



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 33 | 2022

Title	Rethinking Algerian Visibility and Invisibility in <i>Ali au Pays des Merveilles</i>
Author	Chengxi Li
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	33
Publication Date	September 2022

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise *FORUM* as the original publisher.

Rethinking Algerian Visibility and Invisibility in *Ali au Pays des Merveilles*

Chengxi Li

University of Cambridge

This article examines Djouhra Abouda and Alain Bonnamy's experimental documentary Ali au pays des merveilles (1975) and discusses how the filmmakers expose Algerian workers' living conditions in the 1970s France, a promised land where racism and exclusion persist. This study analyses the visibility and invisibility of the Algerian labour by first discussing the exclusion of Algerian migrants on the basis of their racial identity and their social status, in light of thinking related to French republican identification. The author then examines the interrelations between the Algerian labour and the commodities produced by their labour, as well as the glamorous spectacle associated with the commodities. Finally, the article reflects on the reflexive archaeology of the image that questions the power and limits of archives, interrogating the entanglements of French colonial history in Algeria. The article argues that Abouda and Bonnamy's stylistic devices are in line with those of the Third Cinema, providing an alternative that allows post-colonial sensibilities to challenge the official discourse and the self-claiming "universal" but indeed Eurocentric aesthetics.

Introduction

The experimental documentary *Ali au pays des merveilles* [*Ali in Wonderland*] (1975) revolves around the conditions of Algerian migrants in 1970s France. It was not until last year that the film was restored in 4k and rediscovered by scholars and the public. Before that, the film disappeared and was forgotten after its screening at the *Cinémathèque française* in 2000. The destiny of the film constitutes an interesting parallel with the lives of Algerian migrants that the film focuses on. They were once forgotten as well, unacknowledged and invisible in the public eye. However, in *Ali au pays des merveilles*, the two filmmakers give agency to these Algerian workers, allowing them to tell their own stories and register their lived experiences. For Jacques Rancière, the regime that prescribes what is visible or invisible is at the heart of politics. This is what he calls the "distribution of the sensible", a form of intervention that dictates inclusions and exclusions. In his view, "[p]olitics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time" (8). In this essay, I will argue that, in *Ali au pays des merveilles*, Abouda and Bonnamy expose the exclusion of Algerian communities from French society, despite the republican ideal of a universalist "pays des merveilles"

(wonderland). Through a series of stylistic devices, that are in line with those of the Third-World Cinema, they redistribute the sensible and make the silences of history speak the invisible beings become visible once again.

Questioning the French national narrative

The film commences with a long list of names of Algerian victims in green letters against a black background. It is a list of people who died from unnatural causes France in 1975; either from violent attacks, bullets, or drowning. The names - in capital letters - roll on screen in complete silence, thus constituting a commemorative inscription of those whose death remains unseen and unknown. These rolling titles have the nature of a collective gravestone, providing a space for their names to emerge from the forgotten register and archives, so that they can reappear in the public sphere, and we can observe a minute of silence for them. These are the names of people whom the French national narrative has failed to recall.



Fig. 1. Juxtaposition of the blue-white-red flag and the far-right newspaper *Minute*

The title: *Assez de crimes d'Algériens !* [Enough with Algerian crimes!]

In the sequence following the title of the film, an off-key rendition of *La Marseillaise* accompanies the juxtaposition of the blue-white-red flag and images of anti-Arab titles in the far-right newspaper *Minute* (Fig. 1). Guy Debord and Gil Wolman encourage the use of “détournement” (hijacking, defined as a variation on previous work, usually with satirical purpose), because it collides with all social conventions and appears as a “powerful cultural instrument at the service of a well-understood class struggle” (Debord and Wolman 6). The

sequence provides an example of “détournement” par excellence, first in that it re-appropriates racist discourse published on a far-right media, ridiculing the racial hatred towards Algerian and North-African people in France; and second, in that it appears to deride France’s national symbols, such as the national anthem and blue-white-red flag.

