

Algiers of humour, boldness and dreams

- Ameziane Ferhani

While the streets of Algiers and the country in general started to shine with the colours and sounds of an unheard-of popular movement, machines were tearing down les Abattoirs, the city's historical slaughter houses, and with them, a story and a dream. In 1929, the world crisis aggravated the – already difficult – situation of the Algerians. The following year, with the 'Centenary of Colonisation', glorious buildings were built, such as the Palace of the Government, the Museum of Fine Arts, the Aletti Hotel, inaugurated by Charlie Chaplin, or the famous Abattoirs, that became part of the city's industrial patrimony and its urban legend. When in 2010, there is talk of building new ones, artists and intellectuals dream of transforming the slaughter houses into a pole for creation and distribution. But paradoxically, this dream evaporated the moment all dreams emerged!

And so no, alas, Algiers will not have, like its white cousin Casablanca, a cultural factory in its former Abattoirs. Faced with this huge disappointment, life continues in a city where it is customary to say that 'we have seen others'. Was it not here that the French troops, barely disembarked, prohibited the puppet theatres, destroyed the madrassas, tore down Qassairia, a neighbourhood of booksellers, calligraphers, and illuminators? Was it not here that, like elsewhere, expressions carried by a breath of resistance flourished despite everything, fixing the oral heritage by writing it? Protecting old music and reviving it? Seizing the enemy's modernity in theatre, painting and cinema, to turn it against him? The Battle of Algiers was also a long cultural struggle. And, later, when it became necessary to defend art at the price of blood or exile, against the merchants of hate, the defence reflexes resurfaced.

Today, despite its mistakes, in a complex game of rigidities and openings, the city has kept its tremendous energy, running through its slopes like an electric passion despite its troubles to irrigate its daily life, like its arts, with humour, boldness and dream. Here, bold novels are published that tackle the deep layers of society but often remain better known abroad. Here, innovative films are produced that prance at international festivals but are only sparsely seen locally because the network of film theatres has collapsed. Here, sparkling performances take place, but the plays are shown too few times. Here concerts are offered, both traditional ones and modern genres like jazz, blues, rap, rock and techno, adorned with Algerian sounds. But venues are missing too. Here, contemporary art shows are presented, with young talented artists. And again, the absence of an art market leads the latter to emigrate.

In short, while Algiers is becoming a living crucible of creation in the Maghreb's cultural continuum, forming fertile bridges between heritage and modernity, there is no follow-up. Valuable works are wasted due to lack of funding, space, engineering and promotion. The economic crisis is drying up the manna of public subsidies, the State continues to hold the means which, in the absence of censorship, can be used to dismiss without noise the 'busybodies'. While waiting for a real opening to the private cultural industries, artists follow the paths of their imagination. Associations fight. Independent spaces are emerging and, above all, a new generation of writers and creators (more and more feminine, for that matter) carries its visions and voices with great impetus, an impetus that accompanies the popular movement but has also preceded, and even announced it. In the beautiful yet raw light of Algiers, a thousand glimmers emerge to shine.

Ameziane Ferhani (1954, Algiers) is a journalist, writer and cultural mediator. He studied urban sociology in Algiers, a city that fascinates him. Ferhani, working for magazines and newspapers since the 1970s, has been managing the Arts & Letters pages of the daily newspaper El Watan since 2006. He has published a history of the Algerian comic book and two collections of short stories, *Traverses d'Alger* [Algiers Traverses] (2015) and *Les couffins de l'équinoxe* [The Baskets of the Equinox] (2018), published by Chihab Editions.