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Visual Arts and Visual Heritage in Algerian Cinema: An Aesthetic and Cultural Reading

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Abstract:
Heritage, in all its forms, is a key influence on modern and contemporary Algerian cinema, playing a fundamental role in shaping individual culture and preserving national identity. The evolution of Algerian cinema has contributed to the emergence of an aesthetic awareness among filmmakers, enabling them to incorporate heritage into the form and content of their work independently, reflecting social and living realities. This research explores the ways in which heritage, particularly visual and artistic heritage, is present in the construction of cinematic language. It serves as a tool for reinterpreting history and for understanding the details of the daily lives and social customs of Algerian society, compensating for what direct historical narration may fail to convey through visual images.
Keywords: heritage, visual arts, cinema, image, identity.

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Introduction:

Heritage is considered a primary source for cinema in Algeria, and its significance in shaping individual culture, both cognitively and intellectually, as well as its crucial role in preserving identity, has been established in various modern and contemporary Algerian cinematic works. Algerian cinema has undergone significant phases in its history, revealing the beauty of artistic production and enabling Algerian filmmakers to gain experience and aesthetic awareness — a consciousness of heritage and how it is employed in terms of both form and substance. They are free to choose their own themes, which often reflect lived reality and the social environment. Thus, returning to heritage, whether material or immaterial (aesthetic heritage), is essential.

When discussing this topic, our aim is to determine the relationship between heritage and cinema in general. Specifically, this leads us to ask the following question: What are the most significant manifestations of heritage in Algerian cinematic works? This research is important because it attempts to analyse cinematic works that use images from the heritage of visual arts to create artistic works and reveal parts of history through heritage, depicting various aspects of social and cultural life over time. This also helps us to understand the daily life and customs of Algerian society through visual images, remedying what history may fail to describe.

First: heritage.

Linguistically:

In Ibn Manzur's Lisan al-Arab, it states: 'Inheritance, legacy and heritage are all one, and the root of inheritance is "mawrath", where the "waw" changes to "ya" when the preceding letter is broken.' 'Heritage' refers to what is left by ancestors, and it is said that 'inheritance' and 'legacy' pertain to wealth, while 'heritage' pertains to what one creates for their heirs[1].

Terminologically:

'Heritage' refers to what 'predecessors have left behind in terms of material and immaterial aspects, regardless of their type'[2]. Muhammad Abed al-Jabri asserts that 'heritage encompasses everything that is artistically or meaningfully present from the past, whether from our own past or that of others, and whether recent or distant'[3].

From these concepts, we can see that heritage encompasses everything that predecessors leave for successors in terms of concepts and ideas. It is also part of both the past and the present, as evidenced by social interactions between the two, and is manifested in various material and immaterial forms that constitute a nation's heritage.

Types of heritage:

Heritage is divided into two categories:

A. Material heritage:

This includes all aspects of tangible popular culture, such as textiles, decorations, clothing, food and drink, dance, art, paintings, engravings and traditional games.

B. Immaterial heritage:

This includes beliefs, mental concepts and oral arts such as poetry, riddles, storytelling, myths and oral folklore.

Through its collective significance, heritage is characterised by several features, including:

- Its vastness and diversity of sources and dimensions.
- Its ability to transcend the boundaries of time and space with considerable maturity, as well as its capacity for renewal and harmony with all intellectual and civilisational data that changes with generations and cultures.
- Its capacity to assert its existence in all areas and engage with all forms of knowledge, literary genres, and art.
- Its direct and close connection to issues of modernity and contemporaneity.
- Its profound and effective impact on the daily lives of civil societies, influencing their individual and collective behaviours and mental representations that persist to this day[4].

Second: The Heritage of Algerian Visual Arts:

When we invoke the term 'heritage', a distinctive epistemological vision crystallises around a realm that exists in sensation and texture. This realm is a product of creative human thought and behaviour. It is a mistake to reduce heritage to mere drawings, lines and embellishments. Rather, heritage embodies human culture that has existed for millions of years, constituting one of the foundational elements of aesthetic communication between generations. Historical texts reveal that humans first expressed themselves through heritage by drawing on rocks and in caves across bygone civilisations, as seen in the Tassili Mountains of Algeria, ancient Egyptian civilisation and Mesopotamian culture.

