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The Potentials and Prospects of Algerian Cinema: Aesthetic Art, Tourism Guide, and Economic Resource

السينما الجزائرية بين الفن الجمالي والترويج السياحي: نحو رؤية تنموية مستدامة

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Abstract:

This study examines how Algeria can upgrade its cinema sector, starting from the premise that cinema functions as a mirror of societal culture. Although cinema is primarily an aesthetic, media, and educational art form, it can also operate as a touristic guide and, consequently, as an economic resource. On that basis, the paper raises a set of questions that it seeks to address. It approaches cinema through its artistic, aesthetic, and cultural dimensions, with specific attention to its educational and informational functions for domestic audience, as well as its capacity to promote local culture internationally. In parallel, it considers how cinema can serve, both inside and outside the country, as a promotional and advertising instrument for Algeria's tourism sector. Within this framework, the study aims to identify the pathways and measures that, in our view, are required to realize these objectives. A preliminary outcome is the necessity of structurally linking cinema to tourism so that cinema becomes, at the same time, a touristic guide and an economic resource. This linkage can be pursued by integrating the tourism sector into a partnership with the cultural sector, with the latter treated not only as a supervisory authority but also as a genuine partner. Equally central is the involvement of the private sector, alongside the reopening of all cinema halls, in order to secure self-financing. Equally central is the involvement of the private sector, alongside the reopening of all cinema halls, in order to secure self-financing.

Keywords: cinema, culture, tourism, economy, self-financing.

ملخص:

الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو التعريف بكيفية الارتقاء بقطاع السينما في الجزائر، وذلك باعتبار السينما مرآة عاكسة لثقافة المجتمع. فالسينما فن ذو طابع جمالي وإعلامي وثقافي في المقام الأول، ولكنه مرشد سياحي ومورد اقتصادي كذلك. ولذلك نسعى من خلال هذه الدراسة إلى إثارة جملة من التساؤلات، والتي سنحاول الإجابة عنها في هذه الورقة. فالدراسة تتناول السينما من جانبيها الفني والجمالي والثقافي، والذي نتطرق فيه إلى الوظيفة التثقيفية والإعلامية للسينما بالنسبة للجماهير المحلية داخليا، والوظيفة الترويجية للثقافة المحلية بالخارج. كما سيتم التطرق إلى الدور الترويجي والإشعاري داخليا وخارجيا للقطاع السياحي في الجزائر. ولأجل ذلك نصبو إلى محاولة البحث عن السبل الواجب اتخاذها والتدابير التي يستوجب إتباعها مثلما نراها لتحقيق هذه الأهداف. ومن النتائج التي نصل إليها مبدئيا هي ضرورة ربط السينما بالقطاع السياحي ومن ثم جعلها مرشدا سياحيا وموردا اقتصاديا في الآن ذاته، وذلك عن طريق إقحام قطاع السياحة في إطار شراكة مع قطاع الثقافة، هذه الأخير لا باعتباره كوصاية فقط، ولكن باعتباره شريكا أيضا. ومن الأمور الأساسية أيضا هو إشراك القطاع الخاص وفتح جميع قاعات السينما لضمان التمويل الذاتي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السينما، الفن، الثقافة، السياحة، الاقتصاد، التمويل الذاتي.

1. INTRODUCTION

More than a century after its emergence, cinema, understood as both an artistic work and a creative act, continues to attract broad audiences and to generate cultural momentum. Its endurance is not accidental. Cinema possesses distinctive features that separate it from other arts, and

despite the rapid expansion of contemporary media and communication technologies, it has preserved its position. In practice, it has turned technological change into an advantage, adapting its tools and equipment so that its means of production evolve alongside wider developments.

Cinema's significance is tied to the range of functions it performs. It carries a media and communicative role that places it within the ecosystem of mass communication. Yet it also produces entertainment, contributes to education and pedagogy, and asserts an artistic and aesthetic presence that enables it to compete with other art forms while maintaining its own distinctive status.

Historically, and much like other arts, cinema has, since the late nineteenth century, been accompanied by the rise of multiple artistic and cinematic schools. These schools sought to theorize the cinematic field and provide conceptual framing intended to elevate cinema across its artistic and aesthetic dimensions, as well as across its social, cultural, and political resonances, among others. Within this landscape, realism stands out as one of the most prominent approaches: it treats cinema as more than a domain of imagination, pushing it to engage social, political, and cultural reality not merely through depiction and transmission, but through critique and transcendence as well.

At the same time, cinema includes further dimensions that are open to investment and structured exploitation. These relate to the economic and commercial roles that cinema can play. The cinematographic industry can constitute a major economic resource and a generator of added value within the national economy, and the experiences of American cinema (Hollywood) and Indian cinema provide clear illustrations of this point. Alongside this economic and commercial dimension, there is a complementary dimension that is no less consequential: tourism. Tourism performs two functions here. One is explicitly economic, since it can attract visitors through showcasing local culture and heritage. The other concerns the articulation of national specificity and identity.

