

FILM REVIEW

Dorothee-Myriam Kellou, dir. *In Mansourah, You Separated Us*. 2019. 71 minutes. Arabic and French, with English subtitles. Algeria and France. Icarus Films. \$398.00.

Dorothee-Myriam Kellou's *In Mansourah, You Separated Us* explores a staggering, yet largely ignored, dimension of French colonial history in Algeria, the mass displacement of some 50 percent of the rural population into resettlement camps during the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962). Kellou, a journalist and first-time filmmaker, explains via brief intertitles that she learned of this history and its deeply personal connection one Christmas when her father Malek gifted her a half-written screenplay about his childhood in the village of Mansourah, one among hundreds of resettlement centers. Following first on the sound of dogs barking against a black screen and then intercut with shots of Malek Kellou and Dorothee aboard a train cutting across the mountains of Kabylia, the intertitles announce a project of memory and understanding. Through the images, conversations, and testimonies of her film, Kellou sketches the experiences of the displaced, and also, more unusually and importantly, evokes experiences of silencing and erasure. As such, her documentary film provides a useful counterpoint to the heroic feature films of the post-independence period that mythologized Algeria's struggle for independence, while quietly connecting this historical blind spot to more recent social and political upheavals, including the Algerian civil war of the 1990s, which have received far less cinematic treatment.

Fittingly, in this moment when statues of colonial and imperialist figures are being toppled around the world, the film's prologue shows Malek shining a flashlight on a statue of a colonial army officer in the French city of Nancy, recalling that it replicates one he remembers in Algeria. He acknowledges Dorothee's speculation that it triggered his memory, reflecting that it was, "as if it blocked my path," saying, "I'm here, keeping an eye on you." Once back in the family home in Mansourah, Malek immediately places a photograph of his mother, backed by a reproduction of the Mona Lisa, in their old home, blaming himself for its decrepitude. Yet in explaining to Dorothee their family's relationships to the women and children who were resettled with them, he fears that the only French word he can find, *consanguinité*, casts that


relationship in a negative light for her. Through the images, sounds, and words that follow, *In Mansourah, You Separated Us* probes both official and more prosaic erasures of lived experience as much as understanding. By capturing breakdowns in communication and self-presentation, Kellou's film exposes how the familial and personal unsettling occasioned by the mass displacements extends far beyond the personal and the past, to national and global histories today.

From the filmmaker, who struggles to understand the customs and language of her father's Algerian village, and Malek, himself a cinematographer who had not previously returned to his native village, the film moves to the memories of friends and acquaintances. Several are recognized, even decorated, heroes of the struggle for Algerian independence, yet their words belie state narratives of heroism and triumph. Absence permeates the images as the camera seeks what it cannot, or can no longer, capture, and spoken reflections grasp for understanding. Clad in an oversize suit coat adorned with war medals, a frail, elderly man announces that he will relate first in Kabyle (Tamazight) and then in Arabic how as a soldier he survived being burned by napalm. Yet he then seemingly forgets about his native language and proceeds straight to Arabic, later breaking off his account as he is overcome by survivor's guilt. Aldja, now a village elder, pauses in her anecdotes of assisting pro-independence fighters, lowers her eyes, and seemingly checks out when Dorothee interjects questions in French, only ever skirting the questions in her answers. Dorothee discovers that Mansourah has been left off the map of French relocation camps because, as a village, it pre-existed the mass deportations. A friend of Malek's shares his own long history of violence, tracing it to this initial displacement. A screening of French army footage of displaced families in the village shows tents and hastily constructed houses that have vanished in the face of the new roads, houses, and infrastructure that now characterize it, thereby both binding spectators to the past and revealing the gulf between generations. At a ceremony apparently held to celebrate the completion of filming, with which the film ends, Dorothee expresses her bemusement at a blessing she receives from a village elder.

Sometimes, testimony overlays images: a man struggles to remember his displacement as the camera situated behind him and Malek in the bed of an army-like truck records a journey over now-paved roads. Sometimes poetry accompanies scenes, as when Aldja evokes her family's suffering as the camera moves through a moonlit night. Sometimes traditional music takes the place of words. More often, direct sound in the form of wind, footsteps, distant voices, insects, or animals accompanies the long takes that bridge conversations. Each of the film's elements thus contributes at once to a sense of place and a sense of unsettlement. Although marketed as a documentary, *In Mansourah, You Separated Us* might more aptly be termed an essay film. Dedicated to those who, like the filmmaker, "know only the silence of their

history,” it nonetheless encourages all of its audiences to examine how silencing both makes and unravels personal and political histories.

doi:10.1017/asr.2020.108

Suzanne Gauch 
Temple University
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
suzanne.gauch@temple.edu