The earliest drawings were derived from daily life and evolved into self-portraits and significant works carrying intricate symbols and meanings. Discoveries from ancient heritage demonstrate that traces of heritage reached the pinnacle of beauty and creativity, serving as early humans' expressions of their reality in their own unique style, through aesthetic and artistic values. Thus, Algeria is considered one of the world's primary sources of visual arts, with a rich historical depth attributed to primitive human remnants such as drawings, masks, figures, naturalistic drawings and images of hunters, cattle and shepherds, culminating in depictions of the camel — a natural ally to the desert environment[5].

This richness varies across regions and tribes within our nation, each of which has a rich heritage and diversity, including immaterial heritage. Among the Amazigh and Berber peoples, for example, we see linguistic and visual forms such as Tifinagh, as noted by the researcher Michel Duveau, who specialised in the life and history of the Tuareg. He aimed to save the Tuareg from the torments of hell and secure them a place in paradise, and to this end, he sought to study this people comprehensively[6].

The Amazigh also adorned their bodies and handcrafted products in various ways, even decorating them with drawings and tattoos bearing Amazigh symbols and meanings[7]. This visual arts heritage has also attracted the attention of some Orientalist writers. For instance, art critic Aris Alexander wrote an article about the arts and artistic crafts in Algeria in Al-Akhbar newspaper[8]. It is fair to say that Orientalist artists played an important role in conveying social and cultural realities through their artwork, which

has become a historical record of our cultural heritage. This is evident in the work of Eugène Delacroix, who achieved unprecedented success with his depiction of 'The Women of Algiers', as well as with his painting 'Arab from Oran', and another version of 'Women of Algiers in Their Home', dated 1849[9], which is housed in the Musée de l'Armée.

The artist Étienne Dinet was profoundly influenced by rural social life and, like many other Orientalist artists including Théodore Rousseau (1812–1869) and Jean-François Millet, traversed the desert. The realist school includes several paintings by Gustave Courbet (1818–1877) and Camille Corot (1796–1875)[10].

All of these works serve as documentation of the social image, embodying the meanings and connotations of cultural heritage that preserve our national identity.

2.1 Cinema

Concept of Cinema:

"The term cinema, in its simplest definitions, is the writing with images, but it is a broad expression that encompasses everything related to feature films, documentaries, animated films, television films, and more.[11]" Cinema is a pure art and creative activity that mirrors human reality through all its social, cultural, and economic experiences by depicting human life in all its details. Algerian cinema has managed, in a short time, to occupy this prestigious space in terms of its form, content, and the techniques used, as well as through its sincere adaptation and treatment of various human experiences worldwide, along with their details, orientations, and ideological affiliations. Thus, it has become a reflective mirror of human images, among which is heritage, regarded as a means of communication between generations, serving as one of the primary channels through which we can reveal the thought processes of different peoples. In recent years, there has been growing interest in both material and immaterial heritage because it carries a collective significance for human groups.

Third: The Role of Visual Arts in Cinema:

Cinema has been profoundly influenced by the visual arts in terms of meaning and connotation, as can be seen in all kinds of films (historical, social, etc.). Themes often include decorations or the life stories of filmmakers, positioning them within the context of artistic exploration in historical cinematic endeavours. Visual art serves as a conduit for clarifying the true image and positively affects communication with the audience (encounters, dialogues and discussions), thereby forming a collective tendency or consciousness when engaging with the cinematic product. This facilitates an understanding of the work's image and demonstrates an inherent collaborative nature with the product. Furthermore, it broadens viewers' visual imagination by blending their preconceived ideas, resulting in a cinematic image open to various interpretations that shape their perception of commercial cinema. This has long influenced their intellectual understanding of scenes and their ability to interpret incoming messages, acting as a visual gateway to all forms of cinema.

