

## Cinematic Narrative Techniques in Amara Lakhous' Novel "Tir ellil"

تقنيات السرد السينمائي في رواية طير الليل لعمارة لخص

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### Abstract:

The novel and cinema intersect at numerous junctions, converging in their quest to craft an artistic narrative replete with events, characters, and a plot, yet they diverge in their modes of presentation to the audience. The mutual influence between these two art forms has not only grown but has evolved significantly, to the point where cinema now profoundly influences the narrative techniques of the novel.

The film industry's reliance on adapting distinguished literary texts underscores that the modern novel has begun to embrace novel forms and a plethora of tools, including cinematic techniques that revolutionize storytelling and plot development. This paper delves into the artistic choices made by Amara Lakhous, his contextual influences, and how these elements have shaped the construction of his narrative and the formulation of its plot.

**Keywords:** Cinema, Novel; Narrative; Montage; Amara Lakhous.

### ملخص:

تتداخل الرواية والسينما في عدة نقاط وتتقاطع في سعيها لتقديم حكاية فنية بأحداث وشخصيات وحبكة، وتتفارق في وسائل التقديم للمتلقي. وقد تنامي التأثير المتبادل بين هذين الفنين وتطور حتى باتت السينما تؤثر في الأدوات الفنية الروائية، وأصبحت الصناعة السينمائية تعتمد على استلهام النصوص الروائية العظيمة، ولذلك يبدو أن الرواية الحديثة باتت تقدم أشكالاً جديدة وتتوسل أدوات مختلفة، منها التقنيات السينمائية التي تساهم في تطوير السرد وتقديم الحكمة، وتستفيد مما تتيحه هذه الأدوات والتقنيات لتطوير النص الروائي. وقد اختار عمارة لخص عن وعي هذا الاتجاه، واستثمر في معرفته العميقة بالسينما والثقافة الإيطالية عموماً، ما مكنه من تقديم نص روائي بنكهة سينمائية. وفي هذه الورقة سنقوم باستقراء الخيارات الفنية التي اعتمدها عمارة لخص، وسياقاتها، وكيف أثرت في بناء نصه الروائي وصياغة حيكته السردية.

كلمات مفتاحية: السينما، الرواية، السرد، المونتاج، عمارة لخص.

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### ***Introduction:***

The novel is distinct from cinema in several fundamental aspects; primarily, the novel relies on narration to recount an event or a series of events, and employs detailed description to present characters, settings, and the temporal context. In stark contrast, cinema depends on cinematography, which presents sequential scenes primarily through visual imagery and relies heavily on implication and succinctness, communicated through auditory and visual senses via various screen technologies.

Cinema, a relatively modern industry compared to the novel, has been influencing other art forms since its inception in the late 19th century, including poetry and literature more broadly, (Guido & Gibson, 2001, p. 5) due to its distinctive expressive capabilities. (Giannetti, 2005, p. 13)

This paper investigates the potential overlaps between cinema and the novel, examining how each medium influences and is influenced by the other, with a focus on the cinematic impact on the works of the globally acclaimed Algerian novelist Amara Lakhous, particularly how this influence manifests in his latest novel, "Tir ellil." We aim to analyze the cultural and artistic contexts that favor these choices and to pinpoint the key cinematic techniques and narrative tools employed in his narrative.

### ***1. The Interplay Between Cinema and the Novel:***

The relationship between cinema and the novel is marked by both interplay and uniqueness. The film industry has rejuvenated the market for novels by adapting numerous literary texts into films, capitalizing on its significant investments and substantial revenues. This interplay and influence have become more pronounced in contemporary practices.

The novel, among other literary genres, is ideally suited for adaptation into cinema, making it a pivotal source of inspiration for numerous directors. (Giannetti, 2005, p. 13) Indeed, one of the most evident points of convergence between cinema and the novel is their reliance on written scripts, which transform from textual to visual forms.

