

Self and Camera in Contemporary Arab Cinema

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"Fidaï" (Damien Ounouri, 2012)

The film festival "[Mapping Subjectivity: Experimentation in Arab Cinema from the 1960s to Now, Part III](#)," which recently ended at the Museum of Modern Art, concluded a three-part series highlighting a mélange of non-mainstream dramas, documentaries, shorts, and video-collages that defy visual expectations and cultural stereotypes. With the festival coinciding not only with the fiftieth anniversary of Algeria's independence from France (July 5th, 1962), but also with the current revolutionary wave of protests and wars that form part of the Arab Revolution since its inception in December 2010, these films from Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia have already become audacious mini-monuments to human suffering and self-reflection among social and individual conflict. Although only scratching the surface of the wealth of complex issues and

sub-themes addressed in the films of this series, I've condensed the main points to four main topics.

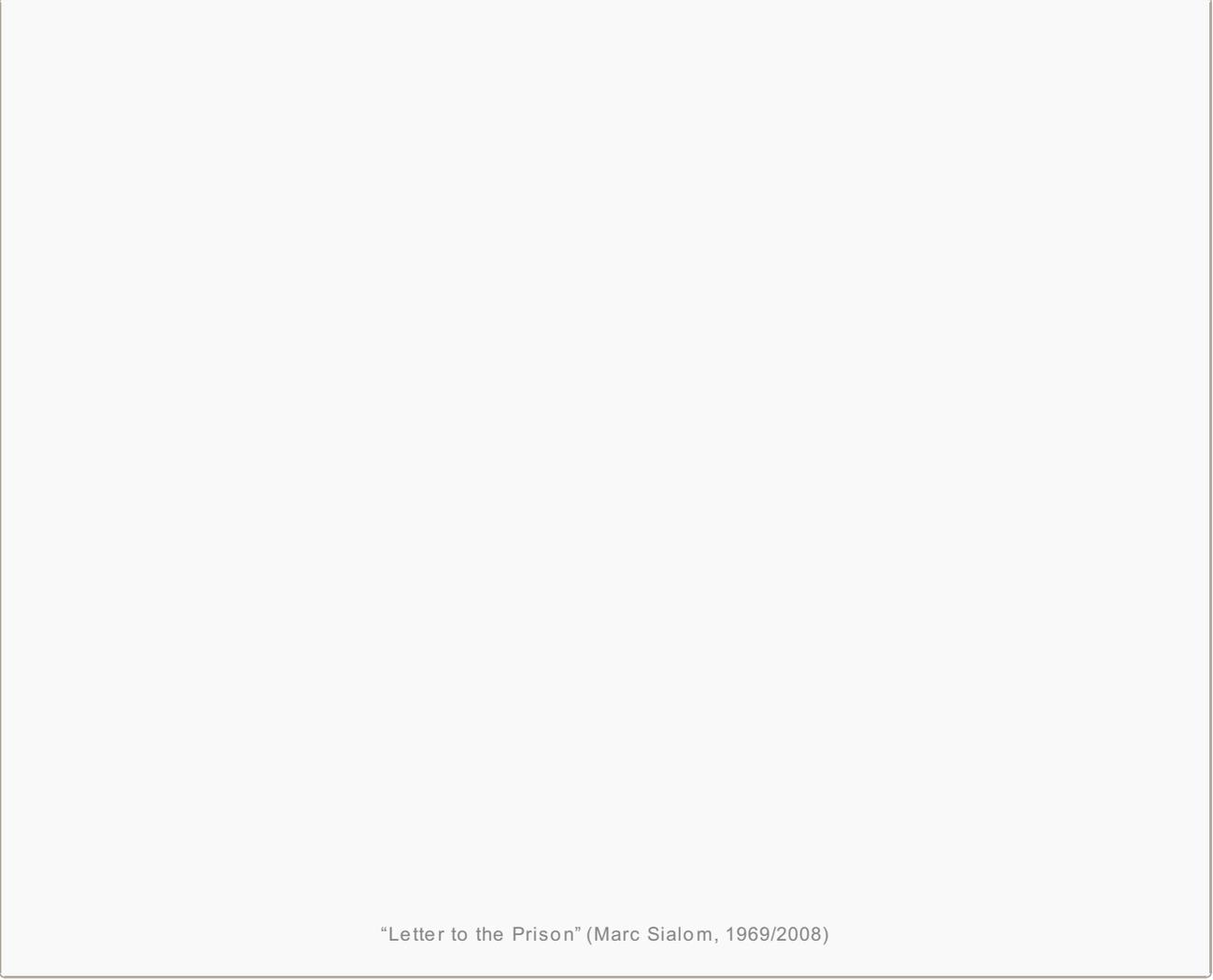
(Post)Colonialism and Algerian Independence

