

Algerian cinema between commercial and political pressures: The double distortion

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Abstract

Although ‘transnational’ cinema is now a widely-used category in the literature, to understand what ‘transnational’ means we need also to be able to conceptualise the ‘national’. This article argues that ‘Algerian cinema’ no longer exists. Instead, what is today termed ‘Algerian cinema’ often deals with social problems which are in fact French issues transposed into an Algerian context. The article demonstrates how this situation has arisen by examining the funding of films ‘about’ Algeria via the French Centre national de la cinématographie (CNC), the language quotas which these bodies impose and how these funding mechanisms give films a linguistic identity which is often at odds with the socio-cultural context of the scenario. It then turns to explore the academic reception of these films and the way in which these films are often used as documentary snapshots into contemporary Algeria, with little attention paid to the ways in which they are products of a particular funding context. Finally, it considers how the Algerian state interacts with these ‘Algerian films’ and the political factors at play in the state’s selective instrumentalisation of them. It concludes that in both subject matter and academic analyses, ‘Algerian cinema’ is subject to a double distortion, a situation which the term ‘transnational’ does not capture. The paper will refer to the works of filmmakers including Merzak Allouache, Nadir Moknèche and Djamilia Sahraoui.

Keywords: transnational cinema, national cinema, Algeria, France, film funding, language choice, academic reception, Merzak Allouache, Nadir Moknèche, Djamilia Sahraoui

Algerian cinema since 1962 has tended to be divided into three distinct phases. A first period, from independence to 1971, is characterized by films narrating the struggle against colonial rule and the War of Independence (*L’aube des damnés/Dawn of the Damned* (Rachedi, 1965), *La Bataille d’Alger/The Battle of Algiers* (Pontecorvo, 1966), *Le Vent des Aurès/The Wind of the Aurès* (Lakhdar-Hamina, 1966), *L’Opium et le baton/‘The opium and the baton’* (Rachedi, 1969). A second phase, from 1971 to

the early 1980s, sometimes dubbed *cinéma jadis* (new cinema), thematically reflects massive rural to urban migration in this period as a result of the agrarian revolution and industrialization, producing films which explored the lives, aspirations and disappointments of newly urban populations (*Omar Getlato* (Allouache, 1976), *Léila et les autres*/'Léila and the others' (Mazif, 1977). Cinema in both of these periods was overwhelmingly funded by the Algerian state. Algerian cinema's third phase is described as emerging from the 1990s onwards and defined as 'film-makers' turn towards contemporary issues' (Constable 2009: 180–81). Films such as *Bab el-Oued City* (Allouache, 1994) and *Viva Laldjérie/Viva Algeria* (Moknèche, 2004), according to Constable (2009: 180–81), have 'production contexts [that] correspond to their representational contexts', respectively the early 1990s and the 2000s, i.e. during and after the 'black decade'. This decade saw – after the cancelled second round of the 1992 elections – Algeria experience ten years of civil violence during which the army and state fought against Islamist insurgents. Constable, like many other scholars, particularly in Anglo-American academia, sees these films as a window into contemporary Algeria and its burning societal issues.

This article argues that the representational contexts of films such as *Viva Laldjérie* do indeed correspond to their production contexts, but not in the way that has hitherto been suggested. I argue that today Algerian cinema does not exist. Instead what we have are films about Algeria, financed with European money. Current Algerian film production thus falls into the category of what Halle (2010: 317) describes as the quasi-national: something that looks like a non-European national production, but is in fact 'attached to the drip of European monies'. For Halle, this dependency on European funding – and in turn the thematic concerns and aesthetic approaches which interest or are seen as commercially viable by European funders –

highlights the pitfalls of using these films as examples of ‘national’ cinema. Building upon Halle’s concept of the quasi-national, the first part of this article analyses the funding mechanisms of three recent Algerian films, *Barakat!* ‘Enough!’ (Sahraoui, 2006), *Harragas* ‘Those who burn borders’ (Allouache, 2009) and *Viva Laldjérie*, underlining how thematic content, modes of representation and language choice are shaped by European, and particularly French, production imperatives and constraints. This is what I term the first distortion of so-called ‘Algerian’ cinema.

The second distortion takes place when academics subsequently call upon these films to provide insights into the contemporary societies which they purport to be about. These ‘Algerian films’ tend to be analysed using a set of predetermined frames of reference, and used as illustrative examples of the apparent paradoxes of ‘Algerian identity’. Given the conditions of production and the target audiences of these films, I question uses of such films as representations – literal or symbolic – of Algerian nation and identity.

