



Mohamed Khider University of Biskra

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Department of Humanities
History Division

Master Thesis
Contemporary Arab History

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Title:

***The role of cinema in documenting
the reality of Algerian society
during the French colonial period
1896 - 1962***

A thesis submitted to the Department of Humanities
in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in History.

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Academic year: 2024 – 2025

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

قَالَ رَبِّ اشْحِذْ لِي صِدْقًا وَسِيرًا إِلَىٰ أَبِي
وَاحْلُلْ عُقْدَةً مِنْ لَدُنِّي أَيْفَقَهَا وَاقُولِي

Dedication

*I dedicate the fruits of this work
primarily to the soul of my dear father, may God
have mercy on him, who always urged me to seek
knowledge no matter the circumstances and no matter
how difficult the challenges.*

*And to my mother, who sacrificed her youth and
health and her comfort to witness our attainment of the
highest ranks.*

*To all members of my family, each according to
their status and name.*

And to all my friends and colleagues.

Nabil AOUCHICHE

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I extend my sincere gratitude to God Almighty, who granted me the strength, patience, and desire to complete this study.

I extend my sincere thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Ridha HOUHOU, who supported me throughout my academic career and provided me with his valuable guidance in completing this modest work.

I would also like to thank profoundly, by name and title, to all the professors and teachers who - over the course of five years of academic training - have contributed to refining my knowledge.

Nabil AOUCHICHE

List of abbreviations

Abrev.	Meaning.
P	<i>page</i>
Op. Cit	<i>The same reference</i>
Ibid	<i>The last reference</i>
G.G.A	<i>General government of Algeria</i>
FLN	<i>National Front of Liberation</i>
COMACICO	<i>Moroccan cinematographic and commercial company</i>
SOGEC	<i>Filmed press company</i>
UGC	<i>French audiovisual group specialising in film exploitation</i>

Introduction

Cinema, as one of the most influential cultural and artistic mediums of the modern era, has played a pivotal role in documenting and shaping historical narratives across different societies and periods. The relationship between cinema and colonial contexts presents a particularly complex and multifaceted phenomenon, where the camera lens becomes both a tool of imperial documentation and a medium for cultural expression and resistance. In the case of Algeria during the French colonial period (1896-1962), cinema emerged as a unique historical witness that captured the profound transformations, tensions, and struggles that characterised this crucial period in North African history.

The French colonial presence in Algeria, which lasted for 132 years (1830-1962), coincided remarkably with the birth and early development of cinema as an art form and technological innovation. When the Lumière Brothers first introduced cinematography to Algeria in 1896, they inadvertently initiated a complex visual dialogue between coloniser and colonised that would evolve throughout the colonial period. This temporal convergence between colonial rule and cinematic development created unprecedented opportunities for visual documentation of Algerian society, its customs, struggles, and transformations under French domination.

The cinematic representation of Algeria during this period encompasses multiple perspectives and voices: French colonial filmmakers who often portrayed Algeria through an orientalist lens, international documentarians who captured various aspects of Algerian life, and eventually, Algerian filmmakers themselves who began to emerge as distinct voices in the latter part of the colonial period. These diverse cinematic approaches created a rich, albeit contested, visual archive that provides invaluable insights into the social, cultural, and political realities of colonial Algeria.

This research examines how cinema functioned as both a mirror and a shaper of Algerian social reality during the French colonial period, analysing the evolution of cinematic representation from early colonial documentation to the emergence of cinema as a tool of cultural resistance and national identity formation. The study traces the development of cinematographic practices in Algeria, investigating how different filmmakers, institutions, and movements utilised the medium to document, interpret, and sometimes challenge the colonial order.

Importance of the Research Topic

The significance of this research stems from several interconnected academic and historical considerations that make it a vital contribution to both film studies and colonial history scholarship. First and foremost, this study addresses a notable gap in the existing literature concerning the intersection of cinema and colonialism in the Maghreb region, particularly regarding Algeria's unique position as both a French settler colony and a site of prolonged anti-colonial resistance.

From a historical perspective, cinema represents an unparalleled source of visual documentation that complements traditional written archives and oral histories. The moving image captures aspects of daily life, social customs, urban and rural landscapes, and human interactions that written sources often fail to convey with the same immediacy and authenticity. In the context of colonial Algeria, where official French archives often present a partial or biased view of Algerian society, cinematic sources provide alternative perspectives that can illuminate the lived experiences of colonised populations.

The research contributes significantly to the field of postcolonial studies by examining how visual media participated in both the perpetuation and resistance of colonial ideologies. Cinema's role as a tool of soft power during the colonial period has been underexplored in the Algerian context, despite its crucial importance in shaping perceptions of both French colonial subjects and international audiences about Algeria and its people.

Furthermore, this study addresses the growing scholarly interest in visual culture and its relationship to power structures, identity formation, and historical memory. As contemporary scholars increasingly recognise the importance of visual sources in historical research, this investigation provides a comprehensive analysis of how cinema functioned as both a colonial instrument and a medium of resistance, offering insights that are relevant to broader discussions about media, power, and representation in colonial contexts.

The research also holds contemporary relevance as Algeria continues to grapple with questions of national identity, cultural heritage, and historical memory in the post-independence period. Understanding how cinema documented and shaped perceptions of Algerian society during the colonial period provides crucial context for contemporary debates about cultural authenticity, national narrative, and the ongoing impact of colonialism on Algerian society.

Reasons for Choosing the Topic

The selection of this research topic emerged from a convergence of personal, academic, and methodological considerations that highlighted both its scholarly potential and its historical significance. The initial motivation arose from recognising the relative scarcity of comprehensive studies examining the intersection of cinema and colonialism in the Algerian context, despite the rich archival material available and the topic's obvious historical importance.

From an academic standpoint, the topic offers unique opportunities to engage with multiple disciplinary approaches, combining film studies methodologies with historical research techniques and postcolonial theoretical frameworks. This interdisciplinary nature allows for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how visual media operated within colonial power structures while simultaneously providing spaces for resistance and alternative expression.

The temporal scope of the study (1896-1962) presents a particularly compelling research framework, as it encompasses the entire period of cinematic development within the colonial context, from the introduction of early cinematographic technology to the emergence of distinctly Algerian cinematic voices on the eve of independence. This chronological span allows for a comprehensive analysis of how cinematic representation evolved alongside changing colonial policies, growing nationalist sentiment, and shifting international attitudes toward colonialism.

The availability of diverse primary sources, including films produced by French colonial authorities, independent documentarians, and early Algerian filmmakers, provides a rich foundation for comparative analysis. These sources offer multiple perspectives on the same historical period, enabling a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of how different actors utilised cinema to document, interpret, and represent Algerian society.

Additionally, the topic's relevance to contemporary discussions about decolonisation, cultural heritage, and historical memory makes it particularly significant for current scholarship. As academic institutions worldwide increasingly recognise the importance of decolonising curricula and research approaches, this study contributes to broader efforts to center non-European perspectives and experiences in historical analysis.

Objectives of the Research

This research pursues several interconnected objectives that collectively aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of cinema's role in documenting Algerian society during the French colonial period. The primary objective is to analyse how cinema functioned as a medium of historical documentation, examining both its potential and its limitations as a source of information about colonial-era Algerian society.

The first specific objective involves tracing the emergence and development of cinematographic practices in Algeria from 1896 to 1962, examining how technological innovations, institutional frameworks, and cultural contexts shaped the evolution of film production and distribution. This analysis will identify key periods, influential figures, and significant developments that characterised the growth of cinema in colonial Algeria.

The second objective focuses on analysing how different cinematic approaches documented various aspects of Algerian social reality, including urban and rural life, traditional customs, colonial transformations, and intercultural encounters. This analysis will examine how filmmakers' perspectives, intended audiences, and institutional affiliations influenced their representation of Algerian society, identifying patterns, biases, and innovations in cinematic documentation.

The third objective investigates cinema's role as a tool of cultural resistance and national identity formation, particularly during the latter part of the colonial period when Algerian filmmakers began to emerge as distinct voices. This analysis will examine how cinema was used to challenge colonial narratives, preserve cultural traditions, and articulate alternative visions of Algerian identity and sovereignty.

A fourth objective involves evaluating the reliability and representativeness of cinematic sources as historical documentation, considering factors such as filmmakers' perspectives, production constraints, censorship, and intended audiences. This critical assessment will contribute to broader methodological discussions about the use of visual sources in historical research.

Finally, the study aims to assess the long-term impact of colonial-era cinema on Algerian cultural production and historical memory after independence, and to examine how these early cinematic representations continue to influence perceptions of Algerian identity and history after 1962.

Research Scope

The temporal scope of this study spans from 1896, marking the introduction of cinematographic technology to Algeria shortly after the Lumière Brothers' global dissemination of cinema, to 1962, coinciding with Algeria's independence and the conclusion of the colonial era. This sixty-six-year period encompasses the complete evolution of cinema from its earliest documentary forms to its emergence as a sophisticated tool of both colonial propaganda and anti-colonial resistance.

The research is situated within the broader academic discourse of postcolonial film studies, visual anthropology, and North African cultural history. Drawing upon interdisciplinary methodologies, this study employs archival analysis of colonial-era films, contemporary critiques, and administrative documents to construct a comprehensive understanding of cinema's socio-cultural impact. The theoretical framework integrates concepts from postcolonial theory, particularly the works of Edward Said on Orientalism and Homi Bhabha on colonial discourse, with film theory perspectives on documentary realism and national cinema.

This investigation addresses a significant gap in existing scholarship, where Algerian colonial cinema has often been examined through fragmented approaches that separate its documentary function from its political implications. By adopting a holistic perspective that considers cinema simultaneously as a colonial instrument and a site of resistance, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how visual media functioned within the complex power dynamics of colonial Algeria.

The central thesis argues that cinema in colonial Algeria operated as a contested space where competing narratives of Algerian identity, social structures, and political aspirations were negotiated, documented, and transmitted. Rather than serving merely as passive documentation, cinema actively participated in the construction and contestation of colonial discourse, ultimately contributing to the articulation of Algerian national consciousness.

Problem of the Research

The central problem addressed by this research concerns the complex and often contradictory role that cinema played in documenting Algerian society during the French colonial period. Specifically, the study investigates how cinematographic representation simultaneously served colonial interests while also providing spaces for alternative expression and eventual resistance to colonial narratives.

The primary research problem can be formulated as follows: ***How did cinema contribute to documenting the reality of Algerian society during the French occupation (1896-1962)?***

This central problem encompasses several subsidiary questions that guide the investigation.

First, *how did the French occupation exploit cinema in its early days as a tool to reinforce the legitimacy of its colonial presence in Algeria?*

Second, *to what extent did early colonial cinema accurately document Algerian social reality, and how did the Algerian people engage with their representation in colonial cinema?*

Third, *how did cinema contribute to shaping and crystallizing Algerian national identity during the struggle for independence?*

Methodologically, the study grapples with the problem of analysing visual sources as historical evidence, examining how cinematic representation can be read as both cultural artifact and historical document. This involves questions about the relationship between cinematic representation and historical reality, the impact of filmmakers' perspectives on documentation, and the ways in which cinema both reflects and shapes social understanding.

Research Plan

This research is organised into three main chapters that collectively provide a comprehensive analysis of cinema's role in documenting Algerian society during the French colonial period. The organisational structure follows both chronological and thematic logic, tracing the development of cinema in Algeria while examining its various functions and impacts.

Chapter One, "The Emergence and Development of Cinema in Algeria During the Colonial Period (1896-1962)," provides the foundational historical context for the



entire study. This chapter traces the introduction of cinematographic technology to Algeria, examining the institutional, cultural, and technological factors that shaped early film production and exhibition. The analysis begins with the arrival of the Lumière Brothers' cinematograph in 1896 and follows the gradual establishment of cinema infrastructure, including theaters, production facilities, and distribution networks.

The chapter examines key periods in the development of Algerian cinema, identifying significant milestones, influential figures, and institutional developments. Particular attention is paid to the role of French colonial authorities in promoting certain types of cinematic production while restricting others, as well as the emergence of commercial cinema and its relationship to colonial cultural policies.

Chapter Two, "Cinema as a Tool for Documenting Algerian Social Reality (1896-1962)," focuses on the substantive analysis of how films represented various aspects of Algerian society. This chapter examines different genres of cinematic production, including documentaries, ethnographic films, commercial features, and newsreels, analysing how each approached the documentation of Algerian life.

The analysis considers multiple dimensions of social reality, including urban and rural life, traditional customs and practices, religious observances, economic activities, and social hierarchies. Special attention is given to how colonial cinema portrayed relationships between French settlers and Algerian populations, as well as how it represented cultural difference and colonial transformation.

Chapter Three, "Cinema as a Tool of Resistance and Documentation of National Identity in Algeria (1939-1962)," examines the evolution of cinema from a primarily colonial instrument to a medium of resistance and identity formation. This chapter focuses particularly on the period from 1939 to 1962, when growing nationalist sentiment and the independence struggle created new contexts for cinematic production and reception.

Methodology Adopted in the Research

This research relies on a multifaceted methodology that combines historical research techniques, film studies and analysis methodologies, and theoretical frameworks from the colonial period. The nature of this research requires a careful integration of the following approaches to ensure accuracy and comprehensive coverage of the research questions.

The Introduction

The primary method adopted is historical, as required by the nature of the study. It was used to trace the emergence of cinema in Algeria, its most important stages of development, and how it portrayed Algerian reality. It also defines the historical context and factual basis for the study.

The analysis constitutes the method adopted in examining visual sources and surviving films from the colonial period. This analysis employs established film studies methodologies, including formal analysis of cinematic techniques, narrative structure, and visual representation. Particular attention is paid to how technical choices contributed to the overall representation of Algerian society and colonial relations.

The research also uses a comparative approach to examine how different directors, institutions, and time periods addressed similar themes or ideas. This approach helps identify patterns, changes, and contradictions in cinematic representation, addressing the differences between the French colonial period and the Algerian period.

Most Important Sources and References Used in the Research

The research draws upon a diverse range of primary and secondary sources that collectively provide the foundation for comprehensive analysis of cinema's role in documenting colonial Algerian society. The source base includes cinematic materials, archival documents, contemporary publications, and scholarly literature from multiple disciplinary perspectives.

Primary cinematic sources form the core of the research materials, including films produced by French colonial institutions, commercial film companies, independent documentarians, and early Algerian filmmakers. Key repositories include the French Archives du film (French Film Archives), the Algiers Cinematheque, and various European film archives that house colonial-era materials. Particularly significant films include early Lumière Brothers actualities, colonial propaganda films, ethnographic documentaries, and independence-era productions.

Archival sources provide crucial contextual information about production circumstances, institutional policies, and contemporary reception. These include materials from the national archives of outre-mer in Aix-en-Provence, which house extensive documentation of French colonial cultural policies, as well as local Algerian archives that preserve materials related to cultural production and censorship during the colonial period.

Contemporary publications, including film industry magazines, colonial publications, and Algerian nationalist periodicals, provide valuable insights into how cinema was understood and discussed by different audiences during the colonial period. These sources help reconstruct the cultural context and contemporary debates surrounding cinematic representation.

Secondary scholarly sources encompass several disciplinary areas, including colonial history, film studies, and postcolonial theory. Key historical works include Charles-Robert Ageron's comprehensive studies of French Algeria, Benjamin Stora's analyses of colonial memory, and various specialized studies of colonial cultural policy. Film studies sources include works by scholars such as Laura Mulvey on visual representation, Robert Stam on colonial cinema, and various studies of North African and Arab cinema.

Postcolonial theoretical sources provide the interpretive framework for analysing the relationship between cinema and colonial power, including foundational works by Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Homi Bhabha, as well as more recent scholarship on visual culture and colonial representation.

Research Difficulties

The investigation of cinema's role in documenting Algerian society during the colonial period has encountered several significant challenges that have required adaptive methodological approaches and careful consideration of analytical limitations.

The most substantial difficulty concerns the preservation and accessibility of primary cinematic sources. Many films from the colonial period have been lost due to poor storage conditions, lack of preservation efforts, or deliberate destruction during periods of political upheaval. This material loss means that the research necessarily relies on surviving films that may not be fully representative of the broader range of cinematic production during this period.

Access to existing archival materials has presented ongoing challenges, as relevant sources are scattered across multiple institutions in different countries, each with distinct access policies and procedures. Some archives require lengthy application processes or impose restrictions on research use, while others lack comprehensive cataloguing systems that would facilitate systematic research.

Language and translation issues have created additional complications, as sources exist in multiple languages and involve cultural contexts that require specialised knowledge for accurate interpretation. Technical film terminology,

colonial administrative language, and cultural references specific to the historical period all require careful interpretation to avoid misunderstanding or misrepresentation.

The interdisciplinary nature of the research has required mastery of different methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks, each with distinct standards and expectations. Balancing historical accuracy with film studies analysis while incorporating postcolonial critique has required careful navigation of potentially conflicting interpretive approaches.

Financial and logistical constraints have limited the extent of archival research possible, particularly regarding international archives that would require extended travel and accommodation expenses. These practical limitations have necessarily influenced the scope and depth of primary source research.

Technical challenges related to viewing and analysing deteriorated film materials have also complicated the research process. Many surviving films exist in poor condition, with damaged image or sound quality that limits analytical possibilities. Additionally, some materials exist only in formats that require specialised equipment for viewing.

Finally, the sensitive political and cultural dimensions of the research topic have required careful navigation of contemporary debates about colonial history, cultural representation, and historical memory. Ensuring scholarly objectivity while remaining sensitive to the ongoing impact of colonial history on contemporary Algerian society has required constant attention to the ethical dimensions of the research process.

Chapter One:
The Emergence and Development of Cinema in Algeria
During the Colonial Period (1896-1962)

The arrival of cinema in Algeria coincided with the consolidation of French colonial administration and the implementation of the mission civilisation, positioning the new medium within a broader framework of cultural and political transformation. French colonial authorities quickly recognised cinema's potential as both an instrument of entertainment and a vehicle for ideological transmission, utilising films to promote colonial values while simultaneously restricting indigenous access to filmmaking technology and distribution networks. This asymmetrical relationship established patterns of cultural dominance that would profoundly shape the medium's evolution throughout the colonial period.

However, the colonial cinematic landscape in Algeria was far from monolithic. The presence of diverse communities—including European settlers, indigenous Berber and Arab populations, and various immigrant groups—created a heterogeneous audience with distinct cultural expectations and viewing practices. This diversity challenged simple narratives of cultural imposition, as local audiences developed their own interpretative frameworks and preferences that often subverted intended colonial messages. Moreover, the gradual emergence of Algerian filmmakers and cultural entrepreneurs introduced alternative perspectives and narratives that contested dominant colonial representations.

The period under examination reveals the tensions inherent in colonial cultural policy, where the desire to modernise and "civilise" coexisted uneasily with fears of political awakening and cultural resistance. Cinema became a contested terrain where competing visions of modernity, tradition, and national identity were articulated and negotiated. The evolution of film production, distribution, and reception in colonial Algeria thus provides crucial insights into the mechanisms of cultural hegemony and resistance that characterised the broader colonial experience.

Section one: The Origins and Development of Cinema in Algeria during the Colonial Era

The history of cinema in Algeria is linked to the country's colonial experience under French rule. From the Lumière brothers first films in 1895 until the eve of independence in 1962, cinema in Algeria was not as an artistic or entertainment medium, but rather as a tool that the colonial authorities sought to harness to further their cultural agenda. This chapter examines the trajectory of cinematic development in Algeria during the colonial period, analysing how this modern visual medium operated within the framework of colonial policy. As a technology introduced by the coloniser, "cinema was initially a tool for colonial propaganda and cultural hegemony. However, its development over nearly seven decades reveals a more complex narrative of cultural negotiation, resistance, and eventual appropriation."¹

“The study of colonial Algerian cinema offers valuable insights into issues related to cultural imperialism, visual representation, and the politics of spectatorship. As the first and only French colony with a significant European presence, Algeria offers a unique case for understanding how cinema functioned in colonial contexts”². We examine three interconnected dimensions of colonial Algerian cinema: its beginnings and early reception; its development across the various political and historical phases of colonial rule; and the institutional infrastructure that supported and regulated cinematic activities across the country.

¹Abdelkader Benali, *Le Cinéma Colonial au Maghreb: L'Imaginaire en Trompe-l'œil*, (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1998), p 14-15.

²Morgan Corriou, « Un nouveau loisir en situation colonial : le cinéma dans la Tunisie protectorat (1896-1956), These de doctorat, Université Paris 7Diderot, (2011) p 23.

1. The Beginnings of Cinema in Algeria since 1895 (Cinematograph)

1.1 The Arrival of the Cinematograph

“The introduction of cinema to Algeria coincided with its emergence in Greater France. A few months after the Lumière brothers' first public screening of a film in Paris in December 1895, their cinematic equipment arrived on the Algerian coast, marking the beginning of the country's cinematic history.”³(See appendix 01)

The French cinematograph was established at the Oran advertising fair in October 1896 (less than ten months after Paris, and a few months after the first paying phonograph screenings), followed in November by another operator in Algiers.⁴

“Perhaps the most famous of the films that the Lumieres showed in December 1895 is *A Train Arriving at a Station (L'Arrivée d'un train a la gare de la Ciotat)*, which runs for about fifty seconds.”⁵(See appendix 02)

“The rapidity with which cinema reached Algeria reflects the territory's privileged position within the French colonial empire. As "an extension of France across the Mediterranean" rather than merely a colony, Algeria received new cultural and technological innovations from the metropole with minimal delay, at least in areas with substantial European settlement.”⁶ This pattern of technological transfer would characterise much of Algeria's cinematic development, with innovations typically appearing first in European-dominated urban centers before gradually diffusing outward.

“The first documented public screening in Algeria took place in 1896, at Algiers, featuring the same program of short films that had captivated Parisian audiences: "*Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory*," (see appendix 03), "*The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station*," and several other brief actualities." Despite the brutality of the scenes captured by Felix Mesguiche in Algiers, Tlemcen, and Biskra, they reflected a historical reality in which the photographer played no role, unless he

³Lotfi Mahfoud, "*Les Débuts du Spectacle Cinématographique en Algérie 1896-1918*" (Master's thesis, Université d'Alger, 1985), p 37

⁴Chevaldonné, François. “ Discours sur la modernité et communication inégale : Un siècle d’audiovisuel el Algérie (1895-1995).” *Revue Tiers Monde* 37, no. 146 (1996), p 289.

⁵Geoffrey Nowell SMITH, “The Oxford History of World Cinema”, Oxford University Press, 1996, p 38.

⁶Eric Savarese, « L'Ordre Colonial et sa Légitimation en France Métropolitaine » (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), p 76.

deliberately distorted it, which Felix was not prepared to do. Lumière's short films were shown in Algiers and then Oran in the fall of 1897.⁷

1.2 Early Reception and Cultural Impact

The early reception of cinema in Algeria followed a distinctly bifurcated pattern, reflecting the divided social structure of the colony. For the European settler community, cinema represented a reassuring link and a sign of "civilisation." Cinema constituted a cultural affirmation for the settlers, demonstrating their self-perception as bearers of modernity in an "underdeveloped" land."⁸

For indigenous Algerians, access to early cinema was significantly more limited. When they did encounter films, their reception was complex and varied. Some historians have emphasised the bewilderment or fear that supposedly characterized initial indigenous responses to moving images,⁹ though such accounts frequently reflect colonial perspectives rather than actual Algerian experiences. More nuanced studies suggest that many Algerians quickly grasped cinema's technological basis while interpreting its content through their own cultural frameworks.¹⁰

By 1900, itinerant projectionists had begun showing films in less urbanised areas with predominantly indigenous populations. These screenings often took place in markets, cafés, or other public spaces rather than dedicated venues. Felix Mesguich, a former camera operator for the Lumiere brothers who toured Algeria extensively between 1905 and 1908, recorded in his memoirs that "the natives watched with intense fascination, though their commentary on the images revealed interpretive frameworks quite distinct from European reactions."¹¹ (See appendix 04)

1.3 Early Film Production and Representation

The representation of Algeria in early cinema was primarily shaped by external perspectives. The territory featured prominently in the catalogue of the Lumiere brothers, who dispatched camera operators to capture footage of Algiers, Constantine,

⁷Abdelghani Megherbi: *Les Algériens Au Miroir Du Cinéma Colonial*, SNED, Algiers, Algeria .p 17.

⁸Benali, op. cit, p 42

⁹Pierre-Jérôme Jehel, "Photographie et ethnologie: La photographie primitive dans le discours anthropologique," *MEI (Médiation et Information)* (1997): p 92-93

¹⁰Hadj-Moussa, *Le Corps, l'Histoire, le Territoire: Les Rapports de Genre dans le Cinéma Algérien* (Montréal: Éditions Balzac, 1994), p 53-55.

¹¹Félix Mesguich, *Tours de manivelle: Souvenirs d'un chasseur d'images* (Paris: Grasset, 1933), p 128.

and Biskra between 1896 and 1900.¹² These films, typically lasting under a minute, focused on picturesque scenes that aligned with prevailing Orientalist aesthetics: marketplaces, "native quarters," religious ceremonies, and desert landscapes.

Similar representational patterns appeared in films produced by Pathe and Gaumont, the dominant French production companies of the early cinema period. Algeria served as an exotic backdrop for fictional narratives or as the subject of travelogues and "educational" films intended for metropolitan audiences.¹³ These productions consistently emphasised cultural difference through visual means. "Early cinema constructed Algeria as a visual spectacle for European consumption, accentuating precisely those elements that confirmed pre-existing colonial imaginaries."¹⁴

1.4 The Transition to Permanent Exhibition Venues

The itinerant model of film exhibition that characterised cinema's first decade in Algeria gradually gave way to more permanent structures. The first dedicated cinema venue, the Seiberra's Cinema, opened in Algiers in 1908, followed by similar establishments in other major cities.¹⁵ By 1914, Algiers boasted twelve permanent cinemas, all located in predominantly European neighbourhoods. Constantine and Oran each had five cinema venues.¹⁶

The first cinemas, built primarily in European neighbourhoods of cities, remained largely inaccessible to the indigenous population due to the racial discrimination practiced by French colonialism from the outset. However, cinema gradually gained a broad audience among Algerian urban populations, particularly among young people who were more open to education and more conversant with the French language.

¹²Catalogue des vues pour Cinématographe, Archives Lumière, Lyon, France.<https://www.institut-lumiere.org/les-films-lumiere>

¹³Mark Rice, "Colonial Photography Across Empires and Islands," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 3, no. 2 (2011): p 7-8.

¹⁴ Mahfoud, op. cit, p 106.

¹⁵ Mahfoud, *ibid*, p 143.

¹⁶Archives du Gouvernement Général de l'Algérie, 10H/15, "Rapport sur les lieux de spectacle," 1914.