If the French republican values intend to be Universalist and colour-blind, the juxtaposition of republican symbols and a discourse that refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of Algerian presence in France as citizens (*citoyens*) is nothing less than a reminder that prompts the viewers to interrogate the tension between the ideal abstract republican universalism and its practical operation. As Lia Brozgal puts it, there exists a myth of the “unitary, universalist and inclusive nature of the Republic of France” and a “unique vision of citizenship and national belonging based on an abstract egalitarianism” (220). In French revolutionist traditions, as in the *Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen de 1789*, all citizens are equal without distinction in the eyes of the law. The citizenship in this context relates to an intrinsic abstraction that seeks to obviate any particular affiliation except for republican French citizenship. The contrasting images reveal that in reality racial minorities remain hyper-visible in France to a degree that their presence could be seen as an “invasion”, or even a “menace” to the French Republic.

By calling the reality of French republican values into question, *Ali au pays des merveilles* appears in accordance with the aesthetic regime and political values of the Third Cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, which attempted to formulate an articulate assault on Eurocentrism that embellishes Western history, culture, and values while demonising its non-Western equivalent (Shohat and Stam 3). The aesthetic and the production method of the Third Cinema, mainly composed of political documentaries, are appropriate to the social, political, and economic situation of the Third World nations (256), in refusal of cultural hegemony and aesthetic paradigms set by European and Hollywood cinema. *Ali au pays des merveilles* is in conformity with the ‘Third-Worldist’ modes of representation, first in that it puts western values and aesthetic into perspective, and second, it renders the socio-economic reality of Algerian migrants in France.

Invisible presence of Algerian labour



Fig. 2. Bustling street in Paris



Fig. 3. Algerian worker digging in the shadow

The exclusion of Algerian migrants from French society is not merely a question of their racial appearance, but also a result of their social status compared to the ruling class. What Abouda and Bonnamy lay bare in *Ali au pays des merveilles* through editing is the striking visual barriers between two contrasting worlds: an all-powerful world of images, i.e. the spectacular world of the powerful, and a non-spectacular world of Algerian workers “without images” in Debord’s sense (Benoliel 347-48). These workers did not benefit from the economic growth and the augmentation of purchasing power that they contributed to during the *Trente Glorieuses* (1945-1975) after World War II. In one sequence, the rapid editing flickers between images of white people strolling on the street near the Parisian gourmet food merchant *Fauchon*, and images of an Algerian worker digging a hole with an electric drill. This sequence gestures to a logic whereby the latter does not belong to the other world represented in the sequence.

When pausing the film, we see two different images: one of a bustling street in the daylight, with an iconography of modern consumerism in sight (the sign of *Fauchon*, Fig. 2), the other one of a worker engaging in excavation solitarily in the shadow (Fig. 3). Apparently, Algerian workers are invisible in the world that they do not belong to because of this visual segregation. However, in hindsight, the presence of the worker is not, and cannot be, entirely effaced - even when the editing shifts to the “other” world. He exists in his invisibility. The unpleasant and persistent diegetic sound of the electric drill inserts the worker’s presence into the embellished world while their labour is off-screen. The stylistic device of rapid editing also

imposes the worker's image on the spectacular world through the agency of the persistence of vision. These heterogeneous images linger and intermingle, producing an effect of superimposition, reminding us of the impossibility of dividing these two worlds, or of dividing Algerian labour and commodities provided for (white) French citizens. These French citizens occupy their middle-class position at the expense of North African immigrants who find themselves marginalised during the process of modernisation.

Another sequence appears to strike us in a similar manner: shiny surfaces of luxurious clothing in an haute couture shop are juxtaposed with plain images of Algerian workers undertaking humble manual labour in a cloud of dust. The decorative objects recall in this respect Debord's point that the commodity "completes its colonisation of social life" and that "commodities are now *all* that there is to see" (29). As a result of invisible social labour, the smiling mannequins are dressed in fashionable clothes against a shimmering background, "subjecting all reality to an appearance that is in effect that labour's product" (33). As the objects of commodity fetishism, they are unapologetically placed on display and appreciated through the display window as dazzling emblems of modernisation and luxury. The low-angle shot accentuates the superior position of the mannequins, suggesting the dominant status of these commodities over the workers, who are filmed in a slightly high-angle shot.

