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Assia Djébar as Film Theorist in "Touchia: Ouverture" and *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*

by Stacey A. Weber-Fève

ALTHOUGH ASSIA DJEBAR may not be a film theorist in the strict academic sense of the term, we may certainly recognize her insights into her creative intentions and struggles with the cinematic medium side-by-side theoretical work of other film theorists. In considering her varied literary, poetic, dramatic, and cinematographic work, we may now discuss much of her work not solely as primary artistic examples in which feminist and postcolonial literary and film theories resound, but as actual theoretical discourses, themselves. We already know Djébar as a novelist, translator, filmmaker, poet, essayist, keynote speaker, and playwright, but we now growingly know Djébar as a theorist. This essay will examine several key theoretical cinematic positions set forth in the opening segment of Djébar's 1978 film, *La Nouba du Mont Chenoua*, and how she theorizes these cinematic positions in her more recent written work, *Ces voix qui m'assiègent* (1999).

In filming *La Nouba*, Djébar returned to the mountains of her childhood, fifteen years after the end of the Algerian war of liberation, in order to interview her aunts and female cousins about their daily wartime experiences. As Anne Donadey summarizes, "Both documentary and fiction, *La Nouba* follows the filmmaker's 'alter ego,' [. . .] as she questions her relatives, thus reactivating her own memory of a war in which she lost many loved ones" (885). When prompted in interviews to discuss the difficulties for the spectator in reading or understanding this film, Djébar has replied that she does not find the film difficult and simply states that she asks for some effort on the part of the spectator.¹ "Some" effort, in my view, proves rather an understatement, for *La Nouba* offers no classical narrative film elements that conventionally allow the spectator to comprehend the subject matter, engage in the storyline, or identify with the characters.

Additionally, there is very little continuous dialogue in the film. The voices and vocalizations that one does hear seem to occupy (or reclaim?) an audio space of "feminine" sound rather than a continuous narrative

space of meaningful words in communicative exchange. These audio spaces effectively contribute to the overall fragmented feel of the film. Moreover, Djebbar often writes about *La Nouba* in a fragmented way, specifically in terms of the function of the gaze in her filmmaking and writing.

One such example in which she discusses her filmmaking, “Regard de l’autre, regard sur l’autre,” appears in *Ces voix qui m’assiègent*—a collection of essays stemming from talks she has given at many international conferences on a variety of subjects related to her work (that is, the Francophone voice, silence, writing in the Other’s language, the veil, her need for the cinema, etc.) In “Regard de l’autre, regard sur l’autre,” Djebbar writes:

Une femme, en gros plan, est représentée; elle tourne le dos aux spectateurs; on ne voit que ses cheveux, que la masse de sa tête et elle est contre un mur [...] elle nous refuse, elle me refuse—moi, le regard-caméra [...] elle continue de marcher, de chercher, de s’obstiner à dire non aux spectateurs; soudain sa voix, et avec elle sa révolte, éclate: ‘Je parle, je parle, je parle!’—silence—je ne veux pas que l’on me voie! [. . .]. (165–66)

Djebbar shares that, in her view, cinema made by women (and possibly all postcolonial cinema in her reasoning) always originates in a desire to speak (166). In other words, this woman’s unauthorized refusal to be gazed upon by the masculine gaze (as expressed in the voicecovered dialogue) as well as by the camera gaze (as evidenced by the actress turning her back to the lens) suggests a privileging of speech over gazing for Algerian women, which is also seen (heard?) in postcolonial filmmaker/film theorist, Trinh T. Minh-ha’s, cinematographic work.²

In Djebbar’s post/colonial revisions of the gaze in Algeria, Algerian women must effectively read against the grain of *two* gazes in order to refuse the normalizing processes of patriarchal socialization and post/colonial representation. For Djebbar, in *Regard interdit, son coupé*, the Postface to her collection of short stories, *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*, this double gaze stems from a masculine, North African gaze that generally represents Algerian women as “limitée[s] certes au terroir, au village, au saint populaire local, quelquefois au ‘clan’” (257) and an orientalizing, Western gaze that represents Algerian women either as an *odalisque* or in exaggerated folkloric imagery.