2. The Stages of Cinema Development in Algeria under Occupation

2.1 World War I and Its Aftermath (1914-1929)

World War I marked a significant turning point in the development of cinema. While film production and exhibition were initially restricted by wartime restrictions, cinema ultimately emerged from the conflict with greater cultural significance and institutional support. Recognising the potential of propaganda cinema, the French colonial administration encouraged the screening of newsreels and documentaries.

For the first time, official colonial policy explicitly acknowledged cinema's potential influence on indigenous populations. A 1917 circular from the Governor-General's office instructed local administrators to "facilitate cinema screenings that demonstrate France's military might and technological superiority," while cautioning against films that might "diminish European prestige or suggest colonial vulnerability."¹⁷ This period thus witnessed the formalisation of cinema as a deliberate instrument of colonial policy.

The post-war period saw a rapid expansion of cinema infrastructure, with the number of permanent cinemas in Algeria doubling.

2.2 The Coming of Sound and the Centennial of French Algeria (1930-1939)

The transition to sound cinema, which began between 1929 and 1930, radically changed cinematic practices in Algeria. Sound technology reinforced the linguistic exclusivity of cinema, with virtually all commercially distributed sound films being in French, without Arabic or Berber subtitles.¹⁸ This technological shift effectively promoted French culture by privileging spectators fluent in French.

The 1930s coincided with the centennial of French conquest, and cinema played a central role in commemorative activities.

The colonial administration commissioned several documentary films celebrating "one hundred years of French achievements in Algeria," including Jean Renoir's "*Le Bled*" (1929), a dramatic film that combined a fictional narrative with propagandistic representations of colonial "progress." The film was considered "a work of useful colonial propaganda".¹⁹ (See appendix 05)

¹⁷Archives du G. G A, 10H/22, "Circulaire concernant la propagande cinématographique," September 7, 1917

¹⁸Benali, *op cit*, 95

¹⁹Histoire des colonisations : des conquêtes aux indépendances: XIIIè-XXè siècle, Paris : Ed. du seuil, 1994, p 245.

Despite these constraints, the 1930s also witnessed the first stirrings of indigenous engagement with film production. In 1935, Mohamed Iguerbouchene composed the music for "*Le Grand Jeu*" becoming the first Algerian to contribute creatively to a commercial film.²⁰ Though modest, this participation signalled the beginning of indigenous involvement in a medium previously dominated entirely by European practitioners. (See appendix 06)

2.3 World War II and Its Impact (1939-1945)

The Second World War disrupted normal cinema operations in Algeria but ultimately accelerated certain developmental trends. Following France's defeat in 1940, Algeria came under Vichy control, resulting in increased censorship and the prohibition of American and British films. The Allied landing in November 1942 brought Algeria under Anglo-American administration, exposing the territory to new cinematic influences and operational models.

American military authorities established mobile projection units that screened films in areas previously underserved by commercial exhibition, including rural regions with predominantly indigenous populations.²¹ Though intended primarily for troops, these screenings often attracted local spectators and expanded cinema's reach beyond established commercial circuits.

The wartime period saw Algiers emerge as a significant production centre for the first time, as French filmmakers fleeing occupied Europe established temporary studios in the city. Between 1942 and 1945, eight feature films were produced in Algiers, including Marcel L'Herbier's "*La Vie de Boehme*" (1943).²² Though these productions employed some local personnel in technical capacities, they did not substantively engage with Algerian themes or perspectives. (See appendix 07)

2.4 Post-War Developments and the Road to Revolution (1945-1954)

The post-war period witnessed contradictory trends in Algerian cinema. On one hand, commercial exhibition reached its zenith, with 250 permanent cinema

²⁰Rachid Boudjedra, *Naissance du Cinéma Algérien*, François Maspero, 1971, p 28.

²¹Marie-Anne Corvisier-de-Villèle : *Inventaire des archives de la guerre*, série P 1940 – 1946, T1, château de Vincennes, 1994, p 179.

²²Boudjedra, *op. cit*, 36

venues operating throughout the territory by 1954.²³ Film attendance peaked, with annual admissions estimated at 32 million in 1952 (approximately 4.5 million inhabitants, indicating multiple visits per person). Cinema had become the dominant form of commercial entertainment for both European and urban indigenous populations.

On the other hand, this period saw increasing colonial anxiety about cinema's potential political effects. Following the Setif massacres of May 1945, when French forces killed thousands of Algerians during independence demonstrations, colonial authorities intensified censorship of films deemed potentially subversive.²⁴ A 1948 directive specifically targeted "films depicting colonial subjects achieving independence or successfully resisting European powers," effectively banning numerous historical dramas and contemporary productions from Egypt and India.²⁵

Paradoxically, this period also witnessed limited official encouragement of indigenous film-related activities. In 1949, the French government established a film training program in Algiers that admitted a small number of Muslim students, though primarily for technical rather than creative roles.²⁶ This initiative reflected the broader contradictions of late colonial policy, which simultaneously sought to suppress Algerian nationalism while making limited accommodations to defuse independence sentiment.

Egyptian films began circulating more widely during this period, particularly in urban areas with significant Muslim populations. These Arabic-language productions offered Algerian audiences their first regular exposure to non-Western cinema and frequently featured themes of national pride and cultural authenticity that resonated with emerging nationalist sentiments.²⁷ Colonial authorities monitored these screenings closely and occasionally banned specific Egyptian films deemed politically problematic.

²³Archives du Ministère des Affaires Culturelles, France, 42/AC/3, "Rapport sur l'infrastructure cinématographique en Algérie," 1954.

²⁴Sylvie Thénault, *Une drôle de justice: Les magistrats dans la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2001), p 67-68.

²⁵Archives du Gouvernement Général de l'Algérie, 10H/47, "Directive concernant la censure cinématographique," March 12, 1948.

²⁶Archives Nationales d'Algérie, 5K/118, "Programme de formation aux métiers du cinéma," 1949.

²⁷Hadj-Moussa, *op. cit*, p 87

2.5 Cinema during the War of Independence (1954-1962)

The outbreak of the Algerian War of Independence in November 1954 transformed the context for cinematic activities throughout the territory. The French authorities imposed stricter censorship, banned gatherings in cinemas in certain areas, and closely monitored audience reactions to newsreels and potentially sensitive films.²⁸ Despite these restrictions, cinema venues sometimes functioned as sites of covert political organisation for the independence movement, with messages exchanged during screenings and meetings arranged in the darkness of the theatre.²⁹

The war period witnessed the first efforts at autonomous Algerian film production, though these necessarily occurred outside colonial structures. The Front of National Liberation (FLN) established a film unit in 1957 that produced documentaries documenting the independence struggle for international distribution.³⁰ Operating primarily from Tunisia and Morocco, these filmmakers, including Ahmed Rachedi (see appendix08) and René Vautier (a French supporter). (See appendix 09), created works that directly challenged colonial representations of the conflict.

Commercial cinema infrastructure suffered significantly during the war, particularly in rural areas where many venues closed due to security concerns. By 1962, the number of operational cinemas had declined to approximately 160, a 36 percent reduction from the pre-war peak.³¹ Attendance similarly declined, especially among indigenous audiences who faced increasing restrictions on movement and gathering.

²⁸Benjamin Stora, *La Gangrène et l'Oubli: La Mémoire de la Guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991), p 112

²⁹Jacques Charby, "Les porteurs de valises et l'écran," in *La Guerre d'Algérie à l'écran*, ed. Guy Hennebelle (Paris: Corlet, 1997), p 36.

³⁰Boudjedra, *op. cit*, p 52-55

³¹Archives Nationales d'Algérie, 5K/142, "État des lieux du cinéma à l'indépendance," 1962.

3. Cinema Institutions and Colonial Infrastructure

3.1 Regulatory Frameworks and Censorship

Throughout the colonial period, cinema in Algeria operated within regulatory frameworks that evolved from relatively informal oversight to increasingly systematised control. Until 1916, film exhibitions were regulated under general laws governing public gatherings rather than specific cinema legislation.³² The first colonial decree specifically addressing cinema was issued in 1916, requiring prior authorisation for public film screenings and establishing basic safety standards for exhibition venues.³³

Censorship mechanisms became progressively more formalised and comprehensive. A centralised censorship committee was established in Algiers in 1922, reviewing all films before public exhibition throughout the territory.³⁴ This committee initially focused primarily on moral content, prohibiting scenes of sexuality or violence deemed excessive.

By the 1930s, Algeria had developed a distinctive censorship regime that occasionally diverged from metropolitan French practices. Films approved for screening in France were sometimes banned or edited for Algerian exhibition based on specific colonial concerns. This divergence reflected the administration's acute awareness of cinema's potential political impact in the colonial context.

Language policies constituted another significant regulatory mechanism. Until the late colonial period, no formal requirements existed for subtitling or dubbing films in Arabic or Berber languages, effectively limiting comprehensive understanding to French-speaking audiences.³⁵ This linguistic exclusion represented a form of censorship that restricted indigenous people's participation in cinematic content.

³²Benali, *op. cit.*, p 72.

³³Journal Officiel de l'Algérie, "Décret concernant les spectacles cinématographiques," April 23, 1916, p 3-4

³⁴Archives du Gouvernement Général de l'Algérie, 10H/25, "Constitution de la commission de censure cinématographique," 1922.

³⁵Benali, *op. cit.*, p 124.

3.2 Exhibition Networks and Commercial Structures

The commercial infrastructure of colonial Algerian cinema was characterised by vertical integration and metropolitan dominance. Major French distribution companies, including Gaumont, Pathe, and later COMACICO and SOGEC, controlled both distribution and much of the exhibition sector.³⁶ These companies operated according to a tiered release system that privileged venues in European-dominated neighbourhoods, which received new films months before they reached cinemas in predominantly indigenous areas.

Exhibition venues themselves reflected colonial hierarchies. First-run cinemas, featuring modern architecture, comfortable seating, and the latest technological animation, clustered in European quarters of major cities.³⁷ These establishments charged premium prices and often maintained formal or informal exclusionary practices. Second and third-run venues, with more basic facilities and lower ticket prices, served mixed audiences or predominantly indigenous patrons.

The geography of cinema distribution reproduced broader patterns of colonial development. By 1954, all cities with populations exceeding 20,000 had at least one cinema, while smaller towns and rural areas remained significantly underserved.³⁸ This distribution pattern reinforced the urban-rural divide that characterised colonial Algeria more generally.

Independent exhibition initiatives occasionally emerged as alternatives to the dominant commercial model. The most significant was the network Magnus, a circuit of mobile projectors that served rural areas beginning in the late 1940s.³⁹ Though privately operated, this network received some support from colonial authorities who recognised cinema's potential utility for "educating" rural populations according to colonial priorities.

³⁶Archives Nationales d'Algérie, 5K/112, "Organisation commerciale du cinéma," 1952.

³⁷Hadj-Moussa, *op. cit.*, p 67.

³⁸Archives du Ministère des Affaires Culturelles, France, 42/AC/3, "Rapport sur l'infrastructure cinématographique en Algérie," 1954.

³⁹Archives Nationales d'Algérie, 5K/121, "Activités du réseau Magnus," 1947-1954.

3.3 Educational and Propaganda Uses

Colonial authorities increasingly recognised cinema's potential as an educational and propaganda tool, particularly for reaching indigenous populations. The Cinematographic Service of general Government, established in 1943, produced and distributed documentary films on agricultural techniques, public health, and civic education specifically targeted at Muslim audiences.⁴⁰ These films combined practical information with ideological content reinforcing colonial narratives of French benevolence and modernising influence.

The educational use of cinema extended to formal institutions as well. By the early 1950s, approximately 30 percent of schools in urban areas had 16mm projectors for classroom use, though this percentage was much lower in rural regions.⁴¹ Educational films typically presented French historical and cultural material, with minimal content addressing Algerian realities except through a colonial lens.

Mobile cinema units operated by various colonial agencies brought films to remote areas lacking permanent venues. The most extensive such program was operated by the Social Educative centers, which screened a combination of entertainment films and instructional content in villages throughout the territory.⁴² These screenings were typically accompanied by French-Arabic interpreters who explained content to non-French-speaking audiences, thus controlling the interpretive framework.

3.4 Training and Indigenous Participation

Formal training in film production remained almost entirely unavailable to Algerians throughout the colonial period. No film schools existed within the territory, and scholarships for study in metropolitan institutions were rarely extended to indigenous students.⁴³ The limited training initiatives that did emerge, such as the previously mentioned 1949 program, focused narrowly on technical skills rather than creative or directorial capacities.

⁴⁰Archives du Gouvernement Général de l'Algérie, 10H/41, "Création du Service Cinématographique," 1943.

⁴¹Archives Nationales d'Algérie, 5K/133, "Équipement cinématographique des établissements scolaires," 1953.

⁴²Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible, eds., *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p 295-296

⁴³Boudjedra, *op. cit*, p 41

Indigenous participation in colonial cinema infrastructure remained minimal and largely confined to subordinate positions. By the early 1950s, Algerians comprised approximately 25 percent of cinema employees, primarily working as projectionists, ushers, and maintenance staff.⁴⁴ Almost no Algerians held management positions in exhibition companies or worked as distributors. This exclusion reflected broader patterns of discrimination in employment and educational opportunities throughout the colonial economy.

⁴⁴Archives Nationales d'Algérie, 5K/112, "Organisation commerciale du cinéma," 1952.

The history of cinema in colonial Algeria reveals the complex entanglement of cultural innovation, commercial enterprise, and political control. Introduced as a metropolitan technology and initially developed to serve primarily European audiences, cinema nevertheless gradually penetrated diverse segments of Algerian society and ultimately contributed to cultural dynamics that exceeded colonial intentions. Throughout its developmental trajectory, cinema in Algeria simultaneously functioned as an instrument of colonial hegemony and a site of potential contestation and alternative imagination.

The infrastructure established during the colonial era significantly shaped the Algerian cinematic landscape. While this infrastructure primarily served colonial interests, it also created spaces and capacities that were later used for national purposes after independence. The constraints of colonial cinema directly influenced the development of a distinctive Algerian cinema focused on national identity and the recovery of historical heritage.⁴⁵

Thus, the colonial period represents not merely a prehistory of Algerian national cinema, but rather a founding period whose effects, both constraining and stimulating, continued to influence cinematic development long after political independence, and its ongoing interaction with issues of cultural authenticity.

⁴⁵Ranjana Khanna, *Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p 125-127.

Section two: Colonial Cinema and Colonial Discourse: The Cinematic Construction of Algeria (1896-1954)

The relationship between cinema and colonialism constitutes a complex web of representation, power, and cultural production that fundamentally shaped both the medium of film and the colonial project itself. This chapter examines how French colonial cinema constructed and represented Algeria between 1896 -the year the Lumière Brothers first brought their cinematograph to Algeria- and 1954, when the Algerian War of Independence began, marking a definitive rupture in colonial representation. During this period, cinema served not merely as entertainment but as a powerful ideological apparatus that helped legitimise, romanticise, and naturalise French colonial domination in Algeria.⁴⁶ By analysing the cinematic production of this era chronologically and thematically, this chapter demonstrates how colonial discourse materialised through visual culture, creating what Edward Said termed an "imaginative geography" that served the imperial project.⁴⁷

The historical significance of this analysis extends beyond film studies or Algerian history. It illuminates how visual technologies became instruments of colonial power, shaping not only how metropolitan French audiences perceived Algeria but also how Algerians themselves were positioned as subjects within the colonial order. As Frantz Fanon observed, colonialism functions not simply through military and economic domination but through cultural and psychological mechanisms that transform colonised subjects' self-perception.⁴⁸ Cinema was instrumental in this process, constructing an image of Algeria that was exotic yet inferior, rich in resources yet requiring French intervention, ancient in heritage yet incapable of modernity without colonial guidance.

⁴⁶Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994), p 100-136s

⁴⁷Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p 49-73.

⁴⁸Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p 35-106.

1. Early Cinema and the Colonial Gaze: 1896-1920

1.1 First Contact: The Lumière Brothers in Algeria

The cinematograph arrived in Algeria just 66 years after the initial French invasion of 1830, during a period when colonial control was still being consolidated in many regions

The first moving images of Algeria coincided with the birth of cinema itself. In 1896, mere months after their famous first public screening in Paris, representatives of the Lumière Brothers arrived in Algeria to capture footage of the colony for metropolitan audiences.⁴⁹ These brief "actualities"—documentary snippets lasting less than a minute—established what would become recurring visual tropes in the representation of Algeria. Films immediately positioned Algerians as objects of ethnographic curiosity rather than subjects with agency.⁵⁰

The formal qualities of these early films reinforced their colonising function. Shot from a fixed camera position that represented the European point of view, they framed Algerians within what film historian Tom Gunning has termed a "view aesthetic"; presenting subjects as specimens to be observed rather than individuals with whom to identify.⁵¹ These films circulated within a visual economy that already included colonial postcards, photographs, and World's Fair exhibitions, all of which had established patterns of representing Algeria as simultaneously exotic and inferior.⁵²

Importantly, these early films were not presented in isolation but were typically accompanied by explanatory narration that framed their meaning for metropolitan audiences. Film exhibitors would provide commentary that reinforced colonial hierarchies, often emphasising the "primitive" or "timeless" nature of Algerian life in contrast to French modernity.⁵³ The films thus participated in what Johannes Fabian

⁴⁹Georges Sadoul, *Histoire générale du cinéma, tome 1: L'invention du cinéma 1832-1897* (Paris: Denoël, 1948), p 283-285

⁵⁰Richard Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town: French Cinema 1896-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p 103-105

⁵¹Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 8, no. 3-4 (1986): p 63-70

⁵²Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p 27-50.

⁵³Alison Murray Levine, *Framing the Nation: Documentary Film in Interwar France* (London: Continuum, 2010), p 45-48

identifies as the "denial of coevalness"; the refusal to acknowledge that colonised peoples inhabit the same historical time as colonisers.⁵⁴

1.2 Docudrama and Colonial Spectacle

By the 1910s, longer ethnographic films and early docudramas about Algeria began to emerge. These Films combined documentary footage with staged sequences to create narratives that purported to represent "authentic" Algerian life while actually constructing careful colonial fantasies.⁵⁵ These films frequently focused on religious practices, crafts, and marketplaces, depicting Algerians as if they existed in a pre-modern temporality untouched by the colonial presence itself—a significant distortion of the already half-century-long colonial reality.

The colonial administration quickly recognised cinema's propaganda potential. In 1916, the Governor-General of Algeria established the Cinematographic Service of the General Government of Algeria to produce films promoting the colony to French audiences.⁵⁶ These officially sanctioned productions emphasised themes of resource extraction, agricultural development, and infrastructure projects that positioned colonialism as a modernising force bringing progress to Algeria. Colonial cinema's development paralleled the emergence of anthropology as a discipline, with both fields claiming scientific objectivity while reinforcing colonial hierarchies.

Perhaps the most significant early colonial film production was “*L'Atlantide*” (1921), directed by Jacques Feyder and based on Pierre Benoit's popular novel. While technically set in the Sahara rather than specifically in Algeria, this film exemplified how cinema translated literary colonial fantasies into powerful visual spectacles. Shot on location with a massive production budget, the film presented North Africa as a space of mystery, danger, and forbidden desire—themes that would dominate colonial cinema for decades.⁵⁷ Its female protagonist, Antinea, represented the colonial fantasy of the exotic yet threatening North African woman who brings European men to their doom, reinforcing gendered conceptions of colonial spaces as feminine territories requiring masculine domination. (See appendix 10)

⁵⁴Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p 25-35

⁵⁵Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, *Le Cinéma des Français: La Ve République 1958-1978* (Paris: Stock, 1979), p 67-69.

⁵⁶Morgan Corriou, "Le cinéma colonial," *Culture coloniale en France: De la Révolution française à nos jours*, ed. Pascal Blanchard et al. (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2008), p 325-335

⁵⁷David H. Slavin, *Colonial Cinema and Imperial France, 1919-1939: White Blind Spots, Male Fantasies, Settler Myths* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p 75-98

1.3 World War I and Colonial Subjects as Soldiers

The First World War marked a significant shift in colonial representations. With approximately 173,000 Algerians serving in the French army, new cinematic representations emerged depicting colonial subjects as loyal soldiers fighting for France.⁵⁸ Newsreels and propaganda films highlighted Algerian troops, although almost always under French command and typically in supporting rather than leadership roles. These images served a dual ideological function: demonstrating the success of the "civilising mission" while simultaneously showcasing the military utility of the empire.

The mobilisation of Algerian troops during First World War occurred alongside increasing colonial extraction of resources and labor, creating tensions that would later surface in nationalist movements. However, this incorporation of Algerians into French wartime imagery created ideological contradictions that would later prove problematic for colonial discourse. The spectacle of colonised subjects fighting for France implicitly challenged notions of inherent racial hierarchy, while the promise of equality in exchange for military service generated expectations that postwar France proved unwilling to fulfill.⁵⁹ These contradictions, though rarely addressed explicitly in colonial cinema of this period, formed an undercurrent that would emerge more forcefully in later decades.

By 1920, cinema had established itself as an essential technology of colonial representation, creating a visual archive that constructed Algeria according to French imperial needs rather than Algerian realities. The foundation was laid for the more elaborate colonial film productions that would emerge in the interwar period, when narrative cinema would build upon and elaborate these early visual tropes.

⁵⁸Gilbert Meynier, *L'Algérie révélée: La guerre de 1914-1918 et le premier quart du XXe siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 1981), p 505-527

⁵⁹Richard S. Fogarty, *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p 285-300

2. The Golden Age of Colonial Cinema: 1920-1939

2.1 Centenary of French Algeria and Cinematic Celebration

The interwar period witnessed the flourishing of colonial cinema as a recognisable genre with established conventions and increasing production values. This coincided with the centennial celebration of the French conquest of Algeria in 1930, which prompted a wave of films commemorating and legitimising a century of colonisation.⁶⁰ These productions moved beyond earlier documentary formats to embrace fictional narratives that dramatised colonial themes, often depicting the French presence in Algeria as a historical inevitability rather than a violent imposition.

The Centennial celebrations themselves were extensively documented on film, with official productions such as *Centenary of French Algeria* (1930) showcasing military parades, exhibitions, and speeches that proclaimed the success of the colonial project.⁶¹ These films employed increasingly sophisticated cinematic techniques, including aerial photography that visually reinforced French dominance by presenting Algeria from above a perspective associated with surveillance, control, and comprehensive knowledge of the territory.

The 1930 Centennial occurred amid growing Algerian nationalist sentiment, though films of the period almost entirely erased this political reality in favor of depicting harmonious colonial relations.

Commercial fiction films of this period frequently used Algeria as an exotic backdrop for adventure narratives centred on European protagonists. Works such as “*Le Grand Jeu*” (The Great Game, 1934) directed by Jacques Feyder portrayed Algeria as a space where Europeans could reinvent themselves or escape their pasts.⁶² In these films, Algerians typically appeared as secondary characters that functioned either as servants, threats, or local color, rarely developing as full individuals with personal histories or perspectives on colonial power.

⁶⁰Jan C. Jansen, "Celebrating the 'Nation' in a Colonial Context: 'France's Algerian Centenary' in 1930," *Nations and Nationalism* 19, no. 1 (2013): p 138-159

⁶¹Pascal Blanchard and Sandrine Lemaire, *Culture impériale: Les colonies au cœur de la République, 1931-1961* (Paris: Autrement, 2004), p 42-45

⁶²Susan Hayward, *French National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005), p 145-147

2.2 Gendering the Colony: Women in Colonial Cinema

Colonial cinema of the interwar period was particularly concerned with gendered representations that mapped sexual anxieties onto colonial spaces. Films frequently depicted Algerian women according to an orientalist binary: either as mysterious, veiled figures symbolising the "impenetrability" of Muslim society or as exotic dancers and prostitutes available for European male consumption.⁶³ This cinematic objectification of Algerian women reflected broader colonial discourse that simultaneously condemned Islamic gender relations while exploiting orientalist fantasies of the harem.

Influential films like "*Pépé le Moko*" (1937), directed by Julien Duvivier, exemplified these contradictions.⁶⁴ Set in the Casbah of Algiers, the film presents this Algerian neighbourhood as a labyrinthine space of danger and allure, reinforcing colonial conceptions of indigenous quarters as simultaneously fascinating and threatening to European order. While enormously popular and technically innovative, the film's representation of Algerians as either criminal accomplices or exotic backdrop reflected deeply entrenched colonial hierarchies. (See appendix 11)

The Casbah became a recurring motif in colonial cinema, representing an impenetrable "native quarter" that symbolised broader anxieties about colonial control and resistance.

French actresses often portrayed Algerian characters in these films, appearing in "brown face" makeup that performed an approximation of Algerian identity filtered through European fantasies. This practice reflected the broader colonial appropriation of Algerian identity while excluding actual Algerians from self-representation.⁶⁵ When Algerian women did appear as themselves in documentary films, they were typically framed as ethnographic specimens, whose domestic practices or craft production demonstrated their pre-modern status, reinforcing colonial hierarchies through visual means.

⁶³Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, trans. Myrna Godzich and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p 35

⁶⁴Ginette Vincendeau, *Pépé le Moko* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), p 9-42

⁶⁵Ella Shohat, "*Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema*", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 13, no. 1-3 (1991): p 45-84

2.3 Cinema as Colonial Education

The interwar period also saw the expansion of cinema as an educational tool within the colonial project itself. By the mid-1920s, mobile cinema units traveled throughout rural Algeria, screening films selected to demonstrate French technological prowess and "civilisational" achievements.⁶⁶ These screenings served as visual propaganda aimed at impressing and intimidating local populations while promoting French language and culture.

In schools for European settlers and the small minority of Algerians admitted to French education, educational films presented sanitised versions of colonial history that emphasised French benevolence while minimizing colonial violence.⁶⁷ These films constructed a historical narrative in which pre-colonial Algeria was characterised by disorder and backwardness until rescued by French intervention—a narrative that served to legitimise continued colonial presence.

Cinema was recognised as particularly effective for colonial propaganda because it could reach illiterate populations and convey messages through powerful visual means.

The Colonial Exposition of 1931 in Paris further demonstrated cinema's role in colonial propaganda. The exposition featured multiple theaters showing films about France's colonial possessions, with Algeria prominently featured as the "jewel" of the empire.⁶⁸ These films emphasised infrastructure development, agricultural production, and natural resource extraction, presenting colonialism as a modernising force while eliding the exploitation and displacement of Algerians that made such developments possible.

By the late 1930s, colonial cinema had developed sophisticated visual and narrative strategies for representing Algeria in ways that reinforced French dominance. However, the approaching global conflict would create new pressures and contradictions that would begin to destabilise these representational regimes.