Finally, I suggest an alternative reading of the reasons for the ‘quasi-national’ nature of contemporary Algerian film production to that put forward by Halle. For Halle, the decline of the autochthonous Algerian film industry is the result of free market constraints forced upon the Algerian state by the EU, the World Bank and the IMF from the 1980s onwards, ending state subsidies to a previously thriving film industry. This article challenges the view of the Algerian state as victim of dominant forces in the global economic order. Instead, I argue that since the 1990s the Algerian state has quite cynically taken a passive role in the film industry, delegating the funding of the vast majority of film-making by Algerian directors or about Algeria, to European and French funders. In a country which currently has a flourishing hydrocarbon industry and significant sovereign wealth, only spending between 0.3–

1.22 per cent of the annual budget on all forms of culture between 2003 and 2013 (Kessab 2013) is a political choice, not an unfortunate circumstance.

The first distortion

Funding: Algerian cinema today does not exist

Algerian cinema was born of the War of Independence (1954–1962). The anti-colonial struggle was won as much through political means as through armed combat, and the propaganda use of cinema was swiftly realized by the FLN. The nation-building aims of the war films which dominated the first decade of Algerian cinema were explicit. For Berrah this was ‘a local image, which addressed the Other in order to force recognition of an identity’ that had been denied by 132 years of colonial rule and the claim that Algeria was French (1981: 46). Political will was matched by financial investment. By 1964, competing cinema organizations had been regrouped under the Centre national du cinéma/National Cinema Centre (CNCA), which controlled more than three quarters of the production and commercialization of Algerian cinema. In 1968, the CNCA was replaced by the Office national du commerce et de l’industrie cinématographique/National Office of Cinematic Commerce and Industry (ONCIC). For Boudjedra, this new name was ‘very revealing of the intention to create a viable cinema from both artistic and commercial perspectives’ (1971: 57). Up until the end of the 1970s, Algeria produced more films than Tunisia and Morocco combined (Armes 2011: 299).

In 1984, as part of a broader programme of semi-privatization, the state monopoly on film production ended. In 1987, the state re-established its film-making

body, under the name Centre algérien pour l'art et l'industrie cinématographique (Algerian Centre for Cinematographic Art and Industry, CAAIC). However, in 1998, the government closed down the CAAIC. It was 'replaced' by the Fonds pour le développement de l'art et de la technique et industrie cinématographique (Funds for the Development of Cinematographic Art and Industry, FDATIC), but this funding came uniquely from a tax on the sale of cinema tickets, which was then supposed to be redistributed to the film industry. By this point, however, there were hardly any cinemas left open in Algeria to generate revenue. In the 1990s, the arrival in many town halls of mayors politically affiliated to the Front islamique du salut/Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), who were ideologically opposed to any kind of visual representation, killed off what was already a dying cinematographic industry.

The main problem cinema in Algeria is facing today is the absence of distribution and exhibition circuits. In 1965, there were 336 cinema screens in Algeria; in 1974 there were 314 (Meghrebi 1985: 15). In 2005, according to the Algerian Ministry of Culture, there were 91 cinema screens. This is undoubtedly an overestimate: many of these 'cinemas' consist of not much more than a DVD or VHS projector. In 2014, the European Union estimated that there were only 20–30 cinema theatres in Algeria (Culture in EU External Relations 2014: 11) – and this for a population of around 39 million. By way of comparison, France in 2010 had just under double the population of Algeria and 5524 cinema screens (CNC 2010a: 6). The United Kingdom, with its 65 million inhabitants, had 3824 screens in 2012 (UK cinema screens 2012). In 2008, as producer Yacine Laloui promoted Lyes Salem's film *Mascarades/Masquerades* (2008), a technician accompanied the copies of the film circulated to Algerian cities, in order to mend broken projectors. He thus

succeeded in attracting 10,000 viewers, a record for that period, which would have been unimpressive in the heyday of Algerian cinema (*Le Monde*, 9 December 2008).

