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## **Loyalty and Betrayal to the Homeland in Algerian Cinematic Narratives: in the Fiction Film *Héliopolis* by Director Djaffar Gacem (Semiotic Study)**

### **Abstract**

Algerian historical filmmakers have sought to reconstruct the pivotal events of the national movement, whether through documentary films that rely on testimonies and archival material, or through fictional works aimed at reinforcing national identity among younger generations. This study seeks to uncover the narrative duality of “loyalty and betrayal” through a semiological analysis based on Roland Barthes’ approach, applied to the historical feature film *Héliopolis* (2020) by Algerian director “Djaffar Gacem”. In this cinematic work, Gacem attempts—through filmic scenes and character portrayals—to depict the events leading up to the massacres of May 8, 1945, in the province of Guelma, highlighting those who betrayed their homeland by colluding with the French colonizer, as well as those who chose rebellion and refused the conditions imposed upon them by colonial authority.

**Keywords:** *Algerian cinema, loyalty, betrayal, Roland Barthes’ approach*

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## **Əlcəzair kinematoqrafik narrativlərində Vətənə sədaqət və xəyanət: Rejissor Cəffər Qasem tərəfindən çəkilmiş *Héliopolis* bədii filmi əsasında (semiotik tədqiqat)**

### **Xülasə**

Əlcəzairin tarixi film rejissorları milli hərəkatın mühüm hadisələrini yenidən qurmağa çalışmışlar: ya şahid ifadələri və arxiv materiallarına əsaslanan sənədli filmlər vasitəsilə, ya da gənc nəsillər arasında milli kimliyi gücləndirməyi hədəfləyən bədii əsərlər vasitəsilə. Bu tədqiqat Roland Barthes-in yanaşmasına əsaslanan semioloji təhlil vasitəsilə “sadiqlik və xəyanət” hekayə ikililiyini üzə çıxarmağa çalışır və bunu Əlcəzair rejissoru Djaffar Gacem-in tarixi bədii filmi *Héliopolis* (2020) üzərində tətbiq edir. Bu kinofilm əsərində Gacem film səhnələri və obraz təsvirləri vasitəsilə 1945-ci il mayın 8-də Guelma vilayətində baş verən qırğınlara aparan hadisələri əks etdirməyə çalışır, vətəninə sataaraq fransız kolonizatoru ilə əməkdaşlıq edənləri, həmçinin üsyanı seçərək kolonial hakimiyyətin tətbiq etdiyi şərtləri rədd edənləri ön plana çıxarır.

**Açar sözlər:** *Əlcəzair kinosu, sadiqlik, xəyanət, Roland Barthes yanaşması*

## Introduction

Since its emergence, cinema has played a crucial role in revealing truths and narrating historical periods that were marginalized or forgotten. This is evident in films that have significantly contributed to the liberation of nations and peoples from their colonizers, documenting events that would have remained unknown without the seventh art. Cinema has often addressed struggles for freedom, as is the case with a range of historical films dealing with the Algerians' struggle before and after the Algerian Liberation Revolution, portraying their lives and resistance against French colonialism during that period. Among these films are *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), directed by Italian filmmaker Gillo Pontecorvo, which won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1966; *Chronicle of the Years of Fire* (1974) by Algerian director Ahmed Lakhdar-Hamina, awarded the Palme d'Or at the Cannes International Film Festival; and *Sheikh Bouamama* (1985), directed by Benamar Bakhti.

### Research

Despite the stagnation in Algerian film production in recent years, films depicting the Algerians' struggle against French colonialism continue to appear. Algerian directors have consistently produced historical films, varying in vision, ideology, and approach from the post-independence era to the present day. Among the films that achieved significant popularity and high audience attendance in Algerian cinemas is *Héliopolis* by director Djaffar Gacem, which was nominated for an Academy Award in 2020. The film depicts a segment of Algerian life before the outbreak of the major liberation revolution, highlighting both the betrayal of some Algerians who abandoned their principles and homeland, and the loyalty and dedication of many others to their national identity.

In this context, the central research question arises (Abderrezak, 2005): How does Algerian director Djaffar Gacem address the duality of "loyalty and betrayal" in his film?

*This question gives rise to the following sub-questions:*

1. How does *Héliopolis* portray the duality of loyalty and betrayal within its narrative and visual discourse?
2. What semiological mechanisms does the film employ to represent this duality through image, sound, and characters?
3. What ideological and symbolic meanings does the film generate regarding the concepts of belonging and betrayal to the homeland?
4. How does cinematic narrative contribute to reshaping the collective memory of the May 8, 1945 events among Algerian audiences?

### 1. Study Objectives

*This study aims to achieve the following objectives (Al-Zubaidi, 2024):*

1. To analyze how the duality of loyalty and betrayal is constructed within the cinematic narrative of *Héliopolis*.
2. To identify the semiological mechanisms used to represent this duality in the visual and auditory discourse.
3. To uncover the symbolic and ideological meanings that the film reproduces regarding belonging and betrayal.
4. To examine the film's role in reshaping collective memory of the May 8, 1945 events and enhancing national awareness among viewers.

### 2. Significance of the Study

The significance of this research lies in providing an in-depth semiological reading of *Héliopolis*, revealing how the duality of loyalty and betrayal is constructed within Algerian cinematic discourse. The study contributes to understanding the role of cinematic imagery in reconstructing collective memory of a pivotal historical event (The May 8, 1945 massacres) and demonstrates how visual and narrative signs function as tools for producing national meaning. Additionally, it enriches media and film studies by analyzing the film's symbolic structure and offers a methodological model applicable to other research addressing values and symbols in audiovisual discourse.

