

## Collective identity and traumatic memory in the cinematic expression

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### Abstract

The present article is an analysing work to the role of the cinematic production in the expression of traumatic memory and cultural identity, in the postcolonial North African societies. Following the cultural production and postcolonial theoretical framework, I try to investigate the way films as a form of visual art production enables the reconstruction of the past and recalls historical narratives. Analysing meanwhile the interconnection of the concepts of identity and memory the article focuses on their expression of the cultural productions. In a second level I specify the conceptual study to the “traumatic memory” and “cultural identity”, and I tried to explain the cinematographic tools explored in the construction of the remembered collectivity. *The Lion of the Desert: Omar Muhtar* being one of the rare films testifying the north African colonial history that reached an international fame, was the cinematic example followed to understand the way the visualization of cultural elements assure effective recall to the past and presents an alternative form of building the meaning and rebuilding the symbolism of the Hero to revive the collective and cultural memory in an intergenerational frame.

**Keywords:** Cultural identity, traumatic memory, post-colonialism, cinema studies

## Sinematik anlatımda kolektif kimlik ve travmatik hafıza

### Özet

Bu çalışma, sömürge sonrası dönem Kuzey Afrika toplumlarındaki sinema filmi üretiminin travmatik hafıza ve kültürel kimliklerin dışavurumundaki rolünü analiz etmek istemektedir. Birer görsel sanat ürünü olan sinema filmlerinin, geçmişin yeniden inşa edilmesinde ve tarihi anlatıların hatırlara getirilmesindeki işlevi üzerinde durulmaktadır. Bu maksatla, Kuzey Afrika'nın koloni dönemini yansıtan az sayıdaki sinema filminden biri olan *Çöl Aslanı: Ömer Muhtar* adlı filmde yola çıkılmaktadır. Film aracılığı ile kültürel unsurların görsel olarak geçmiş ve bugünü bütünleştirici rolüne vurgu yapılmaktadır. Ömer Muhtar karakterinin kahramanlaştırılarak anlamların yeniden üretimi sağlanırken, nesiller arası ilişki kurulduğu ve kültürel hafızanın güçlendiği iddia edilmektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Kültürel kimlik, travmatik hafıza, sömürge sonrası dönem, film araştırmaları

### Introduction

One of the main responsibilities and missions of artists is the expression of the social mind and the reflection of the group's dynamism and development through time. Therefore every idea transformed into a meaningful expression is, in a way or another, a reflection of the social mind and its collectivity. Assuming that the social entity is a result of the constructive process of identity and memory, the core of this article will focus on their transformative presentation through a specific form of art.

The collective memory and social identity reflections are embodied in every category of art productions: oral and written texts, such as literature and narrative and in the visual expressions such as paintings and films. Artist as being a member of the social collectivity, and an individual who had received social information related to his

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belonging system shaping the person's identity understanding, gives a personal form of narration of an already acquired social knowledge. In other words, even if artists are expressing their personal thoughts through their creations, they cannot escape from embodying in the same time social received knowledge that presents a specific perspective. In fact, it is not a recent idea that the social and collective memory are embodied in different human expressive forms and mainly in arts, which presents the core body of the field of contemporary visual arts studies (Bisschoff and Peer, 2013: 213-231)

In the following study, I will limit the analysis to "Traumatic Memory" and "Cultural Identity" in the frame of the cinematographic productions, believing in the role of the screen in denouncing the horrors and sorrows of the past (Blake, 2012). In this article, I seek to present an analysis of the way cinematic productions and film reflects the social traumatic experience and cultural identity especially in postcolonial societies, passing firstly by the investigation of the intersection of memory and identity in the art productions generally. To clarify more the theoretical background, I should mention the capital role cinema has in the reconstruction of the historical memory through the visual channel (Ferro, 2009), assuming that the intersection of history and trauma in the construction process of the personal and collective identity is a main linear in the networking of arts, memory and identity in general (Counsell, 2009).

