



Program Notes: Yema (2012)

Director and Scenarist: Djamila Sahraoui

Cinematographer: Raphaël O'Byrne

Editor: Catherine Guoze

Actors: Djamila Sahraoui, Samir Yahia, Ali Zarif

Arabic, Color, 90min.

The action of the secret passes continually from the hider of things to the hider of self. A casket is a dungeon for objects. And here is a dreamer who feels that he shares the dungeon of its secret. We should like to open it, and we should also like to open our hearts – Gaston Bachelard

Our five-film series at the French Institute, titled “Interiors: Cinema & the Home”, takes its inspiration from Gaston Bachelard’s seminal treatise, *The Poetics of Space* (1958), whose first Hebrew edition has come out recently, through the loving translation of Mor Kadishzon. Houses stand at the heart of this study – not in their architectural, or even wholly material sense, but in our imaginative relationship with them. This relationship, Bachelard argues, is always already blurring the boundaries between human subject and physical domicile – both in terms of actual experience and of its poetic rendering. Looking at houses through

this dual lens, we come to realize that “they are in us as much as we are in them.” They resonate with our psyche yet also anchor it in concrete terms; and we, in turn, help them break away from the chains of the everyday, and achieve profound and varied meaningfulness, through imagination’s faculties.

One important aspect of this meaningfulness, which the house helps to enact both in our daily existence and its mental infrastructure, is the interrelated distinctions of open and closed, inside and outside. That the house is closed onto itself – and holds within it enclosed spaces, from rooms to wardrobes, from armoires to jewelry boxes – allows it to delineate what is within and without. On the outside, space is boundless and belongs to everyone and no one. On the inside, behind physical barriers, lays what can safely be demarcated as mine – as my home, which belongs to no other. This sense of safety encourages me to withdraw into my enclosed places and peacefully reside within them, while at the same time, burrow into my interiority in order to more fully inhabit my innermost soul. The correlation between these two inward movements creates a bond of intimacy, for as Bachelard tells us, by definition “all intimacy hides from view.”

Where “the hidden in men and the hidden in things” intersect most vividly is in the realm of stowed away secrets. The house – and specifically certain parts



of it such as drawers, chests and closets – offer insular sites where treasures may be stored. These are loci which “are not opened every day [...] like a heart that confides in no one;” they rely on their extreme insularity to preserve the core of what is most important to us, “that belongs to us alone,” as if by unlatching them their contents become somehow less exclusive. We enjoy locking away such treasures within our sequestered physical spaces because this gives us “implicit permission [...] to hide [our] secrets” in buried “little caskets” within ourselves. More than a “matter of keeping a possession well-guarded,” the locks we use are but “a psychological threshold” that affirms “the need for secrecy” – for keeping an enclave untouched by external and extraneous circumstances.

Held out of sight, the insides of these treasure-troves, both in the physical and emotional sense, can grow and multiply by virtue of our imagination; when seen, however, such secrets are “verified” out of existence, being reduced to their slimmest factual definition. This is why, for Bachelard, “there will always be more things in a closed, than in an open, box;” and this is also why a secret repository is often kept undisturbed, so as not to have its interiority “killed” through a verifying gaze. Indeed, we may lock away things so obsessively, in the nether regions of our houses and psyches, that the latter become our own private

dungeons. For as Bachelard points out, “he who buries a treasure, buries himself with it. A secret is a grave.”

How should we open our closed compartments, in houses and hearts, to the outside, in order to avoid being imprisoned, yet to also not to overexpose the ground of imagination upon which secrets thrive? Bachelard provides an answer through the physical and metaphorical function of the door. In his words, “the door schematizes two strong possibilities”: “at times, it is closed, bolted, padlocked. At others it is open, that is to say, wide open.” Either of these can evoke “hesitation, temptation, desire, security, welcome and respect” – emotions that make up “the story of one’s entire life” through “all the doors one has closed and opened.” Yet human existence can also offer us an alternative to choosing one possibility while eradicating the other. As Bachelard reminds us, at rare moments “of greater imagining sensibility [...], when so many doors are closed, there is one that is just barely ajar. We have only to give it a very slight push!” With the unshut portal, a movement between open and closed, inside and outside, dissolves their differences and “invite[s] us to the finesses of experience of intimacy, to ‘escapades’ of imagination.” Suddenly, our secrets may be preserved while being also, and at the same time, risen from the grave.



This interim choice stands at the literal and figurative doorstep of the protagonist in Djamilia Sahraoui's sophomore fiction feature *Yema* (2012). In spite of occupying a remote farmstead within northern Algeria's isolated Kabyle mountains, the elderly Ouardia (portrayed by Sahraoui) cannot avoid the violent realities of the Algerian Civil War (1991-2002). The warring parties have each claimed one of her sons, and pitted them against each other. Consequently, a price of blood is exacted, with the son who serves in the military finding his death at the hands of his brother, a rebel leader of the fundamentalist FIS (*Front islamique du salut*). Required to bury her offspring, Ouardia closes herself off. She shuns her remaining child, as well as the invalid guardian he has put in place to protect her. She buttresses her inner and outer walls, abiding by "the need for secrecy" in order to keep emotions and memories safe inside. Yet even as barriers are mounted, an aperture is left unshut, permitting the character to free herself from being buried along with her secrets.

