded in their “mission,” see *I, Nadia, Wife of a Terrorist* (1998), a testimonial recounted by Algerian journalist Baya Gacemi and translated from the French by Paul Cote and Constantina Mitchell. It unravels the story of a young Algerian woman married to a young man who quickly became a local emir for the Islamic Action Group. As such, and during four treacherous years, “Nadia” (not a real name) was forced to participate and at times became a willing participant in the terrorist activities led by her husband. She also endured mistrust, danger and abandonment/rejection (from her community and family) that typically go hand in hand with being associated with such activities particularly in small rural communities.

110 In *L’Express* 17 Nov. 1994. For a further investigation on this matter, see *Algeria’s bloody years* (2003) and *The fundamental question* (1994), two documentaries which offer an insightful account on those who joined the ranks of the AIS (the armed branch of the Islamic Salvation Front) or the GIA (Armed Islamic Group).
and youngsters bored all day. To find answers to their questions, some have found a drug: the FIS [Islamic Salvation Front.]. Saïd’s overall persona is emblematic of a generation deeply disturbed and shaken by the 1988 October revolts, yet nothing in the film suggests the director’s empathy towards those who turned to fundamentalism. Saïd’s demeanor from beginning to end does not call for empathy from the viewer’s part, and the constant close ups on his menacing eyes are a reminder of the oppressive influence and authority he exerts on his followers, family members and the neighborhood’s inhabitants. One scene in particular calls for caution towards Saïd’s character, notably that of the workout session which takes place in the neighborhood’s run-down gym. With a large-size Algerian national flag pinned on the back wall as a backdrop, the camera is positioned at a very close proximity to the inclined workout bench on top of which Saïd executes his sit-ups. As he comes up in a sitting position to contract his abdominals, his contorted face comes dangerously close to the camera, all in a regular motion. This simple camera technique allows the viewer to feel the character’s determination enhanced by his physical strength and his heavy yet controlled breathing. In fact, this scene alone may cause discomfort to some viewers for it positions them in a brief yet tense face-to-face with Saïd’s imposing will and overall presence.

In contrast, those in the film who have not joined the ranks of fundamentalism are either vulnerable to Saïd’s threats (Ali, Mabrouk and the baker are good examples) or simply choose to avoid him. As such, those who have not jumped on the Islamists’ bandwagon find reprieve by the water or in bars where beer is served, where Raï music is played, along with card and board games. When tensions arise, particularly in the scene in which Saïd confronts the youth about the missing loudspeaker, the absence of the state in protecting the citizens from such threatening control is intensified. It is precisely in this sense that a re-articulation of the nation unfolds in Allouache’s film. The national terrain is not only left unprotected and open to a wide range of ills (economic, social and religious), but it has also become a mined

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111 ‘Hittiste’ is a term derived from ‘hit’ which means ‘wall’ in the Arabic spoken in Algiers. Severe unemployment combined with small living spaces force the youth (generally males) to loiter in the streets of their neighborhood and—typically—to lean against the walls hence the term ‘hittiste.’ This boredom often leads the way to mild delinquency (drugs, trafficking on the black market and vandalism). This situation is such that it has inspired Algerian comedian and actor Fellag to jokingly say that there were not enough walls in Algeria and that the Berlin wall could have been sent over as opposed to being destroyed. The alarming growing number of youths wandering the streets bored and with little hope for employment is an ongoing source of concern and the term “hittiste” is used in other North African countries.
playing field where tensions and power struggles take place between different agents whose ability to protect themselves or impose their will varies. As observed in the film, these tensions take place between the following:

1) The Islamists and the moderate Muslims;
2) The youth and the Islamists;
3) The women and the Islamists;
4) The state and the Islamists;
5) The “trabendistes” and the Islamists

Ultimately, those targeted and most vulnerable are ordinary citizens who feel helpless and cannot seek the state’s assistance nor can they expect its immediate intervention. For example, Boualem’s boss—the bakery owner, a proud Kabylian—is told by Rachid (Saïd’s right hand) to fire Boualem and to bring more money to the Mosque upon his next weekly visit there. There are also constant visual reminders in the film alluding to the economic difficulties encountered by the youth such as for example homelessness and lack of sufficient living space, forcing young men to sleep in cars. These individuals are twice as vulnerable and more inclined to join the Islamists due to their disillusionment with the system. In brief, Bab el-Oued’s fate at the hands of fundamentalism, racketeering and score settling is one that seems both out of control and doomed, forcing its inhabitants to live in fear. Furthermore, the ambiguous presence of the secret police compounded by the absence of the state highlights the latter’s failed promise and foremost prime engagement towards its people, namely protection. In his witnessing of the rise of fundamentalism in Algeria (both from outside and within) and the state’s lack of initiatives to better the people’s welfare, Allouache has stated that: “…le grand drame des pays du Tiers Monde, c’est que ce sont toujours les mêmes qui trinquent, toujours les mêmes qui payent. Toujours les mêmes qui sont les tueurs ou les assassinés”. In Jeune Afrique, no. 1769, 1-7 Dec. 1994, p. 16, in an interview conducted by Elisabeth Lecqueret.

Fear in Bab el-Oued City is suggested in a number of ways from the vantage point of every day individuals. However, the focus of this film is not exclusively that of Islamic
fundamentalism. The film also focuses on the tense duality inherent in the coexistence of modernity and tradition in postcolonial Algeria; in other words, a duality experienced on a daily basis by the younger generations. In addition, in the film, western ways are virulently condemned by the Islamists, and as is clearly shown, sought-after western cultural exports only find their way in illegally and through Algiers’s seaport. In no uncertain way, Allouache’s Bab el-Oued City shows that the coexistence of varied lifestyles in a neighborhood like Bab el-Oued inevitably generates friction due to competing interests over the nation’s future between the Islamists and the state. However, Allouache’s cinematic reading and subsequent re-articulation of the nation in Bab el-Oued City does not so much propose a new definition of Algeria as a nation. Rather, the director lets us ponder the question as to how, given the state’s absence, Algerians might define themselves in relation to their own country and culture(s). What rights do they have and how might one be free to interpret and impose the written word on others? Given that the main protagonist Boualem escapes Algeria en route for France at the end of the film, how might one be led to understand, and similarly, define a nation whose state does not protect its citizens? These are the questions the film might prompt the viewer to ask. Without the state’s presence and the gradual overtaking of Algerians’ voices by the Islamists, Bab el-Oued City shows a new generation at a loss vis-à-vis the state, the state’s official religion and the interpretation of the latter by the Islamists. As such, escape, resignation or survival are some of the answers the film’s characters turn to.

Some may argue that the film could be seen as innocuous because it focuses only minimally on fundamentalism through a handful of characters whose affiliation to the FIS or any other Islamic-derived factions remains unclear throughout. However, this cinematic interpretation of fundamentalism in a micro-environment such as Bab el-Oued is rendered twice as effective thanks to the focus on the visual image (or visual narrative). Because Bab el-Oued City was filmed on site during the actual historical and political period its fictional narrative stems from, the film’s rendering of fundamentalism mirrors that of the existing unstable and dangerous climate of the time. This is made apparent by the regular interruptions of the film’s narrative coherence and continuity by static shots of roofs.

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113 Messaoudi has distinguished two opposing agendas in Algeria (early 1990s): “a fundamentalist project, which saw Islam as a means and an end in itself, and viewed classical Arabic as a source of identity; the other a secular project, which called for rationality, liberty, equality, and linguistic pluralism” (100).
overlooking the Mediterranean. The inability to film exterior scenes safely and for long stretches of time is felt throughout the feature. Allouache himself admits: “Quand j’en suis arrivé au montage, j’ai constaté toutes les imperfections, car j’avais autour de moi une équipe de techniciens qui ne travaillait pas tranquillement…”¹¹⁴ [When I got to the editing phase, I was aware of all the imperfections because I had with me a crew of technicians who did not feel safe.] It could then be said that the film’s overall cinematography has not so much been dictated by the director’s usual style but rather by the conditions in which the film was shot. In other words, the Islamists’ presence and control over the neighborhood at the time of filming indirectly dictated and restrained the director’s style which leads us now to consider some of the techniques Allouache resorted to in order to put the feature together.

Cinematic style of Bab el-Oued City, where the rooftop is the limit

To Naficy, one of the visual components of the accented film style is that it is “less driven by action than by words and emotions” (2001: 289). The accented film style is also notable by its use of real locations (also a characteristic of Third Cinema), an “uneven pacing,” “spontaneity and anxious formality,” “immense exteriors,” and “transitional border spaces: airports and seaports trains and buses” (ibid.), among other characteristics. Bab el-Oued City is a pastiche of different shots of which some are executed hastily and others possess a random quality to them. Allouache—as already noted—devotes extensive time to urban landscape images in the film. As such, recurrent motifs are rooftops, the Mediterranean, Algiers’ seaport, streets, balconies, bars, the local cemetery and mosque.

Bab el-Oued, a tight and overpopulated urban landscape characterized by the decay of its crammed houses and buildings, is itself turned character in the film. It becomes a wide open yet closed stage from which images are stolen and whose rooftops, from a cinematographic standpoint, are not only the limit for the filmmaker and his crew but the only way to capture the particular atmosphere of the 1990s. There are not innovative stylistic forms in the film per se, however the panoramic shots, frequent close-ups, the use of Raï music and the voice-over narration make up the overall visual fabric of the film whose

rhythm—in spite of frequent cutaway shots—moves at a steady pace. When it comes to the characters themselves, the framing of each shot is not always consistently meticulous in Allouache’s film. Where at times the camera will give a specific angle to a character in order to highlight or strengthen his/her position in the narrative, it sometimes fails to do so in subsequent scenes. Thus, the main protagonist’s opposition to the Islamists, while cinematographically clear at the very beginning and conveyed through a succession of close up shots, is then lost halfway through the film and is only understood through the script. In other words, the camera gradually ceases to place Boualem as an important dissident voice in the film.

Of note in Allouache’s film is the shooting of interior and exterior spaces. The few interior scenes (most of them filmed in darkness) contrast sharply with the bright exteriors to convey a feeling of duality between the public and private spheres which are each respectively occupied by men and women. A good example of this contrast is seen in a short scene in which a young woman attempts to cool down from the heat with a bucket full of water, in a dark room situated at the rooftop of the building where most women gather. Unable to freely step out, women thus resort to cooling down privately in closed quarters. An immediate cutaway follows that scene and shows men only (young and old) enjoying a swim in the cool Mediterranean. In this manner, the alternative use of inside and outside spaces in Allouache’s film does not always consistently follow that of the textual narrative. At times, rather it implicitly conveys the dividing of the national space into public and private spheres between both genders. To further convey this social reality, Allouache, in many of the film’s scenes, positions unsuspecting passersby and young children as characters. Men are filmed walking the streets, standing leisurely on sidewalks, talking in groups. They are also found sitting by the water, fishing or swimming. In other words, they permeate and dominate all the public, outside spheres. Women, on the other hand and particularly those who remain inside, proved to be much more difficult to capture on film. Allouache had to resort to the use of extremely high angle shots enabling him to “steal” images of unsuspecting women on their balcony, tending to household chores or simply looking down. Such filming of the Algerian national space automatically positions the director as a chronicler as opposed to a filmmaker which explains why the visual narrative’s pace is frequently punctuated by panoramic shots succeeding one another for no apparent
reason other than it was most likely the safest place to shoot from and capture a very specific atmosphere.

As for *Bab el-Oued City*’s narrative technique, various components of the accented style are notable in the film such as:

1) an emphasis on orality (as exemplified by the words communicated through the loudspeaker);
2) multilinguality (use of Arabic and minimum French);
3) multivocality (different voices compete to be heard);
4) asynchronicity (flashback, for example);
5) voice-over narration (Yasmina recounting what happened);
6) native music (Raï and other instrumental music, as heard in the film);
7) epistolarity (exemplified by the letters written by Yasmina);
8) structured absences (some characters appear and disappear throughout);

The above characteristics stress the idea of a fragmented nation and constitute a rich narrative for understanding how fractures might manifest themselves within Bab el-Oued’s microenvironment. In addition, the film draws on a variety of visual urban motifs which likewise serve to translate the idea of fragmentation (whether social, religious or quite simply, economic). The decrepit buildings left in a state of neglect for instance are tied closely to poverty and to the state’s disinterest in providing the lower classes with decent lodging quarters.

Overall, the cinematography’s dramatic and *re... politik* edge in the film gives it a dual function, that of a tragicomedy and that of a social commentary. *Bab el-Oued City* gives the audience the opportunity to get a glimpse of one of Algeria’s popular urban neighborhoods where reportedly—at the time of filming—Islamic fundamentalism is extending its grip. However, the director’s at times ambiguous political and emotional position as well as his geographical location in relation to his homeland Algeria, makes it difficult for the viewer to assume a position other than that of a “voyeur.” In other words, just as the director positioned himself as a “spectator” and an “image thief” (as he puts it) when furtively and clandestinely
filming on location, the viewer is likewise invited to do precisely the same. What remains true in Allouache’s case, just as it is with the other filmmakers dealt with in this study, is that conditions of production (both pre- and post-), distribution and exhibition have all, in varying degrees come into significant play in the making of Bab el-Oued City.

Questions of distribution, production and critical reception

Les gens qui viennent voir les films algériens sont venus parce qu’ils s’intéressent à la situation en Algérie. Aujourd’hui, on devrait essayer d’envoyer partout nos films, notre musique, nos pièces de théâtre, notre culture…Et plus on présentera d’œuvres, plus on montrera que le pays est vivant. Bab el-Oued City va être présenté en Argentine.115

People who come to see Algerian films came because the situation in Algeria interests them. Today, we should try to send our films, our music, our plays, and our culture everywhere…And the more we show our work, the more we’ll be able to show that our country is alive. Bab el-Oued City will soon be shown in Argentina.

Critical reception

Benefiting from the attendance of crossover audiences and niche pocket audiences around the world, Allouache has often been a favorite in the French press due in part to the enormous success of his comedy Chouchou (2003) which attracted up to 4 million viewers in France alone and earned the director a brief yet noticeable entry into mainstream cinema.116

Working simultaneously and alternatively in both countries, Allouache has learned to jump through both national and transnational institutional “hoops” to obtain funding, assistance

116 In the Algerian newspaper Le Matin, Boudjemaâ Karèche wrote that both Chouchou and Rachida came out simultaneously in Algeria at the end of July 2003 in two different theaters (the Algeria and Mouggar). According to the author, each film attracted up to 60,000 viewers during the first week alone (7 Aug. 2003). In El Watan, journalist Yasmina Belkacem reports that Chouchou whose budget amounted to 7.65 million euros earned his production partners up to 18 million euros. This figure has been estimated by Le Figaro Enterprises (2 Feb. 2004).
from various teams of film technicians and access to European-based audiovisual studios. Allouache may be defined as a hybrid *per se*, who more or less easily functions in both countries and who switches genres (drama, comedy and documentary) while remaining smartly aware of cinema’s sheer entertainment and commercial value within the European audiovisual markets. A pivotal figure in Algerian cinema due to his lasting ties to the homeland, Allouache has also earned valuable praise from time to time in the Algerian press, distinguishing him as a filmmaker whose cinematic rendition of Algerian society has been said to remain authentic.

Distributed in six theaters in Paris, *Bab el-Oued City* sold 14,633 tickets upon its first week of release and earned the Prix de la Semaine Internationale de la Critique at the 1994 Cannes Film Festival as well as the grand prize at the 1994 Arab Film Festival in Paris. On the French side, Allouache drew mixed reviews. *Le Monde* was seduced by the film, and in an article titled “État d’urgence,” Frodon wrote: “On retrouve cette finesse attentive et gouailleuse qui avait fait remarquer le réalisateur algérien dès son premier film, *Omar Gatlato*…” [One finds this attentive finesse which has been the hallmark of the Algerian director since his first film, *Omar Gatlato*…] Frodon adds that the dangerous conditions of production are not only a show of courage on the part of Allouache, but also a choice of mise-en-scène.117 *Témoignage Chrétien* calls the feature a “film-résistance” praising the director’s courage for having filmed in such difficult circumstances.118 *Le Canard enchaîné* has mixed feelings and does not find the film “techniquement et esthétiquement parfait,” [technically and esthetically perfect] but adds that it is played convincingly by the actors and has the advantage of having been filmed in Algiers.119 In an article titled “Allouache s’enlise à Bab el-Oued,” [Allouache entrenched in Bab el-Oued] Bouziane Daoudi from the newspaper *Libération* makes an oblique reference to the spaghetti western genre in speaking of Allouache’s film as a “couscous-western” where “on voit les femmes de l’immeuble de Boualem s’arracher des livres d’Harlequin, ou encore la ‘folle’ du quartier prenant des intonations féminines pour mimer une scène de soap américain”.120 [we see women who reside in Boualem’s building grab romance novels, or the neighborhood “queer” playing out

a scene from an American soap with a feminine intonation.] Daoudi further adds: “En renvoyant dos à dos pouvoir et islamisme, Merzak Allouache fait cruellement l’impasse sur cette présumé innocence du cinéma algérien.” [In putting the state and Islamism on the same level, Merzak Allouache cruelly bypasses Algerian’s cinema presumed innocence.] Daoudi ambiguously points to Algerian cinema’s previous relationship with the state in disseminating official national discourses. In doing so, Algerian cinema’s ties with the state are—in Daoudi’s view—as condemnable as the implied collaboration Allouache alludes to in his film, which is that of Islamic fundamentalism and the state. According to the directors, others—whom he has not named—have accused him of not associating the state with the fundamentalists.121

The filmic text can thus be read differently due to the ambiguous nature of the state’s presence in the film and its direct or indirect involvement with the Islamists. On the Francophone Algerian press side, El-Moudjahid for example labels Allouache’s cinema a “cinéma de l’urgence” stressing that the film is a faithful chronicle of a popular Algiers’ neighborhood right after the 1988 October revolts.122 Perhaps the most valuable critique of the film, however comes from renowned Egyptian filmmaker Youcef Chahine. In a piece edited and introduced by Edouard Waintrop for Le Magazine de Libération, and in which Allouache and Chahine are asked to interview each other on issues of censorship, terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism and threats, Chahine praises Allouache’s loudspeaker idea in the film saying:

Dans ton film, Bab el-Oued City, toute cette histoire de haut-parleur, c’est très fort. Quand j’ai vu ça, je me suis dit ‘ce fils de pute a trouvé un symbole incroyable’. Car c’est vrai: ils nous imposent leur parole grâce au haut parleur […] Aujourd’hui, avec ces haut-parleurs, nous sommes tous à la même distance, tous réduits à ne plus répliquer (1995:55).

In your film Bab el-Oued City, the whole story about the loudspeaker is a stroke of genius. When I saw that, I thought to myself ‘that son of a bitch

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121 See p. 9, footnote 21.
122 In El-Moudjahid, 22 Nov. 1994.
found an incredible symbol.’ Because it’s true. They do impose their spoken word upon us through loudspeakers […] Today, with these loudspeakers, we are all held at the same distance. We are all reduced to silence.\textsuperscript{123}

If the symbolism surrounding the loudspeaker in Allouache’s film appears to be—from an interpretative standpoint—clear-cut, the director’s position in relation to \textit{Bab el-Oued City} is as ambiguous as the filmic narrative itself. In what follows, I attempt to highlight some of the inherent contradictions and obvious difficulties for Allouache in attempting to position himself as a filmmaker in a host country where, for financial and political reasons, no side can be taken exclusively and at the expense of the other.

\textit{To talk or not to talk: Allouache’s ambiguous position as a transnational filmmaker}

When the film was released in France, the director said that he has found welcoming groups of Algerians who, in his view, were eager to find out about Algeria and the events that were taking place then: “Quand le film est sorti en France, je l’ai accompagné partout à l’occasion de débats passionnants où j’ai rencontré une communauté algérienne avide d’informations sur son pays d’origine et curieuse de voir comment les Français la considéraient”.\textsuperscript{124} [When the film came out in France, I took keen interest in the passionate debates which took place, during which I met an Algerian community desperate for information about its country of origin, and curious to see how the French considered it.] In partaking in such debates with displaced Algerians,\textsuperscript{125} Allouache’s position as a filmmaker extends itself to that of a visual informer \textit{per se} in that he takes on the non-negligible responsibility and task of informing individuals of Algerian origins via an audiovisual medium.

Debates surrounding the state of culture in Algeria are not ones the director shies away from, however Allouache is paradoxically ambiguous when it comes to discussing

\textsuperscript{123} In this interview, both directors spoke of their then current film. Chahine spoke at length of his film \textit{Al-Mohager (The immigrant)} also made in 1994. In \textit{Le Magazine de Liberation}, 11-17 March 1995, p. 55.\textsuperscript{124} In \textit{Le Monde}, 26 Nov. 1995.\textsuperscript{125} Allouache has not made it clear as to which exact population he was addressing while traveling throughout the country with his film. However, I am guessing that the director most likely found that the interested parties were members of the first generation of Algerians as opposed to the second/third generations (French born children of the first and second generation). The first generation is most likely to be concerned with Algeria’s current events due to remaining family and emotional ties associated with the homeland to which most of them have at some point aspired to return to.
particular elements concerning the narrative of Bab el-Oued City. One might ask what can then be discussed with such target/niche audiences in France and what is left out? What is the extent of the director’s self-imposed censorship in his discussions with his audiences in France thus in his films? Most importantly, one must ask what are the limits imposed by external funding and non-funding parties?

Constraints and compromises

Algerian filmmakers are faced with multiple forms of pressures and constraints. First, there is a form of self-imposed censorship where filmmakers make subconscious and conscious choices in writing their stories. They may choose to use different words or resort to parables to refer to an underlying message intended for the audience to decipher. Secondly, there is a form of censorship imposed by those remaining audiovisual organisms in Algeria such as Algerian television but also the FDATIC which will release funds provided that the narrative does not breach certain codes (restrictions on the representation of sexuality are governed by one of these codes). Thirdly, there are potential constraints which might be imposed by co-production parties in an attempt to make the film more marketable in a wider distribution network. Aesthetic compromises may be made leading as such to what has been termed a “cinéma formaté” [a formatted cinema]. In other words, a cinema where, as Allouache says: “on veut vous attirer vers des réponses qu’on attend de vous. Des réponses toutes faites” [the aim is to direct you towards which are expected of you. Pre-made answers.] Also, the use of European technicians is an example of monitoring at the creative level. As such, the director may have only partial freedom in the postproduction phase of the film. Fourthly, reading committees based in Europe might look for elements in the script that are potentially more relevant to their respective target audience hence the success of Allouache’s border crossing stories. Other constraints might be experienced at the logistical level, and particularly in Algeria’s outside locations. This form of constraint in the case of Bab el-Oued City was imposed by the presence of Islamists fundamentalists. Bearing in mind that the film was never officially released in Algeria, Allouache stated that: “Moi, mon

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126 In El Watan 8 Mar. 2005
127 Although not censored in Algeria, Allouache could not obtain the funds necessary to acquire copies of the film in order to show in the few theaters that were up and running then. (La Nation, no. 171, 29 Oct. 1996, p.20)
As for me, no one had any problem with my film. This is because, in Algeria, we do not forbid. We kill. An Algerian filmmaker, Djamel Fezzaz has just been badly injured on February 6.