This analysis to the presentation of collective traumatic memory in postcolonial North African societies will be made through the study of a specific film *Lion of the Desert: Omar Muhtar* (Webner and Ranger, 1996), an Italian produced film about the Italian colonial past considered to be one of the masterpieces in the colonial and historical film category. The selection of this film could be explained by two main reasons: the importance of the *Lion of the Desert* from a political perspective for both the colonized society and the colonizing part, and secondly the harmony it presents with the theoretical framework of traumatic memory and visual cultural theory.

### ***Art expressions between traumatic memory and cultural identity***

There had been always an ongoing debate on the nature of the special relationship linking both of identity and memory concepts, as the academic interest in this area is not getting any faded. Memory studies and identity studies are proven interconnected to each other in more than a way testified through the various branches of the social sciences and especially cultural studies (During, 2005). The research question paused according to one of them will necessarily face the intersection with the other. It is in the same time, the reason why this field of research is characterized by its Multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, and how the memory and identity research enters the core research of cultural and film studies.

Memory is the constructive base of identity with all its forms, but the more a painful representation of the past is printed in our minds the more its related memorial figure is effective on our personal life and perspective of the world and the other. The more painful it is the more hard it gets to be forgotten and the more solid it exists in our minds, therefore, the more capable it is to face the passing of time and to get recreated in all the expressive forms (Guerin and Hallas, 2007).

The human mind and the social existence figured out through time different ways to reform the past and tell it, in fact, that's why we accept that "human beings are

storytelling animals". Storytelling and narrations are the main channels of social knowledge and they could be seen in all the forms of human expressive forms, otherwise the expressivity would be empty from meaning. Telling a story is an obligatory element in the social and cultural human productivity, providing the expressive form, the blessing of the meaning (Wetta, 2014).

In this part we will try firstly to explain the intersection of memory and identity in cultural productions generally before focusing on the film and cinematic production in the second chapter. In a second stage, the research will explore the choice of the colonial era and the specify category of traumatic memory and cultural identity all along with the way it constitutes richness in the field of studying cultural productivity as the reflection of the social mind and collectivity. In a final stage, the article is emphasizing the importance of the cinematic form in the expression of traumatic memory and cultural identity.

### ***The interconnection of memory and identity in understanding cultural productions***

I would start first to specify that cultural production theory, visual production theory and film studies are the general theoretical framework of the approach in intersection with postcolonial theory from its cultural perspective and not in the international political understanding.

The field of cultural productions is a vast field of research related to the analytic methodology of the expressive and artistically forms, a field that its importance could be supported by the indispensability it has as an academic infrastructure in the study of arts: It was suggested by Pierre Bourdieu that the art world could be investigated from the perception of cultural productions, an idea that came as a result to the movement towards artistic autonomy (Bourdieu and Johnson, 2016: 60-61). Cultural productions is the ensemble of the created works in the process of producing culture, it could be under any form of expression that allows the intellectual ability of receiving a message and concluding a meaning. The cultural production could be a result of both intentional and unintentional exercise of the human intellect, but when it is intentional we mainly focus on the artistic category with all its forms. the two way road between culture and the human intellectual productivity imposes the investigation of how culture effects the human intellect, and how the human intellect express culture and the way both of them raise the complex question of the influence of the social knowledge on the individual human brain and intellectual and how this for instance gets shaped down in the creative forms.

Cultural productions being evidently a human intellectual result, pauses the question of the expression of the individual and the intersection with the expression of the collectivity. This question brings us to the question of the social knowledge and the individual constructed understanding and perception through the social cultural heritage passed by through the social informative tools (Bourdieu, 2016: 78-82). The belonging and the identity formation of the person, from a constructivist perspective, is a socially building process of formation where memory is the primordial key element. The constructivist approach, which highlights the central role that memory, history, and identity play in the construction of both the individual's and collective belonging level, imports an equal influence on the cultural production thesis.

