



**THE TIME IS NEW:
SELECTIONS FROM CONTEMPORARY ARAB CINEMA**

143 Sahara Street

Hassen Ferhani on '143 Sahara Street'

How does one meet a character as singular as Malika?

After having made *Roundabout in My Head*, I wanted to hit the road, to cross landscapes and have the encounters that go with it, but also with the idea of making a road movie, an always fascinating movie genre. I hit the road many times, heading South especially, to find places, characters, stories... During one of these trips, I was joined by Chawki Amari, a writer friend of mine who is also a press columnist and an occasional actor. We made a long crossing that took us from Algiers to the Highlands, then to Ain Sefra and on to a good part of south-western Algeria. We headed towards the centre of the Sahara to join Route One which connects Algiers to Tamanrasset. *Route One* is also the title of one of Chawki's books, a travelogue in the form of a novel. At the time, I did not know if his characters were real or not. For me, Malika came under the rubric of 'literary fantasies'.

You did not expect such an intense encounter?

I already knew that Amari had identified interesting characters for his book but was far from imagining how interesting Malika could be, especially from a cinematographic point of view. As soon as I walked into her place, I knew that's where my movie was. The idea came to me that, here, we could do an inverted road movie.

A paradoxical idea in appearance, because after all, what is a road movie if not a film that happens on the road? Here we were in a place on the road that exists because of the road and for the road the truckers. I loved this simple place that housed so many things, in addition to the charisma and strength of this woman, who is there in the middle of nowhere. It is incredible what can be said and can occur within a 20 square meter space and in one of the largest deserts in the world.

In the middle of nowhere, as you say...

I used this expression but would like to replace it by 'in the middle of everywhere.' It's more accurate to say it like that because, contrary to popular belief, the Sahara is not a deserted place. It's immense, it seems very empty but it's not the case. People live there, work there, and travel there. There is so much going on there. Also, I was able to realise that Malika's truck stop is practically on the geographical centre of Algeria. Places that have atmospheres of their own and that bring together people from all over the country, that's what I'm looking for in my cinema. Here we have those who go down to Tamanrasset in the extreme South or up to Algiers in the far North. After this encounter I called my producer to inform her that I was changing course.

In addition to being a paradoxical road movie, 143 Sahara Street can also seem like a paradoxical 'in camera' movie? We are in a fixed and specific place that we discover through its hostess and guests who reveal to us all the extent of the outside world, like an immense and permanent out-of-camera range.

Things could be presented that way, that is to say an 'in camera' opened onto Algeria and the world. I am always looking for meaningful and expressive places that are capable of hinting at everything that surrounds us far beyond their own space. I follow this approach in the way I choose place and subject but also in the way I film.

This way is already present in your first feature film A Roundabout in My Head...

When I was younger, a phrase by Robert Bresson left a mark on me: 'I'm looking for the shot that will tell about all the other shots.' I have it in mind every time I set up my camera. I have the same approach during scouting. Here, I try to theorise what concerns the realm of experience because the encounter is something that cannot be explained. Like in this case, where this incredible woman who has decided to write her Story in this place, who has left Northern Algeria to settle down where there were only stones, sand, unbearable heat, alone and more than 50 kilometres away from the next house, with her dog and cat. She has created this place and I often imagine that, in half a century perhaps – to use the usual clichés – a small town will grow here, a kind of Malikatown of the Algerian Far South. Everyone knows Malika hundreds of kilometres around, she knows all the truckers, their journeys, their stories... She is this place! Malika's choice had to do with intuition, something that is way beyond us.

But even by intuition, we can follow a process. For example, in your previous film and this one too, we are dealing with people who work hard. Is this a common thread in your film world?

Someone told me once 'you are filming the margins of society.' I said no, I do not film the margins but the heart of society. I film my peers. For me, the important thing is that these people are carriers of poetry. In a direct or indirect way, a conscious or unconscious way, there is a sort of poetry in them. When Malika looks at the road all day long, there is poetry there, like when she comments on what is happening in front of her, from this place that is her centre of the world. Finally, that's what I filmed: this place that became the centre of the world through Malika's eyes.

Can we say that beyond society and history, beyond poetry too, you have a philosophical look at your characters, just as they sometimes ask themselves philosophical questions?

