

FILM REVIEW ESSAY

Mostra de Cinemas Africanos 2021: Focus on Algeria

Ousmane Samassekou. *Le Dernier Refuge/The Last Shelter*. 2021. 85 minutes. French, More, English and Bambara with English subtitles. Mali/France/South Africa. Les films du Balibari, ARTE France, STEPS - Generation Africa (ZA), DS Productions (ML). No price reported.

Karim Sayad. *My English Cousin*. 2019. 82 minutes. Arabic and English, with English subtitles. Switzerland/Qatar/Algeria. Close Up Films, Radio Télévision Suisse (RTS). No price reported.

Nina Khada. *I Bit My Tongue*. 2020. 25 minutes. French and Arabic with English subtitles. France/Tunisia. Sudu Connexion. No price reported.

Amira Géhanne Khalfallah. *El sghayra/Miss*. 2019. 13 minutes. Arabic with English subtitles. Algeria/France. Paraiso Production, Prologomènes. No price reported.

Amel Bliidi. *Tchebchaq Maricane!* 2021. 26 minutes. Arabic with English and French subtitles. Algeria. Centre Algérien de Développement du Cinéma, Arak Production. No price reported.

Hassen Ferhani. *143 Sahara St*. 2019. 104 minutes. Arabic with English subtitles. Algeria, France, Qatar. Centrale Electricque, Allers Retours Films. No price reported.

Founded in 2018 by Ana Camila Esteves (Brazil) and Beatriz Leal Riesco (Spain), the Mostra de Cinemas Africanos (Brazil African Film Festival) (www.mostradecinemasafrianos.com) brings together an array of short and feature-length contemporary African films for Brazilian audiences in the cities and surrounding communities of São Paulo and Salvador. The festival stipulates that the films must have been produced in Africa or the diaspora within the past five years, and for many of them it provides the Brazilian premiere. Esteves and Riesco act as the festival's programmers/curators, and one of their main goals is to showcase for the public African films that promote dialogue about their narrative and aesthetic constructions, and more generally, about African identities in Brazilian contexts.

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Although Black cinema has been increasingly promoted in Brazil, The Mostra is so far the only festival in the country dedicated to screening only contemporary African films.

The festival boasts impressive statistics: since 2018, it has hosted eleven editions (two to three per year due to its dual locations, with all editions in 2020 and 2021 on online platforms due to the COVID-19 pandemic) and screened films from 28 African countries, including Senegal, Sudan, South Africa, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt, among many others. It offers a rare opportunity for Brazilian audiences to become acquainted with the broad repertoire of this vibrant cinema, which examines a diversity of themes, landscapes, and aesthetics. Esteves and Riesco source films through some of the world's most important festivals, including Cannes, Berlinale, Toronto, Venice, Rotterdam, and Fespaco (the world's largest festival of African cinema in Burkina Faso), and they choose what they consider to be the most interesting titles to bring back to Brazil. The festival's main edition takes place in July in São Paulo, at CineSesc. In addition, the festival promotes the Cine África film club project, in Salvador and online, collaborates with several festivals in Brazil and other countries, and offers workshops and panels on African cinemas for different audiences. Esteves and Riesco have produced four impressive digital catalogs with extensive background information about the films and filmmakers, as well as general thematic essays by scholars of African cinema.

During the curatorial process for the 2021 online edition (October 1–10, 2021), in partnership with Sesc (Serviço Social do Comércio) São Paulo, Esteves and Riesco were struck by the abundance of excellent documentary films produced in Algeria in recent years, as well as by the way the country itself is foregrounded as a protagonist in films from other countries such as Mali and Tunisia. The short films in the selection on Algeria were chosen in consultation with the Arab Women Film Festival. In this selection, Algeria also became a protagonist, not only as a country of production, but as an important region in terms of North African politics and culture in the most diverse contexts. With this selection of features and shorts, the curators' intention was to shed light on the contemporary production of a country rarely represented in African film selection contexts.¹

Contemporary Algeria is a complex, complicated product of many influences and factors, including French colonialism, the Algerian War of Independence, Arab, Islamic, and Amazigh cultural traditions, as well as military oversight of the region. Following independence, filmmaking in Algeria tended to favor realism and didacticism along with a total commitment to the liberation struggle in "*cinema moudjahid* or 'freedom-fighter cinema'" (Austin 2012:20). By the 1990s, and after years of rule by the National Liberation Front (FLN), Algeria fell into a tumultuous state of civil war following the 1991 repression of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) by the FLN during national parliamentary elections.² Various armed groups emerged and carried out a campaign of terror and violence against

government supporters during the ten-year period (until 2002) now known as the “Black Decade,” which resulted in as many as 200,000 fatalities.

