

# Sight and Sound

**AFRICAN CINEMA  
ALGERIA  
TO SENEGAL**

## **'PERFORMANCE'**

Drugs, decadence and Jagger

## **TARANTINO'S CHOICE**

'Chungking Express'

## **SASKIA REEVES**

Power play and 'Butterfly Kiss'

## **CLINT EASTWOOD**

and his music man



## **'APOLLO 13'**

# CAUGHT IN SPACE

**PLUS SPACE TRAVEL: 'BUCK ROGERS' TO 'STAR TREK' AND BEYOND**



**Sight and Sound**  
(Incorporating Monthly  
Film Bulletin)  
Volume 5 Issue 9(NS)  
Editorial office:  
21 Stephen Street  
London W1P 1PL  
Telephone 0171 255 1444  
Facsimile 0171 436 2327  
Subscription office:  
01858 468888

**Editorial**  
Editor  
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Acting deputy editor  
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Associate editor  
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Acting associate editor  
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Esterson Lackersteen  
Page make-up  
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Origination  
Precise Litho  
Printer  
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**Advertising sales**  
David Thomas  
Telephone 0171 957 8916  
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Rahway, NJ, and at additional  
mailing offices. Postmaster:  
send address corrections to  
Sight and Sound, c/o Mercury  
Airfreight International Ltd Inc.,  
2323 Randolph Avenue,  
Avenel, NJ 07001  
Subscription price is \$63.00  
Newsstand distribution by:  
Eastern News Distributors Inc.

**Annual subscription rates**  
UK £29.50  
Europe £36.00  
US/Canada airspeed £36.00  
Overseas surface mail £36.00  
Overseas airmail £61.00  
Special rates apply to BFI  
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**Subscription queries**  
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Tower House, Sovereign Park  
Market Harborough  
Leicestershire LE16 9EF  
Telephone 01858 468888  
Facsimile 01858 434958

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Services; Stills, Posters and  
Designs; Research; Publishing  
and Education; and the monthly  
Sight and Sound magazine

BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE  
bfi  
SIGHT AND SOUND MAGAZINE  
Published monthly by the  
British Film Institute  
ISSN 0037-4806

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September 1995



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'Performance': 20



# Same old song

## Contributors to this issue

**José Arroyo** is lecturer in film, University of Warwick  
**Stella Bruzzi** teaches at Royal Holloway College and is writing a book on film and fashion  
**Hadani Ditmars** is a freelance Paris-based writer  
**Lizzie Francke** is the author of *Script Girls* and film writer for *The Observer*, among other publications  
**June Givanni** heads the African and Caribbean Unit at the BFI, and is editor of *Black Film Bulletin*  
**David Meeker** is author of *Jazz in the Movies* and Keeper of Feature Films in the National Film and Television Archive  
**Colin McArthur**'s books include a recent study of *Casablanca*  
**Tony Rayns** is a film critic and curator whose projects last year included the ICA Korean cinema season  
**Jon Savage** is the author of the award-winning *Englands Dreaming*  
**Martin Walker** is the Washington correspondent of *The Guardian* and author of *The Cold War and the Making of the Modern World*  
**Peter Wollen** is a film-maker, curator and film critic. His latest collection of essays is *Raiding the Icebox*

Last year, the moral minority was busy clamouring against the theatrical release of such films as *Natural Born Killers* and the video release of *Reservoir Dogs*; this autumn they seem to be shifting their attention to television. It looks as if the attack will take two forms: one directed towards taste and decency; the other towards political bias. The assaults on Michael Grade, chief executive of Channel 4, as "pornographer in chief", are a sign of the first; the revival of the Tory unit to monitor 'political balance' an example of the second.

The usual suspects on the 'decency' divide – the politicians and popular press on one side, the broadcasters and academics on the other – are already honing their rhetorical knives. Their next clash is likely to follow the publication, just after we go to press, of Sheffield University's research report on levels of violence on television. (The research has been funded jointly by the BBC and the Independent Television Commission.) According to early leaks in the press, its findings are that levels of violence have decreased slightly on the terrestrial channels – while on satellite television, especially the movie channels, the levels are somewhat higher.