The production of meaning is the reflection of the individual's thoughts and intellect, the artist as a member of a group, is under the necessity of applying in the

same time both the social and individual expression. Telling the self is therefore is conditioned with telling the group, its culture, beliefs and memories. The art forms as cultural productions are the version of the social and personal knowledge and set of beliefs of the individual artist. It is in this specific point of argumentation where the need of understanding the interlinked position of memory and identity gets more affirmed, for instance, the social knowledge of the cultural belonging to a specific identity build by the various collective informative channels, is a specific principal dimension of the individual's intellectual expression in whatever of the cultural production forms.

The intersection of identity and memory could be remarked in both written and visual cultural productions: the written texts, poems, novels, plays, reflects the need of telling about the self and the other through the chosen form, where the identity and memory of the social collectivity could be mentioned directly or understood implicitly. Pursuing for example the Turkish poetic text is a way of understanding the development of the Turkish social identity through the poetic expressive form, or, the study of the Arabic poetry during the Israeli Palestinian war would shape the image of the resistance identity resulted from the political and regional conditions. The written novels and books by North African scholars are the mirror of the colonial era and its social memory of pain and oppression, and therefore they constituted principal work pieces in the uprising of the postcolonial theory. The images from the past and the memory of a mother land in the work of Albert Memmi (Pauvert, 1966) or Albert Camus (Francev, 2011), presents an image of the north African person and the identity crises the whole society faced in the postcolonial era.

The written cultural productions are not though more effective than the visual production, in fact, the image plays an equal role in the expression of identify and memory. Visual cultural productions (photography, video arts, graffiti, cartoons etc.) are the expressive form using image and based on the ability of sight in its understanding. Expressing the other and the self through image could not be more effective as it stimulate the remembrance and forces the mind of searching the drawn meaning on its past recorded symbols. A simple frame or photograph would raise a complex set of interactions between a personal and collective memory and the belonging they refer to.

In considering the role of the technological development in the facility given to the visual production, through the technical support and the unlimited available platforms of sharing, the accelerative attention to the visual production could be better understood. For instance the presented data and the huge number of images shared every single second through internet and social networks was the reason of the academic trot towards the creation of an academic background to analyse the visual productions shared on the internet platforms, we even talk now about digital humanities and digital cultural productions.

There is no doubt that the visual production as well as the written production have a principle role in protecting the social memory and by this in assuming the protection of the group's identity and its continuity through time, as Hanna Arendt explains: "Without memory and the representation of memory in the tangible object (which in turn stimulates memory), the currency of living exchange, the spoken word and the thought, would disappear without a trace" (Brown and Rafter, 2013: 82-195).

Even though the culturally informative channels transmitted since the very primitive societies, as oral storytelling, did allow the remembrance of past events that

were considered central in the building of the groups identity, the way visual expressions is applying this mission is surely more effective in the presentation of memory and identity to the group. the visual art productions gives the ability of taking out the memorial event from the simple historical imagination, which is a mind activity, to the real presentation through frames and scenes, a point that supports the role of visuality in maintaining memory and identify narratives alive not as a simple imagination but through a n embodied semi realistic form.

Memory and identity are than present necessarily in every cultural production form, in an interconnected way associated with the nature of the concepts. This linkage of memory and identity could be better understood in a micro analytical level, specifying a temporal scale and with a restricted category, saying, cultural identity and traumatic memory.

### ***The postcolonial scale, cultural identity and traumatic memory***

As in the previous part, we just went through the analysis of the relation between identity and memory and their presentation in cultural productions; we will focus here on a specific category of memory: the collective traumatic memory and a next stage the relation of traumatic memory with cultural identity.

Trauma is mainly a psychological concept that was first presented in the frame of the Freudian approach and after got developed to enter to the sphere of the social psychology and be used as an analytical tool in almost all the sociological branches (Kleber, Brom and Defares, 1997). In the process of the theoretical research and exploration of the different categories of trauma, it was easy to remark the presence of three main concepts that should normally present a different type of trauma: collective trauma, cultural trauma and historical trauma. I suggest in this context the following logical degradation, cultural and historical traumatic memories are two different sources that consist in their unity the concept of collective traumatic memory, in other words, the historical trauma and the cultural trauma with their different elements constitutes the constructive background of the trauma's collectivity. In the frame of this research I will mainly go through the concept of historical trauma as it is the most linked to the colonial era.