Djebbar’s objective in *La Nouba* is to use the gaze to foreground a female-gendered subject who is not uniquely represented as the land/ Nation of Algeria or who is not solely depicted as the exotic object of sexual desire and/ or folkloric exaggerations. She strives rather to foreground a female-gendered subject who is at once both inside (as represented in the figure of the Mother) and outside (as overlooked in the figure of the sororal war participant) the hegemonic post/colonial ideology of gender.

Djebbar succeeds in *La Nouba* in representing portraits of the (Algerian) *multiplicitous* woman—the female-gendered subject who formerly existed outside the (Algerian) ideology of gender. Djebbar effectively asks the

spectator to read the character of Lila (who most conventionally embodies the role of the protagonist) in a revised way which recuperates *alongside* of her multiplicitous figure the representations of Algerian women overlooked in official discourses or who were formerly relegated to the off-screen spaces of post/colonial cinema.

Djebar remains careful to “speak nearby” and not “for” the (subaltern) women of Algeria. She recognizes her privileged position to bring to light in her work the figure of the multiplicitous Algerian woman, but she refuses to embody alone the figurehead of such representation. Rather, she veils her voice with the voices of her fellow speaking countrywomen; since she reminds us that in a post/colonial context, both the Western and the feminine gaze/ voice remain unauthorized.

Djebar constructs *La Noubia* from a “mixture of documentary, fiction, oral history, and music as well as multiple cultural codes and languages” (Khannous 53). The film foregrounds a French-educated Algerian woman’s (Lila) search for “testimonial proof of her brother’s disappearance during the war” (Khannous 53). Ali—Lila’s mute and paralyzed husband (injuries sustained from a horse riding accident)—and Aicha—Lila’s daughter—accompany Lila. Throughout the film, Djebar films Lila at home with Ali and Aicha, her traveling around the Algerian countryside in her jeep, and her interviews with the countrywomen of Chenoua. Spliced throughout the film within these fictional narratives are: fantasy-like enactments of the women’s oral histories, documentary-like military sequences, ethnographic-like images of Chenoua countrywomen and children, and quasi-formalistic shots of grandmothers and grandchildren engaged in the recounting of oral histories. In all of these fragments, Djebar in/ directly investigates various forms of male and female gazing, which is often read by scholars as a “phenomenological reduction” (Bensmaïa 877) or “intercessive strategy” (Zimra 157). In “Touchia: Ouverture,” the textualization of the gaze (in its various forms and with its various associations) results in the outlawing of the male gaze and voice.

This segment of *La Noubia* opens with Djebar’s aforementioned description in which Lila in a medium shot with her back to the camera slowly makes her way down an interior wall while sliding her forehead against it. The camera slowly pans left following her movement. Although this woman does not speak on screen, a voiceover articulates a desire not to be looked upon and rather to speak. Djebar cuts to a closer medium shot of Ali, Lila’s husband, sitting in his wheelchair. We see Ali straight on, but he does not look directly into the camera. Rather, he stares slightly off to the side. Djebar cuts back to Lila as she turns around towards the camera. Djebar pulls back, revealing Ali in the foreground, across from Lila but not looking at her. This opening sequence succinctly sums up the goal of Djebar’s work—the outlawing of the hegemonic male gaze and voice as the only source of Algerian women’s contemporary representation.

Through the editing—the back and forth cutting between Lila and

Ali—Djebbar creates the impression that Lila is the object of Ali's gaze, but it proves to be an illusion. In order to realize her goal of outlawing the male gaze, Djebbar must first effectively rely on this patriarchal way of seeing. She recognizes that the spectator (whether postcolonial, hybrid, or Western) is socially conditioned to position Ali as the primary gazer. So when Djebbar pulls back revealing Ali in the foreground looking elsewhere, she surprises the spectator. By overturning hegemonic cinematic conventions in this sequence, Djebbar succeeds in challenging the spectator's assumptions. Therefore, we immediately must call into question our own conventional viewing/gazing practices and quickly suspend them for the remainder of the film.