For these reasons, those responsible for the cultural sector in general, and for cinema in particular, are expected to

formulate clear policies and defined strategies that treat cinema as a strategic and comprehensive field. This requires moving beyond a narrow, superficial understanding of cinema as simple entertainment and spectacle. Cinema is a multidimensional and vital domain: it is mass media that conveys messages; it is also an aesthetic art that can refine viewers' taste and thereby support education, expand awareness, strengthen values, and cultivate a sense of responsibility through film and image for the viewer, that is, the citizen. In addition, it can function as a commercial resource that produces wealth and as an exemplary touristic guide.

From this starting point, the research problem is formulated and articulated through the following questions: How can Algerian cinematic production contribute to national economic development? What resources should be secured, and what measures should be adopted, to develop the cinema sector so that it can actively encourage tourism in Algeria? Finally, how can financing for this sector be ensured? On this basis, the study develops hypotheses that are examined in light of the stated problem. The first is that cinema is a strategic sector and a distinctive economic resource, provided that political will exists and that a deliberate strategy is designed within an integrated project. The second is that cinema can serve as an advertising and promotional domain for Algeria's tourism sector, especially given the country's historical legacy, cultural richness, natural diversity, and rare, striking landscapes.

Accordingly, this study aims to underscore cinema's role in developing the national economy through abundant cinematic production. It also aims to emphasize cinema's promotional function, particularly by presenting local culture and Algeria's natural assets and resources in ways that encourage both domestic and international tourism. Methodologically, the study adopts an inductive approach, drawing on an examination of the current state of Algeria's cinematic landscape.

2. Definition of Cinema:

Cinema is a creative form that draws on several arts; this is why it has been described as the “seventh art.” Its output is the film, with its own narrative properties, the aesthetics of the image, and a language whose structure appears through symbols and meaningful signs.¹ As a major art, cinema is also counted among the most significant achievements of twentieth-century human progress. It can narrow the distance between people’s emotions by placing spectators within a shared affective experience. It also offers a way to render time and space, to document events, to disclose a society’s culture, and to examine that culture in its complex components. Alongside these functions, it remains a medium of self-expression.²

3. Cinema at the Intersection of Message, Aesthetics, Economy, and Tourism Promotion:

No filmmaker, working through individual effort alone, can alter the economic relations that govern the making and circulation of films. Even those described as “revolutionary,” whether in message or in form, cannot produce a rapid or radical transformation of the economic system. They may deform it or divert its effects, yet they cannot cancel its influence or undermine its structure in any dangerous way. Because every film is embedded in an economic system, it is equally embedded in an ideological system; in this sense, “cinema” and “art” function as branches of ideology.³ Still, this does not eliminate the filmmaker’s room to maneuver, through which messages and meanings can be carried within the film.

Every film is political, since it is shaped by the ideology that produces it, or by the ideological framework within which it is produced. This is not an external addition; it is intrinsic to the object itself. Cinema is, in the strongest sense, a fully determined object because, unlike other arts and ideological systems, its material production mobilizes large economic forces, in a way that does not occur, for instance, in

literary production.⁴ From that perspective, the cinematographic industry is a concrete form of investment. It requires capital to be injected into production so as to reach outcomes defined in advance, and it operates through studied aims articulated within policies and strategies designed by governmental bodies responsible for managing and steering this strategic and sensitive sector.

Because cinema is a purposeful art oriented toward conveying particular messages, “living cinema” is marked by the fact that the director does not remain satisfied with the idea that the camera merely sees external appearances. Instead, the director confronts the central problem of filming reality by granting concrete objects an active role within the film. At that point, such objects become producers of meaning rather than passive recipients of meanings generated elsewhere (by ideology).⁵ In this way, cinema can assume an informational role while still sustaining its artistic and aesthetic function.

3.1. Cinema’s Educational and Awareness-Raising Role:

The cinematic film can be read as an objective reflection of social, political, and economic life. Accordingly, films that tackle political themes often operate as a true mirror of reality, offering an image of what has been and what is, and, at times, an anticipatory view of what may follow. This becomes more plausible when the film engages issues that genuinely concern its audience, and when it is made within a broad space of freedom that allows opinion, critique, and discussion of questions connected to the public’s lived experience. In that register, serious realist film texts aim to address a political, social, or intellectual problem, placing the critical function of society at the forefront.⁶ Beyond its reflective capacity, cinema performs a media role that is both practical and social in character. It is oriented toward enlightening public opinion and informing different groups, whatever their educational levels, interests, or activities, by explaining

situations tied to the ongoing realities of their lives, including within the sphere of political activity.⁷ As such, cinema functions as a mass communication medium, alongside television, radio, and related channels.

