PALGRAVE STUDIES IN ARAB CINEMA

Algerian Cinema in Forty Five Lessons

Art, Politics and Social Change

Ahmed Bedjaoui
Foreword by Nabil Boudraa

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Palgrave Studies in Arab Cinema

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Samirah Alkassim is an experimental documentary filmmaker and Assistant Professor of Film Theory at George Mason University. She is the co-editor of the Palgrave Studies in Arab Cinema and her publications include the co-authored book The Cinema of Muhammad Malas (Palgrave, 2018), contributions to Cinema of the Arab World: Contemporary Directions in Theory and Practice (Palgrave, 2020), the Historical Dictionary of Middle Eastern Cinema, 2nd Edition (Rowman and Littlefield, 2020), as well as chapters in Refocus: The Films of Jocelyne Saab (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), Gaza on Screen (forthcoming 2022), and text book Global Horror: Hybridity and Alterity in Transnational Horror Film (Cognella Academic Publishing, forthcoming 2022) which she co-edited with Ziad El-Bayoumi Foty. She is currently writing a book, A Journey of Screens in 21st Century Arab Film and Media (Bloomsbury, forthcoming 2023) and editing a documentary about Jordanian artist Hani Hourani. She holds an MFA in Cinema from San Francisco State University and a BA in English Literature from Oberlin College.

Nezar Andary is Assistant Professor of Film and Literature at Zayed University in the College of Humanities and Sustainability Sciences. He has published literary translations, poetry, and articles on Arab documentary, and researched the relationship of Arab cinema to the recent Arab uprisings. Among his many involvements in Abu Dhabi, he directed a multilingual play for the Abu Dhabi Book Fair and organized an Environmental Documentary Film Series. In addition, he served as Artistic Director for Anasy Documentary Awards in 2010 and Artistic Director for the documentary series Perspectives and Retrospectives in 2013. He holds a PhD from the University of California, Los Angeles and was a Fulbright recipient conducting research in Syria.

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Ahmed Bedjaoui
University of Algiers III
Dely Ibrahim, Algeria

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In memory of Yamina Bachir-Chouikh

Foreword

Unfortunately, Algerian cinema has not had the recognition and coverage it deserves, particularly in American academia.

Algeria is a nation resplendent with a rich tapestry of history, culture, and diverse landscapes. It has also given birth to a cinematic legacy that is both captivating and profound. Algerian cinema is, in this regard, an interesting journey through history, culture, and the human experience, reflecting the struggles, triumphs, and aspirations of the Algerian people.

Ahmed Bedjaoui's book serves as a tribute to this remarkable journey of Algerian cinema, tracing its evolution from its humble beginnings to its current status as a force to be reckoned with on the global stage. This book is also an exploration into the vast expanse of Algerian filmography, with a fascinating mosaic of narratives, aesthetics, and socio-political contexts that have shaped this artistic form. In this regard, Algerian cinema is a testament to the resilience, creativity, and spirit of a nation that has weathered storms, overcome obstacles, and continuously evolved to reflect the ever-changing fabric of Algerian society. It is a cinema that invites us to explore the depths of the human experience, to question, to empathize, and to transcend borders.

If there was one person who could sketch an excellent overview of Algerian cinema, it would be, without any doubt, Ahmed Bedjaoui, known by his compatriots as "Monsieur Cinéma." With more than five decades of experience in this *septième art* as a film professor, critic, producer, TV host, and organizer of film festivals and commissions,

Bedjaoui shares valuable information and vision that cannot be found in most publications on Algerian cinema. His uniqueness also lies in the fact that he is an insider-outsider. He knows Algerian cinema from within and for long decades, but he also examines it from outside as an academic and film critic.

An Insider's Perspective on Algerian Cinema

While other scholars, such as Guy Austin and Roy Armes, have successfully explored Algerian cinema, Bedjaoui's contribution stands out as that of an insider. Not merely because he is Algerian, but because he has exerted a significant influence within the Algerian film industry.