Much like a screenplay, a novel may originate as a literary text before being adapted into a screenplay and subsequently into a film. Thus, cinematic narration can be viewed as synonymous with narrative in art; it is a framework into which thematic unity or plot is poured, and a set of cues that translate imagined movement into a series of written scenes on screenplay pages. (Morency, 1991, p. 116)

The mutual dynamics and similarities between these two art forms bolster their reciprocal influence, thus significantly impacting the novel. Contemporary novels are increasingly exploiting cinematic techniques and scriptwriting elements. (Zougar, 2020, p. 349) The most significant link between the dramatic arts and the novel is undoubtedly the element of narrative and story, elements of suspense and storytelling that captivate the audience. (Morsli, 2000, p. 11)

These intersections have driven the cinematic industry to adapt literary works into films, and over time, this has influenced and altered the artistic methods of novel writing itself, pushing

modern novels to move away from excessive description and embrace conciseness through the use of scene techniques that rely on implication and succinctness. (Zougar, 2020, p. 349)

They have also shed the monotony that burdens the progression of events by employing a range of techniques that shift the narrative from its traditional linearity to the use of cinematic montage techniques, which fundamentally rely on cutting and assembling, and the technique of simultaneity by creating parallel narrative lines for different events that intersect and diverge according to artistic needs that advance the events towards the conclusion, thereby enhancing elements of thrill and suspense, which are major attractions in the cinematic industry.

## ***2. Amara Lakhous: A Global Experience with Modern Cinematic Culture***

Amara Lakhous, a novelist of Algerian origin raised and culturally nurtured in Italy, holds Italian nationality and composes his literary works in Italian, yet his intellectual and cultural engagements span globally. Born in 1970 in Hussein Dey, Algiers, Lakhous crafted his debut novel in 1993, titled "*The Bug and the Pirate*," which he transported to Italy in manuscript form, owing to publication barriers in Algeria.

This manuscript was eventually published in 2003, in a bilingual Arabic and Italian edition, translated by Italian translator Francesco Lego. This dual-language publication marked a significant milestone, encouraging Lakhous to independently rewrite his second novel, "*Clash of Civilization Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*," in Italian, a notable endeavor within both Algerian and broader Arab literary circles.

This project garnered significant acclaim, cementing Lakhous' reputation in the Italian literary sphere and affirming his status as an eminent Arab-Italian writer proficient in both languages.

Lakhous harbors several ambitious literary projects, particularly noteworthy is his venture into writing in English. Since relocating to New York in 2014, he has been adapting his literary pursuits to include English, engaging directly with local cultures and contexts, a method typical of anthropologists.

He regards his immersion in new cultural and linguistic environments as an essential part of his creative process, one that will not be complete until he undertakes writing in Berber, his mother tongue. He has consistently highlighted in various interviews that mastering this language is not just a personal challenge but a commitment to fostering linguistic diversity and cultural richness.

Lakhous' openness to diverse cultural influences is profoundly evident in his literary work, particularly through his absorption of Italian cultural elements, especially Italian cinema. These influences manifest vividly in the artistic techniques he utilizes in his narratives, including his novel "*Tir ellil*," (Zougar, 2020, p. 357) which is the central focus of this discussion.

"*Tir ellil*" signifies Lakhous' literary return to Arabic after years immersed in Italian culture and writing in Italian. This novel, his inaugural exploration of national memory, emerges at a crucial juncture in the history of independent Algeria, a period marked by demands for peaceful change.

In this narrative, Lakhous places a strong emphasis on the virtues of peace and the importance of non-violent struggle, themes that resonate throughout the text. This philosophical stance is underscored from the very beginning of the novel, exemplified by a poignant quote from Hannah Arendt selected by Lakhous for the epigraph: "The connection between the problem of beginning and the phenomenon of revolution is clear, and such a beginning must be inherently linked to violence, a matter entrusted to the mythical beginnings of our history."

The plot of "*Tir ellil*" intricately weaves the lives of four characters who initially meet in autumn 1958, during the Algerian Liberation Revolution, and subsequently diverge, their destinies intricately entangled with the evolving fate of the nation, spanning its tumultuous history and collective memory. (Lakhous, 2019)

Across 288 pages, Lakhous masterfully intertwines the narratives of these characters through multiple generations and varying historical epochs, addressing a multitude of pressing issues that have shaped contemporary Algerian society, from its revolutionary past to its post-independence era, and into the new millennium characterized by economic liberalization and political diversification. These deep transformations are explored through a narrative lens that reveals underlying social phenomena and practices with acute insight.