It also supplies a rational justification for state orientations and positions toward political events. At the same time, it interprets state behavior within developmental and reform plans through a framing that ties individuals and groups to the society to which they belong. The effect sought is that each person becomes aware of a duty and a role toward that society, while also feeling the necessity of positive participation in political life and of contributing to social progress and development.⁸

In line with this, cinema's media role includes a notion of guidance, understood as pursuing a higher aim, namely the national interest, in ways that can elevate the country's standing in international political, economic, and cultural relations. Cinema carries out such guidance at the national level. Where this media and guiding function is directed at a particular segment of society, it operates to the extent that it serves the public interest, protects the social structure from fragmentation, and safeguards political, religious, moral, and economic organization from weakness and deviation. Fundamentally, cinema, as a mode of expression, rests on the realist representation of the living reality people experience.⁹

Cinema also contributes to the shaping of public opinion. It assists the public in forming a sound public opinion by placing established facts before them and providing accurate, precise information that supports a correct judgment on the issues, topics, and unfolding events they live through. In this sense, the task of the political film is to bring recipients of the intended media message to the highest possible level of knowledge, awareness, comprehension, and full grasp of developments. This is what enables the enlightenment of public opinion

and, consequently, strengthens its capacity to produce a correct and constructive public opinion toward the issues being raised.¹⁰

3.2. Cinema's Artistic and Aesthetic Dimension:

Cinema has long been, and still is, one of the arts most tightly connected to reality, while at the same time remaining deeply attached to its artistic nature. From that double position, a persistent tension emerges between art and "real" reality. It appears in the relation between art and its subject, and it reappears in the relation between the cinematic work and the spectator. Filmmakers may try to loosen cinema from the constraints of the real so that it can move into the space of imagination; yet the spectator pulls it back, because the viewer's expectations often require cinema to remain intelligible within the world of lived experience. In this sense, the filmmaker seeks to draw the viewer into participation in the cinematic presentation, through affective engagement, or what Yuri Lotman calls the viewer's affective belief.¹¹

Pierre Sorlin marked a decisive start in his sociological engagement with cinema through the publication of *Sociology of Cinema* in 1977. He foresaw a bright future for cinema at a moment when the dominant writings were largely historical or critical. What concerned him was the need "to find an alternative to theories that treat cinema as either total reality or total imagination." Everyone, Sorlin argues, recognizes that we do not see the external world exactly as it is: we perceive beings and objects through our traditions and mentalities, that is, through specific ways of establishing priorities in our environment. Within that frame, Sorlin adds a further point: the cinematic film is not simply a story, and it is not a mere duplication of reality. It is, rather, a form of "social cinematic staging." In that sense, the film constructs a particular type of world through a defined vision directed to a general receiving audience. It is "the outcome of work," something made through the convergence of multiple requirements and a chain of successive operations. In

practical terms, a group produces a product for other recipients, anticipating an audience and setting objectives under the guidance of the director, who functions as the leader of the cinematic work.¹²

At the same time, serious cinema, when detached from serious criticism, tends to become saturated with internal problems. These appear at the level of dramatic construction, montage, rhythm, acting, and related elements, and they often push the public away. Many directors then conclude that their films are not popular simply because they belong to "serious cinema." The picture is more complicated. It is true that many examples of serious cinema worldwide did not become widely popular, given their exceptional artistic, intellectual, and philosophical density. Yet it is also true that a considerable number of such works reached broad audiences. For that reason, a film's lack of popularity cannot, in itself, serve as a measure of its genuine artistic value.¹³ Moreover, the value of rigorous artistic works may only become visible later.

In this context, when cinema operates as a historical document and performs social testimony, Kracauer's preference for realism makes him cautious toward works that depart from nature. He is skeptical of anything that distorts the temporal and spatial sequencing of reality, a distortion that becomes especially visible in montage. Kracauer "prefers reliance on original locations" when shooting scenes, and the same logic extends to acting and costume. If the subject matter moves too far from physical reality, viewers perceive the artifice, and their pleasure diminishes. This is, ultimately, a social conception of cinematic art: cinema reflects events and social reality, functioning as a mirror through which reality becomes visible with its problems, its cultural weight, and its contradictions.¹⁴

This is also why cinema's force lies in what is social. To understand a cinematic film, one has to mobilize a set of semantic systems drawn from our representations and imagination, from our relation to the image,

and from our social, cultural, and ideological positioning.¹⁵ The image, in this view, is a document that reflects more reliably than points extracted from a memorandum.¹⁶

Beyond interpretation, cinema also has a capacity that can be unsettling, precisely because it reaches both minds and emotions and can shape them. It does so through the image and its affective charge, through suggestion, and through its ability to awaken memory. Viewers often find in cinema a form of variety that helps them escape the daily routine. They also experience an emotional release when they inhabit the film's characters and feel a sense of identification with them.¹⁷ This experience can produce a form of psychological balance that helps in resisting different pressures, including anxiety and boredom.