Colonialism as a fortunate and more often than not unfortunate politico-socio-cultural phenomenon that has existed for centuries and been experienced in one form or another throughout the globe is no light topic for those who colonize and for those who are colonized. Countries in the Arab world and throughout the Middle East are a case in point. Although changes have occurred since the colonial era of the 1800s, much has remained the same as the fight for territorial occupation continues. Post-colonialism, in effect, has either not arrived or has only augmented the internal turmoil of those affected.



"Sun of the Hyenas" (Ridha Béhi, 1977)

Persistent questions of identity are pondered in several films. Who were we then, who are we now, and what will we be in the future as peoples who have been colonized? A Tunisian classic for its sly searing commentary, "**Shams Al-Dhiba**" ("**Sun of the Hyenas**," 1977), by Ridha Béhi, is both visually gorgeous and thematically bold, and more relevant than ever, as it follows a small fishing village's slow and inevitable death by capitalism. Peace reigns as fishermen toil away at work, their callused hands catching fish, mending fishnets, or rearing in their boats...until German financiers prance in through the white sands and under the scorching sun in their summer suits to declare their intentions to do business (read: build a luxury hotel to attract tourism). The step-by-step transformation is stunning yet perverse as the locals yield to the consumerist money game and become construction laborers and then cultural exhibitionists and sellers of their wares to lines of hungry, overweight foreigners mesmerized by exoticism. Only the economically fit survive destruction, displacement, ridicule...



"Letter to the Prison" (Marc Sialom, 1969/2008)

Mixing documentary and fiction footage to paint the immigrant's perspective in the face of adversity, "**Lettre à la prison**" ("**Letter to the Prison**") (Marc Sialom, 1969/2008) follows Tahar, a young Tunisian sent by his family to Paris to support his brother, who is in jail for a murder charge. After missing the train from Marseille to Paris, Tahar, wandering the Mediterranean coast observing and contemplating the "new world" that transformed his brother, can be heard in voiceover reading a letter to his brother.



“Fidaï”

“**Fidaï**” (2012) chronicles the story of Med El Hadi Benadouda—the filmmaker Damien Ounouri’s own great-uncle—who was a Fidaï, or mujahideen soldier in the Algerian War, which lasted from 1954 to 1962. Together, Ounouri and Benadouda, now seventy years old, return to several of the now-deserted places where Benadouda was ordered to commit executions, and where many soldiers were tortured, and restage in detail how the killings were performed. Although he is calm and collected throughout, Benadouda evinces his frustration in long, poignant silences and stares as he narrates his experiences up to the last detail. His final, haunting words at the end of the film summarize the essence of what it means to live as a society in search of true communal and personal independence from oppression: “Mais automatiquement quand tu tues, tu te tuait. Ben, voilà, l’Islam c’est comme ça. La colonisation c’est insupportable.” (“But as soon as you kill, you’ve killed yourself. Well, that’s the way of Islam. Colonization is unbearable.”)



“Ask Your Shadow” (Lamine Ammar-Khodja, 2012)

Also self-questioning but in a slightly more humorous slant, **“Demande à ton ombre”** (**“Ask Your Shadow,”** 2012) stars the director himself, Lamine Ammar-Khodja, as an Algerian who returns to Algeria on January 6th, 2011 after living in France for eight years. His arrival is welcomed by the current surge of riots forming part of the Arab Revolution. Unsure of where he stands and where he’s headed now that he has returned home, Ammar-Khodja takes his camera with him as he moves from his bedroom to the streets in search of a path, asking himself and others about what they really want from their country.



