

# Timimoun: The Cinema City in the Algerian Sahara from Caravan Crossings to Camera Crossings - An Analytical Reading -

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## Abstract

*Timimoun, designated as the cinema city at the heart of the Algerian desert, represents an ambitious project that bridges historical memory with contemporary visual creativity. The Caravan Khan Tower (Burj Khan al-Qawafil) serves as the central symbolic axis of this project, transforming from a traditional crossing point for commercial caravans into a passage for cameras and image-makers. This choice draws upon the region's rich cultural heritage—including its distinctive mud-brick architecture, folk narratives, ritual practices, captivating natural landscapes, and the caravan routes that traversed the area across centuries—all of which reshape the desert space as a global cinematic filming platform. Through this initiative, Timimoun aspires to become an imagined civilizational space mediated through the screen, where cultural authenticity is leveraged to support a creative economy based on cinema and cultural tourism. The conversion of the Caravan Khan into a cinematic beacon represents a step toward constructing a contemporary visual narrative that reconnects the region's past with its present via the art of moving images.*

**Keywords:** *Timimoun, Algerian Sahara, Cinema City, Mud-Brick Architecture, Cultural Tourism, Caravan Khan Tower, Space.*

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## Introduction

Cinema represents one of the most prominent manifestations of contemporary visual culture, intersecting with the city not merely as a filming space, but as a dynamic, multidimensional entity—architectural, social, and cultural. In cinematic discourse, the city is no longer simply a backdrop for dramatic events; it becomes an active element that participates in the production of meaning and reshapes collective identity and memory through the lens of the camera.

The relationship between the city and cinema is reciprocal: while the city provides raw material for crafting narrative and aesthetic visions, cinema contributes to the visual and symbolic reproduction of the city, often establishing mental images that may transcend reality itself—as seen in the cinematic representations of Paris, New York, or Cairo in global cinema.

Since its inception, cinema has played a pivotal role in documenting urban transformations and capturing social conflicts, while also contributing to the creation of imagined or futuristic cities that reflect utopian or dystopian visions intersecting with urban imagination. This dynamic has not been limited to the West; it has extended to cities of the Global South, where cinematic expressions have emerged from local realities and reflected their complexities, as in the cinema of the Maghreb or the Levant.

Within the Algerian context, the city of Timimoun stands out as a distinctive case that invites reflection on the aesthetic and economic possibilities offered by the city-cinema relationship.

Timimoun, with its mud-brick architecture, earthen tones, and unique Saharan location, constitutes an ideal visual space that can be harnessed to construct alternative cinematic narratives, thereby reinforcing local cultural identity while simultaneously stimulating sustainable tourism and economic development.

This analytical study proceeds from the following problematic:

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## How can cinema reshape the Saharan space of the city of Timimoun from a static scene into a dynamic actor, contributing to the weaving of the city's identity and its positioning on the map of creativity and development?

The paper examines the interactive relationship between cinema and the city, aiming to highlight the creative and transformative function performed by cinema in the project “Timimoun: Cinema City”—without symbolic emptying—by transforming the Saharan space from a mere filming backdrop into an invested aesthetic resource in cinematic production at both national and international levels.

The paper adopts an analytical methodology based on description and interpretation, supplemented, where necessary, by film analysis approaches.

### *The City and Cinema: A Reading of the Cultural and Developmental Relationship*

Cinema constitutes one of the foremost expressions of contemporary visual culture, intersecting with the city as an architectural, social, and cultural field in the reshaping of identity and collective memory. The city has never been merely a filming backdrop for films; it has transformed into an active character that interacts with the screenplay and influences the messages conveyed by the cinematic image.

### *Representations of the City in Cinema*

- **The City as Narrative Space:** Since the earliest days of cinema, cities have played a central role in constructing cinematic narratives, beginning with films depicting industrial European cities (such as Berlin and Paris) and extending to major American cities like New York and Chicago. These films often focused on class dimensions, identity clashes, and urban violence, as exemplified in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), where the city symbolizes a stark class divide between the elite living in towering luxurious skyscrapers and the workers laboring underground in harsh conditions to operate the machines that sustain the city.<sup>2</sup>
- **The City and Visual Memory:** Cinema reflect the memory of cities, preserves their evolving architecture, and reproduces their cultural symbols. Cinematic shots serve as a means of archiving architectural and social transformations. This is evident in the films of Youssef Chahine, who portrayed Alexandria as a city of multiple cultural identities, blending local spirit with cosmopolitan identity in works such as *Alexandria... Why?* and *Alexandria Again and Forever*—part of his “Alexandria Quartet”—thereby demonstrating Chahine’s profound attachment to the city and its changing history.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Algiers appears in Lakhdar Hamina’s<sup>4</sup> *Chronicle of the Years of Embers* as a symbol of anti-colonial resistance and militant identity.<sup>5</sup>
- **Arab Cities in Cinema:** Arab cities have frequently suffered from stereotypical representation in Western cinema, often depicted as sites of violence or exoticism. However, local cinema has reconfigured

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<sup>2</sup> Fritz Lang, *Metropolis*, 1927. The film is set in a gigantic futuristic city called “Metropolis,” where the wealthy live in towering, luxurious skyscrapers, while workers toil underground in harsh conditions to operate the machines that sustain the city’s life. The protagonist, Freder, the son of the city’s ruler, discovers the suffering of the working class for the first time and falls in love with a woman named Maria who advocates for peace and harmony between classes. However, matters complicate when Maria is replaced by a robot resembling her, used to incite chaos among the workers.

<sup>3</sup> (Cosmopolitanism) is a philosophical, cultural, and political concept expressing the idea of belonging to all humanity, rather than solely to a specific nation, ethnicity, or religion.

