presents



THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS
A film within History

A documentary film project
by **Malek Bensmaïl**
(60')

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Men make history
even if they don't know what history they make.

Raymond Aron

Summary

The Battle of Algiers by Gillo Pontecorvo is a film that has marked my life and my work as a filmmaker.

In 1965, three years after the Evian Agreements, which ended Algeria's war of Independence, the Italian filmmaker Gillo Pontecorvo started the shooting of a major film reconstructing the battle of Algiers that took place between 1956 and 1957.

The film powerfully depicts the difficult struggle led by the commandos of the Liberation National Front (FLN), which plunged Algiers and its Kasbah into bloodshed and eventually ended in the independence of Algeria. This film came as a bombshell when it was released and won the Golden Lion in Venice.

I have a special relation with this film. I was born the year it was presented in Venice. Throughout my childhood in Constantine I would watch the film we called then "The Battle" or "Ali la Pointe", the nickname of the hero of the film. The One, as we called the Algerian television, would broadcast this fiction every 1st November thus commemorating the start of the Algerian War for Independence.

So, as the years went by, Ali la Pointe and also Kader, the two protagonists of the film had become for us, kids, exceptional characters, the heroes of a war that we hadn't known, the heroes of urban guerrilla warfare.

On the day after, we would play the important scenes of the film as a game, in our schoolyard or in the streets of our neighbourhood. Role plays: FLN commandos against French paratroopers reciting the dialogues of the film that we knew by heart.

For us, young Algerians, then later for everyone, the film became a must see, a mythical film as we all know.

And yet, who remembers this filmmaker today? Who, among those born after 1960 could claim he has seen this film, which was forbidden in France for a long time? Who also knows *the Battle of Algiers* had been used as the pretext of a successful coup d'état, to depose President Ben Bella?
Very few people most certainly.

On 19th June 1965, at dawn, tanks were brought to different strategic points in the city. It didn't raise any suspicion among the population who thought it was part of the shooting of the film *The Battle of Algiers*. Military units occupied the radio and the television and the staff arrested the president elected. Colonel Boumediene, who had financed the film and authorized the shooting, set up his Revolutionary Council, which would lead him to presidency.

The Battle of Algiers became the scene of different events that all in all were to shape a major part of Algeria's contemporary history and political future.

A film within history



The story of the film: Algiers, 1957, Ali la Pointe, played by Brahim Haggiag, last leader of the FLN commandos, is hiding with three other militants in the heart of the Kasbah. Denounced by a comrade who had been tortured he has very little choice: surrender or die.

Flash back. 1st November 1954, Ali la Pointe is released from jail for minor theft. He is recruited by Djaafar, Saadi Yacef playing his own character, to join the network of militants getting organized in the Kasbah.

The actions of the FLN are getting more and more numerous and the French authority feels it is losing control over the capital. They decide to suppress the rebels by systematically chasing them down so as to reach the leaders. Leading the French army, Colonel Mathieu, who, torn between politicians' hesitations and the journalists' insistent questions, realizes that torture is the only possible way for him to win this battle and save French Algeria. Henceforth, he resorts to torture in order to nip the revolutionary movement in the bud, but to no avail.

A bloody battle occurs in the Kasbah of Algiers from September 1956 to October 1957. The purpose of the French is to fight the "terrorists" of the Liberation National Front (FLN) and have the army maintain order.

For the Algerians, the purpose of this insurrection is to show the French authority how determined the FLN is and how strong its hold over the population is. The capital is meant to become a powerful resonance chamber for the insurrection in order to shake international and metropolitan opinion.

Their aims have been reached as the violence of the acts committed are such that their effects are felt all over the world. The battle of Algiers is really the acme of the war of liberation. This is the reason why the scriptwriters chose to dwell on this part of history.

An Italo-Algerian production (55% for Igor Films and 45% for Casbah Films) *The Battle of Algiers* is based on the eponymous novel written by Yacef Saadi. A member of the FLN but close to the ruling government,

Saadi was one of the main protagonists of the battle. In charge of the military operations, he organized the terrorist commandos. In Pontecorvo's film, that he coproduced, he plays his own character. At the time, he was the manager of Casbah Films, the first and only Algerian private production company just before independence and even before the creation of the cinema official centre.

