



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

Abou Leila

Algeria, 1994. S. and Lotfi, two childhood friends, cross the desert in search of Abou Leila, a dangerous terrorist. The quest seems absurd in the immensity of the Sahara. But S., whose mental health is vacillating, is convinced to find Abou Leila there. Lotfi has only one idea in mind: to move S. away from the capital. It is by sinking into the desert that they will confront their own violence.

Interview with Amin Sidi-Boumédiène

An intertitle indicates that the action takes place in the mid-1990s, at the very heart of the dark years of the Algerian Civil War. This is the only concrete element in the film. Why did you choose to approach this period without any sociopolitical contextualisation?

I think that the films that try to explain the political and social foundations of Algerian terrorism are almost doomed to fail because the subject is far too vast and mostly too complex to be dissected in a two-hour film. For me, the universal foundations of violence are much more interesting to explore, and this is also my way of talking about what I know without trying to be someone else, namely, at the time, a teenager that had accumulated a lot of fear and melancholy due to this period. I am neither a sociologist nor a historian, and I was not old enough to process things internally. However, the trauma is there, diffused and sometimes unconscious, and topics such as the fragility of being and the trap in which violence locks up a country and its inhabitants are the ideal canvas to succeed in speaking out as best as possible about terrorism without ever designating it directly. To evoke this period for me is therefore a way to explore the purely human feelings related to what we have experienced, and to try to recreate a microcosm, through metaphor and art, that while certainly surrealist, is capable of getting into the bottom of things without being hindered by the obligations of being impartial or exhaustive.

Neither of the two characters really impose themselves as the main character; they are taking turns at it and seem to draw the story towards two very contrasting possible paths. How are they complementing each other?

There is indeed no main character in *Abou Leila*, even if S. has a greater time of presence on the screen and is the one around which the story gravitates. Lotfi has an equally important role and I like the idea of playing with these two points of view, to which is added that of the staging. They are not complementary in the sense of a 'buddy movie', but are rather the two possibilities of equal fragilities. This is because Lotfi is just as fragile as S., but he knew how to hide it thanks to his solid personality. Instinctively, he knows that S. is his last chance to find a certain humanity, and he uses that as an excuse to escape from a context that undermines him. Lotfi is a point of reference for S., as much as S. is one for Lotfi. They try to save each other separately by fleeing together. These two characters are representing ideas and thoughts, far more than characters that would purely and simply be identified with.

Abou Leila takes the shape of a metaphysical western. Was it your initial idea to lean towards the mental aspect of your characters, as opposed to their actions?

There is a little western aspect in *Abou Leila*, but not all that much. Moreover, the film differently defuses or integrates all genres that it touches. Indeed, metaphysics somewhat run along the film, taking various forms. The levels of reading can be multiplied and thus, the ideas too. I especially needed to explore a being, and not just the violence in him. His fragility, his dreams, his fears, are as interesting as his impulses of violence, which are actually not put as forward as that. There is indeed a desire to follow a progression that is not narrative but mental, human, emotional, and to make no distinction between the point of view of the 'history' and that of my characters. Mixing perspectives and marrying them without any transition and without warning the viewer, not separating the reality of the ideas that it generates, it is for me the only way for a film to be as philosophical as it is dramatic. And necessarily surrealistic too, in the true sense of the term, namely the emergence of the unreal and the mental projections of the protagonists in reality without the author emphasising the shocking or impossible aspect of such an irruption.

Finally, the narrative mixes different levels of reality and temporality, as if distinguishing the chain of causality in the unleashing of violence had ultimately little to no importance. How did you work with your technical team to build this atmosphere made of nearly invisible variations?

I thought of all the staging in accordance with this border between reality and the dreamlike but by varying the process, as well as based on my own dreams and nightmares. Sometimes the border is invisible, other times it is underlined, depending on what I wanted to express about the relationship between my character and the surrounding context. Whether with my chief operator or with the sound department, we tried to work in a way that would immerse the viewer in the film's parallel universe, yet without abusing effects that were too bright or too easy. This is where a certain surrealism comes in, because it is more about entering into the perspective of the characters without any transition, rather than 'making-believe' that it is real or a dream, or both. This distinction simply does not matter. Once again, it was by moving away from naturalism that I was able to dive deep into the violent context of that time. This may seem superficial in appearance, but I am convinced that it allows the benevolent viewer to feel things first, and then reconstruct the complex ideas that underlie these sensations. Of course, it is not a general rule, but rather a specification imposed by the subject of the film.

What is your relationship to Algerian cinema?

Much like everyone else, I learned the ropes through two short films I produced in Algeria, as well as several other self-produced works. I have always tried not to repeat myself while still keeping my personality. My place in Algerian cinema does not matter much to me, however Algerian cinema itself does, inevitably, because it still seeks itself and does not really have the support of the local public which often accuses it to play into the hands of the West and international funding. There is undoubtedly some truth to this and personally, I try to avoid the solicitation of making films containing no film plan other than tired clichés and shot like a television movie.

There are, however, very interesting personalities that are emerging more and more and I hope that this scene (Algerian and Maghreb in general) will finally be seen as a real contribution to the seventh art and not as a folk curiosity or

a support of simple political or partisan ideas. It is up to both decision-makers and creators to put an effort in this direction. In the meantime, it is important that everyone steers their own ship. By trying to speak only in the first person, we will end up creating a real community of thought that is as varied as it is coherent.

Production notes

ABOU LEILA

Director: Amin Sidi-Boumediène

Producers: Fayçal Hammoum, Yacine Bouaziz, Louise Bellicaud, Claire Charles-Gervais

Screenplay: Amin Sidi-Boumediène

Photography: Kanamé Onoyama

Editing: Amin Sidi-Boumediène

Set Design: Hamid Boughrara, Laurent Le Corre

Sound: Mohamed Amine Teggat, Nassim El Mounabbih, Benjamin Lec

Cast

Slimane Benouari

Lyes Salem

Azouz Abdelkader

Fouad Megiraga

Meryem Medjkane

Hocine Mokhtar

Samir El Hakim

Algeria/France/Qatar 2019

135 mins

THE TIME IS NEW:

SELECTIONS FROM CONTEMPORARY ARAB CINEMA

Tlameess

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

143 Sahara Street (143 rue du désert)

Mon 20 Sep 18:15

It Must Be Heaven

Mon 27 Sep 18:00; Mon 4 Oct 14:30

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)

Let's Talk (Ehkeely)

Tue 5 Oct 20:50

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