⁶⁶Benali, op.cit, p 73-75

⁶⁷Jonathan K. Gosnell, *The Politics of Frenchness in Colonial Algeria, 1930-1954* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2002), p 89-92

⁶⁸Patricia M. E. Lorcin, *Imperial Identities: Stereotyping, Prejudice and Race in Colonial Algeria* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), p 205-207

3. World War II and the Fracturing of Colonial Representation: 1939-1954

3.1 Vichy, Free France, and Competing Visions of Empire

World War II significantly disrupted colonial cinema production while creating new tensions in the representation of Algeria. After France's defeat in 1940, Algeria initially came under Vichy control before being claimed by the Free French forces in 1942, becoming a crucial base for the Allied war effort in North Africa.⁶⁹ These political shifts necessitated different forms of propaganda that often contained contradictory messages about Algeria's place in the French empire.

Vichy-era films emphasised traditionalist values that aligned with Marshal Petain's "National Revolution" ideology, presenting Algeria as evidence of France's enduring imperial grandeur despite metropolitan defeat.⁷⁰ After the Allied landing in North Africa, Free French propaganda films repositioned Algeria as the launching point for the liberation of France itself, creating a narrative of colonial loyalty that obscured growing Algerian nationalist sentiment.

The Sétif Massacre of May 8, 1945, when French forces killed thousands of Algerian demonstrators, marked a profound rupture in colonial relations but was entirely absent from French cinema of the period.

The war years saw an increase in newsreel coverage of Algeria, particularly after the Allied landing in Operation Torch (November 1942). These newsreels typically emphasised military aspects while avoiding complex political questions about colonialism's future.⁷¹ Whereas earlier colonial cinema had confidently proclaimed the permanence of French Algeria, post-war productions often betrayed uncertainty about the colonial project, even as they attempted to reassert its legitimacy.

3.2 Post-war Colonial Cinema and the Reform Narrative

In the aftermath of World War II, colonial discourse attempted to adapt to new global realities, including the formation of the United Nations and growing international criticism of colonialism. This adaptation was reflected in films that

⁶⁹Martin Thomas, *The French Empire at War, 1940-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p 123-147

⁷⁰Jacques Cantier, *L'Algérie sous le régime de Vichy* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2002), p 210-215

⁷¹Pierre Sorlin, "The Struggle for Control of French Minds, 1940-1944", in *Film and Radio Propaganda in World War II*, ed. K.R.M. Short (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), p 245-270

embraced what might be called a "reform narrative"—stories that acknowledged certain colonial abuses while suggesting that a reformed, more benevolent colonialism remained necessary for Algeria's development.⁷²

Films like "*La Casa Grande*" (The Big House, 1953) depicted progressive French administrators working to improve conditions for Algerians, implicitly arguing that problems stemmed not from the colonial system itself but from its imperfect implementation.⁷³ These narratives typically concluded with reaffirmations of Franco-Algerian cooperation under continued French leadership, presenting colonialism as reformable rather than fundamentally unjust. (See Appendix 12)

This period coincided with limited political reforms that granted French citizenship to some categories of Algerians while maintaining a fundamentally unequal system.

Documentary productions of this era, including those made by the General Government Cinematographic Service, increasingly emphasised development projects, healthcare initiatives, and educational programs. Films like "*Progrès en Algérie*" (Progress in Algeria, 1952) showcased new hospitals, dams, and schools as evidence of French benevolence while eliding the economic exploitation that underwrote such projects.⁷⁴ These films attempted to construct a new justification for colonialism based on development rather than civilisational hierarchy, though the fundamental power relationship remained unchanged.

3.3 Ethnographic Film and the Colonial Archive

The post-war period witnessed renewed interest in ethnographic filmmaking in Algeria, often funded by academic institutions claiming scientific objectivity. Filmmakers like Jean Rouch, though primarily working in West Africa during this period, influenced approaches to ethnographic filming that attempted to move beyond the most obvious colonial framings.⁷⁵ However, even these more reflexive approaches remained embedded within fundamentally unequal power relations that positioned Europeans as knowledge producers and Algerians as objects of knowledge.

⁷²Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), p 42-45

⁷³Benjamin Stora, *Algeria, 1830-2000: A Short History*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p 29-32

⁷⁴Jean-Pierre Bertin-Maghit, *Le cinéma français sous l'Occupation* (Paris: Olivier Orban, 1989), p 186-189.

⁷⁵Paul Henley, *The Adventure of the Real: Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p 65-87

The colonial film archive expanded significantly during this period through the work of the Algerian Cinematheque, established in 1948.⁷⁶ While ostensibly preserving film heritage, this institution privileged French productions and French perspectives on Algeria, further consolidating colonial visual hierarchies. The films collected and preserved reinforced a narrative of Algeria's history that emphasised French contributions while marginalising pre-colonial history and contemporary Algerian perspectives.

The establishment of formal film archives during this period reflected growing recognition of cinema's importance as historical documentation and cultural heritage.

By the early 1950s, as nationalist sentiment grew stronger and more organised, colonial cinema found itself increasingly disconnected from Algerian realities. The films produced continued to depict a largely fictional Algeria where French authority remained unquestioned and beneficial, even as the actual territory moved toward revolutionary struggle. This disconnection between cinematic representation and political reality would become unsustainable after the outbreak of the Algerian War of Independence in November 1954.

⁷⁶Guy Austin, *Algerian National Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p 23-25

4. Resistance and Counter-Discourse in Colonial Cinema

4.1 Finding Fissures in Colonial Representation

Despite the overwhelmingly colonial perspective of films about Algeria during this period, certain productions contained ambiguities, contradictions, or moments of rupture that undermined the coherence of colonial discourse. These fissures did not necessarily reflect intentional subversion by filmmakers but rather revealed the impossibility of maintaining a completely consistent colonial narrative in the face of complex realities.⁷⁷

Even in conventional colonial films, Algerian extras sometimes gazed directly at the camera, breaking the fourth wall and the illusion of documentary transparency. These unscripted moments, what film theorist Kaja Silverman might call "suture failures," momentarily disrupted the colonial gaze by suggesting Algerian awareness of and resistance to being filmed.⁷⁸ Similarly, background details in location shooting occasionally captured elements of Algerian life that contradicted colonial narratives of order and progress.

These moments of rupture generally went unnoticed by contemporary audiences but can be recovered through careful analysis of the colonial film archive.

Some French filmmakers, particularly those with leftist political sympathies, produced works that more deliberately challenged colonial orthodoxies. René Vautier's "*Afrique 50*" (1950), though focused on West Africa rather than Algeria, represented the most radical critique of French colonialism in cinema from this period and was promptly banned by authorities.⁷⁹ (See Appendix 13)

While few films about Algeria achieved this level of explicit criticism before 1954, works like "*Le Cap de l'Espérance*" (Cape of Hope, 1951) contained subtle critiques of colonial exploitation that attentive viewers might discern.⁸⁰ (See appendix 14)

⁷⁷Ranjana Khanna, *op. cit.*, p 104-107

⁷⁸Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p 194-236

⁷⁹Nicole Brenez, "René Vautier: Devoirs, droits et passion des images," *La Revue Documentaires* 22, no. 1 (2010): p 23

⁸⁰Matthew Evangelista, *Gender, Nationalism, and War: Conflict on the Movie Screen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p 78-80

4.2 Algerian Participation and Perspective in Colonial-Era Cinema

Though severely limited by colonial structures, some Algerians participated in film production during this period, primarily as technicians or actors rather than directors. Their involvement sometimes influenced representations in ways that complicated straightforward colonial narratives. Actors like Mohamed Abdel Rahman (known professionally as "Rahmani") brought nuance to roles that were written as stereotypes, investing them with humanity that exceeded the limitations of colonial scripts.⁸¹

More significantly, the period just before the revolution saw the emergence of the first Algerian-made films, though production remained extremely limited due to colonial restrictions. Short documentaries produced by nascent Algerian film collectives offered glimpses of Algerian perspectives, though they had limited distribution and have been inadequately preserved in film archives.⁸² These early productions, while unable to directly challenge colonial dominance, laid groundwork for the revolutionary cinema that would emerge during the War of Independence.

The absence of Algerian-directed feature films before 1954 reflects not lack of interest or capability but the systematic exclusion of Algerians from film production resources by colonial policies.

Algerian audiences also developed sophisticated practices of resistant viewing, interpreting colonial films against their intended meanings and sometimes responding to screenings in ways that concerned colonial authorities. Reports from the period indicate instances of Algerian audiences cheering antiheroes or moments of colonial failure in films intended to glorify French power, suggesting that reception did not necessarily align with production intent.⁸³

4.3 Legacies of Colonial Cinema in Postcolonial Memory

The cinematic construction of Algeria between 1896 and 1954 left enduring legacies that would shape both French and Algerian film production after independence. In France, colonial-era films continued to circulate, often without critical contextualisation, perpetuating colonial perspectives for generations born

⁸¹Lotfi Maherzi, *Le cinéma algérien: Institutions, imaginaire, idéologie* (Algiers: SNED, 1980), p 42-45

⁸²Roy Armes, *Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p 22-25

⁸³Valérie Vignaux, *Jean Benoit-Lévy ou le corps comme utopie: Une histoire du cinéma éducateur dans l'entre-deux-guerres en France* (Paris: AFRHC, 2007), p 118-122

after the end of empire.⁸⁴ The visual tropes established in these works influenced later French films about Algeria, including those addressing the War of Independence.

For independent Algeria, colonial cinema represented both a problematic heritage to be critiqued and a technical foundation upon which to build national cinema. Filmmakers like Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina, who directed the Palme d'Or-winning "*Chronicle of the Years of Fire*" (1975), consciously worked against colonial visual traditions while simultaneously drawing on cinematic skills and infrastructure partially developed during the colonial period.⁸⁵ (See appendix 15)

The first major film school in independent Algeria was established in 1964, signalling the importance placed on developing national cinema as a counter to colonial representations.

The archive of colonial films about Algeria remains contested terrain, subject to competing interpretations by scholars, filmmakers, and audiences. Recent digitisation projects have made some of these films more accessible, enabling new critical engagements that situate them within broader analyses of colonial visual culture.⁸⁶ These re-examinations reveal not only how cinema constructed colonial Algeria but also how that construction continues to influence contemporary understandings of Algerian history and Franco-Algerian relations.

⁸⁴Benjamin Stora, *op. cit.*, p 255-260

⁸⁵Olivier Hadouchi, "Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina, *Chronicle of the Years of Fire*," *Third Text* 24, no. 1 (2010): p 83-94

⁸⁶Rachel Gabara, *From Split to Screened Selves: French and Francophone Autobiography in the Third Person* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p 112-115

Between 1896 and 1954, cinema functioned as a powerful technology of colonial representation that constructed Algeria according to French imperial needs and fantasies. From early Lumière actualities to lavish interwar productions and post-war propaganda, these films created and disseminated images of Algeria that shaped understanding not only in metropolitan France but internationally and within Algeria itself.

This chapter has demonstrated how colonial cinema participated in what cultural theorist Homi Bhabha identifies as the "productive ambivalence" of colonial discourse simultaneously asserting difference between coloniser and colonised while anxiously seeking to control the boundaries of that difference.⁸⁷ Films about Algeria repeatedly depicted the territory as fundamentally other to France, yet essential to French identity; as needing civilisation, yet possessing ancient wisdom; as threatening, yet controllable. These contradictions reveal the fundamental instability of colonial discourse even at its most confident.

The outbreak of the Algerian Revolution in November 1954 marked a definitive break in colonial cinematic representation, inaugurating new forms of both French propaganda and Algerian revolutionary cinema.

The cinematic construction of Algeria during this period cannot be understood as merely reflecting pre-existing colonial attitudes but must be recognised as actively producing colonial knowledge and power. Through careful shot composition, editing choices, distribution patterns, and exhibition contexts, these films materialised colonial hierarchies in particularly persuasive forms. By presenting moving images that purported to show "real" Algerians, colonial cinema claimed visual truth while actually producing carefully constructed fictions that served imperial interests.

The legacies of this cinematic construction extend far beyond 1954. Contemporary representations of Algeria, whether in film, television, or digital media, continue to negotiate with the visual archive established during the colonial period. Critical engagement with colonial cinema thus remains essential not only for understanding historical Franco-Algerian relations but also for analysing how visual media continues to shape perceptions of formerly colonised territories in the postcolonial present.

⁸⁷Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p 85-92

Chapter Two:
Cinema as a Tool for Documenting
Algerian Social Reality (1896-1962)

The period under examination encompasses several distinct phases in the evolution of Algerian cinema as a documentary tool. The early years (1896-1920) were characterised by ethnographic curiosity and colonial propaganda, with films focusing on exotic representations of "native" culture and landscape. The interwar period (1920-1945) witnessed the gradual emergence of more nuanced portrayals as cinema technology became more accessible and local voices began to find expression. The final phase (1945-1962) coincided with the rise of nationalist movements and the War of Independence, during which cinema became increasingly politicised and began to reflect the growing consciousness of Algerian identity.

This analysis will demonstrate how cinema, despite its origins as a colonial medium, evolved into a powerful tool for documenting the authentic experiences of Algerian society. Through examination of film archives, production records, and contemporary accounts, we will explore how these cinematic works captured the socioeconomic conditions, cultural practices, urban transformations, and political upheavals that defined this crucial period in Algerian history. The chapter will also address the methodological challenges of interpreting colonial-era films as historical sources while acknowledging their unique value in preserving visual testimony of a society in transition.

By analysing cinema as both cultural artifact and historical document, this chapter contributes to our understanding of how visual media can serve as repositories of social memory, particularly in contexts where traditional forms of documentation were limited or suppressed. The films of this period offer unprecedented insights into the lived experiences of ordinary Algerians, the impact of colonial policies on daily life.

Section One: Representations of Algerian Social Life in Cinema during the French Colonial Period (1896-1962)

The cinematic representation of Algeria during the French colonial period (1896-1962) constitutes a rich and complex visual archive that both reflected and shaped colonial discourse about Algerian society.⁸⁸ As a medium emerging concurrently with the consolidation of French colonial power in Algeria, cinema became an instrumental tool in constructing, disseminating, and occasionally contesting colonial imaginaries of Algerian social life.⁸⁹

This chapter examines how French colonial cinema portrayed Algerian society, with particular attention to the evolving representations of rural and urban spaces, and the construction of Algerian identities across different historical periods.

The chapter is structured chronologically and thematically, examining three distinct periods: the early phase of cinematographic experimentation (1896-1930), the middle period marked by the emergence of sound cinema and growing nationalist sentiments (1930-1954), and the final period coinciding with the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962). Each section analyses how cinematic portrayals of Algerian social life reflected colonial ideologies, responded to historical developments, and occasionally provided spaces for counter-narratives.

By analysing these evolving representations, this chapter aims to demonstrate how colonial cinema functioned not merely as entertainment but as a critical site for negotiating power relations, cultural identities, and social transformations in colonial Algeria. The films produced during this period constitute visual documents that reveal as much about French colonial anxieties and aspirations as they do about Algerian social realities.⁹⁰

⁸⁸Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *op. Cit*, p 108

⁸⁹Peter J. Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary: Mythologies of Humanitarianism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p 23

⁹⁰Benali, *op. cit*, p 20

1. The Image of Algerian Rural Society

1.1 Early Ethnographic Representations (1896-1930)

The earliest cinematic representations of rural Algeria emerged within the context of what French film historian Pierre Sorlin has termed "colonial visual curiosity"; a desire to capture and display exotic peoples and places for metropolitan audiences.⁹¹ The Lumière brothers' operators, who traveled to Algeria as early as 1896, produced some of the first moving images of rural Algerian life in short actualities such as "*Arrivée des Touaregs à Biskra*" (1896) and "*Marché arabe à Biskra*" (1897). These early films established visual tropes that would endure throughout the colonial period: the emphasis on traditional markets, religious ceremonies, and craftspeople engaged in "timeless" activities.⁹²

By the early 1900s, more explicitly ethnographic films began to appear, often sponsored by scientific institutions or colonial expositions. Felix Mesguich's "*Au pays des Kabyles*" (1910) and Louis Feuillade's "*Scènes de la vie arabe*" (1911) typify this ethnographic approach, presenting rural Algerians as cultural curiosities frozen in pre-modern traditions.⁹³ These films emphasised what Johannes Fabian has termed the "denial of coevalness"; the presentation of colonial subjects as inhabiting a different temporal reality from Europeans.⁹⁴

Rural Algerians were frequently depicted performing traditional agricultural practices, weaving techniques, or religious ceremonies, with intertitles emphasising the "primitive" or "ancient" nature of these activities.

The documentary "*Dans l'Atlas algérien*" (1920) offers a particularly revealing example of how cinematic technology was deployed to create what historian Fatimah Tobing Rony has called "ethnographic taxidermy"; the preservation of supposedly disappearing native cultures.⁹⁵ The film presented rural Berber communities as living relics of a pre-modern past, carefully excluding any signs of colonial modernity or cultural change. As anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards has noted, such ethnographic

⁹¹ Pierre Sorlin, *European Cinemas, European Societies, 1939-1990* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p 82

⁹² Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary*, p 31

⁹³ Benali, *op. cit.*, p 45

⁹⁴ Johannes Fabian, *op. cit.*, p 25

⁹⁵ Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), p 102

representations were "not simply descriptive but prescriptive," positioning rural Algerians within a colonial taxonomy that justified the "civilising mission."⁹⁶

It is notable that these early ethnographic films almost entirely excluded references to colonial presence or the economic transformations reshaping rural Algeria. The displacement of tribal communities, the expropriation of communal lands, and the imposition of new agricultural systems remained off-screen, creating what film theorist Bill Nichols has called "the ethnographer's paradox"—the attempt to document traditional societies while obscuring the colonial relations that were transforming them.⁹⁷

1.2 Rural Algeria in Colonial Fiction Films (1930-1954)

The introduction of sound cinema in the 1930s coincided with a shift toward fiction films that incorporated rural Algeria as a dramatic setting. Films like Marcel Pagnol's "*Angèle*" (1934) and Julien Duvivier's "*Pépé le Moko*" (1937), while primarily set in urban environments, occasionally ventured into the Algerian countryside, presenting it as a space of both danger and exotic allure.⁹⁸

This period also saw the production of colonial adventure films that relied heavily on orientalist tropes, such as Jean Renoir's "*Le Bled*" (1929) and Jacques Feyder's "*L'Atlantide*" (1921), which portrayed rural Algeria as a mysterious landscape of danger and desire.⁹⁹

The representation of rural Algerians in these fiction films typically followed established colonial archetypes: the loyal servant, the noble warrior, the mysterious nomad, or the dangerous rebel. Films like Maurice Tourneur's "*L'Homme du Niger*" (1940) and André Hugon's "*Les Hommes nouveaux*" (1936) reinforced colonial hierarchies by positioning rural Algerians as either picturesque background elements or as threats to colonial order.¹⁰⁰ Rural society was frequently depicted as static and resistant to modernisation, requiring French intervention and guidance. (See appendix 16)

⁹⁶Elizabeth Edwards, "Photography and the Performance of History," *Kronos* 27 (2001): p 22

⁹⁷Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p 218

⁹⁸Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, p 145

⁹⁹Benali, *op. cit.*, p 82

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, p 88

By the 1940s, a more paternalistic vision of rural development began to appear in both documentary and fiction films. Following the principles of enhancement(development) that characterised late colonial policy, films like Jean Masson's "*Terre d'effort et de liberté*" (1945) celebrated agricultural colonisation and portrayed rural Algerians as beneficiaries of French technological and administrative expertise.¹⁰¹ These films emphasised infrastructure projects, modern farming techniques, and educational initiatives, presenting colonialism as a benevolent modernising force.

However, this period also saw the emergence of more nuanced portrayals of rural Algeria in the work of filmmakers like René Vautier, whose documentary "*Afrique 50*" (1950) - though primarily filmed in West Africa - challenged dominant colonial narratives by depicting the exploitation inherent in colonial rural policies.¹⁰² Similarly, Algerian-born European directors like Louis Daquin began to show greater interest in the social realities of rural communities, moving beyond purely exotic or paternalistic representations.

1.3 Rural Society as Site of Resistance (1954-1962)

The outbreak of the Algerian War of Independence in 1954 transformed cinematic representations of rural Algeria. The countryside, long presented as a picturesque backdrop or ethnographic curiosity, now emerged as a contested space of insurgency and counterinsurgency. While official French films like "*Jour de guerre en Algérie*" (1956) and "*Pacification en Algérie*" (1957) depicted rural areas as zones requiring military control, independent productions began to present alternative visions of rural resistance.¹⁰³ (See appendix 17)

René Vautier's clandestine film *Algérie en flammes* (1958), (see appendix 18) produced with the support of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN), was one of the first to present rural Algeria as a space of legitimate political resistance rather than irrational violence or primitive rebellion.¹⁰⁴ The film documented the organisation of rural communities in support of independence fighters, challenging colonial narratives that portrayed the war as the work of a small group of terrorists. Similarly, Italian director Gillo Pontecorvo's "*The Battle of Algiers*" (1966), though

¹⁰¹Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary*, p 128

¹⁰²Ibid., p 178

¹⁰³Benali, *op cit*, p 190

¹⁰⁴Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary*, p 205

focused primarily on urban guerrilla warfare, included sequences showing the crucial role of rural support networks in sustaining the independence movement.¹⁰⁵

During this period, French documentary filmmakers associated with the cinema verity movement also began to create more complex portraits of rural Algeria. Jean Rouch, though working primarily in West Africa, influenced a generation of filmmakers concerned with developing new approaches to documenting colonial subjects.¹⁰⁶ Films like Pierre Schoendoerffer's "*La Passe du diable*" (1958), while still operating within colonial frameworks, demonstrated greater attention to the social disruptions caused by the war, including the forced relocation of rural populations to "regroupment camps."¹⁰⁷ (See appendix19)

By the final years of the colonial period, cinematic representations of rural Algeria had become a battleground for competing visions of the country's future. The FLN's film unit, formed in 1957, produced documentaries that explicitly positioned rural society as the authentic heart of Algerian national identity and the primary site of anti-colonial resistance.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, French propaganda films continued to emphasise the benefits of rural development under colonial administration, though with decreasing credibility as the war intensified.

¹⁰⁵Shohat and Stam, *op. cit.*, p 250

¹⁰⁶ Shohat, *Ibid.*, p 260

¹⁰⁷Benali, *op. cit.*, p 235

¹⁰⁸Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary*, 238

2. The Depiction of the Algerian City and Social Transformations

2.1 Colonial Urban Imaginaries (1896-1930)

The earliest cinematic representations of Algerian cities reflected what historian Janet Abu Lughod has termed "the colonial dual city"—the division of urban space into European and indigenous quarters.¹⁰⁹ Films like the Lumière brothers' "*Place du Gouvernement, Alger*" (1896) and "*Rue Bab Azoun*" (1896) focused almost exclusively on the European districts of Algiers, with their wide boulevards, colonial architecture, and European inhabitants.¹¹⁰ When indigenous quarters appeared at all, they were typically framed as picturesque curiosities or as problematic spaces requiring colonial intervention. (See appendix 20-21)

Early actualities and travelogues emphasised what film historian Hamid Naficy has called "*imperial chronotopes*"; spaces and times that visually affirmed colonial power.¹¹¹ Films such as *Alger, "ville européenne"* (1905) and "*Constantine modern*" (1912) celebrated the transformation of Algerian cities through colonial urban planning, often juxtaposing "modern" European districts with "traditional" Arab quarters. These visual juxtapositions reinforced the colonial narrative of bringing civilisation to allegedly backward urban environments. (See appendix 22-23)

The Casbah of Algiers emerged as a particularly significant site in colonial cinema, embodying both fascination and fear. Early documentaries like "*Dans les ruelles de la Casbah*" (1908) presented the old city as a mysterious labyrinth, emphasising narrow streets, hidden courtyards, and veiled women.¹¹² These representations established what Edward Said has identified as a core feature of Orientalist discourse: the portrayal of Arab cities as simultaneously alluring and threatening, exotic and impenetrable.¹¹³ (See appendix 24)

By the 1920s, colonial urban cinema had developed a more systematic visual taxonomy of Algerian cities, dividing them into distinct spaces: the European city, the traditional Arab or Berber city, and emerging hybrid zones. Films like "*Trois villes d'Algérie*" (1922) explicitly categorised urban space according to racial and

¹⁰⁹Janet Abu-Lughod, "Tale of Two Cities: The Origins of Modern Cairo," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 7, no. 4 (1965): p 432

¹¹⁰Benali, *op. cit.*, p 52

¹¹¹Naficy, *op. cit.*, p 152

¹¹²Benali, *op. cit.*, 68

¹¹³Edward Said, "*orientalism*", p 186

cultural hierarchies, creating what geographer Anthony King has termed "colonial urban formations"; spatial arrangements that materially expressed colonial power relations.¹¹⁴

2.2 Urban Migration and Social Anxiety (1930-1954)

The interwar period witnessed dramatic demographic shifts in Algeria, as rural populations displaced by colonial agricultural policies migrated to cities in search of work. These migrations transformed urban society and generated new forms of cinematic representation. Films like Julien Duvivier's "*Pépé le Moko* (1937) and Jean Grémillon's "*L'Étrange Monsieur Victor*" (1938) reflected growing colonial anxieties about these urban transformations, often depicting indigenous quarters as spaces of criminality, moral corruption, and political unrest.¹¹⁵

"*Pépé le Moko*" merits particular attention for its influential portrayal of the Casbah as a zone of dangerous alterity. The film's opening sequence, combining documentary footage with studio recreations, presents the Casbah as "a jungle of houses... a world apart" where European authority struggles to penetrate.¹¹⁶ The film established visual and narrative tropes that would influence subsequent representations of Algerian urban space, including the notion of the indigenous city as a maze-like refuge for criminals and subversives.

During this period, documentary films also began to address urban social problems more directly. Films like "*Bidonvilles d'Alger*" (1949) documented the growth of shantytowns around major cities, though typically framing these developments as public health and security concerns rather than consequences of colonial policy.¹¹⁷ These films reflected the growing influence of social realism in French cinema while still operating within colonial frameworks that attributed urban problems to indigenous cultural patterns rather than structural inequalities.

The post-World War II period saw the emergence of more critical approaches to urban representation, influenced by neorealist aesthetics and growing anti-colonial sentiments. Algerian-born filmmaker René Vautier's "*Une nation, l'Algérie*" (1954), though primarily focused on rural areas, included sequences documenting urban

¹¹⁴D. King, *Colonial Urban Development: Culture, Social Power and Environment*(London: Routledge, 1976), p 45

¹¹⁵Shohat and Stam, *op. cit*, p 182

¹¹⁶Benali, *op. cit*, p 120-126

¹¹⁷Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary*, p 155

poverty and segregation that challenged official narratives of successful assimilation.¹¹⁸ (See appendix 25) Similarly, Paul Carpita's "*Le Rendez-vous des quais*" (1955), while set in Marseille, addressed the connections between urban working-class struggles in France and colonial exploitation in Algeria. (See appendix 26)

2.3 The Contested City (1954-1962)

The Algerian War of Independence transformed cinematic representations of urban space, as cities became key battlegrounds in both military and propaganda conflicts. Official French newsreels like "*Les Actualités Françaises*" frequently depicted urban security operations as necessary responses to terrorism, portraying cities as spaces requiring surveillance and control.¹¹⁹ Meanwhile, films sympathetic to the independence movement began to present alternative visions of urban resistance.