With a stationary camera, the scene continues as Ali wheels himself forward more into the center of the shot. Lila enters the shot from screen-right and walks behind and then around him. She exits the frame screen-left, and then Djebbar jump cuts to a close-up shot of the back of Lila's head looking out a window. The vertical bars in the window pane resemble prison cell bars, and the bright exterior light washes out any background images. We only see the back of Lila's head framed inside a prison-like window. This shot consequently creates two symbolic images. First, Djebbar alludes to her interpretation in *Regard interdit, son coupé* of the home as a space of female confinement and imprisonment and site of women's autism in the "master's" presence. Second, the prison cell-like bars foreshadow the narratives the older women will tell further on in *La Nouba* of the Algerian women and men who were arrested and tortured by French soldiers in their imprisonment during the Algerian war of independence. In *La Nouba*, Djebbar effectively works to undo the first image and memorialize the second.

The scene continues as Lila, still framed within the window, turns to reveal her profile. Djebbar zooms in for a tighter close-up and then quickly cuts to a medium shot of Lila. Lila closes the window shutter blocking out the exterior light, walks towards the screen-left side of the room (camera pans left to follow her movement), and then stops to lean against the wall near a painting of what appears to be a landscape. She removes her scarf. Meanwhile, Djebbar's voiceover continues in which Djebbar expresses a desire to "wander in the past, in my memories" and questions the term, "homeland." Djebbar throws a larger-than-life shadow of Lila on the back wall, which symbolically superimposes a variety of motifs in this film that Djebbar often recasts throughout all of her work.

On the one hand (in addition to Djebbar's voiceover), Lila's shadow provides a second metaphor for Djebbar's direct presence in this work. The actress playing the role of Lila bears a striking physical resemblance to Assia Djebbar. By extension then, one could convincingly read Lila's shadow as Djebbar's authorial signature—her veiled presence—speaking nearby Lila. In a second way, Lila's shadow may also represent a community of shadows (an in-between space) of patios and huts that Djebbar

identifies in *Regard interdit, son coupé* in which Algerian women congregate and from which their whispers and murmurs originate. Finally, the shadow also suggests Algerian women's doubled existence—as the silent woman perpetuated in the hegemonic discourses of Algeria (expressed through Lila's silent on-screen frustration) and as a veiled, marginal speaking transmitter of and (active) participant in Algerian history (the larger-than-life shadow), whom Djébar asserts needs bringing into the light.

The scene continues with a cut to a longer medium shot of the profile of Ali wheeling himself into the shot from screen-left. Lila remains standing in her previous position screen-right. The two appear to mutually gaze at each other via an eyeline matching, and then Lila walks over and stands directly across from Ali. Djébar cuts to a close-up of Ali's profile, which is framed by a window with its curtain drawn in the background. Ali turns his head to face the camera, but he never looks into the camera's eye. He then slowly wheels himself backwards into a corner of the room.

It is interesting to compare Djébar's framing of Ali inside a closed window shut to the exterior with her earlier framing of Lila inside a barred window open to the exterior and its natural sunlight. Immediately, this less dramatic framing of Ali draws out the exceptionalness of Lila's framing and asks the spectator to begin to see Algerian women and men in revised ways. In Ali's framing, the home becomes reduced to a single corner. Djébar reifies the dominator/dominated structure, but she inverts it through gender reversal. In quite a literal way, Djébar's dominating (camera's) eye seeks out and annihilates Ali's dominated eye, leaving Ali no recourse but to retreat to the corner of the room as if out of fear. Thus, the home as represented in relation to Ali ironically becomes even more prison-like than how Djébar presents it in relation to Lila. If we recall, the exterior sunlight that flooded the open window behind Lila also flooded and illuminated Lila's body—thus creating a connection to the outdoors, an "escape route" if one will to reach other women in her effort to wander in the past and in her memories and to explore the meaning of a homeland through the women's narratives.