<sup>4</sup> Nasser Kamel, “In Art and Life... What is the Secret of Youssef Chahine’s Attachment to Alexandria?”, *Al-Qafilah Magazine*, [Link](#), accessed 25/06/2025, 15:12.

<sup>5</sup> Lakhdar Hamina, *Chronicle of the Years of Embers*, 1975. “Chronicle of the Years of Embers” is an epic film that traces the roots of the Algerian Revolution against French colonialism through historical and personal events experienced by the Algerian people in the period leading up to the outbreak of the revolution in 1954. The film addresses, in a poetic and visually impactful style, the journey of the Algerian people’s suffering—from years of oppression, ignorance, and exploitation—to the moment of rebellion and revolutionary explosion.

these images from within, as seen in the works of Nouri Bouzid in Tunisia or Elia Suleiman in Palestine, both of whom offered critical and complex portrayals of the Arab city.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Impact of Cinema on Urban Spaces*

- **Cinema as a Symbolic Force in Urban Planning:** Cinema plays an indirect role in urban planning through its capacity to shape public perceptions of urban space. The cinematic fame of certain neighborhoods can transform them into tourist attractions<sup>7</sup>, as occurred with the Montmartre district in Paris following *Amélie* (2001).<sup>8</sup>
- **Cinema Cities as Economic and Developmental Projects:** The concept of the “cinema city” has emerged as a mechanism for attracting cultural investment, as exemplified by Hollywood in California and Bollywood in Mumbai. In Algeria, the proposal to transform Timimoun into a cinematic city relies on its unique architectural and visual elements,<sup>9</sup> aiming to integrate cultural development with tourism and the seventh art.
- **Public Space and Cinema :** Cinema provide tools for the rehabilitation of public space through festivals and open-air screenings, thereby enhancing its role in the cultural animation of cities. Following the model of the Locarno Film Festival, which utilizes Piazza Grande as an open-air venue accommodating thousands of spectators,<sup>10</sup> the Carthage Film Festival in Tunisia also stands out, employing downtown Tunis spaces as outdoor projection screens that revive cinematic memory and strengthen cultural cohesion in the urban fabric.

### *The City as Producer of Cinematic Discourse*

- **The City and Identity in Cinema:** The city serves as a backdrop for shaping the identity of characters in films, where the character interacts with the city, embodies its landmarks, and reflects them in their discourse. This is evident in Woody Allen’s films, where New York becomes a mirror of his psychological and cultural identity.<sup>11</sup>
- **Cinema as a Medium for Social Transformation:** Cinema acts as a mirror reflecting social transformations in the city and reveals structural crises such as migration, unemployment, and class discrimination. A prime example is the Moroccan film *Casanegra*, which presents a bleak portrayal of Casablanca as a witness to unemployment, corruption, and social violence.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Limbrick, *Arab Modernism as World Cinema: The Films of Moumen Smihi*, University of California Press, USA, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Amélie Poulain is a shy and dreamy young woman living in the Montmartre district of Paris, possessing a fertile imagination and a rich inner world. After finding a small box hidden in her apartment containing someone’s childhood memories, she decides to return this treasure to its owner, thus beginning her journey to change the lives of others without their knowledge.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Manel, *Cities and Cinema*, Routledge, London, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Project "Timimoun Cinema City," Algerian Ministry of Culture, [Link](#), accessed 15/05/2025, 12:55.

<sup>10</sup> De Molli F., Mengis J., & van Marrewijk A., "The aestheticization of hybrid space: The atmosphere of the Locarno Film Festival," *Sage Journals*, 2019, [Link](#).

<sup>11</sup> *Senses of Cinema*, "We Live in a World of Images: Interview with Dana Polan," [Link](#), accessed 12/02/2025, 13:30.

<sup>12</sup> Nour-Eddine Lakhmari, *Casanegra*, 2008. The story revolves around two young men: Karim, an intelligent and educated but unemployed young man who works marginal jobs and dreams of emigrating to Sweden. His close friend Adil, less aware and more reckless, suffers from aimlessness and lives off small illegal activities. Both share a marginal life in popular neighborhoods and gradually become involved in petty crime. They dream of escaping their miserable reality, but social, economic, and political realities encircle them. The story escalates when they get involved in a major theft plan, raising questions about trust, friendship, and the limits that dreams can push them to cross.

- **The Cinematic City as an Experimental Space:** Cinema allows for the creation of imagined cities or the re-imagining of real cities in alternative scenarios, as seen in science fiction films or depictions of future cities. This grants cinema the function of a symbolic urban laboratory.<sup>13</sup>

The relationship between the city and cinema is not merely one of filming location; it is a mutually influential relationship: “the city inspires cinema, and cinema reproduces the city as symbol, architecture, and discourse.” In the Algerian context, cities like Timimoun can play a pivotal role in shaping a cinematic-touristic project that reflects local identity and supports sustainable development.

*The Cinema City:*

*An Urban Space Imagined through the Screen*

Cinema is one of the most important tools of modern culture contributing to the formation of urban consciousness, as it reconfigures cities through the lens of the camera. Within this intertwined relationship between cinema and urban space, the concept of the “City of Cinema” emerges to reflect the intersection between cinema and the city. This term repositions the city as a space that is re-imagined and reshaped within cinematic frameworks. The relationship between cinema and cities can be defined in three main stages: how the city is portrayed in films, how cinema re-imagines that city, and how the city becomes part of a larger cinematic project.

