

Movie Theaters and liberation of images in Algeria can we overpass it?

قاعات السينما و تحرير الصور في الجزائر: هل يمكن أن نستغني عنها؟

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Abstract (English):

This article attempts to describe the cinema as a "physical" space for reception, in order to grasp the repercussions of its presence or absence in cinematographic experiences. First, we will focus on the "classic" cinematic experience in its ritual dimension and on "the place" as a mediation space. In a second step, we try to shed light on the alternative spaces for film reception in Algeria in order to better understand the changes that have taken place in the multiple relationships between the Algerian viewer and the cinema.

Keywords: Movie theaters; Cinematographic Experience; Cinema; Algeria; Oran

الملخص باللغة العربية

يحاول هذا المقال التعرض إلى إشكالية القاعة السينمائية كفضاء مادي للتلقي و ذلك من أجل التعرض إلى تداعيات وجودها أو غيابها ضمن التجربة السينمائية. نتعرض أولا إلى التجربة السينمائية الكلاسيكية في بعدها الطقوسي و كفضاء للوساطة. ثم نحاول تسليط الضوء على الفضاءات البديلة للتلقي السينمائي في الجزائر من أجل فهم التغيرات الطارئة على العلاقات المتعددة بين المشاهد الجزائري و السينما.

كلمات مفتاحية: دور السينما؛ تجربة سينمائية؛ سينما؛ الجزائر؛ وهران

Introduction

Away from being an exhaustive work about Movie Theater, the interest of the following pages is a description of it, to understand the consequences of either the presence or the absence of this experience in Algeria. First, the focus will be on the cinematographic experience (classical one), its ritual dimensions and the place as being a space of mediation. Second, the light will be shed on the alternative spaces of movie reception in Algeria; to understand the changes that took place in the multiple relationships between the Algerian viewer and Cinema.

Movie Theater as an anthropological space

In one of his rare texts devoted entirely and foremost to cinema as a study subject, Roland Barthes acknowledges that he: *"likes to leave the Movie Theater"* (Barthes, 1985 : 345). He is fascinated by the space (movie theater) and the state in which he is, more than the movie itself that he has just seen: *"A little dazed, wrapped up in himself, feeling the cold – he's sleepy, that's*

what he's thinking, his body has become something soporific, soft, limp, and he feels a little disjointed, even (for a moral organization, relief comes only from his quarter) irresponsible. In other words, obviously, he's coming out of hypnosis"(Barthes, 1985 : 345).

Beyond the vivacity of this passage, what we are highly interested in are two conclusions. First, the passivity of the viewer noted in the reception within a movie theater. S/He undergoes a flow of images (sounds and emotions) that cannot be controlled. Apart from the choice of the movie and its timing, the moviegoer has no control except leaving the room in a hurry. Unlike other spaces, the moviegoer neither can freeze nor rewind a sequence. Here the movie is a master more than any other place. Barthes' second observation is the hypnotic-like state in which the viewer is immersed. He does not take into consideration the relativization: watching a movie in a movie theater is hypnosis. Leaving the Movie Theater is not like getting in, this is to say that the movie, the genre, the timing and the place are chosen before we go. We prepare ourselves for a cinema situation; a pre-hypnotic situation in which we plunge into the room's darkness as if we are sinking in hypnotism *"The movie house (ordinary model) is a site of availability (even more cruising), the inoccupation of bodies, which best defines modern eroticism – not that of advertising, or striptease, but that of the big city"*(Barthes, 1985 : 346) .

To grasp this experiment it is enough to evoke the contrary experience (watching a movie even the same one, yet in another context such as on television). The fascination disappears, the darkness is erased, anonymity is repressed and the space is familiar. In his text, Roland Barthes claims that the cinematographic experience is manifested through the act of going to the Movie Theater. In addition, space and all the other considerations are part of this passive experience; since the control is absent for the movie goer. This little gap is important due to watching a movie in another context (outside Movie Theater) is not denying the cinematic experience, rather than it is an opening and a proposal to other conditions of the cinematic experience where the viewer is more than ever an interpretation's producer.