As Pontecorvo stated it himself, he had been "working on Algeria" for some time on the basis of a scenario written by Solinas and entitled "Paras".

Gillo Pontecorvo said:

"An anti-colonialist story that started in Indo-China and also continued in Algeria. Knowing this, the Algerians came to me and proposed that I made a film on Algeria only. The story they suggested was way beyond my kind of films. It was a little laudatory, it wasn't a film really. So I answered: "I don't want to talk about this but if you give Solinas and I carte blanche to write a story about the Algerian War, this is what we've been waiting to do for a long time." And they accepted, so we wrote the story. They didn't ask for any change not even a comma. We could shoot the film thanks to Yacef Saadi's very helpful collaboration. He knew the Kasbah like the back of his hand, it was his home. The Algerian population was also very helpful during the preparation of the film, during the location search to meet the good people, to find the right places, the small alleys…"

The aesthetic stake

Pontecorvo's first decision was to choose an aesthetic form that would recall the images of a documentary film.

Though the film was a reconstruction of reality, completely directed (in the US, there was an introductory note at the beginning of the film specifying that there was no archive films) the Italian director had been inspired by contemporary events.

The critics described the film as "news reconstructed". Indeed, the point was to make a historical reconstruction by exploiting the news of the time so operating in the "present of the facts".

Gillo Pontecorvo said:

"We've worked on the quality of the pictures for a long time in the lab so it could look like the TV news or the press weekly reports of the time. So the viewers could feel concerned as if they were watching a film about events that are happening where they live or if they were in the street at the very moment when the event takes place."

Pontecorvo was a scrupulous filmmaker who claimed to be the follower of a "dictatorship of the truth". His fiction was explicit: the aestheticism of the document was meant to substantiate the story of the film and above all its overt relation to a historical reality.

Other elements were also to be taken into accounts: the fact that Saadi was playing his own character, but also the refusal of the professional actors that had been asked (only Jean Martin, who plays colonel Mathieu, alias Massu, was a professional actor) and last the resorting to sound messages, fake voice-over relating the events reported in various historical documents belonging to the FLN or the French authorities (news reel, flyers, radio programmes etc.)

The topicality of the film is mainly organized around this issue of "documentary fiction". In other words this documentary form is meant to be the medium of a surplus, not of attestation but of fiction or affects through the supposedly "realism" of the film.

This is important as the choice to adopt a documentary aesthetic form had a considerable impact on the posterity of the film, especially in Algeria.

In fact, it was a way to give the Algerian nation the archives of its struggle. Thus, there had been a not so accidental meeting between the form Pontecorvo chose and the "imaginary" aspirations of the Algerian regime. It was certainly necessary to make up for the lack of national images. Of course there had been images of the Algerian War, even many images but most of them were propaganda from the French Army services. Pontercorvo scrupulously included the military photographers and cameramen in his film.

The vivid matter of history

In this film, there is a dimension that goes way beyond the mere directing of a film and it seems Pontecorvo was aware of this especially in the two final scenes ("11th December 1960" and "21st December 1960").

These sequences, which were kind of appendixes to the film, show the spontaneous upraising of the Algerian population and the demonstrations during which they waved Algerian flags for the first time (at the very time when the country that was welcoming General de Gaulle was ablaze).

The message is explicit: these popular upraisings were the late produce of the seeds that had been sowed during the Battle (repression, torture etc.) the obvious signs of the influence of the FLN over the Algerian people and above all of the victory to come.

It is in these scenes, somehow external to the topic of the film, that the Algerian nation was being built as a united, fighting, determined and active political mass (contrasting with the rest of the film that focuses on some key characters, the vanguard of the struggle).