*The City in Cinema: From Backdrop to Character*

- **The City as Narrative Subject in Cinema:** Since the beginnings of cinema, the city has not been a mere silent backdrop for events but has become an integral part of the storytelling. In many films, the city evolves into a living character that controls the course of events. Cities such as New York and Paris appear not merely as places but as living entities that influence characters and contribute to the film’s meanings. For example, in Woody Allen’s *Manhattan* (1979), the city is depicted as an entity with emotional and intellectual influence on the characters, while in *Le Fabuleux Destin d’Amélie Poulain* (2001), Paris becomes a pulsating, poetic space.<sup>14</sup>

- **The City and Social Diversity in Cinema:** Urban cinema reveals social diversity that reflects class and ethnic disparities within the city. In this context, cities are used as sites of conflict and internal struggle between different social classes, as in *Blade Runner* (1982), where the city becomes a dark and complex place reflecting class and technological divisions among inhabitants. These cinematic cities illustrate the tension between progress and urban decay, making them a fundamental component of the films’ meanings.<sup>15</sup>

*The Imagined City: Beyond Urban Realism in Cinema*

- **Re-imagining the City: From Realism to Fantasy:** In numerous cinematic works, the city reshapes itself to become an imagined space far removed from tangible reality. In science fiction films, the city serves as a center for visual imagination that transcends real landmarks. For instance, in *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix* (1999), the city is portrayed as a space that exceeds the boundaries of reality—a place reflecting conflicts between humans and machines or humans and nature. In these films, the city becomes

<sup>13</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, Verso, London, 1989. [Link](#)

<sup>14</sup> Mark Shiel, Tony Fitzmaurice, *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, UK, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, Verso, New York, 2002, p. 119.

a symbol of technological pressure, social division, and the political transformations surrounding humanity.<sup>16</sup>

- **The City and Reflection on Identity through Cinema:** The city plays a significant role in many films in reshaping personal and collective identity. Cities in directors' works often reflect the inner reality of their characters, as in *Lost in Translation* (2003) and the *Before Sunrise* series (1995), where the city contributes to shaping cultural identity and personal experiences.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Cinema City: Artistic and Productive Cities in Reality*

- **“Cinema City” Projects: Artistic and Urban Complexes:** Beyond the narrative dimension in films, the idea of the “Cinema City” emerges as an urban project that transcends the screen. In many countries, large studios and cinematic cities have been established to serve as urban and cultural landmarks. Examples include the Cinema City in Giza, Egypt, or the Ouarzazate studios in Morocco, which have become major regional centers for film production. These projects act as attractions for cultural tourism and promote artistic and economic exchange between countries and regions. In Ouarzazate, for example, the city has become known as “Hollywood of the Desert” after hosting numerous international films, such as *Gladiator* (2000) and *The Mummy* (1999).<sup>18,19,20</sup>

- **The Cinema City as a Cultural and Economic Hub:** In many cases, these cities transform into economic and cultural centers thanks to the film industry. They are not limited to film production but also include film festivals, art academies, and mobile screenings, making them points of cultural and artistic convergence. An example is the Cinema City in Abu Dhabi, which aims to attract the global film industry by providing state-of-the-art studios and facilities for directors and producers.<sup>21</sup>

Cinema is not merely a mirror of urban reality; it is also a tool for re-imagining these cities through films. Cinema reshapes urban space so that cities become entities interacting with characters, contributing to the formation of their identities and expressing their conflicts. Likewise, the “Cinema City” is not only artistic production communities but also a cultural project reflecting social and economic transformations. Ultimately, cinema becomes a means of creating new cities—imagined cities—that offer audiences the opportunity to immerse themselves in diverse and novel worlds.<sup>22</sup>

#### *The Timimoun Cinema City Project in Algeria*

Timimoun is the historical capital of the Gourara region, located in a central position approximately 200 km northeast of Adrar, on the eastern edge of the Great Western Erg. Historically, it served as a hub for organized oasis activity along the sabkha located in the erg (Taghouzi and Tinerkouk). The current population of the Gourara oases stems from a historical series of diverse ethnic contributions.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Baudry, Jean-Louis, “The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in the Cinema,” *Camera Obscura*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1976, [Link](#)

<sup>17</sup> Donald James, *Imagining the Modern City*, Athlone Press, London, 1999. [Link](#)

<sup>18</sup> Henri Lefebvre; trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, UK, 1991.

<sup>19</sup> The film tells the story of Maximus, a great Roman general who is betrayed by the new emperor Commodus after he murders his father, Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Maximus is turned into a slave and then a gladiator in the arenas, seeking revenge, the restoration of his honor, and justice in Rome.

<sup>20</sup> The events take place in the 1920s, where adventurer Rick O’Connell, along with archaeologist Evelyn, discovers a lost pharaonic city. Unintentionally, they awaken Imhotep, a mummified pharaonic priest who returns from the dead to take revenge and reclaim his ancient beloved.

<sup>21</sup> Nezar AlSayyad, *Cinematic Urbanism: A History of the Modern from Reel to Real*, Routledge, New York, 2006, p. 102. [Link](#)

<sup>22</sup> Mark Shiel, Tony Fitzmaurice, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> Tayeb OTMANE; Yaël KOUZMINE, “Timimoun, development and actual stakes in an Algerian Saharan oasis,” *Insaniyat*, Le Sahara et ses marges, pp. 165-183, N°51-52, 2011, [Link](#)

### *Timimoun and the Depth of History*

Timimoun is considered one of the oldest Saharan cities in the Gourara region and has played a significant role as a commercial and cultural station throughout the ages. The city emerged on the banks of an oasis forming part of the traditional "foggara" environmental system—a innovative ancient Saharan method for extracting groundwater. Timimoun's origins date back centuries, with oral narratives and anthropological studies indicating that its foundation was linked to the settlement of tribes from the north and south, particularly from the Tamentit and Tuat regions, contributing to the formation of a composite and open identity receptive to diverse influences.<sup>24</sup>

Since the Middle Ages, Timimoun emerged as a crossing point in caravan trade between Timbuktu and Sijilmasa, fostering its economic and cultural prosperity. During the Ottoman era, it became part of the network of Sufi zawiyas, which played a major role in education, preaching, and social stability. With the arrival of French colonialism, Timimoun underwent transformations in its urban and social structure, as the colonial administration sought to integrate it into a "soft control" project through the construction of French schools and military administrations. However, it faced symbolic resistance from the inhabitants, who clung to their zawiyas, mosques, and tribal structures.<sup>25</sup>

### *Mud-Brick Architecture as a Mirror of Local Identity*

Timimoun is distinguished by its dark red mud-brick architecture, one of the unique features that has made it stand out in Algeria's collective and architectural memory. The red clay used in construction is not merely a building material but a cultural element reflecting the intimate relationship between humans and the Saharan environment.

