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Filming Against the System in North Africa: Pioneering Women Documentary Makers and their Common Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT : This article draws attention to the pioneering women of North African documentary making, and specifically their work in addressing the image of women on screen in rapidly changing societies. Highlighting the creativity of the filmmakers in defying the contemporary censor or addressing taboo topics such as women's rights, the history of women contributing to politics or women's roles in the wars for independence, this article uncovers neglected 'feminist' histories and the ways in which women documentary makers tackle audio-visually challenging topics. The films under discussion show their creative potential to address difficult themes through a poetics of permissibility. This is echoed in the filmmaker's sensitive approach to the subjects' expression and voice, and in particular of the non-vocal expression – the gaze.

KEYWORDS: Cinema – North Africa – Women filmmakers – Documentary – Feminist studies.

North Africa and Third Cinema

Until about ten years ago, filmmakers from North Africa were ignored in Anglophone Arab and African film studies. Since then, Roy Armes has tried to trace an aesthetics within North African culture, with a focus on Tunisian and Moroccan filmmakers and on a theme-based analysis of mainly fiction films. Viola Shafik is the only one who has consistently included the Maghreb in her studies of Arab cinema, while emphasising Egypt's dominance of the whole area.

Apart from the very prolific Egyptian melodrama and independent film industries, the North African region's filmmaking practice has also been left out of many studies on Mediterranean, European, Arab and Middle Eastern cinema. While ignored in film history, geographically North Africa's culture is often seen as the cradle of civilisation. In my view, it is located *not* in the liminal space on the fringes of Africa or Europe or the Middle East, but it hinges several dominant world cultures together.

[1] University of Exeter, UK. This article was first composed in 2010 – and has formed the basis of subsequent research, published in a book entitled *Negotiating Dissidence: The Pioneering Women of Arab Documentary*, published by Edinburgh University Press in 2017.

Since the fifties Egyptian melodrama dominates commercial releases in North African and Middle East cinema. Two models are prevalent in North Africa, as they are in the rest of the world: commercial usually stands in contrast to intellectual cinema. In North Africa this is Egyptian musical melodrama with commercial dominance versus an intellectual strand embracing polemics, social awareness and realism.

Very often, this intellectual strand has been equated with Third Cinema. Third Cinema prefers documentary as a filmic reaction against the First World and against the authoritarian 'System'. In a postcolonial North African context, this 'System' could be either: Egyptian cinema and its hegemonic commercial rule of the region; or it could be Hollywood and European productions; or it could be the national censor.

Ella Shohat shows that Third Cinema has doubly marginalised women, "both as filmmakers and as political actants"[2]. She argues that several women in the 'Third World' have nevertheless made extensive use of the film and documentary medium to express their own participations in the struggle for national independence. They re-claim their agency and their power in images. Shohat's main point is that the Third Cinema Manifestoes were homogeneous and overgeneralising, male and heroic in their terminology. In this context, Third Cinema was "produced mainly by men […] and often favoured generic and gendered space of heroic confrontations"[3]. As an alternative, she suggests a post-Third Cinema women's aesthetic that re-writes cinema history and re-instates women into that history gradually.

I suggest that in the women's films I discuss here, this aesthetic is one that foregrounds moderation and negotiation in terms of context, content and style. There is a cinematic way of commenting on the authority of not only the (colonial) past but also the (neo-colonial) present *implicitly* – which goes further. The 4 films that I discuss here rewrite, imply and contemplate rather than denouncing and attacking heroically. In order to subvert the often very strict and limiting censorship rules, the creativity of the filmmaker shows its true potential in what I like to call a poetics of permissibility and moderation. This is echoed in the filmmaker's sensitive analysis of the subjects' expression and voice, and in particular of the non-vocal expression – the gaze.

1. EGYPT

The state's involvement in the film industry has always been strict in Egypt, and in

[2] GUNERATNE Arjune and DISSANAYAKE Ellen, *Rethinking Third Cinema*, New York and London: Routledge, 2003, p. 17.

[3] SHOHAT Ella, 'Post-Third-Worldist culture. Gender, nation and the cinema', In GUNERATNE Arjune and DISSANAYAKE Ellen, *Rethinking Third Cinema*, New York and London: Routledge, 2003, p. 59.

