PALGRAVE STUDIES IN ARAB CINEMA

From Outlaw to Rebel

Oppositional documentaries in Contemporary Algeria

Meryem Belkaïd

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Palgrave Studies in Arab Cinema

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Note on Transcription and Translation

The politics of language in Algeria is complex. Choosing one language over the other can often be overinterpreted or misinterpreted. For names of people and institutions, I chose the transcription in French that usually appears in official Algerian documents besides the Arabic language, and I did not add the Arabic transcription to facilitate the reading.

I used the French titles of the films I mention to facilitate finding them on platforms such as YouTube or Vimeo, when available. These are usually the titles used by the filmmakers themselves. It seemed crucial to me that I use some expressions in Arabic and French to describe social, political, and cultural realities and I did translate them for anglophone readers. The interviews with the filmmakers and producers were conducted mainly in French and in Algerian Arabic; the sections transcribed or paraphrased in this book are my own translation.

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Introduction

Algerian cinema is born an outlaw and remained a rebel—
Mouny *Berrah*

We see the village of Ghassira in the Aurès region, where the Algerian War of Independence symbolically started in 1954 and near where the first images of Algerian cinema were shot. Fifty years later, another Algerian filmmaker's camera meanders through a place that seems completely abandoned by the authorities. In one of the village's classrooms, Malek Bensmaïl captures the cheerful faces of young children struggling to answer their teacher's questions about the history of their country. The students can't quite identify which country colonized Algeria and, in addition to France, give several answers as improbable as Mauritania, Spain, Australia, Brazil, and the United States. In this one charged scene, Bensmaïl's iconic documentary, *La Chine est encore loin* (2008), summarizes with humor the disconnect between the official discourse that keeps praising the narrative of the nationalist struggle, and the reality of the inhabitants of contemporary Algeria who appear not all that obsessed by a past glorified and often manipulated by the State.

This book is born from a willingness to explore the meaning and extent of this disconnect without seeing it as a sign of denial or ignorance that can be corrected by a deeper and more lucid analysis of contemporary Algeria, and of the weight of its colonial past. Is it possible to understand Algeria not systematically or exclusively through the lens of its colonial past, without being accused of minimizing its lasting impact? Is there a way to talk about Algeria as a young independent nation, with a focus on

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endogenous processes and evolutions? How can one make space for a reality which is crucial, but not always valued academically, politically, or institutionally? If Algerian documentary at its birth aimed to resist colonial rule, what are Bensmaïl and the post-independence generation of documentary makers up against?

The magnitude of the legal, physical, and symbolic violence exercised by the French state to colonize and occupy Algeria has been studied and shown in many works from different disciplines that cannot be fully listed here. Decolonial perspectives such as those developed by historians like Todd Shepard and Françoise Vergès insist on showing that decolonization is an ongoing process and invite us to be wary of a deceptive frame that freezes the colonial violence in the past.[1] Historians such as Malika Rahal, Muriam Halleh Davis, Marnia Lazreg, James MacDougal, and Natalya Vince situate the violence exercised by France within a wider understanding of colonial rule and domination.[2] In her important book, *Le trauma colonial: Une enquête sur les effets psychiques et politiques contemporains de l'oppression coloniale en Algérie*, psychoanalyst Karima Lazali analyzes the enduring psychological impact of colonial violence in contemporary Algeria. Jill Jarvis, in her book *Decolonizing memory. Algeria and the Politics of Testimony*, shows how literature can account for all the losses, massacres, epidemics, and famines that took place during the French colonial rule.[3]

My book, while acknowledging the importance of these works, wishes to step slightly aside by showcasing Algerian film—and more specifically Algerian documentary—and link them to current socio-political realities on the ground in Algeria, thus contributing to a growing body of work on current issues in the Maghreb in general and Algeria in particular. It is, for example, very much aligned with Natalya Vince and Walid Benkhaled's

[1] Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France*. Cornell University Press, 2006; Françoise Vergès, *Le Ventre des femmes: Capitalisme, racialisation, féminisme*. Albin Michel, 2017.

[2] Malika Rahal, "Fused together and Torn Apart: Stories and Violence in Contemporary Algeria," *History and Memory 24*, no.1, spring/summer 2012: 118–151; Muriam Haleh Davis and James McDougall, eds., "The Afterlives of the Algerian revolution," *JADMAG 2*, no.1, June 2014; Marnia Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad*. Princeton University Press, 2007; Natalya Vince, *The Algerian War, The Algerian Revolution*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

[3] Jill Jarvis, *Decolonizing Memory. Algeria and the Politics of Testimony*. Duke University Press, 2021.

ongoing project "Generation Independence: A People's History" that explores creative ways to make Algerian post-independence histories visible and audible to wider audiences. They respond to a context where Algerian public history continues to be dominated by retellings of the colonial and anti-colonial nationalist past and where the international lens remains focused on the war of independence.

What if the young children in Malek Bensmaïl film were paradoxically right? What if France were not the key element in an indeed complex equation? What can be said about Algeria and its cultural production when we rely on frameworks that are not forever legible only in relation to France? What understanding of the country can we have when we come back to simple yet nevertheless vital questions: who are the Algerians today? What do their daily lives look like? What languages do they speak? What are their desires, fears, and struggles? What are their beliefs and political dreams? What makes them laugh or cry? Are they that obsessed with France? Where do they come from, and why do they behave as they do? And finally: are they that different from what is revealed in cultural production?