This clay is extracted from local soil layers, mixed with natural components, and used to build houses, palaces, and zawiyas. Through this material, the inhabitants created an urban system adapted to the arid climate, providing natural thermal insulation and highlighting local environmental intelligence.<sup>26</sup>

The mud-brick architecture in Timimoun expresses not only functionality but also symbolic dimensions: the decorated wooden doors, small windows, and enclosed inner courtyards all point to values of privacy and collective solidarity. Furthermore, the distribution of buildings within the palaces reflects a precise social structure, where each family or clan occupies a specific spatial unit within an integrated collective organization. The zawiyas represent the spiritual heart of the neighborhood and are typically built at the highest or central points of the city, indicating the centrality of religion in the urban space.<sup>27</sup>

### *Cultural and Religious Structure: Sufism and Multiple Affiliations*

Sufism in Timimoun constitutes one of the most important manifestations of popular religion and local Islam, with zawiyas serving as centers of religious and social radiance. The Qadiriyya zawiya and the zawiya of Sidi El Hadj Belkacem are living examples of the educational and spiritual role played by these institutions, which hosted dhikr gatherings, Qur'an memorization, and teaching of Arabic language and Maliki jurisprudence. These zawiyas also provided shelter for travelers and the poor, reflecting their humanitarian and social dimension.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Olivier Pliez, *Les cités du désert: des villes sahariennes aux saharatowns*, IRD éditions, France, 2005, p. 164.

<sup>25</sup> Tayeb OTMANE; Yaël KOUZMINE, Op cit.

<sup>26</sup> Nabila Oulebsir, *Les usages du patrimoine: monuments, musées et politique coloniale en Algérie 1830-1930*, Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, Paris, 2004, pp. 130–135.

<sup>27</sup> Tayeb OTMANE; Yaël KOUZMINE, Op cit., pp. 170–175.

<sup>28</sup> "Timimoun: Major efforts exerted to succeed the Saharan tourism season," Algerian Press Service, [Link](#), accessed 25/06/2025, 18:58.

Ethnically, Timimoun brings together diverse races and cultures: the Black population (Ouled Sidi Issa), Amazigh (Zekara), and Arabs (Ouled Jrir), making it a unique model of cultural pluralism.

This diversity does not lead to conflict but produces a form of cultural and social coexistence evident in folk songs, clothing, rituals, and religious occasions such as the "Sabou" and the Prophet's Birthday. Moreover, Timimoun's oral memory preserves narratives of cooperation among different ethnic groups during times of crisis, reinforcing community unity despite its diversity.

#### *Modernity and Urban Changes in the Context of Globalization*

Since independence, Timimoun has witnessed waves of transformations linked to urbanization, internal migration, and the expansion of urban space. However, these changes have raised significant issues concerning the loss of architectural memory and the marginalization of heritage.

Imported concrete architectural patterns have been introduced that disregard the specificities of the Saharan climate, leading to the distortion of the overall visual landscape and the marginalization of the original mud-brick style.<sup>29</sup>

In the last decade, with Timimoun's elevation to an independent wilaya under the new administrative division in 2019, infrastructure and service projects have been strengthened. However, these often lacked a cultural approach rooted in the city's heritage and history. Tourism, despite being a promising resource, remains limited due to weak promotion and insufficient investment in hotel and cultural infrastructure.

Perhaps the most prominent challenge today is achieving balance between development and identity: How can a modern future be built without sacrificing the city's symbolic, architectural, and cultural depth?<sup>30</sup>

#### *The Cinema City in Timimoun: A Strategic Project to Revive the Cinematic Industry in Algeria*

Within Algeria's efforts to revive and develop its cinematic industry, the announcement was made of a project to establish the first cinema city in southern Algeria, specifically in the Tinerkouk area of Timimoun wilaya.

This project aims to transform the region into a hub attracting national and international cinematic productions, capitalizing on the unique natural and cultural characteristics of the area.

#### ➤ *Background and Objectives of the Project*

The Algerian Minister of Culture and Arts, Souria Mouloudji, announced the launch of the "Cinema City" project in Tinerkouk, approximately 60 kilometers north of Timimoun. Known as "Oasis-Cinema," the project seeks to promote and develop Algeria's cinematic industry by providing a suitable environment for film production, attracting local and international producers, and offering training opportunities in various fields of cinema.<sup>31</sup>

The historic "Burj Khan al-Qawafil" (Caravan Khan Tower) palace in Tinerkouk municipality has been selected as the site for the cinema city. Restoration and rehabilitation work on the palace has begun with a budget estimated at 300 million Algerian dinars, in collaboration with the National Center for Mud-Built

<sup>29</sup> "Timimoun: Major efforts exerted to succeed the Saharan tourism season," previous reference.

<sup>30</sup> Nabila Oulebsir, *Les usages du patrimoine*, op cit., p. 145.