Furthermore, much of the violence of the 1990s was specifically targeted at artists, intellectuals and journalists, forcing film-makers, directors and actors into exile. In order to make a living, these directors needed funding for their films. Djamila Sahraoui's *Barakat!* (2006) tells the story of two Algerian women of two different generations. Amel is a doctor, whose journalist husband has disappeared. Faced with the indifference of the authorities, she decides to set out to find him. She is joined by a veteran of the anti-colonial struggle, Khadidja. *Barakat!* would not exist without the existence of the French-funding mechanism *avance sur recettes avant réalisation*, distributed by the French Centre national de la cinématographie/National Centre for Cinematography (CNC), which is funded by the French Ministry of Culture. The *avance sur recettes* is an advance payment on takings awarded to film-makers, based on a scenario, before they secure funding from production companies. The aim is to give more experimental or commercially risky films 'of French initiative' a chance to be made. The cost of *Barakat!* was estimated at 1.79 million euros when it was put forward as a candidate for the *avance sur recettes* (CNC 2006: 38). Specific numbers about what percentage of this budget was composed of the *avance sur recettes* are not available, but in 2005, advances ranged between 90,000 and 525,000 euros, with the average being 343,600 euros (CNC 2006: 27). This advance plays a key role in bringing forward other financial backers. *Barakat!* is co-produced by Films d'ici (France); BL Production (Algeria); Nomadis Images (Tunisia), ENTV Algérie (Algeria) and Arte France Cinema (France). Additional financial participants include Arte Cofinova, the International Organisation of la Francophonie via TV5 Monde, the Hubert Bals Fund (Holland), plus the CNC

(France). However, *Barakat!* is not officially recognized as a transnational film: the CNC records *Barakat!* as a 100 per cent French production.

In this funding context, Algerian co-producers are often reduced to playing the role of local fixers rather than co-producers with the right to make executive decisions. The majority of *Barakat!* was filmed in Tunisia because the logistics of filming in Algeria – notably from the point of view of security and insurance – are much more complicated than in neighbouring North African countries. Both Tunisia and Morocco also have strong national film industries, ensuring a *savoir-faire* that has been lost in Algeria. If Sahraoui had filmed in Algeria potentially she could have applied for funding from Aide aux cinémas du monde/Aid to World Cinemas (formerly known as Fonds Sud) funded by the French Ministry of Culture (through the CNC) and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This is a source of funding for films made in the global south, on the condition that the film is shot in the director's country of origin, in the language(s) of that country. However, because it is so difficult for Algerian directors to film in Algeria, it is difficult for them to access this funding and therefore they tend to turn towards the CNC and the *avance sur recettes*. The significance of this is that they are then bound to respect the CNC's language clause which decrees that the majority of the film in its original version has to be in the French language, or in a regional language used in France (Article 23, decree no. 99-130 du 24 February 1999).

The funding of Merzak Allouache's *Harragas* (2009) was put together in much the same way as *Barakat!* *Harragas* is the story of three friends who try to illegally migrate to France via Spain. Allouache benefited from the CNC's *avance sur recettes* in 2008. The film's financial backing is composed of Librisfilms (France), Baya Films (Allouache's own production company, based in Algeria) and France 2

Cinéma, with the participation of Cinécinéma, France 2, the Région Languedoc-Roussillon, the Ministry of Culture and the CNC.

Harragas was the first film to be produced within the context of a 2007 framework agreement between the French CNC and the Algerian Ministry of Culture, which established a Franco-Algerian cinematographic co-production scheme. Before 2007, Algeria was one of the few countries not to have signed up to such a scheme, and the agreement was part of an attempt by Minister for Culture Khalida Toumi to reinvigorate the image of Algerian cinema. According to this framework, the balance of contribution between French and Algerian partners can vary between 20 per cent and 80 per cent and there is no explicit stipulation made about language choice.

In reality, French producers are far more likely to be making the 80% contribution and Algerian producers a marginal 20% contribution, and as soon as film-makers access the *avance sur recettes*, they are obliged to respect its language clause. *Harragas* is listed by the CNC as an 80% French, 20% Algerian co-production, with a budget of 1.94 million euros (CNC 2010b). The reasons for this are once again the lack of a viable distribution and exhibition circuit in Algeria. Being a film producer is not commercially viable in Algeria, therefore it is very hard for Algerian film-makers to secure Algerian funding. France provides funding, but also imposes constraints to make the film more attractive to French/European audiences.

