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**Algerian cinema and its accompaniment of the war of national liberation: The film "The Battle of Algiers" as a model**

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**Abstract**

The birth of Algerian cinema is linked to armed struggle, an essential aspect of the war of national liberation. This struggle, adopted by the Algerian people as a method against colonialism, was neither optional nor random. It was scientifically planned to meet the challenges that the Algerian people faced in embracing the war of liberation. Cinema played a crucial role in exposing French colonial oppression. Thanks to their commitment, Algerians have obtained their legitimate right to independence and freedom. Algerian film production began at the same time as the popular revolution against the French occupation between 1954 and 1962. This period played a crucial role in the desire to show the lived reality and to record historical events, especially those related to the Algerian revolution. From the beginning, the revolution used all available audiovisual means to document the struggle of the Algerian people in films reflecting the daily reality of the revolution. Thus, a cinematographic art distinctly linked to struggle emerged, aimed at keeping pace with national history and becoming part of the collective memory. First, the history of cinematographic creation in Algeria is closely linked to the contemporary history of the country, the war of liberation remains the most significant event of the last century both historically and symbolically. And then, understanding the artistic dynamics in Algeria in the post-62 era necessarily involves the first source of inspiration.

**Keywords:** Cinema, Algerian cinema, Audiovisual art, Film Bataille d 'Algérie, Film Eight days of strike, Yassef Saadi, Zahra Zarif

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## **Introduction**

Cinema is defined as the art of animating images to present them to the public. It uses sound and image to reconstruct events on a cell strip. Cinematography, staging and acting are very popular artistic forms, often referred to as the seventh art by audiences.

There are many types of cinematography, including documentary cinematography. The latter aims to communicate real facts in a clear and fluid way to convey an idea or information.

Cinema was born with the invention of photography in 1839. That year, Louis Daguerre invented a process to show a photograph on a board covered with a chemical. Another step towards cinematography was taken in 1882 when Étienne Jules Marey invented chronophotography to photograph birds. The Lumière brothers, manufacturers of photographic equipment, carried out several experiments on moving images, starting with the kinetoscope, first presented in France in 1894, a few months after its presentation in the United States. (Anonymous. 2007).

## **The beginnings of cinema in Algeria**

The birth of Algerian cinema, or "militant cinema", is linked to the period of the "armed struggle" during the war of national liberation. This struggle, adopted by the Algerian people to free themselves from colonialism, was neither optional, nor spontaneous, nor random. (Abboud, 2010) It had to be launched scientifically and deliberately to respond to the challenges faced by the Algerian people and allow them to regain their legitimate right to independence.

The cinematographic effects left by French colonialism are part of the collective memory of the Algerian people, who struggled from the arrival of the French in 1830. French photographers captured images of Algerian society, often depicting the misery and deprivation caused by colonialism.

The "tribal cinema" was in reality the cinema of the colonizer, putting forward European adventurers and French military commanders in search of glory in a country that was not theirs. The natives appeared in distorted images, not reflecting the lived reality. (Abdul, 2006)

When Algeria finally gained its independence, cinema became the authentic reflection of the Algerians who had lived through the period of struggle with its tragedies. Since the late nineteenth century, Algeria has served as a film setting, attracting many filmmakers. Algerian scenes were filmed by Félix Mesguich in 1897, attracting many silent filmmakers.

After the Second World War, many films were shot in Algeria until the outbreak of the revolution in 1954. (Anonymous. 2008) France, having linked its occupation of Algeria to political, economic, social and religious factors, used cinema to consolidate its colonial presence. (Bouaziz, 2007) Cinema was used to prove colonial legitimacy and encourage settlement in Algeria. (Butqa, 2012)

Between the First World War and the war of liberation in 1954, more than 50 films were shot in Algeria by predominantly French companies. Very few Algerian actors participated in these films. During the Second World War, the French authorities set up a film distribution system in rural areas inhabited by Algerians, for propaganda purposes.

### **The Emergence of Revolutionary Cinema in Algeria**

Cinema played a crucial role in the struggle for the liberation of Algeria. The Algerian Liberation Army created a documentary film unit under the direction of René Vautier, a French documentary filmmaker and supporter of the Algerian National Liberation Front (Aziz. 2015). One of his most important works on the Algerian revolution is his film "L 'Algerie en flammes", which was banned for undermining "French internal security".