1947, this resulted in the 'Farouk Code': a strict censorship law that still has consequences today. The Farouk Code says Shafik, "prohibited among others the following:

- images of apparently soiled alleys, of hand and donkey carts, itinerant traders, copper cleaners, poor farm houses and their furnishings, and women wearing enveloping gowns
- the shaking of the social order by revolutions, demonstrations, and strikes
- the approval of crimes or the proliferation of the spirit of revolt as a means of demanding rights

It shows that the Egypt the Ministry wanted to see reflected on the cinema screens is one that excludes any relationship to the reality of the lower classes, detracting political ideologies and the demand for social rights (including women's rights).

In 1976, the Farouk Code was revised, and then it arguably became even stricter in the eighties due to New Islamism. The head of state had complete power over the censorship board. A stricter, religious censorship of cinema developed gradually"[4].

One woman who went against the grain in Egypt is Ateyyat El Abnoudy (1939 – 2018), who started making documentaries in the seventies and is widely known as "the mother of documentary" in Egypt. With her wish to re-inscribe women and the poor into Egyptian history, she emphasises that the reality of Egypt must include the subaltern, whom she refuses to *treat* as a subaltern. She went against all the censorship rules: filming the poor, the dirty and the politically dissident. According to her, the lower classes *do* possess a voice (in spite of what Spivak said), and El Abnoudy provides them with the technological means and the cinematic option to utter that voice on screen: she uses the camera as provocateur. She does not speak *for* the subaltern, she speaks *with* her. She always develops a camaraderie and rapport with her subject.

Permissible Dreams (1984) is an in-depth portrait of a rural woman and her views on women's issues in Egypt. The main voice is Aziza's: she either speaks directly to the camera, or is filmed in conversation with her husband or children. She is not negatively influenced by the presence of the camera: she speaks more openly to El Abnoudy than she does to her family. One example of subtle rebellion is when she has a conversation with her husband about his motorcycle. Aziza suggests he sells it to buy a new one because it is old and he cannot fix it. He dismisses her opinion, so she leaves, but glances at the camera and gives the spectator a conspirational, ironic smile.

She criticises her husband but he refuses to acknowledge her. She then says: 'fine, peace be with you if you do not want to hear my opinion', thus closing the argument but not relinquishing her opinion. While she says 'fine', she smiles ironically at the camera behind her husband's back, indicating her silent rebellion. While she might

[4] SHAFIK Viola, *Popular Egyptian Cinema. Gender Class, and Nation*, Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 2006, p. 296.

be unable to utter explicit criticism, displaying her pragmatism and emancipation in her husband's presence is still possible. Looking straight into the camera implicitly expresses her inner thoughts. Her facial expressions and camaraderie with the camera reveal her underlying opinion. This pulls the spectator in as he or she recognises the irony.

One of the most interesting instances in this documentary is the changing tone of Aziza's voice when she mentions the evacuation of Suez during the war with Israel. Footage of this war is particularly rare in Egyptian cinema as it is such a contentious issue. The close-up of Aziza's face reveals her passionate anger at the Israelis for dispossessing her family. For Aziza and El Abnoudy the inclusion of the footage is a way of clarifying that the government needs to do something about the situation of displaced Suez Egyptians. Once again, the presence of the camera serves as a provocation. The film illustrates how – in spite of it being a personal story from a rural, poor, illiterate woman – the personal is always also political.

The film demonstrates a deep agency of the subject, and shows a belief in the lower classes' ability to know and speak of themselves. Aziza is speaking from the margins, criticising – moderately and pragmatically – her government's ignorance of the lower classes. Keeping things subjective, Aziza ensures she does not attack the government's lack of action. Instead, she says: 'I never dream of things I cannot afford. […] My dreams are permissible'. The subtlety and moderation with which the filmmaker establishes her aestheticism is arguably more effective than explicitly rebellious Third Cinema could be in Egypt. In *Permissible Dreams,* her attitude of negotiation and moderation enable her to function within a repressive cultural environment, but the activism is palpable through irony in voice-over, interviews and extra-textual aspects of filmmaking.

This reaction against the so-called "Hollywood on the Nile" and its strict form and style does not remain limited to independent Egyptian documentary production. Since the 70s and 80s women all over the Maghreb are appropriating the documentary genre to film against the 'System' that supposedly limits them in their creativity and critiques.