### 3. Definition of Key Concepts

#### 3.1. Cinema

Cinema is a technique that allows the recording of moving images photographically and their subsequent projection. It is an art form used to produce films—animated or otherwise—with the aim of presenting a story to audiences (Esmat-artistique, 2025). Cinema is more than a technical process for recording and projecting images; it is a cultural and media medium reflecting societal transformations and reproducing them through imagery and narrative. The camera does not merely document reality but reshapes it according to an aesthetic and ideological vision that contributes to meaning-making and collective awareness. Therefore, media and communication researchers view films as a visual discourse in which language, symbols, and social perception intersect. In analyzing a film like *Héliopolis*, one observes how visual elements (lighting, color, camera angles) become symbols representing deeper concepts such as identity, national memory, and colonial history. Cinema thus becomes a space for the circulation of cultural and political messages and a tool for understanding human interaction with history and society through images.

#### 3.2. Fiction Film (Feature Film)

Qais Al-Zubaidi emphasizes that documentary film aims to depict reality with accuracy and objectivity, capturing real events, issues, conflicts, and emotions while upholding integrity and credibility. He distinguishes between prose documentaries, which present life as it is, and poetic documentaries, which artistically reshape reality to deepen understanding. Al-Zubaidi also traces Arab documentary cinema since the 1970s, noting the search for an alternative cinema focused on realism, but often lacking a clear methodological framework. He argues that contemporary studies of Arab documentary film must adopt a rigorous approach that considers both its history and present to understand its limits and future potential (Al-Zubaidi, *Qafilah*, 2024).

Films are often shot on location—whether in nature, cities, or villages—depending on the narrative and subject. In some cases, directors must create innovative sets for necessity. Historically, cinemas would screen short visual materials alongside the main feature, such as newsreels or animated films. With the increasing length of films and the evolution of cinematic narrative techniques, the term “feature film” emerged to distinguish these longer works. Over time, screening duration became a key criterion for classifying films as features, qualifying them for commercial distribution and eligibility for official awards (Vocabulary.com, 2013). In simpler terms, a feature film is a long film; the term “feature” originated when moving images were first presented in vaudeville shows. Initially, any film was called a “movie,” and the feature film was the main or highlighted film of the evening program, usually advertised prominently on the cinema façade (Arcstudiopro, 2022).

#### 3.3. Roland Barthes' Approach

Roland Barthes is one of the most influential figures in semiotic theory. He argues that all symbolic systems, whether linguistic or non-linguistic, convey meanings that can be analyzed through the logic of the sign. Challenging Saussure's view that linguistics is a branch of semiology, Barthes maintains that language is what confers meaning upon non-verbal phenomena, transforming them into meaningful systems. He also moves beyond a purely functional understanding of signs tied to intentionality, emphasizing that communication may be unintentional yet still meaningful. Barthes' semiological approach is grounded in structuralist linguistic binaries such as signifier/signified, langue/parole, and denotation/connotation. He applied this framework to the analysis of cultural systems including fashion, advertising, myths, and images, treating language as the foundation for understanding meaning across all forms of human expression (Hamdaoui, 2007).

Barthes' approach to cultural analysis is highly dynamic and rich within structuralist and semiotic fields. Building on Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic foundations, he regarded language not merely as a system of signs but as a model for understanding cultural practices as meaningful systems. In his three seminal works—*Mythologies* (1957), *The Fashion System* (1964), and *The Empire of Signs* (1970)—Barthes deconstructs what appears natural in culture to reveal its ideological dimensions, exposing how social phenomena presented as self-evident truths are constructed. His approach also

integrates creative writing, making cultural analysis an aesthetic practice combining pleasure and knowledge. According to Amokrane (2003), Barthes' uniqueness lies in his intellectual dynamism, where each work opens a new path rather than confirming a fixed theoretical position, creating a continuous evolution in understanding signs and meaning (Abderrezak, 2005).

#### 4. Methodology and Tools

##### 4.1. Semiological Method

Semiology, also known as semiotics, emerged as an independent field of study at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its development is commonly understood to have followed two parallel and independent traditions: the European approach associated with Ferdinand de Saussure and the American tradition developed by Charles Sanders Peirce. The term "semiology" itself had largely disappeared from scholarly discourse for centuries, from the Platonic period until it was revived in the late seventeenth century by the English philosopher John Locke. Around 1690, Locke reintroduced the concept under the name *Semeiotike*, integrating it into a philosophical framework that closely echoed its classical origins.

Semiology is not limited to the study of verbal language; rather, it extends to a wide range of non-verbal cultural systems, including gestures, bodily movements, rituals, clothing, architecture, visual arts, and other forms of symbolic representation. Although these domains lie outside the strict boundaries of linguistics, they carry implicit semiotic meanings and are open to interpretation (Latrouch, 2019). Semiology gradually developed through diverse approaches before becoming an autonomous science concerned with all forms of signs, viewing reality itself as a complex system of meaning. While Saussure defined semiology as the overarching science of signs that includes linguistics, Roland Barthes reversed this position by treating semiology as a branch of linguistics, arguing that all sign systems—linguistic, visual, or auditory—derive their meaning through language-based structures (Bouzida, 2015). Saussure used the term "semiology" to describe the study of verbal and non-verbal signs and their usage, treating all types of signs similarly to linguistic signs. With the growing popularity of "semiotics" in the twentieth century, especially in the United States, the term "semiology" remained in use as a methodological framework focusing on language and its relationship to other sign systems (Danesi, 2006).

