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What is My Language? Filming After Independence: Assia Djebar

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This article is based on a short presentation the authors did in the seminar “Filmmaking in Exile” by Nagehan Uskan. Knowing Assia Djebar merely as a writer and motivated by their different foci (Kabyle / Algerian history and culture, film theory, archive and sound theory), they decided to find out more on Assia Djebar as a filmmaker.

This article was done co-working virtually from Russia, Georgia, Japan, and Germany — countries involved in different war affairs — one way or another. It may prove that different cultural and educational backgrounds can complement each other in understanding the artistic work of a woman with even another historical background.

This article gives a short biography overview with an accent on the political context behind Assia Djebar’s work and the problem of language in her writing. The second part of the article is dedicated to analysis of her films, specifically focusing on Djebar’s use of montage and sound when working with archival footage and oral history. The text argues that the approach Assia Djebar takes is a feminist and anti-colonial one, and looks into the instruments and methods she uses in her cinematic work in order to subvert the power narrative.

Assia Djebar is perhaps the most famous recent female writer and filmmaker from Algeria, and her works cover the whole of the Maghreb, the region that includes Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. Djebar’s works are heavily impacted by the history of the whole region, therefore, we will begin with a short overview of the geopolitical context.

The Maghreb is a multilingual region, with the most important languages being Arabic, French, Tamazight (Amazigh-Berber) with different variants depending on the region, and regional mixtures of these languages. The predominant religion is Islam. The indigenous population is presumably composed of Berbers (Imazighen). Because of its vast fertile grounds and advantageous position, the region has been continuously invaded since Phoenician times (by Romans, Vandals, and different Arabic caliphates). After the 19th century, areas of the Maghreb were colonized by France, Spain, and later Italy. Morocco gained independence in 1956, and Tunisia in 1957. Algerian colonization by France began around 1830, and by the end of the 19th century, Algeria was not considered a French colony but part of France itself, while most of the Algerian population did not have French citizenship. Simultaneously, local men were drawn into the French army to fight in wars, while Algerian lands were severely exploited, resulting in poverty in the region. The very bloody war for independence “officially” started around 1954 and ended in 1962 with the country’s independence [1].

Assia Djebar (whose real name is Fatima-Zohra Imalayène) was born on June 30th, 1936, in Cherchell, a town near Algiers. She attended the Koran school and the French elementary school, where her father (the only
native teacher) taught French. Later, she became the first Algerian ever to be admitted to the École Normale Supérieure in Paris. She studied contemporary history and although excluded from university due to her political engagement she was later allowed to finish her studies. In 1956, during the early years of the Algerian struggle for independence, she participated in the Algerian students’ strike in France. Soon she published her first two novels [2].

During the Algerian war of liberation, Djebar worked for the anti-colonialist FLN (National Liberation Front) newspaper, El-Moujahid, conducting interviews with Algerian refugees in Morocco. She continued this work as an assistant professor at the University of Rabat (Morocco), where she became involved in numerous Algerian cultural initiatives [3].

After Algeria’s independence, Djebar was criticised for writing in French as the nationalist movement called for writers to write in Arabic. Algeria’s language issue remains unresolved, as it was during Djebar’s lifetime. In the early seventies, she began to study classical Arabic to broaden her range of expression, simultaneously, she stopped writing. Instead, she turned to filmmaking to reach a non-literary audience [4].

She started teaching film and theater at the University of Algiers. After a ten-year period of textual silence, she began to write again, soon publishing Femmes d’Alger Dans Leur Appartement (The Women of Algiers, 1980), followed up by L’amour, la Fantasia (Fantasia, 1985), which combines autobiographical and historical accounts of the French conquest of 1830 and the Algerian war of liberation. This novel is the first part of a tetralogy that captures the Maghreb in many facets, both past and present. It was continued in Ombre Sultane.
(The Women of Algiers, 1980), followed up by L’amour, la Fantasia (Fantasia, 1985), which combines autobiographical and historical accounts of the French conquest of 1830 and the Algerian war of liberation. This novel is the first part of a tetralogy that captures the Maghreb in many facets, both past and present. It was continued in Ombre Sultane (The Shadow Queen, 1987). Loin de Médine (Far from Medina, 1991) describes women in the life of the Prophet Mohammed. The Vaste est la Prison (Wide is My Prison, 1995) links, with autobiographical echoes, the life of a modern, educated Algerian woman with the lives of outstanding female figures in Maghrebian history and the great civilization of Carthage, which finds its late echo in today’s Berber culture.