2. MAGHREB

The gaze is a much-politicised notion in Maghrebi politics, as 'the prohibition against woman seeing and being seen is at the heart of Maghrebian patriarchy, an ideological system in which the master's eye alone exists'. Women challenge the patriarchal system by re-appropriating and frankly returning the gaze. The male patriarchal gaze is subverted. Selma Baccar's, Assia Djebar's and Izza Genini's revolt

against the dominatingly male gaze "charts woman's transformation from passive object under patriarchal and colonial rule to active subject of her own discourse"[5].
The following films use different attributes of the close-up: Baccar portrays the unspeakable in the close-up of women's faces, while Djebar overtly implicates the voyeuristic male inciting more awareness of women's power. Genini observes the different types of body language and performances in public, semi-public and private situations.

A. Tunisia: Baccar's Fatma 75

Selma Baccar (1945) was the first woman in Tunisia to make her own film. *Fatma 75* is an openly feminist film. It was made during the UN International Year for Women. The film was banned for thirty years in Tunisia, but this did not hold Baccar back from screening it internationally and at clandestine occasions in Tunis.
Baccar is irritated by the paradoxical reality of women in Tunisia. While on paper, women have equal rights to men and the personal status law in Tunisia is more advanced than those in the other Maghrebi countries, in reality women are still repressed, she says. In *Fatma 75* she tracks women's activism throughout the centuries. There are no clear-cut censorship rules in the film industry in Tunisia today, but as the government only funds films that it has accepted through a rigorous and time-consuming application process, Tunisian filmmakers often involuntarily turn to self-censorship. Baccar includes indirect criticism in her films: there is no direct discourse criticising the government, but it is the close-up that pulls in the viewer as an accomplice in order to reveal and mock governmental bureaucracy, the supremacy of male opinions and the patronising manner in which some men treat women in Tunisia.
The film mixes re-enactments of historical circumstances and interviews with contemporary women and men. These interviews not only provide spectators with lots of factual and convincing information, but also with close-ups of the faces of the people being interviewed. The close-ups then provide an individual subjectivity and identity to the speaker. The looks on men and women's faces often say more than comes across in words in the interview. A striking example is when Fatma interviews the boss of a factory after she has spoken to his female employees. The women work more and deliver more quality than the men, but earn less, because the law says that women must be dependent on their husband. The look on Fatma's face clarifies what her opinion is.
"Even if a woman has earned the same degrees as a man, we cannot give her the same responsibilities. First: the man has to take care of his family. The law is very

[5] MORTIMER Mildred, 'Reappropriating the Gaze in Assia Djebar's Fiction and Film', *in* MORTIMER Mildred, *Maghrebian Mosaic. A Literature in Transition*, London, Lynne Rienner Publishing, 2001, p. 214.

clear in this. Second: the woman is too often preoccupied with her own problems. That is why we cannot give her a job with serious responsibilities. Third, public opinion claims that men are physically stronger than woman and that is not entirely incorrect. If you ever work in a factory yourself, then you will come across problems like these. Women get pregnant, feel ill easily, or a child gets ill, or she just does not show up at work. There is always something. And you cannot really blame her."

Fatma does not say anything to the factory boss. Instead, her response is a look that is nearly invisibly sarcastic: she raises an eyebrow, gives a little sarcastic smile, again raises an eyebrow, and slightly moves the corners of her mouth. These very subtle reactions to the nonsense the factory boss is telling her amount to a sort of conspiracy between Fatma, Selma and the viewer. As before with Aziza in El Abnoudy's film, there is a subtle, inter-subjective conspiracy between Fatma, the camera and director, and the audience: the importance of the gaze in this fragment illustrates Baccar's trust in the audience's intelligence and ability for empathy.

B. Algeria: Djebar's *La Nouba*

Assia Djebar (1936 –2015) was the first woman to ever make a film in Algeria. In all of her creative work she was preoccupied with women's issues in Islam, and she was an outspoken feminist. *La Nouba* is her first film, and like *Fatma 75*, it is docufiction. In it, Djebar's alter ego Lila returns from France to her homeland in northern Algeria, where she visits and interviews the women who lived through the war of independence. She sets out to record their voices and their stories to re-inscribe them into history, in which they have ostensibly been neglected.