In his work, particularly *Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film* (Indiana University Press, 2005), Roy Armes explores the cinemas of the Maghreb, which includes Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. His analysis reveals that these cinemas, born post-independence in the 1960s, share commonalities despite their separate histories. They have all relied on state support, with Algerian cinema serving as a key propaganda tool for the government during the 1970s and early 1980s. Armes discusses the influence of France, the former colonizing power, and the independent auteur nature of Maghrebian filmmakers who often address social issues, particularly gender relations, through a predominant style of realism. He also notes the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers, including women, who are shaping the future of cinema in the Maghreb.

On the other hand, Guy Austin's *Algerian National Cinema* (Manchester University Press, 2012) provides a dynamic, detailed, and up-to-date analysis of how film has depicted this often misunderstood nation. He covers key films from *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) to *Mascarades* (2008), offering insights into Algerian history and the national film industry. Austin discusses various themes and genres within Algerian cinema, such as anti-colonial struggle, gender representations, Berber cinema, and films depicting the "black decade" of the 1990s.

As I mentioned above, Bedjaoui, as an insider, provides readers with a fresh and different lens through which to explore the trajectory of Algerian cinema since its inception. His career commenced at the Cinémathèque Algérienne, where he collaborated with the pioneers of national cinema between 1966 and 1972. During this vibrant period, creativity flourished, and each film became a pivotal moment in shaping our cinematic identity. From 1969 to 1988, Bedjaoui hosted télé-ciné club

programs, sharing his passion for the seventh art with hundreds of thousands of viewers. His broadcasts not only entertained but also stirred consciences and cultivated a deep love for cinema. Personally, I attribute my own passion for film to his télé-ciné club. I vividly recall my childhood in the late 1970s and early 1980s, eagerly awaiting his evening TV screenings of classic films, often followed by insightful discussions, sometimes even featuring the filmmakers themselves.

Later, at RTA (Radio Télévision Algérienne), Bedjaoui produced dozens of films between 1976 and 1985, significantly contributing to a golden age of Algerian cinema. However, the winds of change eventually pushed him away from the institution. In 1969, during the PANAF symposium of African filmmakers, Bedjaoui played a crucial role as secretary, facilitating dialogs and exchanges that would shape the future of cinema across the continent. Remarkably, four decades later, in 2009, he produced three films screened at the same festival—an enduring testament to his devotion to African cinema in general, and his unwavering commitment to its growth and development.

In sum, Bedjaoui's book both resembles and differs from Roy Armes' and Guy Austin's books. On the one hand, they all provide valuable perspectives on Algerian cinema, highlighting its historical context, thematic diversity, and the role it plays in reflecting and shaping societal narratives. On the other hand, Bedjaoui's book goes far back by a few decades to include the pre-war era and the very birth of Algerian cinema. Furthermore, Bedjaoui's contribution includes valuable insights, anecdotes, and tidbits which makes the reader feel a certain close connection to both the film and the context surrounding its production.

In addition, through his scholarly work and his involvement in the film industry, Ahmed Bedjaoui has played a key role in documenting and analyzing Algerian cinema, making a lasting impact on how the nation's stories are told and perceived both domestically and internationally. His dedication to the craft and his deep understanding of the medium's power make him a key figure in the history of Algerian cinema.

In this book, Bedjaoui offers us not only the necessary contextual background for a good understanding of Algerian cinema and of Algerian society at large, but also an in-depth analysis of forty-five Algerian films, selected from diverse decades, genres, and directors, all of which tackle various important themes. Bedjaoui invites the readers to embark on a cinematic odyssey that explores the major themes, styles, and milestones that have defined Algerian cinema since its very beginnings. Through the

lens of selected Algerian filmmakers, the readers then delve into the depiction of Algeria's struggle for independence, the exploration of identity and cultural heritage, the complexities of post-colonial realities, and the exploration of universal human experiences.