Like Sahraoui's other documentary and fiction works, *Yema* presents a meditation upon Algeria's violent history. As such, according to scholar Maria Flood, the mother (or "yema" in Algerian dialectical Arabic) symbolizes "the 'motherland' Algeria, caught in endless cycles of mourning for her 'sons,' lost to both state and guerrilla violence;" moreover, she also points

towards a potential escape from such cycles, by "forging new kinship ties" away from the dictates of the state/guerrilla divide. Yet in addition to being a political allegory, the film appears to convey "an abstract, universal quality," one rooted in basic concerns on how humans inhabit themselves and their surroundings. This quality stems from Sahraoui's desire, as noted by Flood, "to purify the film, in order to preserve 'l'essential.'" Such "elemental simplicity," the writer adds, is "conveyed cinematographically through sparse dialogue, a barren setting, silence and the lack of diegetic music, and sharp contrasts between somber interiors and stark and bright sun-drenched outdoor scenes."

It is in relation to the latter point that the house comes into view as a meaningful trope. Ouardia's residence is a typical example of Berber housing: a one-storied building, with adjacent rooms surrounding an uncovered rectangular courtyard (*west-ed-dar*). The exterior walls set a firm border between inside and outside, necessary for protecting residents from the perils of the wilderness. *Yema* accentuates this sense of peril by portraying the outside as a wide-open, unregulated space, which is traversed by men with guns in their hands and violence on their minds. There is nothing in this landscape that welcomes visitors; made out of barren soil and sharply edged mountain facades, it uproots its inhabitants and places them on a collision course with



one another. Even the film's protagonist does not venture out into the countryside, other than in the opening credit sequence, when she is seen dragging her son's corpse across miles of rough terrain. Indeed, in this scene's aftermath, the prospect of exiting the house's walls strikes the viewer as unwise, for a symbolic connection has already been established between the outside and violence.

Countering these outdoor images are the house's inner rooms, and specifically the various bedrooms. Darkened, ascetic, small – these closed areas give the impression of intimate scale, which in turn, to borrow on Bachelard, makes them function as “an inner space where everything is commensurate with inner being.” Through their “narrowness,” which ensures a linkage of human and household interiority, the mother can find “consolation in knowing that one is in an atmosphere of calm.” There objects await to remind her of yesteryear, an age before violence; there is where tender emotions are given license, including those of grief and loss. Entering these private quarters, for her, are tantamount to retreating into the chambers of her heart, protected as they may be through their seclusion from the exterior.

As if exemplifying Bachelard's argument, *Yema* shows how “the two kinds of space, intimate space and exterior space, keep encouraging each other [...] in their growth;” the more the outdoors seems to expand, the

more the rooms recede into their profundity, and vice-versa, if seen solely through the lens of their proper contradiction. Yet Sahraoui is uninterested in designating a clear spatial dialectic. Her position is not of the planner or the psychologist but of the poet, and so her investments are in, to use Bachelard's term, a “poetic space [which] assumes values of expansion” by bridging over supposed contrasts. Examples of this expansion are found in the vicinity of the main gate to Ouardia's home – around the inner courtyard and the outer threshold. The door helps Ouardia ensure that violence stays outside and secrets remain safe within; yet by keeping it shut, she also consigns herself to be buried along with her secrets, in her “dungeon for objects,” while missing out on the opportunity to open up her heart to what life exists on the outside. In order to avoid this fate, the liminal spaces of courtyard and outer threshold are allowed to permeate each other, across a door “just barely ajar.” Existence there is tentative, straddling both flanks of the house's outer wall. People are buried just outside this wall, but their soul still lingers within; others linger outside near its gate, and may be allowed reprieve to enter into the courtyard, just as long as they do not disturb the sanctity of secrets in private quarters. Gradually, through tentativeness, other possibilities than the inside/outside-opened/locked binarism become available; and with them, the protagonist discovers how it feels to live more, and differently.



This is not to say that alternate possibilities are danger-free, and indeed as the film shows, people may take advantage of even the slightest opening to collapse outside onto inside, and kill the secrets that are held so dear. Such, however, is the price of maintaining, in Bachelard’s words, a “dynamic continuity[, where] inside and outside are not abandoned to their geometrical opposition.” Only so, for the philosopher and perhaps for the viewer, can some reconciliation be achieved that would make the entire world *my home*. It all begins, for Bachelard, in liberating queries whose answer may be found in the simplest of domestic scenes, one which also deeply echoes the tale of Ouardia. Thus, he asks: “from what overflow of a ramified interior does the substance of being run, does the outside call? Isn’t the exterior an old intimacy lost in the shadow of memory? In what silence does the stairwell resound? In this silence there are soft foot-steps: the mother comes back to watch over her child, as she once did. She restores to all these confused, unreal sounds their concrete, familiar meaning.”

Dan Chyutin, PhD

Curator