Gillo Pontecorvo's "*The Battle of Algiers*" (1966), though produced after independence, offers the most influential representation of urban insurgency during this period. Based on the FLN's urban campaign of 1956-57, the film depicts the city as a contested space where colonial power is challenged through guerrilla tactics, demonstrations, and strikes.¹²⁰ Pontecorvo's neo-realist aesthetic and documentary techniques created a powerful counter-narrative to colonial representations of urban violence, presenting the FLN's actions as legitimate resistance rather than terrorism. (See appendix 27)

During the war, French authorities also produced films intended to demonstrate urban development and integration. Documentaries like "*Rénovation urbaine en Algérie*" (1959) emphasised housing projects, infrastructure improvements, and social services in urban areas, presenting them as evidence of France's commitment to addressing indigenous needs.¹²¹ These films promoted what historian Todd Shepard has called "integrationist colonialism"—the late colonial attempt to preserve French Algeria through reform rather than repression.¹²²

¹¹⁸Ibid., p 185

¹¹⁹Benali, *o.p cit*, p 215

¹²⁰Shohat and Stam, *op. cit*, p 268

¹²¹Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary*, p 220

¹²²Todd Shepard, *op. cit*, p 48

By the final years of colonial rule, competing visual representations of Algerian cities reflected broader ideological conflicts over Algeria's future. The FLN's film unit produced documentaries emphasising urban demonstrations and general strikes as expressions of unified national resistance.¹²³ Meanwhile, films supporting French Algeria, like Jean-Jacques Vierne's "*Secteur postal 89098*" (1959), portrayed cities as spaces threatened by terrorist violence and requiring military protection.

¹²³Benali, *op. cit.*, p 245

3. Issues of Identity and Cultural Transformation through Cinema

3.1 Constructing "Algerian" Identity in Early Colonial Cinema (1896-1930)

Early colonial cinema played a crucial role in constructing visual taxonomies of Algerian identity that reinforced colonial hierarchies. Films like “*Types d'Algérie*” (1908) and “*Scènes et types d'Afrique du Nord*” (1913) explicitly categorised Algerians according to racial and ethnic classifications that served colonial administrative purposes.¹²⁴ These visual taxonomies typically distinguished between Arabs, Berbers, "Moors," and various religious and occupational categories, creating what anthropologist Nicholas Dirks has termed "ethnographic statecraft"—the classification of colonial subjects to facilitate governance.¹²⁵

These early films established visual codes for representing Algerian identity that would persist throughout the colonial period. Berber communities, particularly in Kabyle, were often portrayed as more "European" in appearance and customs, reflecting colonial policies that sought to separate Berber and Arab populations.¹²⁶ Meanwhile, nomadic groups like the Touareg were presented as exotic spectacles, their distinctive clothing and customs emphasised in films like “*Touaregs du Sud*” (1908) and “*La Vie nomade dans le Sud algérien*” (1915).

Religious practices emerged as a particular focus of early ethnographic cinema. Films documenting Islamic ceremonies, Sufi rituals, and religious festivals presented Algerian spiritual life as both fascinating and fundamentally alien to European rationality.¹²⁷ These representations contributed to what religious studies scholar Tomoko Masuzawa has identified as the colonial construction of "world religions"—the categorisation of non-Western spiritual practices as fixed, timeless traditions defined in opposition to Western modernity.¹²⁸

By the 1920s, colonial cinema had established a set of visual tropes for representing Algerian identity that emphasised difference while simultaneously serving assimilationist ideologies. Films celebrating the establishment of French schools, administration, and infrastructure in Algeria presented colonial subjects in

¹²⁴Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary*, p 45

¹²⁵Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p 43

¹²⁶Patricia M.E. Lorcin, *op. cit.*, p 148

¹²⁷Benali, *op. cit.*, p 60

¹²⁸Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p 179

various stages of "evolution" toward French cultural norms, reinforcing what historian Patricia Lorcin has termed "the hierarchies of difference" that structured colonial thought.¹²⁹

3.2 Cultural hybridisation and Colonial Anxiety (1930-1954)

The interwar period witnessed the emergence of more complex cinematic representations of Algerian identity, reflecting both the growth of educated indigenous elite and increasing colonial anxieties about cultural hybridisation. Films like Raymond Bernard's "*Étoile de Valencia*" (1933) (see appendix 28) and Léon Mathot's "*Le Grand Jeu*" (1934) began to include characters who navigated between European and indigenous cultural worlds, though typically in roles that reinforced colonial stereotypes about "detribalised" or "evolved" natives.¹³⁰

Colonial documentaries from this period often addressed education and cultural assimilation directly. Films like "*L'Œuvre scolaire de la France en Algérie*" (1935) celebrated French educational institutions while presenting Algerian students as grateful recipients of Western knowledge.¹³¹ These representations reflected what historian Fanny Colonna has identified as the central contradiction of colonial education policy: the promise of assimilation alongside the perpetual deferral of full equality.¹³²

The period also saw growing cinematic attention to the figure of the "evolved"; the Western-educated Algerian caught between cultural worlds. While often portrayed sympathetically in liberal colonial films, these characters typically faced tragic endings that reinforced colonial warnings about the dangers of incomplete assimilation. Films like Maurice Gleize's "*L'Appel du bled*" (1942) presented cultural hybridisation as a source of personal and social instability, reflecting colonial anxieties about emerging nationalist movements led by Western-educated elites.¹³³ (See appendix 29)

By the late 1940s, some French filmmakers began to engage more critically with questions of Algerian identity and colonial assimilation. Marcel Pagnol's "*Harvest*" (1937). (see appendix 30) and Marcel Carné's "*Les Enfants du*

¹²⁹Lorcin, *op. cit.*, p 253

¹³⁰Benali, *op. cit.*, p 135

¹³¹Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary*, p 118

¹³²Fanny Colonna, *Instituteurs algériens, 1883-1939* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1975), p 167

¹³³Benali, *op. cit.*, p 162

paradis”(1945), (see appendix 31) while not explicitly about Algeria, included North African characters whose complex identities challenged simplistic colonial categories.¹³⁴ Similarly, Albert Camus's screenplay for Jacques Baratier's unrealised film project “*Les Fanatiques*” (1948) (see appendix 32) attempted to present Algerian characters with psychological depth and moral complexity rarely seen in colonial cinema.¹³⁵

3.3 Cinema and Cultural Decolonisation (1954-1962)

The Algerian War of Independence catalysed new cinematic approaches to Algerian identity, as both colonial authorities and nationalist movements deployed film to advance competing visions of Algeria's cultural future. Official French films continued to promote assimilationist ideals through documentaries like “*Français d'Algérie*” (1960), which emphasised cultural connections between European settlers and indigenous populations.¹³⁶ Meanwhile, pro-independence filmmakers began to articulate visual languages of national identity that challenged colonial categories.

The FLN's film unit, established in 1957 with support from Tunisia, Egypt, and other sympathetic nations, produced documentaries that explicitly constructed a unified Algerian identity transcending colonial ethnic classifications.¹³⁷ Films like “*Yasmina*” (1961) (see appendix 33) realised by Djamel-eddine Chanderli (see appendix 36) and Hamina, “*La Voix du peuple*” (1962) (see appendix 34) emphasised shared struggles against colonialism rather than traditional ethnic or regional distinctions, promoting what nationalism scholar Benedict Anderson has termed “imagined community” through visual representation.¹³⁸

International filmmakers sympathetic to Algerian independence also contributed to this process of visual decolonisation. René Vautier's “*Algérie en flammes*” (1958) and Italian director Gillo Pontecorvo's preparations for “*The Battle of Algiers*” (which would be completed after independence) presented Algerians not as colonial subjects but as revolutionaries fighting for national liberation.¹³⁹ These

¹³⁴Shohat and Stam, *op. cit.*, p 195

¹³⁵Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary*, p 172

¹³⁶Benali, *op cit.*, p 225

¹³⁷Bloom, *ibid.*, p 235

¹³⁸Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), p 49

¹³⁹Shohat and Stam, *ibid.*, p 280

films challenged colonial visual taxonomies by emphasising political solidarity across traditional social divisions.

By the final years of colonial rule, competing cinematic visions of Algerian identity reflected the fundamental conflict over the country's future. French liberal filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard, whose “*Le Petit Soldat*” (1960) was banned for its critical approach to the Algerian War, began to question colonial categories and cultural assumptions.¹⁴⁰ Meanwhile, emerging Algerian filmmakers trained in international film schools were laying the groundwork for post-independence cinema that would continue the process of cultural decolonisation.

¹⁴⁰Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p 112

Section Two: Characteristics of the Algerian people documented in cinema during the colonial era (1896-1962)

The emergence of cinema in the final years of the nineteenth century coincided remarkably with the height of French colonial expansion in Algeria, creating a unique intersection between technological innovation and imperial representation. From the Lumière Brothers' early actualities in 1896 to the eve of Algerian independence in 1962, colonial cinema served as both witness and architect of how Algerian identity was perceived, constructed, and disseminated to French and international audiences.

This section examines the complex portrayal of Algerian people through the lens of colonial cinematography, analysing how French filmmakers, ethnographers, and propagandists utilised the new medium to document, interpret, and ultimately reshape perceptions of Algerian society. The sixty-six-year span under investigation reveals a fascinating evolution in cinematic representation, from early ethnographic curiosity to sophisticated propaganda mechanisms that would influence colonial policy and metropolitan attitudes toward the Maghreb.

The films produced during this period present a paradoxical archive: while purporting to document authentic Algerian life, they simultaneously reflect the colonial gaze that sought to categorise, romanticise, and control indigenous populations. Through newsreels, documentaries, ethnographic films, and fictional narratives, French cinema constructed a particular vision of Algerian characteristics that emphasised exoticism, primitiveness, and otherness while systematically marginalising genuine Algerian voices and perspectives.

This analysis will explore how cinematic representations evolved across different historical phases of colonial rule, examining the recurring themes, visual tropes, and narrative strategies employed to characterise Algerian people. By critically assessing these colonial-era films, we can better understand not only the mechanisms of cultural imperialism but also the ways in which cinema functioned as a tool of both documentation and domination in the colonial project.

The study of these cinematic representations offers crucial insights into the broader dynamics of colonial knowledge production and the enduring impact of such representations on contemporary perceptions of Algerian identity and North African culture more broadly.

1. Documenting Social Life

1.1 Customs and Traditions

The documentation of Algerian customs and traditions through cinema during the colonial period presents a complex interplay between ethnographic curiosity, colonial surveillance, and the exoticisation of indigenous practices. Early colonial films such as “*Scènes de la vie algérienne*” (1908) and “*Mœurs kabyles*” (1910) ostensibly aimed to catalog "native customs" for both scientific and administrative purposes.¹⁴¹ These productions frequently focused on distinctive ceremonies and rituals that emphasised cultural difference between European and Algerian populations, reinforcing notions of alterity that underpinned colonial ideology.

Colonial ethnographic filmmaking in Algeria intensified during the 1920s and 1930s, coinciding with the development of visual anthropology as a discipline. Films produced during this period, such as Jean Renoir's “*Toni*” (1935), which despite being set in southern France featured Algerian immigrant characters, occasionally provided glimpses of cultural practices that crossed the Mediterranean.¹⁴² More directly relevant were documentaries commissioned by the Cinematographic Service of the General Government of Algeria, which systematically recorded ceremonies, craft production methods, and domestic arrangements across different Algerian regions.

The ethnographic gaze in these films reflected prevailing anthropological paradigms that positioned Algerian customs within an evolutionary framework, presenting them as "traditional" or "primitive" in contrast to "modern" European practices.¹⁴³ As Hadj-Moussa notes, colonial-era ethnographic films about Algeria frequently emphasised ritual aspects of daily life that appeared most foreign to European audiences, while downplaying commonalities or evidence of cultural adaptation and hybridisation.¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, these films inadvertently preserved demonstrations of social practices that might otherwise have gone unrecorded, including wedding ceremonies in Kabyle, Sufi rituals in Zawiyas, and nomadic encampment organisations in the Sahara.

¹⁴¹David Prochaska, *Making Algeria French: Colonialism in Bône, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p 196-198.

¹⁴²Denise Brahimi, *Cinéma d'Afrique francophone et du Maghreb* (Paris: Nathan, 1997), p 33-35

¹⁴³Yvonne Turin, *Affrontements culturels dans l'Algérie coloniale: Écoles, médecines, religion, 1830-1880* (Paris: Maspero, 1971), p 213-217

¹⁴⁴Hadj-Moussa, *op. cit.*, p 51-57

By the 1950s, with anti-colonial sentiment intensifying, French documentary approaches shifted toward a more "humanist" perspective, exemplified by René Vautier's contested film "*Afrique 50*" (1950), which, though focused on West Africa, influenced subsequent documentary approaches in Algeria. This shift created space for more nuanced documentation, as seen in Vautier's later work "*Algérie en flammes*" (1958), which deliberately sought to document Algerian social organisation during the war of independence.¹⁴⁵ Despite being created under extreme conditions and with explicit political motivations, these later films provided important visual evidence of how traditional social structures adapted during the liberation struggle.

1.2 Social Norms

The cinematic documentation of Algerian social norms throughout the colonial period reveals the stratified nature of colonial society while inadvertently capturing the resilience of indigenous social structures despite systematic pressures. Films produced by the colonial administration frequently depicted interactions between European settlers and Algerians in ways that reinforced colonial hierarchies, yet background details often revealed the complex reality of social relations that official colonial discourse preferred to simplify.¹⁴⁶

Gender relations received particular attention in colonial cinematic representations of Algeria. Films such as "*Femmes d'Alger*" (1929) and *La "Vie familiale en Kabylie"* (1932) emphasized the gendered segregation of space in Algerian society, often framing this as evidence of women's oppression requiring European intervention.¹⁴⁷ However, as Marnia Lazreg argues, these representations frequently misunderstood or misrepresented the complexity of gender roles in different Algerian communities.¹⁴⁸ Despite these distortions, the films provide visual documentation of gendered spaces and practices during the colonial era, capturing aspects of female sociality that were often inaccessible to male colonial administrators and ethnographers.

Colonial fiction films set in Algeria, such as Julien Duvivier's "*Pépé le Moko*" (1937), while primarily concerned with European characters and narratives, included background scenes showing social stratification in urban spaces like the Casbah of

¹⁴⁵Philip Dine, *Images of the Algerian War: French Fiction and Film, 1954-1992* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p 122-125

¹⁴⁶Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociologie de l'Algérie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958), p 115-120

¹⁴⁷Malek Alloula, *op. cit.*, p 53-58

¹⁴⁸Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p 135-142

Algiers.¹⁴⁹ These incidental representations sometimes revealed practices of everyday resistance and the maintenance of social boundaries that preserved Algerian identity despite colonial pressures toward assimilation.

By the late colonial period, emerging Algerian filmmakers began documenting social norms from an indigenous perspective. Although production was limited before independence, short films by pioneers like Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina offered alternative views of Algerian social organisation that challenged colonial representations.¹⁵⁰ These works often produced under difficult circumstances and with limited resources, nevertheless provided important counterpoints to the dominant colonial cinematic discourse.

1.3 Daily Life

The documentation of everyday Algerian life through cinema offers perhaps the most valuable historical resource for understanding societal patterns during the colonial period, precisely because these quotidian details were often incidental to filmmakers' primary objectives. Whether in the background of fiction films, as contextual footage in newsreels, or as the subject of ethnographic studies, images of daily life captured material conditions, spatial arrangements, and routine practices that written sources rarely described with comparable immediacy.¹⁵¹

Urban daily life appears most frequently in colonial-era footage, with cities like Algiers, Oran, and Constantine receiving particular attention. Newsreels such as “*Actualités Gaumont*” and “*Éclair-Journal*” regularly included segments filmed in Algerian cities, often focusing on European quarters but occasionally capturing indigenous neighbourhoods.¹⁵² These films documented changing urban landscapes, showing how colonial architecture and planning reshaped Algerian cities while also revealing how local populations navigated and adapted these imposed spatial arrangements.

Rural daily life received more systematic documentation through ethnographic films, particularly those focused on agricultural practices. Productions such as “*La Vie agricole en Algérie*” (1925) and “*Labours en Oranie*” (1931) recorded farming

¹⁴⁹Austin, *op. cit.*, p 25-27

¹⁵⁰Brahimi, *op. cit.*, p 68-72

¹⁵¹Benjamin Stora, *op. cit.*, p 255-261.

¹⁵²Austin, *op. cit.*, p 31-34

techniques, seasonal patterns, and the organisation of rural labor.¹⁵³ While often framing these practices as primitive and inefficient compared to European methods, these films nevertheless preserved visual evidence of sustainable agricultural systems adapted to local environmental conditions over centuries.

The documentation of domestic life presents more significant methodological challenges, as the colonial gaze rarely penetrated private spaces except in staged ethnographic contexts. However, films like “*Intérieurs kabyles*” (1937) provide rare glimpses into household organization, though these were often arranged for the camera rather than representing unmediated daily reality.¹⁵⁴ More authentic documentation emerges in later films by Algerian directors such as Ahmed Rachedi, whose early work captured domestic arrangements as they actually existed rather than as exotic displays for European audiences.¹⁵⁵

By the late colonial period, during the war of independence (1954-1962), documentary filmmaking increasingly focused on the disruption of daily life under military occupation. Both French and international filmmakers, as well as the emergent film unit of the National Liberation Front (FLN), documented how military operations, population displacement, and systematic repression transformed everyday existence.¹⁵⁶ These films constitute crucial historical evidence of the social costs of the liberation struggle and the resilience of Algerian communities under extreme duress.

¹⁵³Bourdieu, *op. cit.*, p 87-93

¹⁵⁴Hadj-Moussa, *op. cit.*, p 72-78

¹⁵⁵Brahimi, *op. cit.*, p 75-79

¹⁵⁶Dine, *op. cit.*, p 152-158

2. Documenting Economic Reality

2.1 Agriculture and Farming

Cinema's documentation of Algerian agriculture during the colonial period reveals the profound transformations wrought by settler colonialism on indigenous farming systems while occasionally preserving evidence of traditional agricultural knowledge and practices that persisted despite these disruptions. Colonial agricultural policies in Algeria deliberately restructured land ownership and usage patterns, displacing indigenous communities from fertile lands and imposing export-oriented cash crop cultivation that fundamentally altered the relationship between Algerians and their agricultural heritage.¹⁵⁷

Early documentary films commissioned by colonial agricultural services, such as “*L'Agriculture moderne en Algérie*” (1911) and “*La Mitidja fertile*” (1928), primarily showcased European farming enterprises, emphasising technological “improvements” and the successful transplantation of Mediterranean agricultural models from France to Algeria.¹⁵⁸ These productions visually reinforced the colonial narrative of “making the desert bloom” while rarely acknowledging the sophisticated indigenous agricultural systems they displaced. Nevertheless, these films inadvertently documented the physical transformation of the Algerian landscape through colonial agriculture, providing valuable visual evidence of environmental changes that written sources might describe but cannot render with comparable immediacy.

More ethnographically oriented films occasionally captured traditional Algerian farming practices, particularly in regions less transformed by settler agriculture. Productions such as “*Techniques agricoles berbères*” (1936) and “*Moissons kabyles*” (1941) documented indigenous methods of terracing, water management, and crop selection adapted to local environmental conditions.¹⁵⁹ Though often framing these practices as primitive curiosities rather than sophisticated adaptations to challenging environmental conditions, these films nevertheless preserved visual records of agricultural knowledge developed over centuries.

¹⁵⁷Bourdieu, *op. cit.*, p 103-107

¹⁵⁸Prochaska, *op. cit.*, p 225-230

¹⁵⁹Alain Mahé, *Histoire de la Grande Kabylie, XIXe-XXe siècles: Anthropologie historique du lien social dans les communautés villageoises* (Paris: Éditions Bouchène, 2001), p 183-188

The economic disparities between settler and indigenous agriculture become particularly evident in colonial newsreels and promotional films from the 1930s through the 1950s. Footage contrasting modernised European vineyards and wheat fields with subsistence farming in areas where Algerians had been relocated visually documented the unequal resource allocation that characterised colonial agricultural policy.¹⁶⁰ As historian Pierre Bourdieu noted in his analysis of rural Algeria, these visual contrasts revealed economic stratification more clearly than colonial statistical records, which tended to obscure these disparities.¹⁶¹

By the late colonial period, documentary approaches shifted toward more critical perspectives on agricultural transformation. Films like René Vautier's controversial "*Algérie en flammes*" (1958) included segments documenting how military operations disrupted traditional farming cycles and how forced resettlement policies severed communities from their agricultural lands.¹⁶² These later documentaries provide crucial context for understanding the agricultural challenges Algeria would face after independence, as the visual evidence shows both the destruction of traditional systems and the export-oriented restructuring that would prove difficult to redirect toward national food security.

2.2 Traditional Industries

The cinematic documentation of Algerian traditional industries during the colonial period offers a particularly valuable resource for economic historians, as these productions frequently captured manufacturing processes, workshop organisations, and craft techniques that colonial economic policies were simultaneously marginalising. While colonial economic management prioritised resource extraction and primary production for export, traditional manufacturing and craft production persisted throughout the colonial period, adapting to changing economic circumstances while maintaining distinctive techniques and organisational structures.¹⁶³

Ethnographic films produced during the 1920s and 1930s paid particular attention to traditional crafts that aligned with European expectations of "authentic" North African production. Films such as "*Artisanat indigène*" (1927) and "*Les Potiers de*

¹⁶⁰Austin, *op. cit.*, p 36-41

¹⁶¹Bourdieu, *op. cit.*, p 110-117

¹⁶²Dine, *op. cit.*, p 163-167

¹⁶³Lazreg, *op. cit.*, p 158-164

Kabylie” (1931) documented ceramic production, textile weaving, metalwork, and leather processing in considerable detail.¹⁶⁴ While often framing these crafts as quaint survivals rather than vital economic activities, these productions nevertheless preserved visual records of complex manufacturing processes that written descriptions struggle to convey with comparable precision.

The gendered division of labor in traditional industries received particular attention in colonial-era documentaries. Films focusing on textile production, such as “*Tisserandes d'Algérie*” (1939), frequently highlighted women's economic contributions through weaving, embroidery, and carpet making.¹⁶⁵ These visual records offer important correctives to colonial economic reports, which systematically undervalued women's productive activities by classifying them as domestic rather than economic labor. The footage reveals sophisticated production techniques and artistic decision-making that challenge orientalist notions of "timeless" traditional crafts by showing innovation and adaptation within established craft traditions.

Urban traditional industries appeared less frequently in colonial-era films, with notable exceptions like “*Artisans d'Alger*” (1942) and “*Métiers de Constantine*” (1947), which documented workshop organisation in medina quarters.¹⁶⁶ These films show how traditional guild structures persisted despite colonial economic pressures, with apprenticeship systems continuing to transmit specialised knowledge across generations. The spatial organisation of urban workshops, tool usage, and production processes captured in these films provide invaluable documentation of economic activities that colonial authorities often dismissed as economically insignificant despite their importance to local communities.

By the 1950s, as industrialisation policies intensified, documentary approaches occasionally adopted more anthropological perspectives concerned with documenting "disappearing" traditional industries. Films like “*Derniers maîtres bijoutiers*” (1955) explicitly framed traditional production as endangered by modernisation, sometimes presenting false dichotomies between "tradition" and "progress."¹⁶⁷ Despite these interpretive limitations, these later documentaries often captured traditional industries in greater technical detail precisely because of their perceived endangered status,

¹⁶⁴Prochaska, *op. cit.*, p 231-238

¹⁶⁵Ranjana Khanna, *op. cit.*, p 94-101

¹⁶⁶Austin, *op. cit.*, p 44-48

¹⁶⁷Brahimi, *op. cit.*, p 81-84

providing crucial documentation of economic practices that would indeed face significant challenges after independence.

2.3 Trade and Markets

The cinematic documentation of Algerian trade networks and market systems offers particularly revealing insights into economic structures that colonial authorities simultaneously sought to regulate, redirect, and document. Markets represented spaces where colonial economic policies intersected with indigenous commercial practices, creating hybrid systems that films occasionally captured with remarkable clarity.¹⁶⁸ From rural periodic markets to urban commercial quarters, cinematic representations documented both the resilience of traditional commercial organisation and its adaptation to colonial economic pressures.

Early actuality films and travelogues frequently included sequences filmed in Algerian markets, attracted by their visual vibrancy and exotic appeal for European audiences. Productions such as “*Scènes de marché à Blida*” (1907) and “*Le Souk de Tlemcen*” (1912) captured the spatial organisation of traditional marketplaces, the diversity of goods traded, and the interaction patterns between vendors and customers.¹⁶⁹ While often focusing on picturesque elements that confirmed orientalist expectations, these films nevertheless documented economic exchanges that written colonial records, focused on formal economic indicators, frequently overlooked.

Colonial newsreels and documentaries from the 1920s through the 1940s occasionally highlighted larger trading networks, particularly those connecting Algeria to France and other French colonial territories. Films such as “*Commerce algérien*” (1931) and “*Oran, port d'échanges*” (1937) documented shipping activities, wholesale operations, and the development of export infrastructure that physically reoriented Algerian trade toward metropolitan France.¹⁷⁰ These visual records reveal the material infrastructure of economic dependency that statistics alone cannot fully convey.

The informal economic networks that sustained many Algerian communities received less systematic documentation but occasionally appeared incidentally in

¹⁶⁸Mohamed Benrabah, *Language Conflict in Algeria: From Colonialism to Post-Independence* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2013), p 67-73

¹⁶⁹Prochaska, *op. cit.*, p 242-247

¹⁷⁰Bourdieu, *p. cit.*, p 120-126

films with broader focuses. Documentary projects like “*Villages d'Algérie*” (1946-1952) sometimes captured local exchange systems, peddlers connecting rural communities, and small-scale commercial activities that operated alongside but distinct from the formal colonial economy.¹⁷¹ These glimpses provide valuable evidence of economic resilience and adaptation among populations largely excluded from the benefits of colonial economic development.