However, France could not have left behind its starvation and suffering during the Occupation and achieved economic abundance without the labour of immigrants from its former colonies or its overseas territories. As one Algerian worker points out in her voice-over: "All of us, women and men, we work for France, not for Algeria. We are rebuilding the country. Algerians are rebuilding their buildings. [...] I still have not found a job in which there are no Algerians. And today we are pushed away." The previous scene is precisely indicative of how Algerians work for French modernisation while being subjugated: an Algerian, digging on a construction site next to a clothing shop with the sign "Manteaux de vision" ("Coats of Vision"), appears to be at a visually lower level than those who walk on the pavement. No one stops to look at him. His labour remains unseen and unacknowledged. In *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* Kristin Ross elaborates that French modernisation "was built largely on the backs of Africans—who found themselves progressively cordoned off in new forms of urban segregation as a result of the process" (151-52). This unintentional *mise-en-scène* of the Algerian worker's lower status and the visual segregation between the two worlds, which is registered rather than arranged by the filmmakers, gestures to new forms of urban segregation related to France's investment in consumerism. The unequal distribution of urban space

crystallises in this scene through the unequal distribution of screen space; of the visible and the invisible. Although the spectacle produced under the capitalist economy masks the hierarchical exploitation and inequality, the filmmakers foreground reflections on the labour process behind the glitter of the spectacle, and the interrelations between the spectacular and the non-spectacular.

As an Algerian worker describes his working conditions, how he does “everything”, as a “machinist, a lathe operator, a fitter, a welder”, we see a group of Algerian workers, wearing security helmets, ascending the staircase on a construction site. This view is reminiscent of Louis Lumière’s *La Sortie de l’usine Lumière à Lyon* (1895) showing men and women leaving factory. Both sequences were shot in a long take with no camera movement, capturing workers leaving their workplace and focusing on means of production. However, the contexts of these two remain divergent. The Lumière’s film was made within the historical context of industrialisation, where the workers are visibly white. *Ali au pays des merveilles* was set in the context of reconstruction after the Second World War, shedding light on immigrant workers who entered France during *Les Trentes Glorieuses* as a “mobile and rapidly available work force for the new industrial priorities” (Ross 153) and contributed to the revitalisation of French economy paralysed by the war. Nonetheless, their contribution was insufficiently, if not barely, recognised by the state. As the Algerian worker laments in his voice-over, Algerian workers received deplorable amounts of salary compared to French workers- However, the significant duration of the scene along with the significant duration of their labour suggest the import of work as a means of production—Algerian workers’ production of surplus value for French society is largely instrumental to the capitalist modernisation enjoyed by middle-class white French people. The directors insert close-ups of these workers in-between the long take à la Lumière, bringing us once again closer to the immediate producers of commodities lacking recognition.

These Algerian workers are once again made visible in a later scene, which provides a frontal view of workers walking towards the camera. This time the scene is interrupted by multiple jump cuts and shot in a closer scale, allowing the audience to see the workers’ facial expressions more clearly. Some appear emotionless, as if consumed by work and weary of life, while others converse with fellow workers in a rather lively manner. The repetitive pattern of image is broken up by an abrupt split-screen, dividing the screen into two parts: Algerian construction workers on the left, and the frontal view of the Bourse de Paris on the right, where white employees leave their work in suit and tie. The camera then plunges inside the Bourse