<sup>31</sup> "Algeria: Project for a film city in Timimoun," *Méditerranée Audiovisuelle*, November 9, 2022. [Link](#), accessed 25/06/2025, 19:55.

Heritage in Timimoun. This process aims to rehabilitate the historical landmark to serve as a center for cinematic production while preserving the traditional architectural character of the region.<sup>32</sup>

➤ *Infrastructure and Equipment*

The Ministry of Culture and Arts seeks to equip the cinema city according to international standards, enabling it to host diverse cinematic productions.

The project includes the establishment of a national higher institute for cinema and the provision of training centers in various cinema specialties, in addition to equipping screening halls and facilities for production and post-production.<sup>33</sup>

➤ *Economic and Cultural Objectives of the Project*

The project forms part of the Algerian government's strategy to activate the cultural economy by attracting investments in the cinema sector, creating job opportunities for youth, and promoting cultural tourism in the region. It also aims to preserve local cultural heritage and present a positive image of Algeria through cinematic productions.

➤ *Challenges and Opportunities<sup>34</sup>*

• *Challenges*

○ **Bureaucracy and Administrative Procedures:** The implementation of the project may face challenges related to administrative procedures and bureaucracy, which could impact the speed of execution.

○ **Funding and Investment:** Securing sufficient funding and attracting local and international investors represents a major challenge to ensure the project's sustainability.

○ **Infrastructure:** Improving the infrastructure in the region—such as roads, transportation, and services—is essential to make the cinema city an attractive destination for producers.

• *Opportunities*

○ **Geographical Location:** Timimoun is distinguished by its breathtaking Saharan landscapes and traditional architecture, making it an ideal filming location for a wide variety of films.

○ **Cultural Heritage:** The region's rich cultural heritage can be leveraged in the production of films that reflect Algerian identity.

○ **International Cooperation:** The project offers an opportunity for collaboration with international production companies, thereby enhancing Algeria's position in the global film industry.

The “Cinema City” project in Timimoun constitutes a strategic step toward developing Algeria's cinematic industry by providing a suitable environment for production, strengthening the cultural economy, and preserving local heritage. Despite potential challenges, the exploitation of available opportunities and sound planning can transform Timimoun into a prominent cinematic hub in the region.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Mr. Kaddouri Abdel Salam, Administrative Advisor at the Directorate of Culture of Timimoun Wilaya and in charge of managing the Tower, 22/05/2025, 15:38.

<sup>33</sup> "Mouloudji highlights achievements in the cinematographic industry," Algerian Press Service, [Link](#), accessed 26/06/2025, 12:54.

<sup>34</sup> “Timimoun aura sa cité du cinéma,” *L'Expression*, [Link](#), accessed 24/06/2025, 12:22.

*Analytical Reading of the Choice of Timimoun as Algeria's Cinema City*

The decision to select Timimoun as the site for Algeria's first “Cinema City” represents a qualitative shift in developmental and cultural thinking. It is not merely a cultural infrastructure project but a strategic vision for redistributing cultural investment beyond the traditional axis (Algiers, Oran, Constantine). To understand this choice, it is necessary to analyze the governing factors through several axes. Before doing so, however, we must pause to consider the aesthetic of the desert in cinema:

*Timimoun and Cinema: The Aesthetic of the Desert through the Lens of the Camera*

Timimoun has never been merely a remote Saharan oasis; it has transformed into a unique cinematic location thanks to its stunning natural beauty and distinctive mud-brick architecture. The city has served as an ideal backdrop for numerous cinematic works—both Algerian and foreign—owing to its red sandy hues, ancient palaces, and religious zawiyas, which lend films a magical and deeply spiritual character.

Bernardo Bertolucci filmed scenes from his film *The Sheltering Sky* (original English title) in Algeria, specifically in Timimoun, alongside locations in Morocco and Niger, highlighting the city's natural beauty and its use as a cinematic site that enhances the visual dimension of artistic works.<sup>35</sup>

It is worth noting that in the dramatic film *The Goat Life*, numerous scenes were shot in the Timimoun desert, where the production team emphasized that the city and its surrounding desert trails had a powerful visual impact on the film's artistic and spiritual narrative.<sup>36</sup>

Timimoun has particularly stood out in Algerian cinema in films addressing identity, Sufism, and collective memory. French and Italian directors have also chosen it to capture Saharan scenes symbolizing isolation or existential contemplation. Among the films partially or fully shot in Timimoun is *Long Live Dido* by director Mohamed Zinet, which employed the symbolism of the desert and ancient palaces to express the cultural conflict in post-independence Algeria.<sup>37</sup>

*The Caravan Khan Tower as the Center of Cinema in Timimoun*

Caravanserais (khanat al-qawafil) served as stations at the crossroads of trade and culture along the Silk Roads. These large inns or caravanserais were designed to accommodate traveling merchants and their caravans during their journeys along these commercial routes. Spread across countries traversed by the Silk Roads—from Turkey to China—these khans provided travelers with constant opportunities to enjoy food, rest securely, prepare for the continuation of their journey, exchange goods, trade in local markets, and meet other traveling merchants. This facilitated the exchange of cultures, languages, and ideas. Consequently, the role of caravanserais extended far beyond being mere rest stops along the Silk Roads; they became crucibles for cultural cross-fertilization along these routes.

Linguistically, the term “caravanserai” (khan al-qawafil) derives from the Persian word “karavan,” meaning a group of travelers, and “sara,” meaning a palace or enclosed building, with the suffix “-i” added from Turkish. Since the third century BCE, these khans have offered shelter to travelers crossing deserts,

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<sup>35</sup> *The Sheltering Sky* (original English title; French: *Un thé au Sahara*) is an Italo-British dramatic film directed by Bernardo Bertolucci and released in 1990. It is inspired by the American novel of the same name by Paul Bowles, published in 1949.

