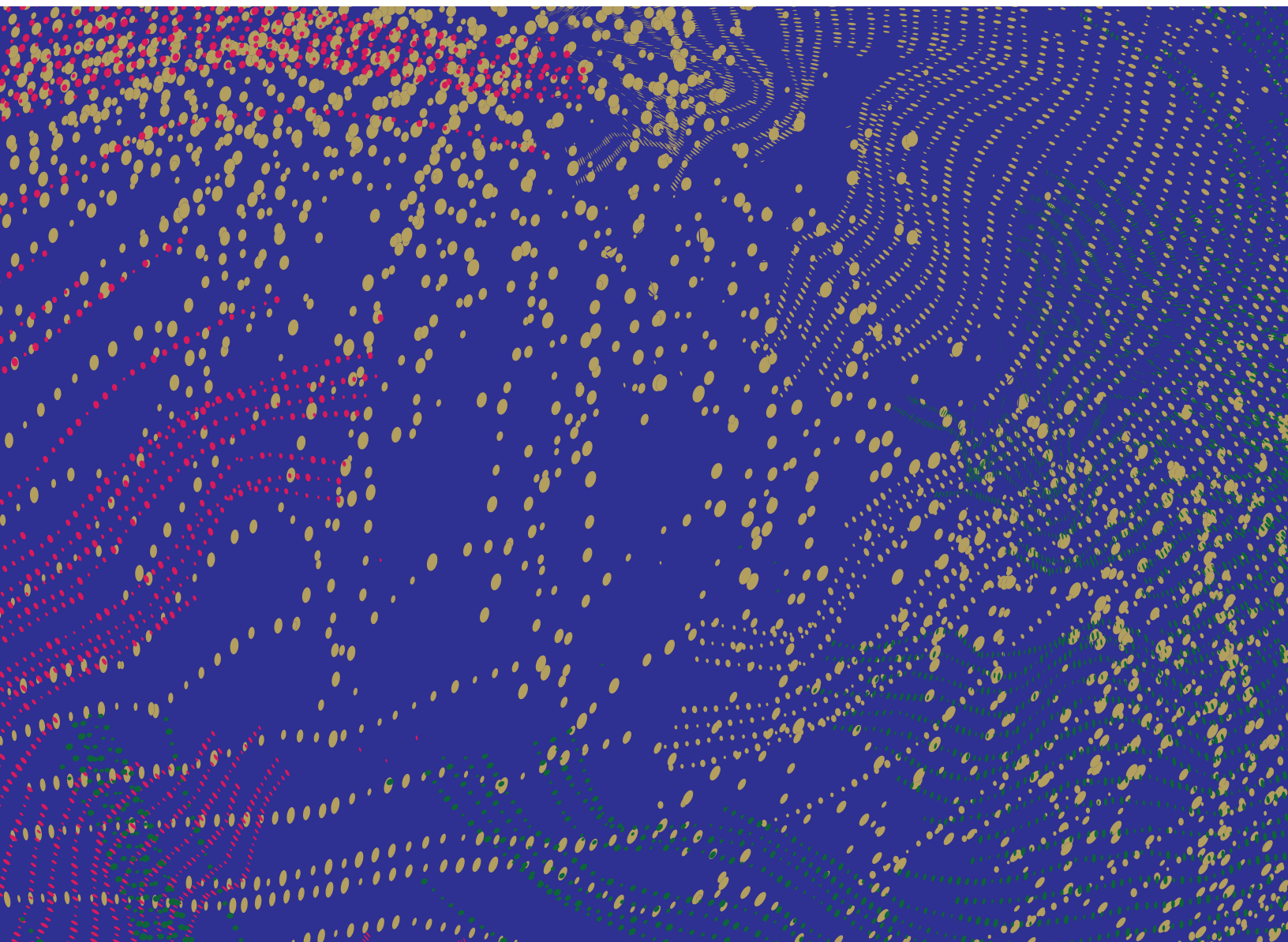


The World Humanities Report

Revolutionary Gazes: Gender Politics in Contemporary Tunisian Film

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Revolutionary Gazes: Gender Politics in Contemporary Tunisian Film