“Death for Sale” (Faouzi Bensaïdi, 2011)

Pawns, Kings, and Broken Paths

Where there's totalitarianism there's submission, and where there's submission there's conflict. Three particularly interesting films in the series highlighted, in a refreshing set of visual representations, the status of marginalized peoples as pawns to the state's "kings." A tale of crime and wasted lives that begins like a sweet Coca-Cola advertisement and ends with a heist gone wrong, "**Mort à vendre**" ("**Death for Sale**") (Faouzi Bensaïdi, 2011) is a modern-day noir with three male twenty-year-olds as its protagonists and Tétouan as the drab northern city of Morocco engendering it all. Drifting apart, the three friends find themselves searching for individual as well as collective self-worth as Malik naively turns informant for the police, helmed by Bensaïdi himself as Inspector Dabbaz. To feed his undying love for a prostitute named Doumia, Soufiane keeps after rich girl's purses, while Allal dreams of making it big among the drug-dealing world just as they hatch their final plan to steal from a local Spanish jeweler and call it quits. Amidst panoramic views of the city, the camera still takes time to zoom in on Malik's character as he wholeheartedly gives his heart to Doumia on Inspector Dabbaz's dime. But Dabbaz doesn't waste time reminding him who pulls the shots, who gets the dirt, and who suffers the consequences for any misbehavior. Things rapidly take a turn for the worst when a frightened Malik declares that "a woman is only a woman, but a man must be a man, a real man" as he lunges himself even deeper into the abyss of false grandiosity.



"Pipe Dreams" (Ali Cherri, 2012)

Interesting examples in the realm of contemporary documentaries, "**Pipe Dreams**" (Ali Cherri, 2012) and "**Babylon**" (Youssef Chebbi, Ala Eddine Slim, and Ismaël, 2012) present the political perspectives of the double-sided coin of totalitarianism: all-mighty presidential power and powerless populous voices. A video-collage of present and past, "Pipe Dreams" presents within its mere six minutes the historic phone call between the late President Hafez el-Assad and the Syrian cosmonaut Mohammad Faris while interposing images of the dismantling of such power symbols as statues of el-Assad himself. "In the historic phone call... we witness the 'eternal leader' questioning the 'hero' about his impressions as he looks down on the Syrian lands," writes Cherri about interpreting his short. "In this two-minute phone call a lot of power relations are revealed: Faris, thousands of miles away up in space, does not escape the authority of the 'father of the nation.' The President, from the comforts of his office, casts a watchful eye on the children of the nation. El-Assad keeps reminding Faris that he is the pride of not only the Syrians but of all Arab nations. Through this, the president wants to confirm his regional hegemony; a glorious moment as his power rubbed elbows with the Soviet dream of conquering space."



"Babylon" (Youssef Chebbi, Ala Eddine Slim, and Ismaël, 2012)

Explicitly produced without subtitles and embracing the harsh uncertainties of the moment, "Babylon" follows the matter-of-fact construction, habitation, and closure of a refugee camp along the Tunisian-Libyan border in Ras Jdir, Tunisia. The scenes are stark, cold, and raw as thousands of laborers from Bangladesh, China, Egypt, India, Thailand, Turkey, and Vietnam who fled from the violence of the Libyan Civil War between February and October 2011 are given shelter, water, and food before being forced to move out. Without language to rely on for narrative content (unless you understand the handful of languages spoken!), voices en masse and nuances in body language grant us an all-access window into the unreported collateral realities of revolutionary consequences. Film, once again, returns to its most basic purpose of representing movement in space and time, reminding us just how telling gestures, ambient sound, and setting are to investigative reporting.



"The Noubas of Mount-Chenoua" (Assia Djébar, 1977)

Female Perspectives

Several films by women and with women as leading characters were included in this series. Considered a classic of Algerian cinema, "**La Noubas des femmes du Mont-Chenoua**" ("**The Noubas the Women of Mount-Chenoua**," 1977) was directed by the renowned North African novelist Assia Djébar (b. 1936 in Algeria) and offers a female perspective on the effects of the Algerian War. Divided into five chapters, or movements from a traditional song known as "Noubas," and composed of many highly stylized framed shots, the film depicts a woman named Lila returning to her hometown after fifteen years away and finding herself a stranger in her own country. Intent on dealing with the childhood memories that haunt her, she visits several women and discovers their anti-colonial and feminist stories of survival as they demonstrate their incredible power as communicators of tradition. "Veiled or unveiled it's all the same," says one woman almost hopelessly, "we are always being watched."



