Sofia Djama and the movement to retake algerian cinema

Daniel Stefani
Gabrielly Pereira

| Algeria |

translated by Lemuel Robinson

Sofia, thank you for being here at the International University of the Peripheries in Maré, Rio de Janeiro. Could you introduce yourself? However you like.

Sofia Djama: I'm Algerian, my name is Sofia Djama and I was born in Oran, which is a large city in western Algeria by the sea. I grew up in Bougie, which is also a seaside town, and I live in Algiers, always by the sea. I'm a filmmaker: I started out with short films, then made a feature-length film, Les Bienheureux, which is The Blessed in English*, and* Al-Sawad in Arabic. *Les Bienheureux* is a film about an Algerian couple in their 50s who lived through the first revolt in 1988. I imagined them as having been militant activists during that time, but the film is really about Algiers—that's the central character in a story that takes place 20 years after, in 2008. During those 20 years there was a civil war between institutions and Islamic radicals who attacked the people because they believed that the 1991 elections were stolen from them. They created an army that attacked the population because they considered every person who didn't respond positively to the project of imposing Sharia on Algeria as not being fit to live. So we've been in a state of war.

The film doesn't only deal with that—it focuses not on the origin of the war, but rather its impact and the post-traumatic context. What marks has it left on people? How have the system and the regime impacted the closeness between people? These questions are embodied by this couple who's going to celebrate their 20th anniversary. You see them wander throughout Algiers—this movement happens nocturnally because the essential parts of this film take place at night. They meet friends, try to go to the restaurant, and each time certain constraints prevent them from doing so. Their discussions allow us to understand what has ruined them. In parallel, you see the youth, whose point of view is that of a generation 20 years removed from that moment. Is this generation's point of view in opposition? Does it break with generations before it? Or does it go in the same direction as the one before it? It's a look at two generations, a look at a city and a country. So that's what *Les Bienheureux* refers to. It's very heavy and funny at the same time because, when I tell it like this, one could say that it's completely dramatic or that it's a political film, but in fact it's a dramedy that occasionally has soft moments because Algerians are really funny people. The misery, war, and poverty—these hard situations always generate humor, perspective, and irony.





We can’t talk about Algerian film having this big movement because if we talked about Algerian film today, we would be talking about five or six known filmmakers from the new generation who are recognizable because film festivals chose them for us. Effectively, we get to know film from a country when that country goes to a big festival; it just happens that way. Me, I was selected to go to the Venice Film Festival and received an award there. Karim Moussaoui was selected to go to Cannes. Narimane Mari for Locarno. And it’s only this way that we come to identify a country’s film, but that doesn’t mean that there aren’t filmmakers there. In the country, there are others who work, who make their films and who exist outside the festival circuit, and that doesn’t mean that their films are uninteresting. It’s just that we’ve had the chance to have foreign productions. Me, my film is an international co-production with a distributor. The festivals ask for money to list a film, and we have money, so that means we have a machine that creates more opportunities for us. I

don’t know why my film over another—it isn’t fair, but that’s how it is. It’s a tendency with the distributors…it’s the international market that makes us see more of certain kinds of films, with certain directors over others. But I’m not saying that in Algeria there are a lot of filmmakers. One should know that there aren’t any film schools there really. And in the same way, one can’t talk about a comedy school, or acting school, or any of that. There are establishments that claim to be schools but aren’t because of the quality of their programs or the teaching. There used to be this cinematic energy from the schools and from the directors in Algeria in the 1970s. There was the emergence of Algerian cinema that was essentially propaganda film, and then filmmakers starting getting formal training. The 70s generation went to Moscow, or the IDHEC (Institute for Advanced Cinematographic Studies), which is now the FEMIS (the National Multimedia School of Image and Sound) in France. In fact, they were taught and financed by Moscow, why? Because of Algeria, socialism, and all that. We were much closer to the Soviet Union. If they didn’t train in Moscow, they were able to train in Ukraine, etc. And then that yielded a certain genre of cinema. The majority of us from my generation are self-taught.