This quasi-fusion relationship with the Movie Theater can only be understood in the light of a ritual act, as it is seen by the anthropologist Marc Augé: *"A social practice organized in accordance with certain conventions"*(Augé, 1994 : 189) ¹. This act allows: *"The establishment, reproduction or renewal of individual and collective activities"* (Augé, 1994 : 51) ², this is to say: this act requires mobility of time and space. Certain conditions should be met: space, time, mental presence adding to that a mutual intelligibility between the viewer (in the Movie Theater) and the movie sender. A viewer who does not master a movie language should look for a place where subtitling is available. These conditions will be the rules of mediation between the movie and the viewer. It is only in the frame of this ritual act that the experience of going to the Movie

Theater should be understood. This ritual act is in contradiction to the example given by Roland Barthes where television is the medium of diffusion and transmission of movies. Despite the absence of the classical ritual act preconditions, through time new rules for new ritual acts (to watch a movie on television) are introduced: a group gathering in one's living room, the use of more or less sophisticated viewing equipment such as home cinema ...etc. Surely, the two experiences are not similar, yet they are not opposite (common points are found in both).

What differentiate the two experiences are two fundamental aspects: accessibility and sharing. Accessibility means moving to the projection. In the classical case the viewer goes to the projection, in other cases it is the projection (movie) that comes to the viewer. To attend a projection - except in specific cases - the viewer has to pay for it hence satisfaction level is conditioned by this act. Next aspect is sharing the experience of going to Movie Theater; most of cases the reception of a movie is done individually though the setting is collective. This is to say we watch a movie together but separately as we watch it separately and together (this implies a sharing of the experience itself, the emergence of the unconscious interpretation groups and value systems are more decisive). Simultaneously, the appropriation and the identification of the movie with the experience become important. The viewer's satisfaction level is higher when receiving a movie than on his way to watch it. The genre of the movie (film d'auteur or commercial movie) and its location (Cinematheque, Neighborhood Movie Theater or Multiplex) are essential parameters in the symbolism of this experience and determine the degree of its legitimacy as a cultural practice; this is according to Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron. Every single viewer interprets the activity of going to Movie Theater differently, to make it a meaningful act and gives it a social meaning. The viewer goes to Movie Theater to watch a film d'auteur because s/he wants to belong - or confirm her/his belonging - to a cinephile community. The same case as s/he goes to watch a commercial movie, because s/he is a fan of a certain actress/actor. Generally speaking, this act of going to Movie Theater is unconscious. What gives meaning to this experience or determines the status of this cultural practice is not the movie itself, but what one does with the movie. The same movie that is received in different circumstances will be the subject of other experience of appropriation; for instance the relation to a HITCHCOCK movie is differed from when it was released in the 1940s or 1950s.

As it is mentioned above, it is not the movie as a received and perceived object that makes the difference regarding to other reception places. It is due to the conditions and the appropriation with the movie that differences occur, for instance watching a movie in another reception place is a sort of challenge to the cinematographic experience status; since the classical

reception conditions are not met or its appropriation is different and would be poorly justified and moderately acceptable on theoretical level.

Movie Theaters in Algeria

In 1964, the first Algerian president Ahmed Benbella proclaimed the nationalization of the inherited movie theaters from the French colonization which were 458. The same year the Algerian National Centre of Cinema (ANCC) was established to manage these facilities. The management of movie theaters was entrusted in 1967 to municipalities, hoping that the supposed revenues from this exploitation will refill the local authorities' fund.