The street scenes are played by extras, which conveys a dramatic intensity to the film much superior to the archive images that can be seen in other historical films. **The vitality of the reconstructed scenes has been puzzling to me:**

- **What could the extras be thinking about, when three years after the end of the war, five years after the "events" and at the very**

moment when Boumediene's tanks were finalizing the military stranglehold on the state power, they were re-enacting the mass movements of 1960? Couldn't it be after all considered as a document? Some people's names have been modified but we can easily recognize General Jacques Massu (born in 1908 in Châlons-sur-Marne) in the character Philippe Mathieu (here born on 5th August 1907 in Bordeaux). The character is played by Jean Martin, a comedian who signed the 121 manifesto. Kader Djaafar is played by Yacef Saadi, who in fact plays his own character as the political leader of the FLN for the zone of Algiers and who is the initiator and coproducer of the film. Nevertheless, the fictional writing and the directing led the authors to work from the vivid matter of history and memories.

Propaganda

It seems the Algerian government fully trusted the Italian director and granted him important means to support his effort to reconstruct collective memory. The question of the relation between the director and Boumediene's new regime has to be raised. The street scenes somehow convey the questions that can be raised about the setting up of the film, Saadi's presence, the episode of the tanks and the possible collaboration with the ruling power. In addition to Pontecorvo's reputation as a committed filmmaker, can we say that *the Battle of Algiers* is a "**propaganda film**"?

Of course, Pontecorvo said it wasn't, putting to the fore the fact that the film was subsidized by Italy for the biggest part, minimizing the role of

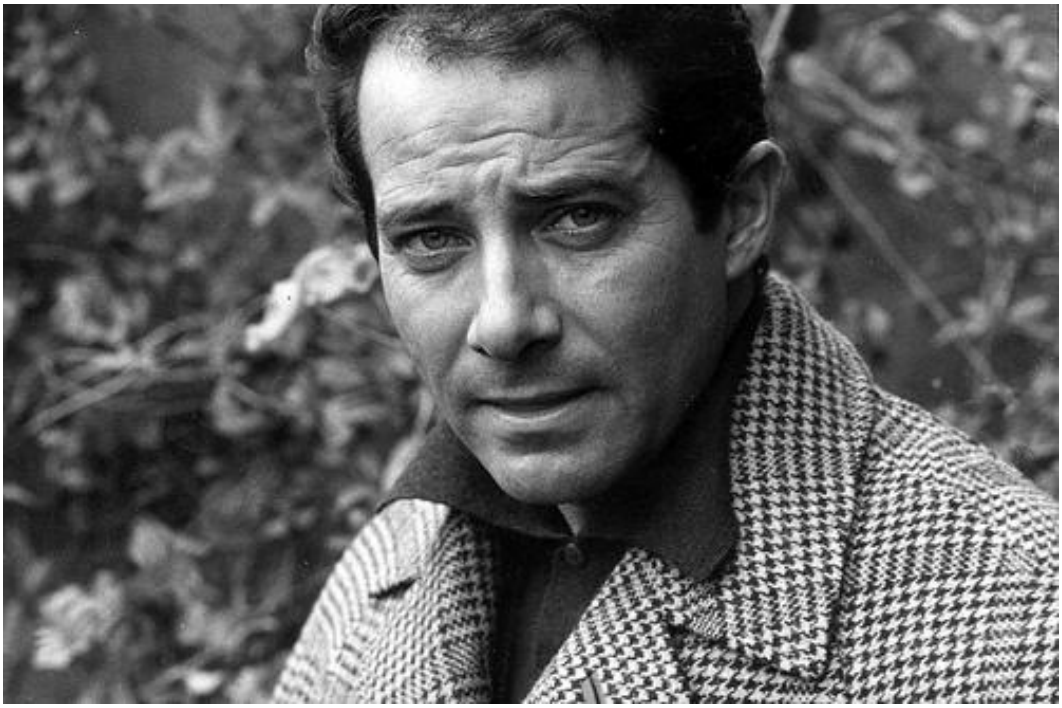
Saadi and even regretting the limited number of extras. His interest lay elsewhere.