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Following the London premiere of her 1994 film *šamt al-qušūr* (*Silences of the Palace*),¹ Moufida Tlatli was interviewed by acclaimed feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey. Mulvey coined the phrase “male gaze” to theorize media portrayals of women as passive objects of heterosexual cis male desire. The “female gaze” emerged in feminist film theory as an alternative conceptual language for the visual representation of gender and sexuality on screen. These theorists argue that a female filmmaker’s gaze disrupts the representational violence of the male gaze, which relies on voyeuristic scopophilia—that is, libidinal and aesthetic pleasure derived from the act of looking.² It does so by offering more attentive ways of looking, as well as a richer visual field, because “the female gaze cohabits the space occupied by men, rather than being entirely divorced from it.”³ In her interview with Mulvey, Tlatli noted the long-standing preoccupation of Tunisian filmmakers with “the condition of Arabic [*sic*] women” and “the theme of women’s liberation,” adding that for male directors in particular “woman was the symbol of freedom of expression, and of all kinds of liberation.”⁴ Her comments

¹ Moufida Tlatli, dir., *šamt al-qušūr* [*Silences of the Palace*], CinéTéléfilms and Mat Films, 1994.

² My use of “female” and “woman” in this essay is trans-inclusive.

³ Lorraine Gamman, “Watching the Detectives: The Enigma of the Female Gaze,” in *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*, ed. Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1989), 16.

⁴ Moufida Tlatli, “Moving Bodies,” interview with Laura Mulvey, *Sight and Sound* 5, no. 3 (1995): 18. Film scholars frequently note the subversive nature of Maghrebi—specifically Tunisian—cinema around questions of gender, sex, and sexuality, which also includes a preoccupation with the complexities of masculinity. See Roy Armes, *Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Nouri Gana, “Bourguiba’s Sons: Melancholy Manhood in Modern Tunisian Cinema,” *Journal of North African Studies* 15, no. 1 (2010): 105–26; Andrea Khalil, “The Myth of Masculinity in the Films of Merzak Allouache,” *Journal of North African Studies* 12, no. 3 (2007): 329–45; Robert Lang, *New Tunisian Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Peter Limbrick, *Arab Modernism as World Cinema: The Films of Moumen Smihi* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020); Florence Martin, *Screens and Veils: Maghrebi Women’s Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); and Martin Stollery, “Masculinities, Generations, and Cultural Transformation in Contemporary Tunisian Cinema,” *Screen* 42, no. 1 (2001): 49–63.

speak to the complicated ways gender is represented and performed on screen, while underscoring the importance of diversity in contemporary Tunisian film production—where well under 10 percent of films are directed by women.⁵

Focusing on Tlatli's *šamt al-qušūr* and Leyla Bouzid's *'alā ḥallat 'aynī* (*As I Open My Eyes*),⁶ this essay examines the relationship between revolution, gender, and the politics of representation. Despite the centrality of women in Tunisian movements for social and political change—from decolonization through the 2011 Jasmine Revolution—these films demonstrate how women remain marginal to the political structures that these movements beget.⁷ With stories that run counter to the liberatory claims of anticolonial and revolutionary rhetoric, Tlatli's and Bouzid's films depict women suffering from patriarchal and paternalistic forms of state violence. They problematize the empty tokenization of women not only in Tunisian politics but also in its film industry. Beyond exposing the false promises of these movements concerning women's rights—among other classed and racialized groups—their films reshuffle the visual economy of Tunisian filmmaking through their artful manipulation of the cinematic gaze.⁸ Reading Tlatli and Bouzid within a broader genealogy of feminist feature and documentary filmmaking helps us contextualize their contributions to contemporary Maghrebi cultural politics.

Feminist Legacies in Maghrebi Filmmaking

Unlike the Egyptian film industry, which exports a wide range of commercial films and television programs across the Arabic-speaking world, Maghrebi films have a much smaller distribution footprint. They are predominantly funded, produced, and circulated in the Maghreb and Francophone Europe—in part

⁵ Patricia Caillé, “Mapping the Circulation of Films by Women Filmmakers with Maghrebi Funding in the Digital Age,” in *The State of Post-Cinema: Tracing the Moving Image in the Age of Digital Dissemination*, ed. Malte Hagener, Vinzenz Hediger, and Alena Strohmaier (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 75. Roy Armes estimates that by 2008, only 492 films were made in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia by some 217 filmmakers, of which only 21 were women (Roy Armes, “Cinemas of the Maghreb,” *Black Camera* 1, no. 1 [2009]: 7).

