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“History itself touches only a small part of a nation’s life. Most of the activities and sufferings of the people... have been and will remain without written record.”

E. L. Woodward

“The writing of history reflects the interests, predilections, and even prejudices of a given generation.”

John Hope Franklin

Presenter:

Habiba Boumlik
LaGuardia Community College, CUNY, NY
hboumlik@lagcc.cuny.edu

Title:

Revisioning Collective Transnational Identities: the Case of Amazigh Film

Introduction

By the 20th century, the *Imazighen* or Berbers of North Africa had survived various invasions. In post-independence North Africa, Amazigh/Berber languages and cultures were neglected and even repressed by various governments as a result of a perceived need to discourage cultural differences in the building of the Arab nation-state. Berbers/Imazighen across North Africa share a struggle vis-à-vis state institutions, particularly in their relationships with schools, television broadcasts, films, and education where the use of Amazigh/Berber dialects was prohibited. North African language policies and economic factors generated Amazigh/Berber “language contraction,” a linguistic phenomenon that can potentially lead to language death. Consequently, and beginning in the 1970s, a number of Berber cultural organizations were formed to sustain and promote Amazigh/Berber cultural identity. It is in this context of rejection, resistance and struggle for recognition that films and videos began to emerge as a result of the Amazigh/ Berber cultural revival (Carter 2009). Amazigh filmmakers started producing their own videos, feature films, shorts and documentaries, using the Amazigh language (Tamazight), sets, actors and stories. We now witness vibrant amateur and professional film and video production that is contributing to shape contemporary *Amazigh* identity.

Over the past five years, the New York Forum of Amazigh Film (www.nyfaf.com) has brought together amateurs and professionals, students and scholars, filmmakers and audience members to discover, discuss and disseminate contemporary indigenous North African film. Occurring in Queens, an extremely diverse corner of New York City, NYFAF actively encourages three types of community: a cultural community of filmmakers, musicians, producers, writers and scholars; the “real” community of Queens, NY; and the imagined community of Imazighen, commonly known as *Tamazghra*/the land of the Imazighen, as they are increasingly represented in feature and documentary film. All three communities intersect at the yearly Forum to collectively address the Amazigh past and present, examining local, national, and diasporic or transnational contexts. Supportive of a new transnational indigenous cinema, NYFAF facilitates the borderless flow of films and filmmakers and “allows the local to circulate globally.” (Nichols 1994, 1-2).

While NYFAF aims to facilitate the visibility of Amazigh cinema, our scholarly work interrogates the cinematographic representation of Amazigh people across the full breath of the region and artistic styles. Taking advantage of the conference's thematic framework, I wish to apply our lens as NYFAF cultural translators to examine the cinematic revisioning of Amazigh history and identity through a selection of three genre films originating from three countries:

- *Itto Titrit* (short, Mohammed Abbazi, Morocco, 2013, 113 min), the story of a pre-independence Amazigh village and a girl who dreams of an education. One of the first films to be shot in Berber/Tamazight.
- *Fadhma N'Soumer* (historical feature, Blekacem Hadjaj, Algeria, 2014, 110 min), a historical drama which depicts a legendary female figure in the fight against French colonizers in the 19th century.
- *Azul* (documentary, Wassim Korbi, Tunisia, 2013, 43 min), offers insights into the director's personal journey to his father's village, situated in an area where the culture of the *Imazighen* is struggling to survive in the last bastions of *Amazigh* land.

The films of my corpus are in dialogue with Amazigh film production and deal with important aspects of storytelling and history writing. The common thread of these films is the representation of identity through history in regions marginalized by the central

governments and the contestation of essentialist rhetoric about the homogeneous national identity.

I believe that these films represent a form of resistance to the sociopolitical silencing of *Amazigh* cultural discourse at the national level. We will see how the domestic space of the indigenous home and the themes of memory play a significant role for the ways in which historical space and place are depicted or not represented at all. After briefly alluding to the theoretical frameworks that have inspired my investigation of cinema and space in contemporary Amazigh cinema, I will attempt to explore the early stages of this research through the question: what kind of new perspectives and insights may we gain from an investigation of contemporary Amazigh cinema and culture in terms of space and polylocality?

Itto Titrit

Itto Titrit tells the story of a young Amazigh girl and her dream of going to school. Set in Morocco's pre-independence days in the Middle Atlas, the film showcases the political turmoil following the exile of King Mohammed V and the resistance of a small town that dreams of liberty and freedom for Morocco. Addressing themes of religious tolerance, Amazigh language and culture, and the role of women, the film represents a milestone in Moroccan cinema as it is one of the first films shot completely in Tamazigh language by a Tamazigh cast and production crew. Mohamed Abbazi, director, belongs to the first generation of post-independence Moroccan filmmakers and has dedicated his career to promoting Amazigh cinema, exploring the spirit of the Amazigh, and documenting their contribution to civilization. Born in 1938 in Khemisset, Morocco and raised with Amazigh values of tolerance and respect among the Zemmour tribe, Abbazi chose to pursue film studies in order to immortalize the values espoused by Amazigh society and to bring attention to the difficulties of modernization in rural areas of Morocco. After receiving his Bachelors' Degree from UCLA's film school in 1966 and graduating from Harvard in 1969, Abbazi returned to Morocco and dedicated himself to cinema.¹ His directing debut was *Les trésors de l'Atlas* (1997). *Itto Titrit* was awarded the Prix de la Photo at the Tangier Film Festival in 2008.