It is likewise important to note that Algerians are still wary of the camera, and directors take great care in manipulating such device in public places. At some level, this may restrain the filmmaker’s style. Nevertheless, film sets in Algeria usually create quite a stir and curious passersby (particularly children) may stand there all day long just to watch. Allouache found it difficult yet manageable to handle such crowds during the filming of his last feature Bab el-Web. All these factors enable us to perhaps better grasp the apparent ambiguity in Bab el-Oued City’s filmic narrative, particularly when concerning the latent presence of the state in relation to the emblematic character Saïd.

Finally, and as expected, finances play a great part in the making and distributing of a film thus placing added constraints on the filmmaker. With Bab el-Oued City, Allouache experienced concrete difficulties: “J’étais un peu gêné par la situation financière qui a fait que mon scénario a été quand même un peu bloqué” [With Bab el-Oued-City, I was a little perturbed by the financial situation which caused my scenario to become a little blocked.] As far as is known and from what has been shared by Allouache himself, no concessions were made at the script level, but the director revealed how challenging gathering funds to secure production in Algeria was.

Acknowledging that: “On ne peut pas faire un film sans une coproduction et des fonds extérieurs”, Allouache adds that:

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128 In Le Magazine de Libération, 11-17 March 1995, p.54. Djamel Fezzaz was brutally shot in the face by unknown Islamists and miraculously recovered.
130 Of note, Allouache has reiterated a number of times and in different print media how difficult conditions of production for this particular feature turned out to be as he felt responsible for the protection and safety of French crew members. His preoccupations during filming were thus in great part geared towards logistical details as opposed to creative ones: “Les conditions de réalisation sont loin d’être faciles. Il y a les équipes de techniciens français à protéger pour tourner au pied de la Casbah, au cœur de Bab el-Oued, devenus des fiefs intégristes. Les finances ne suivent pas…” [The filmmaking conditions are far from easy, There are teams of French technicians to protect if one is to film at the foot of the Casbah, in the heart of Bab el-Oued, which has become a hot spot for Islamic Fundamentalists.] (In Hommes & Libertés / Hommes & Migrations, no. 89-90, May-June 1996, 106).
131 In Le Monde, 21 Nov. 1996.
Les seules concessions que l'on peut faire c'est à la seule qualité. Un coproducteur qui engage des fonds doit réunir toutes les conditions de réussite. J'ai réécrit Salut Cousin ! huit fois et j'en suis très content. Je suis en France et je reste fidèle à moi-même puisque je continue à faire des films sans prendre pour autant la violence et les assassinations dans mon pays pour fonds de commerce.¹³²

The only compromises we can make concern quality alone. A coproducer who commits funding must ensure that everything contributes to success. I re-wrote Salut Cousin! eight times and I am very happy with it. I am in France and I remain faithful to myself as I continue to make films without lucratively taking advantage of the violence and the assassinations taking place in my country.

Based on the above statement, one is led to understand that:

1) A consenting funding partner will take into account the audiovisual market’s demands and may ask the author to adjust his or her film’s subject matter accordingly;

2) Script rewriting may be required to meet with those same market’s demands. This may for instance involve the choice of language and the terminology used within that same language. The use of the North African immigrant accent for example is one of the “flavors” that contributes to the overall comical tone of Allouache’s films. Gad Elmaleh’s accent and portrayal as an individual from Algeria in both Chouchou and Salut Cousin! is highly credible to both Algerian and French audiences. The use of cultural referents within the filmic text that are familiar to mainstream audiences such as contemporary popular music, clothing or a recognizable French locale may also be inserted to appeal to viewers;

3) Sticking to a popular genre such as comedy to entice audiences into the theaters as opposed to being overtly politically engaged.

¹³² In El Watan, 23 Oct. 1996.
Allouache’s last remark regarding the making of films surrounding terrorism in Algeria is rather problematic and may appear to contradict other statements made in regards to—for example—the feature *L’autre Monde* where Allouache asserts that there is a strong need to talk about the Algerian crisis and to make films that would contribute to remembering the bloody decade. As recently as 2001, Allouache feared that amnesia would all but plunge Algerians into forgetfulness, and he wanted *Bab el-Oued City* to be a reminder of the violence that shook the nation. At once filmmaker, chronicler and informer, Allouache’s ambiguous position in relation to both his homeland and host country becomes apparent in his use of the pronoun “nous” (“us”/“our”). When referring to the bloody events endured by Algeria, Allouache’s initial position was that of an outsider as illustrated in the following statement: “Toutes les images et les informations qui nous arrivent de l’Algérie sont terrifiantes”. [All the images and news that came to us from Algeria are terrifying.] The “us” thus places Allouache as an outside spectator of the terror he wishes to film. The director’s voice throughout all the quotations cited in this chapter has jumped from the “chez nous,” “mon pays,” “mon peuple,” to the “en France,” and so forth.

The filmmaker’s transnational status is evidently tainted with a longing to belong as an Algerian national which can only be experienced from the host country, thus from a distance hence a fracture at the self-referential level. This is best exemplified by the following remark: “Fallait-il faire un film en rupture avec mon pays ou au contraire en relation, avec le vécu de mon peuple?” Allouache’s use of the possessive adjective “mon” to refer to himself and the people of “his” homeland while “living” through the experience of the bloody years from outside raises a wide range of complex questions that are out of this

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133 "J’espère qu’il y aura, dans le futur, des films qui permettront de ne pas occulter le drame, et qui aideront à ne pas laisser s’installer une certaine amnésie…J’ai remarqué pendant mes séjours en Algérie, que les gens ne parlent jamais de ce qui se passe, alors que la violence continue, et fait encore des victimes. Je voulais simplement que mon film le rappelle". [I hope that there will be, in the future, films which will allow drama to not be occulted and which will help to prevent a certain sense of amnesia from setting in …I noticed during my visits to Algeria that the people never talk about is happening, even though the violence is continuing and taking more victims. My simple desire was that my film reminds people of these things.] (Allouache in the news magazine *Salama* in an interview conducted by Abdessamed Sahali, no. 24, Nov./Dec. 2001, p. 52)  
study’s scope. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the making of *Bab el-Oued City* proved to be a difficult experience for Allouache who admittedly felt guilt about cinematically interpreting an aspect of the Algerian crisis:

> J’ai tourné ce film au jour le jour, parce que je sentais une sorte d’hostilité sourde. Sans doute entrait là aussi une forme de sentiment de culpabilité: je n’étais pas là, je reviens avec des moyens pour porter un regard sur les choses qui se sont passées ici. De quel droit viendrais-je imposer un regard, une vision? J’avais cette pression-là”.

I made this film from day to day, because I felt a kind of latent hostility. No doubt there was a certain feeling of guilt tied with this: I wasn’t there, I cam back with the means (e.g. money) to look at things that had happened here (Algeria). What right did I have to impose a vision? I felt that kind of pressure.

Five years earlier, Allouache had made a similar statement to *El Watan* to defend his position as a filmmaker and reject the label of opportunist in stating that: “Je me nourris de l’actualité, et c’est loin d’être de l’opportunisme. Je suis un cinéaste d’instinct. J’observe, je suis à l’écoute et je suis attentif à tout ce qui touche de près ou de loin à mon peuple. Je suis pour un cinéma de la quotidienneté”.  

Naficy has pointed out that “exilic” filmmakers “may feel deeply deprived and divided, even fragmented” (12) due their deterritorialized position. Overall, in Allaouche’s case, the filmmaker’s position in relation to his homeland and within the host country is one dictated by three factors; the first one being his deep attachment to Algeria and eagerness to keep up with anything affecting Algeria. The second is his engagement as a filmmaker and desire to relate stories or “récits-passérelles” whose thematics always manage to establish bridges between France and Algeria. Finally and no less importantly, his affiliation with financial institutions and various private funding parties contributes to the overall success of his films in the audiovisual markets. Although mostly if not exclusively funded by European subsidies

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and other private sources, Allouache defines his films as Algerian due in part to their continued thematic which focuses on Algerian national-based preoccupations, but also to the craft involved in making them. Allouache has for instance made the following comments in regards to the making of *Salut Cousin!*, a filmic narrative taking place in France: “Tout compte fait, avec des moyens français, j’ai encore fait un film algérien. Par-delà l’enchevêtrement des thèmes…cet ici et ce là-bas perpétuellement à la rescousse l’un de l’autre, il y a la continuité de mon côté artisanal, le côté que j’aime bien”\(^{138}\) [All things considered, with French funding, I again made an Algerian film. The entanglement of the themes…this here and that there, with each theme perpetually linking up with the others, creates a continuity in my craft that I like.] Finally, and in regards to Algeria and the state’s overall disregard for cinema and culture, Allouache views his ability to make films as an act of resistance.\(^{139}\) The filmmaker has said quite emblematically following the making of *Bab el-Oued City* that: “Entre mourir et partir, et partir pour se régénérer et résister, le choix est vite fait”\(^{140}\) [Between dying and leaving, and leaving to regenerate oneself and resist, the choice is quickly made.]

Thus restrained in Algeria yet relatively free in France, Allouache’s films have been at once openly and politically engaged, or political and/or simply entertaining, yet all bear the print of the director’s strong ties to his homeland and his desire to return some day. The thematic and stylistic continuity in his films (exile, immigration, oppression, gender, sexuality, social ills and so forth) found in *Bab el-Oued City* is one of the ways in which the director’s distant relationship with Algeria may be maintained. However, even a lighthearted comedy such as Allouache’s latest feature *Bab el-Web* (2005) still carries the tensions inherent between the here (France) and there (Algeria). In this latest feature, although not restrained, Allouache’s camera is again and perhaps increasingly distant from Bab el-Oued and its inhabitants.


\(^{139}\) “La résistance, c’est peut être aussi de trouver un mètre de pellicule même au Pôle Nord. De cette histoire-là de l’Algérie, nous verrons un jour s’il y a eu des héros ou s’il y a eu des lâches” (in *El Watan*, 29 Dec. 1999).

Conclusion

Ma volonté est de réaliser des films populaires, accessibles au grand public et décrispés, j’aime l’humour et l’ironie, non pas gratuitement mais pour provoquer une réflexion. (Allouache in *Le Soir d’Algérie*, 12 Aug. 2000)

My wish is to make popular films that are accessible to the general public and easygoing in nature. I like humor and irony, not for the sake of it but to make people think.

Allouache’s position as a transnational and “exilic” filmmaker as well as his varied audiovisual corpus reveals the range of his political and intellectual interests. In particular, Algeria as a fragmented nation remains a central and abiding concern to Allouache. In his films, *Bab el-Oued City* included, the emphasis is geared primarily towards the populace from which Allouache has said he draws his inspiration. Toward that end, the director felt it necessary to create a filmic narrative whose aspiration is to help the viewers (in particular Algerian viewers) remember what led to in the blood shedding of the 1990s.

In shedding light on the unique difficulties surrounding the making of *Bab el-Oued City*, and in discussing aspects of the end result (see the section above on cinematic style), I have suggested—albeit not definitively—that the film, while being the inspiration of one author, has been both esthetically and logistically censored and crafted by the underlying authoritative presence of multiple, external, yet non-negligible authors: the Islamists. Indeed, the interruption of the narrative’s coherence and continuity by intermittent static shots of roofs overlooking the Mediterranean is evidence of such indirect yet decisive authorial input from the Islamists’ part. Having said as recently as 2004 that: “Le tournage dans les quartiers populaires, ce n’est pas évident…”[141] [Filming in popular neighborhoods is not simple...] Allouache’s ties to his homeland have been perhaps more seriously severed than the director had initially hoped.

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Bab el-Oued City is nevertheless an integral part of a “cinéma de l’urgence,” but whose particularities (both logistical and aesthetic) or “accent” bears the marks of Allouache’s deterritorialized status. Thus, and unlike Bachir-Chouikh’s Rachida or Chouikh’s The Ark of the Desert, Bab el-Oued City best fits within the rubric of “accented” cinema that is first a cinema of “displacement.” Although Naficy notes that this particular cinema is not as “polemical” as Third Cinema, Bab el-Oued City is as we have seen throughout, political in that it “stands opposed to authoritarianism and oppression” (Naficy 2001:30).

Indeed, the film’s depiction of latent violence exerted by the Islamists is an example of such opposition. Moreover, the socially divisive elements in the film are numerous such as the youth’s social and economic hardships, women’s oppression and confinement in secluded spaces (such as windows and rooftops that offer little opening to the outside world), the rising tension felt throughout between moderate and radical Muslims, the divide between those who stay and those who leave, and so forth. In addition, at the film’s outset, Bab el-Oued is cinematically rendered as a seemingly peaceful environment; by its end, this same environment is left to its doomed fate at the hands of the Islamists. As a result, the microcosmic national space of Bab el-Oued is open to fractures and becomes a site of aggravating tensions where being Algerian and living peacefully among Algerians is no longer guaranteed by the state. In brief, Allouache’s cinematic rendition thus re-configuration of the nation is one scarred by divisions and fragmentation not only among Algerians but also among two competing ideological discourses, of which one (that of the state) is unforgivably absent.

As a final note, it is important to remember that even though the presence of the Islamists led to serious setbacks in making the film and resulted in fragmentation at the visual narrative level, Bab el-Oued City is nevertheless a considerable addition to the corpus of contemporary Algerian-directed films. While Allouache’s overall political engagement remains ambivalent when it comes to addressing certain aspects of this particular feature, his commitment and bravery at the time of filming is exemplary and showcases a definite willingness to bridge his national attachment to the motherland with his professional engagements within his host country.
Pour la première fois, les Algériens se retrouvaient autour d’un film qui leur appartenait, qui racontait leurs problèmes. Les femmes qui n’avaient jamais vu un film en 35 mm sont entrées, les vieilles, les enfants, des familles entières […] Les vieilles femmes devant les salles vendaient des places au marché noir. C’était quand même assez extraordinaire, ce qui s’est passé. Eh bien ça, c’est l’œuvre d’une femme… ! Au-delà d’un certain stade, les gens sont obligés d’accepter. (Mohammed Chouikh, husband and filmmaker)\textsuperscript{142}

For the first time, Algerians could get together around a film that belonged to them, one that told of their problems. Women who had never seen a 35mm went in, old women, children, entire families […] Elderly women standing in front of the theaters were selling tickets on the black market. And this was for the work of a woman… ! After a while, people have to accept this.\textsuperscript{143}

This chapter considers Yamina Bachir Choui kh’s cinematic approach to terrorism in her widely acclaimed first full-length feature film \textit{Rachida} (2002),\textsuperscript{144} and particularly violence committed against Algerian women. Having lost a brother to extremist violence, Bachir Chouikh undertook the making of a personal film in which the realms of fiction and reality would merge with the experiences of the broad mass of Algerians, especially those who had been directly or indirectly affected by the bloody events of the 1990s. Inspired by a true story, the film probes the intolerant climate of the Algerian crisis whose ripples created by one single bullet shot through a young woman’s lower abdomen reach far beyond Algeria’s borders. At the same time, \textit{Rachida} raises key questions surrounding not only the position of Algerian women within Algeria’s national space, but also questions surrounding

\textsuperscript{142} \textit{Le soir d’Algérie} (Jan. 30, 2003) Interview conducted by Isabelle Kersimon for \textit{CineMovies}, 11.
\textsuperscript{143} All translations from the French are my own.
\textsuperscript{144} The film’s eponymous title refers to the main character ‘Rachida’ thus in this case study, the name in italics refers to the film whereas ‘Rachida’ in its unitalicized form is used to refer to the main character.
physical violations in a Islamic-based culture in which the young and virgin female body is intended to remain unseen, un-discussed and untouched until legally promised away.

Heir to the social and poetic neo-realist cinematic traditions of filmmakers such as Mohamed Lakhdar Hamina, Ahmed Rachedi, Okacha Touita and Mohamed Chouikh,145 Yamina Bachir Chouikh’s first feature distinguishes itself through its minimum use of stylistic effects and a rather simple storyline that branches out into plural narratives intended to spur fraternal bonding emotion and political awareness rather than sensationalistic visual impression. As already mentioned, the previous works of Algerian filmmakers’ have often shown marked concerns surrounding questions directly or indirectly spurred by the nation, and Bachir Chouikh’s first feature (in varying degrees), is no different. With its concentration on the theme of injustice and its use of symbolism, the narratives in the film draw different social portraits whose tragedies or asocial behaviors fall well within some of the tenets of the Italian neo-realist tradition of which the first generation of Algerian filmmakers were so fond. According to Hayward, this particular tradition sought to “focus on its own nature,” “confront audiences with their own reality,” and “project a slice of life,” with a focus on “social reality” (203).

At the same time, the combination of Bachir Chouikh’s cinematic depiction of women, the film’s thematic framework (terror, violence and tradition), and the challenges faced by the rare Algerian women who become filmmakers define a cinema clearly delineated by national and gender-based preoccupations. At the narrative level, this results in the making of a counter-cinema or an oppositional cinema, one that counter-narrates Algeria’s patriarchal-led nation. In addition, because the filmic narrative seeks to render on screen the consequences of a nameless, violent social and political reality from which the state is—in the film—conspicuously absent, the film embodies some of the key characteristics of Third Cinema; one which seeks to provoke a reaction and an open dialogue with a specific and willing public: that of post-colonial Algeria. Moreover, some of the logistical aspects of the film such as the use of non-actors who mostly played themselves, the shooting of most scenes at various outside locations and the prominent use of a handheld camera, further help in defining this feature as part of Third Cinema. Conversely, Bachir Chouikh’s desire to cinematically narrate both terror geared towards all people (men,

145 Among many other filmmakers who started their craft shortly before and after the Liberation in 1962.
children, elders) and specific forms of violence inflicted upon women makes for a transnational cinema in that it highlights—if not the universal character of terrorism—at least its non-discriminatory nature.

Several routes of inquiry are thus made possible thanks to the multi-thematic dimension of Bachir Chouikh’s film. Questions of gender and its subsequent relationship to the state—for example—may be divided into two discursive spaces: the first being a critique of the nation (and effectively its absence in the film), and the second focusing on the place of women within that same nation. However, this case study is not intended to propose a solely feminist-oriented reading of the film, rather the different insights from various perspectives are intended to elucidate further questions surrounding the making of such cinema. The first part of this chapter will then broadly sketch the current social and political framework in which (or against which) Algerian women, particularly working women, attempt to evolve as individual citizens, whether they are wives, mothers, divorced, single or widowed. The Hassi Messaoud case explored in this chapter will highlight the ways in which nation-states that privilege religious-based tradition and practices deriving from old customs render the working woman’s position (here, Algerian women) not only precarious but continuously challenged by the lack of full state support, particularly in the legal domain. This approach will serve to help us better understand Bachir Chouikh’s overall filmic narrative and therefore her intent behind the film.

In the second part of this chapter, I turn to the film itself and explore key themes and symbols, as well as Bachir Chouikh’s cinematic style, and questions of critical reception and audience. We will see how these considerations—based on various readings and personal insight—position this particular cinema as a postcolonial Third Cinema with a transnational dimension both at the logistical and at the thematic levels.

**Algerian women in Algeria: an overview**

*The destruction of colonization is the birth of the new woman.* Frantz Fanon

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While the birth of Algerian cinema chronologically coincided with the rise and building of a new autonomous nation, the steps which would have ensured that the role and contribution of women to society were encouraged and protected in both the public and private spheres continued to remain minimal. In addition, these steps were and continue to be impeded by government-led measures, and the weight of religious-based customs and practices, as framed by the “Shari’a” (Islamic law). In other words, the national emancipatory movements for autonomy in Algeria did not coincide with the desire of Algerian women to be given full access to citizenship, an area which to this day continues to remain a site of struggle. While the role of women in the Algerian National Liberation is undeniable, the Algerian nation is still incontestably premised on well-defined gender identities that defy what we understand as “democratic citizenship.” A citizenship which according to Pnina Werbner and Nira Yuval Davis in *Women, Citizenship and Difference (Postcolonial Encounters)*, “compounds and confounds contradictory tendencies: of universalism and particularism, freedom and order, individual and collective responsibilities, identity and difference, nation and individual” making this same citizenship “inherently unstable…” (1-2). These tensions are particularly problematic in Algeria, a relatively young nation-state seeking to balance economic and other changes brought about by modernity while simultaneously attempting to maintain a seemingly homogenous national identity and culture well anchored within the parameters of religious-based traditions and customs. There is a substantial body of feminist scholarship which addresses specific questions concerning women and their position within a given nation-state all of which is illuminating the challenges inherent to national discourses. However, in the analysis that follows, I will only address some of the most pertinent and actual questions surrounding women’s place and role in Algeria.

March 8, 1965 (three years following Algerian Independence) marked the beginning

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147 The word means literally “the path to be followed”. Islamic law—its framework—is based on five different sources, two of which are divine while three are human-based. The two primary sources are the ethical principles found in the Qu’ran and the “sunna” (meaning tradition) derived from the various teachings, practices and behavior of the Prophet Muhammad. The three other sources, namely the “ijtihad” (juristic reasoning), “qiyas” (analogy) and “ijmaa” (concensus) concern various levels of jurisprudence which are dealt with by muftis, jurists and Muslim scholars. For an accessible reading of Islamic law, see *Fundamentals of Islamic Jurisprudence* (1979) by Zaki Edin Shaban.

of a long and tortuous journey undertaken by Algerian women. Hundreds of women—known
for the most part as “moudjahidates” (revolutionary fighters)—who had actively participated
in the fight for Liberation voiced their outcry at their subordinate status in terms of civic
rights, and demanded to be granted full citizenship. Sixteen years later in 1981, a series of
rallies led and organized by women gathered thousands of signatures in an attempt to prevent
the implementation of the much-debated and contested “Code de la Famille” [Family Code]
often referred to in many women’s circles as the “code de l’infamie” [infamous code]. This
code is also appropriately referred to by Cheriet as a “code of conduct” (96).