In an essentialist way, Djébar, in effect, reinstates the hegemonic or nationalist way of viewing Algerian women in connection to the land. Further editing between the following shots of Lila looking through the window, the countryside, the home's rooftop, and then the mountain of Chenoua crystallizes this representation. But as Djébar had first accomplished in the disillusionment (or defamiliarization) of the male gaze earlier in this scene, she once again succeeds in surprising the spectator.

Following this tranquil editing between Lila and the Algerian landscape, Djébar cuts to an image of a woman standing behind vertical bars—in a prison cell it appears—and then to a sequence of documentary-like archival images of army trucks entering a village, a tree blowing in a storm, and the trees on the mountainside ablaze. Set against these

images are sounds of war: airplanes, explosions, (fe)male cries and shouts, and gunfire. In a very abrupt way, Djebbar unseats the idyllic representation of Algerian women as the Algerian land and creates a new representation by memorializing in this sequence the sacrifices made, the trauma experienced, and the hardships borne by many Algerian women during the struggle for independence from France.

Djebbar also effectively defamiliarizes the traditional representation of the home as a space of female occultation through the low-angle long shot which foregrounds the home while capturing the mountain of Chenoua in the background. Viewing the home in relation to the mountain—a former (fe)male site of gorilla warfare—testifies to the contemporary emancipatory war some Algerian women and Djebbar in/directly wage against the patriarchal State and political factions in Algeria.³ Moreover, viewing the home in relation to the mountain as a beacon to Algerian women's communities (since Djebbar has returned to the rural mountain communities to interview the women there) bespeaks her project to salvage and encourage women's oral histories in a strengthened effort to avoid their cultural, social, and historical autism. Therefore, the home becomes a site of female political action, spectatorship, and authorship in *La Noubia*.

Following the sequence of editing that recaptures images and sounds of the war, Djebbar cuts back to a medium shot of Lila's profile. Lila then turns to look back at us over her left shoulder, directly gazing into the camera's lens. Fully-centered within the cinematic frame, Djebbar subtly zooms in on Lila's face and freeze frames this image. This has a striking effect on the spectator. In a very literal way, Djebbar crystallizes the female gaze. Djebbar's dominant gaze (represented in the camera's eye) directly meets Lila's appropriated gaze in a "metaphorical" or symbolic direct eyeline matching. Equal cinematographic and semiotic ground is established. The male gaze and voice (as represented earlier in Ali's inability to return the camera's gaze and his silence) are successfully outlawed. The freeze frame not only effectively creates for Djebbar a (re)appropriated space of female (on-screen as well as off-screen) spectatorship in postcolonial cinema, but it also directly engages her theorizations of the female gaze as an enabler of female conversations and dialogues (female speech), a point she articulates in *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*.

In "Regard de l'autre, regard sur l'autre" from *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*, Djebbar challenges the traditional gaze through Algerian women's *désir de parole* (166), but she asserts that this desire for speech is borne only after she opens her eyes (166) and specifically when she circulates "dans les paysages retrouvés" (166). Djebbar states that this female gaze searches out locations, houses, dried-up rivers, burned forests and meets other women who gaze back on her in their turn (166–67). Djebbar finds that in their interweaving gazes, dialogue becomes baited on the present and on the past (167). For Djebbar, women's gazes become a departure for speech

(167) or in other words, an impetus for a feminine speech purporting to testify to women's present/past daily existence and memories of "un passé encore à vif" (167). Interlacing or intertwining conversations between women constitutes the key literary/cinematographic strategy in Djebbar's work as a whole. The following sequences in the opening segment of *La Nouba* continue to support her theorizations of Algerian female gaze and speech.

For the remaining roughly ten minutes of "Touchia: Ouverture," the film juxtaposes sequences of ethnographic-like images of Algerian country-women and children and fictional fragments of the doctor's house call to examine Ali, Ali's dream sequence revealing his riding accident, anonymous women performing domestic tasks, and a group of strolling musicians playing traditional indigenous music. Spliced within these fragments are images of the mountain, countryside, and coastline. The most striking element in the juxtapositions of each of the images is Djebbar's *mise en scène*. Djebbar masterfully fills each plane (foreground, middle ground, and background) of the cinematographic frame with figures and objects that on one hand seem dissident to each other yet paradoxically on the other seem interconnected.