<sup>36</sup> *The Goat Life* is a poignant Indian film that tells the heartbreaking story of Najeeb Mohammed, an Indian migrant whose dreams of prosperity are quickly shattered when he finds himself trapped in a desperate situation in Saudi Arabia. A significant portion of this drama was filmed in the majestic Algerian Sahara, specifically in Timimoun, an emblematic location with its vast desert expanses and rich history.

<sup>37</sup> *Long Live Dido* is considered the only film by Mohamed Zinet, who worked as assistant director and actor. The film was commissioned by Bachir Mentouri—who was then Mayor of Algiers Central—to prepare a 20-minute short film to promote the city of Algiers. Zinet contacted acquaintances to present the work, which aimed to promote Algiers. The film was restored in 2017 in collaboration with the Italian “L’Immagine Ritrovata” laboratory in Rome and screened at the Cannes Film Festival as part of the “Cinéma de Classique” program in 2018.

extending from China to the Indian subcontinent, Iran, the Caucasus, Turkey, North Africa, Russia, and Eastern Europe.<sup>38</sup>

The Caravan Khan Tower in Timimoun was originally a military barracks built by the French colonizer in 1957, as the area was then a crossing point for commercial caravans supplying arms. The region witnessed several battles against the French colonizer, most notably the Battle of Hassi Gambo in 1957, which astonished the world and resulted in the death of over 112 French soldiers and 42 martyrs.

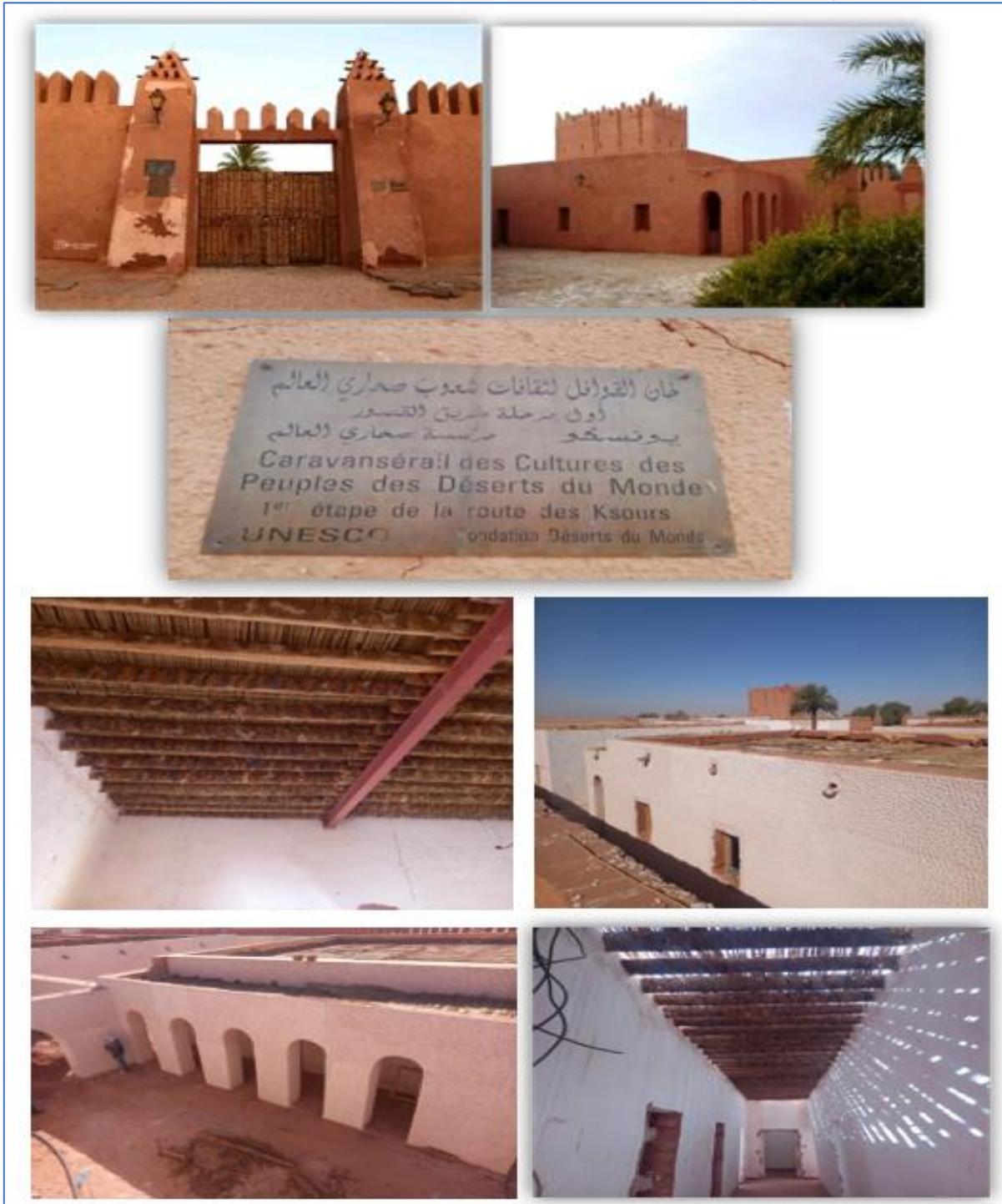
After independence, the Tinerkouk Tower was abandoned, exposing it to sand encroachment and deterioration. In 2002, paleontologists discovered a skeleton and skull belonging to a queen named Toumaï in the Tibesti region north of Chad, dating back 7 million years. This discovery confirmed that Africa is the oldest continent in the world and the richest in cultural heritage, primarily represented by precise scientific manuscripts. For these reasons, the idea emerged to establish an international organization called the “Organization of the Deserts of the World,” recognizing the desert's role in preserving sociological, ecological, and biological heritage.