Technically, Lakhous opts for the crime novel genre, constructing a plot centered around the mysterious murder of Miloud Sabri, known as "*Tir ellil*," who is tragically assassinated on the anniversary of Algerian independence in 2018. The novel delves into the profound symbolism of the assassination, linking it not only to the significant date but also to the complex persona of Miloud Sabri, a renowned mujahid whose historical and contemporary influences have profoundly shaped Algeria's political and economic frameworks.

Throughout "*Tir ellil*," the narrative elegantly oscillates between the historical narrative of Algeria's fraught journey towards independence and the present-day investigation into the murder of Miloud Sabri. As the story unfolds, it revisits the critical moments of national betrayal, the plundering of Algeria's resources and the misdirection of its post-colonial trajectory.

This betrayal mirrors a symbolic assassination that echoes the tangible assassination that stifled the aspirations of nation-building, disturbing foundational certainties. Lakhous adopts a narrative approach that is neither direct nor bluntly rhetorical; instead, he skillfully harnesses a plethora of artistic tools with remarkable expertise, crafting a narrative that weaves philosophical depth with artistic eloquence.

Despite navigating through time, the narrative maintains its lucidity and its compelling allure in unraveling the intricacies of the crime at two levels: one, the personal tragedy surrounding Miloud Sabri's murder, suspected to be an act of terrorism, and two, a national reflection where the narrative probes, with profound artistic finesse, the assassination of a nation's dreams and the thwarting of its developmental aspirations by exposing the betrayals among revolutionary comrades.

This narrative richness is embroidered with symbols and nuanced meanings, alongside allusions that traverse historical and geographical landscapes, dissecting a plethora of issues intrinsic to Algerian society and the profound transformations reshaping its identity.

From a linguistic standpoint, Lakhous articulates his narrative in a language that is both simple and flowing, yet retains a compelling charm and aesthetic quality that does not compromise the narrative's robustness or its thematic vision.

The story achieves a harmonious balance as it meanders through various epochs, enriched with a vivid topographic memory that meticulously redraws the map of Oran, the backdrop for the unfolding events.

As previously indicated, Lakhous' extensive experience writing in Italian and his decade-long hiatus from Arabic literature, his last Arabic texts penned in 2010 with "Little Cairo", have perceptibly smoothed and simplified his stylistic approach, yet without sacrificing depth.

This evolution in style, coupled with his exposure to the rich tapestry of Italian cultural practices, ranging from cinema and sculpture to painting and beyond, manifests distinctly in his literary technique. Lakhous opts to eschew complex linguistic craftsmanship or self-serving language for a suite of cinematic techniques that resonate more vividly with the reader.

These narrative strategies empower Lakhous to tackle a spectrum of pressing contemporary issues that have left indelible marks on both modern and contemporary Algerian history. The discussion in the novel flows with an ease that preserves the work's artistic integrity and enjoyment, a testament to his strategic use of straightforward language, augmented by his adept application of various cinematic techniques.

These techniques, which include a focused scenography of events, artistic montage, and the use of temporal reversals and flashbacks, transcend traditional chronological confines. They craft a narrative montage that draws from cinematic traditions to weave together events across time and space.

This approach not only serves to construct scenes but also replaces the traditional linear narrative arc with panoramic depictions of locales and detailed, dynamic portrayals of characters, who evolve and interact with the unfolding events, dynamically illustrated throughout the novel and presented through the lens of an omniscient narrator, akin to a film director's camera.

### ***3. Cinematic Techniques in "L'uccello Della Notte":***

Amara Lakhous thoughtfully integrates cinematic montage techniques with the nuanced application of anthropological research methodologies, (Lakhous, 2019, p. 9) alongside the rich tapestry of Algerian Arabic cultural heritage, in his narrative creation.

He articulates, "My foremost intention was to craft an authentic Algerian novelistic experience. This endeavor led me to engage deeply with the Algerian reality I aimed to depict, involving extensive study of numerous research works on Algeria's eighteenth-century history.

Secondly, I was committed to constructing a novelistic structure that leans on cinematic montage, benefiting immensely from theatrical traditions in the orchestration of dialogues. Thirdly, I endeavored to forge a narrative voice in Algerian Arabic, one that weaves the inherent beauty of folk sayings and songs into its fabric. (Abdel Kader, 2015)

Lakhous' meticulous selection and application of diverse techniques showcase the depth of his novelistic expertise and reflect the broad spectrum of his cultural, intellectual, and linguistic influences. His penchant for satirical comedy, which permeates various segments of his work, serves to deliver poignant messages effectively.