By the late colonial period, as rural-to-urban migration intensified, documentaries occasionally captured the transformation of traditional market systems and the emergence of new commercial forms in peripheral urban areas. Films documenting Algiers' slums (shantytowns) in the 1950s sometimes included footage of informal markets serving these communities, showing how commercial practices adapted to urbanisation under colonial conditions.¹⁷² These visual records help explain the persistence of informal economic networks that would remain significant after independence.

The cinematic documentation of trade and markets also occasionally revealed the ethnic and religious diversity of Algeria's commercial landscape. Films showing interactions between Jewish, Mozabite, Arab, Berber, and European traders in urban marketplaces captured a commercial pluralism that official colonial economic categorisations often simplified or obscured.¹⁷³ These visual records provide important context for understanding how commercial networks adapted to the demographic transformations that accompanied the independence struggle and its aftermath.

¹⁷¹Mahé, *op. cit.*, p 192-197

¹⁷²Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p 107-112

¹⁷³Ali Merad, *Le Réformisme musulman en Algérie de 1925 à 1940: Essai d'histoire religieuse et sociale* (Paris: Mouton, 1967), p 215-221

3. Documenting Cultural Aspects

3.1 Traditional Clothing

The cinematic documentation of Algerian traditional clothing and adornment practices during the colonial period provides a rich visual archive that reveals both cultural continuities and adaptations under colonial influence. Clothing in Algeria, as elsewhere in North Africa, functioned not merely as practical covering but as a complex signifying system conveying information about regional identity, social status, religious affiliation, and, increasingly during the colonial period, political allegiance.¹⁷⁴ Films capturing these sartorial codes, whether deliberately or incidentally, preserve valuable evidence of material culture and its social meanings across different Algerian communities.

Early ethnographic films often emphasised distinctive regional clothing traditions, documenting variations that reflected Algeria's geographical and cultural diversity. Productions such as “*Costumes d'Algérie*” (1921) and “*Parures kabyles*” (1934) cataloged regional garments like the Kabyl dress (*thaqendurth*), the blue-dyed robes of the Touareg, and the elaborate urban costumes of Constantine and Tlemcen.¹⁷⁵ While these films frequently presented clothing as timeless “traditional” artifacts rather than evolving cultural expressions, they nevertheless preserved visual evidence of garment construction, embroidery techniques, and wearing practices that written descriptions cannot fully convey.

Colonial-era newsreels and documentaries inadvertently captured how clothing practices adapted to changing social conditions. Footage from urban areas in the 1930s and 1940s shows the gradual adoption of European elements alongside maintained indigenous garments, particularly among men working in colonial institutions or European-owned businesses.¹⁷⁶ These visual records help trace patterns of cultural negotiation through clothing those statistical or administrative records rarely documented systematically.

Women's clothing received particular attention in colonial visual documentation, often framed through orientalist fascination with veiling practices. Films such as “*Femmes du Sud*” (1928) and “*Citadines voiles*” (1935) emphasised the “*haik*”,

¹⁷⁴Lazreg, *op. cit*, p 172-178

¹⁷⁵Hadj-Moussa, *op. cit*, p 85-91

¹⁷⁶Austin, *op. cit*, p 52-57

“*niqab*”, and various regional face-covering traditions.¹⁷⁷ While frequently misinterpreting or exoticising these practices, these visual records nevertheless document variations in female sartorial practices across different regions and social classes, showing that veiling practices were neither universal nor uniform across Algeria despite colonial representations suggesting otherwise.

By the late colonial period, clothing acquired increasingly explicit political dimensions that cinema occasionally captured. Documentaries and newsreels from the 1950s sometimes show the adoption of Western dress as a form of claimed modernity among certain urbanised Algerians, while other footage captures the deliberate retention or re-adoption of indigenous garments as expressions of cultural resistance.¹⁷⁸ The visual evidence reveals how clothing became a contested domain where cultural identity was negotiated during the independence struggle, with sartorial choices communicating political alignments that verbal statements might have made dangerous.

3.2 Popular Arts

The cinematic documentation of Algerian popular arts during the colonial period provides crucial insights into cultural expressions that colonial written archives typically marginalised or misunderstood. Popular arts - including music, storytelling, dance, and performance traditions - represented domains where cultural memory was preserved and community identity affirmed despite colonial pressures toward cultural assimilation.¹⁷⁹ Films capturing these expressions, whether as primary subjects or incidental recordings, constitute invaluable resources for understanding artistic practices that sustained cultural continuity throughout the colonial era.

Music received particular attention in colonial-era ethnographic documentation, with films such as “*Musiques d'Algérie*” (1928) and “*Chants kabyles*” (1939) recording regional musical traditions including Andalusian classical music, Chaabi, Bedouin folk songs, and Berber musical forms.¹⁸⁰ Though often recording these traditions in artificial settings rather than their natural performance contexts, these films nevertheless preserved sonic and visual evidence of instrumental techniques,

¹⁷⁷Alloula, *op. cit.*, p 63-69

¹⁷⁸Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, p 35-42

¹⁷⁹Abdelwahab Meddeb, *Phantasia* (Paris: Sindbad, 1986), p 122-128

¹⁸⁰Brahimi, *op. cit.*, p 89-95

performance practices, and musical structures that might otherwise have gone unrecorded during this period.

Performance traditions such as storytelling and puppetry occasionally appeared in documentary films, particularly those focusing on urban popular culture. Productions like “*Conteurs de la Casbah*” (1932) and “*Divertissements populaires*” (1947) captured performances by traditional storytellers (*gouwal*) and puppet shows that maintained oral literary traditions while adapting to changing social conditions.¹⁸¹ These visual records document not only the performance techniques but also audience compositions and reception practices that written accounts rarely described with comparable detail.

Dance traditions appeared frequently in colonial visual documentation, though often framed through orientalist fascination with "exotic" movement practices. Films such as “*Danses d'Aurès*” (1924) and “*Ahwach berbère*” (1936) recorded regional dance traditions associated with particular communities and ceremonial contexts.¹⁸² Despite frequently de-contextualising these practices or presenting them as entertainment spectacles rather than socially embedded expressions, these recordings preserve movement vocabularies and choreographic structures that written descriptions cannot adequately capture.

By the late colonial period, documentary approaches occasionally acknowledged the political dimensions of popular arts during the independence struggle. Films documenting urban youth culture in the 1950s sometimes captured how musical forms incorporated nationalist themes and how traditional artistic expressions were repurposed as vehicles for political messaging.¹⁸³ These visual records help explain how popular arts would come to play crucial roles in constructing national identity after independence, building on traditions that had already demonstrated remarkable adaptability under colonial conditions.

3.3 Occasions and Celebrations

The cinematic documentation of Algerian celebrations and ceremonial occasions during the colonial period provides particularly valuable windows into collective expressions of cultural identity and community cohesion that persisted despite

¹⁸¹Hadj-Moussa, *op. cit.*, p 94-98

¹⁸²Khanna, *Algeria Cuts*, p 112-119

¹⁸³Stora, *op. cit.*, p 267-273

colonial pressures. Religious festivals, life-cycle celebrations, and seasonal observances represented occasions when communities reaffirmed shared values and maintained cultural continuity through ritualised practices.¹⁸⁴ Films capturing these events, whether created for ethnographic purposes or included in broader documentary projects, preserve visual evidence of ceremonial configurations those colonial written records typically described only superficially.

Islamic religious celebrations received considerable attention in colonial-era ethnographic filmmaking, with productions such as “*Aïd el-Kebir en Algérie*” (1925) and “*Moussems du Constantinois*” (1937) documenting major holidays and regional saints' festivals (*moussems*).¹⁸⁵ These films captured the spatial organisation of religious gatherings, the performance of ritual activities, and the social interactions that accompanied religious observance. While frequently misinterpreting theological significance or emphasising exotic elements for European audiences, these visual records nevertheless document how religious practice maintained cultural cohesion during the colonial period.

Life-cycle celebrations, particularly weddings, appeared regularly in ethnographic documentaries focusing on Algerian social life. Films such as “*Mariages kabyles*” (1926) and “*Cérémonies nuptiales à Tlemcen*” (1933) documented regional variations in wedding practices, capturing distinctive ritual sequences, material culture, and performance traditions associated with marriage celebrations.¹⁸⁶ These visual records reveal how communities invested significant resources in maintaining elaborate ceremonial traditions despite economic constraints imposed by colonial conditions, demonstrating the priority placed on preserving these cultural institutions.

Seasonal celebrations tied to agricultural cycles occasionally appeared in documentary films focusing on rural communities. Productions documenting harvest festivals, planting ceremonies and seasonal markets captured how communities maintained ritualised relationships with the agricultural landscape despite the disruptive effects of colonial land policies.¹⁸⁷ These films provide important context for understanding how seasonal ceremonial patterns structured community life and how these structures were forced to adapt as colonial policies increasingly disrupted traditional agricultural systems.

¹⁸⁴Merad, *op. cit.*, p 227-235

¹⁸⁵Mahé, *op. cit.*, p 201-208

¹⁸⁶Lazreg, *op. cit.*, p 181-187

¹⁸⁷Bourdieu, *op. cit.*, p 129-136

By the late colonial period, the political dimensions of public celebrations became increasingly evident in documentary footage. Films from the 1950s occasionally captured how traditional celebrations incorporated nationalist elements or how colonial authorities restricted gathering permissions to prevent ceremonial occasions from becoming platforms for political expression.¹⁸⁸ These visual records help explain the complex relationship between cultural celebration and political mobilization that would characterise the early independence period, when many traditional celebrations were explicitly repurposed as expressions of national identity.

¹⁸⁸Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, p 49-56

This examination of cinematic representations of Algerian social life during the colonial period reveals the central role of visual culture in constructing, maintaining, and occasionally contesting colonial ideologies. From the early ethnographic curiosity of Lumière operators to the competing propaganda films of the independence war, cinema provided a critical medium through which colonial relationships were visualised, and disseminated to both metropolitan and colonial audiences.

The evolution of these representations across time reflects broader historical developments in the French colonial project. Early films established visual taxonomies of difference that served colonial administration, while interwar cinema revealed growing anxieties about urban migration and cultural hybridisation. The cinematic battle over Algeria's image during the independence war demonstrated the high stakes of visual representation in colonial contexts.

This analysis also highlights significant continuities across the colonial period. The persistent exoticisation of rural life, the representation of indigenous quarters as spaces of danger and mystery, and the visual categorisation of Algerian identities according to colonial hierarchies remained remarkably consistent features of colonial cinema. Even as political circumstances and filmmaking technologies evolved, colonial visual logic continued to structure mainstream representations of Algerian society.

However, this study also identifies important counter-narratives and sites of resistance within colonial visual culture. From the critical documentaries of René Vautier to the revolutionary cinema of the FLN film unit, alternative visual languages emerged that challenged colonial representations and articulated new visions of Algerian social life. These counter-narratives anticipated the post-independence cinema that would continue the work of cultural decolonisation.

By examining these evolving and contested representations, we conclude that cinema was not simply a reflection of colonial reality, but an active participant in colonial relations, and sometimes even a counter-construction. The films produced during this period form a complex visual archive that continues to enrich contemporary understanding of Algeria's colonial past and its enduring legacy.

Chapter Three:
Cinema as a Tool for Struggle
and Documentation of Resistance (1939-1962)

The period between 1939 and 1962 represents a crucial epoch in Algerian history, marked by the intensification of colonial domination, the emergence of nationalist consciousness, and ultimately the struggle for independence. During these transformative decades, cinema emerged not merely as an entertainment medium but as a powerful instrument of cultural resistance and a vehicle for articulating nascent Algerian national identity. This chapter examines how cinematic production and representation functioned as both a site of contestation against French colonial hegemony and a means of constructing and preserving indigenous cultural narratives that would prove fundamental to the decolonisation process.

The temporal framework of 1939-1962 encompasses both the consolidation of French colonial cultural policies and the gradual emergence of decolonising perspectives in visual media. The outbreak of World War II in 1939 marked a turning point in colonial relations, as the metropole's vulnerability exposed the contradictions inherent in imperial discourse about civilisation and progress. Simultaneously, the growth of cinema as a mass medium during this period provided new opportunities for both cultural domination and resistance, creating contested spaces where competing visions of Algerian identity could be articulated and negotiated.

This analysis draws upon a diverse corpus of films, ranging from colonial propaganda productions to ethnographic documentaries, from resistance cinema to post-independence retrospective works that sought to memorialise the struggle for liberation. By examining these cinematic texts alongside their historical contexts, production circumstances, and reception histories, this chapter illuminates how cinema functioned as both mirror and maker of Algerian national consciousness during one of the most pivotal periods in the nation's modern history.

This examination reveals cinema's dual capacity to serve as both an instrument of colonial control and a weapon of anti-colonial resistance, ultimately demonstrating its crucial role in documenting and shaping the emergence of modern Algerian national identity.

Section One: Cinema as a Tool of Resistance and Documentation of National Identity in Algeria (1939-1962)

In the context of the Algerian struggle against French colonialism, cinema emerged as an effective tool of cultural and political resistance, transcending its traditional entertainment role to become a means of documenting collective memory and affirming the national identity threatened with erasure. Between 1939 and 1962, a period marked by major political transformations both locally and globally, the moving image gained prominence as a cultural medium capable of challenging and resisting colonial discourse.

This chapter aims to examine the development of Algerian cinema as a tool of resistance and documentation of national identity during this period, focusing on three main axes: the beginnings of national Algerian cinema and its early foundations, films of the liberation revolution and national struggle, and the role of the Algerian cinematic school in confronting colonial discourse. The importance of this study lies in its highlighting of a significant aspect of cultural resistance that accompanied the armed struggle against colonialism, demonstrating how cinema became an effective tool in building national consciousness and affirming Algerian cultural identity against policies of erasure and westernisation.

The relationship between cinema and national identity formation in colonial and postcolonial contexts represents a critical area of inquiry at the intersection of film studies, history, and postcolonial theory. As Edward Said has argued, control over representation constitutes a fundamental aspect of colonial power;¹⁸⁹ therefore, the development of indigenous cinematic practices must be understood as both cultural expression and political intervention. The Algerian case offers particularly rich insight into this dynamic, as cinema became not merely reflective but constitutive of emerging conceptions of national identity during the struggle for independence.

¹⁸⁹Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), p 9

1. The Beginnings of National Algerian Cinema (1939-1954)

The emergence of Algerian national cinema must be understood within the broader context of French colonial rule, which began in 1830 and established a system that relegated native Algerians to inferior status while privileging European settlers. Prior to World War II, cinematic representations of Algeria were predominantly created through a colonial lens, with French productions like “*L'Atlantide*” (1921) and “*Pépé le Moko*” (1937) perpetuating orientalist tropes and colonial fantasies.¹⁹⁰ Early cinema in Algeria was essentially an extension of the colonial apparatus, presenting the territory as an exotic backdrop for European adventures rather than a living society with its own cultural identity. This systematic denial of Algerian subjectivity through cinema created the conditions by which a national cinema would eventually define itself.

The colonial regime maintained strict control over cinematic production facilities and distribution networks throughout this period, effectively prohibiting indigenous Algerians from creating counter-narratives to dominant representations. As film historian Guy Austin documents, colonial authorities recognised early cinema's potential for fostering nationalist sentiment and consequently restricted access to film equipment, censored content depicting Algerian perspectives, and privileged French-language productions in distribution.¹⁹¹ These structural barriers help explain the relative absence of indigenous Algerian films during this early period, an absence that should be understood not as indicative of cultural deficiency but as evidence of deliberate colonial suppression.

The first significant shift occurred during World War II, when global political realignments and nascent independence movements began challenging colonial structures. The Italian neorealist movement, with its focus on everyday struggles and authentic representation, would eventually prove influential for emerging Algerian filmmakers seeking to document their society's realities.¹⁹²

This period saw the first tentative steps toward an indigenous Algerian cinema, though opportunities remained severely limited by colonial restrictions on native access to filmmaking equipment and training. The neorealist influence would prove particularly significant, as its aesthetic emphasis on non-professional actors, location

¹⁹⁰Elizabeth Ezra, *European Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p 112

¹⁹¹Austin, *op. cit*, p 23

¹⁹²Armes, *op.cit*, p 82

shooting, and social conditions aligned with the material constraints and political imperatives facing early Algerian filmmakers.¹⁹³

By the late 1940s, a small but significant cohort of Algerian intellectuals began gaining access to film education, primarily in France. Mohamed Lakhdar Hamina, who would later become one of Algeria's most celebrated directors (see appendix 35), began his studies at the "Institute of Advanced Cinematographic Studies" (IDHEC) in Paris during this period.¹⁹⁴ Though not yet producing fully-fledged feature films, these pioneering figures began conceptualising what an authentic Algerian cinema might entail. The experience of studying film in the colonial metropole created what Hamid Naficy terms an "accented" perspective, a heightened awareness of cultural difference that would inform subsequent cinematic strategies.¹⁹⁵

The early 1950s saw the creation of the first documentaries made by Algerians about Algerian life, albeit under significant constraints. René Gautier, though French, worked closely with Algerian collaborators to produce "*Enrique 50*" (1950), which documented colonial exploitation and is considered by scholars like Ahmed Bedjaoui as "a precursor to the militant cinema that would emerge during the revolution."¹⁹⁶ These early documentary efforts, though limited in scope and often censored, began establishing visual counter-narratives to colonial representations. Significantly, these productions operated in what Viola Shafik identifies as an interstitial space; neither fully endorsed by colonial authorities nor entirely aligned with revolutionary movements that had not yet coalesced.¹⁹⁷

By 1954, on the eve of the Algerian Revolution, the foundations for a national cinema were being laid, even as actual Algerian-directed productions remained rare. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue in their analysis of Third World cinema movements, this preparatory period was crucial for establishing the ideological and aesthetic frameworks that would flourish during the liberation struggle.¹⁹⁸ The cinematic documentation of Algerian identity remained largely aspirational during this period, but the intellectual groundwork was being established for what would become a powerful tool of resistance in the revolutionary era to follow. The

¹⁹³Austin, *op. cit.*, p 31

¹⁹⁴Maherzi, *op. cit.*, p 45.

¹⁹⁵Naficy, *op. cit.*, p 32-33

¹⁹⁶Ahmed Bedjaoui, *Cinéma et Guerre de Libération: Algérie, des batailles d'images* (Algiers: Chihab Editions, 2014), p 73

¹⁹⁷Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2007), 142-143

¹⁹⁸Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *op. Cit.*, p 248-249

conceptual shift from viewing Algerians as objects of cinematic representation to understanding them as potential subjects and creators of their own visual narratives marked a crucial transition that would accelerate dramatically after the outbreak of armed conflict.

2. Films of the Liberation Revolution and National Struggle (1954-1962)

The outbreak of the Algerian War of Independence in November 1954 radically transformed the relationship between cinema and national identity in Algeria. As the National Liberation Front (FLN) mobilised against French colonial rule, film became a crucial battleground for competing narratives about Algeria's past, present, and future. Unlike the preceding period, when indigenous filmmaking was severely restricted, the revolutionary period witnessed the strategic deployment of cinema as both documentation and propaganda. This transformation illustrates Benedict Anderson's thesis that national identity emerges through shared cultural texts that enable previously disparate populations to imagine themselves as a coherent community with common interests.¹⁹⁹

The FLN recognised early the importance of visual documentation of the struggle, establishing the "Farid Group" in 1956 to record footage of military operations and colonial repression.²⁰⁰ Though working with minimal equipment and under dangerous conditions, these revolutionary camera operators captured invaluable footage that would later be incorporated into films documenting the liberation struggle. As historian Matthew Connelly notes, "The FLN leadership understood that the war would be won not just militarily but in the court of international opinion, making visual evidence of their struggle an essential component of their strategy."²⁰¹ This sophisticated understanding of cinema's role in international relations demonstrates how thoroughly the FLN had internalised modern conceptions of media power, despite limited technical resources.

The clandestine filming activities of Farid Group operated within extreme constraints; camera equipment was smuggled through borders, footage was shot surreptitiously, and exposed film required secure transportation out of the country for processing and editing. These material conditions shaped both the content and form of early revolutionary cinema, necessitating brief sequences, minimal editing, and an emphasis on documentary immediacy rather than narrative complexity. As film theorist Teshome Gabriel argues, these constraints should not be viewed merely as

¹⁹⁹Benedict Anderson, *op. cit.*, p 44-45

²⁰⁰Bedjaoui, *op. cit.*, p 94

²⁰¹Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p 219

limitations but as productive forces that generated distinctive aesthetic approaches centred on urgency and authenticity.²⁰²

A watershed moment came with the production of "*Djazairouna*" (Our Algeria) in 1960, a documentary assembled from footage captured by FLN operatives and edited in Tunisia. Though rarely screened internationally at the time due to French diplomatic pressure, the film represented the first coherent cinematic articulation of Algerian nationalist aspirations created by Algerians themselves.²⁰³ Its focus on ordinary Algerians participating in resistance activities established visual tropes that would become central to post-independence national cinema. Significantly, the film's title; using the possessive "*djazairouna*", directly contested colonial claims of ownership over Algerian territory and culture, performing linguistically the reclamation it documented visually. (See appendix 37)

The revolutionary period also saw important collaborations between Algerian nationalists and international filmmakers sympathetic to their cause. Most famously, Italian director Gillo Pontecorvo worked closely with former FLN members to create "*The Battle of Algiers*" (1966), which, though completed after independence, was conceived and researched during the revolutionary period.²⁰⁴ (See appendix 38). Algerian film historian Lotfi Maherzi argues that these collaborations were crucial for transferring technical expertise to Algerian filmmakers while establishing an aesthetic approach that privileged historical accuracy and political commitment over commercial considerations.²⁰⁵ These transnational partnerships complicate simplistic notions of "authentic" national cinema, demonstrating instead how Algeria's cinematic identity emerged through dialogue with international film traditions.

Less examined but equally significant were the underground film distribution networks established during this period, which screened revolutionary cinema in sympathetic venues across Algeria and among diaspora communities in France. These networks, often operating at great risk, created what film scholar Viola Shafik terms "counter-public spheres" where Algerian national identity could be affirmed and celebrated in opposition to colonial representations.²⁰⁶ By 1962, when independence was finally achieved, these networks had created a receptive audience

²⁰²Teshome Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), p 42-43

²⁰³Maherzi, *op. cit.*, p 89

²⁰⁴Austin, *op. cit.*, p 47

²⁰⁵Maherzi, *ibid.*, p 102

²⁰⁶Shafik, *op. cit.*, p 165

for the national cinema that would emerge in the post-colonial era. The experience of collective viewing in clandestine settings reinforced cinema's function not merely as entertainment but as political ritual spaces where national community could be experienced emotionally as well as intellectually.

Perhaps most importantly, the 1954-1962 period established cinema as a central component of Algerian national identity. As filmmaker Ahmed Rachedi later reflected, "Our revolution was not just fought with guns but with cameras. The films we made during the war were not just records of events but active participants in our liberation."²⁰⁷ This understanding of cinema as an instrument of national self-determination would profoundly influence the institutional development of Algerian filmmaking in the decades following independence.

The conceptualisation of filmmaking as a form of combat -what theorist Paul Willemen terms "militant cinema"- distinguished Algerian film practice from both commercial entertainment and purely aesthetic art cinema traditions.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷Ahmed Rachedi, "le cinema a perpetue le travail de memoire," echoroukonline, march 21, 2012

²⁰⁸Paul Willemen, "The Third Cinema Question: Notes and Reflections," in *Questions of Third Cinema*, ed. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (London: BFI Publishing, 1989), p 13-14

3. The Role of the Algerian Cinema School in Confronting Colonial Discourse

The concept of an "Algerian Cinema School" emerged during the revolutionary period but gained coherence in the immediate aftermath of independence. Rather than referring to a single physical institution, the term encompasses the distinctive aesthetic, thematic, and political approaches that characterised Algerian filmmaking during this formative period. Central to this school was its direct confrontation with colonial discourses about Algerian history, culture, and identity. This confrontation exemplifies what postcolonial theorist Ngugi Thiong'o describes as "decolonising the mind"; the process by which formerly colonised peoples reclaim representational authority over their own experiences and histories.²⁰⁹

The colonial cinematic representation of Algeria, as documented by scholars like Elizabeth Ezra, had consistently portrayed Algerians as primitive, violent, or exotic, suitable as background elements but rarely as complex protagonists in their own right.²¹⁰ The Algerian Cinema School developed specific strategies to counter these representations. It focused on three main characteristics: First, a commitment to historical accuracy in depicting colonial oppression; second, elevating ordinary Algerians to a heroic status; and third, an insistence on presenting Algerian cultural practices with dignity rather than exoticism. These strategies functioned not merely as aesthetic choices but as political interventions, directly challenging colonial visual regimes that had dominated cinematic representations of Algeria for decades.

The institutional foundation for this approach was established with the creation of the Algerian National Cinema Center (CNCA) in 1964 and the Algerian News Office (OAA) in 1963.²¹¹ Though these institutions were established slightly after the period under examination, their founding principles emerged directly from the revolutionary experience and shaped how the war period would be remembered cinematically. The OAA in particular developed an archive of revolutionary footage that would serve as a resource for filmmakers seeking to incorporate authentic images of the liberation struggle into their work. This institutional infrastructure demonstrates the new nation's commitment to cinema not merely as entertainment but as fundamental to the project of national identity formation.

²⁰⁹Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*(London: James Currey, 1986), p 5

²¹⁰Ezra, *op. cit*, p 118

²¹¹Austin, *op. cit*, p 62

A crucial aspect of the Algerian Cinema School was its development of a visual language that deliberately countered orientalist tropes. Where colonial cinema had emphasised exotic landscapes and cultural "otherness," Algerian filmmakers like Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina and Ahmed Rachedi privileged images of ordinary Algerians engaged in collective struggle. As Guy Austin notes in his analysis of early Algerian cinema, "These films insisted on the humanity and agency of Algerian subjects, directly contradicting decades of dehumanising colonial representation."²¹² This representational strategy aligns with what film theorist Bill Nichols identifies as the "discourse of sobriety"—an approach that privileges political efficacy over formal experimentation or entertainment value.²¹³

The Algerian Cinema School also directly challenged colonial historical narratives. Films produced during this period explicitly addressed previously taboo subjects like the Sétif massacres of May 1945, when French forces killed thousands of Algerian civilians following Victory in Europe celebrations, an event largely erased from French historical accounts but central to Algerian historical consciousness.²¹⁴ By visualising these suppressed histories, Algerian cinema performed what cultural theorist Malek Alloula describes as "a reclamation of historical memory essential to post-colonial identity formation."²¹⁵ This function cinema as historical testimony became particularly significant given the colonial regime's systematic destruction of archival materials during its withdrawal, an attempt to erase evidence of colonial abuses that film could partially counteract.