In high school, I was very bad at this subject! In any case, when people watch my films, these are things that can appear to them. But I'm not looking for philosophy. I am carried by something that is akin to popular wisdom and, where we come from, it is incomparably rich. My films show the diversity of Algerians. Overseas but also in Algeria, there is a tendency to reduce Algerians to a monolithic vision. What I like about my characters is that they can have multiple colourings to them and that they compose their own colours.

To me, two elements seem to characterise your approach: a long preparation to identify your places and characters but also for you to soak them in and make them accept you, and then very light logistics at human and material level.

For the first point, it's both right and wrong. I am one of the directors who do very little scouting. I spend a lot of time to find a subject and a place, but once it's decided, I don't linger. For me, scouting continues during the

shooting, filming is also scouting. Once I get the agreement of the person or persons I'm going to film, I settle in and start. For the team, it's a staging choice. When there is only two of us, confidence settles in naturally. I am also the director of photography for my films and I cannot imagine leaving the camera work to another because it's my writing tool.

You're often invited to move on to fiction. Does this touch you?

To tell you the truth, I do not really like the designation 'documentary film.' I'm thrilled when my films are selected for festivals that do not affirm a particular genre. This compartmentalisation tends to disappear, I hope. Finally, the difference between a fiction film and a documentary is the work they are based on. In the first case there is a scenario written in advance and in the second, the scenario is written while shooting the film. In any case that's the way I work, I write while shooting. In documentary film, the matter of what is real determines the story. I work on what is alive, which ultimately carries more fiction. With *143 Sahara Street* the story sweeps through many aspects of Algerian society. This was also found in your previous film whose title is becoming a popular expression. Are there any prefigurations or intuitions of what is happening in Algeria at the moment? I won't look for archetypes. I am not into a sociological approach. First and foremost, I try to do cinema. As for what is happening in Algeria today, it is inevitably something that was already stirring our entire society but was a bit buried. If we portray accurately a place or a character, it can become a microcosm that reveals an entire society or country. So yes, there were signs that are easier to spot afterwards. But I did not try to reveal them and everyone is free to interpret the film as they see fit.

Hassen Ferhani interviewed by Ameziane Ferhani, Production notes

143 SAHARA STREET (143 RUE DU DESERT)

A film by: Hassen Ferhani

Producers: Narimane Mari, Olivier Boischot, Michel Haas, Allers Retours Films, Centrale Électrique

Director of Photography: Hassen Ferhani

Editors: Stephanie Sicard, Nadia Ben Rachid, Nina Khada, Hassen Ferhani

Sound Mixer: Benjamin Laurent

Sound: Mohamed Ilyas Guetal, Antoine Morin

With

Malika

Chawki Amari

Samir Elhakim

Algeria/France/Qatar 2019

100 mins

THE TIME IS NEW:

SELECTIONS FROM CONTEMPORARY ARAB CINEMA

143 Sahara Street (143 rue du désert)

Sat 11 Sep 11:30; Mon 20 Sep 18:15

It Must Be Heaven

Sat 11 Sep 20:40; Mon 27 Sep 18:00; Mon 4 Oct 14:30

Let's Talk Ehkeely

Mon 13 Sep 18:00 (+ pre-recorded Q&A with director Marianne Khoury); Tue 5 Oct 20:50

Tlames

Tue 14 Sep 20:40; Thu 30 Sep 18:00

200 Meters

Wed 15 Sep 18:10

The Man Who Sold His Skin (L'Homme qui a vendu sa peau)

Thu 16 Sep 20:50

Talking About Trees

Mon 20 Sep 14:30; Mon 27 Sep 20:45; Sun 3 Oct 18:00

You Will Die at Twenty (Satamoto fel eshreen)

Thu 23 Sep 20:30 (+ pre-recorded Q&A with director Amjad Abu Alala);

Sat 2 Oct 14:20

Narrative Encounters: Shorts Programme

Fri 24 Sep 20:40; Tue 5 Oct 18:10

Adam

Sat 25 Sep 14:20; Mon 4 Oct 20:50

Abou Leila

Sun 26 Sep 18:00; Sat 2 Oct 20:30

As Above, So Below (Kama fissaamaa', kathalika ala al-ard)

Fri 1 Oct 18:10 (+ pre-recorded Q&A with director Sarah Francis)

In cultural partnership with