In 2022, commitments and pledges by the President of the Republic included encouraging cinematic production in the Algerian Sahara, given the region's diverse cultural heritage and the potential it offers to enhance cinematic production.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> <https://ar.unesco.org/>, [Link](#)

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Mr. Kaddouri Abdel Salam, Administrative Advisor at the Directorate of Culture of Timimoun Wilaya and in charge of managing the Tower, 22/05/2025, 15:38.



**The Caravan Khan Tower Palace at the beginning of its restoration process, in preparation for the launch of the cinematic project in November 2025.**

➤ *First: Geographical and Cinematic Factors*

Timimoun enjoys a unique natural specificity within southwestern Algeria, where the scenic Saharan environment—extending between red sand dunes, oases, and ancient mud-brick architectural structures—provides ready-made filming locations with a visually compelling character that aligns with the requirements

of global cinematic production, particularly in the genres of adventure, historical, spiritual, and existential journey films.

The location offers breathtaking landscapes that constitute a natural cinematic canvas, a combination rarely found in other countries with such geographical coherence.

The Minister of Culture, Souria Mouloudji, confirmed in her statements that “the choice of the Tinerkouk Palace as the project site was dictated by the architectural and natural characteristics that enable it to host cinematic productions meeting international standards.”<sup>40</sup>

Through the lens of film analysis and a critical reading of a pivotal scene from the Algerian director Hassan Ferhani’s film *The Wind Blows Where It Wishes* (shot in southern Algeria in an environment similar to Timimoun), it becomes evident how the desert transforms from a mere geographical backdrop into an active dramatic force.

In a long wide shot, the camera remains steady, facing an open desert void in which the character slowly advances amid the wind, while a crumbling mud wall appears in the background of the frame. This image conveys not only a state of existential isolation but precisely embodies the latent tension between limited human time and the profound silence of nature—a precise reflection of how Algerian cinema engages with Timimoun as a symbolic space. Here, emptiness is not absence but dense fullness of meaning: saturated with silence, light, dust, and the weight of time.

The sandy yellow color dominates the frame, while a thin blue line appears on the horizon in a chromatic paradox that eloquently condenses the feeling of separation: history and drought confronting distant hope.

Music is replaced solely by the sound of the wind, endowing silence with narrative function and transforming auditory absence into semiotic presence—an expression of time measured not in hours but in waiting and slowness.

These directorial choices do not consign the place to mere set decoration; rather, they reproduce it as a “silent character” with features, memory, and stance. Here, Timimoun resembles what Edward Said described as representation that reshapes identity not as it is, but as it is desired in the eyes of the beholder. Yet the strength of this scene lies in its preservation of the place’s eloquence and depth, refusing to empty the city of its authenticity in favor of stereotypical imagery.

Thus, Algerian cinema—when it truly listens to the space—demonstrates that Timimoun is not merely a Saharan backdrop but a living visual text that participates in constructing the narrative, stimulates interpretation, and affirms that the “cinema city” is not a slogan but a visual and cultural function with its own distinct existence.

➤ *Second: The Cultural and Symbolic Dimension*

Timimoun constitutes one of the regions with profound cultural symbolism in Algerian collective memory, owing to its unique architectural heritage (palaces, zawiyas, mud-brick mosques) and ritual systems linked to Sufism and folklore, such as the celebrations of “Sabou” and “Ziyara.” Consequently, film production in this space carries a symbolic dimension in re-narrating Algerian history and identity from the heart of the desert, rather than solely from the peripheries of major cities.

This choice can be said to reinforce the idea of “cultural decentralization,” one of the new principles adopted by contemporary cultural policies, aimed at rebalancing development across regions and shifting

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<sup>40</sup> “Timimoun: Toward the Launch of the First Cinematic Production City in the South,” Algerian Press Service, [Link](#), accessed 23/05/2025.

from the conception of “the capital as the center of culture” to “culture as a comprehensive communal right.”

➤ *Third: Economic and Developmental Considerations*

This step forms part of Algeria’s broader vision of the “cultural economy” as a sustainable alternative to the traditional rentier economy. Investment in the cinematic industry is expected to create employment opportunities for local youth, both directly (technicians, actors, designers) and indirectly (logistical support, tourism, services).

Cinematic activity also generates a “local economic dynamic” that may contribute to revitalizing regions previously marginalized or excluded from traditional development plans.

According to official statements, the project includes the establishment of a national higher institute for cinema, filming spaces, and training facilities—creating an “integrated cinematic ecosystem” capable of artistic export and independent production. This aligns with the state’s vision of building a “national cinematic market” with international specifications.<sup>41</sup>

➤ *Fourth: Political and Strategic Motivations*

This choice can also be read within Algeria’s strategy to re-map its cultural image regionally and internationally. By establishing a cinema city with an African-Saharan character, Algeria seeks to position itself as a new cinematic hub in North Africa, capable of attracting foreign productions and competing in the regional distribution market (Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt).

The project also expresses a political will to rebuild national production institutions that declined after the 1980s, moving from the model of “the state as producer” to “the state as enabler of culture” through infrastructure and production facilitation.<sup>42</sup>

The selection of Timimoun as the site for Algeria’s first cinema city is not a passing decision but reflects a shift in cultural policies toward decentralization, sustainable cultural-economic development, and the consolidation of a distinctly Algerian visual identity rooted in the depths of the desert.

Despite the challenges, the project holds strategic potential capable of effecting a qualitative leap in the cinematic landscape if implemented with comprehensive vision and effective institutional coordination.