Language – content – alienation

The impact of funding streams on shaping content and determining language choice has not escaped the attention of Algerian producers and journalists. Lofti Bouchouchi,

head of Algerian production company BL Productions and co-producer of *Barakat!* and *Viva Laldjérie!* underlines that:

For a film to acquire funding via the CNC's *avance sur recettes*, it needs to have at least fifty per cent of its dialogue in French and convey ideas that speak to Western culture.¹ (*El Watan*, 16 March 2012)

Algerian cinema critic and journalist Abdou Benziane is even more scathing:

Film directors established in France before or after 'the great Terror' [a reference to the 1990s], seek to make a living through their art through the funding of the CNC, crony networks and European TV channels which apply a policy of integration which verges on the [colonial] indigenous code. With the unwritten obligation to lose part of one's soul which remains behind in the country of origin.² (2001: 84–89)

These readings are undoubtedly Manichaeistic: they reduce the films they critique to being the unmediated product of an unequal economic relationship between French-funding bodies and Algerian film-makers and in doing so present a monolithic view of 'western culture'. Nevertheless, such caricatures reveal the level of anxiety that the constraints of cinema funding provoke amongst the small number Algerian film professionals who remain in the industry.

Film-makers might use their creative talents to subvert power relations; and Algeria is one of the most francophone countries of the world: but the use of French, or dialectical Algerian Arabic (*derja*), or Tamazigh or classical Arabic (*fusha*) is

determined by political and socio-economic context. All of the Algerian directors under consideration here seek to make realist films. In order to maintain credibility, the approach of most is to seek to develop realistically francophone characters using the odd phrase in *derja*, to provide a bit of local colour. This ultimately has an impact on what ‘types’ of Algerians (in terms of socio-economic profile and geographic location) can be represented cinematographically. In *Harragas*, the main characters attempting to migrate do not correspond to the usual profile of the unemployed, but are relatively privileged, middle-class francophones, which is in fact a very exceptional profile for the risking their lives to cross the Mediterranean. Allouache explicitly demonstrates his awareness of this issue of credibility in one of the scenes in *Harragas*, which shows the three middle-class migrants, Rachid, Nacer and Imène, in a boat with other, poorer, migrants, on their way to Spain. An ex-policeman, Mustapha, who has also joined the expedition, mocks them for speaking French to one another. He indicates that they are not like the other ‘wretches’ on the boat. They are lucky enough to have studied and so he asks them why they could not ask ‘daddy’ to simply get a visa from the consulate. Nacer’s response is simply to tell him to be quiet. Speaking about *Barakat!*, Djamila Sahraoui argues that:

I opted for bilingualism because it seems to me that this corresponds most to the Algerian reality. Then it had to be decided who would speak what, and why? For example, the farmer speaks dialectical Algerian Arabic. The two women, who are educated, urban, lower middle class, master French and use it more often and more easily.³ (cited in Cheurfi 2013: 117)

Sahraoui argument, however, is rather disingenuous, because of the conditions of funding from the CNC via the *avance sur recettes* is that the majority of the film has to be in French: this is not a simple choice.

Nadir Moknèche's *Viva Laldjérie* (2004) makes no effort to justify its 100 per cent use of French language. *Viva Laldjérie* is the portrait of three Algerian women as Algeria emerged from the black decade of the 1990s. Mother and daughters Papicha and Goucem, respectively, a former cabaret dancer and a photographer's assistant, have fled their home town to come and live in Algiers as they feared for their safety. They live with Fifi, a prostitute. Moknèche did not access the *avance sur recettes* mechanism, but *Viva Laldjérie* is entirely funded by French and Belgian producers.

Moknèche justifies the fact that the film is entirely in French not by highlighting the commercial constraints imposed on him by his francophone producers, but by arguing that:

Algeria is the second biggest French-speaking country in the world based on the number of effective speakers, most of Algeria's literature is written in French.⁴ (Stora and Moknèche 2004)

Yet for Sanaker, literary heterolingualism and filmic heterolingualism cannot be seen as one and the same. In literature, the author has no choice but to choose one language, whilst in cinema, multilingualism is a possibility and a choice: 'the verbal behaviour of cinematic characters can become a key question for the efficiency and the honesty of the film as a historical and cultural document' (Sanaker 2008: 147).⁵