Those who argue that viewing violence leads directly to acts of violence have the *Daily Mail* for their mouthpiece, as it decries the report's failure to consider the "drip, drip, drip of brutal and brutalising images" on satellite and terrestrial television, and how these might affect the "suggestible children" and "inadequate adults" who watch them. They may also have support from Virginia Bottomley, who has taken over at the Department of National Heritage and who has followed her decision not to pursue a new privacy law against press intrusion by forcing the BBC to stick to more explicit guidelines, to be drafted into the charter, on "good taste and decency". Bottomley is also planning to meet with the BBC and the Independent Television Commission to discuss the findings of the Sheffield report. The BBC's chairman, Sir Marmaduke Hussey, has pledged to hold a one-day conference in November on standards of taste and decency.

The thinking behind these policy shifts seems to be that the BBC should somehow act as a standard – or moral touchstone – for the more wayward broadcasters (such as some of the satellite stations, and Channel 4). Coupled with other proposed guidelines to enforce "impartiality and accuracy" in the BBC's current affairs – an example of an attack on the political front – this new envisioning of "Auntie's" role (or perhaps that should be "Aunt Sally's" role

from now on) only confirms that the government is eager to discipline the BBC even further than it has already done.

Meanwhile, those who dissent from the view that violence on the box breeds violence in the home have been arguing their case with renewed vigour, citing David Gauntlett's recent report, *Moving Experiences: Understanding Television's Influences and Effects*, which persuasively argues against the simplistic model of television's corrupting influence. Though acknowledging that television undoubtedly influences its audience, Gauntlett systematically demolishes the research which purports to prove that it directly 'effects' viewers. While numerous broadcasters, notably Melvyn Bragg, have expressed their support for this view, Gauntlett's report rests its case on dry and rational research. Unfortunately such research has rarely been successful in persuading the popular press out of its prejudices (and who, with the privacy legislation squelched, are in little danger of having their freedom of expression curbed).

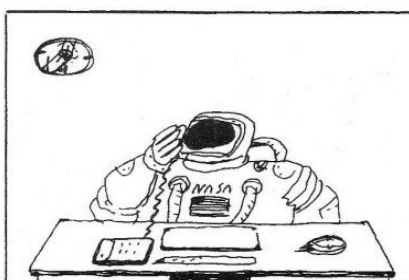
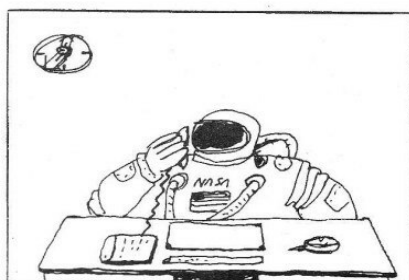
Quite where the New Labour party stands on both the decency and the impartiality issues is far from clear. Of course they oppose Tory attacks on the BBC, but that doesn't mean when (if) they gain power they won't become equally censorious. And if Tony Blair's views of video are anything to go by, he is unlikely to be a staunch defender of television's right to offend (particularly the BBC's).

Whatever Labour's position, it seems highly ironic that this row over broadcasting should be stirring at the moment when old-style terrestrial television (and particularly the BBC seems poised finally to relinquish its central position in the nation's culture. As the new technologies come 'on-line' for more and more people, and patterns of leisure consumption change and evolve, traditional British television is destined to experience the same displacement that radio and film underwent in the 50s – when television supplanted them. Soon, with large numbers of channels provided by digital broadcasting, traditional terrestrial television (or rather the three or four channels most of us have grown up with) will just be a tiny few among a range of entertainments available in the home, including videos, video games, the 'information superhighway', and digital-terrestrial, cable and satellite channels.

In the context of this changeable climate, it remains to be seen whether the government's new curbs on public broadcasting, even if they come into being – and they should be resisted with as much energy as possible – will be quite as important as would once have been the case when a nation sat down to share the experience of watching the box.

JERRY ON LINE #1

Peter Lydon - James Sillavan ©



'Guess what I'm wearing Jerry, I just had it sent up from Wardrobe. I'll give you a clue. It's cured my hay-fever, reduced my exposure to smog and it's finally turned me into something of a fashion item round here. Cough! Cough!! Cough!!! No, it's not a bat suit stupid.'



# TORN APART



Chronicles of a quartier: a woman's world

While *Bab El-Oued City*, Merzak Allouache's latest film, was being filmed in the neighbourhoods of Algiers, in the spring of 1993, a State of Emergency was declared and a curfew imposed. In the film, Bab El-Oued, the *quartier* of Allouache's childhood, is presented as a neighbourhood gripped by fear and confusion after the riots and turmoil of October 1988. His protagonist lives there, a version of the urban Algerian anti-heroes of his earlier films, facing the problems they did in *Omar Gatlatto* (1976) and *Moughamarat Batel* (*Aventures d'un Heros*) (1978): a low standard of living, the monotony of daily routine, but now overpopulation also, and increasing violence.