⁶ Leyla Bouzid, dir., *'alā ḥallat 'aynī* [*As I Open My Eyes*], Shellac, 2015.

⁷ After years of negotiations, Tunisia was officially granted independence from French rule in 1956. The “Jasmine Revolution” refers to the series of uprisings for democratic, social, and economic reform—triggered by the self-immolation of Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010—that toppled the regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. See Nouri Gana, ed., *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

⁸ In both films, the most disenfranchised groups are not just women and the working poor but specifically Black domestic workers.

because of their use of languages that are less familiar to audiences outside the region, such as vernacular Arabic dialects, Berberophone languages, and French. Whereas this limited distribution has resulted in a smaller film industry, it has also cultivated a more auteur and independent approach to filmmaking that favors stylized cinematography, intricate narrative structures, and storylines addressing endemic social issues, including gendered violence, child abuse, addiction, urban poverty, policing, and government corruption. With this trend toward gritty realism, Maghrebi narrative and documentary films often shed light on disempowered communities—particularly women, children, sex workers, the working poor, Indigenous populations, and LGBTQI+ individuals. Moreover, many filmmakers have confronted the region’s violent colonial histories, which culminated in a protracted and brutal French occupation in Algeria (1830–1962), Tunisia (1881–1956), and Morocco (1912–56). As part of their comprehensive program of cultural imperialism, French authorities circulated colonial propaganda films in addition to promoting Franco-Maghrebi film partnerships.⁹ The cultivation of an autochthonous film industry that attends to the Maghreb’s ethnolinguistic, religious, and social heterogeneity has been a critical facet of cultural decolonization.

Pioneering women filmmakers from the Maghreb have inflected these themes with their intersectional perspectives and experiences. For example, Algerian novelist Assia Djebar’s (1936–2015, born Fatima-Zohra Imalayen) experimental directorial debut, *La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* (*The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua*, 1977), is modeled after the multimovement structure of regional *nūba* music. Blending narrative, oral history, and documentary techniques, the film foregrounds the anticolonial voices of indigenous Berberophone women from the Chenoua mountain region.

This first generation of directors—Djebar, Selma Baccar (Tunisia), and Farida Bourquia (Morocco)—developed a distinctive filmic style and visual language that continue to influence feminist filmmakers.¹⁰ Such films not only make use of the cinematic gaze to highlight and subvert gender inequalities, but they also amplify the medium’s multisensory textures in what film theorist Laura Marks

⁹ Martin, *Screens and Veils*, 4. Martin cites Abdelkader Benali, *Le cinéma colonial au Maghreb: L’imaginaire en tromp-l’oeil* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1998).

¹⁰ While many filmmakers are trained in their country of birth/residence or in France, interregional collaborations between Maghrebi directors, producers, actors, and studios are not uncommon—especially in the relatively small community of women filmmakers. See Martin, *Screens and Veils*, 10.

refers to as “haptic visuality.”¹¹

Silences of the Palace and *As I Open My Eyes* borrow from and contribute to this broader feminist aesthetic. While the Tunisian film industry is relatively small, and female directors constitute an even smaller subset, their presence dates back to the industry’s origins.¹² In fact, the first female African screenwriter and actress, Haydée Samama Chikly Tamzali, was Tunisian.¹³ Tunisia also has a history of short and feature-length documentaries directed by women that center on gender equality, including Selma Bacchar’s revolutionary feminist essay-film *Fatma 75* (1976), Nėjia Ben Mabrouk’s *Pour vous servir* (*To Serve You*, 1976) and her semi-autobiographical *al-sāma* (*The Trace*, 1988),¹⁴ the documentaries of sociologist Sophie Ferchiou, Kaouther Ben Hania’s investigative documentary about sexual harassment *shallaṭ Tunis* (*Le Challat de Tunis*, 2013), and Nada Mezni Hafaiedh’s documentary about feminist activist Amina Sboui *fī al-ẓil* (*Upon the Shadow*, 2017).¹⁵