Indeed, Moknèche is almost overly defensive of his language choice. He goes on the counter-attack, criticizing the post-1962 Arabization of Algeria, and the

imposition of classical Arabic as the official language despite its distinct differences with dialectical Algerian Arabic. Moknèche describes state-dispensed theatre lessons in classical Arabic in Algeria as producing results, which are ‘as fresh and lively as a first of May parade in Moscow under Brejnev’.⁶ This a red herring: to have a film in *fusha* about everyday life in Algeria would be ridiculous, but it does not make the use of French (as opposed to *derja* or Tamazight) for buying cigarettes in the street any more credible. As Marcel Martin underlined in *Le langage cinématographique* ‘Cinematographic language’ in 1955:

Respecting national language is an act of honesty and at the same time proof of dramatic intelligence; the fact that characters speak their mother tongue considerably increases the credibility of the story.⁷ (quoted in Sanaker 2008: 14)

Many academics working on transnational cinema today would argue that the definition of ‘mother tongue’ (and by extension an ‘Algerian’ or ‘French’ film) are not so clear-cut. For Telmissany,

[t]ransnational film-makers today benefit from the ability (and privilege) to move across geographic borders, to dwell in and belong to different cities, and to mix languages and cultures in reality and in film without having to justify or disentangle the interwoven layers of their cultural identities. (2013, par. 6)

Higbee argues that ‘transnational cinema’ is a fraught term, because it the ways in which it flattens out borders and power relations. Instead, he proposes ‘cinema of

transvergence' as a more accurate way of understanding 'discontinuity, difference and imbalances of power that exist between various film-makers, film cultures and film industries' as well as 'elements of interconnectedness' (Higbee 2007: 87). For Higbee, film-makers such as Allouache and Mahmoud Zemmouri both alternate between and maintain a distinct position within Algerian and French cinemas.

Yet more attention still needs to be paid to the power relations between Algerian film-makers and French funders: there is clearly a junior and a dominant partner, however much we might be tempted by the language of displaced and shifting centres and peripheries. This fundamental power relation can simply not be dismissed through claims of cultural hybridity or artistic creativity. The fact that the majority of Algerian film-makers are dependent on French funding, which in turn privileges the French language, is problematic not for nationalistic reasons. Rather, it is an ethical issue. It removes the substance of characters, disconnecting them from the environment they are meant to be the product of. This is not seen to be of concern mainly because the films do not seek to be credible to Algerian audiences. Instead, they are aimed at another audience, specifically the festival circuit and art house cinemas in well-established European distribution networks. These audiences include what the Euromed Audiovisual reflection group (2008: 14), in their identification of markets for art house films, call 'new Europeans' of migrant origin. These films employ languages and frames of reference that are recognizable to these audiences and engage in themes which are seen to have an impact and resonance on the northern shore of the Mediterranean. Women's oppression/emancipation, tensions between 'tradition' and 'modernity', youth unemployment, clandestine migration are all brought to the fore.

For Austin (2012: 177–78), this foreign financing is potentially problematic, but also has advantages, such as enabling film-makers to engage with subjects which are taboo within their own societies. The place of women, identity politics, generational tensions and illegal migration are of course preoccupations on the Mediterranean's southern shore. However, and crucially, the way in which these issues are represented is largely packaged for European audiences. A striking example of this can be found in *Viva Laldjérie*. When Fifi and Goucem return from a visit to a fortune teller, Fifi sees a street vendor selling a large copy of a painting of St. George slaying a dragon. This scene has been presented by a number of scholars as an allegory of the confrontation between a pluralistic, more secular vision of Algerianness and a narrow, religiously defined identity. For Austin (2012: 164) the absence of the colour green, often associated with Islam, for much of the film signifies the director's rejection of the latter:

The national tricolour of red, white and green is for once manifest in the painting of St George and the dragon purchased by Fifi, but green is the colour of the dragon: a monster killed by the saint who wears all three colours. This medieval image connects Fifi, an incarnation of contemporary Algerian discourses about the sexualised (female) body, with an ancient myth of (masculine) sainthood, since both Fifi and Saint George are looking straight at the camera, challenging the spectator to trace the link between the medieval knight and the modern-day prostitute.

Leaving aside the questionable assumption that Fifi, through selling her body, is slaying an oppressive value system, Moknèche's choice of allegory, and the analysis

that Austin applies to it, are problematic. The patron saint of England George is also a mythical figure in Middle East, albeit for different reasons. However, he is unknown in North Africa, except as a western pictorial reference. The intended symbolism is much more obvious to western audiences than it is to Algerian audiences.