¹ Mohamed Abbazi has worked in various stages of film production on both Moroccan and foreign films, and played an important role in American film production in Morocco. He was the recipient of the Prix de la Défense du Patrimoine at the 5th Annual Casablanca Film Festival.

Fadhma N'Soumer

This historical drama traces Lalla Fadhma N'soumer's journey in her resistance against French colonization during the 1850s in the Kabylie region. Her fierce resistance earned her the nickname "Joan of Arc of Djurdjura."

Mohamed Abbazi and Blekacem Hadjaj have both contributed to constructing new discourses to express and represent Amazigh voices. They made an effort to chronicle and document the Amazigh's enactment of agency through historic events that shaped the future of their countries for which they did not get much recognition. In doing so, these filmmakers are debunking political memory of their respective nation-state countries.

These two films engage with the memory of traumatic encounters. Through fantasy, lyricism, and historical reenactment, they dramatize the individual and collective choices that have led to cultural resiliency, transmitting this now through a contemporary visual medium. They are engaged in deconstructing the homogeneous national identity created in national post-independence North African cinemas, such as in *Wind of the Aures* (1967) and in *Chronicles of the Years of Ambers*, 1975 by Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina.

Azul

What happens to a culture silenced for decades? Amazigh films made in Tunisia are primarily documentaries. *Azul* offers insights into the director's personal journey to his father's Tunisian village. It documents the marginalized Amazigh enclaves living in Taojout, Tamerzit, and Zraoua, areas where the culture of the *Imazighen* has been struggling to survive in the last bastions of *Amazigh* lands. The film based on interviews accompanies the director's journey to his father's ancestral village in search for his cultural roots. "Azul" is the greeting in Tamazight, and language is one of the main topics that move the Imazighen who are portrayed in the film. They proudly present themselves in front of their culture's centuries-old ruins of historical buildings, or otherwise, in the deserted streets of run-down villages. They want to be recognized as indigenous population with their own history, culture, and language, and they grasp the opportunity after the opening-up of the political space after the 2011 Tunisian revolution to speak about this with for recognition.

Azul explores issues of modernity, nation-statehood, and linguistic/cultural border control in contemporary Tunisian society. Further, the film explores how claiming

Amazigh ancestry is a challenge in an exclusive ideological understanding of belonging and feeling at home.

The notion of spatial loss is to be understood in its broadest sense, not only as loss of territory or geography (or what can be referred to as geographic loss), but as loss of “sense of place” that incorporates the loss of physical, social and mental spaces. (Bolfek-Radovani p. 18) Through questions, interviews, scenes of ruins, the past and the memory of the indigenous people are being revived in remote spaces forgotten about. As Paul Connerton explains, cultural memory is to be interpreted as an “act of transfer” by groups or individuals in which identities of the present are being shaped and defined based on a set of shared common practices of the past.”

Ethnicized space

In the three films, a clear demarcation between “Arab” and “Amazigh” spaces is stressed. The discourse on space-time is often linked to the discourse on ethnicity and language. “It is, moreover, time which is typically coded masculine and space, being absence or lack, as feminine (...) It is time which is aligned with history, progress, civilization, politics and transcendence and coded masculine. And it is the opposites of these things, which have, in the tradition of Western thought, been coded feminine.” (Massey, pp. 6-7). This dualistic paradigm masculine–feminine is not contested in the Amazigh filmmaking in general, more particularly in *Itto and Fadhma*. The discourse about time and space in *Azul* being more general, it encompasses and bypasses this duality.

Discussion:

Cinema’s representational space accounts for the coexistence of heterogeneous spaces: absolute space, abstract space, contradictory space, differentiated space, appropriated space, social space, natural space, leisure space, counter-space, and so forth. Lefebvre dynamic approach of space (p. 42) applies to the 3 films of this corpus where the following binaries appear: nature-city/urban space, native-foreign, internal-external, inside-outside, local/global, public-private, space of childhood/adulthood, open-closed, forest/mountains, the latter acting as a symbol of rootedness.