¹¹ See Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000). She argues that this visual mode is particularly prevalent among “intercultural” filmmakers from the Global South who are seeking to convey embodied forms of memory and experience. Florence Martin applies Marks’s theory to Maghrebi women’s filmmaking and the films of Tlatli and Raja Amari in particular (Martin, *Screens and Veils*). On sensuousness in contemporary Maghrebi film, see Kaya Davies Hayon, *Sensuous Cinema: The Body in Contemporary Maghrebi Film* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

¹² The opportunities available to women filmmakers and the distribution impact of their films is often tied to where a director lives and trains, with whom they apprentice, their connections in the industry, and their access to European funding sources (Caillé, “Mapping the Circulation of Films,” 76). Leyla Bouzid, for example, is the daughter of acclaimed director Nouri Bouzid. Moufida Tlatli was briefly named the interim Minister of Culture in the transitional government installed after the ousting of Ben Ali.

¹³ Haydée Chikly Tamzali (1906–1998) starred in and wrote the films *Zohra* (1922) and *The Girl from Carthage* (1924)—both directed by her father, Albert Samama Chikly—which feature strong female characters and focus on the challenges of being a woman. Jill Nelmes and Jule Selbo, eds., *Women Screenwriters: An International Guide* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

¹⁴ *al-sāma* was initially intended to be a documentary, but Ben Mabrouk struggled to get women to discuss intimate details about their private lives on camera and ultimately needed to secure outside funding to complete the project. The film was shot in 1982, but its release was delayed by six years for bureaucratic reasons (see [https://alchetron.com/Sama-\(film\)](https://alchetron.com/Sama-(film))). Some consider Ben Mabrouk’s *al-sāma*, rather than Tlatli’s *Silences of the Palace*, to be the first Tunisian film directed by a woman.

¹⁵ See Rebecca Hillauer, ed., *Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers*, trans. Allison Brown, Deborah Cohen, and Nancy Joyce (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 399–401; Abdelkrim Gabous, *Silence, elles tournent! Les femmes et le cinéma en Tunisie* (Tunis: Cérés, 1998); Nelmes and Selbo, *Women Screenwriters*; and Martin, *Screens and Veils*.

Voice and Body

Tlatli is a major figure of the new wave Tunisian film movement, and her groundbreaking film *Silences of the Palace* follows Alia, a gifted musician living in 1960s Tunisia, who learns of the death of her biological father, Sidi Ali.¹⁶ His funeral triggers haunting flashbacks to Alia's childhood and traumatic coming of age in the beylical palace where her mother, Khedija, was one of a number of women in domestic and sexual servitude.¹⁷ Alia runs away with her boyfriend, Lotfi, an anticolonial revolutionary employed as the palace tutor, after defiantly singing the banned Tunisian national anthem to an audience of aristocratic beys in political decline. During the performance upstairs, Khedija dies in the downstairs servant quarters from a self-administered abortion following her rape by Sidi Ali's brother in front of her daughter. After independence, Alia finds herself an unmarried and pregnant musician for hire plagued by post-traumatic migraines. Lotfi pressures her to have an abortion because "a child needs a name, a family, a marriage." Just as her mother was a victim of the colonial, feudal, and patriarchal structures of beylical French Tunisia, Alia is failed by Lotfi and the revolutionary nationalist movement that he represents.

Paralleling Khedija's tragic fate in protectorate-era Tunisia with Alia's object life nearly a decade after independence, *Silences of the Palace* exposes the patri-

¹⁶ Robert Lang refers to the postindependence period of auteur Tunisian filmmaking as *Cinema Jedid* (New Cinema) (Lang, *New Tunisian Cinema*). On Tlatli in relation to new wave Tunisian cinema, see Kamal Salhi, "Imaging Silence—Representing Women: Moufida Tlatli's *Silences of the Palace* and North African Feminist Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 24 (2007): 353–77.