In 1997, she was appointed professor at the Center for French and Francophone Studies at Louisiana State University, and in 1999, she wrote her doctoral thesis on the problematics of language and culture in her writing [5].

She died in Paris on February 7, 2015, and was buried in Algeria, where her burial became a demonstration of women from all over the world [6].

“I speak only one language, and it is not my own [7].” Djebar’s need for cinema.

After graduating from high school, at the age of 20, Assia Djebar wrote her first novel, La Soif (The Thirst, 1957). The novel was written in two months during the student protests of 1956. Fearing that this novel would displease her father, she adopted a pseudonym (Assia, “the consolation,” and Djebar, “the intransigence”). This debut and a few following works, written in the 1950s and 1960s, are not experimental but rather provocative. Djebar sought to discover the voices of Algerian women and their difficult identities, compressed by both colonial impact and religious traditions. In her first novel, she already explores the tragic dependence of a Muslim woman on the world of men. She also pierces the resistance to this dependence there. The political landscape of contemporary Algeria, which is experiencing a war of independence, became more and more visible in her following novels.

In Les Alouettes Naïves (The Naive Larks, 1967), reflections on memory and war come to the fore. At the same time, Djebar faces the difficulty of constructing a coherent narrative of Algeria’s ruined history [8]. After the publication of this novel, there was a long period of silence in Djebar’s work.

Djebar felt she could not retell the story of Algeria because it could not be told in one particular language. Algeria was at the crossroads of the cultures and languages of the Maghreb. And this blend was evidence of disunity rather than unity. Throughout the centuries, the Maghreb saw many visitors and invaders from different cultures.

In general, it became problematic to use French for her, not only because it is the colonizers’ language. Djebar says: “When I tried to transpose popular Arabic which felt like a very rich language to me, to French, which is
very rational and intellectual, there was a loss. And then there was the timbre of the voices, which stuck in my mind and which gets inevitably lost in writing. <...> We live in a culture where expression stifles a lot of things. [9]"

Djebar did not command Berber or Arabic the same way the French commanded her. Any of these languages alienates us rather than brings us closer to the things being described. French is the language of the colonizers, obstructing the anti-colonial narrative. Arabic and Berber are the languages of oblivion, of the loss of a homeland torn by war. She used to speak Berber with her family members; she learned French at school, and the Quran taught her Arabic. One more Maghreb language that Djebar recalls constantly is the language of the body.

In the 1970s, Assia Djebar attempted to learn classical Arabic to make her language more fluent and expressive. But she realized the impossibility of writing in this language as well. She turned to contemporary French philosophers, in particular Jacques Derrida, trying to experience the alienation produced by language.

Derrida, Jewish, born and educated in colonial Algeria, argues that the cause of alienation lies not only in the fact of the colonization of Algeria by France but also in the language itself. The language is different from itself. Speech testifies to a contradiction within the reality of language. Even if a language seems native to us, this does not mean that we have control over it — something always remains unsaid.

In the essay Monolingualism of The Other, or, The Prosthesis of Origin [10] Derrida points to the colonial potential of any language. It manifests itself in the ambition of language to be unified against a heterogeneous
reality. The search for language’s paradoxes, testifying to its impossibility and haunting, means launching processes of decolonization.

Djebbar tried to overcome the linguistic artificiality that masks ontological gaps. Language must avoid generalizations to reflect the multiple contradictions of underrepresented groups of Algerian women. Voices must be heard in their multiplicity because any attempt at translation means the reduction of multiplicity to unity again. So, what can we do to avoid a situation where voices speak the language of the colonizer? The postcolonial conflict about languages (that mirrors itself in Assia Djebbar herself and her works) was and is seen by many Algerians “as a ‘challenge’ to social cohesion” [11].