*Timimoun: Between the Allure of the Image and the Risk of Symbolic Emptying*

Although Timimoun has become a preferred space for Algerian cinematic cameras due to its visual density and symbolic depth, this orientation toward transforming it into “filming décor” harbors a dangerous paradox: How can the city maintain its autonomous presence in the image without being emptied of its spirit?

This concern recalls what happened to Venice, Italy, which was submerged under the pressure of touristic imagery and became an open-air museum devoid of real daily life. Venice has turned into what Marc Augé calls a “non-place”—a space emptied of relations, memory, and identity,<sup>43</sup> surrounded by floods of tourists and artificial images, losing its “local soul” in favor of an endlessly repeated stereotype.

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<sup>41</sup> “Promulgation of the Cinematographic Industry Law and Establishment of a National Higher Institute for Cinema: Major Gains for Algerian Cinema,” Algerian Press Service, [Link](#)

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Mr. Kaddouri Abdel Salam, Administrative Advisor at the Directorate of Culture of Timimoun Wilaya and in charge of managing the Tower, 22/05/2025, 15:38.

<sup>43</sup> Augé, M. (trans. John Howe), *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Super modernity*, London: Verso, 1995, pp. 77–78.

In contrast, Algerian cinema faces a decisive choice when filming Timimoun: Will it reproduce a “city of vision only” as a reshaped backdrop for idealized imagery, or will it embed it in a visual narrative that expresses themes of memory and daily action? Filming the city solely as a signifier without everyday interaction reduces it once again to a visual and literal non-place.

From a critical perspective, drawing on Edward Said’s work on representation, cinematic imagery may produce a “corrected” city tailored to audience expectations rather than expressing the complex truth of existence within it.<sup>44</sup> This returns us to the core appeal: that Timimoun be given its true voice through the image, rather than being manufactured merely to satisfy “desert romanticism” or the viewer’s desire for stunning visuals. Here, cinema becomes an element in producing the city rather than merely mirroring it—achieving what Augé calls “representational justice”: making the place alive by carrying memory and relations, not as a space devoid of identity or stance.

In a parallel critical reading, Venice offers a clear example of a city transformed into an open museum for tourism and imagery, having lost its original inhabitants and its organic relationship with history, living only through cinematic or promotional representation. Venice today is a space endlessly reproduced, yet emptied of daily memory. If Venice has fallen into the trap of excessive representation, Timimoun—at the beginning of its journey as a “cinema city”—faces a similar challenge: How can it present itself in the image without disappearing behind it?

... **November 2025 in Timimoun:** The camera will tell the stories... and in every shot... an identity will emerge... and a new horizon for cinema will be born.<sup>45</sup>

In the heart of the Algerian desert, where dunes and light embrace, Timimoun prepares to host the first edition of the International Short Film Festival, scheduled from 13 to 18 November, in a qualitative step carrying profound cultural and aesthetic ambition and consolidating the city’s position as a promising destination on the map of Algerian and African cinema.

The festival bets on the short film not as an exercise or prelude, but as an autonomous art form capable of capturing the glance and wonder, addressing profound human depths with condensed and innovative tools. In this context, the event transforms into a platform for cinematic and cultural exchange, a space that strengthens Algeria’s position within the African scene and enables creative encounters between young directors and an audience eager for living cinema.

The first edition opens to creativity through the official competition dedicated to African films—whether from the continent or its diaspora—alongside panoramic sections, training workshops, and professional meetings that enrich discussion and outline horizons for cooperation. From its launch, the festival declares its African identity, extending bridges between Algeria and neighboring and distant cinematic worlds, aspiring to be not merely an artistic event but a genuine bridge for creative crossing and cultural exchange.

This promising cinematic event is held under the supervision of the Algerian Ministry of Culture and Arts, in response to recommendations emerging from national sessions on cinema that emphasized the necessity of supporting the short film as a laboratory for discovering talents and a fundamental platform for honing young artistic competencies.

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<sup>44</sup> Said, Edward W., *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> <https://festivaltimimoun.com/?fbclid=>, accessed 09/06/2025, 19:58.



## Conclusion:

Since its inception, cinema has proven to be more than a mere entertainment medium; it is a cultural force capable of reshaping our perceptions of the city—whether as an architectural space or as a social entity bearing collective memory and symbolic identity. The chapters of this study have demonstrated that the relationship between the city and cinema extends beyond the functional use of urban space as scene backdrops, reaching deeper levels that encompass representations of power, identities, class conflicts, and urban transformations. In numerous cinematic experiences, the city has transformed into an autonomous character that influences and is influenced by the filmic narrative, serving as an analytical tool for observing societal shifts.

On the other hand, cinema has demonstrated its capacity to impact urban policies and urban imagination through the symbolism it creates for certain spaces and the consumerist and touristic desires it generates around specific locations, leading to the emergence of what are known as “cinema cities”—hybrid spaces between reality and the imagined.

In the Algerian context, the Timimoun “Cinema City” project can represent an exemplary launch for making culture a genuine driver of development. With its distinctive architectural features, unique visual reservoir, and exceptional geographical context, the city is capable of attracting local and international cinematic projects, provided that appropriate infrastructure and a clear cultural vision are available.

Thus, reflecting on the relationship between the city and cinema is not an intellectual luxury but a strategic entry point for understanding contemporary urban transformations and designing cultural-urban policies that place the human, imagination, and identity at the heart of urban space.

In conclusion, we highlight an important recommendation: the necessity of developing film analysis methodologies through partnerships between filmmakers, historians, and cultural evaluators. This would enable the preparation of a guiding manual for visual justice in portraying traditional cities, avoiding the Venice scenario—where the city has become endless visual repetition devoid of life—and establishing

Timimoun as a living character in the discourse of the image, positioned amid humans and history, not behind them.

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