La Nouba des Femmes Du Mont Chenoua is thematically very similar to *Fatma 75*, but in its use of the close-up it could not be more different. In the open space of Mount Chenoua, where Lila interviews the women, the camera keeps its distance. Djebar's preoccupation with voices and testimonies pushes the visual quality of the many faces to the background and brings Lila's individuality to the foreground in the landscape of women. Lila the protagonist is used as a vehicle to interpret and transmit other women's voices to the spectator.

In this film, the domestic space is where the gaze still needs to be challenged most powerfully; therefore, this is where the intricate politics of the male and female gaze are explored in more detail. The image of Ali, the effectively paralyzed and mute husband who is confined to his wheelchair inside the house, is contrasted with the image of Lila, free to roam inside as well as outside. As spectators, we watch Ali watching women, until a little girl closes the window shutters on him. She not only noticed his gaze, she also subverts it by making it impossible for him to continue to gaze. She implicates Ali as a gazer: his voyeurism is exposed, and she reprimands him defiantly.

The male gaze is further subverted through the woman director's eye behind the camera. At one point, Ali is at the door gazing intently at a sleeping Lila. The "mobile camera affects an important transfer of power, appropriating the control that eludes Ali. Her eye behind the lens, the woman filmmaker successfully challenges the patriarchal gaze"[6]. The camera first zooms in twice on Lila's sleeping face. Then it looks at Ali, who is dared to try the same. Then the camera becomes the look of the female filmmaker as she moves with a handheld camera approaching Lila, building up tension and curiosity as to who will be able to claim ownership of the sleeping woman. This time when the camera turns back to see what Ali is doing, he retreats and it is clear that the handheld camera, or the woman's eye, is mocking his inability to move. Once again, he is implicated as a voyeur. In stark contrast to Ali, Lila's power then is expressed by her own as well as the camera's mobility, which affects her speech and gaze. She moves inside and outside of the house at will, sometimes obviously fleeing from the patriarchal gaze, sometimes coming back to it to actively subvert it.

C. Morocco: Izza Génini's Aita

Filmmaking in newly independent Morocco after 1956 was done under the auspices of the CCM, the Centre Cinématographique Marocain. Filmmaking was much more limited in Morocco than in any of the other Maghrebian countries. The implicit censorship regulations in Morocco were and still are dependent on the King and the Ministry of Information. An artist cannot contradict or sully the king, his family or the idea of the monarchy. Moreover, any ideas expressed against Islam were strictly forbidden. Anything to do with a questionable morality, sexuality and poverty was not allowed on the screens. The misery of the peasants and the Years of Lead were not to be imagined. However, in the eighties and nineties, rebellious young filmmakers who had been taught abroad, returned to Morocco and made more critical films than had been done before.

One of the Moroccan women who started to make films in the eighties was Izza Génini, who returned from Paris and rediscovered her love for traditional music. In her film *Aita* from 1987, she follows the route of female troubadours, or Cheikhat. These women are seen as subversive and often called prostitutes as they escaped a typically restrictive life and are considered free, promiscuous and independent. It is Génini's firm belief that music connects generations and traditions. She looks at the past being performed in the present and discovers a Moroccan identity in art. Her main message therefore in *Aita* is: these cheikhat are artists, not prostitutes and their songs invoke the forgotten past that constructs a Moroccan identity.

The performance of the Cheikhat is a sensual and spiritual experience. Their swaying movements and the exciting head and hair tossing leads the men in the audience

[6] MORTIMER Mildred, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

into ecstasy. Génini emphasises this very sensual aspect of the performance as it illustrates the strength and confidence of the women. In a panning close-up, we get to see the faces of Fatna Bent El Hocine and her band, after which a long shot unveils the ecstasy of performers as well as audience. While Fatna is singing, she remains in the background as her band members sway and dance. She is modest and takes the singing seriously. Once she makes eye contact with the camera, very briefly, and looks away quickly as if to show the unusualness of its presence. When Fatna is surrounded by her musicians and dancers at lunch in the hotel however, she takes the lead and is joking directly with the camera, establishing her dominance over the troupe and demanding attention. The most interesting occasion in the film is between performances, when the director visits Fatna and her dancers in their hotel room, and Fatna seems to forget the presence of the camera completely: she gains confidence and explains the performance and the content of the songs. The relaxed atmosphere makes her forget the presence of the camera as she speaks directly to the director.