Guy Austin has noted that following the Black Decade of the 1990s, when film and video images were scarce, in the early 2000s, many contemporary Algerian filmmakers began making films which evoked the recent as well as the deep-rooted past, effecting a sort of return to the source in order to understand the present and make sense of the dispossession and loss of identity that permeates contemporary Algerian history (2012:158–59). Indeed, speaking about the past has increasingly become an imperative in Algerian culture. By recovering fragments of submerged histories and memories, filmmakers give voice to ordinary Algerians to speak what was once forbidden and unspeakable. This strategy works to open up a space of engagement and debate with the viewer—creating the possibility to help build a new Algeria, for all Algerians. The Algerian films screened at this edition of *Mostra de Cinemas Africanos de Brazil* stand out for their innovative use of the film medium and their goal of “giving voice” to everyday Algerians.

Ousmane Samassekou’s feature documentary *The Last Shelter* joins many other recent films in depicting the horrifying perils faced by African migrants attempting to cross the Sahara to reach Europe. The opening extreme long shots of the blistering sun and the desolate Sahara sandscape, with the wind echoing an eerie and bitter lament, set the tone for the film. Failure seems almost certain, and indeed, at the beginning of the film, graves are being dug for migrants who have perished in the desert. The film focuses on the work of Caritas Gao—Migrant House in Gao, northern Mali—a welcoming center for those either leaving or arriving. Through an observational style of documentary, the filmmaker weaves together disparate story strands of migrants so desperate for a better life that they are willing to risk everything. Esther and Kadi, from Burkina Faso, dream of reaching Algeria, and they make their way there by the end of the film. The film builds a sense of community through the sharing of individual experiences of dealing with jihadists, smugglers, and the implacable climate.

The feature documentary *My English Cousin* by Karim Sayad presents another iteration of the migration narrative, but in essay-film form. In a recent essay on African documentary film, Rachel Gabara describes how African films have been excluded from most studies of the essay film, but the testimonial and reflexive nature of much African documentary cinema and docu-fiction make “a powerful argument against the exclusion of African film from the documentary canon and from studies of reflexive filmmaking” (2019:366, 368). According to Gabara, African essay films can be “both intimate and political,” and they are frequently made “from a position of partial exile” (2019:368).

It is this position of exile that Algerian filmmaker Karim Sayad explores in the film as he chronicles his cousin Fahed Mameri’s twenty-year sojourn in England. Organized into five chapters, beginning with “The Shit Life Syndrome,” we learn that Fahed arrived in England in 2000 and slept in the

street for two months before finding a room and eventually a job. He moved to Grimsby, where he had a friend, met a young woman, and got married. Fahed describes the couple's existence as "here we are, living between work and home." The viewer never really learns why or how Fahed ended up in England, nor the circumstances that lead to the couple's separation and divorce. Fahed claims that his goal is to return to Algeria, to be near his mother and to find another bride. He travels back and forth between England and Algeria, to the point where his aunt exclaims that the problem is in his head: "he lives there, but wants to marry here." After spending half his life in exile, he is neither "here" nor "there," and the soundtrack underscores this by frequently layering Algerian music over images of English landscape. The final shots of the film mirror those of Fahed walking at the beginning of the film, but the tone is far less upbeat, as a woman's melancholic lament in Arabic, "O my exile in a foreign country. Whoever comes here is made a stranger...." accompanies the shots of Fahed walking back to his flat.

This notion of existing "in between" nations and cultures is foregrounded in Nina Khada's short reflexive documentary *I Bit My Tongue*, through which she explores her double culture by attempting to leave France to reach her "lost" country—Algeria—but makes a detour instead to Tunisia, as if she is afraid of what she might discover about herself. She admits that she tries to speak her native tongue, but always ends up biting it. She interviews children about how to get her language back, and they very astutely inform her that if you lose your mother tongue, you lose your memory. But what happens if you lose your sight?

This is the theme of the short fiction film *El sghayra/Miss* by Amira Géhanne Khalfallah. In the opening scene, a young girl plays by herself in the sand dunes, pretending to drive a demolished vehicle and searching for pieces of metal buried in the sand. She believes these will help her blind father pay to have the family television's sound restored. Yet, she watches Charlie Chaplin's film *The Kid*, believing it should have sound. Her father tells her that in life, you can see what you want and hear what you want, and without sound you can imagine stories. When the girl asks her father what was the last thing he saw before he went blind, he exclaims, "light!" The film ends with an archival image of "Gerboise Bleue," the code name for the 70-kiloton nuclear bomb which the French army detonated over Tanezrouft, southwest of Reggane, in the Algerian Sahara on February 13, 1960. Today, the region still suffers from the impact of the explosion, and at least 40,000 inhabitants were affected by radiation between 1960 and 1966, with infertility, blindness, cancer, and other diseases.

These moments in history have significant impact, yet they are poorly documented and dismissed by leaders such as General de Gaulle as "hysterical groups who accuse us of poisoning humanity." The film's narrative is structured on irony; the father's words underscore the tragedy wrought by the French on Algeria in the name of progress and world freedom.