**Table 1.**  
 Previous studies and points

Title of the Study	Bibliography	Benefits of the Study
Semiology through the Lens of Roland Barthes	Wael Barakat, Journal of the University of Damascus, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2002.	Enhancing the documentary aspect of semiology in general. Gaining a deeper understanding of Barthes' semiological practice (Barakat, 2002).
Cinematic Image Composition and Its Semiotics	Ilyas Boukhamoucha, Abqounat Journal, No. 06, Vol. 6, 2018.	Enhancing the researcher's knowledge of cinematic images and the principles of their visual composition (Boukhamoucha, 2018). Guiding the researcher on how to analyze film stills, particularly in the practical section of the study.
Roland Barthes' Semiological Approach to the Analysis of A -Digital Advertising Images Semiotic Study of an Electronic Advertising Image	Ismail Ziyad and Tarek Haba, Media and Society Journal, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 6–19, March	Applying Roland Barthes' semiological approach in analyzing an advertising image, step by step (Haba, 2018).

**Source:** The Researcher.

## 5. Practical Section of the Study

### Profile of Director Djaffar Gacem:

Djaffar Gacem is an Algerian director, screenwriter, and television and film producer, born on May 12, 1963, in Sidi Aïch, Béjaïa Province. He is considered one of the pioneers who introduced the concept of the sitcom to Algerian drama and has produced a significant number of Ramadan series that enjoyed widespread popularity for years. Gacem owns the production company Prod Art Film and began his cinematic career with a revolutionary-themed film before establishing his presence in television through successful works such as the series Ashour Al-Acher, Jami Family, Nas Malah City, and Maw'ed Ma'a Al-Qadar, in addition to the historical revolutionary film *Héliopolis* (ElCinema, n.d.).

**Table 2.**

Technical sheet of the film under study

Film Title	<i>Héliopolis</i>
Duration of the film	One hour and fifty-two minutes
Film genre	Feature film – Color
Film language	A mix of Algerian Darija and French
Film director	Djaffar Gacem
Screenplay and dialogue	Salah Eddine Chihani, Djaffar Gacem, Kahina Mohamed Oussaïd
Director of photography	Hugo Lupinto
Production management	Mariem Miftahi Mouaz, Ben Hassan
Editing and montage	Marie-Pier Renault
Sound supervisors	Alexandre Hernandez Emeric, Doubas Mouaz Ben Cheikh
Original music	Armand Amar
Costume designer	Jean-Marc Mert
Production	Algerian Ministry of Culture / Algerian Center for Cinema Development
Executive producer	ProD'art Films
Year of production	2020
Main cast in leading roles	Aziz Boukrouni as Si Mokdad
	Souhila Maalem as Nejma, Si Mokdad's daughter
	Mehdi Ramdhani as Mahfoud
	César Dumenil as Claude
	Mourad Ouguet as Bachir

Source: The Researcher.

### 1. Film Summary:

The Zenati family lives on their large farm in *Héliopolis*, built by the French colonizer in the fertile lands of Guelma, eastern Algeria. Si Mokdad, a widower raising his children Mahfoud and Najma, combined Islamic upbringing with Western education, hoping they would become distinguished figures in French Algeria. With World War II, the family's balance shifted as the national movement gained strength after France's defeat, creating tension that reached the Zenatis. Mahfoud, influenced by Ferhat Abbas and the call for equality, embraced political ideas after earning his baccalaureate in Algiers. Najma, encouraged by her brother and by Bachir, whom she loved, also adopted new visions of an inclusive Algeria. Si Mokdad, caught between loyalty and reality, witnessed escalating violence and ultimately the loss of his son. Critics praised the film's cinematography and accurate 1940s costume design supported by European expertise. Filming took

place in restored colonial-era agricultural estates in Ain Temouchent (Balmalah), renovated to authentically reflect the historical setting.

Study Sample: In scientific research, the sample is a part of the study population selected by the researcher to accurately represent the phenomenon without examining the entire population. In this study, which applies a semiological approach to analyze the film *Héliopolis*, the sample consisted of a deliberately chosen set of cinematic sequences due to their semantic and visual richness, representing the film’s core themes such as identity, memory, and colonialism. This type of sampling was used because semiological analysis focuses on depth of meaning rather than quantity, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the film’s symbolic structure and hidden meanings, and for this study, we selected a sequence which we divided into 20 film stills, as follows:

**Table 3.**  
 Selected scenes for analysis

Clip number	Clip duration
01	From minute 05:58 to 06:41
02	From minute 08:11 to 10:12
03	From minute 13:46 to 14:55
04	From minute 25:09 to 28:54
05	From minute 28:55 to 31:14
06	From minute 42:25 to 45:24
07	From minute 45:26 to 51:26
08	From minute 59:22 to 01:04:54
09	From minute 01:05:37 to 01:08:06
10	From minute 01:09:23 to 01:11:06
11	From minute 01:13:25 to 01:16:03
12	From minute 01:16:17 to 01:21:48
13	From minute 01:27:28 to 01:33:18
14	From minute 01:40:29 to 01:42:10
15	From minute 01:42:16 to 01:43:55
16	From minute 01:46:27 to 01:46:58
17	From minute 01:48:20 to 01:50:33
18	From minute 01:50:35 to 01:51:37

A table showing the number of study clips and their duration

Source: The Researcher.