Gillo Pontecorvo said:

"We were very happy to make this story, which was interesting from a simple cinema point of view but also because it allowed us to do something against colonialism. We saw hundreds of people before we started to write. With Franco Solinas we spent eighteen months being trained. Whatever the topic you deal with is, you need to be trained first. We met high-ranking officers and paratroopers in Paris to have opposed ideas and points of view. After this period of preparation, which lasted several months, we wrote what we wanted in just two months. Yacef Saadi is one of the persons who have been very useful to us as he introduced us to people over there, that's it. I have to say that no one ever imposed even a word on us, neither the Italian private firm nor the Algerian coproduction, which by the way didn't say anything afterwards. (…) There has been no political intervention from the Italian or Algerian sides. Anyway I wouldn't have accepted it because I was only making the film provided nothing was changed in the scenario, not a word, not a comma. I didn't have to make the Battle of Algiers. *(…) But I had to do it from a moral point of view, as I still am an anti-colonialist. I insist we've met tens and tens of people. There has been no political intervention from the Italian or Algerian sides. We've written the scenario we liked and that was and had to be true to reality, not in details but close to the meaning of reality. It was the only law we followed."*

Who is Gillo Pontecorvo?

I am very surprised of the very few articles about Pontecorvo in French cinema press or worse the disparaging remarks about him from some historians among others.



Les Cahiers du Cinema (n° 593, September 2004) (A French monthly magazine dealing with cinema art) even overtly accused him of nurturing the current situation in the Arab world by mythologizing the resorting to holy war (the jihad) as self-defence against the oppressors.

When Gillo Pontecorvo directed his third feature movie, he was not a young man anymore. This Italian, born from a Jewish family in Pisa in 1919, was an anti-fascist partisan and an active militant of the Garibaldi Brigades. He was a journalist and a courier for the Italian communist party during World War II. It is when Pontecorvo was a correspondent in Paris that he discovered Rosselini. He was so deeply moved by *Paisà* that he decided to quit everything to become a filmmaker.

He directed two feature films, one being the controversial *Kapo* (1959). It is the story of a young Jewish girl, imprisoned in a concentration camp, who helps the Nazi.

Pontecorvo would have liked to call his movie "The Birth of a Nation", which evokes his underlying ideological position better than any other title. Despite its objectivizing tone the film shows the sympathy of a man for the oppressed people.

Broadcasting the film was forbidden until 1971. Louis Malle had to fight tooth and nails to allow it to be distributed in France. In fact, the film was boycotted in France where it hadn't really been censored simply because no distributor had been courageous enough to release it until 1971 when it was distributed in Paris for 15 weeks and 22 in the provinces. Former "pieds-noirs" (French colonial born in Algeria) nostalgic of the OAS (Organisation de l'Armée Secrète) (illegal military organization supporting French rule in Algeria in the 60s) violently opposed the film. The families of the three cinema managers showing the movie in France received death threats from far right extremists. Bombs were planted in the few cinemas that had planned to show the movie. In 1971, a fascist gang attacked the audience when the film was shown in Roma, seriously injuring one of them.

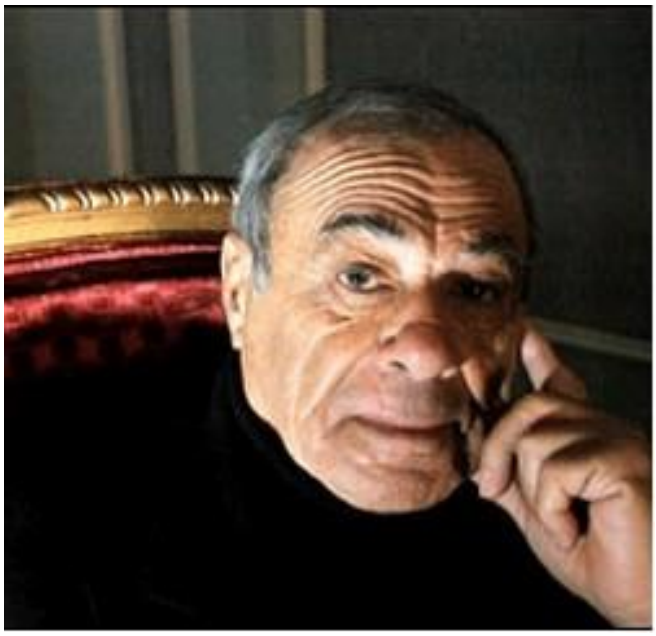
Today, the issue of this war is still a sensitive topic insofar as President Chirac, in 2001, relieved General Paul Aussaresses, former subordinate of Massu in Algiers, of his Légion d'honneur, after he had stated that the

film gave a realistic accurate picture of the scenes of torture the French indeed resorted to and that his sole regret was that some prisoners had died before “spilling the beans”.