The film then is a subtle critique firstly of the situation of women in Morocco: Fatna does not speak freely until she is relaxed and surrounded only by women in her private room – she is not performing but informing. When she is performing on stage, she seems modest and retiring instead of confident. She is aware that she is a spectacle and that the stigma attached to her status as a Cheikha is one of loose morals and prostitution. In the hotel as well, she feels obliged to perform – in another manner – as men and admirers surround her. At the same time, the film is an illustration of this woman's strength and integrity, her knowledge and her talent. The film puts them in the important position of guardians of the past. It is again the camera's gaze and Fatna's gaze that together establish the intimate relationship between past and present and the role of women as the transgenerational guardians of culture and identity. Female performers, storytellers and singers are in these documentaries revalued as the true agents of history.

3. CONCLUSIONS

- The gaze is a tool that can work against the system as extra-textual communication.
- The gaze has several meanings: it implicates the audience (conspiracy) or the voyeur (accusation).
- It is a tool that works in a 'permissible' way: within the constraints of society women documentary makers find ways of reviewing the system and work within its limits *and* against it.

I conclude therefore with the idea that moderation and negotiation are the foundation of the post-Third Cinema female aesthetic in North Africa. Ateyyat el Abnoudy, Selma Baccar, Assia Djebar and Izza Génini, however feminist they have

been in their writings and work, are pioneers that started their film career with a subtle but confident critique of the male norm in North Africa. The gaze as a non-verbal tool needs to be given more attention as a tool to subvert authority. They evaded censorship rules and regulations in intelligent ways, and influenced the younger generation with their resourcefulness.

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ABSTRACT: Cet article porte sur les femmes pionnières du documentaire en Afrique du nord, et plus particulièrement sur leurs efforts à aborder la question de l'image de la femme sur écran dans des sociétés en pleine mutation. Mettant en valeur la créativité de ces cinéastes dans leurs manières de défier la censure contemporaine et de traiter de sujets tabous (les droits des femmes, le rôle des femmes dans la politique ou dans les guerres d'indépendance), cet article révèle des histoires 'féministes' négligées par la critique, et surtout les méthodes audio-visuelles privilégiées pour aborder les sujets sensibles. Les films étudiés démontrent le potentiel créatif de ces documentaristes à traiter de sujets sensibles à travers une poétique de la 'permissibilité'. Cela se ressent dans l'approche sensible que le cinéaste propose des expressions et de la voix du sujet, ainsi que de son expression non-vocale – son regard.

MOTS-CLES : Cinéma – Afrique du nord – Femmes – Documentaire – études féministes.

ملخص

يتناول هذا المقال النساء الرائدات في مجال الأفلام الوثائقية في شمال أفريقيا وبالأخصّ جهودهن في إظهار صورة المرأة في السينما في مجتمعات تشهد تحوّلات سريعة. فمن خلال التركيز على ابداعهن في تحدّي الرقابة والتطرّق إلى مواضيع محرّمة كحقوق المرأة ودورها في الحياة السياسيّة عبر التاريخ وفي حروب التحرير. ويكشف هذا المقال قصصاً مهمَلة عن نساء مناضلات والوسائل السمعيّة البصريّة المستخدَمة في معالجة المواضيع الحسّاسة. إنّ أفلام موضوع البحث تُظهر مدى قدرة مخرجات الأفلام الوثائقيّة على التعبير ضمن مساحة ما هو مسموح به. وهذا الأمر يظهر جلياً في الطرق التي تتّبعها المخرجات في تعبير وأداء الشخصيّات وخصوصاً ما هو خارج إطار المسموع والمعلَن.

الكلمات المفتاحية

سينما أفريقيا الشماليّة مخرجات فيلم وثائقي مواضيع المرأة.

Notice biographique : Stefanie Van de Peer teaches Film History at the University of Glasgow, and specialises in Arab and African cinema. She runs film festivals and has written books and articles on women in Arab and African film. Her latest book, *Negotiating Dissidence: The Pioneering Women of Arab Documentary*, was published in 2017 by Edinburgh University Press and her new book, Women in African Cinema is due for publication by Routledge in 2020.