**Analysis of the promotional poster of the film *Héliopolis***



The advertising poster of the film *Héliopolis*

**The Iconic (Iconographic) Organization of the Image**

The cinematic poster is composed within a rectangular frame centered on Si Mokdad, who stands on a rural road crossing agricultural fields, carrying a rifle on his back and wearing a jacket and trousers, his expression marked by sadness and anger. The upper section features photographs of the main cast, with Aziz Boukrouni as Si Mokdad at the top center and Souhila Maalem as Nejma placed beneath him. To the right appear Mehdi Ramdhani as Mahfoud, Mourad Ouguet as Bachir, and Fodil Assoul as Sadeq, while Alexis Rangheard as Gervais is positioned on the left. The film title, written in bold white font, divides the poster into upper and lower sections. Above it appears the statement “This film is inspired by true events,” in French, and below it the credit “A film by Djaffar Gacem.”

### **Semiotic Approach**

The poster centers on Mokdad standing on a road between wheat fields, wearing a grey jacket and brown trousers, his stern expression conveying anger. Smoke rising from Heliopolis behind him symbolizes colonial violence and martyrdom. Surrounding him are seven characters: *Nejma* at the center, young resistance fighters to the right, and French figures to the left whose expressions reflect brutality and colonial authority. French military aircraft in the sky signify war and repression. The title *HELOPOLIS* appears in bold white letters, accompanied by “Inspired by true events” above and “A film by Djaffar Gacem” below. The black-and-white palette reinforces the historical context and the atrocities following the 1945 demonstrations.

### **Temporal and Spatial Setting of the Film**

**Temporal setting:** The film takes place during the 1940s-between the end of 1944 and throughout 1945, following the end of World War II.

**Spatial setting:** The story unfolds in the village of Heliopolis, built by colonial settlers in the province of Guelma, eastern Algeria. Most events occur within Si Mokdad's vast agricultural estate.

### **Clip 01**



**Photogram No. (1):** Mokdad's friends celebrating Mahfoud's success in the Baccalaureate.

**Denotative Level (Denotation):** The first sequence, spanning from 05:58 to 06:41, opens with a long shot showing Si Mokdad's family seated with a group of colonists around a dinner table held to celebrate Mahfoud's success in the baccalaureate examination. The characters are seen drinking wine and raising a toast to Mahfoud's achievement and to the promising future awaiting him after his success. The scene then shifts to a close-up focusing on Claude, the young Frenchman, whose facial expressions reveal hostility toward Mahfoud due to the latter's academic superiority.

**Connotative Level (Connotation):** The sequence begins with a close-up of Claude's father, followed by a long shot of the guests raising wine glasses in celebration of Mahfoud's success. This gesture symbolizes an apparent harmony between the Mokdad family and the colonists, while Claude's grim expression signals latent hostility. The wine toast functions as a cultural signifier of the Mokdad family's partial assimilation into French social practices despite their Islamic background. The maid's presence behind the guests serves as a social index reflecting class hierarchy and Si Mokdad's attempt to secure stability, status, and coexistence within the colonial system.

### Clip 02



**Photogram No. (02):** Mahfoud informs his father Mokdad of his rejection from the Faculty of Applied Arts.

**First: Denotative Level (Denotation):** The sequence (08:31-10:12) uses close framing and dialogue to convey personal and political tension. Si Mokdad contemplates his father's portrait in Harka uniform, symbolizing colonial collaboration, while Mahfoud holds an envelope representing his academic future. Si Mokdad distances himself from the colonial title of *Qa'id*, taking pride in his son's achievement. This familial affirmation is shattered when Mahfoud reveals his rejection from the Faculty of Applied Arts due to being "local," exposing systemic colonial discrimination.

**Second: Connotative Level (Connotation):** Mahfoud's frustrated expression contrasts with Si Mokdad's earlier pride in his son's academic success and his grandfather's collaboration with the colonial administration. The university rejection transforms the scene into a complex sign revealing the tension between imagined social advancement and colonial restrictions on local mobility. Si Mokdad's shocked reaction functions as a semiotic index, while Mahfoud handing him the rejection letter acts as an iconic sign transferring the shock visually. Si Mokdad's motionless posture embodies a Barthesian social myth, exposing the illusion of "local integration." The interplay between past collaboration and present rejection deconstructs the colonial promise of upward mobility, turning the scene into a visual discourse on the limits imposed by the colonial system.

### Clip 03



**Photogram No. (03):** The activist Ismail enters Sadeq's shop and asks him to dedicate it to the secret struggle, informing him that Messali Hadj is imprisoned.

**Denotative Level (Denotation):** The third sequence (13:46-14:55) opens with a medium shot of Ismail standing outside Sadeq's shop, unnoticed by him. Sadeq invites him in, and in another medium shot they exchange dialogue: Ismail reproaches Sadeq for political inactivity, while Sadeq cites Messali Hadj's imprisonment, implying the struggle is over. Ismail places his bag on the table, and an extreme close-up reveals the newspaper "El-Ouma" Sadeq reads it thoughtfully as Ismail stresses dedicating the shop to the revolutionary cause (ESMA Artistique, 2025).

**Connotative Level (Connotation):** Ismail's sudden, unnoticed arrival marks the secrecy and clandestine nature of his political activity, showing him as cautious and deliberate within a monitored

space. His reproachful glances at Sadeq act as signs of tension between political commitment and Sadeq's forced withdrawal after *Messali Hadj's* imprisonment, while Sadeq's fearful body language reflects activist frustration. El-Ouma, shown in an extreme close-up, functions as an iconic sign of political mythology, symbolizing the continuity of the struggle despite repression. When Ismail presents it to Sadeq, the scene shifts from frustration to hope and from withdrawal to action. His firm tone demanding that Sadeq dedicate the shop to the revolution acts as an authoritative and revolutionary sign, highlighting his leadership and transforming the space into a politically charged environment.