When the fundamentalists plant loudspeakers on the rooftops of the *quartier* to broadcast the *imam*'s sermons throughout the day, Boualem, a young baker who works at night, rips one out in a fit of anger and throws it in the sea. Said, the leader of the local fundamentalist gang, vows to make an example of him. The situation worsens when Yamina, Said's liberal sister who has been forced to take the veil, is caught trysting with Boualem, with whom she is in love. Soon, the whole community is caught up in the accelerating cycle of aggression.

*Bab El-Oued City* – which went on to win the International Critics' Award at Cannes as well as second prize at the Carthage Film Festival – was filmed, often clandestinely and in haste, in an atmosphere of extreme tension, where arrests, kidnappings and killings were commonplace; when artists and intellectuals were being shot daily by anonymous assassins. There was little time for retakes or in-depth analysis of dialogue. Everything was spur-of-the-moment; with many of the large cast first-time actors, much was improvised. Allouache does not hesitate to reveal the hidden Mediterranean charms of a tough neighbourhood that has become the heart of Islamic extremism, but the nostalgia with which he films his old haunts 'is compounded by a kind of fatalism, a sense of the "beginning of the end".'

He sees himself as a teller of tales, a modern *hakawati* (a traditional Arabic story-teller). Like characters in a *hakawati* tale, his Algerian

"urban everymen" must triumph over adversity to succeed. But no two endings are alike. The story changes every time it's told. And with this film, there is a sobering sense of finality to the story's end, as the hero of *Bab El-Oued City* opts out of the narrative and takes a boat to France. Is he gone for good? Will he return in a different guise? Or will Allouache's next film, to be shot in a popular Parisian neighbourhood, be *Bab El-Oued II* in spirit?

**Hadani Ditmars:** What was it like for you to return to Bab El-Oued at a time of crisis?

**Merzak Allouache:** It's a popular, working-class neighbourhood in the centre of Algiers – it's not a suburb, it has a real history. But it's a neighbourhood where all the problems of the capital are evident. It's my neighbourhood, I know it well. Even in my first film, *Omar Gatlatto*, which I shot in Bab El-Oued, I wanted to show the problems of the Algerian youth, their standard of living, how they fit in to a newly independent nation in the middle of building itself up. How they negotiated the practical realities of everyday life – overcrowded accommodation, lack of work. I was particularly interested in their relationship to women – how there were two distinct societies, one male, one female, being created through various forms of segregation. 15 years later, I wanted to return to Bab El-Oued and make a film there.

I wanted to further explore the theme of the *quartier*, because in Algeria it has always been a place of refuge, where you can find yourself and feel at home, despite the problems, where you can find comfort. I don't know if it's like that in other places, but in Algeria, the *quartier* is a place where young people can find a certain solidarity – a place to go and hang out, be with friends – just exist. But what I noticed was that since October of 1988, and with the rise of fundamentalist Islam, the idea of the *quartier* and what it represented was shattered. There was a lot of division, even within families. I found this to be a rather dramatic development and I wanted to document this change – to produce a chronicle of the *quartier*. As a point of departure for this chronicle, I chose the problem of the loudspeaker, which infiltrates the neighbour-

hood with propaganda, functioning as a kind of all-powerful voice. I wanted to show how the young people dealt with this situation.

**HD:** Did this sense of the *quartier* as a place of warmth, of comfort, come from your own memories and personal experience?

**MA:** Yes, completely. I remember it as a true sanctuary. For young Algerians, especially for young men, it was more of a sanctuary than the family home. It was a place where young people could create their own sense of family. Because of the problem of the rural exodus and overpopulation, when there are 15 or 16 people living in one flat, naturally the young people spend more time outside on the street than inside. So in this way, the *quartier* and what it represented played a very important role in the lives of young people in Algiers. But now everything has changed. There is a great sense of mistrust between people. There is an endless cycle of violence which has become a daily reality.

So the *quartier* is no longer a cocoon which protects people, because there is now a great sense of fear and danger, as if anything could happen. This is a truly dramatic change, because the sense of belonging to a *quartier* was really the only thing left for young people. There is no longer a sense of security. The *quartier* was always a place where young people could recount their stories, their dreams, their lies – where they could find someone to listen to them. But now, in this situation of civil war, this is no longer possible.