The film "Sakia Sidi Youssef", directed by Albert Altman and René Vautier, at the request of Frantz Fanon and Abane Ramdane for the film departments of the National Liberation Front, exposes the massacre perpetrated by colonialism in the village of Sakia Sidi Youssef, on the Algerian-Tunisian border. This film sensitized world public opinion to the brutality of French colonialism (Aziz. 2015).

In 1957, the Algerian provisional government created a propaganda organ for film production in Tunisia, headed by Mustapha Kateb, a great filmmaker and director. He was accompanied by

Mohieddine Bachtarzi, Sayed Ali Kouiret (Lahyani, 2015), and others. This troupe played a key role in presenting the Algerian cause to Arab and international audiences (Allal, 2015). Many short films were produced, mainly by Djamel Gacem, Ahmed Rachedi and Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina, who later became one of the most renowned directors.

The beginnings of Algerian cinema: Algerian cinema began later than other Arab cinema experiences in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq (Butqa, 2012). The true emergence of feature-length fiction took place after independence. Of the 150 feature films made since independence, 40 deal with the war of liberation.

Despite the evolution of production methods in Algeria, war remains the main theme of Algerian films, with varied perspectives on this conflict. Zahra Zarif, a lawyer and human rights activist, criticized the early leaders of film production, saying: “They must understand that those who worked in cinema after independence had neither the experience nor the financial means to produce hundreds of films about the revolution, but they still made their contribution to this field, which today needs more attention” (Mansur, Shalabi,, & Ayad, 2009).

Historical cinema has grown culturally, entertaining a wide audience. As an audiovisual art, it touches all cultural and social levels. It is also an important tool for social and ideological change, promoting cultural awareness. The independent Algerian authorities have used revolutionary cinema as a mass media. During the “maturity phase” after independence, Algerian cinema focused on the reality of Algerian society and the dreams for which the people had sacrificed themselves, moving from resistance to self-resistance. Historical cinema began with Mustapha Badie's "La Nuit a peur du soleil" (1965) and Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina's "Le Vent des Aurès" (1966), followed by films like Mohamed Zinet's "Vive la mariée" (1971) and Rabah Laaribi's "Le toit et la famille" (1982), among other serious works (Bliya, 2006).

### **Cinema in Line with the War of Liberation:**

Algerian film production began at the same time as the popular revolution against the French occupation between 1954 and 1962. This period played a crucial role in the desire to show the

lived reality and to record historical events, especially those related to the Algerian revolution. From the beginning, the revolution used all available audiovisual means to document the struggle of the Algerian people in films reflecting the daily reality of the revolution. Thus, a cinematographic art distinctly linked to struggle emerged, aimed at keeping pace with national history and becoming part of the collective memory (Abdul, 2006).

Historical cinema includes films that depict events of the past, whether recent or distant. These films can be documentaries that have recorded events in real time or fiction where actors embody historical characters (Al-Aris, 2005). Although there are few Algerian films on the different phases of the revolution, some have managed to make a place for themselves in international film festivals. The most famous is "The Battle of Algiers" (1965) directed by Gillo Pontecorvo. This film, one of the largest produced by an Arab country since the beginning of film production in Egypt, captivated many viewers with its realism and the quality of its acting and directing.

This film is a true representation of what happened in Algeria during the war of liberation against French colonialism. The November 1 revolution, led by the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the National Liberation Army (ALN), expressed the popular will for freedom and independence (Asli, 1986). The leaders of the revolution sought to use every opportunity, including the internationalization of the Algerian cause, asking for the support of international and regional institutions, including the Arab League for political, material and moral support (Sahuli, 2010).

Faced with the heroic operations of the revolutionaries, the French government tried to conceal the truth by publishing biased allegations. Many Arab countries have used the press and radio to support the Algerian cause and make it known locally and internationally (Abboud, 2010). The beginning of the war of liberation, on the night of November 1, 1954, was marked by a rigorous organization, testifying to a serious and determined plan (Zubayri, 1984). The declaration of 1 November explicitly called on Algerians, men and women, to free themselves, providing for heroic sacrifices, including young heroines (Shirazi, 2015).