#### Clip 04



**Photograms No. (04) and (05):** Si Mokdad and his children Mahfoud and Nejma at an evening gathering with prominent French figures and officers, discussing the threat of Messali Hadj's influence on the locals, and Mahfoud responding to the remarks made in his father's presence.

**Denotative Level (Denotation):** The sequence (25:09-28:54) opens with a long shot of Guelma's military barracks, showing soldiers and civilians entering to celebrate North Africa's liberation. It shifts to a close-up of Claude's father dancing with his wife, then a medium shot of the Mokdad family arriving and being greeted. A close-up shows Mokdad conversing with French officers and colonists, followed by a medium shot of Mahfoud listening angrily to their remarks. A long shot depicts Mahfoud discussing horse race funding with his father, a close-up captures Mokdad slapping Mahfoud, and a medium shot shows Mahfoud leaving the house.

**Connotative Level (Connotation):** The celebration, dancing, and loud music symbolize French joy and cultural dominance after North Africa's liberation, while Algerians remain tense and restrained. Claude's father's movements reveal social alliances and strategies of integration between Algerians and settlers. Nejma and her French friends enjoying wine highlight cultural freedom and contrast with Algerian restraint, while Nejma's glances toward Mahfoud indicate attraction and social divides. Mahfoud's political focus and concern about Messali Hadj reflect his serious stance and resistance against French authority, whereas Mokdad's compliance and funding of the horse race symbolize strategic adaptation and balancing personal and social interests under colonial pressure.

#### Clip 05

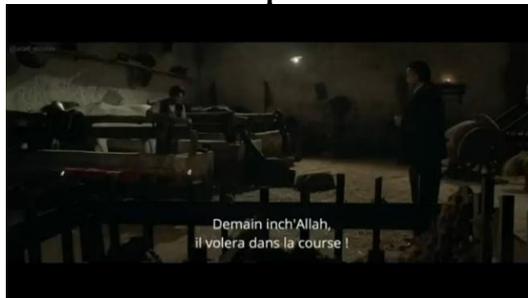


**Photograms No. (06) and (07):** Argument between Mahfoud and his father Mokdad over funding the horse race in Guelma at the colonists' request, and Mahfoud leaving the house after being slapped by his father.

**Denotative Level (Denotation):** The sequence (28:55-31:14) opens with a medium shot of Mahfoud leaning on Mokdad's desk, speaking loudly. The debate over Ferhat Abbas' ideas unfolds, with Mahfoud advocating armed struggle and Mokdad rejecting it. An extreme close-up shows Mahfoud arguing America's support for independence. In a medium shot, Mokdad reprimands him, citing France, Messali Hadj, and Abbas, urging rationality. The argument escalates, Mokdad slaps Mahfoud, who leaves quickly, while his sister Nejma reacts in shock.

**Connotative Level (Connotation):** The scene depicts a generational political conflict through symbolic gestures and movement. Mahfoud's posture and expressions reveal inner tension and resistance to both paternal and colonial authority, reflecting his rejection of conservatism and desire for national independence. Mokdad's cigarette signifies control and paternal dominance, while their verbal clash and the father's slap underscore the generational divide. Mahfoud's defiance and Nejma's shock highlight the family impact, forming a dual semiotic text of political debate and the struggle between authority and revolution, tradition and modernity, colonial loyalty and national liberation.

### Clip 06



**Photogram No. (08):** Si Mokdad prevents Bachir from participating in the horse race for fear of the activists exploiting the situation.

**Denotative Level (Denotation):** The sixth sequence (42:25-45:24) opens with a long shot of Mokdad entering the stable and a medium shot of Bachir cleaning his white horse. Bachir greets him confidently, but Mokdad, smoking, forbids him from racing. Shocked, Bachir challenges him, and in a close-up Mokdad explains that abstaining benefits everyone. He exits in a long shot, followed by an extreme close-up of Nejma watching from her car. In a medium shot, Bachir sits sadly as Nejma speaks, then resumes cleaning, displeased. A close-up shows him vowing to race for Nejma and calling her name; she lowers her head, and he respectfully calls her "Lalla." Another close-up shows Nejma warning him about the farm, and a long shot ends the scene as they leave together, repeating: "We have no choice, God is supreme."

**Connotative Level (Connotation):** The scene depicts the tension between imposed authority and individual freedom. Mokdad's intervention embodies paternal and social dominance, while Bachir caring for the white horse symbolizes purity, balance, and inner resistance. Gestures of prohibition, bodily rigidity, and the cigarette reflect control and repression, whereas Bachir's actions reveal his conflict between obedience and personal desire, especially toward Nejma. The closing door and verbal ban signify restriction, while Nejma's discreet presence conveys silent support. Bachir's persistence demonstrates resilience and dignified action, with movements, gazes, and objects collectively marking authority, resistance, loyalty, sacrifice, and psychological endurance.

### Clip 07



**Photograms No. (09) and (10):** Bachir wins the race; locals cheer and celebrate while activists sing “Fidā’ al-Jazā’ir”.