Historical trauma or as well called the intergenerational trauma is the form of trauma that focuses on the transmission of traumatic experiences and its psychological effects along time and to the next generations in a social order. The historical trauma literature and the majority of the academic articles use the following definition to the concept presented by Yellow Horse Brave Heart who defines historical trauma as the "cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences" (Brave Heart and Spicer, 1999: 7).

The concept of historical trauma is fundamentally present too in relation with the postcolonial experiences and used in the analysis of postcolonial scholars and writers: the historical oppression that the colonial societies went through is the core of their collective traumatic experience and what shifts by time to a historical trauma effecting the next generations showing a psychological relation with the postcolonial suffering.

The traumatic memory is harder to forget and easier to remember for both individuals and societies as it is a central constitutive element of the personal and social identity. The relation between memory and identity was already discussed in the

previous part, but we will add here the way the specific traumatic memory builds the feeling of belonging to a cultural identity. The relation that links traumatic memory and cultural and collective identity constituted the main subject of the research of Jeffery Alexander who did explain this interaction and dynamisms of trauma and identity in the following lines:

Experiencing trauma can be understood as a sociological process that defines a painful injury to the collectivity establishes the victim, attributes responsibility and distributes the ideal and material consequences. Insofar as trauma are so experiences, and thus imagined and represented, the collective identity will be significantly revised. this identity revisions means that there will be a searching re remembering of the collective past, for memory is not only social and fluid but deeply connected to the contemporary sense of the self. Identities are continuously constructed and secured not only by facing the present and future but also by reconstructing the collectivity “s earlier life. (Alexander, 2010: 12)

The traumatic collective experience is the constitutive line of collective identity and in the same time the provider of its continuity, and cultural productions are the new forms of social representations reviving the past to face the risk of forgetting and assimilating. Mentioning that traumatic experience has two main forms, indented traumatic experience and non-intended traumatic experience, the colonial frame of this work would be categorized under the intended criminal traumatic experience. Pain, oppression and victimhood, make the memory stronger and more sensitive, creating a new psychological forms of understanding and meaning creation. A traumatic event that was not intended, like an accident or a natural death, is more easily to forget and heal from than a traumatic event that was caused by intention from another part that may be for individual or political sake. to heal from a traumatic memory of murdering incident, human psychology takes more time and needs more effort to heal, face the traumatic fact and maybe surpass it, in the other hand, a normal death or loss that had no relation with a previous intention could be than surpassed in an easier way: even though pain is a personal expression that nothing could allow us to measure it, we still can assume that the fact that criminal intention is an important variable in the psychological healing process. We can make a simple indexation from this background to understand the collective dimension of the traumatic experience: a traumatic experience caused by a natural disaster, like earthquake or volcanic eruptions, would be easier to surpass and heal from that a collective traumatic experience caused by a criminal intention.<sup>†</sup> A genocide, as one of the main forms of politically organized crimes towards the other as a different identity or collectivity, is a social traumatic experience resulted from a criminal intention that is generally politically performed. This traumatic experience of genocide would be way harder to heal from than a traumatic experience caused by a natural disaster, the pain may be the same, but the mental reception of the criminal act makes it a more complicated psychological fact as proved by the social psychiatric scolarity (Sun, 2006).

The colonial scale chosen in this article could therefore be explained by three main reasons, first the importance of the colonial era in the constructional the identity and as an essential element of the postcolonial societies, second, the applicability of the colonial era to the traumatic experience , third, which is a theoretical reason, is the necessity of the interdisciplinary view to Postcolonial theory and cinema studies that had been overlapping intentionally in all the previous academic literature.