Algerian film was born during the War for Independence. One must know that before, the portrayals of Algeria were made by France. That was colonization. Algerians didn’t have representations of themselves outside of those made by France, and they weren’t even called “Algerians,” they were the “natives.” So in the 50s, the very first thing the FLN (National Liberation Front) did was present images of their involvement in the war. Some foreigners came to film—I’m thinking of René Vautier and the Czechoslovakians—when there was a Czechoslovakia there were a lot of them and also some Bulgarians. Many of them came from the former Soviet Union and Western Europe for the cause of Algerian independence. So the first instances of Algerian film truly were images of war. And after Algerian Independence, there was the creation, this will to create the Cinemathèque as a film school. We sent filmmakers elsewhere to get training and it gave us these filmmakers who we met later: Merzak Allouache, who is very important, or Beloufa, Rachedi, even though he is more from Lakhdar-Hamina’s generation.

Then there was the Cinématheque in Algiers which was very important because Algiers is this place of great independence. There is this whole ideology that is going to make Algerian film take off. Godard, Klaus Kinski, Herzog come. All the West African separatists come too

because Algiers was called the Mecca for revolutionaries. And similarly from Latin America came Argentines, Chileans, and Brazilians. And of course, Russian film comes to the Cinématheque in Algiers. National production made these films popular, meeting demand for films about the revolution mostly, but also for comedies and other genres. People went to theaters. My generation, which grew up in the 80s and 90s, didn't have the chance to do movie theaters because before this we found ourselves in a situation where they closed little by little. They had been salvaged by the mayor's offices as administrative annexes, and then the civil war came.

The first things to be sacrificed in wartime are women and culture. And that's what happened in Algeria: cinemas, theaters, museums, and all of that functioned and then slowed practically to the point of death. And cinema is a very complex industry. I experienced film in a movie theater, for the very first time in my life, in France. So going back to what I said earlier, the Civil War is officially over, and we find ourselves slowly regaining security in the country. The first film shoots start back up, and there is the film by Nadir Moknèche and the one by Merzak Allouache for example. It's key to know that during the 1990s, there hadn't been cinema anymore, and one couldn't make them anymore because security was so fragile. For that matter, during the shoot for Azzedine Medour's film towards the end of the 1990s, half of his crew was killed during a bombing. They had to wait six months before continuing the project. But in what frame of mind do you start back up a shoot where half of the crew has died? It was very difficult, and outside of that, the industry came to a halt.

At the time, I wrote radio spots. Radio is a good place to learn because you write, even if it's advertising. I did that just to do voice direction, because when you do that you have to create a sonic universe that makes the listener imagine. That's really good for working with actors. So I did that and then one day I stumbled into a writing workshop where I wrote two scripts that were adaptations.

I had written *Mollement, un samedi matin,* which was my first short film, and *Les 100 pas de Monsieur X. Mollement, un samedi matin* was a big film shoot, and *Les 100 pas de Monsieur X* which was an exercise in style. Six months after the film shoot, in 2010, I met a

producer in France. In 2011 we were in the process of shooting the film. So I shot my first two short films a week apart. While I was preparing for the big shoot for *Mollement with* a French crew, a film for which I was extremely well-funded, I thought that my whole life was going to be like that. I made the film with 120,000 euros. A ten-day shoot for a short film was huge! I found myself comfortable financially, my team was doing well, I above all had a lot of material, a lot of time for post-production to edit the video and the sound. This film was selected to the Clermont-Ferrand Festival and I was awarded two prizes. First film, big win—it's like going to Cannes with a short film and an international tour. I had all the press. You can imagine. I went with a short film and there was France Culture and France Inter, which are the most important French radio outlets, Le Monde, and a forum at the FNAC sponsored by Arte. Next, I found myself in an international tour and I was really impressed with myself actually! I kept telling myself, "I'm famous, I'm getting recognized." There I decided to quickly roll out my other project. I found a producer and made *Les Bienheureux,* which is another adventure, and I didn't have much money. When I think about it, I was much better off making my short film compared to my feature-length film.

So, you came to Brazil for the Arab Women's Film Festival at the Bank of Brazil Cultural Center (CCBB) in Rio de Janeiro. In this context, why do you think women have succeeded in taking their place in Algerian or Arab film but not African film, despite all the difficulties they face?