Furthermore, readers encounter iconic films and visionary directors who have left an indelible mark on the cinematic landscape, both within Algeria and beyond. They will discover the works of pioneers, such as Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina, Mustapha Badie, and Ahmed Rachedi. Similarly, readers will also become acquainted with the post-independence generation of filmmakers, like Merzak Allouache and Rachid Bouchareb, whose brilliant films poetically captured the hopes, dreams, and struggles of a nation finding its place in the world. Readers will also explore the emerging talents of a new generation who bring fresh perspectives and innovative storytelling techniques to the forefront, namely Mounia Meddour, Damien Ounouri, and Karim Moussaoui. More importantly, Bedjaoui sheds light on Algerian women filmmakers of different generations, who have been kept in the dark for so long even though their filmic works proved to be of the highest caliber. In a way, Bedjaoui's book celebrates the contributions of women filmmakers who have defied traditional gender roles, bringing their distinct voices and narratives to the forefront. Assia Djebar, Yamina Bachir-Chouikh, and Djamila Sahraoui, among many others, are perfect examples of Algerian women who produced such captivating films and documentaries and yet they have been forgotten or completely ignored even in their own country. So, Bedjaoui remedies this discrepancy by giving these women filmmakers the place they rightly deserve in his study of Algerian films. In addition, Ahmed Bedjaoui also merits credit for shedding some light on a number of Amazigh (Berber) films, namely Abderrahmane Bouguermouh's *The Forgotten Hill* (1996), Amor Hakkar's *The Yellow House* (2007), and Omar Belkacemi's first feature film *Argu* (2022). Amazigh cinema has certainly progressed a lot since its beginnings in the early 1990s, and several good movies have been produced in the past few years, but, alas, most studies on Algerian cinema have chosen to discount it or simply relegate it to amateur categories. Last but not least, Bedjaoui's book is also an invitation to re-appraise Algerian cinema through the rehabilitation of certain little known works, such as the films of Moussa Haddad and the production of films for television.

Beyond the films themselves, readers explore the socio-political and cultural contexts that have influenced the trajectory of Algerian cinema. From the early years of state-supported filmmaking to the challenges faced

by filmmakers during tumultuous periods, the readers unravel the intricate relationship between art and society, and between art and the authorities, shedding light on the transformative power of cinema as a tool for reflection, protest, and social change.

In documenting the fascinating journey of Algerian cinema, Ahmed Bedjaoui's book offers a glimpse into a captivating world of visual storytelling that has been both a mirror and a catalyst for the people of Algeria. It is an invitation to discover the hidden gems, the celebrated classics, and the rising stars that have shaped Algerian cinema, leaving an indelible imprint on the collective memory of a nation and inspiring generations to come. The English-speaking audience will, at last, find in this book a most convenient telescope for a good examination of Algerian cinema from its birth to the present day.

Nabil Boudraa
Oregon State University
Corvallis, OR, USA

Introduction by Ahmed Bejaoui

In the last 65 years, including the years preceding independence, Algerian cinema has produced hundreds of films. Quality has always been a high priority and even an imperative for most of the filmmakers. The war of liberation weighed so heavily on the minds of Algerians that it sometimes succeeded in overshadowing an important part of the protracted popular resistance that led to November 1954. For many of my fellow citizens, Algerian cinema was born in the bushes during the war, with pioneers such as Djamel-Eddine Chanderli or René Vautier.

Obviously, the popular national uprising did not occur all at once. On the contrary, it was the result of a series of revolts and political struggles that started right after the French troops landed at Sidi Ferruch in the summer of 1832. The relative obscurity of this fact is present in the artistic field in general and the film sector in particular. Indeed, we cannot forget that the French invasion was carried out with the presence of Orientalist painters embedded in the vessels of the colonial armada. As the witnesses and first reporters of the invasion, they became a new brand of propagandists. Compared to these painters, whose artistic representations were designed to celebrate and glorify the military conquest, the Algerians, trapped by their Islamist traditions, could offer no image to express their rejection of this aggression. The painter-reporters, such as Horace Vernet, celebrated the conquest, allowing the invaders to project a glorifying image of the colonization.