Implemented in 1984 by the Popular National Assembly (APN) under the presidency
of Rabah Bitat, the Family Code is a legal framework that governs all matters pertaining to
family affairs and relationships. The Code firmly positions the Algerian woman as a sub-
citizen (or minor) by legally depriving her of basic rights, thereby leaving key aspects of her
civic, social and domestic affairs in the hands of a male legal guardian. The marginalization
and subordination imposed on Algerian women by the Family Code appeared to many to be
in contradiction with Article 12 of Algeria’s first Constitution (1963), and Article 29 of the
1996 Constitution both of which acknowledge equality among men and women while also
making Islam the official State religion. Among the rights denied to women are:

1) the right to divorce (unless the woman pays for it);
2) the right to remarry a non-Muslim should she wish to do so—a right afforded to
   Algerian men;
3) the right to share custody of her children (if any);
4) the right to have continued use of and access to the marital home;
5) the right to gain full inheritance of her husband’s estate in case of death;
6) the right to travel abroad without a male chaperone (1980-1).

149 Article 29 of Chapter 4 of the 1996 Algerian Constitution: Of Rights and Liberties: Les citoyens sont égaux
devant la loi, sans que puisse prévaloir aucune discrimination pour cause de naissance, de race, de sexe,
d'opinion ou de toute autre condition ou circonstance personnelle ou sociale. [All citizens are equal before the
law and should not be discrimated on the basis of birth, race, sex, opinion or any other personal and social
condition or circumstance.]
http://www.elmouradia.dz/francais/symbole/textes/constitutions/constitution1996.htm
150 On March 8, 1985 (which marked International Women’s Day), thousands of petitioners succeeded in
getting this restriction removed.
The patriarchal practices enshrined in the Family Code make Algerian women’s participation in civic and social life a constant shifting battle. These practices are also regarded by many as contradictory to Articles 31 and 32 of the 1996 Algerian Constitution which protect fundamental liberties and rights for both Algerian men and women and ensure that these are not being violated. Since 2005, and following a number of requests made to President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, some of the Family Code stipulations have been amended. These changes however have yet to be fully and legally reinforced. One of the few changes which has been made concerns for instance the legal age to marry which has been set at 19 years and now requires mutual consent. Men who wish to marry several wives are prohibited from marrying siblings and must show proof that they will provide all wives with decent lodging accommodations. One of the most important changes made to the Family Code, (and one which is considered to be a major victory for Algerian women’s associations both in France and Algeria) is that of joint custody now allocated to both parents in case of separation. However, in spite of these partial changes, the claim of Algerian women to full citizenship remains an ongoing uphill battle. Multiple crises surrounding the status of single or divorced women along with questions of housing and children born out of wedlock are consistently brought forward by human rights organizations.

The shortcomings inherent in the Algerian legal system coupled with its lack of reliability in adequately protecting those most vulnerable (in both social and physical terms) does little to prevent the aggression and violence routinely committed against both women and children. Follow-ups on filed complaints, law reinforcement measures, mandatory court appearances, sentences and punishment (if any), are all at the discretion of a heavily bureaucratic system essentially run by a male-dominated administrative body. In addition to domestic violence, the 1990s – particularly following the 1992 cancellation of the second round of parliamentary elections at

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151 Between 1988 and 1991, such associations were formed in an attempt to not only denounce the discriminatory, undemocratic nature of the Family Code but to demand its withdrawal altogether. In France alone there were 24 Algerian women-led associations created to protect women’s rights in Algeria and in France (Of note, Algerian women residing in France but without French citizenship are subject to the Algerian legal system). Active women’s associations based in Algeria are the ASFAD (Association de solidarité avec les femmes algériennes démocrates), the AFEPEC (Association Féminine pour l’Epanouissement de la Personne et l’Exercice de la Citoyenneté), the SOS Femmes en détresse, the association Rachda, among others. Rallying in the streets, petitioning and calling out for international organizations’ help are the most common methods used by these women’s associations to address the Head of State.

152 To this effect, the UN Human Rights website features various reports concerning Algerian women’s status and the Family Code.
the instigation of the Algerian army—saw a sharp surge of random acts of terrorist violence (such as rape and abductions) committed against women. To this effect, Cathie Lloyd notes that unveiled, self-sufficient and salaried women freely circulating in public places were a specifically favored target (68). An exemplary case of violence committed against women is that of Hassi Messaoud to which I now turn.

**Hassi Messaoud**

*I’m in exile in my own country* - Rachida

On the night of July 13, 2001, thirty-eight women—some of them mothers—working in Hassi Messaoud and living alone in a nearby shantytown neighborhood by the name of El Haicha were tortured, beaten, gang-raped, sodomized and mutilated with knives by a large group of young, mostly jobless, fanatically-enraged males whose motivations were fueled by the fervent call of their neighborhood imam for moral “purity.” Some of these women were also found buried alive. Based on witness accounts, the perpetrators rhythmically shouted Allah’s name while carrying out their “purifying” mission. Although all surviving thirty-eight victims had initially filed a complaint, only three of them were brave enough to continue their battle and face seven of their aggressors, for the first time, at the Biskra court of justice on December 15, 2004. Most of the victims—if not all—had been unjustifiably labeled by some of the conservative Algerian press and community members as prostitutes. In addition, many of them had been persistently dissuaded in their attempts to seek justice by the perpetrators’ families themselves. According to concerned women’s associations, verbal pressure, monetary bribes and/or direct threats were continuously exerted on the victims. In addition, the Algerian authorities chose to minimize the victims’ filed complaints by making their way into the administrative legal system, if not entirely impossible, extremely challenging from an administrative standpoint. Based on this example, it is fair to say that until this lack of legitimacy within Algeria’s national space is overcome (i.e. full access to basic democratic rights as clearly outlined by the Algerian constitution), women’s

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153 Arabic word to designate the teacher and leader of the Muslim prayer. Over 90% of the Algerian population is Sunni.

154 Among them, Association pour l’émancipation de la femme, Rassemblement des femmes démocrates, SOS Femmes détresse and Association Vie.
attempts in seeking fair treatment of justice will—in most cases—prove to be painfully
challenging. In spite of Articles 34 and 35 of the 1996 Algerian Constitution which strictly
prohibit physical violations, and Article 31, which ostensibly ensures that state institutions
strive to remove all obstacles to individuals’ well being and liberty, it took three years and a
supportive network of women’s associations\textsuperscript{155} to overcome bureaucratic obstacles and bring
the Hassi Messaoud victims’ case to the Biskra court of justice. It took another year to come
to a finalized verdict. The perpetrators of the crime were condemned to varying sentences
ranging from 3 to 20 years. A few were inexplicably acquitted.\textsuperscript{156} What remains unshakable
in this case is that the victims of Hassi Messaoud had been openly condemned and
irreversibly ‘punished’ by their surrounding community for leading an independent life (i.e.
providing and caring for themselves) and for financially supporting their respective family
thanks to their hard-earned wages. As pointed out by Cherifati-Merabtine, paid employment
in the case of Algerian women “encourages processes of individualization or financial
autonomy which are associated with decision-making in the private sphere”\textsuperscript{157} (Cherifati-
Merabtine qtd in Lloyd, 2005: 73). Thus, the women of Hassi Messaoud constituted a threat
to the stabilizing order of some very specific gender-based social identities.

\textbf{Of spaces and borders}

It is important to understand that Algerian social and spatial spaces are customarily
divided between that of men (who typically occupy the outside public spheres) and that of
women (who mostly occupy the inside spheres). As a result, for Algerian women, to work
implies that they will inevitably occupy a part of the public sphere. In this way, to work is
synonymous with \textit{transgressing} borders.\textsuperscript{158} In a United Nations Press Release dated Feb. 1,

\textsuperscript{155} See footnote 13.
\textsuperscript{156} A full account of the legal steps taken to treat this legal case is available at:
http://www.imednet.it/ActionsPositivesMaghreb/Htm/Femmes\%20viol\%C3\%A9es\%20Hassi\%20Messaoud.pdf
\textsuperscript{157} “Femmes travailleuses: une identite dans la tourmente,” (1996) in N. Benghabrit-Remaoun (ed.), \textit{Actes de
\textsuperscript{158} For an insightful study of women’s lives and status in Muslim societies, see the works of Moroccan
sociologist Fatema Mernissi such as \textit{Beyond The Veil} (1975), which explores relationships between men and
women relationships, and \textit{The Veil and The Male Elite: a Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam}
(1988). For a study concerning specific representations of women in the Qu’ran, see that of Barbara Freyer
Stowasser, \textit{Women in the Qur’an, Traditions, and Interpretation} (1996). Another noteworthy study pertaining
specifically to Algerian women is that of Marnia Lazreg, \textit{The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in
Question} (1994).
2007, Professor Yakin Ertuk –Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Human Rights Council on Violence against Women—reported from her recent trip to Algeria (Jan. 21-31, 2007) that, although Algerian women had successfully “achieved impressive levels of representation in key areas of the public sector, especially among judges, medical doctors and teachers,” they remain “underrepresented among decision-makers in the private sector, the administration and politics” (1). In addition, and compounded by the lack of adequate State support, women in Algeria are most susceptible to housing crisis, poverty, abuse, domestic violence, and sexual harassment in the workplace. The bloody events contributed further to the helplessness of thousands of female victims who have found that—in spite of the National Charter on Peace and Reconciliation\textsuperscript{159} which exempts perpetrators of crimes such as collective massacres, bombings and rapes from amnesty—they have yet to achieve their right to seek justice in a society where—as Rapporteur Yakin Ertuk pointed out—the “lack of a sufficient institutional response and support for victims of violence silence the victims and perpetuate the violence” (1).

Despite well-documented but nonetheless small advances in government-led employment and education initiatives, Algerian women in pursuit of economic stability and equitable treatment, both at home and in the workplace, have yet to be rightfully acknowledged as fully-fledged citizens in their own society. Yet, despite seemingly insurmountable setbacks, many Algerian women persevere in their endeavors and continue to seek out representation in all arenas (political, social, etc.) pertaining to Algerian life. Besides the collective efforts notable within and among women-led associations in Algeria, numerous others have flourished in the domain of liberal arts, and have found ways to seek representation by carving out a space for themselves through artistic media. Film is, of course, one of these media, and it is through film that an increasingly wider glimpse of Algerian women (both in front of and behind the camera) is made available for everyone to see, both within and outside Algeria’s borders.

**Women filmmakers: (re-) telling the untold**

Few Algerian women have ventured into the field of cinema, but those who have are strongly politically engaged with, and committed to, their typically gender-based subject

\textsuperscript{159} Voted in 2005 by way of public referendum.
matter and craft. Given their interest in re-writing history (past and/or present), and in rendering witness accounts pertaining directly or not to gender issues, these filmmakers are best defined as Third-Worldist feminist filmmakers who—in various and at times innovative ways—deliver a form of ‘cinematic counter-telling’ of patriarchal and in some cases western discourses. In searching into ‘herstories’ (to reprise Shohat’s term), and finding new ways of telling them while—as Shohat puts it—“subverting a particular notion of "narrative pleasure" based on the ‘male gaze’,” they “conduct a struggle on two fronts, at once aesthetic and political, synthesizing revisionist historiography with formal innovation” (7).  

Conversely, these filmmakers are in a continuous and evolving process of carving out their own space within Algeria’s public/outside spheres that are typically male-dominated and managed. They are able to do so thanks to a medium (here, film) that not only mostly takes much of its material from various public spaces but is also located within various public spheres such as television and theater, both inside and outside Algeria. At the same time, women Algerian filmmakers are able to progressively inscribe a space—albeit small—for themselves in an audiovisual field which is mostly male-dominated. Generally speaking, Algerian women wishing to break into the audiovisual sector do so by taking up jobs as editors, make-up artists or script writers (usually in a collaborative capacity) and primarily in television. Often, as revealed by Bachir Chouikh herself, these positions also involve cleaning and putting away equipment. Other filmmakers such as Djebar and Koudil venture head first in the field and start filming with the support of a technically trained staff. 

It was not until 1978, namely 16 years after the 1962 Liberation, that Assia Djebar—a renowned novelist and now a member of the French Academy—manifested a desire to work on women’s memory which in many ways paved the way for Algerian women filmmakers. It is worth noting here that documentary filmmaking is predominantly the preferred genre among Algerian women filmmakers. The need to tell untold stories that take place both within and outside Algeria is manifest. One can sense a hint of urgency in a statement Yamina Bachir Chouikh made to Le jeune indépendent newspaper: « Par devoir de

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160 Although available in print, I am—in this case study—using the online version of Ella Shohat essay: “Framing Post-Third-Worldist Culture: Gender and Nation in Middle Eastern and North African Film and Video” (1997). When quoting parts of this article, the number will be that of the relevant online paragraph and not that of the page. Shohat’s essay is available at: http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/Jouvert/v1i1/shohat.htm

161 Her first documentary was La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua (1977) which obtained the Prix de la critique in 1979, in Venice. In 1982, she made her second and last documentary to date, La Zerda ou les chants de l’oubli.
mémoire ou par douleur, je voulais sceller sur la pellicule le désarroi des citoyens ordinaires, considérés jusque-là comme statistiques dans les bilans des atrocités. » (Bachir Chouikh : 2003) [For memory’s sake or because of pain, I wanted to seal on film the distress of ordinary citizens who, until now, have been treated as statistics in the reports on atrocities committed against them.] Similarly, documentary works by Houria Saihi (Tahia el Djazair; a documentary on women’s predicaments in Algeria), Nacima Abderrahmane (Le défi palestinien, The Palestinian challenge), and Nadia Cherabi (Fatma El Hawata; Fatma El Amarya; two short pieces on the struggle of two different Algerian women) each aims to show and tell of women’s social and political positioning both in and outside Algeria.

Other Algerian women filmmakers include Hafsa Zinai Koudil (also a writer) best known for her film Le démon au féminin (1994), which is based on the true story of a woman whose refusal to wear the veil leads her husband to call for the islamists’ help. The torture endured by the woman left her disabled for life and the islamists whose collective fate was in the hands of one of the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) leaders’ attorneys were condemned to absurdly light sentences. As later revealed, the making of this film involved many challenges. In an interview conducted by Dominique Widemann for the French newspaper L’humanité, Koudil explains that it not only took 8 months to make the film but that it was made in a climate of “peur continuelle” [continuous fear] (1995) but she persevered and completed her film regardless of the threats. In her own words: “Une fois que l’on a identifié un danger aussi mortel, il est impossible de reculer. On connaît la nature violente et antidémocratique des intégristes […] Je ne regrette rien” (1995). [Once such a deadly danger has been identified, it becomes impossible to back down. The violent and antidemocratic nature of the extremists is well known. I do not regret anything.] One must bear in mind that in those states where the official religion is Islam, women’s critique or discourse towards oppression are, as pointed out by Kandiyoti, geared towards two directions: “either denying that Islamic practices are necessarily oppressive or asserting that

162 No. 1423, Jan. 6, 2003. Interview conducted by M. Tchoubane
163 Of note, several women in the show business field (comedians, singers, writers) have felt threatened by the terrorist climate of the 1990s and have sought refuge in France and/or Tunisia. Among them, well-known performers in Algeria such as Nabila Diahnine, Chaba Zahouania, Chaba Fadela, Malika Domrane, Massa Bouchafa. Algerian female comedians are welcome at the AIDA (Association internationale de défense des artistes victimes de la répression dans le monde). This association was established by Ariane Mnouchkine.
164 Other film documentaries by Hafsa Zinai Koudil include: La Fin d’un rêve (1984), Le Pari perdu (1986), Le Papillon ne volera plus (1990), Le Passé décomposé (1993), and Sans voix (1997).
oppressive practices are not necessarily Islamic” (380). Koudil’s defiance ultimately led her to seek exile in Tunisia and France where—in spite of the dangers a return to Algeria would imply—she was only granted short-term visas.  

Although she moved to France in 1975, Djamila Sahraoui –born in Algeria in 1950—has achieved a few milestones in the realm of cinematography, and most of her works are filmed in Algeria. Particularly interested in chronicling the bloody events and its continuing impact on the Algerian people, Sahraoui is best known for her documentary La Moitié du ciel d’Allah [Half of Allah’s Sky] (1995) which won 8 prizes including that of the Villa Médicis Hors les Murs in 1997. Her latest work and first feature film Barakat! [Enough!] (2006) draws attention to the 1990s when women were left at the mercy of unpredictable violence in Algeria. Barakat! tells the story of a woman doctor (Amel) who embarks on a journey along with her friend and nurse (Khadidja) to find her husband who has unexpectedly disappeared.

Other Algerian women filmmakers born in France have followed in Assia Djebar’s footsteps, such as Rachida Krim, Fejria Deliba, Malika Tenfiche, Zaida Ghorab-Volta and the very prolific Yamina Benguigui who is internationally known for her documentary works on Algerian immigrants in France.

*How can I be quiet when there is so much suffering! … I want to shout out in anger!* – Rachida

The isolation of Algerian women filmmakers within their field highlights the precarious practice of their craft and the considerable difficulties in obtaining finances. Despite the tragic events, which claimed the lives of thousands, women filmmakers’ desire to tell has not been tamed. In a candid interview for the French newspaper *Le Monde*, Yamina Bachir Chouikh made the following statements:

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165 Koudil’s current residence status is unknown.
166 Other noteworthy documentaries by Sahraoui are: *Algérie, la vie quand même* (1998) and *Algérie, la vie toujours* (2001). She is also the author of two short documentaries:
J’avais envie de parler d’autres violences que celle du terrorisme. La violence de la société envers les femmes divorcées. Le problème du couple (quand le couple est jeune, chez nous, souvent il se refuse la tendresse). Le fait qu’il y a des filles qui ne choisissent pas leur mari. Le pouvoir des ragôts –c’est pourquoi j’ai filmé la scène du bain, ou Rachida refuse d’aller, de peur qu’on ne prenne la cicatrice de sa blessure pour celle d’une césarienne, elle qui n’est pas mariée.  

I wanted to talk of other forms of violence other than that of terrorism. The societal violence against divorced women. The couple issue (a young couple in Algeria, often doesn’t give in to tenderness). The fact there are girls who do not choose their husband. The power of gossip –this is why I shot the bath scene where Rachida, who is not married, refuses to go for fear that her gunshot scar might be mistaken for that of a caesarean.

Chouikh adds in Cahiers du Cinéma that: “On ne sait pas parler. On ne sait pas se regarder. C’est notre faute, c’est ce qui a fait que d’autres nous ont racontés à notre place” (Bachir Chouikh 2003: 28-9). [We do not know how to talk. We do not know how to look at ourselves. It is our fault and it is why others have spoken in our place.] This last statement regarding the appropriation of Algerian affairs, and particularly matters pertaining to the country’s decade-long crisis has been a recurrent theme in many French and Algerian press articles.

The appropriation of the Algerian voice is one topic that is very close to Bachir Chouikh’s heart. Consider the following statements: “…c’est un drame sur lequel il n’y a pas eu d’images. Les gens ont été pris en otage par l’information, par les médias, par les ‘spécialistes’ de la question algérienne” (Chouikh 2003: 28). […it is a drama about which there have been no images. People have been held hostage by the news, the media and the ‘specialists’ on the Algerian question] And again :“Les médias algériens ne montraient pas

168 Bachir Chouikh has publicly condemned: 1) Algerians intellectuals living in France, 2) experts on the Algerian question, 3) individuals –political or not—who saw in the bloody events an opportunity to occupy part of an increasingly transnational thus wider mediatic space.
imagine de la population…des gens parlaient à leur place, des experts européens ou des Algériens. L’État algérien ne savait pas communiquer, donner la parole aux gens” (28). [The Algerian media were not showing images of the general population…others were speaking on their behalf, European or Algerian experts. The Algerian State did not know how to communicate or give the people the right to speak]

At the same time, the profession Bachir Chouikh has chosen inevitably places her among those who—like it or not—appropriate, translate then proceed to represent on screen. It is important nevertheless to remember that the film is a fictional narrative inspired by a specific social reality in Algeria, but is—to reprise Shohat and Stam’s words in their discussion of representation of realism—a “mediated version of an already textualized and ‘discursivized’ socioideological world” (180). Citing Bakhtin for whom art is but “a historically situated ‘utterance’” meaning a: “complex of signs addressed by one socially constituted subject or subjects to other socially constituted subjects, all of whom are deeply immersed in historical circumstance and social contingency” (180), Shohat and Stam argue that film is then to be viewed as a “specific orchestration of ideological discourses and communitarian perspectives” (80). In other words, it is “constructed.” Thus, in their discussion of representation, which involves “socially situated producers and receivers,” both writers view film as a “delegation of voice” and ask for whom films are constructed. Bachir Chouikh’s desire to denounce a certain social reality goes hand in hand with that of speaking out on behalf of Algerian women and victims of terrorism which brings forth a key question within the field of postcolonial studies elucidated in Spivak’s seminal essay “Can the subaltern speak?”

Born in Algeria in 1954, Yamina Bachir Chouikh studied films early in her life and entered the Algerian National Film Center in 1973. Her thirty-year long career in cinema has been dedicated to editing and script writing on numerous documentaries and feature films for notable Algerian filmmakers such as Abdelkader Lacida, Noureddine Mefti, Ahmed Rachedi, Okacha Touita and her husband, Mohamed Chouikh for whom she has done superb editing work. Her latest work Louisa Sid Ammi (2003) is a documentary about a female photographer who takes considerable risks to remain an independent professional reporter in Algeria. However, it is the unexpected international success of Bachir Chouikh’s first full-length feature Rachida that propelled this unknown first-time woman filmmaker to the
forefront of the festival scene all around the world, and gained her sustained attention from the media. Filmed entirely in Arabic and with its dramatic final momentum, as well as its underlying theme of ‘overcoming terror and fear,’ Bachir Chouikh’s film combines a simplistic yet artistically appealing approach, and unmistakably carries universal appeal.

**Rachida: the film**

**The making of Rachida**

Nominated for seven awards and winning six of them,\(^{169}\) of all Algerian-directed features in recent years, *Rachida* has succeeded in attracting a wide international exposure and has—unlike most Algerian-directed features—benefited from multiple crossover audiences. Access to the international scene facilitated the marketing of the film which is now available to purchase via Film Movement (an online club which specializes in independent and foreign films). Written in 1996 by Yamina Bachir Chouikh herself and filmed over a span of six years due to financial and other infrastructure-related hardships, *Rachida* is not only the work of an auteur but it is also the first Algerian-directed feature that openly sought to give a face to the indescribable terror that has plagued Algeria throughout the 1990s. Nevertheless, it must be noted that although she does deal with terrorism, Bachir Chouikh’s interest does not edge on voyeurism, but rather focuses on the consequences engendered by unpredictable attacks on ordinary citizens.