These questions are the ones that have been on my mind for a long time as an Algerian who, even if she lives abroad, still considers herself as an insider, and is active in defending democracy and freedom of speech in Algeria. I am deeply convinced that within the ongoing field of Francophone studies, this perspective can contribute to the understanding of contemporary Algeria without having to constantly link it to France. Algeria has been an under-researched area (in English) and will, I feel, begin to feature increasingly heavily in university courses in the anglophone world. I am hopeful that my diverse personal and professional experience throughout Algeria, Tunisia, France, and the United States and my positionality as an Algerian scholar who studied at a French University and has been teaching for more than eight years in a liberal arts college in the United States of America will provide a capacious and original perspective on my country.

Algerian Identities

Following the war for independence (1954–1962), the bureaucratic state controlled by Algeria's sole political party the *Front de libération nationale* (FLN) and populated by members of the *Armée de libération nationale* (ALN) manipulated narratives about the Algerian past to construct a

mythical version of the nationalist struggle.[4] To serve the party's political ends and create a cohesive national history, the official discourse has omitted stories of internecine struggles deep within the "nationalist family" and sidestepped many crucial aspects of the decolonization process. The FLN's nationalism has thus proved to be a new form of domination after colonization and post-independence. Historian Mohammed Harbi has insisted on the myth of a *peuple homogène* ("homogenous people") and *table rase* ("clean slate") as a creation of the FLN during the nationalist struggle. More recently the psychoanalyst Karima Lazali has insisted also on how pluralism, after the independence, was banned in Algeria—not only political pluralism but also of languages, cultures, and pasts. According to her, accepting democracy would have meant dealing with and organizing a plurality of opinion and identities which the FLN party refused.[5]

The FLN's discourse of unity after 1962 has indeed erased memories and, with those memories, the diversity of the Algerian identity and the challenges faced by Algerian citizens living in marginalized and abandoned territories. The FLN leadership systematically resorted to constructing a mythological understanding of the past that would justify its own power, a myth that rejected the complexity, nuances, and paradoxes of Algerian history. The Algerian quest for an identity that has been attacked and undermined by the colonial ideology has been hindered also by an artificial foreshortening of the country's past and an unconscionable blurring of its present.

Algerian identity is inherently characterized by multiplicity: Amazigh, Arab, Muslim, Ottoman, Francophone, and more. Algerian identities might logically have been expected to emerge in post-colonial formation as marked by a rich profusion of beliefs, practices, and traditions from the Islamic and Greco-Roman-Christian traditions, and by a diverse range of ideas. The colonial trauma, in large part, but also the nationalists' negation of this diversity are among the factors leading to the Civil War that in the 1990s epitomized the struggle to establish the meaning of Algerian national identity. Legends are necessary for building "imagined communities,"[6] but the fabrication of false histories and the imposition of

[4] Mohammed Harbi, *1954. La guerre commence en Algérie*. Éditions Complexe, 1984.

[5] Pierre Daum, "Le monstre dans le placard. La violence des années 1990 et ses conséquences. Interview de Karima Lazali, psychanalyste", in Karima Dirèche (Dir.), *L'Algérie au présent. Entre résistances et changements*. IRMC-Kartala, 2019, p. 271.

[6] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 2002.

a special, invented heroic identity can also be used to justify exclusion and even violence. More dangerously, violence is often promoted through cultivating a sense of inevitability about an allegedly unique and often unflinching identity that citizens are supposed to embody, and which makes extensive demands on them. It is in the context of such fabricated histories that in the 1980s a clandestine and rising Islamist movement aimed to impose Islam as the main—if not indeed the only—attribute of Algerian identity.

This gesture effectively erased other facets of the present and the past, even though the nationalist state had previously embraced erasure.[7] The official discourse of the FLN party after the independence, and especially after the failed attempted coup of Tahar Zbiri against Boumediene in 1967, gave indeed an important place to the *Association des oulémas musulmans algériens* in the person of Ibn Badis and minimized, if not erased, all the other nationalist actors, effectively placing Islam at the center of the nationalist struggle that is often described in history textbooks as a *jihad*. Thus, both the discourse of state authority and the later emerging narrative of the fundamentalists disfigured the heterogeneous culture and identities of Algerians, a process that both generated and maintained ongoing catastrophe. As historian Sophie Bessis shows—and this is true for many Arab countries including Algeria—culturalist and nationalist public policies and speeches giving only visibility to "Islamic modernity" condemned other positions, expressed outside the religious framework, to non-existence.[8]

Major protests began in 1988, especially in Algiers and the nation's other urban centers, and the state answered with a violent repression. The protests nevertheless resulted in a democratic opening. After years of authoritarianism and exclusive governance by the FLN, the constitution was amended, political parties were legalized, and free elections were organized. During that period, 60 political parties were created, and the State recognized the right to freedom of speech and allowed independent and even satirical newspapers, new radio channels, and innovative TV shows. Most importantly, free elections were organized for the first time since independence. The Islamist party, the *Front islamique du salut* (FIS)

[7] James MacDougal, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria*. Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 16.

[8] Sophie Bessis, *La Double impasse. L'universel à l'épreuve des fondamentalismes religieux et marchands*. Éditions La découverte, 2014, p. 200.