By the beginning of the eighties of the twentieth century, movie theaters were rent to private individuals, this concession was not supported by any regulatory measures. Several movie theaters were transformed into projection booth or auditorium (for different ceremonies). Producer and distributor Malek Ali-yahia commented on this: *"Instead of unifying their voices and ask the authorities to grant theme with permission to import new movies, private individuals opted to equip themselves with projection equipment that allow them to broadcast pirated products (which contained most of times violent or even pornographic themes), without paying taxes in particular VAT, copyright taxes and NFDATCI "National Fund for the Development of Art, Technology and the Cinematographic Industry". During this period people turned away from movie theaters" (Ali-Yahia, 2013)*³.

This was the beginning of the crisis of the Algerian cinema. With the absence of a serious broadcast, the Algerian viewers were seduced by the satellite channels offers, abandoning the remaining functional movie theaters. Public authorities had no clear intention to preserve this sector, because of the Civil War at that time (1991-2002).

The case of Oran city

Oran the second largest city in Algeria was regarded as the most European city during the French colonization, since it was the most open-minded city in the country. With dozens of club nights and *Rai music*⁴, Oran occasionally used to be a festive city (music and debauchery). In his novel *The Plague "La Peste"*, Albert Camus wrote: *"At Oran, as elsewhere, for lack of time and thinking, people have to love one another without knowing much about it."* (Camus, 1991)⁵ During the Algerian Civil War, Oran was to some extent far away from the religious terrorism; except the assassination of some Oranian iconic scene figures.

Though the existence since the beginning of the 20th century in Algeria; *La Famillia* Movie Theater in Oran is considered one of the very first in Africa. Movie theaters remained a European population interest, it was only after 1930 with the coming of the Egyptian

movies the indigenous population got interested in movie theater: "*Quickly, the invention of Lumière brothers was presented in North Africa, the first indigenous audience did not skip this (...) we do not know Algiers case at that time, although the city already had twelve movie theaters. As a matter of fact, it was probably until the thirties of the twentieth century that the seventh art reached the majority of the Algerian (Muslim) urban population*" (Carlier, 2007 : 338)⁶.

During the 1950's under the French occupation, Oran got through a remarkable growth concerning movie theater number. There were 25 (twenty-five) movie theaters for a town that contained 400,000 (four hundred thousands) inhabitants (including 220,000 -two hundred and twenty thousand- Europeans and 180,000 -one hundred and eighty thousands- Muslims) (Stora, 1992)⁷. While *La Famillia* Movie Theater in la Marine neighborhood was dedicated to Spanish movies (original version) and *Grand Casino* Movie Theater (known in 1951 as *Garage de la Paix*) projected Egyptian movies (for indigenous population), the majority of neighborhood or city movie theaters projected the latest French and American releases.

Oranians still remember movie theaters in their hometown, among the most well-known : *El Casar* Movie Theater (well-known in Saint Eugène neighborhood), *Lux* Movie Theater (projected French productions in El Hamri neighborhood after that known as a *Proletarian* Movie Theater), *Le Coq d'or* Movie Theater (became a shop then the headquarters for the *Jewish Alliance* then a party room⁸, nowadays the headquarters of the *ASMO* football team), *Lido* Movie Theater (in Gambetta neighborhood was used as a boxing gym), *Le Plaza* Movie Theater (on Oujda Avenue shutdown after the independence), *Camera* Movie Theater (became *Royal* after that a gaming room), *Le Trivoli* Movie Theater which became *Monaco* (on Mostaganem street closed in 1975), *Le Régina* Movie Theater (in Bel Air neighborhood), *Olympia* Movie Theater (at Saint Eugène square), *Eldorado* Movie Theater (on Tlemcen Street), *Ciné-jeunes* Movie Theater (on Dalle Street), *Don Bosco* Movie Theater (in Eckmuhl neighborhood). Those movie theaters closed gradually after the Algerian Independence.