Co-produced by three different companies\(^{170}\) and other sources in Algeria,\(^{171}\) Bachir Chouikh worked with a limited budget and restricted means. Wearing multiple hats, she recruited non-actors (who mostly played themselves), did her own editing, secured

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\(^{169}\) *Amiens International Film Festival*, 2002: Audience award and Golden unicorn. *London Film Festival*, 2002: Satyajit Ray Award. *Marrakech International Film Festival*, 2002: Cinema of the South Award. *Mexico City International Contemporary Film Festival*, 2004: La Pieza. *Namur International Film Festival of French-Speaking Film*, 2002: Golden Bayard and Youth Jury Award - Special Mention. The film was also screened at the 55\(^{th}\) Annual Cannes Film Festival in a theater of 800 seats where it was nominated for the ‘Un Certain Regard’ award.

\(^{170}\) Ciel Production (Paris, France), Arte France Cinéma (Paris, France) and Ciné-Sud Promotion (Paris, France)

\(^{171}\) Per Bachir Chouikh’s words: “*Rachida* s’est donc fait sans un centime algérien, à part des sponsors et différentes aides amicales au sein des institutions. Ce système de débrouille est très algérien” (Chouikh 2003: 27). [Apart from various sponsors and help from within institutions, *Rachida* was made without a single Algerian penny. This way of getting by is very Algerian.]
distribution, funding, and camera equipment, and managed to attain considerable help from various Algerian public services. She has said in *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*, that: “Les pompiers m’ont proposé toutes leurs ambulances, j’ai eu des décors gratuits, les bus, le téléphérique, l’hôpital et le service de sécurité sur le tournage” (Bachir Chouikh 2003 : 27). [The firefighters offered the use of their ambulances; I had access to free sets, buses, a cable car, and the hospital and security services on the set.]

Such limited funding and equipment meant that every economic decision became an artistic one, such as the fabulous shooting sequence of and within the Casbah, the oldest district in Algiers located at the top of a high hill that surmounts the city. This scene was solely executed with a handheld camera and, to ensure that the crew would not be threatened in any way, the real script narrative was kept under wrap from the Casbah’s inhabitants. Such challenging and at times dangerous working conditions are reminiscent of those of “guerilla cinema,” a term coined by Solanas and Getinos. “Guerilla cinema” not only indicates that the film’s text is based on guerrilla warfare (a good example of such a text being the well-known feature *The Battle of Algiers* by Pontecorvo), it also denotes—as pointed out by Mike Wayne—“the conditions of production in which filmmaking was undertaken.” In other words, when the filmmakers work (as often the case in 1990s Algeria) “in conditions of political danger and state authoritarianism, when their work may be seized, censored or when they themselves might be imprisoned, the only way they can film is by using secrecy and subterfuge” (57). Although Bachir Chouikh and her crew were not threatened by the state itself, the cameras started rolling in 1996 when the political climate was still both unstable and unpredictable, and at times when shooting outside meant that safety issues were a major concern.

**Distribution and critical reception**

In France, *Rachida* played in a total of 6 theaters and was favorably received by the press. The review titles alone highlighted France’s readiness (or rather its cultural gatekeepers’ readiness) to welcome and support Bachir Chouikh’s film in their mediatic space. As such, *Les échos* announced: “Une femme dans la terreur” (Jan. 8, 2003) [A woman living

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172 Casbah is a term that designates any older quarters in the Maghrib.
in terror], *L’Express* displayed: “Pour l’honneur de l’Algérie” (Jan. 2, 2003) [For Algeria’s honor], *Le Figaro* wrote “Le terrorisme au quotidien” (Jan. 8, 2003) [Daily terrorism] while *L’Humanité* alluded to Mohamed Lakhdar Hamina’s iconic film *Chronicle of the Years of Amber* (1975) with the following title: “Les années de cendres” (May 23, 2002) [The years of ashes] and, another title one day later “Une Algérienne contre la culture de la haine” (May 24, 2002) [An Algerian woman against the culture of hate]. *Le Monde* also referred to M.L. Hamina’s award winning feature and titled its article: “Chronique féminine de l’Algérie ensanglantée” (Jan. 8, 2003) [Feminine chronicles of a bloodied Algeria] While some newspapers emphasized Algeria, others stressed that it was a film made by a woman, a rather significant fact given the rarity of Algerian women filmmakers from Algeria. Such an early filmic narrative about daily terror in Algeria was unexpected yet warmly received in France.

Having put together a special edition about Algerian films in 2003 to mark the Year of Algeria in France, Charles Tesson, the chief editor of *Cahiers du Cinéma* made the following statement about *Rachida*:

> C’est un film fort. Parce qu’il y a une tradition dans le cinéma arabe. Il est basé sur des allégories et de grandes paraboles où on n’ose pas dire les choses. On n’appelle pas un chat un chat mais on le signifie et on a besoin de décrypter les sous-entendus, les allusions… Ce que j’ai aimé là, c’est un film sur le terrorisme. C’est un film qui permet aux gens de voir une période qu’ils ont vécue. (Tesson 2003)\(^{173}\)

It is a strong film. There is a tradition in Arab cinema that is based on allegories and parables without daring to say things directly. Things are not normally said explicitly but are rather signified, and one needs to decipher the underlying meanings, the allusions… What I like in this film is that it is about terrorism. It is a film that enables people to see a time period they lived through.

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\(^{173}\) Statement made to the newspaper *Liberté* (Jan. 7, 2003)
Tesson brings to light some important points. Cinema in the Arab world is more or less strictly monitored and, in most countries with an audiovisual institutional framework in place, films’ topics must first be approved by a specific authority and/or committee in charge and armed with a set of specific restrictions (both at the legal and ethical level). Topics that are typically off limits are: religion, sex and politics (34). Having said this, a few Algerian filmmakers—in the days when audiovisual institutions were up and running—have managed to find ways to critique their current social and political atmosphere. *Omar Gatlato* (1976) by Merzak Allouache—a film I will turn to in Allouache’s case study—is a perfect example of such defiance. Others have resorted to the use of symbolism, and/or cryptic dialogues to make their point and reach out to audiences.

In *Rachida’s* case, it appears that the film’s content was uncensored by the Algerian state. In recent years, the state has shown apparent disinterest in all matters concerning the country’s audiovisual subject matters other than those projects made for Algerian television. In addition, the country’s audiovisual space lacks the regulatory systems that more developed nations have in place to, for example, prevent the showing of pirated videos in previously state owned theaters. This is not to say however that there exists no form of audiovisual censorship in Algeria. The fact that the film ‘industry’ has been brought to a halt in Algeria does not mean that filmmakers are free to screen narratives reflecting various aspects of *realpolitik* in Algeria. Information as to whether or not members of the state approved or disapproved of the film *Rachida* is not currently available. One can however safely assume that if—as clearly seen in the film—Bachir Chouikh was granted access to and the use of various public services (firefighters, hospital, helicopters, army trucks, etc.) then, at the logistical level, the Algerian state was made aware of the film’s making and subject matter. Moreover, and to the public eye, the state intervention to aid victims of terrorism in the film reinforces its position in the fight against terrorism hence perhaps its “approval” of *Rachida’s* subject matter. Put simply and its spite of a notable absence during the nightlong massacre final scene in the film, the state—in the battle of “good” versus “evil”—“appears” to be depicted favorably. In *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World*, Khatib points out that typically, films from the Arab world whose message is one of anti-fundamentalism do not encounter much governmental
prior to its distribution in Algerian theaters, *Rachida* had already been sent out to various festivals around the world including the Cannes Film Festival in 2002 which helped in drawing considerable media attention to it. When it was finally released in Algeria in 2003, the country had been through over a decade of hardship and held such wariness towards the state that we can safely assume—as Bachir Chouikh does—that the state did not want to interfere with the distribution of a film everyone had seen but the Algerian people.

**Audiences**

Distributed in three theaters in Algeria, the film was enthusiastically received by members of the public and prompted entire families to step out together to go to the movies. Competing against *Harry Potter*, which opened the same week at the start of the year 2003, *Rachida* managed to entice thousands to the theaters. The first week alone attracted 13,600 viewers (over 2000 viewers a day) against *Harry Potter*’s 10,400 viewers. As multiple accounts attest, audiences were able to ‘relate’ or ‘identify’ to the film, as there were viewers in need of having part of their own story told. Bachir Chouikh tells *Cahiers du Cinema* that:


People were touched by the subject. It talks to them and entire families came out to see the film, not just young people or casual viewers. This had not happened since *The Battle of Algiers* in 1965. It is the same phenomenon: people come to see their story, the first representation of the last ten years of

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their lives. Over ten years in fact, given that we have been living this violence since 1988.

Bachir Chouikh of course acknowledges the risks which the making of such a film involves, but views the emotion felt by the Algerian audiences as a definite success in getting her message across. To her, Rachida assertively debunks the long accepted and resigned idea that there are no longer cinema audiences in Algeria. She stated that: “Si on sait faire des films dans lesquels le public peut s’identifier, il y a un public, tout simplement…” [If we know how to make films with which the audiences can identify then there is an audience. It’s as simple as that…”] (ibid.).

Questions of cinematic identifications are highly complex areas of investigation and, as pointed out by Susan Hayward, such related studies have evolved over time in that they are no longer exclusively framed by psychoanalytical interpretations. Studies of spectatorship are now conducted for example in relation to intertextuality or even exhibition, which places emphasis on the viewer’s experience in relation to the location where the film is screened. Elements of class, gender, age, sexuality, ethnic background and so forth have also become essential components in viewer-reception studies, notably in the domain of television (348). Methodological approaches to viewers’ reception thus vary and may stress emphasis on different elements deemed essential in considering aspects of spectatorship. According to Staiger, for example, viewer reception studies should consider popular and cultural memory in addition to looking at ‘class practices’ and movie going patterns. Staiger stresses the importance of strengthening such analyses via the investigation of the “continual making and remaking of the interpretations and emotional significances through the lives of the individuals” (29). In other words, Staiger points to the importance of looking at a film’s reception over an extended period of time, something she has done in her book Interpreting films (1993) with the infamous feature The Birth of a Nation (1915). This historical-based approach according to Staiger allows further understanding on “how politics and culture interweave” (15).

Taking into account all possible variants (age, sex, class, etc.) involved in viewership studies and different interpretative frameworks may appear highly problematic when pertaining specifically to Algerian audiences or North African audiences for that matter. The
lack of appropriate and sufficient data concerning Algerian audiences whose patterns of movie attendance have been disrupted and whose demographics have changed in recent years makes it altogether challenging to provide an insightful cinematic identification analysis here. However, it is helpful to understand what cinematic identification involves and how it might be defined in terms that are somewhat ‘universally’ applicable. In her essay “A Denial of Difference: Theories of Cinematic Identification” (1990), Anne Friedberg defines cinematic identification as a process:

> which commands the subject to be displaced by an other; it is a procedure which refuses and recuperates the separation between self and other, and in this way replicates the very structure of patriarchy. Identification demands sameness, necessitates similarity, disallows difference. Identification is a process with its own ideology.” (36)

When it comes to Rachida, the emotional responses that the film prompted (based on various witness accounts) were incontestably the result of multiple processes of identification to the film. However, because the filmic narrative spoke was very much close to people’s hearts (as opposed to dry statistical reports published by the state and the press), these responses among audiences could easily be interpreted as a long overdue process of validation. Validation in that the grief caused by the bloody events was for once exteriorized and publicly enabled through a film around which diverse members of the Algerian public could gather and feel a sense of communion, even if temporarily. Third Cinema is typically meant to illicit such spectatorial reaction in that it highlights and interrogates problematic and specific crisis-related questions while addressing key issues such as that of gender, as is the case of the film discussed here.

Gradually taking form at the very end of the 1990s, the new decade during which the film Rachida came out emerged in a somewhat more peaceful political environment where the number of massacres significantly decreased, and when increasingly more Algerians were publicly outspoken about the tragic events which they had lived through. It is then no wonder that such a public outpouring of emotion around a filmic narrative such as that of Rachida

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175 In Psychoanalysis & Cinema (ed. E. Ann Kaplan)
manifested itself so visibly. Furthermore, in a country where the people are traditionally reserved, the film provided a way to safely channel—in a secure environment such as the movie theater—various forms of outcry, grief and vocal protest. Of course, one must take into account that each viewer ‘decodes,’ ‘constructs,’ and/or ‘deconstructs’ meaning differently. However, because the film related part of what is rightfully described as a national tragedy, it is safe to say that the film effectively enabled a collective reaction from Algerian movie-goers.

**Synopsis**

Rachida, pour moi, n’est pas une héroïne, c’est une fille ordinaire, une simple citoyenne. Elle n’est pas militante. Elle devient extraordinaire par le drame qui lui arrive […] Son personnage, ce n’est pas de la résistance militante, c’est de la résistance humaine. (Bachir Chouikh 2003: 27)\(^{176}\)

To me, Rachida is not a heroine. She is the girl next door, an ordinary citizen. She is not a militant. The tragedy she goes through makes her extraordinary […] Her character is not about militant resistance but about human resistance.

The opening segment of *Rachida* starts with a close-up shot on a pair of women’s hands opening a red lipstick tube. The camera moves up to lips on to which the lipstick is applied. The following close-up reveals a woman’s hand untwisting brown curly hair. The camera then placed behind the woman reveals a young, beautiful and uncovered face.

In spite of abrupt jump cuts intended to allow the development of other narratives in the movie, the film’s primary story unfolds in a linear fashion. The plot centers on Rachida, a twenty-something teacher who lives with her divorced mother in the Casbah of Algiers. Both lead seemingly quiet lives until one morning, when Rachida is forcefully halted on her way to work by a group of young men who demand that she takes a makeshift bomb to her school. Upon Rachida’s persistent refusal to obey and her failed attempt to get away,
Sofiane, one of the aggressors/terrorists who happens to be an ex pupil of hers, pulls out a gun and fires a shot in her lower abdomen leaving her bleeding to death on the ground. Rachida survives the attack and, with her mother’s help (Aicha) and that of the school superintendent (Yasmina), leaves Algiers to find refuge in a remote village. Once there however, mother and daughter find out that the villagers have been continuously terrorized by a group of young armed men who boldly come out and venture in the village in broad daylight.

It is in the village that a multiplicity of narratives takes place such as that of Khaled, a young teenager hopelessly in love with Hadjar, promised away to an older man. There is also Kalima, a little girl whose sole dream is to go to the moon and whose father –the owner of the one and only shop in the village—openly partakes (whether by choice or not) in terrorist activities. And then, there is Zohra, a victim of rape and a key character to whom I will return to below due to her emblematic position in the film.

In spite of her efforts to continue a somewhat normal life, Rachida, who has been transferred to the village school thanks to Yasmina’s help, finds it difficult to accept the country’s crisis and virulently condemns the state’s disregard of the Algerian youth. Her fears intensify when, during an evening wedding celebration in which the entire village happily participates, the group of terrorists proceeds to act. First gunshots are heard and are then followed by a long shot of the armed group walking down the village’s main street. People are killed, young women are kidnapped (among them, Hadjar, the bride to be), houses are ransacked, and in some cases burned. The following morning, when finally the sound of sirens and that of a helicopter can be heard in the distance, the camera pans throughout the village that has been left destroyed, deserted and grieving. During that long night of terror, Rachida who had been separated from her mother in a moment of panic, had remained hidden in thick bushes along with a baby she had found sitting alone in the street. Following a mass funeral and the beginning of a collective exodus, Rachida resolves to return to work and walks to school amidst the damages around her and despite her mother’s plea. The closing scene shows small children carrying their school bag and walking to school behind Rachida. Upon entering the destroyed classroom, Rachida turns to the board—close up shot—and writes in Arabic “Today’s lesson:” then turns around to look at the children before looking fixedly into the camera—no sounds, medium shot, fade-out.
Themes and cinematic style

At the beginning of this conflict, I lived through terrible moments of anxiety. After hatred, fear is the most terrible feeling a human being can experience. I was scared, and then one day, my anxiety left me. I woke up without it, but pain took its place. I felt powerless. I found it unfair that everything was a political or mediatic manipulation, that victims were mentioned only to serve this or that cause…People were trapped between the State and the terrorists. It seemed to me that the dead were being counted like business gains and losses. I think this is when I started writing.

The screening of terrorism

Although Bachir Chouikh started the film in the midst of the Algerian crisis in 1996, she did not seek to establish a specific authorship of the violence she had witnessed in Algeria. Instead, she chose to portray groups of armed young men whose looks may be said to defy a ‘standard’ and ‘stereotypical’ representation of the ‘terrorist.’ In Algeria, this image is customarily associated with that of Islamic fundamentalists who typically sport a

177 Le Monde (week of 8-14 Jan. 2003, no. 231)
beard and wear traditional clothing attire. However, acts of terrorism have been reportedly perpetrated by various-looking terrorist groups whose ideological motives and actions were more often than not left unspecified or undisclosed.

In *Rachida*, all groups adorn western clothing, are mostly clean-shaven, and possess somatic features that are in most cases undistinguishable from any westerner of European descent. Sofiane—the character who shoots Rachida—sports fashionable western clothing, has light brown hair and green eyes. Likewise, the terrorists who roam the village in broad daylight also adorn western clothing and are beardless (with the exception of one young man). It is important to note in passing that there is one short scene during which a covered female terrorist nevertheless briefly appears, but her features remain unseen making it difficult to determine the official gender of this enigmatic figure. “She” could be an abducted victim forced to partake in terrorist activities, a willing partner, or quite possibly a man disguised as a woman (a tactic well illustrated in *The Battle of Algiers*). I have not found any information pertaining to this nameless character, yet its presence in the film reinforces the complexity surrounding such representations of terrorists.

Bachir-Chouikh’s rendering of such persona on screen does not fall into a cinematic essentialism of the Arab terrorist as is often witnessed in Hollywood films. The male-composed groups represented in *Rachida* are nevertheless portrayed as the “Other” within Algeria itself. As pointed out by Lina Khatib, this “Other” is often seen as “an ‘enemy’ in a battle of good versus evil, us against them.” Khatib argues further that in Algerian and Egyptian films, representations of Islamic fundamentalism are “made to stand outside the imagined community, at the same time functioning to add to this community’s sense of belonging by being a common threat”(167). Bachir Chouikh’s cinematic representation of the terrorist is complex however, and apart from the first attack during which Rachida is asked to take a makeshift bomb to the school, the motives behind the terrorists’ horrific actions are never spelled out clearly nor are they justified. Four attacks take place explicitly in the narrative, three of which take place in broad daylight:

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178 While I am here making a comparison between the possible tactics used by terrorists in Algeria (in the film *the Battle of Algiers*), I am not necessarily implying that those groups fighting for the independence of Algeria were terrorists.

1) Rachida is a victim of aggression and is shot;
2) An older man is shot for daring to stand up to a group of terrorists and voice his protest against random violence inflicted upon the villagers;
3) During a makeshift barrage, innocent drivers are stopped and killed at random;
4) Finally, the nightlong massacre takes place during which terrorists spare no one.

It is important to note that Bachir Chouikh did not wish to explicitly film the massacres, stating in *Cahier du Cinéma* that:

…je ne voulais pas aller vers le voyeurisme […] Mais la fête est construite sur une autre violence, le mariage arrangé de la jeune fille. […] A aucun moment, je n’ai voulu jouer sur le sensationnel. C’est tellement terrible ce qu’on vit que ce n’était pas la peine d’ajouter une surdose de violence (29).

…I did not want to lean towards voyeurism […] However the wedding celebration is based on another kind of violence, that of the young girl’s arranged marriage […] At no point did I want to rely on sensationalism. What we are going through is so terrible that there was no need to add an overdose of violence.

Bachir Chouikh instead favored the use of different sounds (both technologically-induced and human), dark lights and, at specific times, the use of a single hand-held camera. As she told *Le Monde*: “Et je me disais que, sans montrer forcément l’état de siège et la terreur, je pouvais les suggérer par des bruits: les ambulances, les rafales de balles…” [And I thought to myself that without necessarily showing the state of siege and terror, I could still suggest this through noises: ambulances, gunshots…] (Bachir Chouikh 2003: 2)

Certain scenes also compressed critical elements such as the down shot on the bride-to-be cape (typically worn by all young brides) left on the ground following her kidnapping. Following this close-up shot is a low angle shot showing young men hiding in trees right
above the same spot where Hadjar’s kidnapping took place. Quickly after, a near shot shows Rachida hiding silently underneath bushes. It is my view that these different techniques serve to highlight the universalism of fear and the non-discriminatory nature of such terrorism in that it strikes from every angle, regardless of the victims’ gender.

In addition, the use of close-up shots on the terrorists’ eyes and weapons serve to enhance the underlying threat these self-imposed outcasts represent to all members of the surrounding community. Terrorism—or rather its scarring consequences—in the film is also manifest through the psychological trauma endured by the main character Rachida as well as Zohra, a victim of abduction and rape. The use of true factual information in the film also serves to enhance the reality of terrorism. This is made particularly evident in the scene during which all three women—Rachida, Aicha and Yasmina—are watching the news when the murder of the seven Christian monks from the Tibhirine Monastery is announced.\footnote{For more information on this particular tragedy, see The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria by John W. Kiser (New York: St. Martin's P, 2002).}

As a result, terrorism as well as its consequences is cinematically rendered at two levels: internally (i.e. trauma, psychological distress, fear as a result of terrorism) and externally (verbal and physical aggression, intimidation and threats).\footnote{Khatib has made not so dissimilar observations regarding the consequences of terrorism.} While complex in that the ideological motives of these terrorists in the film are not made explicit, their representation is—as already stated above—that of an ‘Other’ from within which destabilizes order and the peace of the village community. According to Khatib, this ‘Other’ from within may be perceived by concerned governments as a direct “threat to nationalism and democracy” (184). While it is evident that manifestations of terrorism have deeply disrupted order and safety within Algeria’s national space, the film text sought above all to portray the difficult conditions and posttraumatic consequences left by such gratuitous acts of violence on ordinary citizens. Shot during the incipient years of civil unrest, \textit{Rachida} epitomizes with a certain soberness the muted plight of those who have been left helpless and victimized. Additionally, despite the apparent simplicity of the filmic narrative surrounding terrorism and the sagacity of dialogues, Bachir Chouikh succeeded by virtue of her simple filming techniques, and her use of outside locations and non-actors in creating a compelling visual assessment of an Algerian village community in the midst of daily terrorism.
Women as “Others”

The film’s thematic however does not solely revolve around terrorism. Bachir Chouikh is also concerned more generally with the plight of Algerian women as illustrated by the following statement made to the French newspaper *Le Figaro*:

La femme n’a pas véritablement de statut dans la société. Elle n’existe pas en tant que telle. Elle est la sœur, la femme, la génitrice, la gardienne des traditions. Célibataire, divorcée, veuve, elle devient un paria […] C’est l’expression même du paradoxe qui existe dans notre société entre notre désir d’exister et le poids des traditions. (2003: 28)

Women do not really have a status in society. They do not exist as such. The woman is the sister, the spouse, the genitor, the guardian of traditions. Single, divorced, and widowed she becomes a pariah […] This is the very expression of the paradox which exists in our society, between a desire to exist and the weight of tradition.