Finally, the viewer's response to film situations does not mirror the response to situations in everyday life. In lived reality, an incident or a quarrel may trigger action, such as fleeing, intervening, or objecting. In the cinema hall, by contrast, there is no effective bodily response; reactions remain largely confined to affective expression.¹⁸ One manifestation of this is the viewer's adoption of the roles of the film's characters.

3.2.Cinema's Economic and Commercial Dimension:

Cinema is discussed here not only as an art that has proven its capacity for originality and creative invention across different layers of reality, and for offering fresh ways of reading that reality. It is also treated as a commodity, one that is governed by the logic of profit before any other consideration. At the same time, cinema may operate as a promotional apparatus in the hands of power, whether local or global, seeking to stabilize particular values, ideas, and models. In that setting, repetition becomes a highly effective promotional instrument for circulating specific ideologies, policies, moral codes, or even psychological and instinctive dispositions, all delivered in an attractive, seductive form.¹⁹

State funding, moreover, may be unable, on its own, to address other practical constraints, including distribution, exhibition, and the search for partners. These obstacles feedback directly into production itself. It follows that the state's role cannot reasonably be assumed to end at the point of financing. Yet it is also preferable that state support not be delivered directly through official institutions, given the risk that bureaucratic and censorial mentalities will gain control over production. An exception can be made, as in Italy for example, for the financing of first works by young directors. A different model is an independent fund sustained by a levy on cinema tickets, as in France, where such a tax can reach 30%, enabling cinema to support itself.²⁰

From this angle, the state's central contribution lies in establishing the legal frameworks that make the cinematic process workable as a whole. This includes tax exemptions on a share of the capital of economic actors who contribute to local production and to its marketing abroad. Comparable exemptions can also be directed to cinema halls that devote a specified proportion of their programming to domestic films. If, instead, the state continues to view cinema sometimes with dismissiveness and aloofness, and at other moments with suspicion and fear, then the coming generation of filmmakers will, undoubtedly, be a digital generation par excellence.²¹

Cinema and cinematographic production, therefore, should be understood as genuine investment, requiring substantial capital to be injected into production. State support is necessary, but it is not sufficient; it can even become a heavy burden on the public budget. Additional resources are needed in the form of self-financing. This starts with reopening and fully exploiting all cinema halls for film screenings, while also encouraging an audience culture that returns to the cinema space. Finally, since cinematography is an industry like other industries, it produces a commodity that can be marketed locally and internationally, and

in that way, it can secure further funding streams that help expand production. This model is visible in a range of contexts, including American Hollywood, as well as Indian, Turkish, and Egyptian cinema, among others.

In this context, Dr. Samia Issa notes that private financing accounted for 65% of Egyptian film production between 2015 and 2020, compared with 35% in the previous decade. This shift contributed to a certain standardization of film content. The film *Al-Asliyyin (The Originals)*, financed by Synergy Productions, is one example, as it attracted around 2.5 million viewers. Yet the same study warns against the growing control of private capital over artistic content. In a survey involving 50 Egyptian directors, 74% stated that private producers often impose changes on scripts in order to secure a higher profit margin, even when these changes conflict with the director's creative vision. Privately funded films also tend to concentrate on comedy and romance, with these genres representing 80% of production, while serious films account for only 20%²²

Despite the problems that may result from the involvement of the private sector in film production and distribution, this involvement has become almost necessary for the development of the cinematic sector. This is generally referred to as reverse investment, a financing model in which private companies support artistic works, especially films, that can generate added commercial value.

In the Algerian case, data from the Algerian Centre for Cinematographic Development (CADC) indicate that 30% of Algerian films produced between 2015 and 2023 received funding from start-ups, while 70% remained dependent on public funding.²³

Digital technology has also changed the map of film distribution and consumption. The rise of platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime has allowed films from different countries to circulate more widely. At the same time, these

platforms have imposed new standards linked to demand, audience taste, and profitability. Local cinema is therefore placed before a difficult double challenge: it must reach the global audience and consumer, while also preserving the independence of its artistic and aesthetic vision.

3.3. Tourism as an Economic Resource:

In light of current global transformations, national cinema is required to respond to these new conditions. It can no longer remain closed in on itself, because this would isolate it from the market of artistic distribution and consumption. Yet it also cannot enter the global market without limits, since this may lead to the loss of part of its cultural specificity. What is needed, then, is the formulation of new strategies that combine the local and the universal. More precisely, the aim is to promote the local and give it a wider, even universal, dimension without erasing its particular character. From this angle, cinema may be used rationally within a broader development vision, in which tourism forms one important component.

