

**Roy Armes.** *Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Cinema.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. 272 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-21744-8.



**Reviewed by** Ranjana Khanna

**Published on** H-Gender-MidEast (April, 2005)

Roy Armes's new book *Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Cinema* provides an extremely useful survey of films from Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, as well as films made by filmmakers of the North African diaspora in the "postcolonial" or politically post-Independence period. It supplements well Armes's other books addressing North African cinema, providing a useful addition to his *Arab and African Film-making* (1991, with Liz Malkmus), *Omar Gatlato* (1998), and the *Dictionary of North African Film Makers* (1996).

Armes begins his work with a provocative claim that he broaches through an examination of Edward Said's contention concerning the deeply interlaced developments of the nineteenth-century European novel with European colonialism. If Said thought the literary genre and the colonial politics were impossible to think without each other, Armes elaborates, in the introductory pages of the book, a similar argument concerning the development of cinema and its deep tie to twentieth-century colonialism and U.S. imperialism. He provides this proposition as a backdrop for his

survey primarily because of the narrative theory he sees encapsulated within Said's argument. If Peter Brooks argued that the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels functioned through the desire for a plot that included every possibility, something Armes writes could be said too of Hollywood cinema, Armes favors a Saidian reading that focuses on what is not included, and therefore what kinds of omissions become particularly striking for the contemporary reader who has knowledge of the forms of coloniality that emerge in those textual omissions. Said, in his reading of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* focused on the omission of Antigua as a name. Similarly, Armes tells us we should look to the naming of sites conspicuous through their omission in Western (mostly French) films, shot in North Africa frequently, but utterly silent on the topic of colonial presence. Even as "the films produced in the Maghreb inevitably had a very close relationship with the colonial authorities," (p. 5) there is a conspicuous silence on this matter which needs to be examined if the history of film in the region is to be understood.

Armes's backdrop provides the justification for examining these three film industries together as one regional block. At one end of the development of film in the region, there is a colonial presence that gives these three countries a commonality in spite of their very different relations to colonialism. At the other, there seems to be a categorization of something sometimes called "beur" (Armes rejects this term) or "immigrant film" that once again seems to place films of the region within a similar framework, in spite of the very different national histories of film in the region, its politics, genres, and modes of production. Other reasons offered for the regional study include Michel Serceau's fascinating claim that Maghrebian cinema, in recent years, "has effectively become in certain respects a feminist cinema." [1]

Having provided the historical backdrop for the development of each independent nation-state's film industry, Armes gives a brief overview of the filmmakers after colonialism, explaining, for example the strong influence of Egyptian cinema on them. Reluctant to fall on older "colonial" forms of expression dominating commercial cinema at the time (the late 1950s and 1960s), and working within the context of new national energies, they found filmmakers like Youssef Chahine inspirational. Giving us a sense of the excitement and energy of a film industry burgeoning with new possibilities, Armes then provides, in chapters designated by decades, summaries of the major developments in each national cinema, and, where relevant, each "immigrant" cinema from the period.

The structure of the book is not entirely predictable from the introduction, and sometimes leads to repetition. The bulk of the book is divided into two sections: "Histories" (with chapters on the "1960's"; "1970's"; "1980's"; "1990's"; and "Into the Present") followed by "Themes and Styles" (with more in-depth analyses of ten different films: *El Chergui* (Moumen Smihi, Morocco, 1975); *Chronicle of the Year of Embers* (Mohamed

Lakhdar Hamina, Algeria, 1975); *Omar Gatlatto* (Merzak Allouache, Algeria, 1976); *La Nouba des Femmes de Mont Chenoua* (Assia Djébar, Algeria, 1978); *Miss Mona* (Mehdi Charef, Immigrant Cinema, 1987); *Golden Horseshoes* (Nouri Bouzid, Tunisia, 1989); *Halfaouine* (Ferid Boughedir, Tunisia, 1990); *Looking for my Wife's Husband* (Mohamed Abderrahman Tazi, Morocco, 1993); *Silences of the Palace* (Moufida Tlatli, Tunisia, 1994); *Ali Zaoua* (Nabil Ayouch, Morocco, 1999). These sections are then followed by two very useful appendices: "Dictionary of Feature Filmmakers" which includes brief biographical data and the names of films made; and "List of Films" by year and country of production, or in certain cases, the designation of "immigrant cinema." The appendices are very helpful, and could have been improved only by distribution information given that many of the titles mentioned are difficult to find outside the Maghreb and France. On the whole, the structure of the book is not entirely satisfactory. Indeed, at times it appears as if the "Introduction," "Histories," and "Themes and Styles" belong to three different monographs.