Women are thus positioned as “Others” within the national space of Algeria but also within the communal spaces that are shared by both men and women during particular circumstances. The wedding celebration for instance shows a distinct divide between men and women who celebrate separately and among themselves while the children are free to roam freely between both spaces. On the other hand, women can also be positioned as ‘Others’ by other fellow women. In the workplace, Rachida is shunned by a female teacher who disapproves of her uncovered head, warning her that “God commanded us to cover our head. Severe is His punishment!” to which Rachida replies “Only to those who substitute themselves for Him!” Rachida also refuses to join a group of women at the bathhouse for fear of having her scar mistaken as a caesarian and of being rejected as a result. Aicha – Rachida’s mother—more than once relates her struggle as a divorced woman, and complains about the lack of a male’s presence in the house which would ensure protection and prevent gossip. Women in the film are also positioned as “Others” by the threat of continuous
terrorism. The female doctor whom Rachida goes to for a follow up discloses her fear of the terrorists and feels like an outcast due to her ‘liberal’ profession. Likewise, the village shop owner’s wife is muted by fear and does not stand up to her husband who houses and feeds the terrorists under their common roof.

Khatib rightly points out that the manner in which “masculinity and femininity is represented [in cinema] can dictate political statements” (102). In my view, the film Rachida showcases a variety of women whose respective positioning as “Others” within their community is also emblematic of an increased tension between public and private spheres whose domination is generally gender-based but whose borders are constantly shifting and/or being “violated.” At the same time, when faced with the consequences of terrorism as exemplified by the raped character Zohra, women are shown as capable of bonding and protecting each other, thus forming what could be termed as a symbolic female resistance. Rachida’s last scene, for instance, symbolizes the continuity of a single woman’s defiance in the face of a nameless terrorism. In deciding to return to work instead of returning to Algiers with her mother, Rachida is re-asserting her place within a very specific national space—that of the classroom—where the taught official discourse (one that re-hashes selected and glorious past events to justify the presence and merits of the long standing single party) is irremediably damaged, if not destroyed altogether. Rachida then becomes a symbolic figure of courage and independence whose decision to return to school may be seen as a sacrifice in the name of a fragmented nation within which she no longer feels safe, but from which she chooses neither to run nor hide.

The violation of spaces in the film also encompasses that of the female body and, it is now that I turn to Zohra’s narrative; one which following a jump cut surfaces on screen disrupting the linearity of the main narrative. This sudden shift calls for the viewer’s renewed attention and is indicative of an impeding moment in the film. It also serves the purpose of communicating the fear of the new character more faithfully than could ever be produced by a smooth transition from one shot to the other, or with the use of a steady camera. Bachir Chouikh’s montage in fact shows her years of expertise in editing, for she chose to create a fragmented narrative, which could be said to mirror that of the nation’s fragmented discourse as well as that of the then political and social climate. Mike Wayne has rightly pointed out that “inspiration” and “memory” among other elements are: “the umbilical cord that
nourishes Third Cinema in a time of reaction and barbarism” (8). By the time Bachir Chouikh reached the postproduction phase, she was able to edit the film based on what she remembered from the crisis which Algeria had only recently endured. As a result, the apparent discontinuity in the narrative as well as the disruptive cuts between sequences are meant to somehow reflect the oppressive, out of control atmosphere initiated, and left by senseless and widespread acts of terrorism.

A selected scene: “A family disgraced”

The camera zooms in on a young and fair-skinned girl with a disheveled appearance in the middle of the woods somewhere near the village. Her long dress-tunic is torn, revealing part of her bare legs as she is running barefoot. Her long dark hair is uncovered, loose and matted. A hand-held camera follows her at a quick pace going through branches and trees. The sounds are that of breathing, dry leaves and wood cracking underneath the girl’s steps, and those of the cameraman running behind her. Looking scared and confused, she is trying to find her way out of the woods. When entering the village, she slams her hand on doors shouting in Arabic: “let me in.” She keeps running—the camera still following behind in a quivering manner —and finally, she stops, lets herself drop on the ground and looks around in a daze before a couple of men approach her in an attempt to appease her. The camera then rises up, slowly pans the surrounding crowd from the waist up and focuses on separate women standing quietly, looking at the girl. One by one, the women take off their colorful scarves and proceed to gently cover the girl up.

It is only after this scene that we find out that the girl’s name is Zohra, that she is from the village, and that she had been kidnapped and raped by the group of terrorists that had been threatening the small village population. Upon her return, however, Zohra is virulently rejected by her father who exclaims: “She is no longer my daughter. I don’t want her. I’d rather she be dead! She has humiliated us in front of the neighbors, in front of the family. She has dishonored us; I don’t want anything to do with her. She is no longer my daughter.” To which Zohra’s eldest sister, replies: “She is my sister. I’m keeping her.”

182 On the DVD, this scene is numbered as Chapter 8.
scene ends with a medium shot of the father’s frail figure. He then lowers his eyes and walks silently away.

There are two important aspects to consider in this scene. Firstly, there is the physical and sexual violation of the female body. In a society where premarital female virginity is not only tied to family honor but also to that of the surrounding social group, it is worth remembering that the importance given to the female virginity is above all a form of control exerted upon women, and upon the female body. Once the body has been unlawfully transgressed (regardless of the woman’s innocence), it has lost its symbolic value and no longer validates Zohra’s family honor. Furthermore, because women in Islam are symbolically objects of temptation (‘fitna’), they are more often than not presumed guilty of temptation hence Zohrah’s father rejection of his own daughter. However, a long medium shot focusing on the father’s saddened and afflicted facial expression, as well as the long shot following his departure, invites the viewer to formulate his or her own interpretation as to whether or not the father is feeling the weight of tradition and harmful gossip. His rejection though ultimately leads to Zohrah’s self-inflicted punishment. This is shown in the bath scene during which Zohrah –now pregnant as a result of having been raped—exfoliates herself so hard that she starts bleeding. This self-punishing/self-purifying gesture is in direct response to her father’s rejection. The once virgin body is now irreversibly stained by the shame of rape and is irrevocably discarded by a male authority (her father) regardless of the victim’s innocence and in spite of her plea. Of note, the women of the village and Zohrah’s eldest sister only proceed to assist and then shelter the victim from further harm.

Symbolism: the female body, the nation and the veil

The significance of rape in the film goes beyond the violation of a virgin female body. As pointed out by Hayward in her essay “Framing National Cinemas,” the female body is “closely aligned/identified with nationalist discourses,” in that the nation is often referred to as a “mother-nation” and/or “mother country” (97).183 Thus, in brief, when the female body is violated, so is the nation. The woman’s body-as-nation metaphor or equation

is then according to Layoun (whom Hayward quotes), “fearfully problematic” (65) and is summarized as follow by Hayward:

- Violated motherland = violated woman
- Invasion by the enemy = rape of the mother-land / woman
- Rape = occupation of the mother-body by the enemy
- Occupation = reproduction of the enemy within the mother-body (98)

In *Rachida*, terrorism has not only pervaded Algeria’s national space but has also infiltrated itself within the female womb, violating not only the nation but also undermining the importance given to premarital virginity within old yet firmly anchored traditions and culture in Algeria. Both matriarchal and national spaces are thus invaded by means of physical violation and are forced to nurture unwanted, enemy seeds. In looking at rape in male-driven narratives, Hayward observes that the female body “by extension becomes the site of life and death of a nation, the rise and fall of a nation” pointing out further that the woman’s body-as-nation metaphor (or symbolism to use her exact word) “disguises real questions of gendered agency and power” (98-9). Hayward further contends that the female body “serves the image of the nation-state,” but notes that both “agency and power are invested in the male not the female body” (99).

As a woman’s narrative, *Rachida* clearly spells out existing tensions between both genders in Algeria and highlights specific inequalities discussed earlier when noting that women are (much like perpetrators of terrorism) effectively positioned as ‘others’. Zohra’s rape in the film is symbolic in that it represents not only a violent act against a woman, but also a violent act against the entire Algerian nation. Paradoxically so, it is not only the family’s honor that has been tainted, but also that of the nation. Following this line of argument, if Zohra, as a victim of rape, is discarded by her family then so is the nation given its underlying and symbolic absence in the filmic narrative. Shaken and violated by acts of terrorism, the nation—as metaphorically compared to the female body—is left fragmented and unhealed. The symbolic meaning of rape in the film is also to be understood as a *counter-narrative* of the patriarchal nation in that it confirms that even though the nation

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184 See Women as ‘others’, p.20
is meant to be “gender-neutral” (to draw upon Hayward’s term), agency and power are effectively male-bound.

Most importantly (whether knowingly or not), Bachir Chouikh uses the rape of the female body as a metaphor for the nation to highlight not only its vulnerable position towards terrorism but also its absence or inability to defend itself. This form of symbolism is a significant component of Bachir Chouikh’s film and it is one that can also be found in the use of the veil or ‘hijab’ which for Bachir Chouikh, is one of the key moments in the film’s narrative. In the following remarks we see how Bachir Chouikh—as a filmmaker—looks at her own culture and somewhat alters the meaning and use of a national and religious symbol worn by Muslim women in Arab cultures to symbolically emphasize a particular viewpoint.

Dans cette scène où des femmes enlèvent leur foulard pour en recouvrir la jeune fille violée, il y a comme un défi aux intégristes, ceux-là mêmes qui leur défendent de montrer leur chevelure et qui ont enlevé et violé la jeune fille. Les voiles dont elles la recouvrent ont les couleurs de la vie […] Tout est dans les voiles pour moi, dans ce film : les voiles qui séparent l’intérieur de l’extérieur ou les hommes des femmes pendant la cérémonie du mariage. Et ces étoffes sont tour à tour symboles de bonheur, d’interdit ou de deuil. Cela ne se discerne pas forcément, mais cela fait partie de mon regard, de ma culture. (Chouikh – retrouver la source!)

In this scene where women take off their scarf to cover the young raped woman, there is a sort of defiance held towards the extremists, the very same people who forbid them from showing their hair and who kidnapped and raped the young woman. The veils used to cover the girl are made of lively colors […] To me, everything is in the veils in this film: the veils that separate the inside from the outside or the men and women during the wedding celebration. And these fabrics are alternatively symbols of joy, of forbiddances or of mourning. This may not be apparent but it is how I look at my culture.
The veil is also used as a symbol of unity amongst women. They are not only placed upon Zorah’s violated body, but also—metaphorically speaking—upon that of the nation. It not only enables a form of rallying but also a form of collective healing and protection from further harm. Such representation in Bachir Chouikh film goes against a typical view of the Arab woman as being subjected to Islamic fundamentalism, and thus wearing a veil to hide her ‘fitna’ (temptation). In this scene, where women fearlessly and publicly take off their veil to cover Zorah, we witness a certain resisting femininity, and it is in this sense that we must again understand this film as a counter-narrative of the patriarchal nation.

Other objects are symbolically used in the film to highlight tensions between modernity and tradition such as the walkman always carried by Rachida, the make up she uses to enhance her facial features, the public telephone booth in the village used by the village youth but which is destroyed by the terrorists in the end, and so forth. However, the body and the veil as symbols of nation and resistance are the most powerful metaphors used in the film to counter-narrate the existing nation as also a victim of rape. In her essay “Framing Post-Third-Worldist Culture: Gender and Nation in Middle Eastern and North African Film and Video” (1997), Ella Shohat turns to invoke post-Third-Worldist feminist film and argues that texts produced by women of the Third World “challenge the masculinist contours of the 'nation' in order to continue a feminist decolonization of Third-Worldist historiography, as much as they continue a multicultural decolonization of feminist historiography” (5). She also notes that “the macronarrative of women's liberation has long since subsided yet sexism and heterosexism prevail, and in an age when the metanarratives of anticolonial revolution have long since been eclipsed yet (neo)colonialism and racism persist.” (ibid.) Certainly, Bachir Chouikh’s feature film is an authentic effort to recuperate the Algerian woman’s long lost voice in an attempt to re-tell herstories within the very fabric of patriarchal discourses.

Further reflections on Third Cinema as a counter-cinema

L’histoire de cette fille existe, je suis partie d’un fait réel, dont la presse a parlé […] La fille du fait reel a été abattue dans un marché et personne n’est venu à son secours. Quand on tire sur quelqu’un, la rue se vide et les
terroristes partent tranquillement. Les gens ont peur des représailles. C’est ainsi que mon frère a été assassiné. (Chouikh 2003: 30)

The story of this girl is real. My starting point was an actual event reported in the press (...) The girl was killed in a market and no one came to her help. When someone is shot, the streets are deserted and the terrorists leave the scene without hurry. People fear reprisals. This is how my brother was assassinated.

Bachir Chouikh’s feature is undoubtedly a social and political commentary whose jump cuts and multiple narratives could be said to highlight a certain discontinuity between the official narrative of the state and that of the people. While Rachida could be said to be emblematic of a cinema of rupture, it is also one of mending. What mattered most to Bachir Chouikh and what she subsequently revealed to the French newspaper Le Monde in an interview conducted by Orianne Charpentier was to remain “le plus honnête possible dans mon regard, dans ma démarche. Je ne voulais pas faire de concessions. Et cela, je pense que j’y suis arrivée.” (Chouikh 2003: 2) [What mattered to me was to be as honest as possible in my outlook, in my approach. I didn’t want to make any concessions and I think I succeeded.]

This desire to transcribe a new outlook on screen and to highlight a certain social reality makes it impossible to not look at Bachir Chouikh’s film as representative of Third Cinema; one which challenges official discourses. Bachir Chouikh deliberately chose to make a film which addresses several key issues pertaining to the positioning of the Algerian woman within her incontestably patriarchal society whose traditional heritage and practices rest upon those framed by the Shari’a. Rachida is an open dialogue which seeks to highlight inequalities lived by Algerian women, and as a result, Rachida can be interpreted as a counter-narrative of the nation from which its subject matter emerges. It effectively denounces the illusionary unitary character of the Algerian nation which posits the woman as a permanently endangered entity and undervalued member of society. The film is also a critique of religious beliefs and practices such as the importance of female virginity. In making this film, Bachir Chouikh is inscribing another history, from another perspective; notably her own which is one that has been sculpted by her own status as an Algerian
woman. Although Algerian women actively participated in the Liberation movement and thus played a considerable part in Algeria’s most significant historical change (that of the liberation), their status as sub-citizen has not moved forward. As noted by Shohat in her examination of Third-World feminists: “Third-World nationalist revolution has been covertly posited as masculine and heterosexual” (10).

Furthermore, the weight of tradition compounded with that of the state religion has in Bachir Chouikh’s view challenged and confused Algerians’ ability to delineate their own identity and talk of and look at themselves without fearing persecution. In Bachir Chouikh’s film, Algeria’s culture finds itself torn between tradition and a need to redefine what social spaces modern culture(s) and external influences in Algeria should occupy without interfering with the core teachings of the Qu’ran. As rightly noted by Mike Wayne, Third Cinema “intervenes in culture as a site of struggle” (75). In choosing to feature traditional and modern music, traditional and modern dress, and in crafting popular characters such as the older couple drinking coffee underneath a fig tree, the young jobless man who will never marry the love of his life because she has been promised away, or yet again the women bathing together in the hammam (bath house), etc. Bachir Chouikh has deliberately chosen symbols of popular culture that are inscribed in people’s memory and that need to be inscribed in history along with the official discourse. Bachir Chouikh’s historical reality is that of an Algeria where old and new, women and men, religion and modernity are permanent sites of conflicting views and practices. Thus it is her view that more similar stories need to be told.

Conclusion

According to Armes, understanding Third World filmmaking involves a consideration of at least three factors (social, cultural and economic). Throughout the analysis presented here, I have endeavored to examine these and other factors in relation to the social position of Algerian women, Algeria’s political climate, the film’s conditions of production, and its thematic framework. Key defining features of Third Cinema have been outlined throughout in questions of production, viewers’ reception, gender issues (i.e. social inequalities), and so forth. Originally and as pointed out by Gabriel, Third Cinema “was and continues to be
participatory and contributive to the struggles for the liberation of the peoples of the Third World” (55). At the time when Gabriel wrote his essay, he distinguished two types of struggles: one surrounding the (re)writing of history and the “original manifesto of ‘camera as a gun’” (ibid.).

In Rachida’s case, I have argued that the film constitutes a counter-narration to the nation. In doing so, Bachir Chouikh seeks to write history, or rather ‘herstories’ pertaining to, among other things, violence and terrorism in Algeria. However, the difficult economic conditions of production and the instable political climate did not preclude external help in the form of funding and logistical apparatus. Thus, it is more accurate to define Third Cinema—as Willemen does—as “a body of films adhering to a certain political and esthetic program, whether or not they are produced by Third World peoples themselves” (qtd in Shohat and Stam 27-8). Rachida contains the ingredients of a Third Cinema film in that it is passionate and ultimately political in its endeavor. It also seeks to open a dialogue with a post-colonial population that has just started to recognize itself on screen and, while it is considered to be the work of a woman, it is above all the work of an active observer, witness and citizen of Algeria’s society.

At the same time, because Third Cinema is ultimately preoccupied with questions of the nation, it is also paradoxically a derivative of national cinema. The film medium in Bachir Chouikh’s hands not only becomes a way to craft a historical visual but, its subject matter surrounding gender issues aims to shift—in Algerian viewers’ minds—deeply anchored traditions that maintain Algerian women as marginal citizens. Such fictional narrative helps in creating female characters who embody a single persona, a common plea made silently or not by most Algerian women. Indeed Rachida’s main actress Ibtissem Djouadi’s said to Wahiba L.,185 a journalist for the newspaper Liberté: “…Rachida est un hymne aux sacrifices et au courage de toutes les Algériennes.” (Djouadi: 2003)186 [Rachida is a hymn to the sacrifices and courage of all Algerian women]. As we have seen, the film’s other key themes besides terrorism include the following: the stigma around divorced, single or widowed women within Algerian society as exemplified by Rachida and her mother’s uneasiness about living alone without a male figure in the household; tradition (the bathing

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185 To preserve their identity, many Algerian journalists only sign their initials or go solely by their first name.
186 Liberté (Jan. 9, 2003)
scene in which all the women including the bride-to-be participate before the wedding, pre-
arranged marriage, virginity and family honor); violence committed against the female body
(i.e. rape) and dishonor followed by disownment.

Finally, the film also contains the ingredients of a transnational cinema in that its
subject-matter and binary oppositions (good versus evil) resonate just as well with audiences
outside Algeria. Of note, the film was distributed in US-based film festival two years
following the attacks of September 11. Following its screening at the 2003 DC Film Fest, the
public gave a standing ovation to Bachir Chouikh, an Algerian woman and filmmaker whose
first feature, although shaped by national and gender-based concerns, successfully
‘humanizes’ an Arabic speaking people whose fears of terrorism are—in today’s climate—
universally felt and understood.
CHAPTER 5

TODAY’S ALGERIA IN NADIR MOKNÈCHE’S VIVA LALDJÉRIE

Released internationally through a variety of venues such as festivals and small independent theaters, *Viva Laldjérie* (2004)\(^{187}\) generated a mixed bag of responses, but captivated the attention of many. A young and rising director, Nadir Moknèche who is sometimes described as the Algerian Almodovar, notably stands out as a director who has begun to create a new space for new cinemas of the Maghreb. A proud cosmopolitan hybrid, Moknèche understands the importance of the image and its reception and value in a global screen space overrun by competing cinematic images. It is his belief that as long as the world sends its images to Algeria then Algeria—as a cinematic presence—needs and should be able to reciprocate by sending its own images back out to the world. In this customarily sender (the world)/receiver (Algeria) relationship, *Viva...* is, metaphorically speaking, a surprising “back at you” gesture in the form of a groundbreaking film filled with images of an atypical Algeria; one that is seemingly populated by an unshakable and monolithic Arab society.

From both a logistical and content standpoint, Moknèche’s cinema is best defined as a transnational cinema in that it is showcasing an Algeria whose borders (both within and outside) are continuously stretched, challenged, and as will be shown, crossed over. Just as other Algerian filmmakers have done, Moknèche is filming from the margins of society, but with a clear and sharp contemporary outlook. In Stora’s view, Moknèche “attaque la société par ses marges pour en toucher le cœur” (2004: 94) [attacks society by its margins in order to reach its heart]. In doing so, Moknèche is adding further truth to Godard famous words in

\(^{187}\) The film will be referred to as *Viva...* for the remaining part of this chapter.
that “la marge c’est ce qui tient les pages ensemble” [it is the margin that keeps the pages together]. Through its dramatic edge, Viva... makes clear for instance that women, and particular women of the Maghreb, are not all the veil-wearing, olive-eating and tongue-deprived individuals they are perceived to be, but rather outspoken, modern and most definitely visible. Furthermore, the complex issues raised by Viva... such as sexual freedom, serve to break down obsolete images of Algeria that have, according to Moknèche, remained frozen on the screen of Pontecorvo’s Battle of Algiers. Moknèche’s focus is thus geared towards a renewal and update of Algeria’s images in an attempt to jump-start the country’s visual exposure and participation on the global scene.