Renowned for his profound appreciation of Italian cinema, Lakhous brings attention to often overlooked aspects of cinematic influence on literature. In a dialogue with Kheir Shouar from Al Jazeera, he remarks, "From cinema, I have gleaned not merely the mechanics of screenplay writing but have grasped the critical importance of collaborative dynamics, the art of montage, and the deliberate selection of characters, themes, and settings, all punctuated by meticulous dialogue crafting." (Lakhous, 2024)

This holistic cinematic literacy has not only distinguished him within the Italian literary arena but also led him to clinch the Flaiano International Literary Prize in 2006 for his acclaimed work, "*Clash of Civilization Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*."

This novel's subsequent adaptations into cinema and theater across Italy and other European nations underscore his sagacious application of cinematic techniques, techniques so adept that they transform his written narratives into ready-to-film screenplays.

Critics have observed that director Isotta Toso faced little challenge in transposing the narrative from text to screen, suggesting that Lakhous' writing so vividly conjured the visual and dialogic elements of cinema that the transition appeared seamless, with the film unfolding as a visual echo of the novel, dialogues intact. (Lakhous, 2006)

As we proceed, a detailed exploration of the distinct cinematic techniques Lakhous employs in "*Tir ellil*" reveals the unique and inventive trajectory of the novel:

### ***3.1 Event Scenography:***

Lakhous' use of language transitions from the poetic and imaginative towards a direct and technically precise mode of description. His prose becomes a tool of economy, each word meticulously chosen to serve the dual purpose of clarity and impact, mirroring the precision of a film director's camera.

This technique transforms the narrative space into a visual spectacle, where scenes glide across the reader's imagination like camera shots across a screen (Lakhous, 2015). From the very first scene, the narrative draws readers into a vividly painted world: "Upon arriving at Saint Hubert, Colonel Karim Soltani effortlessly parked his car in front of Villa Badiya, echoing the architectural grace of the colonial era.

As he passed through the main gate, a meticulously curated garden brimming with orange and lemon trees, their arrangements as orderly as a regimented orchard, greeted him..." This description not only sets the visual scene but also anchors the reader firmly within the spatial dynamics of the narrative, offering a cinematic journey through the locales and landscapes of the story. (Zougar, 2020, pp. 358-359)



### ***3.2 Artistic Montage Technique:***

Amara Lakhous skillfully subverts the traditional linear narrative structure through his adept use of the artistic montage technique. This approach not only disrupts the chronological sequence of events but also enriches the narrative by weaving together diverse temporal strands.

Through the use of cutting-edge montage and the strategic placement of flashbacks, Lakhous stitches past experiences directly into the fabric of the present narrative, allowing history and memory to interact dynamically with the unfolding story. These narrative intersections, where past and present converse through a tapestry of shared symbols, imbue the events within the novel with profound significance and layered symbolism.

Lakhous meticulously constructs each scene with a cinematic eye, starting from the deliberate selection of setting details and camera angles that enhance the narrative momentum, to the precise pacing of events.

He introduces characters in vivid detail, then propels them into action, layering their emotions and movements to build a crescendo of narrative tension. This methodical build-up in the montage sequence, encompassing visual, auditory, and emotional elements (Boulnoar & Bouzidi, 2022, p. 1081), facilitates a multifaceted narrative experience.

It allows Lakhous to elegantly present interconnected vignettes that converge into a holistic narrative tableau. His command over these techniques is evident, as he orchestrates a narrative that leaves no room for randomness, reflecting his deliberate artistic choices and his profound mastery of narrative construction.

### ***3.3 Panoramic Imaging Technique of Places:***

In "*Tir ellil*," Lakhous undertakes a detailed topographic exploration of Oran, drawing the reader into an intimate acquaintance with the city and its storied environs. His innovative use of panoramic imaging stands out for its meticulous attention to detail and its capacity to evoke a vivid sense of place.

By employing a narrative lens akin to a director's zoom, Lakhous captures essential details that not only enhance the visual imagery but also contribute significantly to the narrative's foundation.

