

The Temporal Entanglements of Assia Djébar's *The Zerda and the Songs of Forgetting*
by Philip Rizk

“The fox runs through the land of the lion with his tail in the air.

The shepherd has become sultan.”

In 1982, on the 20th anniversary of Algerian independence, Algerian novelist and filmmaker Assia Djébar released *The Zerda, and the Songs of Forgetting*, a film that digs deep into the French colonization of the Maghreb and the hauntings of anticolonial struggles. The film reappropriates images from the colonial-era archives of Pathé and Gaumont, using remnants that colonial image-makers deemed useless for their propaganda films. French colonial authorities had long used the image in their visual warfare against the national liberation movement in Algeria, where they carried out a scorched earth campaign against the indigenous population for over 130 years.^[1] As soon as the French navy fleet landed on Algeria's shores on June 13, 1830, and before the first town had even been conquered, the colonizers quickly worked to **depict their narrative** of the conquest in text and image.

“The battle is not yet joined, they are not yet even in sight of their prey,

but they are already anxious to ensure a pictorial record of the campaign.”^[2]



In 1962, after eight years of revolutionary struggle, Algerians liberated their country from their foreign occupier. And yet, in *The Zerda*, and *Songs of Forgetting*, Djébar depicts neither the war of independence, nor the leaders of the Front de libération nationale (FLN) who were still in power when the film premiered. Yesterday's revolutionary heroes emerged twenty years later as neocolonialists claiming to represent the revolution's ideals while legislating the dispossession of large numbers of men and almost all women.^[3] *The Zerda*, and *Songs of Forgetting* is an affront to these resistance fighters-turned-politicians who betrayed the revolution in spirit and in letter. When the film debuted, a clique of male filmmakers, whose mission was the circulation of an uncritical nationalist discourse of revolution and independence, shunned it, and state-owned Algerian Television, which had produced the film, tried to prevent it from being screened in international film festivals. The reception of *Zerda* among Algeria's cultural establishment revealed that the post-independence state had, after all, inherited colonial structures of image-making and censorship. While anticolonial in its narrative of the past, the state emerged as brazenly neocolonial in the present.

"Your heart, O France, is merciless...You beat us as if we were a drum."

And today, it is another heart that is merciless.

Today,

“they surveil,

they watch,

they review the troops,

they inaugurate.”

A partnership maintained.

“The past is never past,” Djébar told Josie Fanon in an interview. “Only if you have a clear view of your relationship with the past can you come back to the present.”^[4] While the

men compete for the leading place on the podium of the FLN, a single woman draws a line of coloniality from the past straight into the present. Saidiya Hartman expresses this ethos as “temporal entanglement, where the past, the present, and the future are not discrete and cut off from one another.” “Rather,” she says, “we live the simultaneity of that entanglement.”^[5] And so, Assia Djébar’s is not a Third Cinema that celebrates post-independence state structures, for these have revealed themselves to be a farce. Hers is more akin to a Fourth Cinema, “a cinema that works against all modes of ideological and narratological hegemony.”^[6] *Zerda* references towns, villages, and cities all across North Africa without setting borders; it paints a picture of the greater Maghreb in its pre-colonial form with no mention of Algeria, the nation-state.

During the revolution, Frantz Fanon and Assia Djébar were for a short time colleagues at *Al-Moudjahid*, the FLN’s official organ. The root word of the magazine’s name *ja-ha-da*—struggling, striving, vigorous effort—is a verb that defines both of their lives. After Frantz’s death, Djébar maintained a close friendship with Josie Fanon. It was Djébar who wrote of the FLN’s complicity in Frantz’s murder—a political complicity, not a physical one. It was Djébar who received Josie’s call after protests rose up against the post-independence government in the winter of 1988. It was Djébar who wrote Josie’s obituary.

“Night after night we suffocate her, suffocate her in leaden sleep.”

In *The Zerda*, and the *Songs of Forgetting*, it is the sound, the music, that does the talking; the timbre of voices disrupts the intentions of the colonizer’s images of subjugation. Djébar described her first film, *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* (1977), as producing “sound-images.” Keziah Poole describes Djébar’s second film, *Zerda*, as a practice of “sound against image.”^[7] The “gaze of the ear” subverts the “feast of the gaze.”^[8] Philosopher Martin Heidegger considered the “fundamental event of the modern age” to be “the conquest of the world as picture.”^[9] It was through the colonial image that colonizers sought to restore “a little order to disordered souls.”^[10] Modernity conquered the eye, but the ear is a revolution. And in Djébar’s *Zerda*, the “complete disorder” of decolonization enters through the ear, disrupting the given order, setting memory in motion, a decolonial cinema “bring[ing] representation to crisis.”^[11] The film overwhelms the viewer with “a curious dissociation in which, with his eyes wide open where he listens, he surprises himself as if blind to the image.”^[12]

In *The Zerda*, and *the Songs of Forgetting*, “a growing chorus of disembodied voices—one of them Josie Fanon’s—permeates the images with protestations, poetry, and song, overwriting their significance and dismantling their ‘silencing’ power.”^[13] Djébar does not recuperate “Algerian women’s voices to make up the gaps in the national/colonial archive,” Poole writes. “Djébar’s films dwell in the radical potential of irrecuperability, exploring new possibilities of feminine resistance from without re/presentation and History.”^[14] Her films undermine “the continued submission to its single memory of the peoples whom the West has subordinated in the course of its rise to world hegemony” and show us how we can “fly in the face of a reality, even where one is condemned by, and in, it.”^[15]

Djébar celebrates not an anticolonial struggle that has as its outcome a neocolonial state but the spirit of a deeper struggle that has long been silenced.

“Brothers of Abd el-Krim and Omar, have you forgotten your ancestors’ thawra?”



She asks. But it is the sisters, the mothers, the grandmothers who have not.

“Documentary, as I understand it, is a way of proceeding,” Djébar tells us in an interview in 1978.^[16] In *The Zerda*, and *the Songs of Forgetting*, Assia Djébar reminds us of the permanent revolution and the need for its permanent renewal.

Will we heed the call of this radical feminist voice and find in the past an inspiration and then a way to proceed?

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Philip Rizk's upcoming edited volume *Neocolonialism and its Dismantling* puts in conversation Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* with the wave of mobilization that has moved across the Arabic-speaking world in the past 15 years, marked by the chant "the people want the fall of the system." The book is a re-reading of Fanon's final testament from the global neocolony, with an eye on strategies of its undoing.

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- [1] Hafez, 1995: 46.
- [2] Djébar, 1993: 8.
- [3] Brownhill, 2009: 6 & 25.
- [4] Cited in Fanon, 1977.
- [5] Hartman, 2021.
- [6] Ranjana, Khanna cited in Poole, 2021: 81.
- [7] Poole, 2021: 90.
- [8] Spillers, Hortense J. "Peter's Pans: Eating in the Diaspora." In *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- [9] Heidegger, Martin, "The Age of the World Picture," in *Off the Beaten Track*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1950] 2002, 71.
- [10] "Disordered souls" cited in Hafez, 1995: 46.
- [11] Ranjana Khanna in Poole, 2021: 81.
- [12] Calle-Gruber cited in Poole, 2021: 90. "une curieuse dissociation où, écarquillant les yeux là où il tend l'oreille, il se surprend comme aveugle à l'image."
- [13] Poole, 2021: 89.
- [14] Poole, 2021: 82.
- [15] Wynter, 2020: 29-30.
- [16] Djébar, 1978.