**HD:** To what extent does the narrative, storytelling aspect of the *quartier* play a role in your films? Do you see it as a place where the oral tradition can naturally develop? And if so, has its voice now been silenced?

**MA:** The *quartier* was really a place where young people could express themselves. The importance of its role cannot be overstated. I've been dealing with this theme in my films since *Omar Gatlatto*. It was a place where values were formed. The young people even invented their own language, their own catchphrases. They speak a popular dialect which borrows words from French and Spanish, and changes existing words in Arabic. One of the important narrative





Chronicles of a quartier: a man's world

**A state of emergency was declared in Algeria as its director Merzak Allouache was filming 'Bab El-Oued City'. He talks with Hadani Ditmars about story-telling, politics and nostalgia**

traditions from the *quartier populaire* is the *chabi*. This is a song that celebrates the popular idea of the woman – the inaccessible woman, always behind a window, always “untouchable” – an expression of a certain kind of “courtly love”. The scene in *Bab El-Oued City* where the young protagonist sits on a rock by the beach and dreams of his inaccessible love expresses the essence of the *chabi*. But now even the songs and stories of the *quartier* have been shattered.

**HD:** At the end of *Bab El-Oued City* there is an image of the young woman – the Islamist leader's sister, played by Nadia Kaci – on the balcony, watching the boat depart for France. She is literally “closed in” on both sides by two different men. With this image of the cloistered woman – almost imprisoned or suffocated – were you trying to represent the imprisonment of the Algerian spirit, held hostage, as it were, by the present crisis?

**MA:** Yes, in a way, that was the image. What I really wanted to show was that Algeria today is a “blocked” society. But in psychological terms, this “blockage” already existed before the present crisis. What happened after the war of ‘Liberation’ for example, was disturbing. Women played an active role in the war, but when it was over, they were expected to return to their traditional roles. There is a tradition in Algeria of men gathering together in exclusively male groups. Their conversation often concerns women but if a woman approaches the group, they feel a bit destabilised. They don't really know how to communicate with her.

**HD:** In terms of the relationship between the two young “lovers” in the film, do you see *Bab El-Oued City* as following in a certain tradition of *Romeo and Juliet*, or even *West Side Story*?

**MA:** Yes there is that element of *Romeo and Juliet* in the film. But essentially what I wanted to show in the film was that there are already psychological problems between Algerian young men and women – that the rise in Islamism has augmented them. Certainly there are already problems that exist on a basic human level – as when a guy in the neighbourhood loves a girl whose brother objects – but Islamism complicates these basic problems.

**HD:** How did you approach the casting?

**MA:** In two ways. First of all, I approached established actors from the *Théâtre National*, to see if they were interested in participating in the film. But actually I prefer to work with actors who've had no training – young unknowns who are easier to mould. With more established actors, there's always the question of discussing the scenario, analysing the script and so on. I prefer the spontaneity of young unknown actors. They have a certain freshness and natural quality. I've always preferred this way of casting for my films. We actually advertised in the local press for young people who wanted to be in the film. I was astounded by the response. Over 1000 people turned up. The scene on the roof, with all the young women gossiping and hanging out the laundry – most of them were local girls from the neighbourhood who had never acted before. At the time their participation in the film was a courageous act. It was a period during which there were many assassinations and violent attacks in the street. And we were being “watched” throughout the filming.

In practical terms, this method of casting was preferable because of the way in which we had to shoot – that is very quickly, without attracting too much attention, changing sets frequently. It didn't allow for any discussion or analysis of the script.

**HD:** Besides the practical necessity, do you think that, aesthetically, this method of casting and shooting gave *Bab El-Oued City* a kind of documentary feel?

**MA:** Certainly. And I like to play with the documentary idea. Especially in an atmosphere as chaotic as Algiers, I like to arrive and see what presents itself – things that one cannot necessarily plan for. I like to film these unexpected situations – I don't let them get away. It's usually advantageous for the film. These scenes give a new dimension of spontaneity.

**HD:** What kinds of practical problems did you face while filming in Algiers?

**MA:** Well, first of all, we had to deal with the constant factor of danger. But what was most troubling was the random, unknown face of this danger. We were always afraid. We never knew

from one moment to the next what was going to happen. The period during which we were filming was an officially declared State of Emergency, and a curfew was imposed. Often we'd be filming and a few streets away there'd be sirens wailing – because of some violent incident. Sometimes, I asked myself, why am I filming? What's the point? It was very discouraging.