After the independence *ABC* Movie Theater became a boxing gym then gaming room which is now a cultural center named after Ibn Mahrez El Wahrani (one of the first Muslim scholars of the city). Other neighborhood movie theaters can be mentioned such as *Folie bergère* (in former Richelieu Street), *Pigalle*, *El Feth* (in Lourmel Street), *Le Club* (in Alsace Loraine Street became in the 1950's a gambling hall), and *l'Empire* known after that as

Africa (in Alsace Lorraine street), occupied by the *American Red Cross* in 1942 after the Allied landings on the Algerian west coast).

Only few movie theaters have survived, yet still struggling to project today: *L'Escuria*/which became *Marhaba* (on Séguin Boulevard Clémenceau) projects movies in video version, The *Colisée* currently *Saada* (renovated at the end of the 2000's partially mobilized to house *Arab Film Festival*/since 2009), The *Vox* which became *La Cinémathèque* (on Arzew Street - the most steady Movie Theater in the city with an average of two projections per day) and *Ritz* now *The Lynx* (few hundred meters away there is an illegal projection room for pornographic movies). Last but not least *The Regent* currently *Maghreb* Movie Theater (the largest movie theater in the city with a capacity of 800 persons) modernized and under Ministry of Culture custody where the rare national releases are projected during special events).

Liberation of images in Algeria

In such studies on the theme of cinema, it is an obligation to distinguish between two aspects, at least, of cinema to move forward .Talking about cinematic experience can refer to space/medium material and to content/movie. If the problem did not appear during the first days of cinema when movies could not be without Movie Theater, things would seem less clear with the technological evolution of media. In a country like Algeria watching a movie is rarely synonym with going to Movie Theater, in contradiction to other countries where movie industry is entrenched and movie tradition is rooted as cultural practices. The experience of going to the movie theater, for the reasons mentioned above is an exception in public space that is no longer accustomed to.

Since several decades, in Algeria as well as other countries there have been other spaces and conditions in which movies could be received: the relationship with movies is no longer exclusively within the framework of Movie Theater as a medium. This phenomenon began in the early of the 1980's with the emergence of the first video clubs; thank to video recording technology. This continued with the emergence of satellite television, DVD, mobile phone screens and online sharing websites. Mediums that offer the possibility of receiving a cinematic work are diversifying and becoming more democratic. Beyond the pessimistic vision that wants to present this technological metamorphosis as a crisis in cinema, it is obvious that these mediums changed the relationship between the viewer and the movie thus had an impact on the process of reception - yet are they part from the cinematic experience?

These new technologies, as some authors affirm, are drastically changing the way we communicate. Marshall MC Luhan claims that: "*The medium is the message*"; this may seem excessive, but it deserves to draw the attention to these media that are changing our relationship with media and artistic content in particular. The substance of communication is considerably influenced by its form (medium). The medium does not only allow us to transmit content, but it acts on the content as well as on our senses to the point where the content itself is affected.

Concerning the Algerian case, it can be noticed that a whole generation or almost is deprived from enjoying the Movie Theater. This generation nevertheless continues to attend movie theaters but differently: rent DVD, illegal downloading, broadcasted movies on television channels. They have no choice, but due to the cinematographic absence they opted for such behaviors. Unlike other countries such as France, watching a new movie release on one's computer or on DVD player is not an exception but a norm. Moreover, going to one of the few remaining so-called movie theaters is considered by many as an act of resistance, snobbery or commitment (depending on the perception).

In this involuntary context, the cinematographic experience is strongly affected by the reduction in the ways of watching a movie and by the dematerialization of the experience. This leads to a divergence at the level of cinema viewer status. Usually, it is the viewer who has to adjust her/himself to movie in the classical cinematographic experience, whereas in the Algerian case, it is the context that has to adapt to the viewer. At this level, s/he is freed from one constraint: moving around to see a movie. According to the way they possess and relate themselves to the movie, Algerian viewer can be categorized as follows:

Homebody viewer: On her/his couch as s/he could also be in her/his bedroom. Generally, s/he invests in home theater-type projection and seeks the best possible quality. S/He tries to reproduce the conditions of the movie theaters cinematographic experience. The equipment is bought from black market with good price, illustrating a *fetishistic* relationship with the movie that maybe illegally downloaded (especially in the absence of a jurisdiction that clearly and effectively prohibits illegal downloading of artistic work).