Filmed in both Algeria and France with a script written in French, Viva... is a film that calls for a multiperspectival reading for a wealth of cultural and social elements shows the complexity of Algeria’s current ever changing, and evolving cultural scene thereby illustrating the effervescence of hybrid cultural practices against traditional ones. The film puts forth three female characters (Goucem, Papicha and Fifi) living in a self-contained society which functions as an unpredictable and still dangerous territory. While seemingly positioned as socially powerless, the female characters are given primacy of voice and are thus central to Moknèche’s film. Of equal interest in Viva... is the depiction of social classes in Algeria, and in particular that of the bourgeoisie which stands out throughout the film. Using some of Fanon’s analysis in The Wretched of the Earth (1961), I will spend some time quickly highlighting pertinent points of reflections about Moknèche’s cinematic interpretation of the Algerian “nomenklatura.” I thus plan to examine in this chapter how Viva Laldjérie represents an exceptionally bold film was received and then translated in the Francophone, Arabic and English speaking worlds. As such, I will shed light on a particular emerging cinema while, at the same time, discussing how this same cinema fares both inside and outside of Algeria. In the first part, I turn to the filmmaker himself, his first feature and his influences. I then turn to the making of Viva..., the film text and the themes which will consider Moknèche’s women, but most importantly the use of French as the primary language. I will also, albeit briefly highlight some of Algerian’s cultural hybridity and Fanonian motifs, as perceived in the film. The second part of this chapter will address at some length the film’s critical reception and the question of audiences before situating
Moknèche as a filmmaker. In doing so, I am hoping to shed some light into complex questions Moknèche’s cinema transnational dimension.

About the filmmaker

A true transnational and a product of three cultures (Arabic, Kabyle and French), Moknèche was born in Paris in 1965 where he resided for just a month and returned to Algeria where he grew up until the age of 16. He then obtained his Baccalauréat in 1984 in Paris and attended law school for two years, but left for London where he lived for one year. Once back in Paris, Moknèche took classes at the Ecole du Théatre National de Chaillot in 1988 and then took off for the US to attend the New School for Social Research in New York where he learned about cinema from 1993 to 1995. During that time, he directed two short features, one of which Hanifa et jardin won the 1996 school festival first prize. Moknèche took off yet again and resided in Italy for three months where he studied art history before returning to Algiers where he lived for a while. Le Harem de Mme Osmane (2000), which puts forth the remarkable vicissitudes and controlling fits of a woman landlord haunted by the fear of being abandoned by her daughter, is his first feature. While Le Harem… relates Algeria’s pre-terror era, Viva… covers the post-terror era, both times clearly reflecting a deep social malaise in Algeria. Moknèche is what we might say part of a new wave of directors emerging from the Maghreb. Moknèche has often been compared to Almodovar due to his cinematic style which makes use of dark, reddish colors and tones.

In truth, the comparison between the two filmmakers might come easily to all adept “cinephiles” for they will recognize these two directors’ fascination with women, and in particular their world. Indeed, the glimpse into the hermetic world of Algerian women in a post-terror society makes the comparison between Almodovar and Moknèche inevitable. Just as in Le Harem… and Viva…, Volver, Almodovar’s latest feature recently presented at the

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189 The film will be referred to as Le harem… for the remaining part of this chapter.
190 Sunday 2nd - Monday 3rd, 2003. Author: Franck Nouchi
59th Annual Cannes Film Festival, is a film that delves deeply into the lives of (Spanish) women from the “couche populaire” [lower class]. Such cinema about women, revolving in a world where masculine interference remains minimal or does not take away the women’s central position in the feature is referred to by French critics as a “women cinema” (a “cinéma de femmes”).

Both of Moknèche’s films are therefore committed to showing a slice of Algerian society through women, while at the same time taking up a critical stance insofar as both films explore gender inequalities as well as other observable key issues in Algeria. In doing so, both films are defining a new way of looking at Algerian women, their plurality and assertive desire to keep on going in spite of the unpredictable national terrain. At the same time, both films show how national culture in Algeria is constantly remolded by external influences which in turn threaten political stability. Examples of such influences include sounds of pornographic TV shows on satellite television heard in Le harem… and music, the club scene in Viva… as well as the cabaret scene. Moknèche is giving life to marginal stories using a pastiche of disparate individuals across social classes that defy the usually more subdued tone of other Algerian-directed cinematic texts. A keen observer, Moknèche has clearly been both influenced and inspired by current social and political events in Algeria. In addition, Moknèche is interested in showcasing Algiers’ diverse population stating in Le Monde newspaper that

…chaque personnage porte en lui plusieurs mondes, plusieurs modes de vie […] Il n’y a dans le film ni optimisme ni pessimisme, mais le sentiment que la douleur et la soif de vivre, qui ne font parti d’aucun systeme ou projet politique, sont pourtant profondément politiques, car elles sont le moteur de l’avenir de ce pays. 191

…each character embodies several worlds and lifestyles […] There is neither optimism nor pessimism in this film but the feeling that pain and a thirst for life, which are no part of any political agenda, are however deeply political because they represent this country’s future.

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The director has also manifested interest in the existing tradition-modernity cultural binarism in Algeria stating in *Le Soir d’Algérie*:

> C’est ce mélange qui m’intéresse. On voit très bien, dans la rue, les deux projets de société qui essaient de s’installer. Le projet islamiste et ce qu’on peut appeler le projet moderne. C’est pour cela que je voulais tourner ici […] Pour saisir cette complexité et aussi cette vitalité du présent. (in *Le Soir d’Algérie* 2003: 10)

This mélange interests me. We can see in the streets the two projects that are at play in Algerian society. The Islamic project and the modern project. This is why I wanted to film here […] To grasp this complexity and the present’s energy.

As we will see, *Viva...* showcases a variety of sexual orientations, behaviors and choices that are a definite part of Algerian contemporary society; a society in which for instance contraceptive methods are increasingly accepted (Lloyd, 2005: 71). As is revealed in *Viva...*’s narrative, the main character Goucem has had two abortions. The question of terrorism is likewise addressed and Papicha and Goucem’s fate in the film is not uncommon. Many families have had to leave Sidi Moussa (one of Algiers’ popular neighborhood) following the massacres that occurred there. Having left most of their belongings, many of these families found themselves living in various cheap hotels in Algiers thus Moknèche’s social and economic portrayal of his female characters are indeed very close to Algeria’s post-terror reality.

**The making of *Viva Laldjerie***

Unlike Moknèche’s first feature *Le harem...*, which took two years for the director to gather funds (an estimated total of 10 million francs), and an “aide à la réécriture” by the CNC funding committee headed then by Didier Haudepin, *Viva...*was funded by three separate production houses (Sunday Morning Productions in Paris, Need Productions in Brussels, and BL. Production in Algiers). The film also obtained extra funds from the *Commissariat*
The film production and marketing techniques just like most European cinematic productions are typical Hollywood: use of continuous script, production team made up of directors, assistants, actors, costume designers, music director; international marketing initiatives such as press and DVD releases and CD soundtrack in both Europe and the United States. Apart from the technical crew, the film’s cast is primarily made of Algerian actors, however out of four producers, only one is of Algerian descent. Moknèche has made great use of star power in the film with the presence of Biyouna, a greatly loved popular soap actress in Algeria and Nadia Kaci, an increasingly familiar face in various French and Franco-Algerian productions. However, the main character “Goucem” is portrayed by a successful French Moroccan actress, Lubna Azabal. Of note, the main character in Moknèche’s first feature Le Harem... was played by the talented yet non-Algerian actress, Carmen Maura (of Spanish descent) who happens to be a regular in Almodovar’s films. Of this particular choice, Moknèche has said in an interview with Marie-Claude Abaudie for Le film français, that he looked for an Algerian actress and found many who resembled Madame Osmane however: “une fois sur le plateau, elles avaient un blocage. Il fallait une comédienne libre avec son corps.” [once on the set, they could not perform or there was a block. I needed an actress who felt free with her body] (May 2000). The choice of Lubna Azabal is perhaps best explained by the storyline itself in that it involves explicit sexual encounters that would otherwise appear highly offensive to Algerian audiences would they have been performed by an Algerian actress. Moknèche’s most recent feature Délíce Paloma (2007) likewise features a non-Algerian and newcomer actress of Argentinean descent.

Although filming in Algeria is proving to be safer, Moknèche admitted to having had difficulties in gathering a French crew for Viva... stating in an article he wrote himself

192 Biyouna played in a long-standing Algerian TV soap in the 1970s directed by Mustapha Badie and titled “La grande maison” (an adaptation of Mohammed Dib’s novel). Biyouna is known for her strong love for Algeria and its inhabitants. She was one of the few actors who in spite of constant threats remained in the country during the bloody decade of 1990s. In Télérama, she was quoted as saying: “Je n’ai jamais abandonné le peuple algérien, je suis restée même pendant les attentats, nous avons dépassé la peur ensemble. Quand j’ai tourné dans les rues avec Nadir [Moknèche], des femmes se sont mises aux fenêtres et elles m’ont crié : ‘Merci, Biyouna ! Merci pour l’oxygène !’” [I have never abandoned the Algerian people. I even stayed throughout the terrorist attacks and we overcame fear together. When I was filmed in the streets, women would open their window and scream ‘Thanks, Biyouna! Thanks for the breather!’] (No. 2775, March 19 2003, p. 36)
for the French newspaper Libération: “J’ai eu beaucoup de mal à réunir une équipe française de cinéma pour tourner en janvier 2003. Les craintes habituelles. Au bout d’une semaine, il fallait les tenir, ils sortaient en boîte tous les week-ends” [I had a hard time gathering a French crew to film in January 2003. The usual fears. After one week, I had to get a hold of them for they were going to night clubs every week end.] (Aug. 1, 2003). While outside scenes were all filmed in Algiers, all inside scenes were filmed in a studio in the outskirts of Paris. Unlike Le harem… which was filmed in Morocco, Viva… includes many shots of “Alger la blanche.” As will be seen further down, the city to Moknèche offers an opportunity to see marked signs of modernity but also tradition. Referring to Algiers as both a mother and a whore, Moknèche was bold enough to set his camera in the streets and let it record pedestrians. With the sound of piano in the background, the film thus opens right in the heart of Algiers and amidst the buzz created by traffic and people. The camera then takes us inside the Mouffok photography shop and zooms in on Goucem (the main female character) dusting the reception counter, applying lipstick and spraying perfume on herself. She then sings in English coquettishly into an interphone to coax her boss into letting her go early. This opening stresses an atmosphere that will remain throughout the film.

Synopsis

Having run away from Sidi Moussa, a neighborhood not far from Algiers and gradually taken over by Islamist fundamentalists, Papicha and her daughter Goucem take refuge in a hotel room in the center of Algiers. While Goucem works in a photo shop and maintains a long-term affair with Sassi, a 50ish married and wealthy surgeon whom she longs to marry, her mother lives secluded in their hotel room spending her time eating pizza, sipping on whisky, smoking and watching soaps on TV. Papicha’s life is only interrupted by the fear each bearded man inspires her when she looks out the window and a weekly visit to her husband’s grave. Mother and daughter have a relationship where conventional social roles have been reversed. As such, Goucem “mothers” Papicha while Papicha spends her time nostalgically recalling her old life as a cabaret dancer in front of her television or in the
company of a 10 year old, Tiziri, daughter of the hotel concierge and aspiring cabaret dancer. While Goucem regards her mother’s old life as a dancer embarrassing, she paradoxically has a certain admiration for Fifi, an extroverted prostitute as well as one of the hotel’s residents. Goucem –on a permanent truth or dare high—takes us on nightly journeys across Algiers where we witness the freedom of her sexuality, a surprisingly vibrant club scene where the young “tchi-tchi” from Algiers socialize and her confusion when confronted to the fact that she might never get married. Intertwined along and within these three narratives are other tales about homosexuality, corruption, and deceit.

Themes

“Cinéma de femmes”

The film text makes use of multiple narratives as a storytelling tool to give a voice to female characters as members of a subjugated social group, humanizing them in a contemporary context, providing a raw but also candid look at the victims of terrorism or sheer neglect from their society. This representation of Algerian women attempts to reflect the actuality of life in the aftermath of a long cycle of violence in Algeria, while at the same time piques our curiosity and sympathy for the survival of socially unconventional if not rejected and ignored women. The talented trio is composed of a widow/previous cabaret dancer (Papicha), her daughter (Goucem), a 27 year-old sexually emancipated woman yet trapped within a world of restrictive social conventions, and finally a prostitute (Fifi) whose life ends tragically on the littered shores of Algiers.

Of Goucem’s character, Moknèche said that she incarnates very well “cette génération d’Algériennes émancipées, qui vivent leur sexualité, qui disent ‘moi je’, et puis qui, arrivées à la trentaine, se retrouvent dans un cul-de-sac, trop tard pour être mariées” (Moknèche 2004: 36) [this generation of emancipated Algerian women who live their

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193 “tchi-tchi” is a somewhat pejorative term referring to Algiers’ young bourgeoisie.

194 For a condensed yet insightful and factual description of violence committed against Algerian women in the 1980s and 1990s among other social and political matters concerning these same women, see Chapter 5 of Transition & Development in Algeria: Economic, Social and Cultural Challenges (2005), pp. 63-82.
sexuality, who say “me, I.” Once they hit their thirties however, they get to a cul-de-sac, and it is too late to get married.]. It is however in Le Figaro that Moknèche elaborates a bit further which he defines as a modern-day Algerian “lolita”195 for the French and a “papiche”196 for the Algerians:

Goucem appartient à cette génération des 25-30 ans […] Elle s’assume pleinement en tant que femme libre de son corps et de son destin. Elle ne se laisse pas enfermer dans un carcan et casse l’image de la Maghrébine soumise à la volonté masculine. Il existe de plus en plus de Goucem en Algérie, surtout dans les couches populaires de la société. (Baudin 2004)197

Goucem belongs to the 25-30 generation […] She is fully in control of her body and her fate as a free woman. She does not let herself be trapped and breaks the image of the Maghrebian woman submitted to man’s will. There are more and more Goucem in Algeria, particularly among the lower classes of society.

Moknèche adds that Goucem is “est inclassable, comme sa ville. Elle a grandi en réaction aux contraintes, aux principes, aux fausses espérances […] Elle se rend compte que son “je” est vide, qu’elle n’a qu’une identité de surface” (Moknèche 2003)198 [is inclassifiable, like her city. She grew up against constraints, principles and false hopes (…) She realizes that her “I” is empty, that she only has a hollow identity.]

Moknèche is particularly interested in giving life on screen to characters he has observed in real life. Madame Osmane in Le harem..., just like Goucem, was also inspired by real life Algerian women whom the director has more or less known in his lifetime.

195 “lolita” is a term that usually designates a free-spirited, desirable, sensual and young female (often a teenager). She is usually independent and slightly self-destructive in her behavior. A “lolita” character inspires desire and strong infatuation and often treats love as a game, sometimes a fateful one. This female is usually the older men’s prey (so to speak). The “lolita” is a fascinating figure that has often been represented in cinematic productions.

196 “papiche” is a term used by Algerians to refer to a young and pretty girl (age 18-25) who dresses well and is most likely of a modest origin. A “papiche” manages her own sexuality.


198 In Libération, Aug. 1, 2003
Evidently, the women in *Le harem*... socially differ from those of *Viva*... but they have a common denominator in that they break taboos and silence. In some ways, we could look at Goucem as a younger, modern-day version of Madame Osmane whom Moknèche describes as one of these women who

…ont fait la guerre pour libérer leurs pays et ont cassé les traditions. Ce sont des citadines qui ont souvent rencontré leur mari dans le maquis et ont fait des mariages d’amour […] Ces anciennes combattantes se ressemblent toutes: tyranniques, libres car ouvertes au monde, souvent décolorées en blond et, en un mot, insupportables! (Moknèche 2000)\(^{199}\)

….participated in the war of Liberation and broke traditions. These are city women who for the most part met their husband in the maquis and married for love. These old veterans are all the same: tyrannical, free because open to the world, often dyed blond, and quite simply unbearable!

*Viva*... unfolds three seemingly unexceptional yet powerful stories. As such, we witness Goucem’s slight departure from superficiality and careless behavior and her descent into reality when faced with her lover’s betrayal and her friend’s Fifi murder. We then have Papicha’s glorious return to the Copacabana cabaret as a singer. She succeeds in overcoming her fear of the outside and rediscovers a hint of confidence in herself. Last but not least, we also witness Fifi’s desperate and unanswered plea for help in the Place des Martyrs [public square of the Martyr] when faced with the threat of kidnap by the “police secrète” and eventually murder.

Of all three characters, Fifi is probably the most troubling. In openly addressing prostitution, Moknèche acknowledges its presence in Algerian society and succeeds in creating a character filled with humanity yet utterly ignored by the crowds of Algiers. Of prostitution, Moknèche has said in *El Watan* that “le phénomène est là, et on est en droit de comprendre ses raisons d’être. Même si cela fait parti du champ du documentaire, la fiction, à travers son détachement par rapport à la réalité, permet de mieux reprendre les thèmes” [the

\(^{199}\) Moknèche in an interview conducted by Marie-Claude Arbaudie for *Le film français*, May 2000.
phenomenon is there and we have to be able to understand its presence. Even if this inquiry belongs in the documentary genre, the fiction genre allows to better cover its themes.]

In Viva... one could say that Fifi embodies a tragedy of Algiers itself. The scene in which no one reaches out to help her gives further truth to Belkhiri’s comments in that “…l’Algérie n’ose pas se regarder en face, de peur d’affronter une réalité coupable” (2004: 15). […Algeria does not dare to look at itself for fear of facing a guilty reality.] Ironically and before disappearing somewhere in the crowd, Fifi attempts to hide in a “cortège de marriage” but realizing that she is in danger, the wedding guests (visibly bourgeois) force her out of the car. Not wishing to be involved in any ways with threats of terror, they turn their back on her to continue with their wedding celebration. Moknèche’s insightful perception and cinematic interpretation of Algiers bourgeoisie towards terrorism is notable. In the context of his film Le harem…, Moknèche has said the following about Algiers’ bourgeoisie:

J’étais à Alger en 93 où j’ai eu l’occasion de fréquenter la nomenklatura algéroise. À l’époque, ces gens soit étaient convaincus que ‘ça allait s’arranger’, soit disaient : ‘Et pourquoi pas mettre le foulard, s’il faut pour être tranquille ?’ La bourgeoisie a sous-estimé ou traité par dessus la jambe le terrorisme pendant longtemps. Peut être parce qu’au fond, comme d’ailleurs tous les Algériens, elle refuse de s’interroger sur la violence qui imprègne l’Algérie. (Moknèche 2000 : 5)

I was in Algiers in 93 where I had the opportunity to mingle with the Algiers’ nomenklature. At that time, these people were either convinced that ‘it was going to be ok,’ or said: ‘why not wear the scarf if we must to be left in peace ?’ The bourgeoisie underestimated or ignored terrorism for a long time. Perhaps because deep inside, just as with all Algerians, they refused to question the violence that is taking over Algeria.

This is an important quote in that it highlights the bourgeoisie detachment from the country’s internal affairs. It likewise sheds light on another social phenomena which is that of individualism; an individualism coming from an increasingly hybridized culture. Of Mme Osmane’s character, Moknèche has said that she belongs to the: “laquelle s’exprime en
français […] Par les langues utilisées, je souhaitais montrer le cloisonnement de la société algérienne” (Moknèche 2000: 4) [expresses itself in French (…) By the languages spoken in Algeria, I wanted to show the isolation within Algerian society.] In other words, French is still the privilege of those who are socially elevated as opposed to Arabic which in Le harem… remains the main language in the rural areas.

Overall, Viva…’s storyline is well crafted and all three actresses succeed in conveying the idea of a “société corsetée [qui] vous oblige à lutter continuellement pour exister” (Moknèche quoted in Telerama, 2004: 36) [a corseted society which continuously forces you to fight in order to exist.] The film’s engagement with the subject matter is genuine and leaves ample room for reflection about Algeria’s society, one which happens to be “laminée et dechirée” (Boulahbal 2003: 17) [ripped and torn.] The use of marginal characters who are, as Yasmina Belkacem puts it, “complètement en décalage avec une société puritaine” [completely displaced in a puritan society], and whose “extravagances et la vulnérabilité traduisent au mieux le malaise d’une société schizophrénique” [extravagances and vulnerability best translate the ill of a schizophrenic society] (Belkacem 2004: xx)200 is a coup de maître from Moknèche’s part. Such characters reinforce the idea that there are a far greater mix of social actors in Algeria. At the same time, the focus on problematic female characters exceeds conventional conceptions of the woman in general and suggests that tensions surrounding gender inequality, homophobia and misuse of power (to cite a few) are at play within Algeria’s society. To convey this idea, the camera insistently centers around the multiple gazes each character sends to the other.

On the use of French

Thematically, Viva… as a screen-text uses French as its prime language partly because according to Moknèche, the distance created by the French language allows to go past certain

taboos and therapy goes down better (in *El Watan*, 2004: 17).

In concrete terms, the use of French as a prime language is also likely to increase the film’s chance of being distributed a bit more widely in France. Fifteen films come out on a weekly basis in France. As a result, distributors practice a merciless policy thereby if a film struggles to attract a minimum quota of viewers, it is quickly taken out of the theaters. Understood thus, a film in French has a potentially greater advantage than a film where Arabic is spoken. In an interview conducted by Elisabeth Schemia, Moknèche acknowledged such constraints:

> Quand j’ai vu que les impératifs commerciaux et réglementaires ne me laisseraient placer que quelques mots d’arabe, tendance couleur locale et folklore colonial, j’ai préféré renoncer complètement à cette langue [arabe]. (2000: 3)

> When I saw that commercial imperatives and responsible parties would only let me use a few Arabic words to add a touch of local color and colonial folklore, I chose to give up this language [Arabic] completely.

However, Moknèche’s reason for choosing French as opposed to Arabic is one marked by a desire to acknowledge Algeria’s linguistic hybridity for he rightly points that: “le français n’est pas une langue étrangère en Algérie, c’est une des langues algériennes” [First, French is not a foreign language in Algeria, it is one of the languages spoken there.] (ibid.)

Following the independence of Algeria in 1962, one of the most ambitious projects undertaken by the state to construct and solidify the national space was that of “Arabisation.” Thus, Arabic was to become the prime language to be used by all. However, and as previously mentioned, the fact that Algiers’ elite has remained francophone in spite of the fact that French was the language of the colonizers is a clear indication that French was, is and will remain a part of Algeria’s rich languages pool. Based on the current languages

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201 “La thérapie passe mieux en français […] En outre, la défaillance de formation des comédiens en Algérie m’a poussé à prendre d’autres francophones” [Therapy goes down better in French […] Besides, the lack of trained actors in Algeria motivated me to hire other francophone speakers.] French is also the prime language in Moknèche’s first feature *Le harem de Mme Osmane* (2000).
policy in Algeria, French is now considered a foreign language (Miliani 2005: 136). Quoted in Miliani’s article, Nait Belkacem, head of the High Council for the National Language in Algeria stated that the Francophone elite “are orphans of culture, neither oriental nor westerner […] They are unstable disabled persons one must treat” (quoted in Madi 1997: 119). This observation clearly and perhaps cruelly denies Algeria’s linguistic heritage from a very long period of French colonization.