Thus, instead of the film representing a situation particular to the Algerian context that aspires to have a universal reference, we have a supposedly ‘universal’ reference being transposed into Algeria, claiming to represent the local and particular. In this perspective, *Viva Laldjérie* is light years away from Assia Djebar’s *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua/ The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua* (1977) which, through the use of local languages and a filmic structure based on the *Nouba* musical structure, sought to use local modes of representation as a starting point to bring in more universally recognizable sounds, references and stories. In *Viva Laldjérie* nothing is as organic. The film is composed of the superimposition of meanings drawn from a western canon of modes of representation, reinforcing the alienation of subject matter from representation.

The second distortion: Academic reception

When we examine the academic reception of these films, the vast majority of authors focus on providing close thematic readings, notably privileging themes of national trauma, unhealed wounds, hybridity or Algerian crises of identity. Discussing *Rachida* (Bachir-Chouikh, 2002), *El Manara* (Hadjadj, 2004), *Barakat!* (2006) and *L’Arche du desert/ The Ark of the Desert* (Chouikh, 1997) Austin argues that:

All of these examples explore the trauma of the civil war, to focus ultimately on the survival of a protagonist at the close of the narrative. Both collectively

(as a national cinema) and within each film, the suffering of the 1990s is remembered and worked through. (2010: 30)

In this analysis, films become transcripts of the nation's session on the psychologist's couch. Indeed, Austin (2012: 121, 137) explicitly refers the father of psychoanalysis when he argues that *Youcef* (Chouikh, 1993), *Bab El-Oued City* (Allouache, 1994) and *Rome plutôt que vous*/ 'Rome rather than you' (Teguia, 2006) are 'case studies' of how 'a Freudian melancholia in the shadow of a crushed revolt might relate to Algerian experience after Black October'. Austin (2012: 179) does recognize that the fact that many of these film-makers, through choice or necessity, live in France, and that this might heighten their feelings of nostalgia and trauma as individuals, however, there is still the tendency to equate the vision of (one) Algerian film-maker with 'Algerian experience'. The way in which these films are read as ways of collectively addressing a difficult past also does not always acknowledge the fact that the idea that nations experience 'trauma' and have to 'work through' their past is not universally accepted and is increasingly challenged. As Kansteiner pithily puts it: 'Nations can repress with psychological impunity' (2002: 186), although the frame of traumatic national memory continues to dominate the field of cultural studies about Algeria and France.

For Constable, discussing *Bab el Oued City* and *Viva Laldjérie*:

both resonate with the social affects of humiliation experienced by displaced subjects in Algiers and their cinematic soundscapes bear the signs of the changes that have reconfigured and complicated nationalist-colonialist binaries and undone dichotomous identities within the nation; simultaneously,

these changes have been accompanied by, and countered by, polarizing rebel religious Islamist solidarities that triggered the civil war and gender-based violence of the 1990s in Algeria. (2009: 183–84)

Behind this statement is the assumption that the Algerian nation is based on ‘dichotomous identities’ constantly at war with each other. Such a statement – frequently reproduced by historians and political scientists as well as academics in cultural studies – is rarely backed up with concrete empirical evidence. Indeed, whilst the confrontation of different versions of ‘Algerianness’ appears to be a key feature of Algerian political discourse – making it seemingly easy to categorize Algerians into ‘secular democrats’, ‘nationalist FLN’ and ‘Islamists’ – as Vince (2013: 36) underlines, we should not take these categories at face value. They are far less mutually exclusive than they claim to be, with ‘elements of overlap’ and ‘points of connectedness’.

These films are thus celebrated in the existing academic literature as challenging ‘fixed, essentialised notions of cultural or national identity’ (Higbee 2007: 89), but in fact it is these films which reproduce and reinforce fixed notions of identity as being easily reduced to Islamists/nationalists/secularists/Berberists/women, with each battling to annihilate the other. This is the ‘second distortion’. Not only does *Harragas* ‘adapt’ the theme of clandestine immigration to the language and preoccupations of its French and European audiences, it is then also consolidated by academics as unfiltered documentary evidence of the desires and frustrations of Algerian youth. This is not just a problem for films ‘about’ Algeria. Irit Neidhardt, a producer for German production company Mec film, which specializes in Middle Eastern documentary, highlights the dangers of reading films from the region as

‘national works’ when funding and distribution mechanisms indicate that directors might have limited control over their stories. She uses the example of ‘Western decoding’ of the film *Waltz with Bachir* (Folman, 2008), which was read as ‘connected to the actual political experience *within* the region’ as opposed to ‘political assumptions *about* it’ (2011: 11, original emphasis).