One hundred years later, while France was celebrating the centenary of a reign designed to last forever, the advent of a new generation of Algerian painters trained in the French educational system coincided with the emergence and consolidation of a national political movement aspiring to independence, and clearly marked a sharp difference between the colonists and the natives of North Africa. The development of a modern national culture that broke with old behaviors reinforced an image profoundly distinct from that of the occupying power. Many talented artists, including Choukri Mesli, Mohammed Khadda, and M'hamed Issiakhem, who were called "indigenous," put an end to the imbalance in the iconographic representation of identities. We may conclude that if a certain form of Orientalism fed by warmongering writings represented the conquest, justifying at the same time unacceptable exactions and massacres, the emergence of a generation of Algerian artists supported by the national movement fed the imagination of the resistance.

After a century of denial, painters, writers, and stage actors were finally offering an entire population the mirror it needed to project its dreams of freedom. Writers such as Mohammed Dib and Kateb Yacine were among the first to create a clear breach, while providing the national movement with a culture of resistance.

With the reawakening of the national sentiment, the arrival of the first Algerian filmmakers in the audiovisual landscape of the early twentieth century marked a crucial stage in their ability to project an image other than the one reflected by colonial ideology. Was Algerian cinema born after independence, during the war of liberation, or even before, in the 1930s? This question prompts us to revise our records on a schematically taught history. While the war for independence has been massively represented, the films that independent Algerian cinema devoted to the episodes of resistance that happened from the beginning are still very rare, as if Algerian national historiography never existed before November 1, 1954. Two of the greatest episodes of the armed struggle led by Algerians against the colonial invasion have so far been covered by a veil of silence. The long resistance of Emir Abd-el-Kader and that of Sheik El Mokrani and his brother Boumezrag have never been transposed to the screen.

The objective of this book is to analyze some carefully chosen films in order to propose a revised concept of Algerian cinema since its first steps. The selected films will inevitably refer to a historical context which also includes other works produced and directed in the same period or based on a similar theme. Because there have been so many Algerian films

produced over the last 70 years, we had to make a choice—necessarily subjective but systematic—of works that have marked an era or at least a stage in the history of Algerian cinema. In addition to these selected films, we will refer to other productions that can be classified in a factual, thematic, or simply artistic way, while placing them in their historical and social context.

In 1962, following Algeria's independence, socialist principles became the predominant framework for managing the entire economy and imposing authority. Virtually every aspect, including even bakeries, seemed set for nationalization. Conversely, the nascent state promptly mandated equal wages for both genders, compulsory education for all, irrespective of gender, co-education in secondary schools, and unrestricted access to healthcare. Six decades later, over 70% of university students in Algeria are female, and illiteracy, previously at 88% on the eve of independence, had fallen to 25% in 2016. Subsequently, the nationalization of hydrocarbons on February 24, 1971 brought about a profound transformation in the living standards of Algerians.

While these policies have largely benefited the populace, the film industry has endured substantial setbacks due to the shift in ownership from the private to the public sector. The myth of a so-called *cinematographic golden age* associated with the first two decades after independence has long hindered the way the realities of the sector are perceived. The nationalization of the cinema theaters, their transfer to municipalities, the monopoly granted to the state for the distribution and production of films, as well as the refusal to provide the country with film laboratories, have all undermined the development of a once flourishing industry. Of course, quality films have been produced, but in the absence of a film industry and with a network of cinemas condemned in advance to deterioration, can we really speak of a national cinema? It is useful here to recall that Algeria, populated by less than ten million inhabitants, has inherited about 450 theaters equipped with 35mm and a network of mobile projections in 16mm, entirely managed by native Algerians. Even if the European settlers invested in the construction of cinemas, most of these cinemas were run by Algerian professionals who, after independence, acquired them from their owners before being dispossessed by populist measures that have resulted in a general loss of know-how in the sector. The same situation prevails in the field of film distribution. Along with the major American or European companies, many distribution companies initiated and directed by Algerians were created in the

early 1950s. The foreign companies were all nationalized in 1969 and the monopoly of distribution was entrusted to a state agency. Here again, the country has never managed to reconstitute an efficient distribution system.