Here, we agree with William Shakespeare's assertion that 'all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players'. From this statement, we can develop the epistemological idea that all societies

rely on their cultural heritage. As we know, heritage encompasses everything humans do, including movements and crafts represented in visual forms. Therefore, cinema is not devoid of visual arts; this is an essential element, as it is manifested in the scenography upon which screenwriters and directors rely.

Filmmakers' imaginations are always immersed in the world of visual arts (colours, lines, shapes, etc.). Michelangelo Antonioni, who received an honorary Oscar for his pioneering work with colour, stated: 'I would like to colour my films as if they were works of art. I want to create my own unique colour moods and invent colour relationships. I don't want to be confined to the natural colours of photography.[12]'

While colour is a fundamental element in the aesthetics of a work of art, it also drives the viewer's emotional response to a visual painting or cinematic image. 'The sensory processes, that is, the processes related to the perception of colour, occur through the perception of both the object and its image. However, this is often overlooked in favour of the idea that the image must possess sensory characteristics that differ from those of the object, such as different brightness and colour contrasts. This is partly true, and it is up to the viewer to unravel all of this despite the fact that human physiological psychology is a highly flexible system[13].

Since colour is not the only element linking visual arts and cinema, other elements shape visual taste within a cinematic framework. These elements adhere to the principles and laws of visual arts, such as perspective (three-dimensionality), spatial harmony and contrast — essentially the relationship between brightness and darkness. Cinematic images are subject to important indicators such as music, lighting and decorations, which place the television frame at the heart of the visual and meaningful significance of the visual arts, encompassing drawing, painting, photography, sculpture and spatial treatment[14].

Here, the form illustrates the viewer's cognitive process regarding the visual image, whether artistic or cinematic.

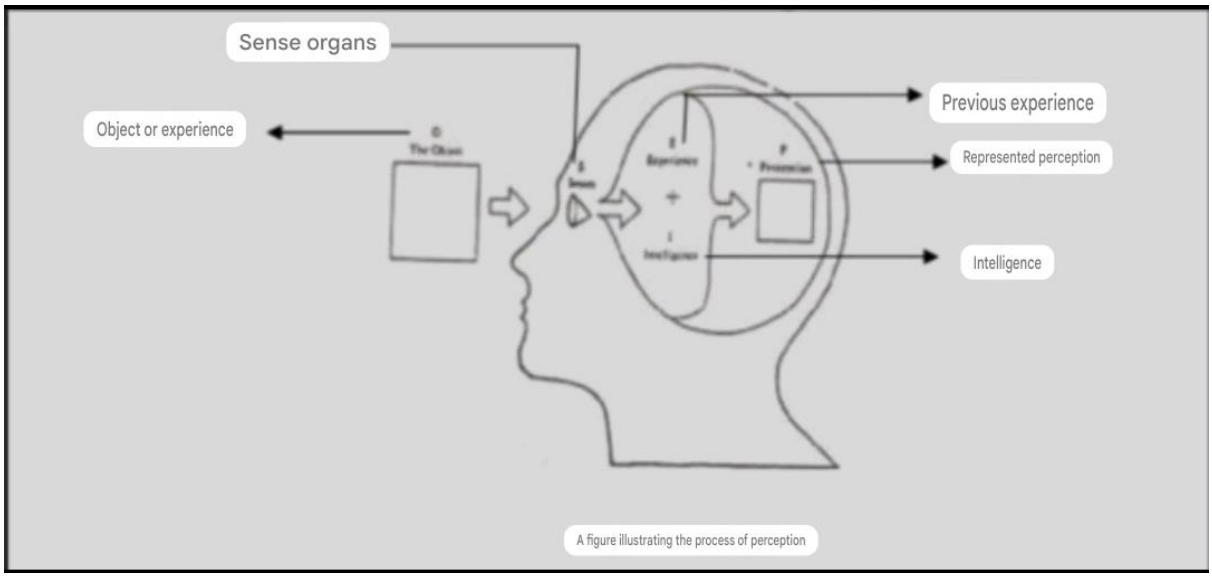


Figure:[15] Visual Perception: Saadia Mohcen A'id Al-Fadhli, Culture of the Image, p. 164.