In colonial societies, the vision of the colonizer, memories of the oppressive events and the hate pain and revenge, hunts the social mind's remembered memory and its cultural and collective identity. The other side of the story is not far away from the colonization traumatic experience, as the colonized societies suffer from the victimhood psychology, the societies of the colonizing powers and states, suffers too from the so called collective guilt. The chosen film in this research, is constituted under the colonial film category, but was produced by artists who do not belong to the colonized society, they were Italians denouncing the colonizing politics of Italian military and state, which I suppose was a form of solidarity with the colonized society, reconnaissance of their rights and past pain, and reflection to the image and psychology of guilt.

### ***The role of cinematic expressions as a cultural production form***

The visual productions generally and cinematic representations especially gain their effectiveness from the use of image. Image and visuality provides the artistic expression with the simplicity and makes it complex in the same time, it makes the idea simply presented and easier to understand through the transformation of the historical events to a visual presentation: it is no more a group of sentences in old history books, it is a sequence of moving images that revivify the past. In the same time, it is a complex set of symbols where all the small detailed are manipulated for the purpose of the message and the sake of the meaning. In a cinematographic expression, a simple scene of few seconds, embodies unlimited number of messages emphasized through different materials and channels, the light, the dialogue, the colour, the decor. Everything is a container of a message.

Our art, for the time being, because it emerges from and speaks to the poor, will find its antean renewal in folklore and parable. We present to others a deceptive simplicity that they may dismiss as provincial, primitive, childish, but which is in truth a radical innocence. (Hill, 1972: 133)

Cinematic expressions constitute the platform of the meaning and the transformer of the intended symbolism and therefore cinema production is a more complicated form of cultural productivity that allows to install as much cultural elements as possible in even few short seconds, the collective memory, the traumatic past and the belonging question are not hard to configure into a one unique scene. The ability a film has through its visuality and by the use of the image makes cinematic productions one of the most successful cultural and art production forms in the expression of the collectivity and the past.

Cinematic art and the film production is therefore a double edged sword that could be used in every possible intention and that has the possibility to access the social memory transformation, reminding and reconstruction. The powerful role of cinema is than embodied on its access to the preventative mission to the cultural identity and traumatic identity (Gallagher, 2013). That's the reason why "Postcolonial Cinema Studies" denotes a hybrid field of research that has the academic importance of exploring not just the cinematographic side of the research subject but the way it reflects the traumatic memory and the identity in the postcolonial collectivities.

For instance, the choice of analysing the postcolonial cinematic material is supported by a general intention to the field from a multidisciplinary vision.

Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, film and video have been burdened with transformative expectations: revelation contributes to recognition,

recognition demands action, and representations throughout transform audiences into witnesses and publics. But while these media have certainly contributed to the development of popular, political, and legal understandings of genocide, the process is hardly straightforward or inevitable. (Tortchin, 2012: 1017–1032)

The cinematic expressions and the filmmaking industry, in both fiction and documentary, has more than one role it plays in the construction of the social awareness and even in influencing the future construction of the collective understanding to the belonging and to the past. This unlimited functions of cinematic expressions and their effect on the social mind could not be unfortunately studied in this context, that's why we will focus in the next parts on the role it has in reconstructing the postcolonial collective traumatic memory and how it builds the image of the past in the imagination of the present generation assuming that it has meanwhile a linked role in the shaping of the future social understanding to the belonging and national history.

This article will investigate how cinematic production embodies traumatic memory and collective identity of the colonial past analysing the film *Lion of the Desert* and its symbolism as a social expression of the North African postcolonial society.

### **The North African cinematographic expression of the colonization trauma**

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps, instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished historical fact, which the new cinematic discourses then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a “production” which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (Baker, 1996: 210)

Our understanding of the past is linked to images that we can see materially or in our imagination, it is the ability of remembering what had been told to us in a narrative form, and to reconstruct it in our minds. The stories we read in history books, or the narratives recited from our grandparents, or the scenes we watched on historical films, are all different forms of telling the past and drawing its image using variable tools. With the developing of technologies and the digital capacity, the visual forms of narratives is getting to be easily and fatly spreading all over the world. Therefore, the visual narrative form of representation to the past is getting more eco and attention in the scholar field.