It should be noted that although national films were exempt from tax, the tax revenues collected from admission tickets largely contributed to the Film Aid Fund created by decree in 1968. We may assert today that almost all national production has been financed through this fund,[1] fed by the entries generated by international films, especially American films. It should also be mentioned that up until the mid-1970s, some Algerian films had spectacular results at the box office. This was the case for *Opium and the Stick,* with more than a million paid admissions and *Inspector Tahar's Holiday* with nearly a million and a half entries. Even more astonishing are the receipts of *Leila et les autres*, a feminist activist film by Sid-Ali Mazif with 650,000 tickets sold. These statistics stand in stark contrast to the few thousand paying spectators who frequent the 20 or so theaters still in commercial operation.

Once the seeds of bureaucratic destruction had been planted, it was easy to foresee the inevitable decay of Algerian cinema. Compared to the poverty of their other resources, the municipalities entrusted with the management of theaters considered them to be a goose with golden eggs for them to exploit. For example, they used the theaters to solve the thorny problem of employment and, as a result, hired staff that quickly became an unbearable burden for the balance of accounts. This situation worsened with the arrival of maintenance and projection equipment renewal deadlines that most town halls could not meet.

Initially, they sub-let part of their cinemas to private individuals who used pirated media such as VHS cassettes, a situation which led to the almost total cessation of ticket sales and consequently, the drying up of the resources of the Film Aid Fund. Of the 450 cinemas in operation in 1962, only 383 were still in operation at the beginning of the 1980s and less than 200 at the end of that decade. This deterioration continued until the early 1990s. With the arrival of a majority of Islamist elected municipal officials, another myth was put in place, attributing the closure of the halls to these elected officials, whose mandate did not last long.

[1] The unique private film production company Casbah Films, producer of *The Battle of Algiers*, was nationalized in 1969.

The reality unfortunately sends us back to the decisions taken during the 1960s in the fervor of the all-socialist group, which condemned these theaters—and with it the whole of cinema—to an inevitable death. So, can we still speak of a golden age of Algerian cinema?

Another question has often been raised: have Algerian films sufficiently testified to the war of liberation? We usually refer to the public sector when speaking about cinema. For 30 years, Algerian Radio and Television (RTA) had a dynamic film production policy. The result was the release (with limited budgets) of the most significant films in this regard. In *Cinémas d'Afrique* dated 2002, we find the following testimony:

> In Algeria, the state, via the ONCIC[2] created in 1967 … has held the effective monopoly of the production, import of films, distribution, and operation of cinemas until early 1991, the date of the beginning of the liberalization of the system. It imposed an almost unique theme on filmmakers: the celebration of the struggle for independence, first political (films exalting the armed resistance) and then economic (films on the "agrarian revolution").
> Unexpectedly, freedom came from the RTA which, under the impetus of its director of productions, Ahmed Bedjaoui had produced quite avant-garde films in 1978–1979 (*Nahla* by Farouk Beloufa, *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* by the novelist Assia Djebar). In 1985, this unique public and unique Radio and Television station split into three organizations, including ENPA,[3] which followed the steps of the RTA in terms of film production.[4]

At a conference delivered during a Tunisian colloquium held in 1968, Mostefa Lacheraf, the sociologist and personal advisor to the President of Algeria, declared:

> It is not at all exaggerated to affirm that heroism in its individual and fractious conception and its often free and romantic finality increasingly invades the Maghreb literary space ... When our writers are invited to lecture on the popular revolution, it is only heroism that is enthusiastically affirmed. But this vein … perpetuates an anachronistic form of nationalism

[2] Office national pour le commerce et l'industrie cinématographiques.

[3] Entreprise nationale de production audiovisuelle.

[4] © *Notre Librairie*. Revue des littératures du Sud. N° 1 4 9. *Cinémas d'Afrique*. October– December.

> that distracts people from the new realities and from the real struggle that implies the transformation of social relations in concrete ways, a far cry from the inhibiting myths and epics of the past.[5]

Undoubtedly, this tendency to glorification at a time when the priority was logically the establishment of a nation state, ultimately explains why we produced more war films than films exploring the war of liberation and the reasons it was fought. The confusion was accentuated by the fact that the cinema was commissioned to write history, whereas it could only provide the testimony of individuals, with history remaining the field of competence of historians. A former journalist, Abdou Benziane, commented: "Mr. Lacheraf wrote these lines about literature," adding that from his point of view, "they cannot apply to cinema."[6] It should be noted that Mostefa Lacheraf preferred to concentrate his efforts on the production of films on the public TV channel. In 1973, President Boumediene decided to put an end to the reign of the two major filmmakers as the managers of the cinema sector and to invest in television as a popular medium rather than a commercial production.