Accordingly, the private sector should be involved in tourism promotion through film production and distribution. A content analysis of 15 independent Algerian films produced between 2018 and 2023 showed that 40% of these films focused on cultural heritage issues. By contrast, commercial films represented only 10%. This shows the role that independent cinema can play in preserving cultural diversity, which may later be converted into a tourism resource.

However, independent film production cannot achieve this role without effective marketing mechanisms. According to a survey conducted by the Algerian Filmmakers Association among 50 directors, 78% of respondents stated that the absence of international marketing support limits the circulation of their films to the local level.

On this basis, new economic models can be developed by using cinema as a means of tourism promotion. Since cinema is a visual medium, it can be used during

filming to highlight tourist potential, especially through the careful selection of shooting locations. This is particularly relevant for Algeria, which possesses considerable tangible and intangible heritage. Tangible heritage includes ancient monuments and archaeological sites, while intangible heritage includes traditional crafts, handicrafts, customs, and social practices. This cultural density can become an important factor in attracting tourists, and therefore an additional resource for broader development.

The impact of cinema on tourism can be seen clearly in the case of New Zealand, where the number of tourists increased by 50% after the release of *The Lord of the Rings*, especially among visitors interested in seeing the filming locations. In the same sense, Algeria has attractive natural landscapes, diverse tangible heritage, and a rich cultural legacy. These elements represent real assets that can be mobilized to support economic activity through a more effective use of the seventh art.

4. Censorship, Self-Censorship, and Their Effects on Cinematic Production:

Censorship is commonly framed as the state's right to oversee a specific cultural production. Its interventions can remain at the level of ordinary, limited critique, or they can escalate to prohibition. Which of these prevails depends on place, historical moment, and the nature of the political regime in question. Under that pressure, screenwriters, directors, and producers sometimes adopt self-censorship, primarily out of apprehension toward the reach and severity of official control.²⁴

In modern accounts, censorship is often classified into four principal forms: political censorship, religious censorship, censorship targeting explicit literature, and censorship that constrains academic freedom.²⁵ Even with this typology, the phenomenon does not present uniformly across contexts. Its modalities and intensity shift from one country to another because political systems differ, and so do the intellectual and cultural frameworks that

organize public life. As a result, censorship may expand or contract in line with the underlying logic of each system.

In this regard, and according to a report by the Arab Cinema Observatory, only 40% of government-funded films addressed social issues, compared with 85% of independent films. This confirms that censorship can restrict artistic creativity and reduce cultural diversity in film content.²⁶ Yet, although censorship may limit freedom of expression and creative practice to some extent, it also has a positive, and even necessary, role in regulating film production in accordance with the values and principles of society.

The degree of censorship practiced is directly reflected in the space available for freedom of opinion and freedom of expression. Where censorship is described as “enlightened,” it is presented as protecting expression rather than suffocating it. It relies, to a significant extent, on trust in the individual’s rational capacity and on an affirmation of freedom in ways that accommodate legitimate interests while avoiding harm to the rights of others. In such an environment, creators can exercise a responsible freedom of expression anchored in professional conscience. When censorship instead aims to suppress the thinker’s freedom in order to preserve the existing order and guarantee its stability, its function shifts. It moves away from protecting expression and becomes a mechanism for protecting power across multiple domains of life.²⁷

Since art cannot replace the most basic human requirement, namely freedom²⁸, cinema faces a central stake tied to the principle of freedom, including freedom of opinion and expression, which concerns it directly. It is expected to show the courage to place freedom on the agenda and to address it openly, precisely because cinema is both a mass communication medium and a purposeful art that seeks to reach noble values and to act on reality. Cinema is, in fact, the most directly implicated field here: without freedom and without freedom of

expression, there is no viable space for creativity.

The problem, however, is not confined to the insufficient or inappropriate responsiveness of governing political authorities. It also exists within the social and cultural structure of society itself. This becomes one of the key challenges for cinema understood as serious, purposeful work, and as an educational and awareness-raising medium that attempts to break rigid molds and unsettle stagnant ideas. Cinema is not merely the depiction of social reality, nor its reproduction on screen. It also carries pedagogical and critical functions, particularly when it approaches certain taboos that can obstruct social dynamism, taboos often defended through arguments and pretexts that are neither reasonable nor acceptable.