Lefebvre's theory of space emphasizes the interplay between the production of space and the space of production. He argues that if "space is a product," then the object of our interest must "shift from things in space to the actual production of space," that is, from space as a fixed entity to space as a "productive process" that induces change and is subject to revision (pp. 36-37). As such, and given the interdependence of space and time (they cannot be defined in opposition to each other), I am calling for considering another frame of space and time specific to film festivals. This unique space taking place at a fixed time frame is, as Lefebvre conceives it, a productive process. The New York Forum of Amazigh Film (www.nyfaf.com) is an example of venues that contributes to creating new spaces where real and imagined communities interact thus creating a virtual space for Amazigh voices. I argue that film festivals such as NYFAF correspond to what Lefebvre describes as "three moments of social space" or a "triad of the perceived, the conceived, and the lived," Lefebvre differentiates three critical concepts: "spatial practice" (a physical space characterized by a certain cohesiveness without necessarily being coherent), "representations of space" (a space largely dominated by social engineers that tends toward a system of verbal signs), and "representational spaces" (a space dominated by artists [including filmmakers] and writers that tends toward a system of nonverbal symbols and signs." (pp. 38-40). These "spaces of representation" are linked to "imagination."

Identity Claims in a Transnational Amazigh Cinema

Stuart Hall argues that identity is the product of multiple representations, each of which are formed by unique contexts, and that these cultural identities can be thought of in two distinct ways. First, that there is "one true self" residing as a common spirit among all members of the same ethnicity. Second, that cultural identity is not a question of "are" but rather of "becoming." (Harindranath, pp. 44-45). This is particularly true for *Azul* in that it looks at Amazigh origin and cultural identity with a freshly gained pride (after the Jasmine Revolution, 2011) and openly calls for recognition. Therefore, Stuart Hall's definition of identity as a "'production', which is never complete [and] always in process" (1996: 210) speaks to the 3 Amazigh films. Even though rural exodus and immigration concern all layers of society, *Itto Titrit* concentrates on the marginalized region of the Atlas mountains which has the highest emigration rate in Morocco. Hall's description allows us to see identity as something ever fluid and dynamic. Due to its

adaptable and plural characteristics it can be attached to multiple places and layers at the same time. Lensu (p. 3).

According to Lensu (p. 9), in intercultural and transnational cinema (which, to some extent, is the case of Amazigh cinema), filmmakers draw from various cultures, memories and attachments. For transnational filmmakers, questions of home, identity, nation and belonging are often central to their work (Naficy 2001: 6-9). The importance of their work lies in the way they challenge cultural separateness: the three films clearly underline the language as a line of demarcation that separates between the Arab culture and the Amazigh culture. Yet, the filmmakers stress many cultural common denominators that both communities share.

In addition, since transnational filmmakers' productions are multicultural and hybrid, giving voice to multicultural scenes and settings, they can move between the dominant cultural relations and make hegemonic settings visible, as it is the case in *Azul*. Hamid Naficy (2001) has further emphasized that films made by filmmakers with multicultural backgrounds (which is the case of most Amazigh filmmakers) often share similarities in the cinematic style and narratives.

Naficy discusses three overlapping types of films which all have characteristics of what he calls accented cinema: exilic, diasporic and ethnic films. Naficy (2001:15) explains: [E]xilic cinema is dominated by its focus on there and then in the homeland, diasporic cinema by its vertical relationship to the homeland and by its lateral relationship to the diaspora communities and experiences, and postcolonial ethnic and identity cinema by its exigencies of life here and now in the country in which the filmmaker resides." *Itto Titrit, Azul and Fadhma N'Soumer* have aspects that apply to exilic, diasporic and ethnic films. They allude to "there and then in the homeland:" the ruins of Tunisian Amazigh villages in *Azul*.

Diaspora and home space

The number of films set in the diaspora is increasing. Though more recent diasporic films do not often make use of the diaspora to explicitly contrast the homeland and the foreign land, such contrasts subtly persist and are still indispensable parts of diasporic films that account for multiple localities. *Itto Titrit* illuminates the notion of

polylocality. Indeed, driven by the logic of flows, the world of places (for example, the home, the city) is increasingly superseded by spaces characterized by circulation and flow as it appears in *Itto Titrit*. Conversely, translocality implies multiple sites of identification (no longer a unique “native place”) and suggests that “home itself becomes complicated, its roots to a single locality multiplied to a network of localities.” (Zhang p. 8) Translocality simultaneously designates three areas: places of attachment or identification (ruins in *Azul*), people whose physical or imaginary movements across scale connect disparate spaces and places (*Fadhma* and *Itto*), and technologies and modes of communication that facilitate such attachment, identification, movement, and connection (*Azul*).

Conclusion:

Can fictional film be used as historical evidence? As evidence of what? Fictional films serve as historical evidence in the same way that other representational art forms do -- by making events vivid, portraying social attitudes, and even revealing the unconscious assumptions of past societies.

I would like to finish by pointing to the fact that the three films I discussed operate within the post-/ de-/ colonial memories. As for the New York Forum of Amazigh Film, it contributes to the framing of the discussion responding to the question: does contemporary indigenous film create a place for public history through representation and rebuilding a collective memory?

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