¹⁷ An Ottoman Turkish honorific, the term *bey*, was used to indicate the privileged lineages of leaders. The beys of Tunis were part of the Husaynid dynasty, in power from 1705 through Tunisian independence. While initially under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire, Tunisia became a protectorate under the control of the French resident-general with the 1881 Treaty of Bardo. Tlatli's *Silences of the Palace* emphasizes the collusion of the beys of Tunis with their French occupiers, as well as how they actively resisted the anticolonial movement to protect their power and status. As the figurehead of the Neo-Dustūr Party (*al-ḥizb al-ḥurr al-dustūrī al-jadīd*, or the New Constitutional Liberal Party), Habib Bourguiba led the effort to depose the beys when Tunisia was declared a republic in 1957. For two decades, Bourguiba led a one-party state and was infamously voted president for life in 1975. He was declared mentally unfit and unseated from power by Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in 1987. Despite his notorious cult of personality and stronghold on state power, Bourguiba implemented a number of progressive policies. Most notably, the set of laws known as the Personal Status Code introduced sweeping education and gender reforms that granted women increased rights as part of a broader effort to "modernize" the country, while simultaneously expanding presidential power through the absorption of the shari'a courts into a centralized state apparatus. See Kenneth Perkins, *A Modern History of Tunisia*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); and Norma Salem, *Habib Bourguiba, Islam, and the Creation of Tunisia* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

archal structures undergirding both colonial and postindependence regimes. Tlatli suggests that the only way to resist these forms of oppression is through alternative family assemblages. She offers this in the homosocial bonds of the women's collective laboring in the palace, in Khedija's insistence to Alia that "I am your mother and your father," as well as in Alia's final monologue addressed to her dead mother:

I thought that Lotfi would save me. I have not been saved. Like you, I've suffered, I've sweated. Like you, I've lived in sin. My life has been a series of abortions. I could never express myself. My songs were stillborn. And even the child inside me Lotfi wants me to abort. This child . . . I feel it has taken root in me. I feel it bringing me back to life. Bringing me back to you. I hope it will be a girl. I'll call her Khedija.

In choosing to continue her pregnancy, Alia rejects patriarchal modes of social reproduction that render women's bodies expendable, instead charting a new future built on networks of care by and for women.

Set nearly fifty years later, *As I Open My Eyes* is a cinematic nod to Tlatli's

These films challenge the representational politics of the Tunisian film industry, in which the theme of "women's liberation" is often a symbolic placeholder signaling broader social freedoms, rather than a legitimate subject of critical inquiry.

film that also centers on a mother-daughter relationship, the coupling of state and sexual violence, the false promises of revolutionary rhetoric, and the radical power of women's voices. Set in the summer preceding the 2011 Jasmine Revolution that

toppled Ben Ali, the film narrates eighteen-year-old Farah's coming of age and political consciousness as the lead singer in an alternative rock band. The group's incendiary lyrics reflect Tunisians' growing socioeconomic and political dissatisfaction, and Bouzid's filmmaking simultaneously exposes and subverts the regime's state surveillance apparatus. When the band's manager, Ali, is outed as an informant, Farah is kidnapped, interrogated, and physically and sexually assaulted by the police. Linking official forms of state surveillance with sexual violence against women, *As I Open My Eyes* exposes the insidious nature of Ben Ali's police state across its plot and cinematography. As does Tlatli's film, Bouzid gestures at other possible futures in Farah's relationship with her mother,

Hayet, who helps her traumatized daughter regain her voice by urging her to “continue” singing and, by extension, resisting.

Looking Back

In the aftermath of Ben Ali’s ousting in 2011, director Leyla Bouzid was driven to document not the promise of the (post)revolutionary period but the social and political unrest that incited the uprising:

When the [Jasmine] Revolution happened, the desire to film and document that period was very strong. Many documentaries were shot then—all full of hope, all focused on the future. I, too, really wanted to film. Not the revolution, but what everyone had lived through and been subjected to: the suffocating everyday life, the total power of the police, the surveillance, the fear and paranoia of the Tunisian people over the past 23 years.¹⁸

As I Open My Eyes captures the totalizing nature of Ben Ali’s state surveillance apparatus specifically as it intersects with questions of gender, class, and free speech. Bouzid does so through her use of the cinematic gaze and *mise en abyme*,¹⁹ as well as in the film’s characterization of two male figures associated with the police—band manager Ali and the mother’s former lover, Moncef.