de Paris, breaking the split-screen, to display the stockbrokers at work who come and go, looking occupied and serious. The accelerated image accentuates the speediness of their movement, as though they could not wait for a minute to be interrupted in their rush towards the capital, producing a quasi-caricature effect typical of silent cinema in which the characters' movements appear faster and comical. The parallel montage then cuts into a high-angle shot of a construction worker under a metal grille, as if imprisoned behind the bars, sitting on the ground to collect crushed stones. The directors juxtapose two types of workers and two labour processes: one in which employees are smartly dressed, walking confidently in elegant surroundings, the other in which workers are covered in dirt on dusty construction sites. This distinction is also indicative of the urban segregation that I have mentioned above. Algerian workers are refused access to intellectual jobs and therefore confined to construction sites with manual labour, and, by extension, confined to their current socioeconomic status. The capitalist domination of everyday life crystallises around the contrast of two divergent labour processes that create political meaning through the images, alongside the voice-over demonstrating the reality of Algerian workers.

(An)archive of the history

As we watch Algerian men digging, one Algerian woman laments in her voice-over: "We lose our blood here. We die here. The old, the young, the strong, the sick ones... We all die here." What appears to be ironic here is that, as she predicts the fatal destiny of Algerian migrants in France, we still see the Algerian workers working on screen for France. They carry on excavating as if they are digging their own graves to meet their fatal future. This is emphasised by the fact that they are, in fact, standing inside the hole that they are digging, therefore at a level lower than the ground. Through an inserted pan shot, the viewers also catch a glimpse of the Arc de Triomphe standing at the end of the Champs-Élysées, one of the most well known avenues in Paris. The night sight of the Arc de Triomphe, which also appears at the beginning of the film, is reminiscent of the curfew imposed on Algerian communities in the Paris region from 1958 to 1961 that forbade their public appearance in the night-time. This led to the FLN's protest on the night of 17 October 1961. According to historians' estimation, more than two hundred unarmed Algerian demonstrators died from police brutality. Many of the Algerian victims died from beating and were then drowned in the Seine (House and MacMaster 195).

The Algerian workers' act of excavation, in this respect, can also be read in relation to the film's act of unearthing the buried traumatic history invisible in the grand national narrative. It can be seen as an act of resistance against France's reluctance to confront episodes of historical traumas relating to Algeria's independence, such as the Sétif massacre in 1945 (killings of Algerian civilians by French colonial authorities) and the Paris massacre in October 1961, both recounted in the film by the means of archival images. Lia Brozgal offers an etymological reading of Jacques Derrida's "anarchive", as a word composed of "archive" and the prefix "an-", meaning "anti-archive" or "without the archive". At the same time, it can be understood as a "portmanteau word", a "blending of 'anarchy' and 'archive'" (26). According to Brozgal, both meanings are germane to studies of the "October 17" event, because they refer to the absence of official archives, the absence of a physical site of recollection, and its "conditions of production independent of the aegis of the state at the same time" (26).

Archive and anarchive can indeed serve as salient points of reference with regard to the film, prompting us to reflect on the filmmakers' resistance to the official narrative. In 1975, when the documentary was made, the event was still subject to state censorship and disavowal by the French government. No official state archive was available for research yet. In *Ali au pays des merveilles*, the filmmakers combine black-and-white journalistic photos: from victims of police brutality on 17 October 1961 to the present image of police officers inspecting the paper of people of North African descent on the street. The parallel montage of still archival images and moving present images creates a disturbing and shocking effect. The artists do not attempt to compensate for the absence of irrefutable film archives proving the reality of the massacre; instead, they reflect on the pertinence of the issue in their present times.

In this regard, Tina M. Campt's definition of "still-moving-images" is relevant to our discussion of this visual conjunction of still and moving images. For Campt, "still-moving-images" are "vibrational images that hover somewhere between still and moving images", and they can be "animated still images, slowed or stilled images in motion, or visual renderings that blur the distinctions between these multiple genres" (27). She also underlines the affective labour that these images require from the viewer, in that they "demand our affective labour through their capacity to touch or move us" (27). If the irrefutable presence of archival images' referent in the past provides the image with a Barthesian ontology of "that-has-been" [ça-a-été] (92), it inevitably introduces a dimension of indexicality that differs the incidents in the past from the present.