The 1970s are often marked as a crisis period for Djebbar. In 1967, she disappeared from the radar for ten years. Then she returned, and not with novels but films. Researchers of her literary work call this time “the period of silence.” They do not find a subject of study in it, dignifying it with only a cursory mention. They state, however, that this pause affected Djebbar’s later work. For example, Jane Hiddleston writes: “[Djebbar’s] films are difficult to access and less widely known than the novels, and show less evidence of the engagement with philosophy and theory that I hope to track here. [12]”

It is films that can depict silence and a voice that does not pretend to be signified. In the films, the silence (of Djebbar and Algerian women) becomes a statement.

The Nubah of the Women of Mount Chenoua

“...in ‘cinematography’ worthy of the name, there is a need to show and to hide, to deplore and not to cry, but to harden so that the lost tenderness nidifies. [13]”

— Assia Djebbar

The Nubah of the Women of Mount Chenoua (La Nouba des Femmes du Mont Chenoua, 1977) is not only Djebbar’s first film but also the first film directed by an Algerian woman. It consists of stories about the Algerian revolution, told by women from Kabylia (a region in northeastern Algeria).

“This film, in the form of a nubah, is dedicated, posthumously, to Hungarian musician Béla Bartók, who had come to a nearly mute Algeria to study its folk music in 1913, and to Yaminai Oudai, known as Zoulilha, who organized a resistance network in the city of Cherchell and its mountains in 1955 and 1956. She was arrested in the mountains when she was in her forties. Her name was subsequently added to the list of the missing. Lila, the protagonist in this film, could be Zoulilha’s daughter. The six other talking women of Chenoua recount fragments of their lives.” [14]— the opening title in Arabic announces.

Nubah is a form of Arabic-Andalusian music found in the Maghreb countries. In Arabic, “nubah” means “to wait your turn” or “to follow one another.” Nubah is a suite of several musical pieces performed one after the
other, hence its literal meaning of “your turn.” This musical form is non-hierarchical and horizontal: there is no priority given to any particular part of the performance, and every voice counts. Nubah is used in the film not just as a metaphor but as a narrative structuring principle: every woman’s voice will be heard when it is her turn. Djebar and Bartók do similar things: they listen to and record humble voices in “almost silent” Algeria. The fiction in the film relies on a documentary — interviews with women and archival footage. And the script is based on this. Ethnography and magical realism coexist here: the author ensures that the stories of the women she is listening to take their rightful place in Algerian history.

There is gender tension in the film, which Djebar creates by jabbing at the patriarchy. Lila, Zoulikha’s daughter, is married to Ali, the only male character in the film. Together with their young daughter Aisha, the couple lives near Cherchel, at the foot of Mount Chenoua. At the beginning of the film, Ali falls off the horse and is injured. He sits in a wheelchair during most of the film. Henceforth, he embodies powerlessness.

Compared to Ali, Lila is extremely active. She explores the neighbourhood, playing with children and driving a car, collecting stories from Algerian war survivors. Djebar forces his character Ali into silence, but this is not a misandrist gesture at all. Ali himself is neither a despot nor an antagonist. The image of Ali is functional: it creates an uncommon cultural and gender contrast, a situation in which women’s voices can be manifested and perceived by men.
Thus, Lila becomes the lead character in the film. Similar to her mother, who created a web of resistance, she creates webs of memory, bringing the hidden and silenced into visible and audible dimensions.

Each story told is unique. There are a lot of holes and gaps in Algeria’s History (his story). This is why Djebar suggests listening to the stories (women’s stories). Women’s roles in Algerian history must be remembered and reconnected. When analyzing Djebar’s work, both in writing and film, Weltman-Aaron counterposes the spectacle and the verbal testimony: Djebar uses the speech of women in her writing as an instrument to bring out the voices behind History (his story) as it (speech) is constructed, for example, when writing about war and resistance [15].