France and Algeria haven’t obviously come to terms with the dark period of colonial time and the bloody war that followed.

The Battle of Algiers has become a source of inspiration for directors like Costa Gavras among many others.

What about Yassef Saadi?



Yacef Saadi fought in the rank of the FLN. He was the leader of the Autonomous Zone of Algiers during the battle of Algiers in 1957.

He started his professional life as a baker. In 1945, he joined the Parti du Peuple Algérien (the party of Algerian people) (a nationalist party) which became the Mouvement pour le Triomphe des Libertes Democratiques (MTLD) (the movement for the triumph of democratic freedoms) where he was in charge of the armed branch, l'Organisation Spéciale (the special organization) between 1947 and 1949. After the OS was dismantled, he went to France and only came back to Algeria in 1952 when he resumed his work as a baker.



In 1955, he joined the FLN when the war of independence was just

starting. Then he went to Switzerland for a mission in relation with Ben Bella. Expelled by the Swiss authorities, he got arrested at Orly airport by the French police that transferred him to Algiers and imprisoned him. He was released in October 1955 under the condition that he informed the DST (French MI5) about the activities of the FLN in Algiers. He went underground and became the right-hand man of the leader of the military zone of Algiers, Larbi Ben Mhidi that he replaced after he was eliminated in March 1957 by General Aussaresses, who had imprisoned him.

On 24th September 1957, he was captured by the French paratroopers and condemned to death but he was finally released after the Agreements of Evian were signed on 18th March 1962.

Close to Ben Bella, he founded a movie production company, the very first one in Algeria, Casbah Films, that he got financed by Algerian and Yugoslavian funds.

In 1962, he published *Souvenirs de la bataille d'Alger* (memories from the battle of Algiers), relating his memoirs of the events, that he wrote while he was imprisoned.

In 1966, with Gillo Pontocorvo he coproduced *the Battle of Algiers* in which he played his own character.

Author's note and directing

The Battle of Algiers concerns several generations. First, the generation that witnessed the Algerian war and the beginning of nationalism. The generations that came afterwards, which I belong to, have lived this nationalism and seen this event-like film on many occasions. *The Battle of Algiers* is a go-between, between these generations.

The film is built around a double statement. The first one is the distance that can exist between two viewpoints: Yacef Saadi's (yesterday) and my own as a director (today). The second one is that in general the places where the shooting take place have memories and it is all the truer for this one. La Pointe, a neighbourhood in the Kasbah, is a two square kilometres part of Algiers, very populated and extremely poor. It played an important part during the armed insurrection.

My project is meant to be both the portrait of a man who has become a legend, Yacef Saadi (the leader of the Autonomous Zone of Algiers, a scriptwriter, an actor and the producer of the film) and an attempt to interpret the film, its making-of, its time, its relation to the myth and what it means today for both the Algerian and French audience, 50 years after it was made.

A question will lead my directing of the film: how can history live and remain within ourselves, in our present? Starting from *The Battle of*

Algiers, **I would like to create a space of resonance that would allow everyone to think, question and rethink history.**

To reach my aim, I will try to patiently discover this history with the help of Yacef Saadi and all those who participated to the film and are still alive.

The shooting itself will be preceded by conversations organized by common friends. In a second time the conversations will be filmed with Yacef Saadi and the others. These conversations will naturally lead us on the one hand to the places where the film was shot and on the other hand to the places where Yacef Saadi lived during his childhood, his youth and during the war, experiencing the life of a young leader of the FLN in the Kasbah. He will tell us about his relationship with Pontecorvo, with the crew, the actors but also with the ruling power of the time Ben Bella and Houari Boumedienne, the coup, the ban of the film in France until the Pentagon and President Bush's recent demand to see the film before launching the war on Iraq.

In August 2003, the Defence Department, the chain of command of Special Operations and Low intensity Conflict of the Pentagon decided to show *The Battle of Algiers* to their employees. The screening was organized at a moment when the Iraqi resistance started to intensify its oper ations against the US army and when the American Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld demanded "enhanced interrogation techniques" from his specialists of interrogation in Iraq and elsewhere. David Ignatius, who wrote for the Washington Post, said that it was an

encouraging sign that the army started to think about Iraq in a creative and unconventional way.