Blatantly ignoring this well-embedded linguistic reality (meaning the coexistence of French and Arabic in Algeria) is to deny Algerians the right to affirm themselves in ways that are uniquely expressing Algeria’s social reality. In fact, Arabic and French coexist and mingle in different cultural arenas (songs, literature, theater, cinema…) and also give birth to hybrid linguistic expressions and words such as “Laldjérie” (used in Moknèche’s title) which happens to be a marriage of Algeria’s name in Arabic (“Djazair”) and in French (“Algerie”). “Viva Laldjérie” is what can be heard in football fields when millions of hopeful Algerians cheer their home team. The film’s title is then significant and celebrates the undeniable hybrid character of Algerian polyglot culture. Ultimately, it is all these hybrid cultural and social manifestations that Moknèche seeks to celebrate and highlight in his film. Neither Algerian nor French but ultimately between the two, Miliani wrote that:

The Algerian will remain prisoner of his past, seated between two languages (because he does not master any of them correctly: state of semi-bilingualism), and two cultures, affected by a disabling linguistic schizophrenia due to the critical predominant discourses held by proponents and adversaries about all vernaculars and languages. (136)

Although important, looking in depth at Algeria’s language policy (or any national cultural policies for that matter) is beyond the scope of this study. What interests us here is the sole reason behind Moknèche’s use of French in both his films and the significance it bears when used by either the elite in Le harem… or by the lower class in Viva… In both cases, Moknèche has given slightly different reasons as to his use of French as the prime language. However, Moknèche has also cited commercial imperatives (e.g. distribution) to increase the film’s success on French and francophone territory. Given these imperatives, Hedetoft’s
observations (citing English language as an example) resonate true in that: “Certain nationalisms, cultures, ideas and interpretations are more transnationally powerful, assertive and successful than others” (2002: 280).

Algeria’s cultural hybridity

The lack of or little cultural productions in Algeria makes the country’s cultural scene particularly vulnerable to outside cultural exports, codes and practices. The first shots of Viva… shows varied western influences and we can observe how the global consumer culture has penetrated the Algerian market (SUVs roaming through the streets, people talking on their mobile phones, occidental/American clothing). English has also made a place for itself amidst the other existing languages in Algeria. This is best illustrated by the scene in which Goucem pleads teasingly in a faultless English with her boss in order to get out of work early. Likewise, the music played in the discotheque is admixture of Raï and techno on which an exotic belly dancer moves rhythmically. Culinary habits bear the marks of external influences as well, and are best illustrated by Papicha’s daily consumption of pizza which she washes down with whisky before lighting up a cigarette and watch American soaps. Given such influences, one may be led to wonder what specifically is Algerian in the film besides Algerians themselves. We are witnessing in Moknèche’s film the uncertain birth of two hybrid cultures: one of consumers (practiced out in the open) and one of entertainment (kept underground). National specificity in the film is minimal yet the film’s content is clearly about Algerians.

Fanonian motifs

Fanonian motifs are present in both of Moknèche’s features where we witness a society divided into two worlds, the haves and the have not, the veiled and the veil-less, the veiled outside and the veil-less inside. A “world cut in two…inhabited by two different species” (1990: 30) as Fanon wrote to describe a then colonized Algeria. We see for instance in Viva… spacious apartment buildings vs. a small hotel room. In Viva… we see the narrow and
neglected streets of the Casbah as well as the pristine facades of well maintained buildings. There is a clear distinction between the rural classes and the city inhabitants in *Le harem*…. Moknèche seems to take pleasure in poking fun at this elite and exclusive class of Algiers. His vision is one flavored with artistic angles which both flatter yet unveil the qualities and downfalls of a class turned inwardly. There is also a certain cynicism, a slight teasing from Moknèche’s part which does not take anything away from the perception we, as viewers, might have about this elite class. In *Le harem*…, Mme Osmane (portrayed by Carmen Maura) openly shows her disgust when meeting a simple, uneducated country woman (the mother of her daughter’s fiancé). In *Viva*…, the bourgeoisie is embodied by the surgeon, his bitter wife and their son who happens to be homosexual. They live in an exclusive building in the center of Algiers. As an example of this clear dichotomy in Moknèche’s world, there is a scene in which Goucem looks up the lavish spiraling stairs inside the building (in an attempt to catch a glimpse of her lover). At that precise moment, we have a superb long shot taken from the top in which both her lover’s wife and son look down on her.

This shot may be interpreted as a metaphor of the social classes positioning on the ladder and the clear existing distinctions between them. However, as seen in *Viva*… certain public spheres such as the discotheque are neutral ground on which temporary cross-fertilization between social classes takes place but distinctions among them are maintained. Although Goucem clearly enjoys her sexual escapades with a wealthy young man, her hand is not being asked for. This young Algerian “lolita” or “papiche” only succeeds in attracting the ongoing attention of a young man of a lower class who faithfully awaits for his visa to France.

It is well known that the gap between an elite bourgeois class and the masses in Algeria is getting wider (the riches of Algeria are in the hands of a few). Today in the wake of the disappointment (sour reality) of a post terror Algeria, Fanon’s concern and warning (or predilection) about how the masses are shut out of the power by the elites continue to resonate: “we must repeat, it is absolutely necessary to oppose vigorously and definitively the birth of a national bourgeoisie and a privileged caste” (1990: 163). Fanon’s observations about social order are quite insightful for he cunningly observed that exploitation “can wear a black face, or an Arab one” (116). Two scenes come to mind when quoting these last Fanon’s words. One in *Le harem*… in which Madame Osmane beats her maid played by the
talented Biyouna, and a scene in Viva... in which the surgeon’s wife roughly handles her domestic help. Such rapport between the elite and the help is strangely reminiscent of that of the French and the Algerians during colonization. Algeria’s independence has given birth to an elite class that has molded itself on a model (that of the master-slave dialectic), and which excludes the inclusion and participation of the people in the affairs of the nation including its wealth.

**Critical reception and the question of audiences**

Movies can be a significant cultural marker of a moment within the society they seek to depict, and Viva... seems to be such a movie; one that reflects a growing interest in and awareness of alternative gender/sexual identities in the city of Algiers, or “la maman et la putain” [the mother and the whore] as Moknèche lovingly puts it. The press on each side of the Mediterranean seems to have noticed the radical departure Viva... has taken from other and perhaps shyer Algerian productions on this matter. Articles titles alone can help us greatly in highlighting such observation such as La Tribune’s: “Viva Laldjerie, zoom sur la face cachée de l’Algérie” [Viva Laldjerie, zooming in on Algeria’s hidden face.] (Belkhiri 2004: 15), suggesting as such that Algeria is still hiding from others, but above all from herself. Another title from Le Figaro is “L’Algérie en pleine émancipation” [Algeria fully emancipated] (Baudin 2004), again suggesting that Algeria as a society is coming to grip with the reality of changes. Libération, true to its sometimes leftist bluntness, prints the following: “Trois minutes et demie de sexe qu’Alger a du mal à avaler” [Three and a half minutes of sex that Algiers has a hard time stomaching] (Aubenas 2004: 3). This title alludes to a counter-reaction from Algerian critics to which I will turn to further down. Le Soir d’Algérie takes it back in time with “Papicha fait de la résistance” [Papicha joins the resistance.] (2003: 10). This title not only suggests but reinforces the idea or rather a concrete social reality: that women being the object of unfair oppression in an essentially

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202 The filmmaker’s interest in and love for Algiers is well known. As mentioned above, he referred to the city as both a mother and a whore in a press article he wrote himself for the French newspaper Libération (Moknèche, Friday, August 1st, 2003). In El Watan, Moknèche reveals some of the influence he received from American features such as those of Hitchcock: “Parfois, Alger, à travers ses lumières, me fait penser à San Francisco dans les films d’Hitchcock.” [Sometimes Algiers’ lights remind me of San Francisco in Hitchcock’s films.] (in El Watan, Apr. 5, 2004).
patriarchal society where the “code de la famille” maintains them as subalterns. As was done forty years ago to fight French occupation, “Faire de la résistance” suggests a need for emancipation. In this sense, and given that the film openly deals with rebellion against gender oppression, Moknèche’s cinema is best defined as a “cinéma moudjahid au feminin.”

In regards to the sexual activity taking place in the film, and which the press has also picked up on, Moknèche made no qualms about it and stated rather bluntly in Télérama that “il faudrait que notre société sorte de tous ces mensonges, que les Algériens acceptent enfin leur sensualité et leur désir. Qu’ils s’acceptent, tout court, avec leur identité faite d’islam, d’arabité, de berberité et de judeïté” (Leclere 2004: 36) [Our society needs to rid itself of the lies. Algerians need to finally come to terms with their own sensuality and desire. They should accept themselves period, with their identity made of islam, arabic, berber and judaism.] Adding in El Watan that “Ca ne m’intéresse pas de faire des films sans toucher aux vices de la société.” (Moknèche 2004: 17) [I’m not interested in making films that do not tap into society’s vices.]

According to Hedetoft in her article on contemporary cinema, an analytical focus based on press reviews and articles can help us in assessing “the role of the ‘national optic’” (2002: 279). Calling all reviewers and critics “national mediatic gatekeepers,” Hedetoft argues that their role is to “make sense of it [the film text] within the interpretative palimpsest of specific national knowledges, cultural identities and aesthetic and philosophical traditions” (ibid.). Adding in Benjamin Stora’s comments on the film for instance clearly show his position as a knowledgeable historian of Algeria. His take on Moknèche’s film makes use of several theoretical lenses all in one: sociological, political and historical. His following observation is full of implications. To Stora, Viva... clearly disrupts the idea of a seemingly faultless and sinless society in Algeria, and as he puts it: “c’est cela qui déranger, peut être, ceux qui rêvent toujours de la pureté impossible d’une société algérienne vertueuse et...

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203 Hedetoft further elaborates: “Film critics operate within communicative spaces that are primarily nationally bounded: the papers/journals that they write for (or television stations their commentaries are broadcast on) more often than not define themselves as national, the primary audience targeted is the national citizenry of their respective nation-states, the premiering of movies that their reviews or framing commentaries relate to is usually organized so as to occur simultaneously within specific national circumstances, their reviews are phrased in the national language and so on.” (285)
honnête, donc irréelle” (Stora 2004: 95) [this is perhaps what will bother those who still dream of the impossible purity of a virtuous, honest yet unreal Algerian society.] In doing so, the film also disrupts the idea of a stable national entity in Algeria since what we are witnessing in the film is the survival of a handful of individuals amidst an absent Algerian national community where individualism clashes with collectivism.

To Stora, Algeria’s cultural borders like many other nation-states are porous and there is a need to accept the present as is. The youth portrayed in Viva... craves for “La liberté. La jeunesse algérienne de 2004 regarde vers le large: on a pu l’entendre il y a quelques temps à l’occasion de la visite du président français Jacques Chirac, lorsque le cri ‘des visas!’ a fusé” (Stora 2004: 95) [Freedom. The 2004 Algerian youth looks outside: we heard it some time ago when France’s president Jacques Chirac came to visit and that the shout ‘(we want) visas!’ was given.] Stora’s take on Viva... differs from that of Le harem... in which he deplores the men’s absence from the film while at the same time acknowledging that “tout est là, suggéré en permanence, avec une extrême finesse…” (Stora 2000)204 [everything is there, consistently suggested with extreme attention…]

On the Algerian side, not everyone reacted favorably Moknèche’s representation of Algeria. Upon a press conference following the first viewing of Viva... in Algiers, a journalist from the Quotidien d’Oran furiously exclaimed : “montrer les bas-fonds d’Alger, l’homosexualité, la prostitution, une petite fille qu’on conduit à la débauche (reference to Tiziri in the film)...Ici, on est en Algérie. Et c’est pas ça l’Algérie” (quoted in Aubenas 2004 : 3) [showing Algiers dodgy areas, homosexuality, prostitution, a little girl being led to bad things…we’re in Algeria here and this (the film) is not Algeria.] Another critic from El Watan also addressed Moknèche directly: “Ce que vous montrez, c’est l’Algérie de Paris, les gens qui se permettent de voyager deux fois par semaine. C’est comme ça que vous nous imaginez ?” (quoted in Aubenas 2004 : 3) [What you’re showing is Paris’ Algeria, those people who can afford to travel twice a week. Is this how you’re picturing us ?]

This criticism is quite eloquent in that it shows that perhaps, Moknèche’s vision of Algeria is one “tainted” with the director’s transnational character. The critic’s comments seem to be animated by a latent resentment towards those Algerians living in Paris, those

204 First article which is part of a press kit put together for Le harem.... [no publication date and no page number available] The title is: “La guerre invisible: Algéries, années 90”.  

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who have recreated there an Algeria molded to their lifestyle, a mere copy of the original. Moknèche’s reply in Arabic to the critic is unabated for he defends his work in the following terms: “Je suis un artiste. Si j’ai envie de parler de 5% du pays, j’en ai le droit” (quoted in Aubenas 2004: 3) [I am an artist. If I want to talk about these 5% of the population, I have the right to do so]. Adding that to complete his first feature Le harem... and deliver a portrait as authentic as possible, Moknèche had to overcome his own prejudices: “En Algérie, on nous répète sans cesse : il ne faut pas parler comme ça de chez nous. Nos ennemis vont rire. On va montrer notre maison du doigt. Pour faire ce film, j’ai du lutter contre moi-même, mes propres préjugés” [We are always told in Algeria that we should not speak of the country in this manner. Our enemies will laugh. They’ll point to our home with their finger. To make this film, I had to fight against myself, against my own prejudices.] 205

Situating Moknèche

While it is true that in the process of “decoding” the film text, each reviewer’s comments will be based on his/her own national, cultural, political and social referent, little has been said in regards to the film’s position within Algerian cinema. The critical reception of the film has been mixed, however no one seemed to be concerned with the question of national cinema in Algeria. At the same time, not one review hesitated in referring to Moknèche’s film as Algerian or a Franco-Algerian. Undeniably, there exists an Algerian cinema, but it is one that raises questions. Indeed, Moknèche’s cinema is boundaries less and questions Algeria’s unified identity leading us to ask what makes Moknèche’s cinema Algerian? Which questions should we be concerned with? That of form, production or aesthetic strategies? Which theoretical perspective suits the film best? Most importantly, where does the director situate himself?

Moknèche answered this last question himself in an interview for Le Soir d’Algérie and shared the following:

205 Moknèche in an interview conducted by Florence Aubenas for Libération. This article is part of a press kit put together for Le harem... Publication date: Apr. 13, 2000.
I do not care to situate myself between Algeria and France. In a strange love-hate relationship, France is the only one that exists for Algerians. For me, Paris is not the center of the world. I went elsewhere and it frees me.

Yet, Moknèche’s cinematic world does indeed situate itself between Algeria and France and while the condition of women in the world has yet to be resolved, his films’ engagement with the matter is solely and specifically related to the condition of Algerian women today. *Viva*... and *Le harem*... are both unrolling the incertitude underlying the daily life of minuscule matriarchal circles within a patriarchal society where manifestations of hybrid cultures have yet to be openly acknowledged. These same matriarchal spaces in Moknèche’s films are spaces where cultural exports and practices are manifest. Moknèche is distinctly establishing a cinema within a hybrid space he has observed in Algeria yet that same cinema for varying reasons (and while cosmopolitan) does not offer enough cultural referents to capture and retain the interest of international audiences. While mainstream cinema succeeds in giving a universalistic twist to their films subject matter thus widening their distribution worldwide, Algerian-directed productions that deal specifically with Algeria’s social/political/religious reality leave very little room for cultural reframing by different audiences that are not familiar with Algeria hence the difficulty in entering mainstream cinema distribution (Merzak Allouache perhaps being the exception). This last observation brings us now to the thorny question of audiences.

**Audiences: up close and personal**

Audiences are not composed of passive viewers. A cultural reframing process takes place during the viewing of a film or a reinterpretation which makes any feature accessible or not,
comprehensible or not. Hedetoft in her study concerning contemporary cinema versus Hollywood productions observes that:

National cultures do assimilate outside influences, but for one thing the primary sender (the US) itself constitutes a diverse, assimilationist cultural rag-bag, and second, receivers both react, interact and proact vis-à-vis American influences, in the process reforging and reinterpreting them in the context of national history, culture and perceptual optics. (281)

Of course, Hedetoft speaks in her article of how audiences outside of the United States might receive and translate American feature. Bachir-Chouikh’s feature Rachida (2002) proved to be widely successful with niche audiences across the United States. Using Rachida as an example, I am hoping to show how and why a given American audience successfully managed to reinterpret a feature that in spite of its “algerianness” does not stray from the Hollywood format. Rachida was successful worldwide due to its Manichean storyline, leaving no room for ambiguity and doubt: good vs. evil, terrorism vs. innocents, the will of one (a heroic figure) against many, and so forth. The fact that many might not have been aware of Algeria’s civil distress and unrest during the 1990s did not prevent moviegoers from relating to the story of a young female teacher who while overcoming her fears of nameless terrorists, reverses the shift of power from a terrorist group and resumes her teaching duties the day following a widespread massacre. The final images of young children walking to school and sitting down in a devastated classroom are symbolically powerful. The overcoming of fear in the name of justice has universalistic appeal hence the success of Rachida, a movie perhaps less aesthetically appealing than Viva... yet a film accessible to many, particularly since the attacks of September 11th Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have rightly pointed out that “Perception itself is embedded in history. The same filmic images or sounds provoke distinct reverberations for different communities” (1996: 163). However, distinct perceptions do not take away from a central, universal idea such as the right of man to be free in a world ridden of deadly threats or in a world saturated daily with politics motivated and guided by the fear of terrorism.

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206 The film was extremely successful in Washington D.C. (US) at the 2003 Annual FilmFest.
As was pointed out earlier, Moknèche has claimed that his film holds a much-needed therapeutic benefit but the director has not specified which audience he had in mind. Of homosexuality, Moknèche has said for instance in 2000 that with the Algerian audience, one has to proceed slowly: “…sur ce thème, il faut y aller doucement avec le public algérien…” (2000: 3). Today, Moknèche’s position about his film *Viva…* subject matters is more assertive, and is undeniably political: “Ca ne va pas plaire à tout le monde que je montre une jeune fille comme Goucem faire l’amour dans des toilettes publiques […] je ne suis pas compromis, mais je sais aussi faire preuve de bon sens” (2003: 36) [It is not going to please everyone that I show a young girl like Goucem having sex in public toilets. I am not corrupt but I am capable of common sense.] Moknèche’s use of the cinema medium is not solely for artistic reasons. To him, the camera

…peut être un instrument d’exploration sociale et d’investigation psychologique fantastique, qui peut révéler son âme au public algérien, comme le néoréalisme a révélé la riche, multiple et profonde humanité des Italiens. Mais pour cela, il faut une véritable volonté politique et des producteurs épris de leur art et pénétrés de leurs responsabilités.  

…can be a fantastic tool of social exploration and psychological investigation and can reveal to the Algerian public his soul, just like neorealism revealed the rich, varied and deep humanity of the Italians. But to achieve this, there must be a true political will and producers in love with their art and faithful to their responsibilities.

In seeking such an active engagement from the viewers’ part with his film, Moknèche is attempting to open a continuous dialogue with a society (both in house and at large) who lacks images of herself. Indeed Moknèche’s camera gives us an insightful glimpse of Algiers’ streets and of its inhabitants. As a result we see a city “débarrassée de son côté carte postale” [ridden from his postcard image] (Ferenczi 2004: 44). These images are described by Stora as “fulgurantes” for they recall “les souvenirs qui ressurgissent sous

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207 This article is part of a press kit put together for *Le harem…* Publication date: May 2000.
forme de mélancolie ou de cauchemars.” (Stora 2004: 94) [Memories coming out in the form of sadness or nightmares.] These memories Stora speaks of only exist in the mind of those who have lived in Algiers throughout the 1990s thus if recalled, they can only be so by Algerians living in Algeria. To Moknèche, the most important thing is to “donner à voir des images de l’Algérie, qui reçoit des images du monde entier, mais qui n’en envoie plus aux autres pays” (Moknèche 2003: 36) [to give images of Algeria which receives images from around the world but doesn’t send any anywhere.] Adding that the inhabitants themselves:

… ne se voient pas. Ils sont comme leur ville: on ne peut parler de l’une sans les autres […] Les Algériens ont commencé par se voir à travers le regard colonial, masse indifferenciée, figurants qui agrémentent une histoire exotique. A l’Indépendence, on les transforme en archétypes réalistes socialistes: le Combattant, le Paysan, l’Ouvrier. Jamais, ils ne sont montrés en individu avec une personnalité propre. 208

… do not see themselves. They are like their city: we cannot talk about it without them […] Algerians started to see themselves through the colonial gaze, an indifferent mass, extras used to agreement an exotic story. Following the independence, we transform them in socialist prototypes: the soldier, the peasant, the factory worker. They have never been shown as individuals with their own personality.

This observation is one Moknèche has remained faithful to since the release of his first film Le harem… for which he has stated: “Nous, Algériens, ne nous voyons jamais qu’à travers le regard des autres. Nous en sommes toujours à l’époque coloniale dans notre production artistique […] Je voulais cette vision non biaisée de nous-mêmes” (Moknèche 2000: 4) [Us Algerians never see ourselves but through the others’ gaze. We are still stuck in the colonial era in our artistic production […] I wanted this non-biased vision of ourselves.] And again, in an article he wrote himself for Le Matin: “L’Algérie, pays sans images, dans un monde d’images! Pour se voir de l’intérieur, s’exprimer, prendre conscience de ses possibilités

Moknèche’s ambitious attempt at reaching out to his audiences calls for a closer examination of the relationship between text and audience however the question of audience in Algeria remains a tricky one. Forty some years ago, Algeria had literally no audiences. Massive uprooting and displacement of the peoples (particularly in the rural areas) during the colonization era contributed to damaging disruptions and permanent losses of cultural traditions, folklores and so forth (Bensmaia 2003:12). Some of the key questions following the independence were: what do we use of what is left to create, build a national cohesion based on culture? What do we take and what do we leave out? Which language should we use? Certainly, what was left was simply not enough to create a massive, heterogeneous and national cohesion at the cultural level.