Although the main focus of the film is still the women voices, Djebar does not deny her characters’ silence. She creates a productive space for the imagination by combining the audible and the inaudible (as well as the visible and the invisible). Narrative caesuras create rhythmicity and make the film a piece of music, a dance. Silence is an organic part of the nubah.

In doing so, Djebar seeks to break the silence surrounding the representational attributes of women. Silence as a means of representing Algerian women is a consequence of both gender politics and colonial history. Lila’s intention to listen to these women’s nubah is a political gesture.
The Zerda or the Songs of Oblivion

The haunting by the ghosts of colonialism essay film, The Zerda or the Songs of Oblivion (La Zerda ou les chants de l’oubli, 1977), won the Grand Prize for Best Historical Film at the 1983 Berlin International Film Festival. Nothing in this film, however, is as questionable as History. Memory is juxtaposed with oblivion and Djebbar shows contemporary Algeria as a society divided by losses. The film’s patchwork quilt is made of archival chronicles recorded by the colonizers between 1912 and 1942 in the Maghreb.

Djebbar carefully explores not only the images but the ways of gazing they expose. She avoids the language and watches as her gaze is appropriated by the oppressor. A montage is a crucial tool in deconstructing the language, the History, and the gaze in the film.

In his text Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order, Timothy Mitchell tells the story of Egyptian orientalists visiting the Paris world exhibition and discovering the Cairo street being reproduced within it [16].

The description of their experience from an exhibition and passage streets, and experiences of other non-western visitors introduces Europe as a space ruled by an “exhibitionary order”, and europeans — as carriers of this specific gaze, which supposes that there is a finite number of objects, all of which can be arranged in a certain way to compile a so called “greater meaning” — or we can call it “representation”, which is to be perceived and understood in its entirety.
In the same text, Mitchell writes of the French visiting Cairo. He describes several photographers and painters searching for the point of view that would allow them to capture the “essence of the East” and their shock when they first cross from their exhibitionary order of the west into the “great outer east” — astonished by the simultaneity of experiences and the lack of order, which is interpreted by them as chaos.

The colonial gaze that the photographers and videographers of the archival footage were carrying has a symbolic order embedded in it, looking to produce signifying images of people, their lives, and their cultures.

Djebar’s brisk editing follows many Soviet editing principles, especially Eisenstein’s. For Eisenstein, the goal of editing was not to connect disparate shots into a story. On the contrary, he insisted that a film should not be coherent in its narrative. A film frame is not a “brick” of editing but a single element of conflict, that is based on a montage of visual and sound (later) contrasts. That is why this approach is called dialectical.

In a broader sense, montage becomes a crucial tool for reinventing a world that lost value after life-destroying events (World War I and the Revolution, in Eisenstein’s case). The montage is a tactic that generates a discrete narrative. “Reassembled” in a new foundation world does not coincide with itself. Joints and internal conflicts indicate hidden gaps. Montage is the most aesthetically expressive method of presenting the conflicting nature of history.

The diversity of Djebar’s montage techniques can be explained precisely by her critical attitude toward history as the narrative of the victors and the vanquished. On the one hand, her way of editing is an attempt to resist colonial expropriation. On the other hand, it avoids well-intentioned reassurances of the full after-war rebuilding. She splits simple actions (often using photographs) into many short takes. Each subsequent take shows the same event from a slightly different perspective.

Djebar employs linguistic techniques in her work with the chronicle. And at the same time, she works with the language “montagely.” She adds sound — not the classic linear voice-over commentary, but voices — stumbling, shaking, and whispering, singing, crying, being disturbed, calling, being frantic, accelerating, melodic, breaking, stumbling, spluttering, throttling, short of breath, susurrous, and vigorous.