5.Common Features of Arab Cinema’s Contemporary Landscape:

Across much Arab cultural policy, the arts are still treated primarily as “entertainment material.” Cinema, in particular, is often placed at the bottom of the artistic hierarchy. In some contexts, it is even cast as vulgar, or labeled “forbidden.” This outlook cannot be separated from the wider Arab political order, with its dominant patterns of authoritarian repression, economic infringement, cultural alienation, and social marginalization. Under such conditions, the sidelining of culture tends to become systematic: culture is pushed toward trivialization and turned into a commodity that is cheap to produce, easy to consume, and detached from specificity and authenticity. What is being avoided, in effect, is precisely what cultural seriousness can generate, namely a dissenting voice or an oppositional sensibility.²⁹

At the same time, it is true that power everywhere, whether liberal or authoritarian, seeks to use cinema in service of its interests and political orientations. The difference lies in what remains possible within the system. In totalitarian regimes, the “other cinema,” meaning oppositional cinema, is largely negated. By contrast, American cinema

provides a revealing example of coexistence: there are films that glorify fanaticism, war, violence, and authority, yet within the same cinematic space one also finds films that oppose war and racial discrimination, that criticize class oppression, that expose authoritarian corruption, and that express contempt for spiritual decline. This pluralism exists even though cinema in the United States has, in general, been strongly tied to major financial monopolies and their broader policies. Totalitarian systems, by contrast, have repeatedly assumed that eliminating the other cinema would maximize their effectiveness and strengthen their influence over public consciousness. It should be noted, however, that exceptions can be found in both systems.³⁰

In this context, the Tunisian director Farid Boughdir argues in an article that cinema, in practice, exists only among expatriate directors, those who find in Western host societies an environment more conducive to creativity and to sustained production. Bureaucracy and the absence of freedom of expression may appear as the visible reasons behind the migration of Arab directors away from their countries. In his view, however, the deeper cause lies in the crisis of managing the commercial cinematic system itself.³¹ The scarcity of screening halls, not to say their near disappearance, makes this crisis difficult to deny, and Algeria stands as a vivid and direct illustration.

6. History and Themes of Algerian Cinema:

6.1. Algerian Cinema: Origins and Development:

Up to 1962, Algeria had no dedicated institution for cinematographic production, with the exception of the television studios in Algiers. Before independence, the country counted roughly 350 cinema halls, largely used to screen and distribute European and American films. Within that colonial configuration, Algeria was rarely treated as a cinematic space with its own voice; more often it served as a backdrop, or as the

subject of certain documentary productions made for, and oriented toward, the French Governor-General's administration in Algeria.

A first marked step toward building Algerian technical and filmmaking capacity is frequently linked to 1957. At that time, and with authorization from the National Liberation Front, a number of Algerian technicians and filmmakers received training under the French filmmaker René Vautier, initially in the outskirts of Tebessa and later in Tunisia, Belgrade, and Prague.³² Jamal Chanderli is commonly cited among the most prominent figures associated with this early formation.

Some sources further suggest that, in 1962, Algeria had more than 400 cinema halls, and that Algiers alone contained 37 screening venues. Today, only about 40 halls remain across the country's provinces, with the Cinémathèque holding 17 of them.³³ Although accounts differ on the exact number inherited after independence, the stable fact is that very few halls remain operational, and most are marked by a near absence of meaningful activity.

In the immediate post-independence period, Algerian authorities sought to grant cinema a significant place. This was pursued through the establishment of public and private structures, including Casbah films, the Office of Algerian News (OAA), the National Cinema Center (CNC), and, later, the National Office for Cinema and the Cinematographic Industry (ONCIC). After ONCIC was dissolved, it was reconfigured into three distinct branches: the National Agency for Film News (ANAF), the National Enterprise for Audiovisual Production (ENPA), and the Algerian Center for Art and the Cinematographic Industry.³⁴

Film production did occur in connection with major cultural events hosted in Algeria, including Tlemcen as Capital of Islamic Culture, the PANAF Pan-African festival, and Constantine as Capital of Arab Culture. The pace, however, remained limited. Production was also shaped by the prevailing political discourse, while

coherent strategic visions aligned with social development were largely missing. On this basis, one can speak of a certain fragility characterizing cultural spaces when they are treated as “non-sensitive” domains.³⁵

Since independence, the institutions overseeing cinema have been marked by recurrent incapacity, linked to the severe absence of any consistently successful project. This ongoing weakness, however, cannot justify the systematic and near-final closure of Algeria’s film and cinematic landscape. In many countries, and in Europe in particular, cinema benefits from substantial public support, since it is treated as a dual public service: commercial in one respect, while simultaneously serving as an image of the country itself.³⁶

6.2. Algerian Cinema Between Aesthetics and Social Commitment: Film Examples:

Cinematic production in Algeria has contracted severely. There was a period in which output could reach 17 films a year, largely because the state was supporting the sector. What is noteworthy is that some Algerian filmmakers have interpreted this downturn as a sign of release rather than decline. Mohamed Zemmouri, in a 1998 interview, argued that the crisis Algeria had been experiencing for about a decade had produced a different production pattern, and that cinema had become, to a large extent, freer from the censorship of an authority that used to finance films only if cinema spoke in its name. Funding can still be requested from the Ministry of Culture through the Fund for the Support of Creativity. Yet even formal approval does not resolve much, since the fund may simply be empty. This is precisely what happened to Rachida Chouikh when she was looking for financing for her film (*Rachida*).³⁷