Did we witness the birth of rich careers not only in terms of the number of films made, but of outstanding works? Algerian cinema could be considered a victim of the first-film syndrome, in which subsequent productions cannot match the first. Few are those who have managed to build a long career, marked by a significant number of major works. Finally, was the question related to the number of films or to the why and how? Despite long careers, many Algerian filmmakers are known only for their first film, the rest of their production being of little interest. On the other hand, we have directors like Merzak Allouache, Lakhdar-Hamina, Ahmed Rachedi, Rachid Bouchareb, or Sid-Ali Mazif, who have managed to build rich and very interesting filmographies. The systems of aid based in the first two decades on entries and then on public subsidies have undoubtedly supported the production of author films.

On the other hand, Algeria has had a continuous and successful practice of co-production with films like *Z* or *The Battle of Algiers*. This book is mostly focused on productions entirely funded by Algeria, such

[5] Quoted by Guy Hennebelle in Algérie de la lutte de libération nationale à la révolution agraire, *in Les cinéma nationaux contre Hollywood,* Paris: Cerf-Colet, 2004, p. 219.

[6] Abdou B. Cinéma algérien : thème et version, *Les deux écrans*, No 1, March 1978, p. 11.

as Klein's *Festival culturel panafricain*. We shall present a selection of coproduced films entirely devoted to an episode of the Algerian War for Independence, particularly those of Gillo Pontecorvo and Yacef Saadi. It is interesting to explore the reasons why *The Battle of Algiers* propagated the image of the Algerian War throughout the world, more than hundreds of other Algerian and/or French fictions ever could. We shall also compare the productions of the generation of the first decades and the current one in terms of creativity and capacity to reflect the specificity of Algerian society and culture.

At the origin of the Algerians' love for cinema, we find that, since the early times of the seventh art, our ancestors were present at public presentations. Since the advent of cinematography, the colonial system has always provided the European populations with an important network of film theaters. Wherever there was a church steeple, a cinema was built. Slowly but surely, the Algerians invested in these rooms, a situation which provided a solid cinematic culture to many generations. Paradoxically, most of the films classified under the heading of colonial cinema were produced and directed by filmmakers living and working in France, including Renoir and Duvivier. While the Europeans in Algeria were the majority of the investors in successful commercial activities, it is an Algerian who managed, despite all the obstacles and ostracism, to create the first production company initiated by an indigenous person. His name—Tahar Hannache. He will be the subject of our first analysis.

Prologue: The Demise of Colonial Cinema

Algeria proved to be a fertile landscape for the Lumière brothers' cinematographic pursuits, prompting two of their renowned cameramen, Promio and Mesguish, to establish residence in Algiers.

Film exhibitions appeared very quickly on the Algerian soil occupied by a European power. France has always dreamed of using the Algerian Sahara locations as a new El Dorado for the seventh art, using Hollywood as a model. However, neither the quality nor the quantity of films produced during the colonial era succeeded in giving wings to these ambitions. As Claude Liauzu notes, colonial cinema represented barely 5–6% of the whole French production between the two world wars. Like Jean Renoir or Julien Duvivier, almost all the filmmakers who came to shoot under the exotic sun were established in Europe. Maybe the reason behind this failure was the fact that the European settlers never succeeded in developing a local cinema, independent from the mother country. Most often it was on the occasion of anniversaries, such as the centenary of colonization, that the French state invited so-called "metropolitan" filmmakers to submit their projects. Things have hardly changed in independent Algeria, since at each celebration of the outbreak or the end of the war for independence, budgets are set up to nourish the national historical narrative through the production of films glorifying the national struggle. Our purpose here is to identify the main audiovisual productions which have contributed to the sedimentation of a colonial culture still alive decades after decolonization.