Transmitting the Past via the audio-visual representations of history is not a new issue, since the early starting of the visual production industry, telling the past and documenting the present was a main goal. Film industry and filmmaking especially is adopting this responsibility of telling the past and narrating the memory. Dutch historian Chris Vos explained this will as being a form of “changing historical awareness” made by the film-makers’ efforts to represent the past (Vos, 2005). Therefore, the cinematic representation of the social memory is not just for the simple sake of telling but it embodies for sure more complex dimensions.

The interactions between cinema and history, and the historical presentation in films, are an interesting field of study that linked the visual productions to the narrative form and history from a cultural study and sociological perspective as we saw in the previous part of this article. Even if this was not generally appreciated by historians, this branch is getting more attention, and is being practically used as a theoretical frame to the study of any potential historical film production. this branch in fact stood up facing many logical questions of the reliantly of such a presentation of history, it is not just



about studying the films as a production and a narration of the past, it is also the debate over whether cinema and filmmaking is able to present the past in a historical methodology. Some of those question mentioned by Robert Rosenstone one of the well-known scholars in the historical film studies, where about the need of using films as a source of study posing the following “What might we learn from viewing a number of films devoted to a single incident or major subject? To what extent will those films, taken together, relate to, comment upon, and add to the larger discourse? (Rosenstone, 2012: 151) the importance and efficacy of films in explaining and presenting history could also be seen by the fact that as an Audio-visual media and a visual cultural production category, films are being presented in courses and classrooms as studying materials not just for cinema students but in all the other domains and specifically history.

Even though the debate between historians and cinema studies scholars is a very deep theme in the study of films related to the past, I would leave this debate behind, and rather try to focus on the presentation of the past, memory and identity through films as a visual cultural production, accepting meanwhile that historical films are a new history reading material and will be a source for historians especially with the raise of technology that allows everyone having a phone to shoot a film or documentary. I do adopt the idea insisting that “It is time for the historian to accept the mainstream historical film as a new kind of history that, like all history, operates within certain limited boundaries” (Rosenstone, 2012: 51-52).

In this part of the article I will address historical trauma and traumatic memory and the treatment of repressed memory in films (*Lion of the Desert: Omar Muhtar* film as a case study) and the representation of the visually narrated cultural identity, using the selected films situated under the genre of “colonial cinema” as a subcategory of “history film”.

### ***The pain, oppression, and the traumatic experience***

The African continent and its history is one of the mysterious attractive subjects of research with its richness yet with the amount of pain it embodies. African colonial history is one of those periods where the pain, oppression and victimhood flow on the surface of each research in every branch of study.

The North African countries: Tunisian Algeria, Morocco and Libya are known in the region and in the international community by the colonial experience they went through in the last century by some of the European colonial powers mainly France and Italy. Even though those nations have each of them a very rich history marked by the successions of civilizations, postcolonial period presents one of the most effective eras in the construction of their social and political identity.

Having a limited economic wealth the north African societies are not really present in the media and film industry comparing to other countries from the middle east such as Turkey and Egypt, it is what explains the luck of huge cultural cinematic productions telling the truth about the colonial reality. The postcolonial film category is more related to Indian and African societies and it is the historical films that explain the socially lived trauma and pain and the forms of resistance in facing the colonizer and the risk of assimilation, one of the earliest definition to the colonial cinema is the following:

The anti-imperialist struggles of the peoples of the Third World and of their equivalents inside the imperialist countries constitute today the axis of the world revolution. Third Cinema is, in our opinion, the cinema that recognises in that struggle the most gigantic cultural, scientific, and artistic manifestation of our time, and the great possibility of constructing a liberated personality with each people as the starting point - in a word, the decolonisation of culture ... The culture, including the cinema, of a neocolonised country is just the expression of an overall dependence that generates models and values born from the needs of imperialist expansion original emphasis. (Solanas, 1968: 47)

The chosen film *Lion of the Desert* is one of the very few examples that of cinematic production related to the colonial experience in North Africa and more precisely in Libya, and that were a partnership production between Libya and Italy where the majority of the principal actors were not Arab Libyan. The film *Lion of the Desert* directed by Moustafa Akkad the Syrian American filmmaker and director and Performed by Anthony Quinn, Oliver Reed, and Rod Steiger, is a rare sample on the cinematic expression of the North African colonial trauma.