"Buried Secrets" (Raja Amari, 2009)

Another film directed by a woman and about women is Raja Amari's "**Les secrets**" ("**Buried Secrets**," 2009). Things appear to be rather dull as we watch a mother and her two daughters cook, eat, and sleep in the basement of a once glorious, now abandoned mansion. Soon thereafter, a young rich couple suddenly appears and starts to move into the main quarters of the mansion. The youngest daughter's curiosity skyrockets to new sexual and violent levels—repression gone wild at the moment of revelation, it seems—as she spies on the couple in their bedroom and eventually, with the help of her mother and sister, kidnaps the woman as she snoops around in their sleeping area. Keeping general narrative suspense, but losing much individual psychological complexity in the process, the film shows us the women interacting, the power relationships among them sometimes blurred, sometimes made clear, their disdain for men introduced but ignored. It would have been fascinating to see a true cat and mouse chase between social classes, but alas, the rich woman is kept hostage but doesn't put up a fight, and all we end up caring about is the younger daughter's final act of revenge on her domineering mother.



"The Pessimists" (Sama Alshaibi, 2009, 2010)

A short video piece exploring the idea of repetition and space as both vast and suffocating, "**The Pessimists**" (Sama Alshaibi, 2009, 2010) is divided into three segments. In "Sweep," a woman in the foreground of an expansive open space with mountains in the background incessantly sweeps a sand-colored floor, her hijab flowing in the wind. In "Sissy" and "Chicken," two women in black tank tops, their heads outside of the camera's frame, stand in the foreground of a seemingly endless expanse of huge white sand dunes as they engage either in an individual clap and then two-handed claps with each other, or in a rock-paper-scissors-type of interaction. Again, entrapment is evident: in all three clips the women continue ad infinitum either solo or in a couple as if locked in space and time.



"Last Days in Jerusalem" (Tawfik Abu Wael, 2011)

Taking a step further into the realm of male/female relationships, **“Last Days in Jerusalem”** (Tawfik Abu Wael, 2011) is an intimate psychological drama that takes a while to warm up to amidst its concrete walls. The film narrows in on the marital problems between a doctor, Dr. Iyad, and his much younger theater actress wife, Nour. On their way to the airport to catch their flight to Paris, where they are emigrating for a better life despite their comfortable living situation, a bus accident pulls Dr. Iyad back to the hospital and into the operating room, leaving Nour wondering about her desires and wandering through the city and eventually finding consolation in the arms of her theater colleague and her mother. No mention of political conflicts, of economic hardships, of work issues; nothing but the absence of sexual attraction between the doctor and the actress, and Nour’s eventual and unfortunately submissive role as a woman. The topic is ripe for analysis but unfortunately turns stale much too quickly. The intellectualism of sex and gender role examination, à la Catherine Breillat, is a distant goal. To Abu Wael’s credit, however, this film certainly defies expectations of what Arab films are about. Perhaps it’s the sheer examination of such a universal topic as desire, or lack thereof, that makes this story greater than its parts.



“Man of Ashes” (Nouri Bouzid, 1986)

Culture

Of particular interest for must-see viewing were the Tunisian classic **“Rih Al-Sid”** (**“Man of Ashes”**) (Nouri Bouzid, 1986) which examines with a wonderfully saturated color palette the societal, familial, and individual psychological expectations of being an adolescent male. The story centers around soon-to-be husband Hachemi, and his friend, Farfat, as they courageously decide to rebel against expectations of virility and flee the house where preparations are being made for Hachemi’s arranged marriage.



"Jajouka, Something Good Comes to You" (Eric and Marc Hurtado, 2012)

"Jajouka, quelque chose de bon viens vers toi" ("Jajouka, Something Good Comes to You") (Eric and Marc Hurtado, 2012) is perhaps the most visceral of all the films presented—rites and movements are shot with almost hypnotic effect. A documentary of sorts that weaves preserved ancient ritual with fiction, "Jajouka" takes its name from an ancient village located in the Djebala foothills of Morocco's Rif Mountains, where one of the oldest musical traditions in the world is run by the Attar family and has been passed down through the generations by the "Master Musicians of the Jajouka."



"Cabaret Crusades: The Path to Cairo" (Wael Shawky, 2012)

"Cabaret Crusades: The Path to Cairo" (Wael Shawky, 2012) is a fascinating video based on Amin Maalouf's non-fiction novel "The Crusades through Arab Eyes." Performed entirely with grotesque anthropomorphized animal puppets and specialized sets, the video recounts from multiple religious perspectives the forty-nine years between the first and second Crusades. In the wake of societies governed by authoritarian political systems, surviving with low economic standards of living, suffering from extreme inequalities, and bearing the brunt of Western influences, among other things, cinema is indeed a medium that paves a hopeful temporal pathway of image and sound for each of these unique voices in its search for a new collective memory. History has most defiantly been re-recorded.