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"Outside the Law", a film by Rachid Bouchareb

Mischa Geracoulis

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Algerian-French filmmaker Rachid Bouchareb has said, "Cinema is a wonderful tool to converse with French society." And beyond, I would add. As a filmmaker, Bouchareb is notorious for applying the art of cinematic storytelling to analyses of immigration, rootlessness, racism, alienation, and culture pluralism—matters, one would assume, that are close to his heart. He's chosen the French colonization of Algeria (1830-1962) and subsequent decolonization (via the Algerian War 1954-1962) as his latest backdrop to the study.

Outside the Law premiered in Cannes under the "protection" of riot gear-suited French gendarmerie in preparation for uprisings due to some supposed inaccuracies in the film's recounting of French history. (More likely, French nationalists feared public reaction to the spotlight placed on France's dark stain on North Africa.) If there are any historical inaccuracies, they provoked no riots. In fact, *Outside the Law* was an official selection for the Palme d'Or, and has been selected as the Algerian entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the 83rd Academy Awards, 2011.

A melodramatic mingling of actual footage from 1940s, 50s and 60s Algeria and France with big screen storytelling, *Outside the Law* focuses on the narrative of one Algerian family's struggle for freedom amid the larger context of Algeria's fight for independence from the French.

The film opens in 1925 Algeria with the family being evicted from their ancestral home. Like thousands of others in same circumstances, the family relocates to the ghettos of Sétif, the nearest large city in the north of Algeria. Just as World War II ends, Algerians flood the streets of colonized Sétif calling for equal rights and freedom. The protestors are swiftly and

militarily put down. Scenes of the reenacted Sétif massacre of 8 May, 1945 are not for the faint of heart. Here, our family is split by death and imprisonment.

Through a series of adrenaline-rushing events, ten years later the main characters—three brothers from this family, Abdelkader (Sami Bouazjila), Messaoud (Roschdy Zem), and Said (Jamel Debouze)—reunite in the slums of Paris. Said is a two-bit hustler, pimping out Algerian girls; Abdelkader whose been imprisoned for his political ideals, is on an impassioned mission; and Messaoud is physically and emotionally damaged by his years fighting the "Dirty War" in Indochina and subsequent capture by the Viet Cong.

Eventually, with Abdelkader as leader, the National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale or FLN) becomes their guiding life force. Dedicated to Arab Socialist ideals, revolution, and independence for Algeria, the FLN was a paramilitary body operating from Algeria and France. Living an existence void of joy or meaning, Messaoud too falls in with the FLN regime and works closely with his brother. Said, however, ever the hustler, has become a nightclub owner and boxing manager, is resistant to the cause.

As Abdelkader and Messaoud are gripped by ideology and goals, they lose sight of their humanity. Serious, scowling gangster-like, they are involved in murderous plots against the French government, and even resort to killing their own as means of discipline and teaching points. In their efforts to rise up in armed struggle against the humiliations suffered at the hands of the French, the brothers sacrifice personal relationships, human emotions, and finally their lives. Not for naught though, as Algeria's independence was finally won in 1962 with a cease-fire and France's compliance with the Évian Accords.



Outside the Law is essentially a war movie. It's fast-moving and guaranteed to keep viewers on the edge of their seats for the two-plus hours. Many of the scenes are rife with explosions, pounding gunfire, screams of terror and ruthless devastation. The dialogue and interaction is testosterone-heavy,—lots of macho posturing, tough talk and brutality. There are noticeably scant few female characters, but their appearances are well-placed and serve to accentuate the atmosphere of struggle and sacrifice.

Outside the Law is a riveting chronicle of Algerian and French history, which Bouchareb renders comprehensible (even for viewers with no prior knowledge) with his use of biographical-like narration. One leaves the film with a clearer understanding of politics and tensions in the France of yesterday and today, and with particular regard to its Algerian population. While *Outside the Law* features carnage extrême, terroristic tit-for-tat, human misery and flagrant disregard for life, it is not a demoralizing film. Rather, it inspires compassion and consideration for repressed and dispossessed peoples; in this case, the Algerians. All told, Bouchareb has given us another piece towards reconstructing our global puzzle.

Rachid Bouchareb (Director)
Running time: 2 hours, 18 minutes
French and Arabic with English subtitles

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