Perhaps most significantly, the Algerian Cinema School developed what film theorist Teshome Gabriel identifies as a "Third Cinema" aesthetic—rejecting both Hollywood entertainment models and European art cinema conventions in favor of approaches that center collective rather than individual experience.²¹⁶ This aesthetic choice itself constituted a challenge to colonial discourse, which had consistently privileged individual narratives (usually of European protagonists) over collective Algerian experiences. The emphasis on collective protagonism—villages, families, or resistance units rather than individual heroes—reflected not just political ideology but cultural values that colonial representations had systematically marginalised.

²¹²Austin, *ibid*, p 75

²¹³Bill Nichols, *op. cit*, p 4

²¹⁴Bedjaoui, *op. cit*, p 118

²¹⁵Malek Alloula, *op. cit*, p 124

²¹⁶Gabriel, *op. cit*, p 36

The Algerian Cinema School's approach to gender representation also merits examination. While scholarship has rightfully criticised the sometimes limited portrayal of women in post-independence Algerian cinema, films of this period nevertheless made significant interventions in countering colonial representations of Algerian women as passive victims requiring Western liberation.²¹⁷ Films like “*Patrouille à l'Est*” (1971) (see appendix 39), though produced slightly after the period under examination, draw on revolutionary-era footage to present women as active participants in the liberation struggle. This visual assertion of female agency directly contested colonial discourses that had instrumentalised gender to justify imperial domination.

²¹⁷Austin, *op. cit.*, p 82

4. The Impact of Algerian Cinema on Global Liberation Movements

The influence of Algerian revolutionary cinema extended far beyond national borders, establishing models for filmmaking that would inspire anti-colonial and liberation movements worldwide. This international impact occurred through multiple channels: direct training relationships, aesthetic inspiration, and the establishment of theoretical frameworks for understanding the role of cinema in decolonisation struggles. The transnational circulation of Algerian cinematic practices exemplifies what film scholar Dudley Andrew terms "cinematic geopolitics"; the ways in which film movements traverse national boundaries to create solidarities among disparate resistance struggles.²¹⁸

The Algerian experience established what film historian Roy Armes terms "a paradigm for revolutionary Third World filmmaking" that would be studied and emulated by liberation movements from Palestine to South Africa.²¹⁹ The FLN's early recognition of cinema's importance as both documentary evidence and consciousness-raising tool provided a template that other movements would adapt to their specific contexts. Palestinian filmmaker Michel Khleifi explicitly acknowledged this debt when noting that "Algerian cinema taught us that cameras could be as important as guns in a liberation struggle."²²⁰

This conceptualisation of cinema as weaponry -as direct intervention rather than mere representation- would prove particularly influential for movements facing similarly asymmetrical power relationships.

Direct training relationships also facilitated the spread of Algerian cinematic approaches. In the immediate post-independence period, Algeria welcomed filmmakers from other liberation movements, particularly from Portuguese colonies in Africa. These training relationships created what film scholar Olivier Hadouchi describes as "a transnational network of militant filmmakers who shared not just technical knowledge but a commitment to cinema as revolutionary praxis."²²¹

²¹⁸Dudley Andrew, "Time Zones and Jetlag: The Flows and Phases of World Cinema," in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Nataša Đurovičová and Kathleen Newman (New York: Routledge, 2010), p 89.

²¹⁹Armes, *op. cit.*, p 145

²²⁰Michel Khleifi, "From Reality to Fiction—From Poverty to Expression," in *Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema*, ed. Hamid Dabashi (London: Verso, 2006), p 49

²²¹Olivier Hadouchi, "African Culture Will Be Revolutionary or Will Not Be: William Klein's Film of the First Pan-African Festival of Algiers (1969)," *Third Text* 25, no. 1 (2011): p 121

The Algerian model was particularly influential in establishing approaches to historical memory in post-colonial contexts. Robert Stam and Ella Shohat document how Algerian films' unflinching depiction of colonial violence established a counter-narrative to European historical accounts that minimised or justified such violence.²²² This approach would later influence filmmakers addressing colonial legacies in contexts from Vietnam to Latin America. The Algerian example demonstrated how cinema could function as what Pierre Nora terms "counter-memory"; an alternative historical record that challenges official narratives and preserves experiences that dominant historiography might otherwise erase.²²³

Perhaps most significantly, Algerian experiences informed theoretical understandings of "Third Cinema" as articulated by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in their influential 1969 manifesto "Towards a Third Cinema."²²⁴ Though drawing primarily on Latin American experiences, their conception of cinema as a decolonising practice explicitly referenced Algerian examples. This theoretical framework would prove essential for subsequent generations of filmmakers seeking to develop cinematic languages appropriate to their specific liberation contexts. The Algerian influence on Third Cinema theory demonstrates how praxis preceded theory, concrete filmmaking experiences under revolutionary conditions generated conceptual frameworks rather than the reverse.

By 1962, as Algeria achieved independence, its cinematic legacy had already begun shaping global film practices. Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, though completed in 1966, exemplifies how Algerian approaches to representing resistance would influence international cinema. The film's pseudo-documentary style and unflinching portrayal of both colonial oppression and revolutionary violence established aesthetic approaches that would be widely emulated.²²⁵ Indeed, its influence extended beyond cinema to real-world revolutionary tactics, with the film famously screened by groups ranging from the Black Panthers to the Irish Republican Army as both inspiration and practical guide.²²⁶ This circulation between cinematic representation and political action demonstrates the permeability between cultural and political spheres that characterised revolutionary film practices.

²²²Shohat and Stam, *op. cit.*, p 285

²²³Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (1989): p 8-9

²²⁴Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema," *Tricontinental* 14 (1969): p 107

²²⁵Austin, *op. cit.*, p 49

²²⁶Connelly, *op. cit.*, p 279

The legacy of this period continues to resonate in contemporary global cinema. As film scholar Hamid Naficy argues, "The Algerian model established an enduring template for how cinema can function not merely as representation of national identity but as active participant in its creation and defense."²²⁷ This understanding of cinema as constitutive rather than merely reflective of national identity remains perhaps the most enduring contribution of Algerian revolutionary filmmaking to global film culture. Contemporary filmmakers addressing occupied territories, refugee experiences, and ongoing liberation struggles continue to draw inspiration from the Algerian example, adapting its lessons to new political contexts and technological possibilities.

The global impact of Algerian cinema during this period also challenges Eurocentric film histories that position Europe and North America as the primary sources of cinematic innovation. As Robert Stam argues, the Algerian case demonstrates how aesthetic advances often emerge from political necessity rather than artistic experimentation for its own sake.²²⁸ The techniques developed under the constraints of revolutionary filmmaking, including handheld camerawork, non-professional actors, and fragmented narrative structures, would later be adopted by European art cinema as formal innovations, often without acknowledgment of their political origins. Recognising Algeria's contribution to global film language thus constitutes not merely a historical correction but a decolonisation of film theory itself.

²²⁷Naficy, *op. cit.*, p 94

²²⁸Robert Stam, "Beyond Third Cinema: The Aesthetics of Hybridity," in *Rethinking Third Cinema*, ed. Anthony R. Guneratne and Wimal Dissanayake (New York: Routledge, 2003), p 31-32

The period from 1939 to 1962 witnessed the transformation of cinema in Algeria from a predominantly colonial medium to a powerful tool of resistance and national identity formation. Beginning with limited indigenous production capacity but growing intellectual foundations in the pre-revolutionary period, Algerian cinema rapidly developed during the War of Independence into a sophisticated instrument for documenting struggle and projecting alternative visions of national identity.

This trajectory illustrates broader patterns in postcolonial cultural development, demonstrating how decolonisation processes unfold not just in political and economic spheres but in representational practices as well. The Algerian case reveals cinema's particular potency in what cultural theorist Homi Bhabha terms "the narration of nation"; the cultural processes through which national communities define themselves against colonial impositions.²²⁹ Film's capacity to combine visual evidence, emotional affect, and narrative structure made it uniquely positioned to articulate emergent conceptions of Algerian identity during this pivotal historical moment.

In the words of filmmaker Ahmed Rachedi, who both documented and participated in the events described: "We did not simply want to make films about our revolution; we wanted our films to be revolutionary acts in themselves."²³⁰ This understanding of cinema's transformative potential remains perhaps the most enduring legacy of Algeria's cinematic resistance.

The significance of Algerian cinema during this period extends beyond its historical importance to offer methodological lessons for contemporary film scholarship. By examining how cinematic practices emerged under colonial constraints and revolutionary conditions, we gain insight into cinema's functioning not merely as art or entertainment but as essential infrastructure for political imagination. As contemporary societies grapple with new forms of imperial power and resistance, the Algerian case reminds us that control over visual representation remains central to both domination and liberation.

²²⁹Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), p 7.

²³⁰Rachedi, Ahmed. "Notre cinéma face à ses responsabilités." *Algérie Actualité*, July 5, 1974.

Section Two: Cinema as a Visual Memory of the Liberation Struggle (1954-1962)

The period between 1954 and 1962 represents not merely a chronological framework of armed resistance, but a foundational epoch in which cinema emerged as both witness and architect of collective memory. During these eight transformative years of the liberation struggle, the seventh art transcended its conventional role as entertainment to become a powerful medium of historical documentation, ideological expression, and cultural preservation. This chapter examines how cinema functioned as a visual repository of the liberation experience, capturing the complexities of a people's struggle for independence while simultaneously shaping the narratives that would define national consciousness for generations to come.

The relationship between cinema and liberation movements during this period reveals a unique dialectical process wherein film served as both mirror and molder of revolutionary identity. Through documentary footage, fictional narratives, and propagandistic works, filmmakers—both indigenous and international—created a visual lexicon that translated the physical and psychological dimensions of the struggle into accessible, emotionally resonant imagery. These cinematic works did not merely record events; they actively participated in the construction of liberation mythology, establishing visual codes and symbolic frameworks that would become integral to post-independence national identity.

The temporal boundaries of 1954-1962 frame a period of intense cinematic production that occurred under extraordinary circumstances. The urgency of the historical moment, combined with limited resources and political constraints, gave rise to innovative filmmaking approaches that prioritised authenticity over technical perfection, message over spectacle. This context produced a distinctive aesthetic that merged documentary realism with revolutionary enthusiasm, creating works that functioned simultaneously as historical testimony, artistic expression, and political manifesto.

1. Documenting the Sétif and Guelma Massacres

The Sétif and Guelma massacres of May 8, 1945, which resulted in thousands of Algerian deaths, occupy a complex position in the visual memory of the Algerian Revolution. Though occurring nine years before the official start of the revolution, these events have been retroactively incorporated into revolutionary narratives as evidence of the impossibility of peaceful reform within the colonial system. As historian Benjamin Stora notes, "The massacres function as an origin myth for the revolution in post-independence memory, establishing the necessity of armed struggle."²³¹

The initial visual documentation of these massacres was severely limited. French authorities restricted press access to the affected regions, confiscated film, and controlled the narrative through official photography that emphasised property damage caused by Algerian protesters rather than the subsequent mass killings. Visual historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat characterises this as "strategic invisibility"—the deliberate prevention of visual documentation to deny atrocities.²³²

Despite these restrictions, some visual evidence survived, primarily through amateur photography. Images of mass graves and executed Algerians circulated clandestinely, particularly in the international communist press. These photographs' authenticity has sometimes been questioned—historian Jean-Pierre Peyroulou has demonstrated that some widely circulated images actually depicted victims of earlier conflicts.²³³ This uncertainty highlights the contested nature of visual evidence in colonial contexts, where documentation was both politically dangerous and technically difficult.

The absence of comprehensive visual documentation of the massacres has led contemporary filmmakers to develop innovative approaches to representing these events. Mehdi Charef's fiction film "*Cartouches Gauloises*" (2007) depicts the massacres through the eyes of a child, using this perspective to justify artistic license in recreating events for which little visual evidence exists.

Digital archives have recently transformed access to visual documentation of the massacres. The Algerian Ministry of Mujahideen's online archive, launched in

²³¹Benjamin Stora, op. cit, p 121

²³²Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), p 27

²³³Jean-Pierre Peyroulou, *Guelma, 1945: Une subversion française dans l'Algérie coloniale* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009), p 187

2014, makes previously restricted photographs available to the public, though critics note that these selections still conform to official narratives. Simultaneously, French colonial archives have gradually declassified photographs taken by military photographers during the repression, though many remain restricted under French privacy laws. This uneven access to visual evidence reflects what historian Elizabeth Thompson calls "archival colonialism" the continued control of historical documentation by former colonial powers.²³⁴

²³⁴Elizabeth Thompson, *Justice Interrupted: The Struggle for Constitutional Government in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), p 298

2. Documentation of the Massacres and Major Events of the Algerian Revolution

The visual documentation of key events during the Algerian Revolution represents both historical evidence and political intervention. One of the earliest efforts at visual documentation came from the FLN itself, which recognised the importance of creating its own visual archive even before independence was achieved. As media historian Sohail Daulatzai argues, "The FLN understood that the battle for independence would be fought not only on the ground but also through images that could mobilise international support."²³⁵

The documentation of massacres proved particularly contentious, as French authorities sought to control visual evidence of atrocities. The May 1945 Sétif and Guelma massacres, though predating the official start of the revolution, have been retroactively incorporated into revolutionary visual memory through films like Mehdi Lallaoui's documentary "*Les massacres de setif, un certain 8 mai 1945*" (1995). (See appendix 40)

The 1957 general strike in Algiers, immortalised in Pontecorvo's film, generated its own competing visual archives. French newsreels portrayed the strike as a failure and emphasised "normalcy" in the streets, while FLN photographers documented widespread participation and French repression. These contrasting visual narratives demonstrate what cultural theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff terms "the right to look" the contested ability to create and circulate visual evidence that challenges dominant power structures.²³⁶

The December 1960 demonstrations in Algiers, during which thousands of Algerians defied French authorities by openly displaying FLN flags and chanting pro-independence slogans, generated particularly powerful visual documentation. Amateur photographers captured images of massive crowds facing French tanks, images that quickly circulated internationally and undermined French claims that the independence movement lacked popular support. As historian Matthew Connelly notes, "These images made visible what French authorities had long denied: that the FLN enjoyed mass support across Algerian society."²³⁷

²³⁵Sohail Daulatzai, *Fifty Years of "The Battle of Algiers": Past as Prologue* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p 45

²³⁶Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p 277

²³⁷Matthew Connelly, *op. cit.*, p 215

3. Documenting Torture: Breaking Visual Taboos

The visual documentation of torture during the Algerian War represents one of the most ethically and politically charged aspects of revolutionary cinema. While written accounts of torture circulated widely during the war itself, most notably through Henri Alleg's memoir "*La Question*" (1958), visual evidence remained scarce due to the clandestine nature of these practices. As historian Raphaëlle Branche notes, "Torture was designed to be invisible, conducted in spaces specifically chosen to prevent documentation."²³⁸

The few photographs of torture that did emerge during the conflict had tremendous political impact. In 1957, photographs showing evidence of torture at the El-Biar detention center were published in the French newspaper "*L'Humanité*", prompting widespread debate within French society. As media historian Christine Vidal argues, "These images transformed what could be dismissed as propaganda into visceral evidence that demanded a moral response."²³⁹ The images' authenticity was disputed by French authorities, highlighting the contested status of visual evidence in colonial conflicts.

Post-independence Algerian cinema approached the representation of torture through various strategies. Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina's "*Le Vent des Aurès*" (The Wind of the Aurès, 1966) avoided explicit depictions, instead using sound and shadow to suggest torture occurring off-screen. This approach, as film scholar Guy Austin observes, "Acknowledges the ethical problems inherent in recreating scenes of torture while still insisting on their historical reality."²⁴⁰ (See appendix 41)

By contrast, Pontecorvo's "*La Bataille d'Alger*" includes explicit recreations of torture techniques, including water boarding and electric shocks. These scenes were based on detailed testimonies from survivors and have been praised for their historical accuracy. However, their unflinching realism has also raised questions about spectatorial ethics. As film theorist Malek Khouri argues, "Pontecorvo walks a fine line between documenting atrocity and potentially creating pornography of violence that could desensitise viewers to real suffering."²⁴¹

²³⁸Raphaëlle Branche, *La Torture et l'armée pendant la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p 178

²³⁹Christine Vidal, "Le FLN et la photographie: La politique de l'image pendant la guerre d'Algérie," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 67, no. 2 (2020): p 97

²⁴⁰Austin, *op. cit.*, p 112

²⁴¹Malek Khouri, *The Arab National Project in Youssef Chahine's Cinema* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010), p 88

Recent French films addressing the Algerian War have increasingly acknowledged torture as a systematic practice rather than isolated incidents. Laurent Herbiet's "*Mon Colonel*" (2006), based on a screenplay by Costa-Gavras, portrays torture as institutionalised within the French military structure. Similarly, Florent Emilio Siri's "*L'Ennemi intime*" (2007). shows how ordinary French conscripts were drawn into participating in or witnessing torture. As historian Pascal Blanchard notes, "These films mark a significant shift in French visual memory, moving from denial to acknowledgment of systematic abuse."²⁴²

The 2000s also saw the emergence of documentary films directly addressing torture through survivor testimony. Patrick Rotman's "*L'Ennemi intime*" (2002) features interviews with former French soldiers who participated in torture, breaking decades of silence. Similarly, Malek Bensmaïl's documentary "*La Chine est encore loin*" (China Is Still Far, 2008) includes interviews with Algerian torture survivors. These documentary approaches, as trauma theorist Cathy Caruth suggests, "Place emphasis not on recreating the visual spectacle of torture but on recording its lasting psychological impacts, which cannot be directly visualised."²⁴³

²⁴²Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, and Sandrine Lemaire, eds., *Colonial Culture in France since the Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), p 432

²⁴³Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p 115

4. Films and Representations of the Algerian War of Liberation

4.1 Pontecorvo's *La Bataille d'Alger*: Neorealism and Revolutionary Memory

Gillo Pontecorvo's landmark film "*La Bataille d'Alger*" (1966) stands as perhaps the most internationally recognised cinematic representation of the Algerian War of Independence. Shot in a stark black-and-white documentary style merely four years after Algeria gained independence, the film reconstructs the urban guerrilla warfare that occurred in the Casbah district of Algiers between 1954 and 1957. Pontecorvo's aesthetic choices - handheld cameras, grainy footage, and the use of non-professional actors - created what film historian Robert Stam describes as "an aesthetic of urgency" that blurred the boundaries between fiction and documentary.²⁴⁴ This neorealist approach lent the film an authenticity that would influence generations of filmmakers and shape global understandings of the Algerian struggle.

The film's production history itself reveals much about the politics of visual memory in post-colonial Algeria. Produced with the support of the newly independent Algerian government, "*La Bataille d'Alger*" represented an early attempt by the Algerian state to cement its preferred narrative of the liberation struggle. Yacef Saadi, a former (FLN) commander who had participated in the actual Battle of Algiers, not only co-produced the film but also played a character based on himself.²⁴⁵ This direct participation of revolutionary figures in the creation of their own cinematic representation demonstrates what historian Benjamin Stora calls "the immediate transformation of historical experience into visual memory."²⁴⁶

Pontecorvo's film is particularly noteworthy for its unflinching portrayal of violence on both sides of the conflict. While depicting French paratroopers' systematic use of torture, the film also shows FLN bomb attacks that killed French civilians. This moral complexity - unusual for revolutionary cinema of the period - has allowed the film to maintain its relevance across changing political contexts. As film scholar Matthew Evangelista notes, "*La Bataille d'Alger*" refuses the comfortable moral certainties of propaganda while nevertheless maintaining a clear political stance against colonialism."²⁴⁷

²⁴⁴Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p 234

²⁴⁵Austin, *op. cit*, p 89

²⁴⁶Benjamin Stora, *op. cit*, p 247.

²⁴⁷Matthew Evangelista, *op. cit*, p 118

The film's afterlife has proven as significant as its initial impact. Initially banned in France until 1971, the film experienced a resurgence of interest following the September 11 attacks and subsequent U.S. military operations, when it was reportedly screened at the Pentagon as a case study in urban counterinsurgency.²⁴⁸ This appropriation demonstrates how visual memories of the Algerian War continue to be mobilised in new contexts, sometimes in ways that run counter to their original revolutionary intent.

4.2 Beyond Pontecorvo: Alternative Visual Narratives

While “*La Bataille d'Alger*” dominates international perceptions of the Algerian Revolution, numerous other films offer alternative visual narratives that complicate and enrich our understanding of this historical period. Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina's “*Chronique des années de braise*” (Chronicle of the Years of Embers, 1975), which won the Palme d'Or at Cannes, provides a broader historical perspective by tracing the roots of the revolution to the devastating drought and famine of the 1940s. Unlike Pontecorvo's urban focus, Lakhdar-Hamina centers rural Algeria, depicting the gradual political awakening of peasants who would form the backbone of the revolution.²⁴⁹

Assia Djebbar's “*La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*” (1978) offers a feminist counterpoint to the often masculinist narratives of revolutionary struggle. As film scholar Ella Shohat observes, “Djebbar's camera does not seek to recreate the spectacular moments of revolutionary combat but rather explores the subjective memories of women whose contributions to the liberation struggle have been marginalised in official histories.”²⁵⁰ Through innovative formal techniques that blend documentary interviews with poetic imagery, Djebbar creates what she terms “a cinema of the interstices”—one that explores the gaps and silences in conventional historiography.

French-Algerian filmmaker Rachid Bouchareb has contributed significantly to transnational memories of the Algerian Revolution through films like “*Indigènes*” (Days of Glory, 2006) and “*Hors-la-loi*” (Outside the Law, 2010). The latter film provocatively reframes the beginning of the Algerian Revolution by directly

²⁴⁸Sohail Daulatzai, *Fifty Years of "The Battle of Algiers": Past as Prologue* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p 12

²⁴⁹Armes, *op. cit.*, p 143

²⁵⁰Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p 217

connecting it to the Setif massacre of 1945, where French forces killed thousands of Algerian civilians. As historian Todd Shepard notes, "Bouchareb's work insists on placing the Algerian Revolution within longer historical trajectories of colonial violence and resistance, challenging both French and Algerian official narratives that treat the war as an isolated episode."²⁵¹ (see appendix 46)

Recent years have seen a new generation of filmmakers engaging with the visual memory of the revolution through more experimental approaches, creating what memory theorist Marianne Hirsch terms "postmemory" the transmission of traumatic experiences to generations who did not directly experience them.²⁵²

4.3 René Vautier and Clandestine Filmmaking

French filmmaker René Vautier represents a crucial figure in the visual documentation of the Algerian Revolution. His 1957 film "*Algérie en flammes*" (Algeria in Flammes), shot clandestinely while living with FLN fighters in the Aurès mountains, stands as one of the earliest documentary films to present the revolution from the perspective of the Algerian fighters. Vautier's approach was unprecedented; a French filmmaker explicitly aligning himself with the anti-colonial struggle and risking imprisonment to create counter-narratives to official French propaganda.²⁵³

For his efforts, Vautier was imprisoned multiple times by French authorities and his films were banned. As he later recalled, "I understood that my camera was not just recording reality but intervening in it. To film was to take a political position."²⁵⁴ Vautier's commitment to documentary as a form of political intervention prefigured later developments in Third Cinema theory, which would posit filmmaking as a revolutionary practice in itself.

Vautier's collaboration with Algerian filmmakers was equally significant. In 1961, he helped establish one of Algeria's first film schools, training a generation of Algerian filmmakers who would later document the final stages of the war and the early years of independence. This transfer of technical knowledge represents what film theorist Teshome Gabriel calls "the decolonisation of the apparatus"; the process

²⁵¹Todd Shepard, *op. cit.*, p 280

²⁵²Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p 5

²⁵³Olivier Hadouchi, "African Political Cinema in the 20th Century," *Third Text* 25, no. 1 (2011): p 120

²⁵⁴Austin, *op. cit.*, p 45

by which formerly colonised peoples gain control over technologies of visual representation.²⁵⁵

Vautier's later film "*Avoir vingt ans dans les Aurès*" (To Be Twenty in the Aurès, 1972) addressed the psychological impacts of the war on French conscripts. (see appendix 42). By focusing on the moral corruption of ordinary French soldiers, Vautier challenged narratives that attributed atrocities solely to specialised units like the paratroopers. As historian Raphaëlle Branche argues, "Vautier's film suggested that the Algerian War corrupted not just military specialists but an entire generation of young Frenchmen, implicating French society more broadly in colonial violence."²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵Gabriel, *op. cit.*, p 95

²⁵⁶Raphaëlle Branche, *La Torture et l'armée pendant la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p 312

5. Cinema as a Visual Archive of the War of Liberation

Algerian revolutionary cinema functions not merely as artistic expression but as a deliberate archive—an attempt to preserve visual memory of the liberation struggle for future generations. From its inception, Algerian national cinema understood itself as performing historiographical work, creating visual documents where colonial archives had excluded Algerian perspectives.

The creation of this visual archive began even before independence. The FLN's Film Unit, established in 1957, prioritised filming military operations, political gatherings, and refugee camps in neighbouring Tunisia and Morocco. As media historian Olivier Hadouchi notes, "These early films were conceived with a dual purpose: immediate propaganda for international circulation and long-term preservation of revolutionary memory."²⁵⁷ The explicit archival intention distinguishes these films from mere propaganda.

The post-independence Algerian state institutionalised this archival function through the creation of the Algerian National Cinema Center in 1964 and the Algerian Cinematheque in 1965. These institutions were tasked with both preserving existing revolutionary footage and commissioning new films that would document the revolution while its participants were still alive to bear witness. Film scholar Roy Armes describes this as "the creation of a retroactive visual archive; an attempt to compensate for the documentation that could not be created during the conflict itself."²⁵⁸

In recent decades, the status of this revolutionary film archive has become increasingly precarious. Many original films have deteriorated due to inadequate preservation facilities, while others remain inaccessible in French archives. The digitization project launched by the Algerian Ministry of Culture in 2012 represents an attempt to preserve this visual heritage, though as archivist Zahia Rahmani notes, "The material conditions of preservation cannot be separated from the political questions of who controls access to these images and how they are contextualised."²⁵⁹

²⁵⁷Olivier Hadouchi, "African Political Cinema in the 20th Century," *Third Text* 25, no. 1 (2011): p 122

²⁵⁸Armes, *op. cit*, p 98.