### **Maseo's attempt to isolate the people from his leadership:**

The French responded to the popular revolution with war, increasing the number of soldiers in Algeria. They burned schools, killed defenceless children and women, and bombed schools and villages with internationally banned weapons. For the colonizer, these acts of violence were acts of pacification (Qabaili, 2012). However, the National Liberation Army perfected its methods, especially after the Siam Conference of 20 August 1956, and confronted colonial forces in several decisive battles. For their part, the French applied a repressive policy against the masses, trying to isolate the people from the Liberation Army. They hoped to weaken the latter by depriving it of human and logistical support.

On 7 January 1956, the colonial authorities placed all the responsibilities and powers of the civilian police under the command of General Maceo, marking the beginning of the period of "paratroopers" or "major means". On January 14, 1957, Maceo threatened to loot goods and vandalize stores that would comply with National Liberation Front instructions to participate in the strike (Shrayt, & Mili, 1965).

### **The social aspect of the "Battle of Algiers"**

The Battle of Algiers refers to the daring commando operations carried out in the capital between the end of 1956 and September 1957, in response to decisions taken by the leaders of the National Liberation Front (FLN) after the Fasting Conference (Shrayt, & Mili, 1965). This conference was held on 20 August 1956 in the village of Ivri, west of Bejaia, under the presidency of the Arab martyr Ben M'hidi. It helped establish an integrated strategy for the revolution (Farkous, 2005).

Faced with repression, raids and starvation imposed by colonial forces, the FLN, despite its clandestine activities, was the only truly influential organization in Algeria (Farkous, 2005). At the Fasting Conference, it was decided to develop a tight strategy around which the people would rally to support the intensity of French repression.

In this context, the film shows that FLN officials in the capital gave orders to compensate for the actions of the French administration in the social interactions of Algerians, including young men

and women preparing to marry in front of a civil registrar affiliated with the revolutionary organization. For the eight-day strike, launched by the Front, to succeed, the neighbourhood committees, formed by the families, were asked to provide the necessary equipment for the duration of the strike, to offer help and to take care of the poor and needy as a sign of social solidarity.

### **The Politics of Mass Repression:**

Zahra Zarif, a heroine of the "Battle of Algiers" and number two after Yasif Saadi in the military organization of the "independent zone" of the Kasbah, placed a bomb at Milk Bar, a meeting place of the pieds-noirs, on September 30, 1956 (Mansur, Shalabi, & Ayad, 2009). She stated that "it was France that named what happened in the capital between January 1957 and September of the same year the 'Battle of Algiers' in order to justify the daily repression of the inhabitants of the besieged city by all factions of the French army: the red hats, the misguided infantry, the police and the gendarmerie" (Mansur, Shalabi, & Ayad, 2009). The film "The Battle of Algiers" begins with a scene familiar to Algerians where a person is tortured to obtain a confession, even a false one. The traces of torture are obvious. This type of physical and psychological torture was practiced by French experts with long experience in Indochina. The French military authorities saw the interrogation as a way to calm the situation in Algeria and restore order. To this end, the administration has set up specialized agencies, including the "D-O-P Operational Protection Detachment" created in 1957 to interrogate suspects (Tah, 2012).

### **The place of Algerian women in the liberation revolution:**

The revolution of November 1 impacted the social aspects of Algerians by abolishing the difference between men and women in the duty to liberate the homeland. Women engaged with the Liberation Front and the Liberation Army, taking on dangerous commando responsibilities and operations, convinced of their effective role on all fronts (Jouiba, 2007). Aware of their responsibility to their religion and their homeland, they rose up and joined the ranks of the armed

revolution with faith and determination, strengthening the fighters (Jouiba, 2007). The revolution went beyond the mere liberation of women and men, giving women an active role. Zahra Zarif claimed that the stories about him and about Jamila Bouhired and Hassiba Ben Bouali were "false scenarios launched by the French intelligence services to tarnish their image and honor, by exploiting the conservative values of Algerians" (Mansur, Shalabi, & Ayad, 2009). The Arab martyr Ben Mehidi, famous for his saying "Throw the revolution into the street, the people will embrace it", was a legendary figure of the revolution, effective in the organization of forces and the management of the conflict (Asli, 1986). He settled in the capital with Ben Youssef Ben Khadda and Aban Ramadan, organizing military operations in the streets and neighborhoods.