**Denotative Level (Denotation):** The sequence, from 45:25 to 51:26, shows Bachir entering the race with clear confidence in his ability to win against the French riders. He is dressed in a jockey uniform, wearing a gray shirt with a black armband displaying the number “02” in white, topped with a gray-and-white cap. Bachir rides a brown horse instead of his usual white one. He succeeds in winning the race amidst the cheers of the local population, while the activists take advantage of the moment to perform the anthem “*Fidā’ al-Jazā’ir*”, provoking the anger of the colonists.

**Connotative Level (Connotation):** The sequence highlights dominance, social hierarchy, and national identity. The announcer elevates French riders while labeling Bachir “the Arab,” reinforcing colonial superiority, which Bachir disrupts through his defiant response. Spatial arrangements visually assert colonial control, while replacing the white horse with a brown one shifts Bachir’s role from peace to rebellion. His reaction to “Fidā’ al-Jazā’ir” politicizes a sporting victory, and the activists’ anthem signals the move from symbolic resistance to armed struggle.

### Clip 08



**Photograms No. (11) and (12):** The settlers gather to form militias to retaliate against the locals, while Ferhat Abbas meets activists supporting Messali Hadj and decides to fight France.

**Denotative Level (Denotation):** The sequence (59:22-01:04:54) begins with a long shot establishing the visual space, followed by a medium shot showing Mahfoud’s friend driving him to the Grand Hotel Reggui for the activists’ meeting with Ferhat Abbas. Inside the hotel, activists are prominently present, while Mokdad is observed in the background from a distance. A subsequent long shot depicts Mokdad approaching the agricultural office, where guards prevent his entry due to a secret meeting he is excluded from. A medium shot then shows extremist settlers planning armed militias against the Algerian population, followed by a close-up of Claude’s father leaving to inform Mokdad. The scene concludes with a close-up of Ferhat Abbas at the podium, addressing activists and declaring that the moment to fight France has arrived.

**Connotative Level (Connotation):** the scene functions as a coherent semiotic system conveying ideological meaning. The activists' formal clothing operates as a Barthesian myth, signifying an educated elite engaged in organized national struggle. Spatial elements reinforce symbolism: the Grand Hotel Reggui represents a myth of integration masking tension, while the dark, chaotic agricultural office indexes colonial violence and militia formation. The activists' disciplined posture before Ferhat Abbas signifies symbolic legitimacy, and his close-up embodies both a man delivering a speech and, mythically, national authority. His firm tone signals the rupture of the "myth of silence," marking a decisive shift from colonial discourse to open resistance.

### Clip 09



**Photogram No. (13):** Si Mokdad visits his son Mahfoud in the café and warns him about the settlers' militias.

**Denotative Level (Denotation):** The scene, from 01:05:37 to 01:08:06, begins with Mahfoud arriving at the café in a friend's car. He notices his father sitting and smoking a cigarette. Mahfoud approaches with a look of clear disdain, then pours himself a glass of liquor before asking his father the reason for the visit. Mokdad explains that his concern for Mahfoud prompted the visit. Mahfoud responds that France cannot prevent the activists' meetings, citing the lack of suppression of their recent gathering with Ferhat Abbas. Mokdad then surprises him with the news that armed militias targeting the locals have been formed, supported by the district chief, a former officer.

**Connotative Level (Connotation):** The scene forms a semiotic system revealing parental tension and political conflict. Mahfoud's cheerful arrival signals triumph, yet his hesitation at seeing his father with liquor reflects reluctance to confront him. His disdainful gaze marks a generational and ideological rupture, symbolizing the submission-liberation conflict. His sarcastic "A visit?" challenges paternal authority, transforming dialogue into a site of political power negotiation. Mokdad's quiet admonition signals awareness of danger, while Mahfoud's widened eyes show shock at the mention of militias. Mokdad extinguishing his cigarette closes the exchange, symbolizing his attempt to contain the situation. His departure leaves Mahfoud stunned, heightening personal and political tension.

### Clip 10



**Photogram No. (14):** French authorities refuse to authorize the activists to hold their own demonstration, and the activists in turn refuse to participate in celebrations with the settlers.

**Denotative Level (Denotation):** The sequence (01:09:23-01:11:06) opens with a long shot of the district building as French celebrations echo nearby. A truck carries French men and women marking France's WWII victory. Inside, a close-up shows three AML members in the district chief's low-lit office requesting permission to hold their own celebration, which is denied. One activist declares they will not join the French procession, prompting the chief to rise angrily and threaten strict action.

**Connotative Level (Connotation):** The scene creates a semiotic network expressing dominance versus resistance in a colonial context. The French-style district building, surrounded by police and vehicles, signals settler authority, while chants and the passing celebration truck build a Barthesian myth of colonial sovereignty. The dimly lit office conveys obscurity and authoritarian power, with low lighting signaling institutional repression. Activists' upright posture and refusal to join the French procession symbolize defiance and rejection of dominance. The district chief's anger and threats reinforce hierarchical control, using language as an ideological tool to maintain colonial subordination.

### Clip 11



**Photogram No. (15):** Launch of the French celebrations for the end of World War II and France's victory over Germany.

**Denotative Level (Denotation):** The scene, from 01:13:25 to 01:16:03, opens with a *long shot* showing the settlers and police celebrating France's victory over Germany and the end of World War II. This is followed by an *extreme long shot* showing the activists standing in anticipation of the news, with Si Mokdad among them. In a *close-up*, the district chief descends from a black car and is greeted by the French authorities, accompanied by two men dressed in the *qa'id* uniform. Then, in a *long shot*, two young policemen carry a wreath of flowers and place it on a memorial dedicated to the victims of World War I, inscribed with: 1914-1918.