Reappropriation by the Algerian state

Films a priori ‘about’ Algeria, funded by European companies, represent European concerns, interests and fantasies expressed in French. However, this is not just product of domination. Despite its bluster about wishing to ‘decolonise’ Algerian history and rediscover an ‘authentic’ Algerian culture, and despite the fact that this is an oil rich country with the material means to fund its own cultural policy, the Algerian state appears perfectly happy to allow this situation to continue. In fact, the Algerian Ministry of Culture has delegated responsibility for its film industry to the French CNC and French production companies, happy to recuperate at a later date any positive publicity. On the website of the Algerian Ministry of Culture, clicking on the link ‘Politique du secteur’ (Policy) under cinema comes up with the telling message ‘page under construction’.

The only condition to this is that the Algerian state remains alert to the need to sufficiently neutralize any content which appears too explicitly political. In October 2009, the Algerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs proudly produced a press release, reproduced by state owned newspaper *El Moudjahid* (8 October 2009), declaring that the film *Harragas* had been selected at the Festival International du Film

Francophone de Namur (FIFF). The press release took care to cite Allouache who stressed that the film ‘does not promote *harga* [illegal migration]’. This politically correct statement is in line with a 2009 law (no. 09-01 25 February 2009, article 175 bis 1) passed by the Algerian National Assembly which made attempting to migrate illegally from Algeria a criminal offence, punishable by a prison term of two to six months and a fine of 20,000–60,000 Algerian dinars (approximately 130–400 euros). Readers were reminded that illegal migration was a law and order issue, not a societal problem for which the state was responsible.

The only thematic area in which the Algerian state is particularly attentive to the subject matter is when films funded through the FTADIC have a link, however tenuous, with the War of Independence. The anti-colonial struggle between 1954–1962 is considered in official national history as the foundation of the Algerian nation, to quote the official slogans, this was a war ‘by the people, for the people’ in which there were ‘one and a half million martyrs’, but ‘one sole hero, the people’. Since 1999, the Ministry of Mujahidin (war veterans) has had the right to ‘authenticate’ audio-visual, written and filmed documents relating to the War of Independence before publication, that is to say, check their historical veracity, or rather check that the content conforms to the official narrative. This state control was reinforced by a law passed in February 2011 (law no. 11-03 of 17 February 2011 on cinematography). Article six of this law stipulates that: ‘The production of films about the War of National Liberation and its symbols are subject to the prior approval of the government’⁸ – presenting far reaching possibilities and consequences for censorship.

The fact that this kind of censorship is *not* employed for contemporary films engaging with themes such as women’s oppression/emancipation, tensions between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, youth unemployment, clandestine migration is revealing.

It suggests that the vision of Algerian society presented by these films and their academic analyses – a vision of a society ravaged along the lines of conflicting versions of Algerian identity – are not considered a political threat, perhaps because they correspond little to the lived reality of ordinary Algerians whose identities are complex, sometimes contradictory, but not always in violent, diametric opposition to each other.

Conclusion

The argument of this article has not been in favour of rediscovering an Algerian cinematic ‘authenticity’. Instead, it has sought to challenge the packaging and reception of a narrow range of films that brand themselves as authentic or indeed subversive but are in fact alienated from the realities which they claim to represent. Algerian film-makers need to be more honest about how their dependency on European funding shapes the content and form of their films, rather than seeking to distract attention away from this through concepts such as cultural hybridity and artistic creativity. It is essential to foreground the funding mechanisms when analysing these films. With the complicity of Algerian cultural bodies, European – and particularly French – funding exercises significant control over the thematic and linguistic content of so-called ‘Algerian’ cinema. Not using local languages alienates actors from their characters, and in turn characters from their films and films from their audiences. Films that engage with a specific set of issues are privileged, and the representation of these issues is then analysed by academics as reflecting how they are experienced in Algeria, rather than as the product of European producers’ and audiences’ expectations of how these issues might be experienced.