### **Eight-day strike:**

The film "The Battle of Algiers" illustrates the popular heroism from the declaration of the revolution in 1954 until independence. The eight-day strike was organized to intensify revolutionary and political action, involving all segments of the Algerian people. The film contains no invented story, it formulates the real events of the Algerian revolution against French colonialism, which lasted one hundred and thirty-two years, until the people, led by the National Liberation Front, managed to expel it. The film recounts a period of the Great Liberation Revolution in Algiers, defended by the people against French colonialism. The Coordination and Implementation Committee decided on the famous eight-day strike from 28 January to 4 February 1957, coinciding with the United Nations General Assembly. The gravity of the situation in Algeria pushed the French army into unprecedented actions in an attempt to suppress the national movement, but the situation was more complex than they imagined. An article by French journalist Claude Purdy in the journal *Observatoire France* compared the methods of the Gestapo to French actions in Algeria, highlighting the severe repression (Shrayt, 1955). Despite the suffering, this epic marked a historic turning point where the Algerian people demonstrated their determination to achieve independence. To ensure the success of the strike, committees asked families to provide the necessary materials and support the poor and destitute.



**The strike marks a definitive break with fear and hesitation:**

This strike launched a revolutionary wave after the fasting conference, where all the people openly confronted French colonialism. It put an end to the hesitation, fear and shenanigans with which colonialism and its agents tried to hinder the revolution. The "Battle of Algiers" was a qualitative turning point in the liberation revolution, because it brought armed action to the heart of the capital, under the eyes of the international press and diplomatic missions. Thus, there was no longer only talk of a few rebels in the mountains, but of the confirmation by the Algerian people, through the strike, of their adherence to the liberation revolution and their destiny linked to the National Liberation Front.

Zahra Zarif, a lawyer and human rights activist, highlighted in an interview with the Al-Shorouk Online newspaper the strikes that the Front was conducting against the French army from the capital, despite the differences in strength and equipment. Operations included the placement of bombs in French army centers, bars and police stations, such as the bombing of the La Corniche casino on June 9, 1957, and the assassination of some traitors and tyrants. (Mansur, Shalabi, & Ayad, 2009) In the film, as in reality, Algerian women attracted the attention of the Somme conference, which focused on their ability to lead the armed struggle for a long time, thus becoming examples of courage. (Mansur, Shalabi, & Ayad, 2009)

On the ground, guerrillas and commandos emerged in the streets of Algiers. Figures like Yassef Saadi, Hassiba Ben Bouali, Ali Lapointe, Omar Yassef "Al-Sagheer", Mahmoud Bouhamidi, Talib Abdel Rahman and others have marked this period, some sacrificing themselves in the heart of the capital. Among the actors embodying these guerrillas, Ibrahim Hajjaj, playing the role of Ali Lapointe, impressed all the film's viewers, despite the lack of formal film training, being a graduate of the Kasbah school with its alleys and its popular Dziri poetic language. (Zawi, 2012)

The symbolism of "Ali Lapointe" remains deeply rooted in memory and continues to fascinate the world more than five decades after French paratroopers blew up the hideout of "Ali" and three other fedayeen, "Hassiba Ben Bouali", "Mahamou Bouhamidi" and "Omar Saghir", in the popular Kasbah district at dawn on October 8, 1958. Ali Lapointe, born in a metropolis, had a

difficult childhood that led him to work early on farms, before joining the fedayeen of the capital after his release from prison. He carried out several attacks on centers of the colonial army and police. (Shirazi, 2014)