Early Algerian cinema attracted massive audiences and created a taste for all sorts of cinematic productions (Italian, Russian, Egyptian) however, over time, the audience’s demographics and numbers changed and went from a family-oriented one to a solely masculine one (tied to the heavy unemployment factor) and now recently back to a family-oriented audience. The young male population however remains the majority in Algerian cinema audiences. In addition, theaters are now increasingly used as meeting places where the young meet in order to stay away from the “laaraya” (“voyous” in Arabic) who roam through public parks in search of adventurous young couples to rob and/or rape (Amari 2004: 43). Most theaters (privately owned in their majority) screen foreign productions where violence and sex are prized and where the word ‘culture’ is “presque bani” (Boualem

209 Page number missing; article part of a press kit put together for Le harem… Publication date: May 2000.
A sentiment echoed in Mohammed Miliani’s observations in that he sees culture as being in “total shambles” adding that: “The failure of the management of culture by state-run institutions has precipitated the disappearance of long and well-established culture oriented bodies […] Furthermore culture is being managed by administrators, not creators” (2005: 133). The state’s disinterest in cultural productions has forced Algerian filmmakers to tap into external resources in order to produce features exclusively concerned with and about Algerians. A good example of this is Boualem Guerdjou’s film which relates the killings of Algerians in Paris in October 1961. Not a dime from the Algerian state was given to Guerdjou but this refusal to partly finance the latter has most likely political implications that are far too complex to analyze here.

To get back to the question of audiences in Algeria, Miliani’s sentiment is differently echoed by Moknèche who sees the state’s control over cultural affairs as an impediment. To him: “La participation volontaire des citoyens d’une république à sa vie culturelle est une expérience d’un tout autre ordre que le divertissement des masses d’un pouvoir autoritaire” [The voluntary participation of the citizens of a given republic to its cultural life is a different experience from the entertainment of masses given by an authoritarian state].

Further reflections on the reception of Algerian-directed filmmaking

As such Algerian-directed filmmaking is competing against three increasingly strong adversaries or obstacles: Internet downloading of English speaking features, privately owned theaters showcasing pirated videos and last but not least, satellite television. As we can see, a number of factors make the question of audiences difficult in Algeria. In a country where cinema was long in the service of the state and where it gradually found itself disappearing, moviegoers patterns simply changed according to what was and what was not available, what was obsolete or not, etc. However, Moknèche seems to be able to discern an audience whom he said is in need of therapy, a sort of collective and national “coming out of the closet”

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211 In an insightful article titled “Que reste-t-il de nos salles de cinéma?” (in La Dépêche de Kabylie, 2004, p. 19), Boualem B. remarks the neglected state of cinemas across Algiers and parallels their poor care to a meager cultural life in Algeria: “Détritus, crachats, déchets de toutes sortes jonchent le sol, fauteuils (si ce n’est pas de bancs en bois) déchiquetés, mauvaises odeurs, un environnement désolant qui illustre notre misère culturelle. Plus grave encore, c’est le laxisme et le laisser-aller des autorités face à cette désertification artistique. Que reste-t-il de nos salles de cinéma?”

212 Article part of a press kit put together for Le harem… Publication date: May 2000.
measure that would enable Algerian society to see itself as it is now. However, his film has raised eyebrows and questions on both sides of the Mediterranean. While the French press is more concerned with the aesthetic and technical strategies Moknèche’s films, the francophone Algerian press’ focus is on the film content.

On the French side, some have said of his script that it is a “…scénario parfois trop volontariste.” (Ferenczi in Télérama 2004: 44) […a sript at times a bit too voluntarist]. Of the film’s Le harem… technical shots, that “la mise en scène abuse des tres gros plans” 213 (Sotinel in Le Monde, 2000). On the Algerian francophone press side, some have suggested that commercial motives have somehow restrained Moknèche’s freedom as a filmmaker, and that France remains the authority in Algerian’s cultural production:

Et Viva Laldjérie n’a fait que dire tout haut ce qui se mijote tout bas. Nadir Moknèche se suffira-t-il d’avoir ouvert une brèche que d’autres sont appelés à investir. Toutefois, la dépendance des cinéastes algériens et leurs modèles de représentation vis à vis des circuits européens, français en particulier, isole leurs oeuvres: des oeuvres partout étrangères. (Khaled in El Watan 2004: 17)

And Viva Laldjérie only says outloud what is being said behind closed doors. Nadir Moknèche opened a door that others will feel compelled to investigate. However, Algerian filmmakers’ dependence and modes of representation towards European circuits, and in particular French circuits, isolate their works that are considered foreign everywhere else.

There is perhaps a hint of truthfulness in Khaled’s observations given that Algerian productions are finding it increasingly difficult to create niches of faithful and growing audiences both in Europe and the rest of the world. There is a greater challenge in finding production houses that are willing to finance features with no or very little commercial value. Apart from an artistic investment, no outstanding profit can be expected from films that seem

213 Article part of a press kit put together for Le harem… Publication date: Apr. 12, 2000. Author: Thomas Sotinel.
to be tailored to the aesthetic taste of select French audiences.

As for the audience in France, Moknèche has been known to be (rightly or not) concerned with misleading perceptions of Algerian women. His first feature, *Le Harem de Mme Osmane* (2000), puts forth strong female characters from Algiers. In an interview, Moknèche has said that: “En France, on se représente toujours l’ensemble des femmes algériennes comme des victimes, des muettes qui portent un turban sur la tête et mangent des olives. Je prétends que c’est faux.” (Moknèche 2000: 2) [In France, we always think of Algerian women as victims, as muted who wear turbans on their head and eat olives. I am saying that it is wrong.] And again, when speaking for *Le harem*…:


In Algerian cinema, we are the victims of our own colonial folklore. Women munch on olives with a turban wrapped around their head. If they have a role of revolutionary, they pass messages. More recently, they are feminists and harass crowds against the wear of the Islamic scarf. I wanted to show them differently than those images made for exportation. They are as responsible than the men when it comes to the Algerian state.

It is this misrepresentation that Moknèche seeks to break and that of Algeria: “Le film *[Le harem*…] montre une Algérie moins cliché, plus complexe que celle qu’on imagine

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214 This interview is part of a brochure on *Le Harem*… (or small press kit which includes information about the actors and Moknèche) financed by the Production house (Bloody Mary Productions) There are no page numbers. The interview from which the quote above was taken was conducted by Elisabeth Schemia, journalist who also published *Mon journal d’Algérie, novembre 1999-janvier 2000* (Flammarion)

de l’extérieur” [The film shows an Algeria that is less hackneyed, more complex than what outsiders imagine.] (Moknèche 2000)²¹⁶

Of *Le Harem…*, Moknèche has said that it was a film about Algerians for Algerians on both sides of the Mediterranean pointing out that it is “le film d’un Algérien” however, he adds that he wishes the film be understood by the French: “j’espère aussi ardemment être reçu et compris par les Français: le local n’est nullement contradictoire de l’universel!” (Moknèche 2000: 4). This optimistic and also transnational outlook is a promising one for Algerian films and it is most likely something other filmmakers will attempt to invest in (provided that there is an interest). Whether or not Moknèche has succeeded in breaking misconceptions about Algeria and its women is something that is debatable but observable in press reviews. Overall, the critical reception from the French side is a favorable one. For his first feature *Le harem…*, Moknèche was received very warmly and was acknowledged as a filmmaker (not an amateur). *Le harem…* won the first prize at the 2000 Biennale des films arabes organized by the Arab World Institute in Paris and was distributed widely in Paris and across France. Financed by five production houses, the film which opened on July 12th, 2000 remained open in Paris for a total of 16 weeks. Based on the CNC numbers, the film was graced by a total of 64,837 viewers across France (not a modest record by all means for a first film distributed in France).

Using a variety of cultural and artistic referents, the French “mediatic gatekeepers” — to use Hedetoft’s expression—translated and mediated Moknèche’s film *Viva…* to the viewers using references that would appeal to the French audiences such as comparing him to an Almodovar (the French are fond of this Spanish director), or commenting on the feminist angle (feminism still resonates favorably in France), or putting emphasis on the libertine character of Goucem (the French are no stranger to sex on the big screen and love “lolita” type characters), or mentioning homosexuality (the French are known to be more liberal than the Algerians on this question), or insisting on the fact that the film is in french (the French speak french). All of this points out to a favorable mediating in which the film’s components that are familiar to the French national cultural space while internationally recognizable are highlighted and deemed worthy of entry into the French movie theaters.

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²¹⁶ Comments taken from an interview printed in a glossy “brochure” especially made for the Le Harem de Mme Osmane. The brochure was financed by the Centre National de la Cinématographie (CNC)
In Moknèche’s films, the transnational component weaves together elements from the Algerian and French national spaces. Moknèche has managed to include French national elements (such as the primary use of French language and the hiring of a French technical crew) while at the same time incorporating transnational elements (hiring of a French Moroccan actress for *Viva*… and a Spanish actress for *Le harem*…), and creating a film about Algerians, with Algerians and primarily for Algerians (use of a multitude of Algerian nationals as extras, filming in Algiers, use of star power with Biyouna, Algerian Raï music, belly dancing…). The Algerian space is thus both national and transnational. These spaces are complementary since, evidently, the Algerian transnational space would not exist without the national. What I am attempting to say here is that Moknèche has succeeded in creating a new kind of Algerian national cinema; one with changeable/mutable transnational characteristics yet one revolving around a fixed national space. In doing so, the very concept of national cinema is being freed of its geographical borders and is becoming a more permeable notion without a fixed definition.
CONCLUSIONS

The sharp rise of audiovisual transnational and global co-productions coupled with the dominance of Hollywood in audiovisual markets has and continues to problematize the place and survival of national, regional and local cinemas worldwide. Such filmmaking practices around the globe have and continue to contribute to irreversible imbalances at the level of local and national production, distribution and exhibition. The intensity of cultural exchanges brought about by increased international and transnational economic practices means that western and non-western countries alike—in particular those wishing to preserve their own cultural independence in the name of local, regional or national values—are faced with new challenges. Furthermore, the decline of most cinemas of the Third World, and particularly the minimal support given to directors originating from these regions (e.g. in terms of screen exposure) adds considerable tensions to the already uneven center-periphery cultural and economic exchanges.

As a result of such reconfigurations and financing of cinemas worldwide, film scholars interested in the question of national cinema(s) are faced with the thorny prospect of having to re-think both the applicability and the fluctuating parameters of concepts such as nation, nationalism, national identity, and so forth. To many, both inside and outside academia, it has become impossible to ignore the porosity and blurriness of nation-states’ boundaries that are being virtually expanded or minimized, reinforcing as such the idea that nations (even the most seemingly hermetic ones) are indeed “imagined” communities.

In this dissertation, my objective has been to circumscribe the nature and defining characteristics of contemporary Algerian-directed filmmaking against the concept of national cinema and associated concepts of transnational cinema and “accented” cinema. While remaining aware of the challenges presented by this study (such as questions of audience among others), among, I have sought to identify a body of films whose thematics emerged from a very specific political and historical context in Algeria, that of the bloody events of the 1990s. In doing so, I have in each chapter, highlighted some of the inherent difficulties faced by Algerian filmmakers today in pursuing their craft, and have demonstrated some of
the ways in which the lack of an Algerian film industry compounded with the co-produced status of contemporary Algerian-directed features have affected the way films were made.

Chapter 1 highlighted some of the limitations presented by the concept of national cinema in regards to Algerian-directed films while at the same time considering the relevance of other concepts such as Third Cinema, transnational cinema and “accented” cinema. Having noted that Algerian directed films are infrastructurally “dislocated” and that Algerian filmmakers today are no longer civil servants (e.g. paid and supported by the Algerian state), I sought to highlight some key aspects of the previous Algerian cinema’s role in projecting a national imaginary molded by the state and discussed how today’s filmmaking differs from the former. As such, I have proposed to read contemporary Algerian-directed films as part of Third Cinema and also “accented” cinema (in the case of Allouache) in that their narratives are politically oppositional to official discourses of the nation, which is to say that today’s films—unlike early Algerian productions—do not seek to promote a single, homogenous Algerian identity. A close-up analysis of the filmic texts chosen here and of the conditions of production surrounding each of them further helped in distinguishing patterns of counter-narratives of the Algerian nation, which have emerged from a specific national context hence their grouping under the rubric of “cinéma de l’urgence,” [crisis cinema].

As seen in chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5, each director aimed to illustrate some aspects of the country’s cultural and ethnic diversity, contradictions, social, political and economic tensions. In this sense, Algerian directors today are representative of the general trend towards cultural mutation and fragmentation witnessed in Algerian filmmaking during the last fifteen years. Each director’s ties to Algeria and personal motivations as well as aesthetic inclinations in crafting their visual narratives vary based on a range of factors including, but not limited to, financing, crews, actors and use of non-actors, choice of locale(s), and distribution. However, all four are joined by their desire to create images of Algeria, from Algeria and to which Algerian nationals can relate.

Mohamed Chouikh’s “cinéma de l’urgence” is one above all motivated by a need to transcribe histories both from the distant past and the present. It is also marked by a clear political engagement towards the nation as a whole in that it seeks to project a people whose diversity constitutes one of Algeria’s greatest assets but whose fate—as seen in the concluding part of *The Ark of the Desert*—is tragically trapped within a claustrophobic
system leaving no clear hope for younger and future generations. In addition, the use of parables in Chouikh’s cinema makes the director one of the last remaining “meddahs” (story tellers) in the most traditional sense, but also an auteur in his own right. Chouikh’s varied influences and notable education as well as training as a theater actor and director are seen in his films through the form of a certain poetic realism which brings together a unique blend of images where the surrounding reality is intertwined with fictional narratives, as is the case in *The Ark of the Desert*.

Chouikh’s close proximity to Algeria and natural command of open spaces as well as smaller locales such as remote villages distinguishes him from Allouache whose cinematic flair for urban centers (in particular Bab el-Oued’s neighborhood) has earned him worldwide recognition in festival circles. As discussed at some length in chapter three, Allouache’s deterritorialized status positions him differently than Chouikh in that his camera—as shown in *Bab el-Oued City*—is likewise displaced. *Bab el-Oued City* offers a powerful tale of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism within a microcosmic popular urban space. The logistical constraints under which the film was made are precisely what made it an effective narrative whose visual fragmentations reflect and successfully convey the social and political fractures of the time. Furthermore, Allouache’s visual rendering of Islamists fundamentalists makes for a particularly insightful interpretation and gives interested viewers a revealing glimpse of actual events and social behaviors.

Allouache’s depiction of such disruptive presence is likewise rendered insightfully in Bachir-Chouikh’s feature *Rachida* where each and every individual character portraying a terrorist challenges every mediatid and popular (mis-)conception of the terrorist. Gone are the beards, the kamis, and the religious admonitions and in are the guns, the make shift bombs, the jeans, the Nike hats and shoes. In addition, *Rachida* is carefully crafted to substantiate every female character’s fate and position within and vis-à-vis Algerian society. The protagonist’s mother for instance was particularly convincing in her rendition of a divorced woman deeply affected and at loss with her daughter’s continued trauma. Bachir-Chouikh’s long-standing expertise in cinematography (and particularly editing) makes for a film where each pocket narrative is visually carefully crafted around three major themes: gender, community and violence. Specifically, at a stylistic level, Bachir-Chouikh’s use of cutaway shots and a handheld camera successfully convey an impression of instability and
unveil complex dynamics in the relationships between different members of the community where the main narrative has been relocated. In doing so, Bachir-Chouikh’s *Rachida* also acquaints an international audience with a humanistic tale of a North African nation torn by daily terrorism.

Moknèche’s film takes the issue of terrorism to another level in *Viva Laldjérie*, where sex and loves, breaking every taboo in a Muslim society, are stifled by the women’s continued marginal status. The key to understanding Moknèche’s film is thus to be found in his treatment of women and visual rendering of Algiers as a cosmopolitan urban center, following the bloody decade. As made explicit in the film, threats remain in certain parts of Algiers but life (particularly nightlife) is experimenting a newfound renewal. Introducing a night world composed of young people of all social backgrounds, Moknèche’s true innovation lies in his carefully visual and musical crafting and in the importance he gives to sexuality (both heterosexual and homosexual) in social interactions. Taking everyone by surprise, Moknèche breaks away from traditional representations, particularly that of the younger woman, and was able to do so via a diverse cast of professional actors (Algerians and non-Algerians) and extras.

Overall and with regard to terrorism, each filmmaker’s vision unfolds differently on screen. In each case, I have observed common patterns of counter-narratives of the nation, particularly via the use of both individual marginal and ordinary characters. In addition, all four directors have addressed the hot-button issue of the absent state and that of gender. Thus compared to early Algerian cinema, which for the most part closely followed the state’s directives; contemporary Algerian filmmaking is in retrospect best described as a “cinéma de l’urgence” [crisis cinema]. As noted throughout, this particular cinema thematic is essentially motivated by national-based preoccupations that address Algeria’s immediate political, social and cultural reality via a multiplicity of voices as well as languages. The 1990s in Algeria represented a unique political and social phase, dominated by waves of unprecedented terrorism thus inspiring four filmmakers differently yet similarly in that they all sought to cinematically tell the untold. To a certain degree, I have sought to look at each film in terms of each filmmaker’s position in relation to Algeria but also as an open window into one of Algeria’s most problematic and complex eras. One of the most essential issues for these directors at the time of filming was to remain as close to Algeria as possible. Because of their
determination, beliefs and personal motives, each director succeeded in adding substantial films to a growing corpus of works exclusively concerned with Algeria and its peoples. Furthermore, each film analyzed in this dissertation reveals a successful combination of techniques and plural narratives asserting Algeria’s inherent diversity thus positing the nation as a site of tensions, fractures and competing ideologies. While often not yet able to reach wider audiences, Algerian filmmakers continue to underscore the importance of recording—even if fictionally—narratives emerging from years of terrorism and nationally-lived trauma.

My analysis of Chouikh, Bachir Chouikh, Allouache and Moknèche sheds light on some of the key difficulties faced by filmmakers whose projects’ concretization depends crucially on the interest and generosity of external funding parties. At the same time, I have noted that the commitment of these four Algerian directors to examining the bloody events, their beginning and/or aftermath, clearly illustrates a need to “repair” Algeria’s broken and missing image to the world. At times, I have also suggested that co-production agreements and other pre- and post-production constraints might hinder or compromise the directors’ position and commitment vis-à-vis Algeria. Although difficult to assert with precision, these compromises are best noticeable via certain components such as the choice of language, actors, crews and so forth.

Although recent cinematic productions have emerged over the past decade, many of these films did not receive the attention they so greatly deserved. For various reasons and unlike other cinemas of the Arab world, the painstaking and often dangerous efforts of Algerian directors have too often gone unnoticed. As a result, Algerian-directed features have not fared well on the global media scene and remain omitted from a formidable global media playground where select cinematic works are embraced by growing audiences. Most independent films from Third World regions or those directed by displaced directors, even though lacking in commercial power, are typically viewed as being bearers of various cultures and places. Some of them have succeeded in making a place for themselves (New Iranian cinema for instance) but for Algerian-directed films, that place has yet to be made. For all the uncertainty of Algerian-directed productions, the “cinéma de l’urgence” is providing an opportunity for a new breed of filmmakers (such as Nadir Moknèche) to contribute to the making of new images of a nation who after a long absence from the
audiovisual global scene is now—more assertively than ever—expressing a need to see itself on screen as well as being seen.

1988
La citadelle (Mohamed Chouikh)

1989
Rose des sables (Mohamed Rachid Benhadj)
Hassan niya (Ghaouti Bendeddouche)

1990
De Hollywood à Tamanrasset (Mohammed Zimmouri)
Les enfants des néons (Brahim Tsaki)
Le cri des hommes (Okacha Touita)

1991
Le clandestin (Benamar Bakhti)
Ombres blanches (Said Ould-Khelifa)
Sahara Blues (Rabah Bouberras)

1992
Automne-Octobre à Alger (Malik Lakhdar-Hamina)
Radhia (Mohammed Lamine Merbah)
Marathon Tam (Rabie Benmokhtar)
Touchia (Mohammed Rachid Benhadj)
Le troisième acte (Rachid Ben Brahim)

1993
Amour interdit (Sid Ali Fettar)
L’honneur de la tribu (Mohammed Zimmouri)
Le démon au féminin (Hafsa Zinai-Koudil)
Errances-ou-Terre en cendres (Djafar Djarmadi)
Ya Ouled (Djarar Djarmadi)
Youcef-la légende du septième dormant (Mohamed Chouikh)

1994
Le portrait (Hadj Rahim)
Bab el Oued City (Merzak Allouache)
La nostalgie du monde (Rabah Bouberras)

1995
Machaho (Belkacem Hadjadj)

1996
Salut Cousin! (Merzak Allouache)
La colline oubliée (Abderahmane Bouguermouth)

1997
L’Arche du désert (Mohammed Chouikh)
100% Arabica (Mohammed Zimmouri)
La montagne de Baya (Azzedine Meddour)
L’albero dei destini sospesi-Trees of Suspended Fates (Mohamed Rachid Benhadj)
Question d'honneur (Abderrazak Hellal)
Sous les pieds des femmes (Rachida Krim)
Les résistants (Yahia Debboub)

1998
Alger-Beyrouth, pour mémoire (Mahmoud Zemmouri)

1999
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2000
Mirka (Mohammed Rachid Benhadj)
Le harem de Mme Osmane (Nadir Moknèche)

2001
L’autre monde (Abdelkrim Bahloul)
La Voisine (Ghaouti Bendeddouche)

2002
Rachida (Yamina Bachir-Chouikh)

2003
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Cheira Belguellaoui was born in France, where she received her baccalaureate from the Lycée Joffre, Montpellier. She then pursued part of her undergraduate studies at Paul Valéry University (Montpellier, France) with a concentration in English and Russian and a minor in contemporary French literature. Following seven years of travel and work in the United States for the Urban League of Portland (a non-profit organization), she returned to Europe and completed her undergraduate studies with a focus on French and Francophone studies at Birkbeck College, University of London. Upon her relocation to the US, from 2001 to 2003 she studied for her Masters in French Literature at The Catholic University of America (Washington, D.C.) where she also taught French language courses. From 2003 to 2007, she pursued her doctoral studies at Florida State University.