²⁵⁹Zahia Rahmani, *France, récit d'une enfance* (Paris: Sabine Wespieser, 2006), p 87

5.1 The Front de Libération Nationale Film Unit

The establishment of the FLN Film Unit (*FLN Cinematographic Group*) in 1957 marked a significant development in the visual documentation of the revolution. Operating primarily from Tunisia and Morocco, this unit represented one of the earliest examples of what film theorist Teshome Gabriel would later term "Third Cinema"; filmmaking explicitly aligned with anti-colonial liberation movements.²⁶⁰ As film historian Lotfi Maherzi notes, "The unit's formation reflected the FLN leadership's growing awareness that the struggle needed to be fought not only militarily but also at the level of visual representation."²⁶¹

The Film Unit was initially directed by René Vautier, whose experience in documentary filmmaking provided crucial technical expertise. However, Vautier deliberately worked to transfer skills to Algerian filmmakers including Ahmed Rachedi and Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina, who would later become leading figures in post-independence Algerian cinema. This approach reflected what film scholar Manthia Diawara calls "revolutionary pedagogy"; the conscious development of indigenous technical capacity as part of the decolonisation process.²⁶²

The unit's first major production, "*Algérie en flammes*" (1957), established several characteristics that would define FLN cinema: direct testimony from fighters and civilians, emphasis on the collective rather than individual heroes, and a refusal to aestheticise violence. As political philosopher Frantz Fanon, who worked closely with the FLN, observed, "These films reject the spectacular conventions of Western cinema in favor of what might be called a 'pedagogy of the oppressed' through images."²⁶³

The international circulation of the Film Unit's productions played a crucial role in generating support for the Algerian cause. Films were screened at solidarity events in Europe, at the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Conferences, and through networks of sympathetic distributors in Latin America and the Eastern Bloc. As historian Jeffrey Byrne documents, "FLN films reached audiences that diplomatic envoys could not, creating visual evidence that countered French claims that the

²⁶⁰Gabriel, *op. cit.*, p 30

²⁶¹Lotfi Maherzi, *op. cit.*, p 67

²⁶²Manthia Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p 54.

²⁶³Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, p 179

conflict was merely an internal security operation rather than a war of national liberation."²⁶⁴

After independence, many members of the Film Unit formed the nucleus of Algeria's national film industry. The experience gained in producing revolutionary cinema under difficult conditions informed their subsequent approach to building a national cinema that continued to prioritise social and political themes. As film historian Roy Armes argues, "The aesthetic and organisational practices developed by the FLN Film Unit did not end with independence but evolved into what became known as Algerian national cinema."²⁶⁵

However, tensions soon emerged between filmmakers' desire for artistic autonomy and the new state's interest in controlling revolutionary narratives. The 1964 Code of Cinema placed film production under strict government oversight, limiting possibilities for critical perspectives on the revolution itself. As filmmaker Mohamed Chouikh later lamented, "We gained independence from France only to find our creative independence restricted by a new authority that claimed exclusive ownership of revolutionary memory."²⁶⁶

5.2 Colonial Visual Archives: Appropriation and Re-contextualisation

The visual archive of the Algerian Revolution includes not only films produced by Algerians and their allies but also colonial footage that has been appropriated and re-contextualized. As cultural theorist Ariella Azoulay argues, "The colonial archive contains within it evidence that can be mobilised against colonial power itself, if read against the grain."²⁶⁷ Algerian filmmakers have engaged in precisely this process of critical re-appropriation.

French colonial authorities produced extensive visual documentation of Algeria through newsreels, military photography, and administrative films intended for audiences in metropolitan France. These materials typically portrayed French Algeria as a space of modernisation and progress while representing Algerians themselves either as grateful beneficiaries of colonialism or as threatening "fanatics" when they resisted. As media historian David Slavin notes, "Colonial visual production worked

²⁶⁴Jeffrey James Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p 145.

²⁶⁵Armes, *op. cit*, p 102

²⁶⁶Austin, *op. Cit*, p 93

²⁶⁷Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), p 127

to justify occupation through a binary representation of 'backward' indigenous culture versus French 'civilisation'." ²⁶⁸

Post-independence Algerian filmmakers have systematically re-appropriated this colonial footage, incorporating it into counter-narratives that expose its propagandistic function. Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina's documentary "*Décembre*" (1972) juxtaposes colonial newsreels celebrating French development projects with testimony from Algerians who were displaced by these same projects. This technique, which film theorist Catherine Lupton terms "critical montage," reveals the disjunction between colonial self-representation and lived Algerian experience. ²⁶⁹ (see appendix 43)

The documentary series "*Les Années de braise*" (Years of Embers, 1975), produced by Algerian television to commemorate the revolution's twentieth anniversary, makes extensive use of French military footage that was originally created for intelligence purposes. By re-contextualizing surveillance footage of suspected FLN members, the series transforms these images from tools of colonial control into evidence of resistance. As anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards suggests, "This re-contextualisation performs a kind of visual justice, returning dignity to subjects who were originally photographed as objects of suspicion." ²⁷⁰

French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard's experimental film "*Le Petit Soldat*" (1963), though banned in France until 1963, represents an early attempt to critique colonial visual representation from within French cinema itself. Through its fragmented narrative of a French intelligence agent in Geneva during the Algerian War, the film explores how photographic images can simultaneously reveal and conceal political realities. As film scholar Nouri Gana argues, "Godard's film suggests that the colonial gaze cannot fully control the meanings of the images it produces." ²⁷¹

More recently, documentary filmmaker Malek Bensmaïl's "*La Chine est encore loin*" (2008) uses colonial educational films produced for Algerian schoolchildren as evidence of cultural violence rather than benevolence. By showing these films to contemporary Algerian audiences and recording their responses,

²⁶⁸David Slavin, *op. cit.*, p 75

²⁶⁹Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), p 112

²⁷⁰Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums*, p 184.

²⁷¹Nouri Gana, *Signifying Loss: Toward a Poetics of Narrative Mourning* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2011), p 93

Bensmaïl creates what memory theorist Michael Rothberg calls "multidirectional memory"; a dialogue between past and present that generates new understandings of colonial history.²⁷²

The physical location of much of this colonial visual archive remains contentious. Significant portions remain in French institutions, with access restricted by archival regulations. As historian Todd Shepard notes, "Control over these images represents a continuation of colonial power relations by other means, with France maintaining authority over how its colonial past can be visualised."²⁷³ Ongoing negotiations between Algerian and French cultural institutions focus not only on repatriation of original materials but also on digitisation projects that would make these archives more widely accessible.

5.3 Women's Experiences and the Gendered Archive

The visual representation of women's participation in the Algerian Revolution reflects complex intersections of national liberation and gender politics. Revolutionary cinema initially celebrated women fighters through iconic images of what historian Neil MacMaster terms the "moudjahidate with rifle"; women in military fatigues carrying weapons alongside male counterparts.²⁷⁴ These images served to mobilise women's participation while demonstrating the revolution's modernity to international audiences.

Pontecorvo's "*La Bataille d'Alger*" features a famous sequence in which three Algerian women remove their veils, apply makeup to appear more "European," and carry bombs into French civilian areas. This sequence has generated extensive critical commentary. As scholar Ranjana Khanna argues, "The scene simultaneously recognises women's agency in the revolution while reducing them to their bodies as objects of disguise and deception."²⁷⁵ The ambivalence of this representation reflects broader tensions within the independence movement regarding women's roles.

²⁷²Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, p 186

²⁷³Todd Shepard, *op. cit.*, p 248

²⁷⁴Neil MacMaster, *Burning the Veil: The Algerian War and the 'Emancipation' of Muslim Women, 1954-62* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p 78

²⁷⁵Ranjana Khanna, *op. cit.*, p 157

6. Transnational Solidarity and Global Visual Memory

The visual memory of the Algerian Revolution extends beyond national boundaries, encompassing a transnational network of solidarity cinema that connected Algeria's struggle to global anti-colonial movements. As film historian Olivier Hadouchi argues, "Algerian revolutionary cinema must be understood not as an isolated national phenomenon but as a node in an international circulation of militant images that linked liberation struggles across Africa, Asia, and Latin America."²⁷⁶

During the revolution itself, films about Algeria were produced in multiple countries by solidarity filmmakers. Egyptian director Youssef Chahine's "*Jamila the Algerian*" (1958) celebrated the story of Djamila Bouhired, an FLN militant captured and tortured by French forces. These productions, as postcolonial theorist Ella Shohat notes, "created a visual imaginary of Third World solidarity that transcended linguistic and cultural differences."²⁷⁷ (see appendix 44)

Italian filmmaker Gillo Pontecorvo's involvement with "*La Bataille d'Alger*" exemplifies how revolutionary cinema operated through transnational collaborations. Similarly, French filmmakers like René Vautier and Pierre Clément risked imprisonment to create solidarity films supporting Algerian independence. These collaborations, as film scholar Robert Stam suggests, "embodied a practice of transnational solidarity that challenged the alignment of cinema with national borders."²⁷⁸

The Algerian Revolution significantly influenced the development of revolutionary film theory. Cuban filmmaker Santiago Álvarez cited Algerian documentary techniques as an influence on his own approach to creating "urgent cinema" during the 1960s. Similarly, Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino referenced Algerian revolutionary cinema in their seminal 1969 manifesto "Towards a Third Cinema." As film historian Teshome Gabriel observes, "Algerian revolutionary filmmaking provided both practical techniques and theoretical inspiration for emergent Third Cinema movements worldwide."²⁷⁹

²⁷⁶Olivier Hadouchi, "African Political Cinema in the 20th Century," *Third Text* 25, no. 1 (2011): p 119

²⁷⁷Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*, p 231

²⁷⁸Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p 272.

²⁷⁹Gabriel, op. cit, p 38

The revolution's visual memory was further internationalised through its impact on anti-colonial movements in Portugal's African colonies. As historian Jeffrey James Byrne documents, liberation movements in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau explicitly modeled their film units on the FLN example. Portuguese filmmaker Sarah Maldoror, who had trained in Moscow alongside Algerian filmmakers including Ahmed Rachedi, directed "*Sambizanga*" (1972), which depicted Angola's liberation struggle using techniques pioneered in Algerian revolutionary cinema.²⁸⁰

In France, immigrant filmmakers from the Maghreb have created what film scholar Will Higbee terms "cinema of transvergence,"²⁸¹ which connects contemporary immigrant experiences to colonial histories. Rachid Bouchareb's *Indigènes* (Days of Glory, 2006) links the discrimination faced by North African soldiers who fought for France during World War II to later struggles for independence. (see appendix 50)

Digital platforms have recently transformed access to this transnational visual archive. The Pan-African Federation of Filmmakers' archive digitisation project, launched in 2017, includes significant holdings of Algerian revolutionary cinema alongside other African liberation films. As media scholar Brian Edwards notes, "These digital archives create new possibilities for tracing visual connections across revolutionary movements that were previously difficult to access outside specialist film archives."²⁸²

²⁸⁰Jeffrey James Byrne, *op. cit.*, p 273

²⁸¹Will Higbee, 'Beyond the (trans)national: toward a cinema of transvergence in postcolonial and diasporic francophone cinema(s)', *Studies in French Cinema*, 7:2, (2007) p 79.

²⁸²Brian T. Edwards, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), p 204

Cinema's role in preserving and constructing visual memory of Algeria's liberation struggle reveals the profound entanglement of visual culture with historical and political processes. From the militant films produced during the conflict to contemporary re-examinations of revolutionary legacy, cinema has served as both witness to and agent in the ongoing construction of historical memory.

The contested nature of this visual archive - with competing French and Algerian narratives, disputes over archival access, and evolving interpretations of key events - demonstrates that visual memory is never merely a passive record but an active field of continuing struggle. As historian Benjamin Stora argues, "The battle over who controls images of the past is inseparable from struggles over who shapes the future."²⁸³

The transnational dimensions of Algerian revolutionary cinema highlight how visual memories circulate beyond national boundaries, creating connections between disparate struggles and generations. This circulation has allowed Algerian revolutionary imagery to maintain relevance in new contexts, from anti-apartheid activism to contemporary decolonial movements.

After more than sixty years of Algeria's independence, questions of access, preservation, and interpretation of revolutionary visual archives gain renewed urgency. Digitiation efforts promise wider access but raise questions about contextual presentation, while collaborative projects between Algerian and French institutions attempt to address colonial archival legacies. These developments suggest that the visual memory of the Algerian Revolution remains not just a historical resource but a living archive continuously reactivated in response to present concerns.

²⁸³Benjamin Stora, op cit, p 318

The Conclusion

This thesis has examined the multifaceted role of cinema in documenting Algerian society during the French colonial period from 1896 to 1962, addressing the fundamental question of how cinema contributed to documenting the reality of Algerian society during French occupation, and evaluating the objectivity and credibility of this documentation. Through a systematic analysis of the emergence and development of cinema in Algeria, its function as a documentary tool, and its evolution into an instrument of resistance and national identity formation, this research reveals the complex and often contradictory nature of cinematic representation during the colonial era.

The investigation demonstrates that cinema in colonial Algeria served multiple, sometimes conflicting purposes. Initially introduced as part of the colonial apparatus, film gradually evolved into a medium capable of both perpetuating colonial narratives and challenging them. The documentation provided by cinema during this period must therefore be understood not as objective historical record, but as a contested terrain where different visions of Algerian society competed for legitimacy and recognition.

The first chapter's analysis reveals that cinema's introduction to Algeria in 1896 was inextricably linked to the colonial project itself. The early decades witnessed the establishment of a cinematic infrastructure that primarily served French colonial interests, with films often presenting Algeria through an orientalist lens that emphasised exoticism while marginalising authentic Algerian voices. The institutional development of cinema during this period reflected broader colonial power structures, with French filmmakers and distributors maintaining control over production, distribution, and exhibition networks.

However, this period also saw the gradual emergence of local participation in cinematic production, laying the groundwork for more authentic representations of Algerian society. The evolution from purely colonial propaganda to more nuanced portrayals suggests that cinema, even within colonial constraints, possessed the potential to capture elements of social reality that transcended official narratives.

The second chapter's examination of cinema as a documentary tool reveals both the medium's remarkable capacity to preserve social realities and its inherent limitations. Cinema succeeded in documenting various aspects of Algerian society, including urban and rural life, traditional practices, social customs, and the gradual

transformation of society under colonial influence. Visual documentation provided by films offers invaluable insights into clothing, architecture, social interactions, and cultural practices that might otherwise have been lost to historical record.

Nevertheless, the documentation was heavily mediated by colonial perspectives and commercial considerations. The selection of subjects, framing of narratives, and omission of certain aspects of Algerian life reflect the ideological constraints within which filmmakers operated. The apparent objectivity of the camera lens masked subjective editorial choices that shaped how Algerian society was presented to both local and international audiences.

The third chapter demonstrates cinema's transformation from a colonial tool into an instrument of resistance and national identity construction, particularly from 1939 onwards. This period witnessed the emergence of films that challenged colonial representations and asserted Algerian cultural authenticity. Cinema became a means of preserving and transmitting cultural memory, documenting resistance activities, and articulating visions of national independence.

The documentation during this later period reflects a growing consciousness of cinema's power to shape collective memory and national narrative. Films began to serve not merely as entertainment or propaganda, but as historical testimony to the Algerian struggle for independence and cultural sovereignty. This evolution highlights cinema's capacity to function simultaneously as documentary medium and active participant in historical processes.

Regarding the central question of how cinema contributed to documenting Algerian society and the objectivity of this documentation, this research concludes that cinema's contribution was significant but complex. Cinema documented Algerian society through multiple lenses: the colonial gaze that sought to justify and romanticise French presence, the commercial perspective that emphasised marketable exoticism, and increasingly, the Algerian perspective that asserted authentic cultural identity and political aspirations.

The objectivity and credibility of cinematic documentation must be evaluated within this framework of competing perspectives. While no single film or body of films can claim complete objectivity, the collective corpus of cinema from this period provides a multifaceted portrait of Algerian society that, when critically analysed, offers valuable historical insights. Credibility does not lie in the truth claims made by individual films, but in the aggregate picture that emerges from diverse cinematic voices and approaches.

Cinema's documentation is most credible when understood as a form of social testimony rather than neutral observation. Films serve as witnesses to their historical moment, reflecting the tensions, aspirations, and transformations of their era. The value of cinematic documentation lies in its ability to capture not just events and appearances, but the emotional and cultural climate within which these occurred.

This thesis contributes to historical scholarship by demonstrating cinema's role as both historical source and historical actor in the colonial context. The research reveals how visual media can simultaneously preserve and construct social reality, serving as repository of cultural memory while actively shaping collective consciousness. The findings have implications for understanding the relationship between media, power, and identity formation during periods of political transformation.

The study also contributes to postcolonial studies by examining how colonised societies appropriated and transformed imported cultural technologies. The evolution of cinema in Algeria illustrates broader patterns of cultural resistance and adaptation that characterised the colonial encounter. Cinema emerges not merely as a reflection of social change, but as an agent of cultural and political transformation.

Based on this investigation, several avenues for future research emerge. First, comparative studies examining cinema's documentary function in other colonial contexts would illuminate whether the patterns observed in Algeria represent broader phenomena or context-specific developments. Second, more detailed analysis of audience reception and interpretation of films during the colonial period would enhance understanding of cinema's social impact.

Additionally, investigation of how post-independence Algerian cinema has reinterpreted and reconstructed the colonial period would provide insights into the ongoing process of historical memory formation. The digitisation and preservation of surviving films from this era represents an urgent priority for both historical research and cultural heritage conservation.

Finally, interdisciplinary approaches combining film studies, social history, and anthropological methods could yield richer understanding of cinema's role in documenting and shaping social reality. Such approaches would be particularly valuable for analysing the intersection between visual representation and lived experience during the colonial period.

The Conclusion

This thesis demonstrates that cinema's documentation of Algerian society during the French colonial period was neither purely objective nor entirely subjective, but rather a complex negotiation between different forms of seeing, knowing, and representing social reality. The medium's capacity to preserve visual evidence of historical moments makes it an invaluable resource for historical research, while its inherent subjectivity requires careful critical analysis.

The legacy of colonial-era cinema continues to influence contemporary understanding of Algerian history and identity. By examining this cinematic heritage critically, we gain insight not only into the colonial period itself, but into the ongoing processes through which societies construct and reconstruct their historical narratives. Cinema emerges from this analysis as both mirror and lamp: reflecting social realities while simultaneously illuminating new possibilities for cultural expression and political imagination.

The documentation provided by cinema during the colonial period ultimately serves as testament to the resilience and creativity of Algerian society under colonial rule. Despite the constraints and distortions inherent in colonial-era filmmaking, cinema succeeded in preserving traces of authentic Algerian experience that continue to inform historical understanding and cultural identity. In this sense, the medium fulfilled its documentary function not through perfect objectivity, but through its capacity to bear witness to the complexity and vitality of a society in transformation.

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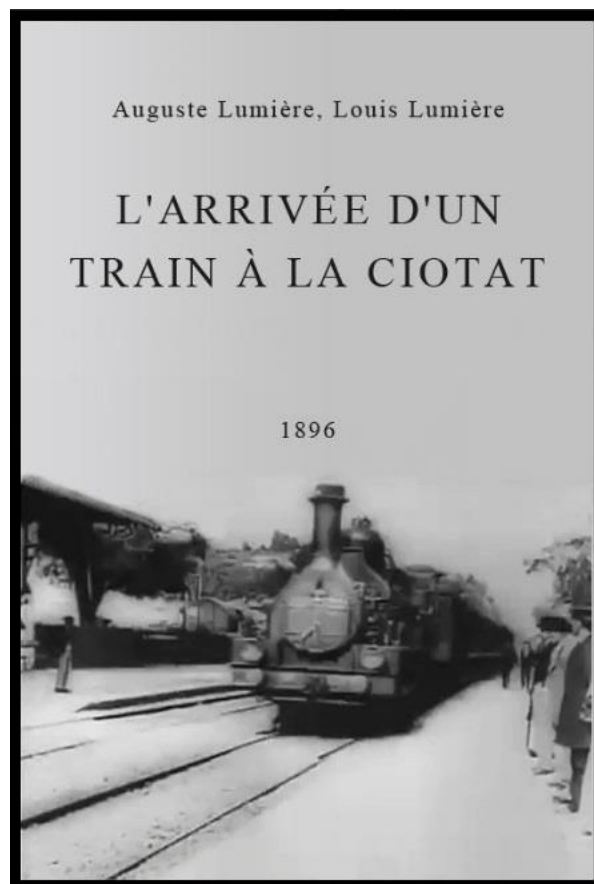
D. Special Collections and Institutional Publications

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Appendicies



Appendix 01: Lumiere Brothers: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/history-magazine/article/creation-of-the-motion-picture-lumiere-brothers>.



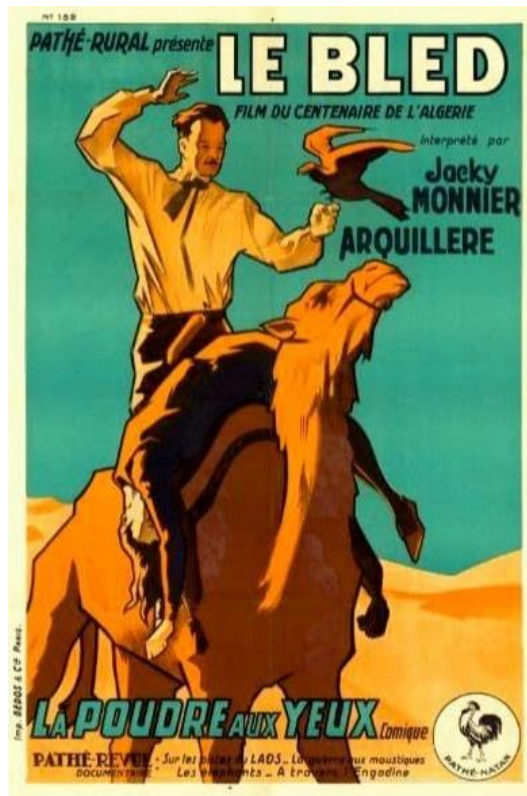
Appendix 02: "The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station":
https://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/film/LArriv%C3%A9e_dun_train_en_gare_de_La_Ciotat/780



Appendix 03: Exit from the Lumière Factory in Lyon is a French film directed by Louis Lumière, released in 1895: <https://archive.org/details/LaSortieDeLUsineLumireLyon>



Appendix 04 : Felix mesguich: <https://www.victorian-cinema.net/mesguich>



Appendix

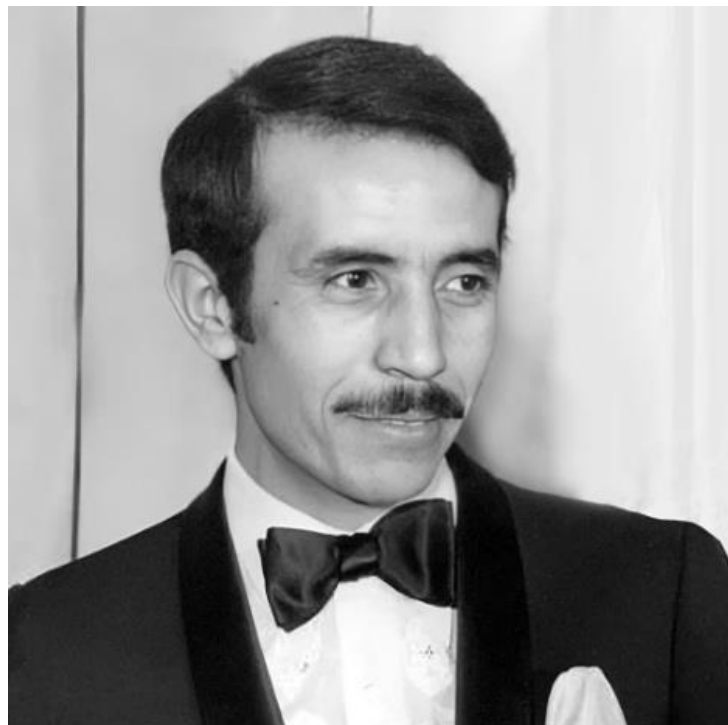
05 : https://www.imdb.com/fr/title/tt0019704/?reasonForLanguagePrompt=browser_header_mismatch



Appendix 06 : <https://kinopitheque.net/grand-jeu-le/>



Appendix 07 : <https://www.unifrance.org/film/6930/la-vie-de-boheme>



Appendix 08 : Ahmed Rachedi: <https://africultures.com/personnes/?no=7225>



Appendix 09 : René Vautier: <https://www.journalventilo.fr/agenda/festivals/105405/rene-vautier>



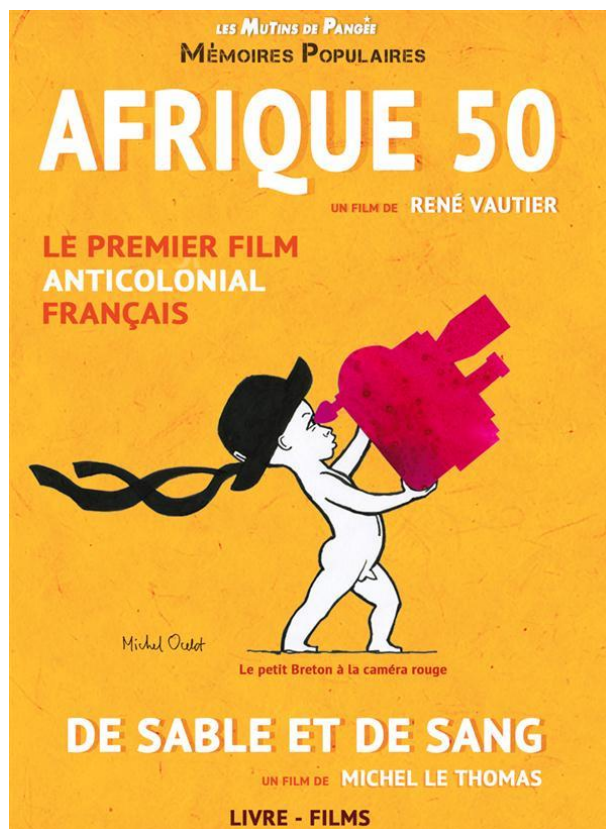
Appendix 10 : <https://www.unifrance.org/film/48965/l-atlantide>



Appendix 11 : source : <https://www.todocoleccion.net/cine-fotos-postales/tarjeta-postal-pepe-le-moko-jean-gabin~x459394162>



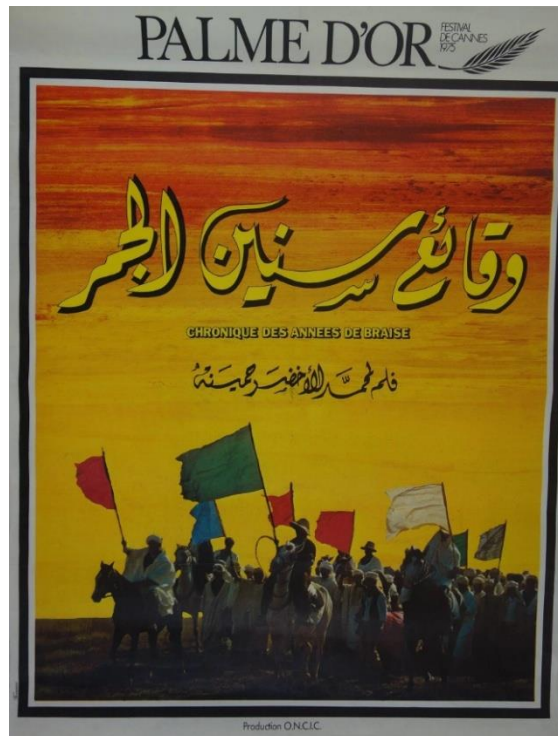
Appendix 12 : https://www.imdb.com/fr/title/tt0178305/?reasonForLanguagePrompt=browser_header_mismatch