The first section of the book, "Histories," includes mostly plot descriptions of the films, and also provides information about the development of the film industry in each country. Armes describes, for example, the nationalization of the film industries in each country, explaining the constraints this put on production, but also the assurance, at various moments, of a steady salary for the filmmakers involved. He gives us very interesting information about the conditions of production, also informing us of the curious staying power of so many of the filmmakers, many of whom started making films in the 1960s and 1970s and continued to be not only the dominant and more established filmmakers decades later, but in some instances continued as the only filmmakers as younger generations were very slow to start if they came into the industry at all. Armes plots the economic and political factors that went into shaping the film industries' developments,

explaining, for example, why the very strong Algerian film industry went into decline. From independent companies like Casbah Films (which produced *Battle of Algiers* alongside Igor Films), to the ONCIC (Office National pour le Commerce et l'Industrie Cinématographique), many films were co-produced with France and Italy until the energy shifted to Algerian-born cinema which remained strong until the 1990s and was frequently structurally reorganized.

Armes is excellent on the film industries themselves, but pays less attention to such important factors as the boycotting of Hollywood in the region, or the presence and influence of other national cinemas (besides the Egyptian). Sometimes frustrating was the two line description of what the films were about thematically, with little attention to genres, style, or any other analysis. There was very little sense in the "Histories" section of Armes as a film critic, (in describing the plot, he could be presenting a novel) and perhaps were the two sections of the book merged, it would seem slightly less jarring in its analytical style. It is not really until we reach the second section of the book, "Themes and Styles," that we have the sense of the films as film.

Armes is at his best when he is doing in-depth readings of films. Each chapter first contextualizes the film (and this is where we sometimes have repetition from the "Histories" section of the book). Armes then presents a reading of the films in terms of their style (for example, the use of sound in *Omar Gatlato*; the problematic of autobiography in *La Nouba*; sexuality and gendered space in *Halfaouine*, or temporality in *Looking for my Wife's Husband*.) At times Armes seems to want to make an anthropological point, using the films as if they were cultural informants. These are some of the slightly strange moments in the book when, for example, an explanation of the film's use of gendered space will be explained with a reference to Fatima Mernissi's work. While this reader is all for interdisciplinarity, and also

enthusiastic about the use of film and other cultural artifacts as factors in the understanding of cultural difference, these moments seem to render the film transparent, as if not a medium to be analyzed at all, but rather something to be simply explained. Mernissi's work is of course very important, and yet here it appears to close down possible readings of the films rather than open them up to analysis of the style.

The strongest readings are of the Algerian films, Assia Djebar's *La Nouba des Femmes de Mont Chenoua* and Merzak Allouache's *Omar Gatlato*. In these chapters, Armes neither spent too long describing the basic plot of the film, nor tried to give anthropological explanations too often for the way they unfolded. What is evident in both these readings is the extraordinary use of sound, rhythm, and structure.

Armes's book is a very useful introduction to the cinema of the region and will be a useful handbook and reference for beginners and experts in the field of cinema as well as the region. There is little English language material on Maghrebi film, and most texts in any language fail to give an overview of the regional cinema over time. Armes' book will fill this void well.

#### Note

[1]. Michel Serceau, "Questions de genre, questions de sexe: les femmes dans le cinéma maghrébin" in *Le machisme à l'écran*, ed. Françoise Puaux (Paris: Corlet/Telerama, 2001), p. 116; cited in and translated by Roy Armes, *Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005) 83.

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**Citation:** Ranjana Khanna. Review of Armes, Roy. *Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Cinema*. H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. April, 2005.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10434>



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