Interestingly, this film did not just affect the Libyan society and the North African neighbouring countries, but it did as well create a cultural collective shock in the European societies mainly the Italian society as a result of facing the reality of the history of their states under a strange identification of the oppressor, the guilty and the colonizer. The film through specific scenes of torture, aerostations and rape, exposed the injustice and oppression applied by the Italian military and how normal citizens were subject of illegitimate behaviours. The used cultural elements in the picturing of the Libyan Saharan life and its simplicity allow the interaction and empathy with a society that had nothing to do with the luxury life Italian were having in the other side. The material elements as well as the acting form tried to reach an intimacy with the spectator and to facilitate the empathy with the colonized rural group. The concentration on the pain in its individual and collective form in the film was linked in the same time to a culture of resistance and solidarity. The arm smuggling fact visualized three times in the file, was an expression of the rebellion and opposition to the colonizing power, and a presentation of the solidarity among the North African societies in their common fight to colonization: the director insisted on the cultural identity elements through metaphoric and direct expressions. The praying scenes and the Quran was a figure of the Islamic religious identity, the resistance scenes and armed confrontations with the Italian military were a figure of the solid fighter identity, and the informative replicas of the Tunisian and Algerian condition was the presentation of the belonging to the regional North African Arab identity.

In the court scene and in the debate that took place between the Italian military official and Omar Muhtar, the colonizer side argued the legitimate of the Italian colonization and the historical existence in Libya for one hundred years, a discussion that put in evidence the historical conflict and the importance of the land in the Arab North African culture, emphasized by the answer of the main character and his attachment to the territorial identity. It is in fact another form of presenting the identity and belonging importance through the colonization experience by an argumentation linked to the concept of belonging and legitimacy.

*Lion of the Desert*, tried to represent the cultural identity of Libyans during the colonization era with the concentration of the oppression they went through, screening meanwhile the traumatic experience elements which will serve for the reminding of the

colonial authority and its crimes towards humanity: a cinematic presentation of history, trauma and identity.

### ***The hero image and the cultural identity of the resistant***

When discussing the construction of meaning in film as a visual production, different tools and channel come to our minds, and every detail would be a meaning producer in the hands of the director, but yet, the construction of the character and the hero image is one of the most effective elements. In fact the importance given to the hero is linked to the role of the character in presenting the symbol: symbolism is the linking channel between the story, the collectivity and the meaning:

There are so many symbols, from which one can choose; each symbol can be interpreted differently; a symbol can become ossified and can fail this year to evoke a reality, which it evoked last year; and the realities to which any social group refers are themselves subject to change. And above all, each social group and each individual is likely to shape reality in a different way, bending the symbolism to their particular desires. (Buckley, 1998: 87–108)

The use of symbolism in cultural production generally and in the cinematic expression especially is a known fact that gets a higher value when the cinematic production is related to a national narrative and a specific historical era, therefore the colonial films focus more on the symbolism of the character. To create a particular meaning in the colonial film category and to show the traumatic experience of the postcolonial societies, the work on the hero image and the construction of a heroic path could be accepted as a main classical methodology, which *Lion of the Desert* adopted.