Appendix 13 : <https://store.potemkine.fr/dvd/3770001117126-afrique-50-de-sable-et-de-sang-rene-vautier/>



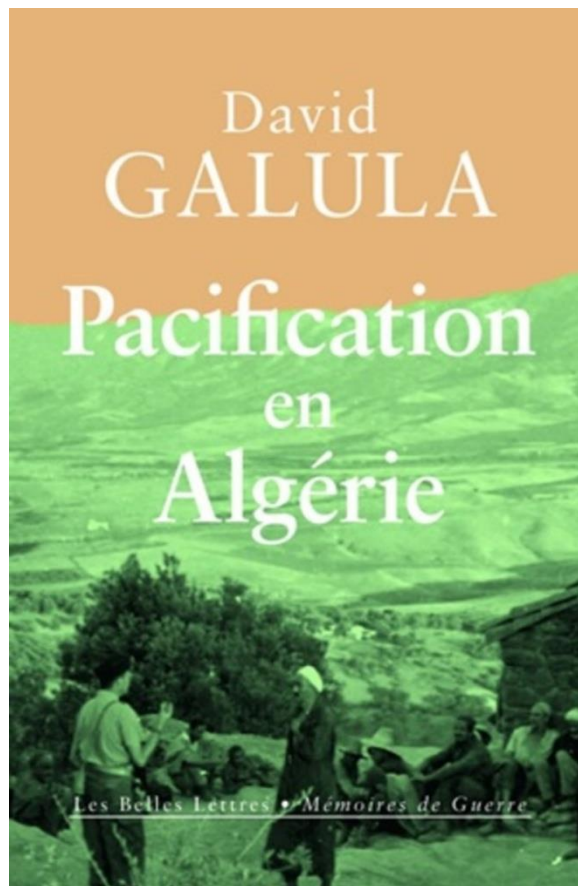
Appendix 14 : <https://www.imdb.com/fr/title/tt0135178/>



Appendix 15 : <https://embbrussels.mfa.gov.dz/ar/embassys-activities/screening-of-a-restored-copy-of-the-film-chronicles-of-the-years-of-ember-by-mohamed-al-akhdar-hamina-at-the-royal-belgian-cinematheque>



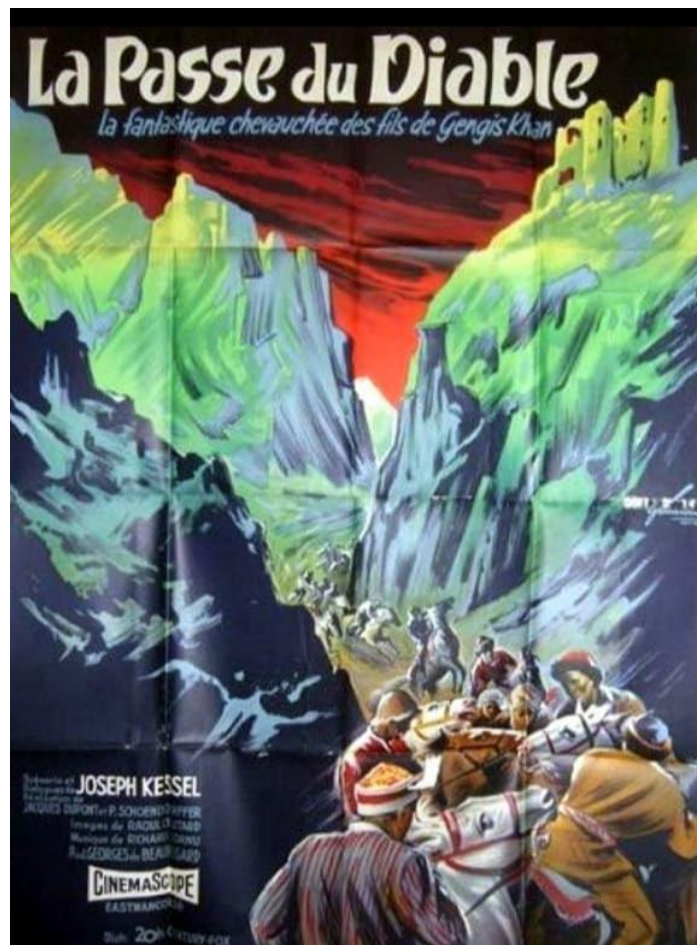
Appendix 16 : <https://www.comitedufilmethnographique.com/oeuvre/lhomme-du-niger/>



Appendix 17 : <https://lignesdedefense.ouest-france.fr/enfin-en-francais-la-pacification-en-algerie-de-david-galula/>



Appendix 18 : <https://www.videodrome2.fr/afrique-50-jai-huit-ans-algerie-en-flammes-rene-vautier/>



Appendix 19 : <https://www.imdb.com/fr/title/tt0051615/>



Appendix 20 : place du gouvernement – Algiers : <https://catalogue-lumiere.com/place-du-gouvernement/>



Appendix 21 : Rue Bab Azoun Algiers : <https://catalogue-lumiere.com/rue-bab-azoun/>



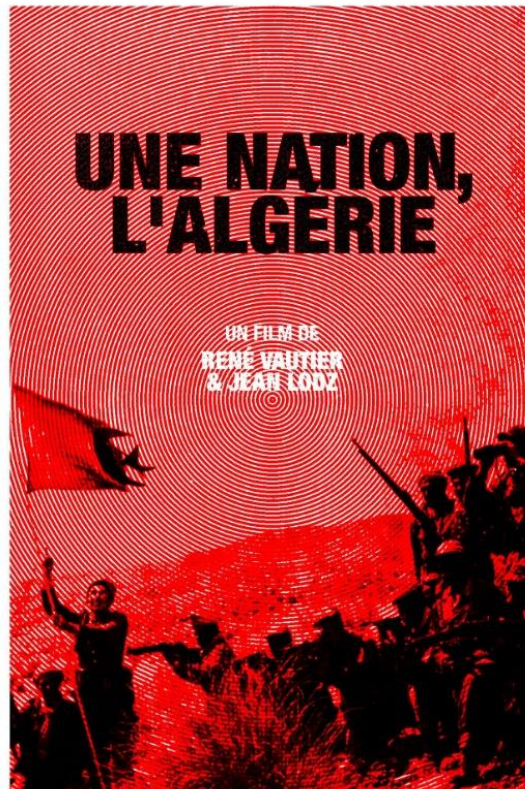
Appendix 22 : Le boulevard de la republique alger :
<http://algeroisementvotre.free.fr/site1000/alger09/alger040.html>



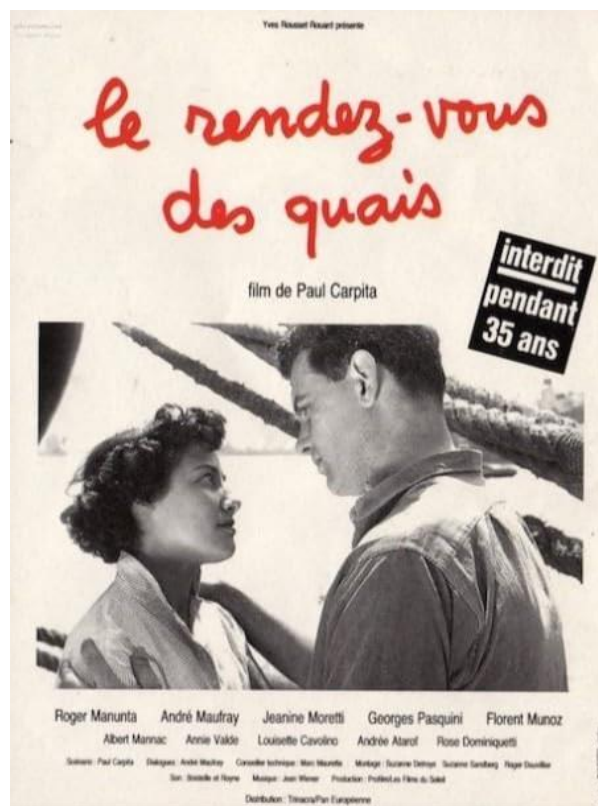
Appendix 23 : ville de constantine : http://afn.collections.free.fr/pages/24_constantine.html



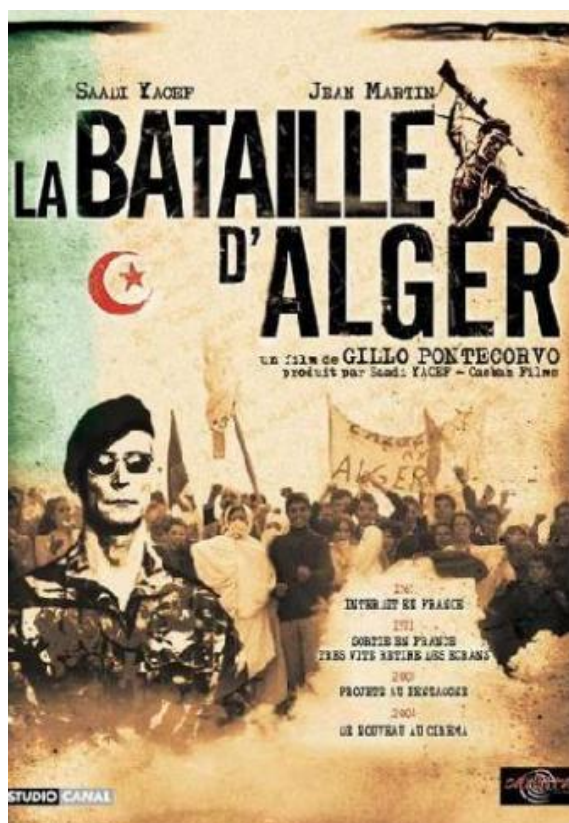
Appendix 24 : Casbah Algiers : <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/857583954050109550/>



Appendix 25 : <https://www.imdb.com/fr/title/tt11369014/>



Appendix 26 : https://www.allocine.fr/film/fichefilm_gen_cfilm=4774.html



Appendix 27 : https://www.allocine.fr/film/fichefilm_gen_cfilm=89957.html



Appendix 28 : <https://www.unifrance.org/film/6370/l-etoile-de-valencia>



Appendix 29 : https://www.senscritique.com/film/l_appel_du_bled/37996856



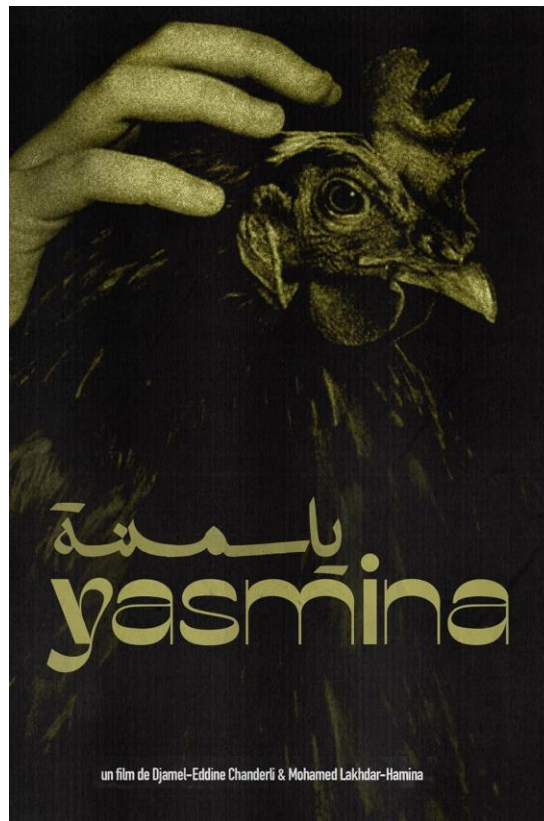
Appendix 30 : <https://www.selenie.fr/2019/10/regain-1937-de-marcel-pagnol.html>



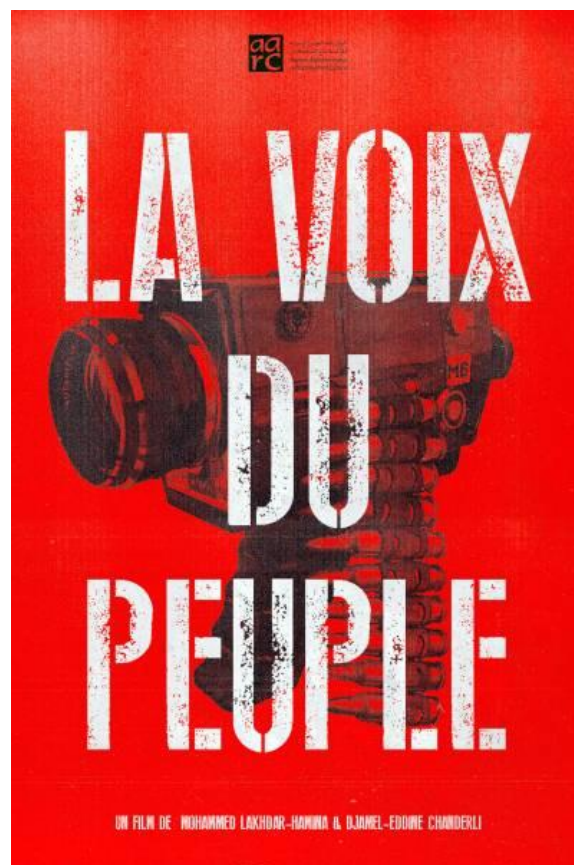
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Appendix 33 : <https://www.imdb.com/fr/title/tt31149462/>



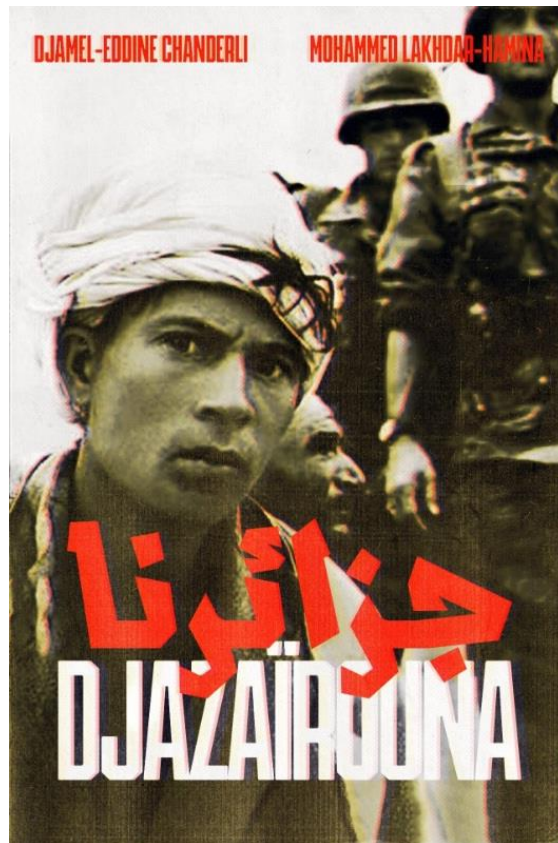
Appendix 34 : <https://africultures.com/films/?no=6892>



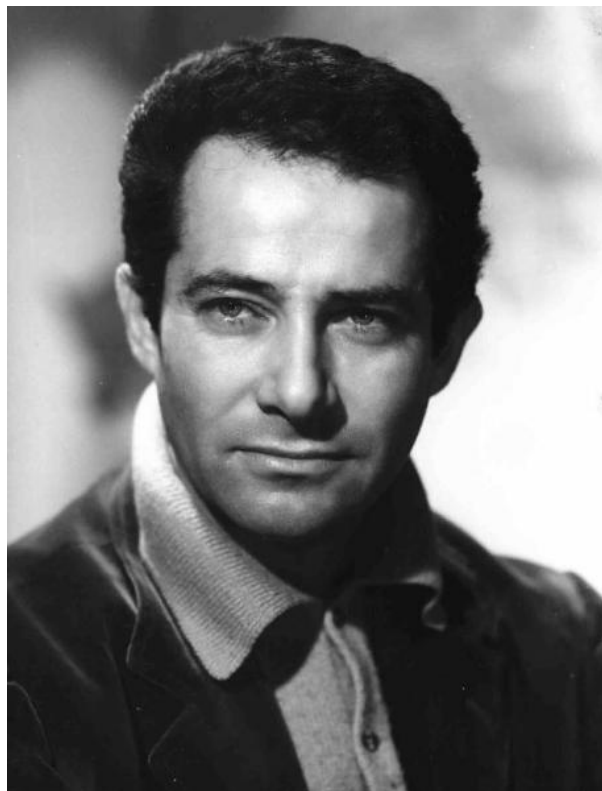
Appendix 35 : Mohamed Lakhdar Hamina : <https://www.unifrance.org/annuaires/personne/119224/mohamed-lakhdar-hamina>



Appendix 36 : Djamal Eddine Chanderli : <https://www.africine.org/personne/djamel-eddine-chanderli/18500>



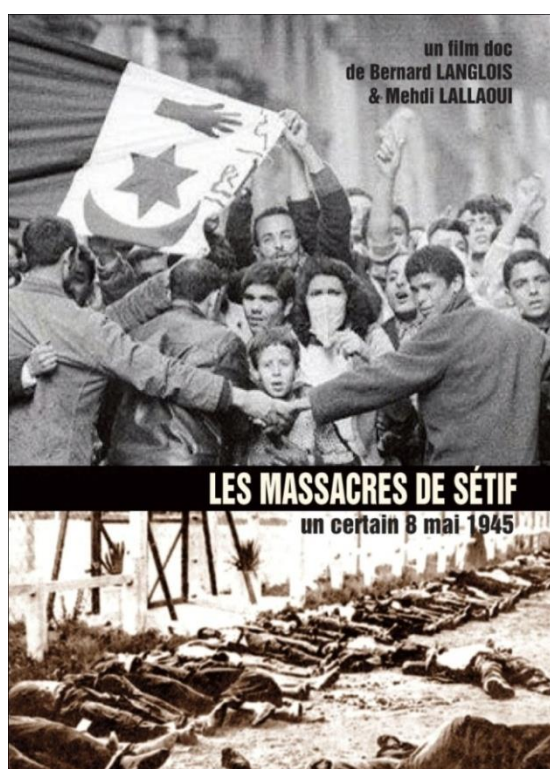
Appendix 37 : <https://africultures.com/films/?no=22222>



Appendix 38 : <https://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/fotografie/schede/IMM-6x010-0004924/>



Appendix 39 : <https://africultures.com/films/?no=3685>

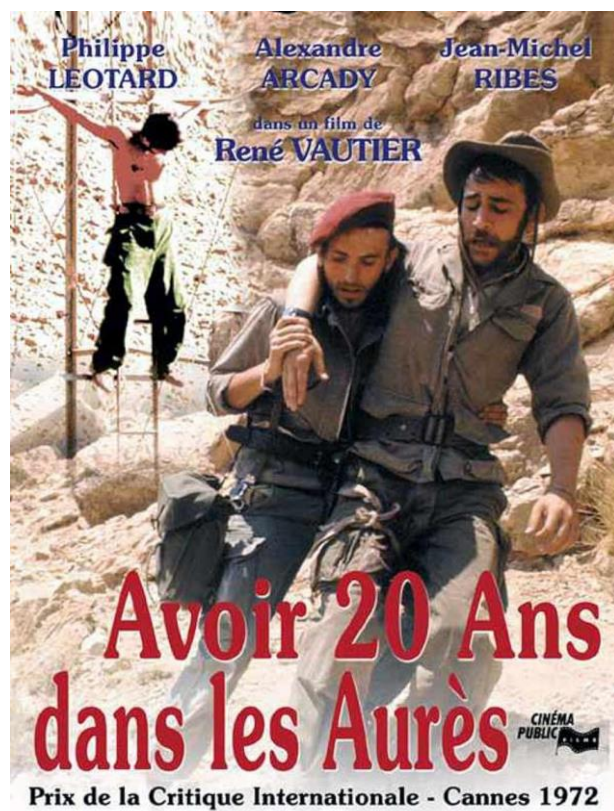


Appendix 40 :

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ompt=browser header mismatch](https://www.imdb.com/fr/title/tt12658388/mediaviewer/rm1166557953/?reasonForLanguagePr ompt=browser_header_mismatch)



Appendix 41 : https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Vent_des_Aur%C3%A8s



Appendix 42: https://militotheque.org/wiki/Avoir_vingt_ans_dans_les_Aur%C3%A8s_%28film%29



Appendix 43 : <https://www.unifrance.org/film/2745/decembre>



Appendix 44 : <https://www.okbob.net/2017/05/djamilah-film-de-youssef-chahine-consacre-a-djamila-bouhired-l-algerienne-1958.html>

Abstract

This study explores the complex role of cinema, both as a colonial tool and a documentary medium, in depicting the reality of Algerian society during the French colonial period, from 1896 (the date of the emergence of cinema and its introduction to Algeria) to 1962 (the date of independence).

Through a systematic analysis of archival footage, colonial propaganda films, ethnographic documentaries (descriptions of peoples), and early Algerian cinematic productions, this study examines the extent to which moving images fulfilled colonial narratives while simultaneously preserving authentic glimpses of social structures, cultural practices, and local resistance movements.

The research demonstrates that while French colonial cinema was primarily an instrument of cultural hegemony, it also unwittingly documented authentic aspects of Algerian society that challenged official colonial claims. These films depicted traditional celebrations, urban transformations, social hierarchies, and moments of cultural continuity that might otherwise have been lost to the historical record. Of particular interest are scenes depicting indigenous responses to colonial policies, traditional craft practices, and the gradual emergence of national consciousness.

The study traces the evolution from early realist and ethnographic films to the emergence of local filmmakers in the 1950s, highlighting how Algerians gradually appropriated cinematic technology to document their own experiences and resistance activities. The study pays particular attention to the works of René Vauthier, Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina, and other pioneering filmmakers who bridged colonial and postcolonial perspectives.

The main findings reveal that colonial cinema, despite its propagandistic intentions, created a valuable visual archive of Algerian social transformation. It demonstrates how a close analysis of these films—reading them against their own tendencies—reveals patterns of cultural resistance, social adaptation, and identity preservation that complement, and sometimes contradict, written historical sources.

ملخص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة الدور المعقد للسينما، كأداة استعمارية ووسيلة وثائقية، في تصوير واقع المجتمع الجزائري خلال الفترة الاستعمارية الفرنسية، من عام 1896 (تاريخ ظهور السينما ودخولها الجزائر) إلى عام 1962 (تاريخ الاستقلال).

من خلال تحليل منهجي للقطات الأرشيفية، وأفلام الدعاية الاستعمارية، والأفلام الوثائقية الإثنوغرافية (وصف الشعوب)، والإنتاج السينمائي الجزائري المبكر، تبحث هذه الدراسة في مدى تحقيق الصور المتحركة للسرديات الاستعمارية مع الحفاظ في الوقت نفسه على لمحات أصيلة عن الهياكل الاجتماعية والممارسات الثقافية وحركات المقاومة المحلية.

يُظهر البحث أنه في حين كانت السينما الاستعمارية الفرنسية في المقام الأول أداة للهيمنة الثقافية، إلا أنها وثّقت أيضًا، عن غير قصد، جوانب أصيلة من المجتمع الجزائري تحدت الادعاءات الاستعمارية الرسمية. صورت هذه الأفلام الاحتفالات التقليدية، والتحويلات الحضرية، والتسلسلات الهرمية الاجتماعية، ولحظات الاستمرارية الثقافية التي ربما كانت ستضيع -لولا ذلك- من السجل التاريخي. من المشاهد التي تبرز ردود أفعال السكان الأصليين تجاه السياسات الاستعمارية، وممارسات الحرف التقليدية، والظهور التدريجي للوعي الوطني، مشاهد ذات أهمية خاصة.

كما تنتبع الدراسة التطور من الأفلام الواقعية والإثنوغرافية المبكرة إلى ظهور صانعي الأفلام المحليين في خمسينيات القرن الماضي، مُسلّطَةً الضوء على كيفية استيلاء الجزائريين تدريجيًا على التكنولوجيا السينمائية لتوثيق تجاربهم الخاصة وأنشطة المقاومة. وتُولي الدراسة اهتمامًا خاصًا لأعمال رينيه فوتييه، ومحمد لخضر حمينا، وغيرهما من صانعي الأفلام الرواد الذين ربطوا بين المنظورين الاستعماري وما بعد الاستعماري.

تكشف النتائج الرئيسية أن السينما الاستعمارية، على الرغم من نواياها الدعائية، قد أنشأت أرشيفًا بصريًا قيمًا للتحويل الاجتماعي الجزائري. وتُبين كيف يكشف التحليل الدقيق لهذه الأفلام - بقراءتها في ضوء توجهاتها الخاصة - عن أنماط من المقاومة الثقافية، والتكيف الاجتماعي، والحفاظ على الهوية، تُكمل المصادر التاريخية المكتوبة، وتناقضها أحيانًا.



التصريح الشرفي الخاص بالالتزام بقواعد النزاهة العلمية لإنجاز مذكرة الماستر

أنا الممضي أسفله،

- الطالب: نبيل أوشيش رقم بطاقة التعريف الوطنية: 201267118 تاريخ

الصدور: 2017/03/15

المسجل بكلية العلوم الإنسانية والاجتماعية قسم: العلوم الإنسانية شعبة: التاريخ

تخصص: تاريخ الوطن العربي المعاصر

والمكلف بإنجاز مذكرة ماستر الموسومة ب:

“The role of cinema in documenting the reality of Algerian society
during the French colonial period (1896-1962)”

أصرح بشرفي أنني ألتزم بمراعاة المعايير العلمية والمنهجية ومعايير الأخلاقيات المهنية
والنزاهة الأكاديمية المطلوبة في إنجاز المذكرة المذكورة أعلاه.

التاريخ: 2025/01/01

توقيع المعني:



بسكرة في: 2025/06/01

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نبيل أوشيش.

في تخصص: تاريخ الوطن العربي المعاصر
والموسومة بـ:

**The role of cinema in documenting the reality of Algerian society
during the French colonial period (1896 – 1962)**

والمسجل بقسم العلوم الإنسانية، شعبة التاريخ، أقر بأن المذكرة قد استوفت
مقتضيات البحث العلمي من حيث الشكل والمضمون، ومن ثمة أعطي الإذن بطبعتها.

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