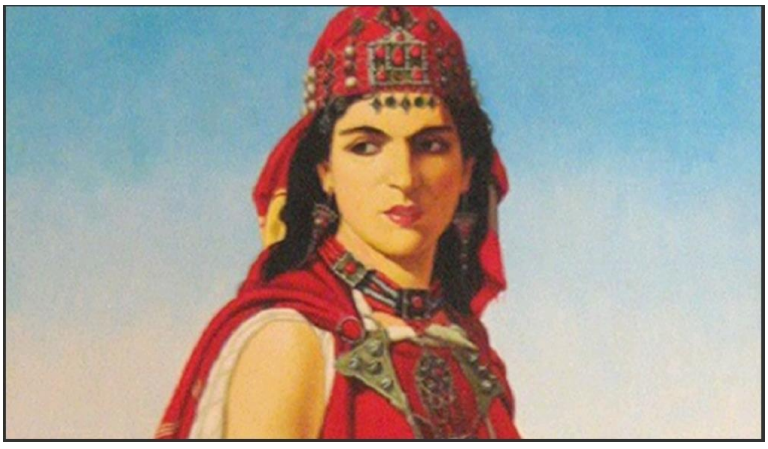
3.1 Visual arts in Algerian cinema

As previously mentioned, we can assert that Algerian cinema has played a significant role in preserving the country's artistic visual heritage through clothing, architecture and visual symbols. A prime example of this is the film Lalla Fatima N'Soumer, which depicts the heroic resistance of an Amazigh woman against French colonialism. The film showcases the visual heritage of the Amazigh people, highlighting their traditional clothing, jewellery, architecture and tattoos. These elements serve as historical communicative signs, providing a visual representation that goes beyond mere words.

Belkacem Hajjaj's camera portrays the fourth decade of the nineteenth century, capturing the colonial readiness for direct invasion of the region. In an atmosphere charged with resistance, struggle and combat, Fatima N'Soumer stands at the centre, advocating the independence of rural women, and ultimately dies alone[16]. The film's imagery is inspired by diverse heritage forms and expressions, rendering the image — whether cinematic or artistic — capable of multiple readings and dimensions. This interplay between the two domains is manifested in the epistemological and aesthetic relationship revealed through visual expressiveness, which underlines the relationship between the cinematic and the artistic[17].

The film Fatima N'Soumer confirms that visual arts are the fundamental factor in constructing the cinematic image, as there was no description or image to convey her original appearance, according to her relatives. Her granddaughter commented on this, recalling a well-known oral tradition in their family: 'On the day she was arrested, having been betrayed by a relative who revealed her home to the French, she emerged adorned with all her jewellery, head held high, proud.[18]'

Some Orientalist artists depicted Fatima in this attire, as this account was widely known: 'Orientalists painted an image of Lalla Fatima based on Douti's description.[19]' This artistic representation then became the basis for the historical image of Fatima N'Soumer, which has since become a reference point for Algerian cinema in its portrayal of this heroine.



Artistic representation by Orientalists



Cinematic image extracted from the film Fatima N'Soumer.

4. Conclusion:

Cinema plays an important role in transmitting and promoting information audibly and visibly to all segments of society as it incorporates various forms of art, such as music and visual arts, into its works. Thus, cinema has played a significant role in preserving the cultural heritage of the visual arts, upon which humans relied in their early days to record the history of civilisations and cultures, thereby providing a source for cinema. This is evident in the previously mentioned cinematic works, where the filmmaker's creativity transforms a static image into a living one, even when the characters are mythical.

Through this study, we have learned that cinema does not rely solely on images; it also uses dialogue to engage the audience. However, the visual aspect tends to have the most significant impact on viewers, highlighting the importance of form and colour in the artistic collaboration between visual arts and cinema, which share the goal of creating beautiful images.

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