So, I don't really know the state of African film, and it's terrible. Do you know why? When we talk about Arab cinema, it concerns Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania, and Libya—whether or not they have films. But that doesn't include Subsaharan Africa. It means just the Arabic-speaking countries. Arabic-speaking Africans. When I say Contemporary African outside of international festivals like Cannes, Venice, Cinéma du Monde, etc., I have very little access to African film festivals besides FESPACO and the Carthage Film Festival in Tunisia. Carthage is a festival encompassing all the languages of the Maghreb, the Arab world, and Africa. I wasn't asked for at the Anglophone African festivals because Maghreb countries have given up their "Africanness." They prefer to go to the Cairo Festival or the Dubai and Abu-Dhabi Festivals. We have surrendered our Africanness. It's terrible. For example, if you tell me to quickly name an African filmmaker, I would say…apart from the

Mauritanian Med Hondo and obviously Abderrahmane Sissako…You see? I have a low level of familiarity with African cinema. That said, I received an award in Rwanda from the Academy of African Film, and I was very happy because it was so important for me to be in a festival that was separate from the festivals of the Arab world.

And how do you see this movement of women making films in the Arab world?

And North Africa.

And North Africa, right.

So as a woman, as a North African woman—because I identify as such—who is linguistically Arab because my film is Arabic, in Algerian—you can't say there's a category. There isn't enough visibility for our film in the Arab world and North Africa to even have a precise concept of genre. It's not like in France where there are 250 films per year, where one could set a quota and say "This year, how many women have been financed to make films? How many have been funded?" You could manage to calculate that statistic. But in the Arab world, the number of filmmakers is so low, and the film industry is suffering so much that simply being a filmmaker is a struggle in itself. So you can't pose the question of genre: films by women, films by men, or otherwise.

I was saying that if one did this calculation this year in Algeria among the filmmakers that we've heard speak at the international festivals, there are Karim Moussaoui and Narimane Mari, Yasmine Chouikh, and me. There have then been more women than men. And it's the same in Tunisia. You hear more about women than men. The question you should ask yourself in the future is: "Will our generation break with the idea of gender as nature or not?"

In ten years will it be the same? In the new wave of North African and Arab cinema, we have

done away with gender. Besides, there aren't only women who take charge of the story of feminist struggle. In the Arab world, this struggle is led by women and by men. That for me is a beautiful evolution.

At any rate, we have to deal with the same issue of financing films in the Arab world. We're in the same catastrophic situation—we suffer in the same way.

So how do you see feminist struggle in Algeria and the Arab world?

When I was a teenager, I had a view of feminism that was heavily influenced by that of France: I had a very radical opinion on the question of the Hijab. I had a totally French viewpoint. It took me some time to undo that and to integrate the particularity of my own country. And I see it like that everywhere, it's suitable for all of the feminist struggles across the world.

The first issue is economic, since many women work without being paid even though they still take part in rural life. A woman who works and doesn't have control over what she generates financially is a woman who cannot take charge of her own emancipation. In fact, if the woman doesn't have control of her money, she can't assert herself in her home vis-a-vis the patriarchy. All the women who have succeeded in creating small businesses or making a profit doing something first have the instinct to invest in their daughters' education. In Algeria in the 80s, many women stopped their education in high school, and then got married after that. Today the economic situation in Algeria is such that men want women to work because rent is expensive, because life is expensive, because there's inflation. So when men marry they want women to work so there are two salaries. So it isn't equal because [gender inequality] is a product of history and their mentality, but the relation has realigned itself by other means. Before, at the university women always studied the social sciences—sociology, psychology—or they became teachers. Now medicine has a lot of women, the [hard] sciences, mathematics, engineering, and technology universities have a lot of women. It's very important, and it's an evolution. And each country has its own evolution.

It was the Civil War in the 1980s that weakened feminist struggle in Algeria, same as all the other countries that have known civil war. Like I said before, the first sacrifices are culture, women, and then the family. Algerian feminist struggles that took place in the 1960s were avant-garde, but in 1984 we got the "Code of the Family" that reduced women to the status of minors. Right away women, women and men, mobilized in force. But in 1990, we found ourselves in a war with Islamic radicals, so there were many assassinations of intellectuals and activists. They were the first victims. After that they attacked the general population. That weakened us. And now we find ourselves in peacetime where it's necessary to rebuild, but in the meantime things have evolved. The new generation isn't like ours, questions of sexuality aren't posed in the same way. There are so many things that have evolved, but there are also some things that have stagnated or regressed too.