Certain technical things were impossible, like “travelling” shots. Everything had to be filmed quickly and discreetly. The conditions were not ideal, to say the least. But we did it in seven weeks. If it had been three months I don't think I would have made it.

**HD:** How did this experience compare with past productions in Algiers?

**MA:** Well, to put things in context I think it's necessary to explain a bit about film production in Algeria. It's different from production in Morocco or Tunisia because for 30 years cinema was state controlled. Film-makers functioned as civil servants. I worked in this way, and my first film was produced under this system. On one level, this system of state film production protected film-makers from harsh market realities. But on the other hand it posed the problem of state censorship and self-censure. It also meant that even if a film-maker were unable to produce a film, or could only make one every five years because of lack of funds, he would still receive a salary. There was inevitably a lot of corruption and a lot of bureaucratic waste. Finally, after the riots of 1988 which led to government concessions and a certain *multipartisme* [legalisation of different political parties], a system was devised where the Ministry of Culture would help specific film projects, but the film-maker would be able to keep the profits, and form his own production company. People were now talking about the beginning of a market economy, and the state monopoly on film production and distribution was easing up. This new system opened up opportunities for many film-makers. The Ministry established an independent committee composed of artists and writers who would judge the merit of a screenplay and distribute funds accordingly. For example, the Ministry would fund, say, 30 ▶



◀ per cent of a project, and then after that the film-maker could choose his partners in co-production. Ironically, this new system began to develop at the same time as the rise in Islamic extremism. Writer Rachid Mimouni was the president of the commission; Tahar Djaout, who was assassinated last year [by Islamic militants] was also on the committee, as was the writer Merzak Baktache, who was wounded in an assassination attempt. There were several women also on the committee. It was an interesting venture – quite progressive actually. Technically, this system is still in place. I personally made *Bab El-Oued City* as a co-production with Channel 4 and ZDF, a German television station. So, one could say that the new system is better, more efficient than the old bureaucratic way. But on one level, it puts us more at risk. At the same time the question that we are now asking, as Algerian film-makers is: are we losing a sense of our own reality, are we compromising cinematic content for “northern” funding?

**HD:** Speaking of the evolution of Algerian film production, and of Algerian political evolution as a whole, to what extent do you see things as a generational conflict? Is the polarity of the current situation largely due to the tension between the “old guard” perceived as complicit with state corruption, and the new generation?

**MA:** Yes. I do see things in generational terms. There was a rapid rate of population growth in the 60s and 70s, but the children of this generation were not properly cared for, neither by the state education system, nor by their families, and left to fend for themselves. After Algerian Independence, there was a trend of “arabisation”. As a result, many teachers were brought in from Egypt, to instruct children in classical Arabic. But the majority of these teachers were Muslim “brothers”. This was how the new generation was formed.

**HD:** Did the “Muslim brother” then replace the father as a paternal figure, as a role model?

**MA:** Certainly. And the whole question is really about an identity crisis. When young adolescents have nothing to hold on to – nothing stable – it’s easy for the “brother” to usurp the paternal role. And since the *quartier* is no longer the refuge it once was, the mosque has in a way become the new kind of sanctuary, the cocoon – a new place to hang out together in a group. In this way, Islam has replaced the role of the family and of the *quartier*.

**HD:** What about the influence of American film and media in the Algerian youth culture?

**MA:** Well, we live in the audio-visual age, and there is no escaping this influence. I deliberately had the young characters – the guys in the “Islamist gang” – dress in leather jackets and jeans. I didn’t want to folklorise them. I mean, these are characters born from an urban milieu. They are both Islamicised and “Ramboised”.

**HD:** How does the new generation view the old?

**MA:** Well, I think that young Algerians see the old generation as one that for 30 years replaced French colonialism and exploited the country, as a corrupt, absolute power. They are viewed as being responsible for bringing Algeria to the brink of catastrophe. So the young people don’t identify with this “power”. They don’t even identify with the values of the War of Liberation

(or Independence). The way the old generation legitimised themselves was by constantly saying, “We’re the ones that brought about Independence from France.” But for the new generation this is already *depassé*. Essentially, the old generation has lost touch with the reality of Algeria today – the reality that the young people experience daily.