A different dynamic emerges when filmmakers, Algerian or foreign, deal with historical events using archival documents or biographical sources. Many of them avoid historical critique and instead present events in a photographic mode that still leaves space for artistry and creative construction. This is visible in Ahmed Rachedi’s

(*Mustapha Ben Boulaïd*) (2009), as well as (*Karim Belkacem*) (2014) and (*Colonel Lotfi*) (2015). The same strict historical approach appears in (*Zabana*) (2012) by Mohamed Ould Khelifa. In Algeria, anxiety about altering historical facts, whether by adding details or omitting them, often becomes a constraint imposed by the audience itself. This, in turn, sharpens the confusion between history and imagination and helps explain why many directors gravitate toward historical subjects at the expense of freer fictional cinema.³⁸ The case of (*Larbi Ben M’hidi*) by Bachir Draï’s reflects this tension. Although the film was produced years earlier, it was not screened in halls and only appeared in 2024, after the matter reached the courts in a dispute involving the director and the Ministries of Mujahideen and Culture, both of which were co-financing partners.

For related reasons, (*Chronicle of the Years of Fire*) cannot be straightforwardly classified as a historical film. The historical genre narrows artistic freedom by binding the filmmaker to the factual record, so that any deviation is read as falsification. That constraint limits the director’s ability to state a personal position or to articulate a particular vision of events. The director therefore insisted that the film is not a copy of Algerian history. He framed it as a fictional work through which he seeks to question Algerian history and carry it into the realm of image and cinema. This is why the film can accept critique: it is, first and foremost, an artwork, and Mohamed Lakhdar Hamina remains faithful to his own ideas and interpretations of modern Algerian history.³⁹ The broader dilemma is clear here. Many assume that a historical film, whether centered on a figure or on specific events, must reproduce the past exactly as written in history books and as official discourse repeats it.

That expectation lies at the heart of the controversy surrounding Bachir Draï’s film on the martyr Larbi Ben M’hidi. The debate became so intense that it evolved into litigation between the director and the

Ministries of Mujahideen and Culture. The ministry claimed that the director did not respect the agreed screenplay and that the film did not do justice to the martyr's heroic struggle. The director, however, aimed to move beyond the exemplary and sanctifying frame long maintained by official discourse. According to his own statements, he sought to give the martyr a more human dimension rather than confining him to the revolutionary and militant register. In the same landscape of stalled projects, the film on Emir Abdelkader has remained in limbo for almost forty years. The project dates back to 1984, and its stagnation can be attributed to several reasons, some known and others unknown.

In another direction, *The Forgotten Hill* by Abderrahmane Bouguermouh is widely presented as the first Algerian feature film in the Amazigh language. It was adapted from Mouloud Mammeri's novel of the same title, screened in 1995, and received substantial audience attention in what remained of Algeria's cinema halls. The historical nature of its theme was central to that reception. The film depicts Kabylia at the end of the 1930s, in a climate of anxiety shaped by anticipation of the war unfolding north of the Mediterranean and by the colonial army's intention to conscript Algerian youth into a war that did not concern them. Some of these young men had studied in Paris and returned to Algeria, which triggers a generational confrontation with older men over whether heritage should be preserved and inherited values maintained, values said to have accumulated over thousands of years.⁴⁰ One element that can be credited to the film is its effort to make visible the conflict between tradition and renewal. It stages younger resistance to guardianship imposed in the name of tradition, while suggesting that traditions are not necessarily all positive, indispensable, or beyond revision, critique, and updating.

If one sets aside films such as (*Tahya Ya Didou*) by Mohamed Zinet and (*Omar Gatlato*) by Merzak Allouache, one still finds many Algerian films from the 1970s

that turned toward social analysis and close examination. These films reveal a preference for lived reality in a cinematic field otherwise dominated by historical subjects in the post-independence period. On this basis, social films are treated here as realist by default, a view that is common among many Arab critics.⁴¹ Yet cinema is not simply the photographic duplication of reality. It also aims to act upon reality and to direct it toward what is perceived as better.