However, Abouda and Bonnamy's refusal of completion and resurrection of the traumatic history exemplifies what Campit refers to as "vibration" between past and present; between both still and moving images. They attempt, instead, to employ the materiality of the archive with a deconstructive approach that questions the capacity of cinema to reconstitute physical reality. By blurring the boundaries between past and present, between still and moving, they endow the present of Algerian people with reverberations of the past, reminding us that the past did not pass but takes another form to become a haunting presence. The utilisation of archives in *Ali au pays des merveilles* raises questions regarding the erasure of collective memory and the indiscernibility between the past and present moment. The history of Algerian people's suffering (especially October 17) collides with the present discriminatory treatment against people of Algerian descent, gesturing to a spatiotemporal and political continuum even though these events are years apart, forcing us to interrogate if the circumstances for Algerian people have effectively changed over time.

Accompanying the voice of an Algerian woman, relating how Algerian martyrs fought and died for their nation during the Algerian war of independence, we see archival moving images of Algerian soldiers marching with weapons in their hands, as well as still images of Algerians captured, killed, or beheaded by French army. By procuring and curating these archival images, Abouda and Bonnamy carried out a form of archaeological work, consisting of excavation of the war's ontological remains, while locating images that signal a connection to the oral testimony of the Algerian woman. These images, however, reveal at the same time the limitation of archives: the directors refuse testimonial usage of image that substitute the woman's voice. As Laura U. Marks and Dana B. Polan explain regarding the audio/visual disjunction in documentary, it "refuses the reassuring mutual reinforcement of sound and image that gives a sense of authenticity to conventional documentary" (34), and that cinematic archaeology is "not a question of exhuming the 'authentic voice' of a minority people—for that would be a unitary voice" (65). The filmmakers do not intend to reconstitute the history and employ the archive as a depository of historical events. Rather, they encourage the viewer to make use of his or her own resources to complete the image and to comprehend the link between the audio and the visual.

In this sense, it is again appropriate to draw an analogy between the aesthetics of *Ali au pays des merveilles* and that of Third Cinema as it urges the spectator to actively participate in the decoding of image and sound. For example, in *La hora de los hornos* [*The Hour of the Furnaces*] (1968), Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas utilise voice-over commentary as well

that “participates mightily in the film’s work of demystification” so that the spectator is “taught to distrust images, to pierce the veil of appearances, to dispel the mists of ideology through an act of revolutionary decoding” (Shohat and Stam 263). Abouda and Bonnamy’s choices of mise-en-scène are in line with the strategy of the Third Cinema filmmakers, serving as a witness to the struggles and reality that Algerians face in France. The revolutionary aesthetics of *Ali au pays des merveilles* derives from its striking montage style that violently juxtaposes images of diverse nature as well as the fact that it gives agency to the silenced and invisible ones in French society. The montage style could be regarded as reminiscent of that of Soviet cinema, especially the montage of attractions advocated by Eisenstein (Beller 96), whose function, however, is restricted to the production of ideological and political propaganda that contributes to a totalitarian configuration. The meaning of the image is univocal and without ambiguity, corresponding to the official ideology of the Soviet regime. *Ali au pays des merveilles* and the ‘Third-Worldist’ Cinema, do not draw power from unicity, but rather from their opacity that invites the spectator to question the meaning of image and to comprehend by his or her own means.