A seemingly benevolent figure who manages the band’s operations, Ali comes from a working-class background and is slightly older than the group’s youthful members. Shortly before Farah’s kidnapping, her boyfriend and bandmate Borhène is arrested, interrogated, and beaten by the police after Ali shares footage of the band’s underground performances. When confronted, Ali notes how easy it was for Borhène to be bailed out of prison by his family (“you’re all rich kids; one call and you get out”), demonstrating how class differentially affects policing practices while also suggesting that his informing was driven by economic need.

Through Ali’s character, Bouzid links official forms of state surveillance with sexual violence against women. Not only does Ali report the group to the police, but he also aids in their incrimination. After pressuring Farah to smoke hashish for the first time—resulting in a positive toxicology report, which is punishable

¹⁸ Leyla Bouzid, quoted in Lizelle Bisschoff, “Daughters and Their Mothers: Between Conflict and Acceptance,” in *Women in African Cinema: Beyond the Body Politic*, ed. Lizelle Bisschoff and Stefanie Van de Peer (New York: Routledge, 2020), 146.

¹⁹ In the media of art, film, and literature, the doubling or mirroring technique of *mise en abyme* (also *mise-en-abîme*) refers to the reproduction of the object, story, or image in the object, story, or image itself.

by up to a year in prison—Ali aggressively tries to kiss her. After being fired as the band’s manager, he pursues Farah again, this time with a menacing threat: “It’s not normal that nothing’s happened to you up to now. I can’t be the only one protecting you.” The scene demonstrates the ways the very facilitators of state violence hide under the cover of state paternalism.

Similarly, Moncef is a corrupt officer with the Ministry of the Interior who takes advantage of his state-sanctioned authority to curry favor with his ex-lover, Hayet (Farah’s mother). When he warns her that Farah’s band is under surveillance, Hayet calls attention to the absurdity of such sweeping policing practices: “Don’t you have anything better to do?” After her daughter’s kidnapping, Hayet turns to Moncef, even offering her body in exchange for information on Farah’s whereabouts. Although he does not take advantage of Hayet’s desperation, her offer renders legible the libidinal economy underlying state power—recalling Farah’s fate at the hands of the police officers who assault her. As in *Silences of the Palace*, where Alia witnesses and reproduces her mother’s sexual trauma, the paralleling of Hayet’s and Farah’s sexual exploitation demonstrates the intergenerational nature of women’s subalternity. Spanning French Protectorate Tunisia through the Jasmine Revolution, Tlatli’s and Bouzid’s films foreground how the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes relied on a model of “state patriarchy”²⁰ that coded the state as the paternalistic caretaker of the body politic—and, quite literally, women’s bodies.²¹

Bouzid further represents Ben Ali’s deep state and vast surveillance network through a formal manipulation of the cinematic gaze and *mise en abyme* that builds on Tlatli’s filmic vocabulary. Specifically, she intercuts the scenes of Farah performing with shots of Ali filming her and the grainy footage from his hand-held camera (figure 1). Ali’s docu-style footage is at once an extension of state surveillance and a double for the male gaze—suggesting that Farah’s voice and her body constitute a political threat to the state security apparatus.

By contrast, Bouzid’s diegetic shots of Farah simultaneously centralize and

²⁰ Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon, *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History, and Ideology* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 122, quoted in Lang, *New Tunisian Cinema*, 132.

²¹ Bourguiba’s Personal Status Code “strengthened the nuclear family and fostered a more equitable relationship between the genders” by granting women the right to divorce and approve arranged marriages, expanding child custody and inheritance laws, banning polygyny and male repudiation, and setting minimum marriage age requirements (Perkins, *Modern History of Tunisia*, 140). At the same time, Bourguiba paternalistically tried to shape the image of the modern Tunisian woman—from new expectations on women’s contributions to the labor force and household to speeches condemning “traditional” attire and the veil. The Personal Status Code remained in effect under Ben Ali, with additional reforms added in 1993.