In your opinion, is it possible to talk about alternative experiences in the Algerian periphery?

I think that we really need to reflect on alternative spaces, alternative thinking and all that because they are very present things. I think we should benefit from the experiences of certain countries, especially neighboring countries like Tunisia for example, which has created its own counterculture: alternative spaces, alternative thought. In comparison, they are more advanced than we Algerians. In sub-Saharan Africa also—Burkina Faso for example—as far as culture is concerned. We Algerians are pretty traditionalist really. That is going to change with the new generation I think.

The popular mobilization movement that just took place in Algeria, demanding political change and the resignation of the president after twenty years, how were you a part of that?

The only analysis that I can give is that we retook possession of the right to mobilize in the public space. That in itself is an enormous achievement. But it happened 18 years after we had lost possession of our public spaces as spaces to make statements—for the right to protest. Furthermore, we proved that we are capable of doing that peacefully because our protests were peaceful. The second thing I'm happy about is that for a long time, Algerians said: "There is no alternative voice." What voice? What person? What entity could have a

leader's discourse? Actually thanks to all that has happened, we have demystified the fact that there isn't just one. Because there are so many people that have expressed themselves. So we have heard many voices. Me, I heard Justice Zoubida Assoul, who has a leader's quality. She's a woman with the potential to be elected president.

When I was younger, there was an association called the Algerian Youth Rally (RAJE). They went into grade schools and high schools to teach us to be activists. I was fourteen when I joined my first protest, and it was RAJE that got us out in the street. The high schools were very active, thanks to groups like this. During the civil war, all the activists and intellectuals organized the way of thinking, the way of bringing together the associations and workplaces while also giving things meaning and an objective. During this decade, all of that was weakened because of the civil war: civil society, thought, alternative lifestyles, how to recover [public] spaces, and how to occupy them otherwise. So why are we behind on this peripheral thinking—How can you be in the counterculture? How do you produce an economy on the margins? How do you fashion an economy on the periphery? How do you do something different without being in opposition to something institutional?

For you, as an Algerian and North African woman, how can you discuss Algerian and North African identity in relation to Arab identity?

I'm agnostic, but I say that I am from the Arab-Muslim culture because I was steeped in that. I don't reject my culture and my Arab-Muslim heritage. The same goes for me linguistically: I speak Algerian, which is a mix of Arabic, French, Turkish, Spanish, and Berber. All of that is my heritage. I speak French, and it's the language I communicate in the most. I feel mediterranean, francophone, algerianophone, and if we can coin it here "maghrebophone" because I understand Tunisian and Moroccan—we understand each other. But I can't understand Lebanese or Palestinian Arabic, because the East is far for me. Same for Egypt, Mauritania, Libya—to me those are more distant culturally.

For me, Arab values or Al-ummah al-arabiyya[1], have nothing to do with my identity. It's an ideology that made sense in the 1960s, but today is a lie really. It's sad, but it's a corrupt

ideology. And that's a shame because it could have been a lovely project. It's what I've said before: "If they had truly had the will of Al-ummah al-arabiyya—a real cultural identity issue—we wouldn't have had to renounce our own identities." If they were smart, they would have celebrated the linguistic differences between Arabness, Berberness, Africanness, and our Mediterranean identity as elements belonging to Al-ummah al-arabiyya. When you ask an Algerian student or highschooler, "What is the Arab world?", they say, "It's the religion of Islam and it's the Arabic language." But in the Arab world there are Christians, Maronites, Druzes, and Malikites. In itself, Al-ummah al-arabiyya is just one single identity—Arab, and one just single religion—Islam. Just Sunni Islam. It's sad actually, because it's the erasure of so many people living within territories of the Arab world.

What do you think of the idea of potency from the periphery?

You find it in the favelas, in the creative space. We recover our legitimacy as creators of thought, art, and culture.

Interview conducted March 2019

PERIPHERIES thanks to Analu Bambirra and Layla Braz, curators of the Arab Women's Film Festival at the Bank of Brazil Cultural Center (CCBB) in Rio de Janeiro (march/2019)
Collaboration: Deborah Spatz
Original in French