In the early 1990s, Said Ould Khelifa introduced the project (*White Shadows*) (1992), a film that exposes practices described as shameful within Algerian society, including racial discrimination. Even if racism was not, at the time, a prominent social phenomenon demanding sustained public attention, the director still warned against its pitfalls. The film follows Asia, an archaeology researcher, and her struggle to maintain her life by balancing work, social status, and complex emotional entanglements. She becomes involved with Akli, a simple worker cleaning the streets of Algiers, although he had previously been a senior technician in France. The film includes scenes showing how difficult it can be for a woman living alone to secure housing in Algerian society. It also contrasts the French environment from which Akli came with a conservative Algerian society organized around the family, set against an individualistic society marked by different values and standards.⁴² What can be credited to the film is its anticipatory gesture: it pointed to a social ill even when it did not appear clearly visible. Later developments suggested that racism does exist, particularly toward Black Africans, a reality that contradicts humanitarian principles and Islamic principles as well.

Among Algeria's distinctive comic, spectacle-oriented films is (*The Square*) by Dahmane Ouzid, one of the notable television directors. The film starts from a neglected public space, "the public square," and uses it to weave together the trajectories of several youth groups in contemporary Algerian society, including irregular

migrants (harraga) and drug addicts. The characters debate democracy, migration, and the position of girls within society. These questions are raised through a youth outlook that often departs from the dominant reality, yet the shared square, positioned at the center of the new neighborhood, gathers them. The film suggests that the square's future will inevitably reflect the future of youth, beginning with awareness of public space as a pathway toward the homeland, much as unity appears in the artistic performances held in the square.⁴³ Even though comedy dominates the film's tone, it touches an important citizenship issue: participation in public space, a concept that is civic in the strongest sense. For many, public space remains vague, and cinema can help cultivate the norms and values associated with it, particularly because conflicts between individuals and groups often arise where a culture of respect and coexistence in shared space is weak or absent.

A closely related perspective appears in Mohamed Chouikh's (*Women's Village*) (2005), also built on a real event in western Algeria. Chouikh's film is presented as more realistic than Djamilia Sahraoui's. It depicts women resisting in a village after men were forced to work in factories far from home, leaving women responsible for defending themselves and their property. Their strategy of self-defense develops under the pressure of a frightening enemy that shows no mercy. The film thus foregrounds resistance rather than surrender. By choosing the resisting woman, the director centers what is often described as the weak element in society, yet weakness turns into strength, producing a new awareness of reality and of women's position within a changing Algerian society.⁴⁴ The film's distinctiveness lies in its boldness. It addresses women directly and presents them not as passive or fragile, but as agents who resisted and continue to resist violence, backwardness, and obscurantism. The director also sought to craft a positive image of women, long perceived as deficient or, at best, weak.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations:

Ultimately, if cinema is to play a meaningful role in strengthening and consolidating citizenship, as a mass communication medium and as an art oriented toward the aesthetic, it has to enter this terrain directly by addressing its varied subject matter rather than skirting it. One of cinema's main advantages is precisely its communicative and media power. From that starting point, cinema becomes educational and formative, shaping audiences through its tools, its techniques, and its specific properties, above all the image, since nothing communicates as forcefully as an image. Film also has a distinctive capacity to combine seriousness, as a vehicle of socialization, with an artistic and aesthetic dimension that refines public taste and expands the audience's relationship to art. Few other arts, and no other media form, can bring these elements together in the same way.

It is equally clear, however, that Algerian cinema faces persistent challenges and multiple barriers. Still, these obstacles do not eliminate the possibility of moving beyond them, provided there is serious thinking oriented toward workable solutions within the means and resources already available. In that spirit, the following proposals can be advanced. Their implementation remains dependent on political will, exercised through the supervisory authority, namely the Ministry of Culture:

- Reopen all cinema halls that are already operational, and rehabilitate those that are not yet ready across most Algerian cities. It is not credible to speak of cinematic production without screening spaces. The link is structural: when screening halls disappear, production inevitably weakens and then recedes.
- Transfer cinema halls out of municipal ownership and management, since municipalities are not equipped to run them, and place them under an independent body or under the Ministry of Culture, through an office or institution mandated

specifically to administer and operate these venues.

- Treat cinema as a strategic sector within culture and tourism, and therefore within the economy, by adopting a clear public policy anchored in a defined strategy rather than ad hoc interventions.

- Bring the Ministry of Tourism into a genuine partnership in developing production and the cinema industry. This requires orienting film production toward tourism promotion and toward presenting Algerian culture and national heritage in ways that attract foreign visitors. A portion of the tax revenues generated in this process could then be allocated to funding the cinematographic industry.

- Build self-financing mechanisms by reopening cinema halls to screen national and foreign films through ticket sales, while actively restoring a public culture of cinema attendance.

- Open the sector to private investment, whether in production or in distribution, to reduce exclusive dependence on public funding.

- Prioritize the dissemination of awareness and values consistent with national culture, especially at a moment when currents hostile to the arts, and to cinema in particular, are expanding. These currents either declare cinema forbidden or, at best, reduce it to activities deemed useless and trivial.

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