abstract her body through the use off-kilter camera angles, cropped or obstructed compositions, and extreme close-ups. During sex scenes, parts of Farah's face or body fill up the frame as they are stroked or kissed by Borhène's disembodied hands and mouth. Whether scenes of sexual intimacy or of Farah's performances, Bouzid emphasizes her visceral pleasure in ways that disrupt political demarcations of private and public. As Alena Strohmaier suggests, the camera's focus on the physicality of Farah's performances is an extension of her sexuality into traditionally male-dominated spheres of public life where she performs, such as cafés, clubs, and sidewalks.²² Farah, however, is not simply the passive object of a consuming gaze. She sees, acknowledges, and even confronts the camera's voyeuristic gaze—whether Bouzid's extradiegetic filming or Ali's intradiegetic handheld camera. Strohmaier notes that "Farah is looking back. She is making eye contact with the spectator, challenging him or her, making him or her be aware that she too holds the power to gaze, to watch, to look back."²³ This looking back disrupts the recursiveness implied by Bouzid's use of *mise en abyme* insofar as it gives Farah the power to redirect the cinematic gaze back on to the camera itself and, by extension, the gendered state surveillance apparatus that it signifies.



Figure 1. Intradiegetic footage from Ali's handheld camera in which Farah stares directly at the camera and Ali.

²² Alena Strohmaier, "Tunisians in Motion: Performing and Narrating the (Non-)Political in Leyla Bouzid's *As I Open My Eyes*," *Journal of African Cinemas* 11, no. 2 (2019): 141–54.

²³ Strohmaier, "Tunisians in Motion," 148.

Bouzid explicitly highlights this visual agency in the scene after Farah and Borhène first have sexual intercourse, when he wakes up to her lifting the bedsheet and inspecting his naked body. In a reversal of the male gaze and celebration of female scopophilic pleasure, the camera lingers on Farah's curious gaze at Borhène's vulnerable body and exposed genitals. Bouzid follows this scene with a close-up of Farah plaintively singing about the revolutionary spirit that continues to confront "a world destroyed" by state violence and terror. Read together, these scenes underscore the film's coupling of Farah's libidinal pleasure and political consciousness across her voice, body, and gaze.

By centering the countering female gaze formally and narratively, Bouzid underscores how feminist filmmaking can confront gendered forms of oppression. She not only highlights the importance of having women behind the camera but also links her film to Tlatli's *Silences of the Palace*. Scholars have long noted the importance of the cinematic gaze in Tlatli's film, where viewers observe Alia furtively watching her mother being visually and sexually consumed by men.²⁴ This is further emphasized by the film's *mise en scène* in the flashbacks to Alia's childhood (figure 2), where she frequently appears framed



Figure 2. Alia watching her mother and the other women in the palace serving the beys upstairs. The color green is a visual symbol in the film associated with anticolonialism.

²⁴ Anne Donadey, "Representing Gender and Sexual Trauma: Moufida Tlatli's *Silences of the Palace*," *South Central Review* 28, no. 1 (2011): 36–51; Gil Hochberg, "National Allegories and the Emergence of Female Voice in Moufida Tlatli's *Les silences du palais*," *Third Text* 14, no. 50 (2000): 33–44; Salhi, "Imaging Silence"; Dina Sherzer, "Remembrance of Things Past: 'Les Silences du palais' by Moufida Tlatli," *South Central Review* 17, no. 3 (2000): 50–59; and Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon, "Memory as Allegory: The Spectre of Incest and the (Re)naming of the Father in Moufida Tlatli's *The Silences of the Palace* (1994)," *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies* 21, no. 1 (2007): 47–67.

within doors, windows, gates, and mirrors. Tlatli's compositional crafting of these scenes forces viewers to be aware of our own voyeuristic complicity with Alia, while framing her childlike curiosity in a complex matrix of patriarchal power structures—in both the palace walls and the broader body politic of a decolonizing Tunisia.

However, *Silences of the Palace's* self-conscious staging of the woman-as-nation trope deliberately unsettles the overall allegorization of Alia's character.²⁵ For example, in a scene that parallels Alia's emergent political consciousness with her coming of age, Lotfi flirtatiously tells her, "You are like the country, indecisive. One word thrills you, the next scares you."