Still, one may question whether the Algerian representation is a continuation of the stereotypical frameworks that reinforce the status of Algerian workers in France as racial minorities and objects under the European gaze, situating Algerian people as the “Other” to the French society. It is worth taking into account the workers’ gaze at the camera and the filmmakers’ engagement to question the spectator’s legitimacy to gaze. As one worker claims that he is proud to be Algerian and refuses to naturalise as French, the directors insert still close-up images of Algerian workers resembling a series of portraits in which they stare back at us, as if interrogating our scrutiny into their lives. The access to their faces is a refusal of ethnographic objectification, providing a salient example of a Levinasian ethics of the face: the face of the ‘Other’ has a “very uprightness” “without defence” that prohibits killing (Levinas 86). “The face speaks. It speaks, it is in this that it renders possible and begins all discourse” (87). This relation to the face described by Emmanuel Levinas gives to understand the authentic relationship with the ‘Other’ that bears recognition without any context. In *Ali au pays des merveilles*, the straightforward succession of faces allows the viewers to take the time to observe the Algerians without any social context, to see them as individuals and to reflect on preconceived Eurocentric ideas that they may or may not have.

Conclusion

By articulating Algerian immigrants' lived experience into meaning and their socio-economic reality, Abouda and Bonnamy attempt to construct a political collective that requires agency to come into being. According to Gilles Deleuze, modern political cinema exists on the basis of a people that "no longer exist, or not yet" (216), which means a political collective yet to come into being, and should contribute to the invention of the people that are missing. During an era where a "plural France" and new French identities were yet to be constructed (Niang 126), *Ali au pays des merveilles* demonstrates the difficulties of integration faced by Algerian migrants in France: a people that did not exist yet. By means of experimental essay cinema, such as jump cut, superimposition and flicker, the juxtaposition of still and moving images, Abouda and Bonnamy illustrate the exclusion of Algerian communities from French society in a capitalist consumerist context after WWII, despite the republican ideal of egalitarianism. They insert the Algerian existence in the public sphere by giving them visibility and the right to speak, despite the absence of the speakers' image, a proof of the film's non-conformity with the traditional documentary that conventionally features the faces of interviewees. In fact, as the spectator only knows the storytellers as Algerian men and women, the voice-over not only offers agency to the invisible individuals but also contributes to the pre-configuration of an emerging people. The individual commentary has become a collective narrative and functions as a redistribution of the sensible in Rancière's sense by giving the Algerian community "the ability to see and the talent to speak" (8). *Ali au pays des merveilles*' application of aesthetics provides an alternative that allows post-colonial sensibilities to challenge the official discourse and the self-claiming "universal" but indeed Eurocentric aesthetics.

Works cited

- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. translated by Richard Howard, Vintage Classics, 2020.
- Beller, Jonathan. *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle*. Dartmouth College Press, 2006.
- Benoliel, Bernard. "Ali au pays des merveilles. Montage permanent." *Jeune, dure et pure! Une histoire du cinéma d'avant-garde et expérimental en France*, edited by Nicole Brenez and Christian Lebrat, Cinémathèque française, 2001, pp. 347-48.
- Brozgal, Lia. *Absent the Archive: Cultural Traces of a Massacre in Paris, 17 October 1961*. Liverpool University Press, 2020. *Contemporary French and Francophone Cultures*, Charles Forsdick, vol. 73.
- Campt, Tina M. "The Visual Frequency of Black Life: Love, Labor, and the Practice of Refusal." *Social Text*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2019, pp. 25-46.
- Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Zone Books, 1994.
- Debord, Guy and Gil Wolman. "Mode d'emploi du détournement." *Les Lèvres nues*, no. 8, 1956, pp. 2-9.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- House, Jim and Neil MacMaster. *Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror, and Memory*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity*. translated by Richard A. Cohen, Duquesne University Press, 1985.
- Marks, Laura U. and Dana B. Polan. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Duke University Press, 2000.
- Niang, Mame-Fatou. *Identités Françaises. Banlieues, Féminités Et Universalisme*. vol. 28, Brill-Rodipi, 2019. *Francopolyphonies*, Kathleen Gyssels and Christa Stevens.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. edited by Gabriel Rockhill, translated by Gabriel Rockhill, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2013.
- Ross, Kristin. *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*. MIT Press, 1996.
- Shohat, Ella and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. Sightlines, 1994.