The downloader viewer: S/He is younger and skillful with ICT's. Most cases s/he downloads movies and collects them in databases; that can be used as a bargaining mean in a market of symbolic goods with members of this community. The quality (sound and images) is not so important for such viewer (who cares more about download speed and backup space). S/He is ready to sacrifice the quality for the sack of having a free and new released movie.

The roaming viewer: this practice is characterized by minimization and movability. S/he generally watches downloaded movies on smartphone, laptop or tablet. The practical viewing and usage are the elements that define the relationship of the roaming viewer with the movie. Although we hardly attend movie theaters in Algeria, thank to other media and alternative supports we watch more movies than we use to (even more than when Movie theater attendance was at its peak). A quantitative study would make it possible to confirm this hypothesis. Therefore if we consider that receiving a cinematographic content on these alternative media is part of the cinematographic experience; this would mean that it is not the audience that has become less cinephile, but cinema has evolved - as well as our ways of communicating with the movie.

- 1- Personal translation of: *une pratique sociale organisée selon le respect de certaines convenances*. Marc AUGÉ, *Le Sens des autres*, Paris, Fayard, 1994, p. 189.
- 2- Personal translation of: *Cette activité rituelle permet « d'établir, de reproduire ou de renouveler les activités individuelles et collectives*. Marc AUGÉ, op.cit., 1993, p. 51, cité dans Maude BONENFANT et Gaby HSAB, « L'expérience d'aller au cinéma comme activité de médiation », dans *Cahier du Gerse*, n°5.
- 3- Personal translation of: *« Plutôt que de se regrouper et de demander à l'État l'autorisation d'importer des films nouveaux, ils optent pour la voie de la facilité et s'équipent en matériel de projection vidéo qui leur permet d'effectuer des projections pirates, le plus souvent de films violents ou même à caractère pornographique, sans reverser à l'État les taxes lui revenant, en particulier la TVA, la taxe sur les droits d'auteur ainsi que le FDATIC. C'est à cette période que le public se détourne durablement des salles »*. Malek Ali-Yahia "Presenting the Algerian cinema industry", First cinema group expert meeting of European Audiovisual Euro-Mediterranean Audiovisual Co-operation - Euromed Audiovisuel III, Casablanca, 20th-21st June 2013.
- 4- Rai literal translation means "my opinion"; a musical style emerged in the middle of the 20th century in the region of Oran. Known for its subversive discourse and taboo subjects, tackle a variety of subjects such as love,, alcohol and the relationship with women
- 5- Personal translation of: *« Très vite présentée en Afrique du Nord, l'invention des frères Lumière n'a pas échappé à l'attention d'un premier « public » indigène (...) Nous ignorons ce qu'il en est d'Alger à cette date, bien que la ville compte déjà douze cinémas. En fait, il faut sans doute attendre les années Trente pour que le septième art gagne à lui la majorité de la population citadine algérienne (musulmane)»*. Omar Carlier, « L'émergence de la culture moderne de l'image dans l'Algérie musulmane contemporaine (Alger, 1880-1980) », *Sociétés & Représentations*, 2007/2 n° 24, p. 321-352, p. 338.

- 6- Personal translation of (On dénombrait vingt-cinq salles pour une ville de 400.00 habitants (dont 220.000 européens et 180.000 musulmans). Benjamin Stora, « *Été 1962 : Oran, ville d'apocalypse* » dans *Le Monde* - Août 1992, <http://www.univ-paris13.fr/benjaminstora/articlesrecents/72-ete-1962-oran-ville-dapocalypse>
- 7- Singers such as Reinette l'oranaise and Blanc-Blanc -two figures of Judeo-Arabic music- used to perform there.

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