Omar Muhtar, the principal character of the film, is a peaceful, grandfatherly old school teacher instructing village children in the mercy of God (Godard, 1980) attached to his religion and having the mission of transmitting knowledge. An image of a hero, even though confirmed historically, reflects the conception of heroism in the Arab culture in the time, a hero in this cultural context should be ethical with an intellectual specificity, a religious strong connection and a socially well respected status. The ethical side in the hero picturing is of the primordial elements to take care of. Omar Muhtar in the film is portrayed in such a way that he presents in the same time a respected by both his people and his enemy: being patient, strong, sage and wise makes him a universally accepted hero. Hero construction narratives are changeable according to the cultural context, but the director was able to construct the image of a common ethnical presentation that evens the colonizer and the enemy has to confess. The cinematic approach to the principal character was built on the base of the cultural frame and helps understand the construction of the hero conception in the Arab context.

Compatible with the principle of shaping films according to the audience (Heintz, 2006), the director shaped the character in a way that both Libyan and Italians receivers will be open to accept him and through the acceptance of the hero, the director makes the receiver believes indirectly in the legitimacy of his principles, case and path. Confronted with the risk of being opposed by a political power and a natural will of hiding the historical crime, the director focused on winning the empathy of the spectator by the constructed here image.

The construction of the heroic identity in *Lion of the Desert* was a principal cinematographic purpose and constituted a developing line of the films, the human hero since the first scenes till the ending scene, the hanging of Omar Muhtar was linked to a well-known expression in the Arab geography that became a motto “We will never

surrender. We win or we die, and don't think it stops there. After this generation you will have the next to fight and after that the next, and so on."

The hero, supposed to be humiliated by the colonizer by hanging him in the public square, reaches immortality and his value becomes related to the historical identity of the nation. Omar Muhtar is not just a hero and rebellion but he is a symbol of the Libyan resistance. The director following the character and screening his thoughts created and verified the symbolism of the Libyan resistance movement and formed a visual expression of the cultural identity and traumatic memory of the colonial era. Picturing pain and the scenes of torture were from a secondary importance, as the main goal of *Lion of the Desert* was not the dramatization and exaggeration of the oppression experience but it was mainly the presentation of a humanistic model of heroism that could enclose, parenthood, wisdom and honesty. The relation Omar Muhtar had with the child, and the way he smiled to him even before facing death, reflects the personal ability of intimate communication firstly, and has the symbolic meaning of the transmission of the hero's vision and morality to the future generations.

Relationship between the films and the colonial historical period was possibly to study through the pursuit of the main character, even though, the other characters were as much important in the reflection of the cultural identity of north African societies and the attachment to the belonging and the resistance principle. The study of *Lion of the Desert* as a colonial film on the North African experience could be made by the investigation of more other cinematographic dimensions which is a proof of the richness and value of the film.

## Conclusion

Some anti-colonial films were banned for decades such as the *Voyage au Congo* of Marc Allegret and the film of René Vautier, *Afrique 50*. It is what proves the power of cinema as a visual production and the way it may threaten the political power. It is one of the proofs of the power of the visual cinematic production and the way it may even threaten the political governance. The colonial films and the historical films generally, being representations of a controversial past related to oppression, crime and genocides, were always a threatening expression to specific parts. The recalling of the historical truth or the argumentation of the known facts by a new narrative cinematic discourse is surely a bothering fact, because some countries are still not able to face their historical mistakes and take responsibility of it. *Lion of the Desert* created a social protesting movement in Italy and made the Italian society aware of a hidden history of crimes towards humanity. The Italy's shame in Libya was better proved by the use of the cinematic production that expressed the perspective of the victims rather than the propaganda of the colonizer.

*Lion of the Desert* is a one of the reflections of traumatic memory and cultural identity of the North African societies during the colonial era that proves the power of the cinematic production in telling the past through the visual narration. Films and cinematic productions are the new narratives of history, and directors are the new storytellers.

Collective memory and cultural identity in their collective understanding invades the cultural productions in general and the visual arts especially. The ability to see the past in the screen realise the intellectual remembering of the national historical

discourse and so, assure the continuity of the collective belonging and attachment to the past through the image of the hero and its symbolic power. Historical films of the colonial era are the reconstructed image of the past in the age of technology, where the historical truth is not anymore limited to the elites and protected from the critics and the alternative reading.

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