Djebar explains her understanding of filming as “first closing the eyes to listen better in the dark.” The priority of the image in cinema is thus questioned and even devalued in order to rethink the link between image and sound: “First with my eyes shut, to grasp the rhythm, the noises from submerged depths believed lost, then rising back to the surface again and finally, eyes washed clean, seeing everything lit by dawn.” In order to see, one needs to be silent and listen; filming entails “turning one’s back to images <...> as though blind.” [17] This quote shows Djebar’s approach to sound in film as a tool for a sort of unlearning to see in order to see more clearly.

Archival images, created by the French photographers and journalists, transmit a specific view, which, through the archive, claims to become the representation of Mahrebi countries and people — and so, it needs to be if not
deconstructed, then deposed, subverted, overthrown — by the sound.

The process of colonization is deeply intertwined with the production of knowledge about the colonized and subaltern people. As an instrument of knowledge production, archiving belongs to the colonial paradigm since it involves transforming experience into knowledge.

Among colonized peoples, such as those in the Maghreb territory, the most common method of preserving and transmitting knowledge was through oral history, including songs, dances, celebrations, and rituals. This “hot” knowledge is alive and transformative, passed on from one storyteller to another. In contrast, creating an archive, whether a state archive of documents or a video archive, produces passive memory preservation, resulting in so-called “cold” knowledge that is alienated from its context.

Assia Jabar uncovers the colonizer’s perspective by repeating visual and sound fragments. This technique deconstructs both the gaze and the image itself, revealing the repressive nature of the archive. In doing so, Jabar exposes and subverts the archive’s power dynamics, challenging the dominant narrative and allowing for the reclamation of the colonized people’s own histories and voices.

The sound follows a logic of its own. It develops in convergence with the image but is sometimes at odds with it. The soundtrack creates its own rhythm and patterns within the film, guiding the viewer’s attention — there isn’t a rule by which sound necessarily relates to camera movement or montage cuts. Quickly coming back to
Mitchell, we would like to say that an important part of constructing a perfect image of the oriental is to relieve it of any image of the viewer — that is a european/white person. In the footage that we receive from Djebbar, the colonizers and the colonized are equated in the sense that we get to witness them next to each other, as well as listen to the music of both France and the counties and peoples of the Maghreb.

The song is a cultural unit and one of the oldest media for transmitting knowledge and memory. Sound is closer to the body. It speaks directly to the ears and feelings, thus overpowering the image, even if we cannot understand the language in which the songs are sung to us (although it is important to note that interpretation and decoding of sound and music are also culturally defined).

It also creates dark gaps — one cannot decipher the message completely. The archive is always constructing a story, and it cannot represent the whole picture. The voice on the one hand is personal and coming from the first person, on another hand, carries a fragmentary nature of speech.

Djebbar turns to the archives and chronicles not to show the hidden but to cut through the limited consistency of historiography and its excluding logic. Thus, the film activates the full force of the montage and restores the dialectical relationship between past and present. That aesthetic, which eludes totalization, implies that Djebbar’s project is in itself neither exactly historical nor accurately memorial but precedes both history and memory as one of their possibilities, as a preparation for a work of anamnesis.
“Can it be simply by chance that most films created by women give as much importance to sound, to music, to the timbre of voices recorded or captured unawares, as they do to the image itself? It is as though the screen had to be approached cautiously and be populated, if need be, with images seen through a look, even a short-sighted, hazy look, but borne on a full, commanding voice, hard as stone but fragile and rich as the human heart.” — Assia Djebar. [18]

About authors:

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**Anna Litovskikh** is a researcher from Yekaterinburg where they are currently co-curating an archive of contemporary art. They also write, edit and translate texts on/for/near art and volunteer at the cat shelter. Their interests intersect on feminist, queer, decolonial and archive theory and critical approaches to geology, ecology and history of Ural and it’s art.

**Burghilde Wieneke-Toutaoui** is currently a student of Area Studies Africa/Asia at Humboldt University of Berlin. She has family ties to Algeria and has travelled to Algeria numerous times since 1981. Since then, she has been especially interested in the Kabyle language and traditions and the political developments in Algeria. Apart from this she works actively for the equal participation of women at the workplace, especially in engineering, her former profession as a professor.

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