**HD:** I’m interested to know how you, as a middle-aged film-maker, are perceived by the new generation. Recently I spoke to a young Algerian journalist in Paris about the “intellectual and artistic diaspora”. I mentioned a certain well-known Algerian writer in his 50s, at which point the journalist let loose a ten-minute tirade on the writer’s “complicity” with the

**“I had the young guys in the ‘Islamist gang’ dress in leather jackets and jeans. I didn’t want to folklorise them. I mean, these are characters born from an urban milieu”**

state, and the old regime. But when I mentioned your name, his attitude was quite different. He seemed to think you were OK.

**MA:** You know, in Algeria I live in a pretty down-to-earth neighbourhood – nothing special. And since I’ve always made films full of social criticism – and very often from a young person’s perspective – I’d like to think that young people in Algeria see me as being “on their side”. I think that when *Bab El-Oued City* is released in Algeria, it will be quite popular.

**HD:** Are you actually under threat from militant Islamic groups?

**MA:** I’m not entirely certain. I know that I’m in a category “at risk”.

**HD:** Are you targeted for “political” reasons?

**MA:** Political reasons? [thoughtfully] I don’t know. I think it’s more chaotic than that. It could be anything, really. They’re killing people who are explaining things, talking about what’s really going on. But who knows? I mean it might be a simple question of someone not liking a scene in my film.

**HD:** In *Bab El-Oued City*, the portrayal of the imam as a man of peace and tolerance who leaves the *quartier* in protest was an interesting contrast to the violence of the young extremists.

**MA:** Well, I wasn’t trying to make a kind of religious commentary. I was just interested in producing a chronicle of the *quartier* – by showing the different people that live there. There happened to be a peaceful, tolerant imam in the neighbourhood – like one that you could find anywhere. There was nothing abnormal in this.

**HD:** What opportunity is there today for a young Algerian who wants to become a film-maker?

**MA:** Hardly any. It’s an extremely difficult situation. I don’t know if I could advise anyone to take that path. Especially now. Satellite television has become increasingly important as a

medium. People now watch a lot of European and American channels – often as a way to get an alternative commentary on the events in Algeria. But sometimes it’s pure escapist entertainment. The last time I was in Algiers, I found myself alone one night in a friend’s flat. There was a curfew and I started to feel a bit afraid. So I turned on CNN and watched their live coverage of the events in Moscow, when the parliament was surrounded. It was strangely reassuring to watch events happening thousands of miles away.

**HD:** There seemed to be a real sense of nostalgia in the way you filmed *Bab El-Oued City*, particularly in the panoramas of the sea, and of the cityscape seen from the beach. And of, course in the final scene, where the boat departs for France. Was this partly because of your own feelings toward your homeland?

**MA:** Well, the nostalgia was operating on different levels. On one level, I suppose, I was expressing my own reaction to an Algiers which has changed tremendously since my own youth. Mainly through modernisation. A lot of the old parts of the city have just disappeared. And the shots of the sea – well, in Algiers the sense of the Mediterranean is omnipresent. It’s something that I really miss in Paris, waking up and smelling the sea air, squinting from the brightness of the sun.

Certainly, the events that were unfolding at the time we were shooting also influenced this sense of nostalgia. Perhaps there was a feeling that this might be “the last time”. Some people have mentioned that in my films, there is even a sense of nostalgia for colonial times. I don’t know if I’d completely agree, but I admit to a certain nostalgia for the past. There is a *chab* which speaks of the Algiers of the past, in almost mythical terms – describing all the beautiful old hotels, etcetera. But in real terms. Well, it’s easy to sentimentalise things.

On another level, the reality is that a lot of young people, like the hero of *Bab El-Oued City* are leaving – for France, for Canada, for Australia. I don’t know if you noticed, but there was a subtle kind of homage to Elia Kazan’s *American America* in the last scene between the two young “lovers”. The young man had suddenly grown a moustache – just like the scene in *American America*, where the young guy is about to leave Greece for America and he comes to say goodbye. I wanted to show that he had reached a certain maturity. He had arrived at a turning point – a certain loss of innocence.

**HD:** What are your future plans, now that working in Algiers is no longer a viable option?

**MA:** Well you know, since 1982, I’ve been going back and forth [between Algiers and Paris] a lot. Nothing is definitive, but for the moment I’m based in France. I’m not interested in martyrdom. My next film will be set in Belleville [a Parisian neighbourhood with a high concentration of immigrants]. It’s going to be about a romance between a young Algerian drug dealer and a Senegalese girl.

The setting is different, but many of the issues explored will be the same. But this time, the “Romeo and Juliet” kind of opposition will come from the relationship between a black woman and an Algerian man.