**Connotative Level (Connotation):** The scene forms a semiotic network portraying colonial dominance versus subdued resistance. Elegantly dressed soldiers, police, and settlers celebrating reinforce France as a sovereign power, mythologizing public space as the victor's right. The district chief's arrival from a black luxury car signals authority and prestige, confirmed by his reception within the colonial hierarchy. Two Algerian *qa'id*-uniformed figures mark loyal local intermediaries, their handshake with the chief affirming subordination. Young policemen approaching the memorial with a red-and-white wreath symbolize sacrifice and peace, while funeral music and the 1914-1918 inscription legitimize colonial authority and cast settlers as "bearers of peace and victory."

### Clip 12



**Photogram No. (16 & 17):** Launch of demonstrations in the streets of Heliopolis and Guelma amid the astonishment of the French, and French authorities suppress the protest, assassinating an activist who refused to lower the Algerian flag.

**Denotative Level (Denotation):** The scene (01:16:17-01:21:48) begins with a long shot of activists awaiting news. In a medium shot, an officer reports demonstrations and casualties in Setif. A close-up shows the district chief taking the podium, praising France's unity as chants of "*Min Djibalina*" rise outside. He ignores them, prompting shock and accusations from AML activists. A close-up then shows him in his car, glaring at them, while Ismail meets his gaze defiantly. Demonstrators appear in close-up carrying the national flag and signs reading "*Long Live Free Algeria*" and "*Release Messali Hadj*" French soldiers intervene in a medium shot, killing a young man who refuses to lower the flag and brutally beating Mokdad-clearly depicting colonial repression versus resistance.

**Connotative Level (Connotation):** The activists gather in a tense space, a Barthesian sign of meaning awaiting rupture. The chief's speech mythologizes French supremacy, while chants of "*Min Djibalina*" counter it with a call for liberation. The activists' shock, including Mokdad's, marks a moment of semiotic awakening. Islamic Scout children at the front symbolize continuity of resistance. Raising the flag-and refusing to lower it-becomes an iconic symbol of dignity and sacrifice. Arabic and French signs form a dual discourse aimed at both people and colonizer. The violent repression and killing of the flag-bearer reveal the clash between national symbolism and colonial force, transforming martyrdom into a collective sign of honor.

### Clip 13



**Photogram No. (18 & 19):** Claude arrests Mahfoud and throws him in prison along with his fellow activists.

**Denotative Level (Denotation):** The scene (01:27:28-01:33:18) depicts Mahfoud hiding from colonial patrols, defiantly confronting Claude before being arrested. A child alerts Najma and Si Mokdad, while Mahfoud is dragged into a dark cell. His comrades face the threat of a special trial, and Sadiq notes his father's foresight. The scene ends with Mahfoud leaning against the wall in frustration as Ismail whispers an apology, emphasizing defiance, guilt, and the pressures of political struggle.

**Connotative Level (Connotation):** Claude represents normalized colonial violence, while Mahfoud lying beside a child amid corpses symbolizes Algerian lives devalued under colonization. His defiance turns submission into resistance, exposing colonial fragility. Jalil's arrival heightens family tragedy, and Mahfoud being dragged through the corridor signals his grim fate. His comrades' reactions challenge colonial authority, while the close-up of Mahfoud and Ismail's whispered apology highlight guilt, inner fracture, and a semiotic shift among the activists.

### Clip 14



**Photogram No. (20 & 21):** Mokdad wears the “Qa’id” uniform and kneels before the French flag in an attempt to secure Mahfoud’s release.

**Denotative Level (Denotation):** The scene (01:40:29-01:42:10) shows Mokdad, holding his father’s Qa’id medal and wearing the burnous, setting out to rescue his son Mahfoud with a mix of anger and grief. Refusing Bashir’s offer to accompany him, he bribes a soldier with the password “Champagne” to reach the military square. There, French forces confront activists awaiting execution. Mokdad pleads for Mahfoud, offering loyalty, and ultimately kneels before the French flag, marking a moment of enforced submission.

**Connotative Level (Connotation):** Mokdad holding the Qa’id medal symbolizes sacrifice and his shift of loyalty from France to his son. His tense, bowed posture conveys anger and grief, while kneeling before the French flag reflects forced submission and humiliation. Military vehicles and soldiers represent colonial control, contrasted with the activists’ attire symbolizing hope and resistance. The officer’s demand strips Mokdad of dignity, merging symbolic and physical violence and highlighting the tension between coerced loyalty and national defiance.

### Clip 15



**Photogram No. (22 & 23):** Mahfoud and his comrades refuse Mokdad’s kneeling before the French flag, chant “Long live Algeria,” and are executed by French soldiers.

**Denotative Level (Denotation):** The scene spans from 01:42:16 to 01:43:55. It opens with an order for Mokdad to compel his son to say the phrase “I am a dog,” which Mahfoud refuses to utter, while the officer demands silence. Mokdad remains silent but does everything in his power to secure his son’s release. In a *long shot*, Mahfoud’s comrades appear, shouting insults at Mokdad, their faces full of anger, while repeatedly chanting “Long live Algeria.” In a slow, long shot, the French soldiers open fire, executing the activists.