In a lengthy interview with Al-Shorouk Online TV, activist Yasif Saadi ( who portrays the character of C. Jaafar in the film), who took over the direction of the independent region of the capital, revealed that he presented his famous film, which he participated in the writing, theater and production, "The Battle of Algiers" in 1966, to French parties, before the Italian Gilo Pontecorvo later directed it. Saadi said, “ When I showed the film to the French parties immediately after independence, they insulted and insulted me, and then I decided to go to Italy and offered to work on Pontecorvo, which embodied the Battle of Algiers.” (Bin Ammar, 2012)

The "Battle of Algiers" ended in military failure, as the film shows, after less than a year when General Maceo's forces managed to dismantle the bases of the "autonomous zone". Despite this, this battle marked a great political victory by changing the course of the Algerian liberation revolution and drawing global attention to the Algerian issue. From 1957, Algiers became a media hotspot where hundreds of international journalists revealed the violence committed by the French army against unarmed civilians. This revealed to the world the secret actions of France, which, until then, was perceived as a model of respect for human rights that came to "civilize" the indigenous people (Mansur, Shalabi, & Ayad, 2009).

Although Maceo temporarily neutralized Algiers, the Algerian revolution continued with determination despite great popular sacrifices (Khalifi, 2010). Maceo, in charge of "liquidating the revolution", mobilized many officers experienced in France's previous wars, including General Aussaresses, known as the "godfather of torture in Algeria". Aussaresses was involved in the capture, torture and execution of revolutionary figures like Ben Mahidi, a symbol of the Algerian struggle for independence. These actions were confirmed by Aussaresses himself in his 2001 memoirs. He also ordered the assassination of Ali Bu Mengele, which reinforced his reputation as a "serial killer" (Libération, 2013).

The torture practices of French forces during the Battle of Algiers, authorized by Maceo, sparked outrage in the press and political circles in France, although the French government did not officially change its colonial position in Algeria (Zait, 2013). For example, a French paratrooper testified that he personally buried a torture victim (Farkous, 2005). These revelations had a significant impact but did not influence French colonial policy in Algeria.

### **Invite free Europeans to join the revolution:**

One of the paragraphs of the Fasting Conference states that the revolution is not aimed at expelling Europeans, and condemns the slogans of some, such as “Kriwo”, who seek to intimidate minorities and distance them from the Front and the National Liberation Army. These slogans, such as “The truth or the coffin”, are rejected. The revolution only wishes to restore national independence and calls on all residents, regardless of their origin, to join it (Zubayri, 1999).

People of conscience in France supported the truth against the tyrants of colonialism. The terrible methods employed by the French security were not only directed against Algerians, but also against all supporters of the Algerian cause. Among those executed, Maurice Audin, a left-wing fighter, was killed, and French authorities hid the truth for years after the end of the Algerian War. The book "La vérité sur la mort de Maurice Audin" by Jean-Charles Deniau confirms the words of General Aussaresses, who declared on the third French channel on January 9, 2014: "We killed him with a knife so that we believe that the Arabs killed him..." Maurice Audin, professor of mathematics at the University of Algiers and a member of the Algerian Communist Party, was killed in such a way as to make it appear that the Arabs were responsible, in order to dissuade Europeans from joining the struggle (Video, 2014).

In the film, the entire population of Algiers seems surprised, observing the streets and balconies of the houses, listening to the warnings and assurances of Colonel "Maceo" who is confident that the resistance movement in Algeria has been destroyed (Bin Ammar, 2012). However, this did not last long thanks to the great sacrifices of the different groups of the Algerian people in their villages, cities, mountains and deserts, as well as the struggle of the representatives of the Liberation Front abroad. They mobilized all means, with the help of Arab and friendly countries,

and international and regional organizations, to develop an international position favorable to the Algerian cause. Most major nations have begun to denounce the French policy of murder and repression of innocent Algerians (Farkous, 2005).

Among the activities of the Algerian delegation abroad to publicize the national cause, an application was submitted on 9 March 1957 to the Political Committee of the League of Arab States. This request aimed to transform the embassies of Arab countries into centers of propaganda and work to promote the Algerian cause (Madani, 1982). The Algerian delegation was warmly welcomed at the 1958 Cairo Conference on Afro-Asian Solidarity. The struggle continues at all levels, inside and outside the country, with the participation of all groups of the Algerian people, until Algeria becomes independent.

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