In one memorable sequence, Ali, occupying the middle ground, sits in his wheelchair with his back quarter-turned towards the camera and appears to be staring through an open window. Djebbar cuts to a reverse longer shot of Lila in the background entering the house and removing her wrap. (Ali is now in the foreground.) Lila walks towards the room in which Ali is sitting and stops in the door frame (now occupying the middle ground.) Djebbar cuts to a close-up reverse shot of a young girl peering into the room, in which Ali and Lila are positioned, through an open window from the exterior. The window frames her head. The young girl closes one of the window shutters, slides screen-left into the left-hand side of the window, and appears to engage our gaze by directly returning Djebbar's camera's gaze. Djebbar then cuts to a reverse full shot of Ali occupying the middle ground rolling backwards in his chair (as if away from the girl in the window now in the background.) Lila's larger-than-life shadow is recast on the back wall and dramatically overshadows Ali. She enters into the room from the foreground, moves to the middle ground standing opposite of Ali, then moves to the background and closes the second window shutter, thus cutting off the young girl's gaze.

The character positionings throughout the various planes, the angles Djebbar employs when filming the characters, and the characters' moving about the frame create a cinematographic "dance" of sorts in which the characters constantly appear to vie for agency on screen. There are definite overtones of a kind of struggling for ground to occupy (perhaps colonize?), and the only direct outcome is the occultation of the young girl from the camera's eye and the interdiction of her gaze (effected by Lila's closing of the window shutter.) With everything discussed so far in this

essay, Lila's action—the intentional shutting away of the young Algerian girl—proves quite curious, as it seems to oppose many of Djebbar's goals in her work.

In many ways, I think Lila's act speaks to Djebbar's own experience and understanding of Algerian women's rather pessimistic fate if viewing practices are not revised in Algeria. Many scholars read the figure of Lila as a "stand-in" for Djebbar or Djebbar's "alter ego." I do believe that some aspects—namely Lila's fictional desire to record the oral narratives of her countrywomen in the film which so reflects Djebbar's own artistic goal in her work—do validate such readings. However, it seems to me that the figure of the young girl more accurately reflects Djebbar's presence in the film by reminding us that she is "speaking nearby" the Algerian women multiplicatively represented in the figure of Lila.

In this instance, I wish to read Djebbar more specifically in the young girl's figure than in Lila's, largely because this young girl seems to recognize that she has something to learn about Algerian culture, history, society, etc. by watching/ listening to the mother figure as represented in Lila. Indeed, this most literally reflects Djebbar's project—to look and listen to the (grand)mother as a source to the past and a means for revised Algerian women's representation.

Lila's closing of the window shutter, which symbolically reinstates social occulting practices in the film, effectively demonstrates the potential effacement of an entire female generation's representation and predicts the implicit dangers for the new generations if communication between female generations is cut. In the remaining segments of *La Nouba*, Djebbar works against these dangers by establishing spaces of female spectatorship and authorship through Lila's gaze/speaking voice and her own voiceovers that meld with the gazes/voices of the countrywomen Lila interviews.

Thus, we have come to see in this essay how Djebbar's theorizations of the gaze contribute to debates central to feminist and postcolonial film theories. Djebbar's postcolonial women's cinema works to subvert the double gaze by outlawing the male gaze through gender reversal and by (re)claiming multiple representations of Algerian women from feminine perspectives. As a film theorist, Djebbar (like Minh-ha) asserts that women's cinema privileges female voices forging spaces of cinematic authorship, but Djebbar effectively shows how these voices first rely on the female gaze appropriating cinematic spaces of spectatorship.

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Notes

¹See Réda Bensmaïa, "La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua: Introduction to the Cinematic Fragment," *World Literature Today* 70 (1996). 877-84.

²See Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) 212–16.

³See Winifred Woodhull, *Transfigurations of the Maghreb: Feminism, Decolonization, and Literatures* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1993).

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