The film will be shot in the Kasbah, a historical part of Algiers comprising the old town (inscribed to the World Heritage List since 1992). A maze of streets, alleys, houses, terraces, cellars, hiding places, prisons and places of torture among others. These places filmed today will show what the Kasbah looks like today, the real heart of the city of Algiers, its humble inhabitants, its life, some derelict houses and others refurbished but very few. Some houses have collapsed with the passing of time to become the kids' playing field.

These spaces will be shot with a fixed camera at a time of the day when there are very few people so as to enhance their power to evoke the past. The camera will also be handheld, at other times of the day, working its way through the crowded streets of the Kasbah. It will focus on the details, the faces, people's spontaneous interventions and discussions.

There will be two kinds of material: the news pictures of the time and the reconstructed pictures of the film *The Battle*. We will find back the French and foreign journalists and all those who acted in and participated to Pontecorvo's film. These witnesses will recall, describe and comment the situations of this battle that they lived through but also its reconstruction filmed by Pontecorvo.

We will also rely on statements made in the press at the time, recorded by the ORTF (French Television) and also on today's street conversations

recorded by my camera. These materials will also constitute two forms, two elements of the structure: one steady (the statements of the time filmed with a mounted camera) the other mobile (handheld camera filming everyday conversations mixed with several pictures of the setting and the people). These pictures will be used to counterbalance the public image of Yacef Saadi.

The way these elements are organized will contribute to render the complexity of the story of the film.

I will resort to the usual elements, that is to say the testimonies of those who more or less participated to the making of the film. The Italian or Algerian members of the crew of course. I'm thinking about my friend Hamid, the sound engineer in some of my films, was a sound engineer in *The Battle* and still remembers this day of 19th June 1965. Thinking he was going to be late on the set and being rebuffed by the soldiers who prevented him from going forward, he insisted to have the gates open and showed his professional card and then realized it was a coup d'état and that Algiers was surrounded by the army under the cover of the film shooting.

There is also Gillo Pontecorvo's son (photographs of the shooting, letters, posters), the cowriter Franco Solinas (writing, location search, documentation research), René Vautier, a committed filmmaker, he was the first director of the Audio-visual Centre of Algiers (coproducing, commitment, a certain vision of the war), the filmmaker, Mohammed

Lakhdar Amina, (the worth of the film, participating to the government, the revolution, the myth etc.)

As for the archives there are many exceptional documents:

- Newsreel of this famous battle inside the Kasbah shot in 1956/1957 by the cinema services of the French army.

- Conversations dating back to the period concerned but also more recent ones between General Massu and General Aussaresses talking about the battle of Algiers and the issue of torture.

- Interviews of Yacef Saadi shot in 1962 on a terrace in the Kasbah when he was the leader of the Autonomous Zone of Algiers.

- Pictures of the shooting of *The Battle of Algiers* with interviews of Gillo Pontecorvo and Yacef Saadi when the film was presented in Venice.

- Pictures of Boumedienne's coup in 1965 when the film was being shot.

- Pictures from Cinq Colonnes à la Une (a French news programme at the time) about how the Algerian people reacted to this coup.

- Interviews of veterans and "pieds-noirs" (French colonial born in Algeria) asking for the film to be banned in France.

- A 1980's documentary of the Rai, never released in France, about Gillo Pontercorvo going back to the places where the film was shot.

- Pictures of the last time Gillo Pontercorvo was seen in public during his presentation at Cannes in 2002

Malek BENSMAIL

Malek Bensmail was born in Constantine (Algeria) in 1966. He started making super-8 films very early and was awarded a first prize in a national film contest. He ran a film club at the film library in Constantine. He studied cinema in Paris, went to Saint Petersburg on a training at the Lenfilms studio, and then dedicated himself to documentary films. All his films are related to the story of his country. His cinema style outlines the complex and sensitive contours of humanity.