This panoramic technique transcends mere visual description, adopting the directorial approach of using the camera to give voice to the setting, thereby allowing the environment to play an active role in the narrative. (Lakhous, 2019, pp. 22, 37, 82, 101)

The text is replete with precise, sweeping descriptions of locales that transport the reader directly into the heart of Oran, visiting neighborhoods like Sidi El Houari, Saint Hubert, and Gambetta. Each location is introduced with such clarity and detail that the reader becomes a virtual traveler within the story's geography.

Lakhous's strategic use of language in this context underscores the critical role of each chosen word and description in crafting the narrative's backdrop, ensuring that every element serves the

overarching story development. His methodical approach to setting and description is informed by cinematic principles of careful selection and meticulous planning, affirming his belief in writing as a disciplined craft.

### ***3.4 Character Presentation in Portrait Form:***

Lakhous introduces his characters through a series of cinematic techniques that render them not only visible to the reader's eye but also vividly present within the unfolding events. Characters such as Miloud Sabri, Zahra, and Colonel Karim Sultani are initially portrayed through detailed visual descriptions that bring them to life, allowing them to evolve and interact dynamically with the narrative's progression.

Instead of confining these characters to static molds, Lakhous employs a flexible, cinematic portrayal that allows the reader to engage with the characters as if watching them on screen.

Each character is meticulously crafted through a series of actions and dialogues that accumulate like cinematic frames, gradually compiling into a complete and dynamic persona. This technique showcases Lakhous's finesse in blending cinematic narrative tools with traditional literary character development, highlighting his innovative approach to storytelling.

His utilization of an omniscient narrator does not constrain the characters within a rigid narrative framework but instead enhances their depth, allowing them to resonate more profoundly with the reader.



***Conclusion:***

In his seminal work, which has firmly established Amara Lakhous's stature on the international literary scene, the novel has seen broad dissemination and has been critically and translationally celebrated at numerous scholarly venues, including the recent translation symposium at Yale University in March 2024.

Here, Lakhous continues to refine and utilize the artistic methodologies that he has been perfecting since his earlier work, "How to Nurse from the She-Wolf without Getting Bitten." His deliberate selection of cinematic techniques has adeptly facilitated the construction of scenes that meticulously dissect and illuminate the anthropological insights he seeks to convey.

Lakhous strategically employs a cinematic toolkit that encompasses detailed scenography of events and an artistic montage technique that eschews traditional linear narrative structures in favor of a more fluid, dynamic presentation of interlinked events that traverse both time and space.

This approach effectively dismantles the conventional horizontal narrative arc, replacing it with a rich tapestry of panoramic place imaging and dynamically unfolding character portraits. These characters evolve within the narrative, revealed through their deeds and emotions, compelling readers to engage deeply with their complexities.

Fueling anticipation, Lakhous teases the forthcoming sequel where his protagonist, Karim Sultani, will delve into another intricate investigation. Holding a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Rome and having immersed himself in the study of the Arab and Muslim diaspora in Italy, Lakhous brings a scholarly rigor and deep cultural understanding to his narrative.

This anthropological acumen is vividly portrayed in "*Tir ellil*," where he has not only written from an informed perspective but has physically inhabited the spaces where his narratives unfold, conducting exhaustive research into the historical and social fabric of Oran to authentically depict its milieu and the lives of its residents.

Lakhous's narrative method, characterized by a migratory journey through various Italian cities to craft his diverse literary works, is underpinned by a consistent reliance on cinematic techniques, borrowed primarily from the rich tradition of Italian cinema known for its unique narrative style and deep cultural heritage.

This has significantly influenced his distinctive approach to the serial detective genre in Arab literature, which pivots around a central detective figure and embraces a diversity of thematic explorations.

Amara Lakhous has, with his first installment in this genre, masterfully drawn readers into a vortex of suspense and intrigue that mirrors the engrossing appeal of classic detective cinema. His adept use of cinematic narrative devices ensures that the novel "*Tir ellil*" not only captivates the imagination but also sets the stage for its inevitable adaptation into film.

Given Lakhous's meticulous attention to detail and his profound narrative craftsmanship, the transition of "*Tir ellil*" from page to screen seems not just likely but imminent, especially with the anticipated release of the novel's translated versions, which may further expedite this cinematic journey.

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