**Connotative Level (Connotation) :** The officer’s order for Mokdad to make his son say “I am a dog”, and his labeling of the locals as dogs, symbolizes humiliation and colonial psychological domination over individuals and the group. Mahfoud’s refusal, reinforced by his comrades’ shouted insults, acts as a counter-sign, deconstructing the colonizers’ symbolic discourse. When one activist shouts “Long live Algeria” and the others repeat it, the scene embodies collective symbolic resistance,

asserting national will despite imminent death. The subsequent execution highlights the tension between material domination-the colonial apparatus-and symbolic resistance, emphasizing both sacrifice and martyrdom in opposing oppression.

#### Clip 16



**Photogram No. (24 & 25):** Mahfoud burns his father Mokdad's "burnous" and medals  
Denotative Level (Denotation):

The scene spans from 01:46:27 to 01:46:58. It opens with an *extreme close-up* showing Mokdad's father's clothing and medals burning after Mahfoud decides to dispose of them. Mokdad stands in front of the fire, gazing at it, with tears glistening in his eyes. In a *medium shot*, his daughter Najma joins him, and sorrow fills the space, amplified by Mahfoud's martyrdom.

**Connotative Level (Connotation):** The burning of the burnous and medals carries dual symbolism: it represents rebellion against France and rejection of colonial loyalty, while also expressing shame over Mokdad's father's past allegiance. The fire signifies inner torment and psychological suffering, reflecting Mokdad's anguish over Mahfoud's death, and acts as a symbolic attempt to erase past distress before the French authorities, rewriting personal and national history amid pain and betrayal. Najma's presence humanizes the scene, symbolizing family continuity and hope in resistance, highlighting the contrast between personal grief and national tragedy.

#### Clip 17



**Photogram No. (26 & 27):** The settlers storm Mokdad's house yard, and Mokdad stops on the road, deciding to return and confront them.

**Denotative Level (Denotation):** The scene spans from 01:48:20 to 01:50:33. It begins with an *extreme long shot* showing Mokdad's caravan and several villagers continuing to flee from Héliopolis. Najma rides a brown horse with the help of Bashir, while smoke rises from the city due to the burning of martyrs' corpses. In a *medium shot*, colonial vehicles head toward Mokdad's farm, accompanied by armed Frenchmen. Jervy appears, organizing them and distributing them across the yard. In a *close-up*, Mokdad is seen walking slowly, deep in thought, before deciding to return to Héliopolis, while Jervy shouts at him, ordering him to come out and face them.

**Connotative Level (Connotation):** The scene symbolically conveys trauma and moral choice: the road journey reflects displacement and suffering, Najma on horseback signals privilege and dependence, and smoke from Héliopolis represents colonial violence and martyrdom. Advancing

armed forces embody coercion, while Mokdad's measured movements show mourning and strategic resolve, marking a shift toward confrontation *Jervy's* aggression underscores colonial contempt, highlighting the tension between domination and resistance

**Clip:18**



**Photogram No. (28):** Mokdad holds his rifle, preparing to confront Gervi and the settlers.

**Denotative Level (Denotation):** The scene (01:50:35-01:51:37) presents an intense dramatic progression combining visual description with symbolic meaning. It opens with Gervi angrily mocking nationalist figures amid the settlers' laughter, followed by Najma's futile search for her father. The focus then shifts to Mokdad's office, where his preparation-placing bullets on the desk and loading his weapon-signals readiness for confrontation, reinforced by an extreme close-up of his black-and-white family photograph. The scene concludes with Mokdad standing in the middle of the road behind the caravan.

**Connotative Level (Connotation):** Gervi's behavior embodies colonial humiliation and dominance, while Mokdad's actions symbolize courage, the recovery of dignity, and commitment to resistance. His stance in the road reflects the psychological tension between withdrawal and defiance, and the family photograph links personal loss to political struggle. The final composition unites family, weaponry, and confrontation, emphasizing individual resistance and leaving the outcome open to interpretation.

**Study Results**

The study concluded that the film *Heliopolis* offers an in-depth depiction of the duality between betrayal and loyalty to the homeland within the context of the French occupation. Si Mokdad embodies the model of a citizen who sold his conscience to the colonizer in exchange for luxury and comfort, while the majority of Algerian families suffered from poverty and injustice. The film highlights an internal conflict between the desire for a stable life and the maintenance of social status, and the national conscience coupled with guilt stemming from prior colonial allegiance. The film also reveals the contradiction between Islamic upbringing and exposure to European culture, as social affiliations prevented Mokdad's children, particularly Mahfoud, from accessing education equivalent to that of the French, reflecting the class-based discrimination inherent in the colonial system. Moreover, the film underscores that resistance against the occupation existed from the outset but was suppressed due to fear and complicity, until the emergence of Mahfoud-a young, educated, and cultured figure-who rejected his father's pro-colonial stance and led the May 8, 1945 demonstrations, which sparked the Algerian War of Independence. Within the narrative, the film portrays the evolution of Si Mokdad's awareness, as he faces colonial pressures and is compelled to kneel before the French flag to secure his son's release, before ultimately reclaiming his courage to confront the colonizer in defense of honor and national dignity. Through this trajectory, the film reflects the tension between individual loyalty and national resistance, emphasizing that the national conscience and the right to dignity cannot be suppressed, even under colonial domination.

## Conclusion

*Heliopolis* thus serves not only as a cinematic representation of historical events but also as a profound exploration of ethical, social, and political dilemmas under colonial rule. It illustrates how personal choices intersect with collective struggle, revealing that the awakening of conscience and the assertion of national dignity can emerge even amidst oppression and moral compromise. Ultimately, the film reinforces the enduring message that resistance, courage, and the pursuit of justice are inseparable from the preservation of cultural identity and national memory.

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