Acclaimed by critics, his films have won many prizes in several festival all around the world. His last feature film released in cinemas *La Chine est encore loin (*China is still far) (2010) won the Dokfilmfestival Prize in Munich and the Prize of the Jury at the 3 Continents Festival. Before this, *Aliénations* (alienations) (2004) won him the great prize of the libraries at the Festival du Réel in Paris.

Recent award winner at Villa Kuyojama in Japan (Villa Medicis in Asia)

Filmography

2012. Ulysse, le brûleur de frontières et la mer blanche du milieu. (Ulysses, burning borders and the white sea from the middle) Documentary. 60 min.
Portraits of Mediterranean people for the exhibition MÉDITERRANNÉE(S)
© Les Films d'ici/ Marseille-Provence 2013.

2011. De l'Algérie française à l'Algérie algérienne. (from French Algeria to Algerian Algeria)2 x 60 min. Co-réal. M. Colonna.
1962, the first year of an independent nation.
© JEM Prod/INA/Euromedia/France 3.

2010. Guerres secrètes du FLN en France. (the secret wars of the FLN in France) Documentary 70 min.
The second front in France and the fratricidal war between the FLN and the MNA
© CDKI/France 2/RTBF.

2008. La Chine est encore loin- (China is still far) long feature. 120 minutes.
Chronicle of a primary school class in the village « craddle of the revolution » 50 years after independence.
© Unlimited/CirtaFilms/3B productions/INA/France télévisions.

Grand Prix. Munich Festival. Jury special prize, 3 continents festival, Nantes. Grand Prix authors' film, Paris. Jury Prize, Tetouan festival.

2005. Le Grand Jeu (big game) - Documentary 90 min-
Presidential campaign through the prism of Bouteflika's outsider
© So What/INA/TV5 Monde-LCP.

2004. Aliénations (alienations)- Long-feature film. 1 h 45 min-
Algerian therapies at the psychiatric hospital in Constantine
© O3 productions/INA

Grand Prix, Biennal Arab cinéma, Paris. Magnolia Award, Shangaï Festival. Librarians' Prize, festival cinéma du réel. Ulysses Prize best documentary, Montpellier festival. Jury Prize Fespaco and Carthage JCC.

2003. Algérie(s) (Algeria(s))- Documentary 2 x 80 min-
A reference film about the bloody decade.
© Article Z/Canal+/ARTE/Channel 4

Jury Prize and Public Prize, Pessac. Human Rights Prize. Vues d'Afrique, Montreal. « Mediterranean Stakes » Prize. CMCA, Palermo.

2002. Plaisirs d'eau (water pleasure)– Documentary. 76 min.
A plunge into public baths around the world through four personal stories.
© Les films Jack Fébus/France 5/SBS Australie

2001. **Demôkratia** (Demokratia) –short feature. 20 min.
A fable about dictatorship and absolute power.
© Icav/LFJF/ARTE/BBC Arabic

2000. **Des vacances malgré tout** (holidays despite all) Documentary. 68 min.
A family of Algerian origin is going on holidays in their home country for the summer.
© INA/France 5/VRT/RTBF/RTSR/YLE

Heritage Prize, cinéma du réel festival
Best documentary Prize, Montpellier festival

***1999.* Boudiaf, un espoir assassiné** (Boudiaf, a murdered hoped) -Documentary 60 min.
6 months of the life of a president, an exile in his own coutry for 30 years before he was murdered
© INA/LA SEPT-ARTE/VRT/RTBF/RTSR/YLE

1998. **Décibled** (decibled)–Documentary. 52 min.
Algerian new musical scene in fusion. With Markunda Aurès, le Diwan de Béchar, Gnawa Diffusion, Djam & Fam et Malik.
© CB NEWS TV/France 5

1997. Algerian TV Show- short feature. 13 min.
Humour, parody and self-derision about the unique channel of Algerian television.
© Les productions de l'œil Sauvage/Canal +

1996. Territoire (s) (territories)- Documentary. 28 min–
An essay about the violent acts the Algerians undergo and post modern violence in the Western world.
© Listen Prod/Bensmaïl/Kunstkanaal (Pays-bas), BBC Arabic

Best documentary Prize, nouveau cinéma, Festival Montréal
Jury Prize, Sao Paulo festival. Television Prize, Avanca festival Portugal.

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