Tlatli not only challenges the power asymmetries in anticolonial political movements, but she also implicates the aesthetic regimes at play in Tunisian filmmaking.²⁶ The film's slow pacing and frequent use of long takes compel viewers to attend to the lifeworlds of women, their bodies, and their domestic and sexual forms of labor. Tlatli explains:

I was interested in the bodies of women who move, and work, with all the time in the world. The women, the servants who work in the palace . . . I couldn't allow myself to show them in an "efficient" montage, which would be false. . . . I had to show them in their own rhythm, in their own way of living and breathing. I had to show the slowness of their lives through my use of the camera.²⁷

These comments speak to the revolutionary nature of Tlatli's cinematic gaze and specifically how feminist filmmaking can model new ways of looking—as well as embodying time and space—that challenge conventional modes of cinematic representation. Tlatli's layered cinematic gaze and deliberate use of slow filmic time upend Tunisian filmmaking practices, in which women are reduced to national symbols in ways that mirror paternalistic state discourses. *Silences of the Palace* explicitly links the revolutionary

Tlatli's layered cinematic gaze and deliberate use of slow filmic time upend Tunisian filmmaking practices, in which women are reduced to national symbols in ways that mirror paternalistic state discourses.

²⁵ Hochberg, "National Allegories."

²⁶ On the theory of aesthetic regimes, see Jacques Rancière, *The Aesthetics of Politics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum International, 2004).

²⁷ Tlatli, "Moving Bodies," 18–19.

rhetoric of Bourguiba, the self-dubbed “liberator of women,” with the class and gender inequalities of French Protectorate Tunisia. Tlatli arguably also traces a more subtle link to the period of the film’s production during the reign of Ben Ali, who notoriously lauded women’s liberation while quietly quelling public dissent, as we see in Bouzid’s *As I Open My Eyes*.

Feminist Filmic Futures

Considered by many to be the first Tunisian feature film by a woman, Tlatli’s *Silences of the Palace* has been celebrated as an exemplar of “post-Third-Worldist feminist film”—simultaneously garnering immense international acclaim while resisting its conscription into Eurocentric models of feminist praxis.²⁸ Tlatli helped usher in a generation of feminist filmmaking in Tunisia concerned with representations of gender and sexual trauma. Directors such as Leyla Bouzid, Raja Amari, Kaouther Ben Hania, and Hinde Boujemaa have paid homage to her 1994 classic.²⁹

Read together, Tlatli’s *Silences of the Palace* and Bouzid’s *As I Open My Eyes* reveal the critical importance of Tunisian feminist filmmaking. By centering music as a means of political dissent and social change, their films expose how embodied forms of cultural expression can be profoundly threatening to the state apparatus. Tlatli and Bouzid subsequently highlight the importance of their own medium of filmmaking to social and political movements. From Tunisia’s decolonization in 1956 through the 2011 revolutionary uprisings, *Silences of the Palace* and *As I Open My Eyes* reveal the myriad ways gender intersects with questions of class and labor, as well as freedom of speech and political dissent. These films challenge the representational politics of the Tunisian film industry, in which the theme of “women’s liberation” is often a symbolic placeholder signaling broader social freedoms, rather than a legitimate subject of critical inquiry. Tlatli and Bouzid thus problematize how this tokenization of women whitewashes patriarchal forms of state paternalism that disproportionately affect women, among other disenfranchised, classed, and racialized populations. Upending the visual hierarchies of Tunisian filmmaking, their films highlight at once the rich histories and promising futures of feminist cultural production in the contemporary Maghreb.

²⁸ Ella Shohat, “Post-Third-Worldist Culture: Gender, Nation, and the Cinema,” in *Rethinking Third Cinema*, ed. Anthony R. Guneratne and Wimal Dissanayake (New York: Routledge, 2003), 53.

²⁹ See Raja Amari, dir., *al-dawwāha* [*Buried Secrets*], 2009; Kaouther Ben Hania, dir., *‘ala kaf ‘ifrū* [*Beauty and the Dogs*], 2017; Hinde Boujemaa, dir., *yā min ‘āsh* [*It Was Better Tomorrow*], 2012, and *Noura Réve* [*Noura’s Dream*], 2019.

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