Algerian film-makers are undeniably in a difficult position, seemingly with a ‘choice’ between accepting European/French funding and its thematic and linguistic constraints, or making a politically acceptable film about the War of Independence funded by the Algerian state, or not making a film at all. There are no easy solutions, but there are alternatives. For example, Tariq Teguaia’s 2006 *Rome plutôt que vous* was self-produced, filmed on a DV camera. Teguaia then sought completion funds, notably from the German World Cinema Fund and the French Institut national de l’audiovisuel/National Audiovisual Institute (INA) at the post-production stage – i.e. once the content of the film had already been determined and shot. Malek Bensmaïl is currently making a film about the 2014 Algerian presidential election campaign financed through crowd-funding via the website www.touscoprod.com, thus making his audience co-producers. Béjaoui (*Liberté*, 18 October 2012) argues that the Algerian public does not currently see films about Algeria such as *Barakat!*, *Harragas*, *Viva Laldjérie* not only because of the absence of cinemas to watch them in, but also because of a lack of interest in these kinds of films: ‘perhaps audiences no longer recognise themselves in cinema which doesn’t look like them’.⁹ Teguaia and Bensmaïl’s work in both documentary and fiction may begin to reverse this trend.

Beyond funding streams, before they begin to tackle ‘an issue’, Teguaia and Bensmaïl reflect on how the subject with which they are dealing might be transposed and politicized in terms of form and aesthetics. Discussing Chantal Akerman’s documentary *De l’autre côté/ From the Other Side* (2002), which makes the fence along the US-Mexico border the subject both as a physical object and as the subject of competing discourses, Jacques Rancière argues that: ‘The film’s political impact consists precisely in the way it turns an economic and geopolitical issue into an aesthetic matter’ (2010: 150). In *Gabbla/Inland* (2008, financed through a variety of

European-funding mechanisms, but notably Fonds Sud which as outlined above promotes the use of local languages), Tegua similarly creates an aesthetic universe within which the main character, city dwelling topographer Malek, travels into the interior of an Algeria largely ignored by both Algerians living on the coast and the rest of the world. Tegua pays minute attention to shifts in local accents, the rhythm created by the editing, the soundtrack (a mixture of traditional raï music and Archie Shepp's turns at the Pan-African Festival of 1969) and to the representation of authority: every shot which represents a figure of authority, including an official photograph of President Bouteflika, is rendered 'headless' by the framing. Tegua also demonstrates that he is aware of his own position in recounting this 'interior' of which he is not a part: two levels of narration exist in the film, on the one hand, a group of intellectuals putting Algeria to rights (and Tegua is in part targeting himself here), and in parallel, Malek's journey to the 'real' interior. As Rancière argues, 'critical art is not so much a type of art that reveals the forms and contradictions of domination as it is an art that questions its own limits and powers, that refuses to anticipate its own effects' (2010: 149).

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Notes

¹ Translated from ‘Pour qu’un film soit retenu pour l’avance sur recette par le Centre national de cinématographie français, il doit compter 50% du dialogue en langue française et véhiculer des idées propres à la culture occidentale’.

² Translated from

Les réalisateurs établis en France avant ou après ‘la grande terreur’, tentent de faire survivre leur art à travers les aides du CNC, des réseaux de connivence et des chaînes TV européennes qui appliquent, à la limite du code de l’indigénat, une politique d’intégration. Avec l’obligation non écrite de la perte d’une partie de son âme restée dans le terroir originel.

³ Translated from

J'ai opté pour le bilinguisme car il me semble que ça correspond plus à la réalité algérienne. Restait à savoir qui parlerait quoi et pourquoi? Par exemple, le paysan parle l'arabe algérien, dialectal. Les deux femmes, lettrées, citadines, petites bourgeoises maîtrisent le français et y recourent plus souvent et plus facilement.

⁴ Translated from 'L'Algérie est le deuxième pays francophone du monde par le nombre de locuteurs effectifs, la majeure partie de sa littérature est écrite en français'.

⁵ Translated from 'le comportement langagier des personnages filmiques peut devenir une question primordiale pour l'efficacité de l'honnêteté d'un film en tant que document historique et culturel'.

⁶ Translated from 'aussi frais et vivants qu'une parade du premier mai à Moscou sous Brejnev'.

⁷ Translated from 'Le respect de la langue nationale est une démarche d'honnêteté et en même temps une preuve d'intelligence dramatique; le fait pour les personnages de parler leur langue maternelle accroît considérablement la crédibilité de l'histoire'.

⁸ Translated from 'La production des films relatifs à la Guerre de libération nationale et à ses symboles est soumise à l'approbation préalable du Gouvernement'.

⁹ Translated from 'peut-être le public ne se reconnaît plus dans un cinéma qui ne lui ressemble pas'.