In Amel Bliidi's short docu-fiction *Tchebchaq Maricane!*, the first-person cinematic voice embedded in the film's reflexive structure takes on complex

inflections in the Algerian context. A grown-up female voice-over (Samia) situates the action of the film as actually taking place twenty years earlier: “We were so excited to grow up that we were missing out on the blood that was being shed in our neighborhood...Politics spilled over onto children’s innocence.” The film’s title refers to a children’s game and serves as a metaphor for the nostalgia of lost childhood innocence. Nouara and Samia are childhood friends who anxiously await the arrival of their first periods (lifeblood) and who experience the traumatic assassination of Nouara’s father (bloodshed), when it is whispered throughout the neighborhood that Samia’s journalist father was the actual target.

Filmmaker Blidi complicates spaces of experiences and history, situating the childhood storyspace frame during the early years following the civil war. Samia and her mother watch a television program called “The Route,” which reported on the main achievements and reforms initiated by then-president Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Focused on rebuilding Algeria following the civil war of the 1990s and on strengthening Algeria’s international reputation, Bouteflika granted wide-ranging amnesty to militant Islamist groups within Algeria in a gesture toward “peace-making and self-reconciliation” for all Algerian people. When Samia asks her mother what “peace-making” means, her mother is at a loss to describe it and tells her daughter to finish her dinner. The filmmaker creates a space in which the viewer must engage with the issues experienced by the film’s characters within historical moments and, as such, the film reaches far to “search for a more complex treatment of the past” (Derderian 2006:253).

The documentary films of Hassen Ferhani also carve out spaces for thought and debate in the new Algeria. His recent documentary *143 Sahara St.* follows on the success of his 2015 feature documentary *A Roundabout in My Head*, set in the main Algiers abattoir, which proved remarkable for its distinctive cinematography and framing of issues in the historical moment of post-Arab Spring Algeria. Like *Roundabout*, *143 Sahara St.* features direct cinema-style depictions of a dilapidated truck stop café in El Menia, an oasis town on the major highway (Route Nationale) in the Algerian Sahara. The café is run by a Kabyle woman named Malika, who serves her mostly male truck-driver clientele, as well as other travelers who venture in off the road for an omelette or soup and cup of tea.

The film opens with an extreme long shot of the café from across the highway. In the distance, the lone figure of a woman, carrying large bags, trudges toward the café, two dogs barking and jumping alongside her. A medium shot follows, depicting Malika sitting at her table and staring at the camera. The next shot is another extreme long shot of the highway and desolate desert from Malika’s point of view. Windows and doors are recurring motifs in the film, which function as frames within the frame: the framed space in which action and movement occur or through which action outside is viewed. Trucker Ryadh calls Malika “Gatekeeper of the Void” but adds that she has neighbors now: “it’s not a no-man’s land.” They act out a comic skit through a barred window, with Ryadh pretending he is a prisoner promising

Malika a whole truckload of tuna if she releases him from prison: “fresh tuna—not like the one we had under Boumedienne.” Malika offers a further reference to President Boumedienne, who was in power from 1965 to 1978, when she describes how he inaugurated the road of African Unity “just right here—He drove here, close to the sign. Then he got back in his DS and he was gone. And now we don’t see their faces anymore.” By referencing this period in post-independence Algeria, the filmmaker provides a hint to the viewer that Malika has been operating this café for forty years or more.

The camera remains mostly static throughout the film, with the exception of a 360-degree pan around the building. The composition and framing shifts from frontal angles to almost tableau-style staging of characters in the frame. The camera as witness becomes suspect when actor Samir El Hakim, portraying a hitchhiker, arrives, sits at the table, and reads the newspaper to Malika as she cooks his meal. He claims he is looking for his missing brother in Timimoune, but when he leaves, she indicates that his brother is not missing. Her musing that, “people lie but they don’t know how,” could be read as a statement by the filmmaker on the constructed nature of film and its capacity for veracity. Should we believe everything we hear and see?

The film ends as two young men try to convince Malika, who has recently been ill, to leave her café to go live with their sister. Her refusal to leave culminates in a mournful song: “Tell my Mom not to cry, O you, the exiled. That her son is gone and won’t come back. O you, the exiled.” In the final extreme long shot of the night sky, the neighboring gas station that has been recently built suddenly lights up, ready for business, leaving the viewer wondering what will happen to Malika.

As the films selected for this program on Algeria demonstrate, the expressive potential of contemporary Algerian cinema is breathtaking. Often testimonial in nature, they “give voice” to those silenced by official histories and encourage ordinary Algerians to “perform Algerianness”³ by telling their own stories using their own voices (Martin 2011:57; Donadey 1999:111–12).

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Notes

1. Email conversation with Ana Camila Esteves, January 11, 2022.
2. The National Liberation Front (FLN) was founded on November 2, 1954, and established itself as the main nationalist group in Algeria to fight for independence. It is still the largest political party in Algeria. The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was founded in Algiers on February 18, 1989, with the objective of establishing an Islamic state ruled by sharia law.
3. I borrow this term from Walid Benkhaled and Natalya Vince's discussion of coded performances of various identity positions in Algerian culture (2017:243–69).